



Sanders, Fred.

The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything.

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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Introduction

Books on the Trinity abound; in fact I have around 100 books related to the subject lining my shelves as I type this. Some document the history of the doctrine's formation while others examine the Trinitarian theology of various ancient and contemporary theologians. Some are textbooks meant to introduce the novice to the subject and others are collections of essays on a particular aspect of Trinitarian thought. But in none of them, save one, have I seen Nicky Cruz (former leader of the 1950s street gang the Mau Maus), Michael Polanyi, and Susanna Wesley (John and Charles Wesley's mother) referenced and quoted within pages of each other. The one book in which I have seen this is the book under review, Fred Sanders' *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (hereafter *DTG*).

For those unfamiliar with Sanders, he is an associate professor of theology at Biola University's Torrey Honors Institute and the author/editor of a number of articles and books on the doctrine of the Trinity. He also maintains a popular blog (along with a number of co-authors) called The Scriptorium Daily (<http://www.scriptoriumdaily.com/>). Anyone familiar with Sanders' writing, either his academic or more popular works, will know that he's an effective communicator who writes with a wit rarely seen in theological works. *DTG* isn't a stiff theological treatise even though it's nothing if not theological; but it reads like a novel while being consistently informative and engaging. There's almost a conversational element to the book where the reader

feels like they've entered into dialogue with Sanders and the subject matter. It's a work that takes into account the extreme importance of Trinitarian *theology* and *doctrine* but recognizes that the Christian's inherent *experience* of the Trinity is what leads us into these areas of deeper reflection. Sanders explains that "A Christian, and especially an evangelical Christian, is somebody who is already immersed in the reality of the Trinity, long before beginning to reflect on the idea of the Trinity." (26)

Sanders' contention throughout the book is that the very gospel itself is Trinitarian and as such it makes sense that evangelicals (a nomenclature derived from the *evangel* itself) are thoroughly (he controversially claims that evangelicals are the "most thoroughly Trinitarian Christians in the history of the church" [9]) Trinitarian even if this hasn't been the public face of evangelicalism in recent history. The book self-consciously focuses on evangelical writers from the last 500 years with the intention of proving this controversial statement true. But I'd be remiss to not mention that in saying this Sanders doesn't intend to take away from the thoroughgoing Trinitarianism of other Christian traditions; he simply wishes to emphasize a particular point about the Trinitarian shape and content of the gospel and salvation.

Summary

The introductory chapter gives a brief summary of what is to follow while the first chapter deals mostly with Sanders' methodology for the book. It is here where he employs Polanyi's ideas about the nature of (tacit & explicit) knowledge. "Trinitarianism is the encompassing framework within which all Christian thought takes place and within which Christian confession finds its grounding presuppositions," says Sanders. (46) The second chapter takes relatively difficult subject matter (i.e., the immanent and economic Trinity; God's aseity; Christ's preexistence; etc.) and makes it easy to understand for the reader without advanced theological training by taking them into "The happy land of the Trinity." It's here that Sanders establishes the importance of God being God *in himself* before being God *for us*.

Chapters 3-5 address the evangelical doctrine of salvation and its Trinitarian shape and character. In chapter 3 Sanders focuses on God's grace which is nowhere exhibited more than in his self-giving love. God purposed within himself to come into his creation and save us when this was far from being necessary (as Sander's makes abundantly clear in his discussion of God's aseity a chapter earlier). Chapter 4 fleshes out this Trinitarian mission, i.e., the Father's sending of the Son and the Spirit and the respective roles played by each divine person in bringing about our salvation. Here Sanders shows that evangelicals have been at their best in their understanding of adoption. While it may seem as if the Trinity is ignored in evangelical soteriology this is easily refuted by simply looking to what evangelicals have been saying for the past half-millennium about believers' adoption as sons and daughters. Chapter 5 addresses

salvation *in Christ* by looking at the trinitarian theology of Francis Schaeffer and the believer's assurance. But perhaps the most powerful content of this chapter comes in the early pages where Sanders rightly notes that the *Trinitarian* gospel is salvation *in Christ*, i.e., "There are not two different messages here but a single proclamation of good news that is simultaneously Christ-centered and Trinity-centered." (167-68) It's a mistake to think that we'd pit one against the other when they are in fact the same! But this doesn't mean that error can't ensue; Sanders warns against a type of Christ-centeredness that results in a "Father-forgetfulness" and "Spirit-ignoring." Focus on Christ should always entail reference to the Father and Spirit since all three work together to bring about our salvation.

Chapters 6 (admittedly my least favorite in the book) teases out the tacit Trinitarianism in the evangelical doctrine of Scripture using Adolph Saphir and Philip Mauro as case studies. The bulk of the chapter, however, is spent on evangelical hymnody by examining a number of hymns about the Word of God collated by George Campbell Morgan. While some of these seem to intimate an explicit bibliolatry there is a "recurring theme in several hymns" which is "the believer's dependence on God's Trinitarian action to make himself directly known in Scripture." (206) But past the hymns themselves, Sanders notes Morgan's editorial influence in arranging his hymnal "within an overall Trinitarian structure." (208) Chapter 7 is perhaps the most practical chapter in this excellent volume. In it Sanders addresses prayer, both to the Trinity, and also its Trinitarian structure rounding out his case studies with C. S. Lewis' "mere Trinitarianism." He rightly points out that the biblical pattern is to pray to the Father, in the name of the Son, and in the power of the Spirit, but he's not willing to cast aspersions on those who deviate from this pattern. I've often quipped that people don't get excited about the Trinity because they're just not sure what to *do* with it—but I can say with sincerity that after reading this chapter they'll finally know.

Conclusion

As I said early in this review, Sanders writes with a wit uncommon in theological books, and this can be seen in the countless Sandersian aphorisms that line the pages of *DTG*, e.g., in discussing divine freedom and grace Sanders comments on the reason we say "please" concluding that "Good manners is good theology" (65); or his priceless comment against overly-speculative theology:

We cannot describe the geography of the happy land of the Trinity. We do not know what kind of music the persons of the Trinity listen to, or what they cook for each other, or who does the dishes, or if they carpool. We do not know if they hold hands and do some kind of liturgical round-dance, as has often been suggested in some of the more purple theological literature. (82-83)

Sanders' devotion to the Trinity is evident throughout this book, no one could deny that, but something else that's evident is his extensive knowledge of evangelical theology and his appreciation for evangelical theologians of all ages. While I can't claim to have learned much about Trinitarian theology from reading this book (for me this was more an exercise in saying, "Amen!" than anything else), I can claim to have learned quite a bit about evangelical theology and its robust Trinitarianism.

In general I hardly ever find myself with a lack of criticism, especially on books devoted to the Trinity, but there's not much to criticize about this volume. There are certain editorial/stylistic problems such as the use of endnotes rather than footnotes, the absence of a bibliography, and the small type employed for quoted material, but I'm at a loss to think of anything pertaining to the content of the book that I took *serious* issue with. At one point Sanders says that Jesus bears the wrath of God (140) which I personally disagree with but it's not a huge issue. At another point I found Sanders to be a bit ambiguous in his reference to the preexistence of Christ, i.e., he referred to it in a way that seemed as if he might be equating preexistence with eternity (see p. 85). It follows that if someone is eternal then they are preexistent but the reverse is not true (my mind immediately goes to the Enochic Son of Man who is clearly preexistent [see e.g., *1 Enoch* 48.6], yet a created being, hence non-eternal). But that's it. At the end of the day this is a smart book and one that anyone with even the slightest interest in the Trinity should read. I enthusiastically recommend it to one and all.