

EDITORIAL

Welcome to the Fall 2019 issue of the *Midwestern Journal of Theology*. I am again indebted to those who work so hard each semester to ensure the Journal appears. As usual, particular thanks go to Dr. Jason Duesing, Provost and Academic Editor, for all his generous assistance, and also to Mrs. Kaylee Freeman, for all her work as Journal secretary. I would also like to thank Mr. Pat Hudson, who as Institutional Editor at Midwestern, provided invaluable help in preparing this issue for publication.

We are honored to begin this issue, by publishing a symposium on Fred Sanders' volume, *The Triune God*. This scholarly collaboration features responses from Wesley Hill of Trinity School for Ministry, Stephen R. Holmes of St. Andrews University, and Paul T. Nimmo of Aberdeen University, together with an introduction and assessment of each respondent by Fred Sanders. Next comes Midwestern's 2019 Faculty Address, which was presented by Michael D. McMullen, in which he shared aspects of his research into the impact and unpublished writings of William Wilberforce.

Our final three articles begin with Ryan Rippee's helpful contribution to studies on Spurgeon, with an analysis of the work of the Father in the thought and writing of the great preacher. Our penultimate piece, by Jason Kees, is a careful study of how the inauguration of the Last Days is presented in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. Our final contribution, from J. Tristan Hurley, is a thought-provoking article examining how God may be using visions and dreams today, especially in missionary situations.

We again close this issue of the MJT with a number of relevant and thought-provoking book reviews, helpfully secured and edited by Dr. Blake Hearson.

Book Symposium on *The Triune God*

FRED SANDERS

Professor,

Associate Director, Torrey Honors Institute

Biola University

Introduction by Fred Sanders

This suite of responses to Fred Sanders' book *The Triune God* (Zondervan, 2016) were originally read in a symposium at the 2016 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. It was the Reformed Theology Group that drew these theologians together to reflect on the book. Mark Bowald did most of the organizational work to make it happen; Tom McCall also gave a response and participated in the discussion.

Beyond What is Written?

Reading the Bible with Fred Sanders' *The Triune God*

WESLEY HILL

Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies,

Trinity School for the Ministry

Introduction

It is a pleasure to respond to Fred Sanders' beautifully written and powerful new book on the Trinity. It is a comprehensive and compelling treatment of the doctrine, as exegetical as it is tradition-conscious, as judicious as it is generous, and it will be read with profit by scholars and students alike.

My own expertise lies in the area of biblical exegesis, so I will attempt a response from that angle. Happily, Sanders' book is filled both with trinitarian exegesis and also rich second-order reflection on what trinitarian exegesis is and what it is for. So the book itself is one that invites this kind of response.

In particular, I want to query Sanders' book, and, I hope, advance its basic thrust, in two areas. In the first place, I want to probe more deeply the relationship between, on the one hand, what Sanders calls "grammatical-historical exegesis" and, on the other, dogmatic or systematic theology. More specifically, I want to suggest that Sanders' account of this relationship is salutary as far as it goes but also that it might go a bit further and unpack trinitarian doctrine as the divine ontology that Scripture's affirmations and narratives require.

Second, I want to reflect with gratitude on Sanders' recognition that modern grammatical-historical ways of reading Scripture might offer new roads by which to arrive at the old destination of trinitarian doctrine. This is a conclusion to which my own study has already led me, and I want to deepen Sanders' suggestive observations in this area.

On the Nature of Dogmatic Theology

In multiple chapters (and especially chapter 6) of his book, Sanders reflects at length on the place of biblical exegesis in trinitarian theology, arguing that the Trinity is indeed a biblical doctrine, even if the vocabulary and conceptual apparatus of developed fourth-century conciliar definitions (and their subsequent commentary) is absent from the Old and New Testaments.

