



Sanders, Fred and Klaus Issler, eds.

Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Introductory Christology

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective is a collection of six essays from a group of interdisciplinary scholars which seeks to set Christology in its proper Trinitarian perspective, as the title maintains. Each essay is capable of standing on its own, but one of the editors, Fred Sanders says: “the chapters have been carefully calibrated and arranged so that taken together they reinforce one another and develop a coherent line of argument regarding the person and work of the incarnate Son.” (37) Each chapter opens with a brief summary, three axioms for Christological study, and a list of key terms.

1. Chalcedonian Categories for the Gospel Narrative

In the introductory essay, Sanders makes his case that in order to frame an adequate Christology, we must work within the confines of Chalcedonian categories. He says that: “Chalcedon already provides us with Christology in trinitarian perspective, and makes no sense without presupposing the Trinity.” (15) This is very true. All throughout the chapter Sanders notes the importance of these Chalcedonian categories in understanding the incarnation and the work of salvation. Early on in the chapter he states:

Though the body of Christian truth is made up of a great many doctrines, perhaps hundreds of them, there are only three great mysteries at the very heart of Christianity: the atonement, the incarnation, and the Trinity. All the lesser

doctrines depend on these great central truths, derive their significance from them, and spell out their implications. (8)

I couldn't agree more. Sanders then takes the reader through the first five ecumenical councils (Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and Constantinople II), noting the heresies that were being combated (i.e., Arianism, Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, Eutychianism) and the response to them in the various creeds. He then spends a few pages arguing for the usefulness and validity of anhypostatic/enhypostatic Christology (which can largely be attributed to Cyril of Alexandria). He notes that while these technical terms were not used at the fifth council (Constantinople II), they are accurate to summarize the heart of the council's theology.

Sanders position is best summed up in his own words:

Is the human nature of Christ, therefore also a human person? The Christology we are considering gives a twofold answer. On the one hand, the human nature of Jesus Christ is in fact a nature joined to a person, and therefore enhypostatic, or personalized. But the person to who personalizes the human nature of Christ is not a created human person (like all other persons personalizing the other human natures we encounter); rather it is the eternal second person of the Trinity. So the human nature of Christ is personal, but with a personhood from above. Considered in itself, on the other hand, and abstracted from its personalizing by the eternal person of the Son, the human nature of Christ, therefore, is both anhypostatic (not personal in itself) and enhypostatic (personalized by union with the eternal person of the Son). (31)

Sanders acknowledges that this might be taken as a subtle form of Apollinarianism, but notes that the fathers of the fifth century anticipated this charge and safeguarded against it by issuing an anathema to anyone who would charge Cyril of writing opinions like those of Apollinarius.

Sanders closes the chapter by giving a brief description of the essays to follow, all of which sound fascinating in their own right. He notes that each chapter begins with three axioms for the study of Christology that are to each be accepted by the reader, even if following them leads to different conclusions than those reached by the authors. He then lists 6 study questions which help the reader to really retain the information they have just read.

All in all, this was a very well-written, semi-technical essay, and one that has me looking forward to those that follow. In terms of this being an introductory Christology, I'd imagine that they have the seminarian in mind, as in my opinion, this is a bit too advanced for someone with little to no knowledge of Christology as it has unfolded throughout Church history.

2. The Eternal Son of God in the Social Trinity

J. Scott Horell offers up a revised version of his 2004 *JETS* article “Toward a Biblical Model of the Social Trinity: Avoiding Equivocation of Nature and Order”¹ in this chapter. He states as his three axioms for Christological study as follows (44-5):

1. Speculations of trinitarian theology are not to supersede the metanarrative of divine revelation, particularly as revealed in Jesus Christ.
2. Ontological equality of the members of the Godhead and reciprocal indwelling of each in the other does not necessarily preclude eternal relational order among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
3. Biblical revelation points beyond mere economy to the transcendent relationality, such that a univocal correspondence of the economic and immanent Trinity cannot be affirmed.

He begins this chapter by pointing out the rich trinitarian experience of the early Church and how this is reflected in the text of the New Testament. I think that Horell is on the right track when he says that:

Powerful as it may be, as the early church understood, experiencing God as tripersonal is not the same as *articulating* precisely what God has revealed of himself. Neither Jewish theology nor Greek philosophy provided the conceptual frameworks, much less the right words, needed to express what the church fathers were seeing in the Bible’s witness of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (46)

Horell notes the place and importance of both experience and tradition, but maintains that Evangelicals should always hold them in second place to Scripture (which raises questions concerning the *tradition* of the canon’s formation, but that’s an issue for another time). Horell’s purpose is threefold in this chapter: (1) He wants to sketch a Biblical model of the “social Trinity”; (2) He wants to provide Biblical evidence for an eternal order in the Godhead; and (3) He wants to synthesize the two streams of thought into a coherent picture of an eternally ordered social Trinity.

