



Chester, Tim.

Delighting in the Trinity: Why Father, Son, and Spirit are Good News. 2nd ed.

New Malden: The Good Book Company, 2010. Pp. 192. Paper. \$12.99. ISBN 9781907377334.

Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

"It's déjà vu all over again." –Yogi Berra

I've already [reviewed](#) Tim Chester's *Delighting in the Trinity: Why Father, Son, and Spirit are Good News* so one might wonder why I'd review it again. Two reasons: 1) this is a second edition, and as such I wondered what changes had been made from the first edition; 2) almost five years have elapsed from my initial reading and I've learned a great deal in that time; I wanted to see what this book would be like with fresh eyes. I have to admit that my overall assessment of the first edition remains pretty much the same with the second, but there's good reason for that, which we'll get to in a moment.

I'll get the general description out of the way before moving on to the meatier matters. *Delighting in the Trinity* is an introductory text written with the intention to make anyone at any stage of their spiritual development see just how important the Trinity is and how it stands at the center of all things Christian. The book is divided into three sections in which Chester highlights the doctrine's biblical foundation, historical development, and practical application. It's a solid format that balances right belief with right practice when many authors prefer to favor one over the other. This book is clearly written, generally well argued, and very approachable (which is to say that the uninitiated could read it with great comprehension).

Allow me to begin the critical part of this review by noting that the second edition of any volume affords an author the opportunity to update, expand, or revise as necessary. It's a crying shame when that opportunity is squandered and little to no change is made. Unfortunately, Chester has squandered a golden opportunity to correct some dated readings, interact with some solid arguments in recent literature, and update his overall method and thinking a bit.

For example, when making his case for the biblical foundation of the Trinity, Chester follows a well worn path of highlighting monotheistic passages; contrasting those with "us" and "our" language in the OT; showing triadic statements in the NT; and proof-texting passages that show each person of the Trinity to be God according to the authors of Scripture. Now there's nothing wrong with this approach per se, but it's been done to death, and this kind of piecemeal case assumes a certain later doctrine of the Trinity (be it patristic, medieval, or Reformed) to be *the* doctrine of the Trinity that the Scriptures merely allude to.

But there's a better way to go about showing the Trinity in Scripture that pays more attention to the overall narrative and authorial presuppositions (see, e.g., the recent contributions of Christopher Seitz and C. Kevin Rowe in *The Oxford Handbook on the Trinity*). The approach Chester takes is also at odds with his approving use of Barth who saw the Trinity as the substructure of all of Scripture/revelation (see chap. 8). But perhaps most problematic and most widespread in literature on the subject is that it sets a post-biblical formulation as the standard that the biblical authors never quite measure up to. Chester says that "It would be wrong to say that the New Testament contains a doctrine of the Trinity in the way we now conceive it" (60), but that's a rather banal observation, and that's something completely different from saying that the NT contains a doctrine of the Trinity.

He later says that "A doctrine of the Trinity in this sense [i.e., the sense that the raw data is there] is only latent in the New Testament" (86). But just what if the Trinity is exactly what's required to make sense of everything the NT has to say? Inasmuch as it contains a doctrine of God, it contains a doctrine of the Trinity! Chester must surely believe this since he believes that the Trinity is God. And to approvingly quote Witherington and Ice as saying that the NT authors were "functionally trinitarian" is to say what exactly? That they were trinitarian? Amen! Indeed they were! But that they weren't later theologians is really a non-issue. We run into the same problem when Chester tackles the ante-Nicene theologians like Irenaeus, Origen, and Tertullian. He's nice enough to say that they're not heretics since they couldn't predict what shape the doctrine would take, but again, why not appreciate their formulations in their own right?

Other issues surface in Chester's treatment of so-called Eastern vs. Western approaches to the Trinity. He uncritically parrots Théodore De Régnon's paradigm, which stated that the East began with the three Persons while the West began with the one substance. He also continually repeats a false dichotomy that says the East was concerned with causal relations while the West was concerned with personal relations as if causal relations of order were anything less than personal. And as Fred Sanders has noted in [his review](#) of this volume, recent contributions from Ayres, Barnes, Behr, Anatolios, and a host of others have put De Régnon's paradigm to rest. Both East and West affirmed the Father's *monarchē* and were concerned with causal relations; there's not nearly as much difference as has often been proposed. Even Calvin, whom Chester extols as uniting the best in both Eastern and Western thought, maintained this fundamental personal order (see *Inst.* 1.13.25).