In the course of developing his account, Sanders makes several claims. The first is a kind of pre-exegetical or meta-theological recognition that Scripture is the divinely authorized verbal interpretation of the events of the trinitarian missions—the Father sends the Son and Spirit in history—and, as such, is not so much the origin of trinitarian theology as it is its authoritative vehicle: Scripture is the self-attestation of the God who is revealed as triune. Scripture has its being "in" the Trinity, and not vice versa. In this sense, the quest to "find" the doctrine of the Trinity "in" the Bible is the effort to find out in what way the extra-Scriptural God exists, has acted, and will go on acting for the church and in the world. This is more than a clever Barthian flourish: it is meant to properly locate the doctrine of revelation and Scripture in relation to their Lord, the triune God himself.¹

¹ Here fruitful comparison might be made with John Webster's many essays which argue for a "dogmatic location of the canon" vis-à-vis the doctrine of God.

But from there, second, Sanders begins to flesh out what he means when he says that the specific articulation of trinitarian theology is not to be found *in* the Bible *per se*. What Sanders argues is that there is indeed a fairly trivial sense in which trinitarian doctrine is not “in” the Bible: there is no one proof-text that sounds like the so-called Cappadocian settlement. But there is a much more significant sense in which trinitarian doctrine is indeed a straightforwardly exegetical derivation or even description: if the ending of Matthew’s Gospel insists that the baptism of Christian converts be in the singular name of three characters, Father, Son, and Spirit, then to comment that this ending evinces a *threeness*—or *Trinitas* in Latin—which includes a certain *oneness* as well is simply to “say what [Matthew] said.” Trinitarian doctrine aims to articulate an identical theological judgment as the biblical text does.²

But, second, Sanders presses on from there to make a bolder claim not only that there is a certain three-in-oneness at work in various biblical passages but also that there are (to quote Cornelius Plantinga) “highly developed patterns of reflection” on this three-in-oneness. We have triadic formulae such as Matthew 28:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:13. But we also have texts like John 5:26, in which Jesus the Son’s relationship to the God whom he calls Father is one in which he shares the Father’s own “life in himself” (which is to be distinguished from the borrowed life of redeemed creatures) *and* one in which that shared life is *granted to him by the Father*. In this way, Scripture furnishes what Sanders, along with others, calls the “raw data” of trinitarianism *as well as* a kind of layered reflection on how that raw data is assimilated into both narrative and, for lack of a better term, ontological or metaphysical affirmations.

The third claim Sanders makes—and the one I wish to linger on for a moment—is one he states in a variety of ways. He suggests that trinitarian theology is a kind of “re-speaking” of Scripture, albeit in a different idiom. It is an organized, systematic, historically and culturally conditioned way of attempting to re-articulate, in a given time and place, what has already been said in the Bible. Theology, he writes in one place, “is a matter of listening actively to scripture and saying back what we

² Here I allude to an essay to which Sanders references multiple times, David S. Yeago, “The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis,” *Pro Ecclesia* 3/2 (1994): 152-64.

understand by what we are hearing.” Careful to maintain that such re-sayings must be, in large measure, continuous with Scripture’s own verbiage, Sanders appears to envision dogmatic theology not as a simple repetition of Scripture nor as an improvement upon Scripture’s own messier way of putting things but rather as a kind of second-order re-proclamation, in a slightly changed language, of the Bible’s own proclamation.

And it is here that I wonder whether enough has been said, or whether what has been said has been said precisely enough. Is it that a claim like “The Son is God from God, begotten by the Father from all eternity” is best understood as a re-statement in a different conceptual idiom of a judgment Scripture has already made? Or might a more nuanced understanding be needed?

In a recent essay, my fellow panelist Stephen Holmes has made the suggestion that “theology is more than collating the Biblical passages; it is, in the classical tradition, mostly the task of trying to imagine what must be the case for everything in the Bible to be true.”³ Or, more fully:

[T]he work that we would now name ‘systematic’ in the fourth century was not an attempt to construct a logical edifice out of the texts of Scripture, so much as an attempt to imagine what must be true for every text of Scripture to be taken as true in plain sense. Systematic theology, that is, is not a task of building on top of Scripture—building a system up taking the various biblical claims as axiomatic—so much as a task of building beneath Scripture—constructing an underlying set of conceptions and distinctions that allows the whole of Scripture to be taken seriously without resort to hermeneutical gymnastics.⁴

³ This sentence is actually taken from a blog post that appears to have served as a precursor to the essay in question: Steve Holmes, “The place of theology in exegesis: reflections inspired by Kevin DeYoung,” *Shored Fragments*. <<https://shoredfragments.wordpress.com/2012/03/06/the-place-of-theology-in-exegesis-reflections-inspired-by-kevin-deyoung/>>. (Accessed 12 November 2016.)