All of the necessary steps are taken in defining terms such as ‘nature’: “the generic essence, universal property, or attributes of Godness manifest equally in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (49), and ‘person’: “a center of self-consciousness existing in relationship to others” (52), but the most important of Horell’s definitions come when he defines what he means by “social model of the Trinity” and “eternal order.” He says:

¹ Available online: http://www.freewebs.com/trinitytruth/Social%20Trinity_JETS.pdf

My definition of a *social model* of the Trinity is that *the one divine Being eternally exists as three distinct centers of consciousness, wholly equal in nature, genuinely personal in relationships, and each mutually indwelling each other*. I define an *eternally ordered social model* as the social model that, while insisting on the equality of the divine nature, affirms a “perpetual distinction of roles within the immanent Godhead. Within the biblical revelation, this entails something like the generous preeminence of the Father, the joyous collaboration of the Son, and the ever-serving activity of the Spirit. (48, cf. 44; 56; 67-8; 76)

He does well to briefly survey the Biblical data concerning the Father, Son, and Spirit as distinct centers of consciousness, the way in which they relate to one another, and finally their mutual indwelling of each other, thus achieving his first objective, which was to establish the social Trinity in Scripture.

He then moves on to survey the Biblical data which affirms a clear order within the Trinity, arguing against the position of certain theologians, such as Kevin Giles which sees any kind of eternal order as akin to Arianism. He brands this model of social Trinitarianism as “*egalitarian trinitarianism*” and notes “two subgroups: those who accept the creedal and traditional language of begetting and procession—therefore some form of eternal distinction between the members of the Trinity—and noncreedalists who reject such terms and, therefore, have few criteria at all for distinguishing among the members of the Godhead in their eternal relations.” (62)

He examines various “giving” passages which use the words *didomai* and *paradidomai*, noting the various ways in which the Father gives to the Son and the Son gives to the Father, while the Father gives both the Son and the Spirit to the world for the purpose of salvation. He turns his attention to the Johannine language of comes/came from; sent by/from; goes forth; proceeds, etc, observing that it is the Father who sends and the Son and Spirit who are sent from the Father. He then notes something that is often overlooked, and that is the presentation of the Son in the Apocalypse, which slowly unfolds to reveal his glory. But in this unfolding, the exalted Son seated at the right hand of God still refers to the Father as “his God.” The section is closed with a brief look at 1Corinthians 15:24-28 in which he observes that the Son is equal yet submissive.

Horell’s final section is a balancing act between the first two sections. He notes the problems with “egalitarian trinitarianism” as being that it tends to blend or erase the eternal distinctiveness of the persons of God. There is also the problem of its highly speculative nature, which honestly doesn’t account for the Biblical revelation. The danger of going to the extreme with “functional subordination” is damaging the eternal fellowship of the three persons. Horell says there is a risk

of violating the “generous character of God seen in the many New Testament passages affirming the Godhead’s self-giving and reciprocity.” (73)

I thoroughly enjoyed this essay, and I feel that Horell has made very important arguments concerning an eternal order (*taxis*) within the Trinity. More importantly, I appreciate that his argument was grounded in Scripture, with supporting references to the Church fathers and various creeds. This essay is worth the price of the book alone.

3. The One Person Who Is Jesus Christ: The Patristic Perspective

Donald Fairburn of Erskine Theological Seminary spends this chapter doing three things: (1) Correcting what he perceives to be a common error perpetrated by modern scholars concerning the portrayal of the reasons for the Definition of Chalcedon, (2) Showing the link between soteriology and Christology, and (3) Showing the patristic belief in the Logos as the personal subject of Christ.

Concerning #1, the error he finds common amongst many modern scholars, is framing the Christological controversy of the early fifth century as a debate between the schools of Antioch and Alexandria, with the Symbol of Chalcedon being a compromise between the two positions. He takes some space to outline that according to this understanding, the Antiochenes took what many call the “literal” approach to Scripture, and emphasized the full humanity of Christ as it was represented in the historical accounts presented in the Gospels. The Alexandrians on the other hand took the “allegorical” approach to Scripture and emphasized the deity of Christ. When the debate is framed in this manner, “the Alexandrians often come off looking like the bad guys, since we are told they cared little for history.” (86) According to Fairburn:

[P]atristic scholarship over the last generation has demonstrated convincingly how inaccurate the [two-school] approach is. In fact, patristic scholars now recognize that the entire notion of a uniform and well-represented Antiochene school is problematic. [. . .] careful study of these writers² exegesis over the past half century has shown that the differences among the Antiochenes were greater than the differences among the Alexandrians. (87-8, footnote mine)

Concerning #2, Fairburn says:

² Eustathius of Antioch, Diodore of Tarsus, and John Crysotom in the fourth century, and Theodore of Mopsuestia, Nestorius, John of Antioch, and Theodoret of Cyrus in the fifth century.

