

Pastor Stef's Book Review – April 2016

God is beyond understanding. Anyone who claims otherwise is telling you about a god who doesn't exist. Take the idea of God being "one God in three persons." This is something we see in scripture, but *how* God is like this is baffling. So the title of Alister McGrath's book, ***Understanding the Trinity (1988)***, may be a bit presumptuous, and McGrath would agree. One of his points in this book is that, because God is infinite and we are finite, it is impossible for us to know God infinitely. In fact, the only reason we know anything about God is because of the things he has told us about himself. And God has done this in a way we can understand by using metaphors like parent, shepherd, rock, or light, even though no metaphor (or even all of them together) can exhaustively explain God. So, maybe a better title would have been, "Understanding the Trinity *a little bit better*", but I'm sure the publishers would have had something to say about that.

This book is actually one of the best introductory books on the doctrine of God that I have read. At only 150 pages it is not intimidating and Alister fills it with examples, pictures and stories. This is a great place to start before pouring into larger theological tomes. The topic is important because, as Calvin shows at the beginning of his *Institutes*, how we think about God affects how we behave and think about ourselves. McGrath is one of the top evangelical teachers today and does a great job of guiding us through what the Bible reveals about God and, therefore, about ourselves. It would be a major loss not to sit down and learn from such a good teacher. (The book is also a great supplement to our current series on the Apostle's Creed).

The one criticism I have is the flip side of the richness of McGrath's pictures and illustrations. When it comes to trying to do this for the Trinity, we are always on shaky ground and have no scriptural guidance. I felt McGrath was too free with his Trinitarian examples without giving enough caution. Some of his examples bordered on modalism which was an early church heresy that taught that God was only one person who appeared in three different roles: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. This would be like me being one person but having the roles of pastor, father, and husband. And though I respect that he likes the three-leaf clover illustration because he's Irish, it is not a reason to use it.

I know McGrath has orthodox Trinitarian beliefs and so I give him the benefit of the doubt and realize that he is simply trying to illustrate his points, but the danger of these illustrations is that people remember the illustration and think, "The Trinity is just like...". The Trinity, however, is never *just like* anything in our world of understanding.

Still, all in all, it was a good book.