⁴ Stephen R. Holmes, “Scripture in Liturgy and Theology,” in Angus Paddison (ed.), *Theologians on Scripture* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2016), 105-18, at 117.

On this account, one might understand the claim “The Son is God from God, begotten by the Father from all eternity” not so much as a worked-out implication or edifice built on Scripture’s foundation or a restatement of a biblical truth. One might rather understand it as the attempt to spell out the theological substructure embedded and submerged within the Bible that allows a biblical author such as Paul to ascribe the reverential substitute for the divine Name *kyrios* to Jesus Christ, thus implying Jesus’ deity and equality with the God of Israel, and another biblical author such as the author of the Fourth Gospel to describe the Son as having been granted life in himself by the Father, thus implying an eternal relationship of reception from the Father. The dogmatic statement of trinitarian theology—“The Son, who is God, is begotten...”—is the result of the effort to plumb the depths of all of Scripture’s combined affirmations, so as to allow the biblical chorus to swell to its full height without being muted in any way. Sanders sees trinitarian doctrine as a faithful outworking or re-preaching of biblical truth—and on this I think, insofar as I understand him, that I agree. But might it be better to see trinitarian doctrine more specifically as a kind of teasing out of the ontology which is *there* in the Bible but never preached in the Bible *as such*? If so, then trinitarian doctrine is indeed biblical but less in the way that, say, “a theology of contemporary American cultural engagement” might be a faithful application of biblical truth and more in the way “a theology of salvation” might be an articulation of the underlying and veiled theological mechanics that permit the biblical writers to preach what they preached.

Having read Sanders’ book, I am convinced he would largely, if not entirely, agree with this analysis. But when he makes statements such as, “Trinitarian theology is a complex discourse based on an insight into the overall meaning of scripture,” I would want to insist that such statements are best understood as shorthand not for the claim that Scripture’s various propositions can be assembled into a trinitarian theology but rather for the claim that Scripture’s various affirmations (and acclamations and narratives and...) are displayed as interlocking and non-competitive when trinitarian conceptualities and categories are elucidated. And I hope that we might see more exploration of this distinction in any follow-up work that Sanders may attempt on the heels of this book. Put another way, when Sanders says that his book is largely an effort to “give dogmatic guidelines for trinitarian exegesis,” implying

that trinitarian dogma functions as a sort of grammar that helps our biblically faithful theological speech come to articulation, I hope that he may also pursue the matter from the other direction, answering with more nuance the question of how the Bible's faithful speech is more fully understandable as faithful when we trace out the grammar to which its speech conforms.

On the Achievements of "Modern" Exegesis

One of the most stimulating portions of the book for me as a New Testament specialist was Sanders' discussion of how "creative new ways of demonstrating the doctrine of the Trinity are emerging" even as grammatical-historical exegesis has called into question some older proofs (such as the so-called Christophanies of the Old Testament). At one level, this might suggest a blind commitment to traditional doctrine for its own sake, if we now are casting about for new exegetical rationales for maintaining it. But it need not do so. Rather, Sanders suggests, this newer trinitarian exegesis is equally readable as our "cultivat[ion], in a way appropriate for our own time, the interpretive practice which produced [the early church's holistic interpretation of scripture]."

Several comments may be made about this claim. In the first place, Sanders is simply right that much of the so-called newer "trinitarian" exegesis is rather different from its patristic wellspring. It may be worth taking a moment to sketch, in a way that Sanders does not in his book, the shape and content of some of this exegesis.

Richard Bauckham's important 1998 Didsbury Lectures, published as *God Crucified*, are a case in point. With great theological subtlety, Bauckham argues that Paul envisioned what he describes as the "inclusion" of Jesus in the "unique identity" of Israel's God. For Bauckham, "identity" is a term related to, or indeed constituted by, narrative. "Identity" is "who someone is." Hence, "[r]eference to God's identity," writes Bauckham, "is by analogy with human personal identity, understood not as a mere ontological subject without characteristics, but as including both character and personal story (the latter entailing relationships)."⁵ The identity of the God of Israel is, we might say, the

⁵ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 6 n. 5.

story of God's mighty acts in Israel's history and the narrative of God's relationship in covenant with Israel.