The fact that this type of caricature remains in the second edition of Chester's work, and that his suggested reading list (187-88) has barely been updated, suggests that perhaps Chester hasn't updated his own reading. Even if he ultimately disagreed with these authors and thought De Régnon was onto something, he could have given some reasons why; instead we're simply left to wonder.

But there were plenty of areas in which Chester didn't need updating, revision, or expansion. I think Chester rightly notes that there's a very particular God that Christians worship and that this God means everything to us. Chester won't settle for just any old generic deity, no, it's specifically the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. He says, "We cannot talk about belief in God without asking which 'God' we believe in. So many of the people who claim to believe in 'God' do not believe in God—not the God who truly exists and has truly revealed himself in Jesus Christ" (17-18). Amen! I'm glad to see that he hasn't wavered on this point. What he said originally stands up to recent treatments of the question of whether or not Christians worship the same God as non-Christians.

And Chester rightly sees how easy it is to fall into idolatry; it lurks around every corner; this is why it's so important to know and commune with the Trinity. He also sees the Trinity at the heart of all things Christian (e.g., the Gospel, evangelism, missions, salvation, worship, etc.), and guess what? he's correct to see such! It seems silly to commend an author for spotting something that is so self-evidently true, but sadly, a great number of believers just can't see why the Trinity matters. For many Christians the Trinity is a confusing doctrine; something to be left to the theologians to discuss and argue over. They want to get to the practical life application type stuff,

and Chester wants to get to that too (the third part of the book is devoted to it!), but he realizes that there's no life application apart from the giver of life, the Trinity!

I also commend Chester for examining various atonement theories in light of the Trinity. Of course, I think he gets so much wrong when it comes to atonement (see my first review), but the fact that he sees such a strong connection is a positive feature. And he should be commended for spending a little time introducing novices to the ways in which various types of theologians use the Trinity for their own theological ends (e.g., the liberation or feminist theologians). He does a great job with the descriptive task without coming across as an adherent/defender of any one position, although it is quite evident that Chester is a *theologus crucis* after the order of Jürgen Moltmann when reading his thoughts on the cross.

And that's really my sticking point; the abovementioned criticisms are relatively minor compared to Chester's overwhelming emphasis on the cross, which in and of itself isn't a bad thing, until one realizes that Chester sees a rift in the Trinity when the Son is crucified and dies for our sins. We read of the "moment at which God was most absent" (64) in referring to his absence from the Son. Likewise, we're told repeatedly that God forsook God (64-66). Unfortunately, this contradicts Chester's various comments about the oneness and unity of the Trinity. Right after speaking of the Son's "separation from God" he speaks of the "unity of Father and Son in salvation" and further says that "Their unity at the cross is more than a unity of will. It remains a unity of being. The God of the cross is the God of the *Shema*—one, single, undivided" (71). But how are the Father and Son united while separate? How is this an argument *for* the Trinity and not tritheism?

He also inexplicably cites godforsakenness as the key to the Trinity. "Forsaking' is an interpersonal term. The cross makes it possible for us to understand the Trinity as a community of persons in relationship," Chester tells us (78). But is not the Father's nod of approval at Jesus' baptism in which he speaks to the Son who has just ascended out of the Jordan River in the power of the Holy Spirit relational? Can we not hear the Father's "this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" and see an intimate relationship? What about Jesus' agonizing prayer in Gethsemane, or any of his prayers throughout the Gospels? What about the upper room discourse in which Jesus speaks of sending another Comforter to his disciples? Is not all of this evidence of "persons in relationship"? Doesn't the very Incarnation of the Word who was *with* the Father from all eternity show us "persons in relationship"? You get my point.

So in the end I think that Chester has the best of intentions but I think that the myopic focus on the cross to the near exclusion of other major themes hurts his cause. I only pray that less seasoned readers will discern the intention while sifting through some of the more questionable portions of this work.