I believe one of the most fundamental theological axioms is that all doctrine should be intimately and clearly connected to soteriology. It is a great mistake to isolate various Christian doctrines one from another, and this mistake is particularly dangerous when one is dealing with the trinitarian and Christological controversies. (92)

He goes on to argue that the patristic concern wasn't arriving at philosophically sophisticated definitions of God, but rather to answer the question: "What does God have to be like in order to give us the kind of salvation that we Christians know (from Scripture and the Holy Spirit's witness) we have?" (92) I couldn't agree more with Fairburn's assessment; not only were these Chalcedonian concerns, but they were the concerns that came with every Christological/trinitarian controversy of the early Church. For the fathers, a savior who was less than God was no savior at all.

Fairburn takes some space to acquaint the reader with the soteriology of the major players in this controversy, i.e., Theodore of Mopsuestia (who was more influential on Nestorianism than Nestorius himself), and Cyril of Alexandria. For Theodore there are: "two ages... the first age is one of mutability, corruption, and sin; the second age is one of immutability, incorruption, and perfection." (93) The second age is the one to which we aspire, but God only gives us the tools necessary to get there ourselves. Fairburn says: "[a]s a result, one can see that in Theodore's soteriology, human effort plays a very significant role." (94)

Cyril on the other hand understood God to have originally created mankind in close personal fellowship with himself. He also believed mankind to have fallen into sin through Adam and Eve, breaking our fellowship with God, resulting in God entering into the world via the Incarnation in order to restore the world to its original condition. For Cyril, Christ was the only-begotten Son of God, and we are children through adoption, but we do not have some inferior relationship with God. It is through God's grace that we are adopted into the very same eternal relationship that the Father and Son have always been in with one another. Such a soteriology only works if the Son is by nature God's Son. Fairburn says:

No elevation of a man to divine status would accomplish anything for us, but such an elevation of the man Jesus to divine status is precisely what Theodore and Nestorius teach. In their soteriology, that is all we need, and we can follow in the footsteps of that man so as to reach the second age. But if one sees salvation as God's action to give us his own natural fellowship, then God himself must come down to us through the incarnation. (101)

Concerning #3, Fairburn shows that in Cyril's thought, it was the Logos himself (i.e., the eternal divine Logos) who personally experienced human life. Cyril expresses this by speaking of the

Logos as uniting flesh to his own person (in the womb of Mary, the theotokos). The Nestorian model saw Christ as a “graced man” upon whom the Logos was conferred after his birth. The implications of this are that for Cyril, it was truly God who suffered and died on the cross. Fairburn examines the Definition of Chalcedon and notes that while it doesn’t explicitly say that the Logos is the personal subject of Christ, that the dominant statement of the definition is that Christ is “one and the same” (or “the same one”) in reference to deity and humanity. These dominant statements are “three parallel framing statements” (105) that show a progression:

1. “one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ”
2. “one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, and only-begotten”
3. “one and the same Son, the only-begotten, God the Logos, the Lord Jesus Christ”

Fairburn says: “The increasing specificity of the statements makes clear that the person who is one and the same is the Logos, the only-begotten himself.” (105) Throughout this section he does well to point out that error in stating that Christ “in his humanity” suffered and died, while “in his deity” he did not. He is quite right to note that “suffering and death are not things that happen to a nature; they are things that happen to a person. . . . an insight that I believe is another fundamental axiom of Christology, is that one must not treat a nature as if it were a person” (108) I have criticized Oneness Pentecostal Christology on exactly these grounds, concluding that ultimately, it devolves into Nestorianism.

Thus far, Fairburn’s contribution has been the best in what seems to be a collection of essays that gets better and better. His treatment is fair, concise, clear, and cogent. It’s writing like this that has me so interested in the early Church and the early Trinitarian and Christological controversies. If I were to rate the book on this essay alone, it would easily be a five star volume, but the two essays that preceded it are equally worthy of such honor. Let’s hope the momentum continues.

[Chapters 4-6 not reviewed]