"The value of the concept of divine identity appears partly," for Bauckham, "if we contrast it with a concept of divine essence or nature."⁶ Whereas the former is concerned with the "name" and the "act[ing], speak[ing], [and] relat[ing]" that God does, the latter is a static category, answering the "what" rather than the "who" question.⁷ The payoff of this narrative approach, according to Bauckham, lies in the way it can explain, for instance, Paul's exalted view of Jesus and also the absence of any categories of "substance" or "ontology" in Paul's letters. For Bauckham's Paul, Jesus is involved in the creation of the world as the pre-existent Son (1 Corinthians 8:6) and in the consummation of all things insofar as he reigns over all things at God's behest (Philippians 2:9-11; 1 Corinthians 15:24-28), and *just so* is he identified with the God of Israel. But he is not thereby a sharer in the divine "essence," that category not being a Jewish, first-century one.⁸

By contrast, Bauckham's reading of the Patristic era is one which the fundamentally Jewish/Hebraic categories of both Paul and his Old Testament background are increasingly forgotten or marginalized as the church fathers shift "to categories focused on divine being or nature—what God is."⁹ Bauckham grants that the *homoousion* made its initial appearance in a narrative-creedal context (insofar as the Nicene and Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creeds pick God out by way of the narrative of the history of Jesus), but he is less sure that the Hellenistic categories

⁶ Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 7.

⁷ Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 6, 7.

⁸ One can chart a connection between Bauckham's exegetically-based arguments and the larger theological project of thinkers such as, e.g., Robert Jenson who speak of "the old dissonance between the metaphysical principles of the Greeks and the storytelling of the gospel" (*Systematic Theology* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], 1:112).

⁹ Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, p. 58. Bauckham thus subscribes to a version of what Paul Gavriluk has called "the theory of theology's fall into Hellenistic philosophy" (*The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought*, Oxford Early Christian Studies [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 5, 176).

the Fathers employed were able to articulate “the revelation of the divine identity in the human life of Jesus and his cross.”¹⁰ As he puts it, the categories of divine nature and the Platonic definition of divine nature which the Fathers took for granted proved serious impediments to anything more than a formal inclusion of human humiliation, suffering and death in the identity of God. That God was crucified is indeed a patristic formulation, but its implications for the doctrine of God the Fathers largely resisted.¹¹

Here, then, is an example of a kind of contemporary “trinitarianism” whose exegesis is relentlessly theological and uses much of the language of the tradition in articulating its conclusions but whose arguments and explicitly and firmly set over against patristic trinitarian exegesis, with the latter’s interest in what Scripture implies about the divine nature.

This is a significant development in the history of Christian trinitarian reflection, and I wonder whether Sanders is overly optimistic about its continuity with its antecedents. Just as many contemporary systematic treatments of trinitarian theology note the radical gulf separating more “social,” “personalistic” trinitarianisms and more traditional, so-called “essential” ones (one thinks here, for instance, of Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s criticism of Aquinas or of Colin Gunton’s criticisms of Augustine), so also many contemporary exegetical arguments for trinitarianism scarcely resemble older exegeses to the point that one begins to reach for strong language to describe the chasm that separates them.¹² Is there a more than linguistic connection between the trinitarian exegesis of John 1 that, say, Augustine performs, in which the singular divine essence is eternally communicated by the Father to the Son and the more contemporary trinitarian exegesis of Philippians 2 by, say, Michael Gorman in which Paul is said to be “reconstructing the

¹⁰ Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 58.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² One might compare Bauckham’s more recent admission that he finds the twentieth century’s social doctrines of the Trinity more fruitful for Johannine (and, one gathers, wider biblical) interpretation than he does the mainstream of the so-called “Western theological tradition”: Richard Bauckham, “Divine and Human Community,” in *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 21-41, at 36-39.

meaning of God's essential attributes and thus the meaning of divinity itself"?¹³ I want to say that there is, but I am also aware of the difficulty of giving a straightforwardly affirmative answer.

The second observation I want to make about Sanders' reading of contemporary trinitarian biblical exegesis is that he accepts the need, in principle, for a *renewal* of trinitarian exegesis and not simply a *repristination* of past examples of it. Regardless of whether contemporary exegetical performances like those of Richard Bauckham or Michael Gorman above represent the best way forward, Sanders does admit that "[c]ertain techniques of [pre-modern or pre-critical trinitarian] interpretation are so temporally bound and culturally located as to be unavailable to modern academics," and, at the same time, that "the tools, techniques, and standards of modern biblical studies are warranted and legitimate [and thus] the way forward must be to use them better, more fully, and more strategically."

As a practitioner of modern critical reading methods, I think I am largely in agreement with Sanders on this score. In company with other contemporary exegetes, such as Walter Moberly, I would wish to maintain that

Christians should seek to relearn, downwind of modernity (and so not unlearning its lessons), older (biblical, patristic, medieval) conceptions which construe the nature of God and the world in ways many today find difficult to conceive (so deeply embedded are the seventeenth-century mental habits) but which must (for the sake of Christian truth) be freshly articulated and re-appropriated in our postmodern context.¹⁴

¹³ Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 25, 27, 28: "Christ's divinity, and thus divinity itself, is being narratively defined as kenotic and cruciform in character.... Paul is doing in Philippians 2 something very similar to what he does in 1 Corinthians 1: reconstructing the meaning of God's essential attributes and thus the meaning of divinity itself. Like the wisdom of God and the power of God, so also the very form of God is displayed for Paul on the cross by the one who was and is equal to God.... God, we must now say, is essentially kenotic, and indeed essentially cruciform."

¹⁴ R. W. L. Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 36.

And yet I confess that I have not yet worked out to my satisfaction exactly how to hold this appreciation for grammatical-historical reading together with an ongoing affirmation of the authority and importance of figural (and indeed allegorical and “radical”) readings of Scripture, not least those modeled within Scripture itself(!), for a renewed contemporary trinitarianism. Does grammatical-historical exegesis need to serve as a kind of bedrock starting point for and tethering check on more figural approaches, in a way akin to how the literal sense grounded other senses in the medieval *Quadrigena*? Or does grammatical-historical exegesis need to occupy some kind of subordinate role in the exegetical scheme?¹⁵ In short, are newer ways of reading the Bible normative now, and, if so, why? To make the question concrete, if the church fathers could find the Trinity in the first-person plural pronouns of Genesis 1, for example, while most biblical scholars today would view such a move as a violation of that text’s original grammatical-historical sense, does the biblical scholarship of today then trump the fathers? Or to take another example, should contemporary trinitarianism, while acknowledging the lack of authorial-intentional grounding for such a reading, view the fourth figure in Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s furnace as a pre-incarnate Second Person of the Trinity?¹⁶ And if so, what does that imply about the normativity, or lack thereof, of the grammatical-historical approach? As an exegete myself, I would benefit from reading and engaging with Sanders’ further reflections in this area.

Finally, I may simply note that I am also beginning to wonder how *great* a gulf separates (at least some) pre-critical exegetical arguments for

¹⁵ Someone like Dale Martin would simply deny modern historical criticism, and its determination to locate one meaning of the text in accord with the human author’s intention, a place as the final arbiter of Scripture’s interpretation: “As one method for reading Scripture among others, [historical criticism] is not only appropriate but often quite valuable. What I am arguing is that any insistence that historical criticism is *necessary* or provides the *ruling and controlling* meaning of the text offends the theological notion of the communion of saints and is therefore not theologically defensible” (*Sex and the Single Savior* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2006] 10. Cf. Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 36.

¹⁶ As artfully attempted in Richard B. Hays, “Who is the God That Will Deliver You?” in Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (eds.), *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 306-10.

trinitarianism and (at least some) modern, critical exegetical arguments for trinitarianism. Not all of the patristic and other pre-modern arguments were figural or allegorical, and many of them sound not too dissimilar from some of the newer exegesis. Consider, for instance, this passage—chosen from among a number of other possible authors—from Martin Luther’s 1535 *Lectures on Galatians*, in which Luther is commenting on Paul’s opening salutation in Galatians 1:3, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”:

The true deity of Christ is proved by this conclusion: Paul attributes to Him the ability to grant the very same things that the Father does—grace, peace of conscience, the forgiveness of sins, life, and victory over sin, death, the devil, and hell. This would be illegitimate, in fact, sacrilegious, if Christ were not true God. For no one grants peace unless he himself has it in his hands. But since Christ grants it, He must have it in His hands.¹⁷

Luther’s exegetical point is that the powers and activities ascribed to Jesus in this passage are divine prerogatives. His claim seems to be that the functions attributed to Jesus here are ones that are reserved in the Old Testament for the God of Israel. Having made this observation, Luther concludes not so much with a diachronic reflection on how the early Christians came to “include” Jesus within their understanding of Jewish monotheism (that being, of course, the route of contemporary scholars like Bauckham). But he does reflect on what this means about the ontology of the man Jesus: he must be more than a man, indeed he must be “true God,” if Paul’s attributions are not to amount to blasphemy.¹⁸

This strategy is not new; the Cappadocians and other fathers had already made use of such arguments from Christ and the Spirit’s actions in the economy to what faith must say about their ontological status. But nor is the strategy passé now, and that is my point here: the way Luther goes about making his point about the equality between Father and Son is one that reappears in similar, if not identical, guise in much of the so-called “early high Christology” research carried out in the New Testament

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535, Chapters 1-4*, LW 26 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 31.

¹⁸ Compare on this C. Kevin Rowe, “Romans 10:13: What is the Name of the Lord?” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 22/2 (2000): 135-73, at 171-3.

guild of today. What this might suggest, in turn, is that there is room to explore the possibility of our own “exegetical amnesia”¹⁹—the way we have arrived, via Bauckham and Gorman and C. Kevin Rowe and Matthew Bates and others, at a view of the Bible as trinitarian, only to realize that our forebears got there first, after taking a very similar route to the one we ourselves took. My hope is that we might see more from Sanders on this theme in the future: more discussion of how the exegetical dimensions of traditional trinitarian theology open up into (or, occasionally, fail to open up into) the current efforts at a renewal of trinitarian exegesis.

It is, of course, all to the great credit of Sanders’ book that it raises these intriguing and endlessly fascinating questions. One finishes this book not only with gratitude but with expectation and a renewed determination for theological exploration as well.

Defining “Doctrine” and Seeking a Third Way: Reflections on Fred Sanders’ *The Triune God*

STEPHEN R. HOLMES

Principal of St. Mary’s College,
University of St. Andrews

Introduction

There is much to like in Fred Sanders’ new book, and much to admire. His primary orientation of doctrine to praise is not just right, but a welcome departure from contemporary scholarly norms; his insistence on the primacy of Scripture, and the proper modesty of systematic theology as seeking only to witness to Scripture, is something we should not just applaud but echo—and indeed heed. He understands Trinitarian doctrine, and its history, and deploys deep learning with effortless charm and great generosity to all those he interacts with. He leads us down by-

¹⁹ I borrow this highly suggestive term and concept from Dale C. Allison, “Secularizing Jesus,” in *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and its Interpreters* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 1-26, at 9.

ways of the Christian tradition that are always fascinating and instructive—and that only add to the increasing list of books I must find time to read. Most of all, his concern that the foundational doctrine of the Trinity should be shown to have secure Biblical moorings, the concern that drives the text, is one that we could wish many more recent writers on the doctrine had shared. Had our Trinitarian revival been more solidly grounded in Scripture, and less desperate to defend the doctrine on grounds of utility, we might have done better.

It is, that is to say, an excellent book and a welcome addition to the—admittedly crowded—shelves of Trinitarian theology. It deserves to stand out from that crowd, to be widely read and widely discussed. All that said, I am slightly uncomfortable with the central premise, and I think that reflecting on that disagreement might help elucidate—not so much the doctrine of the Trinity, where I believe Sanders and I stand shoulder to shoulder, but the right way to relate systematic theology to Scripture. To put the point in a sentence, Sanders seems to want to say that only deductive argument from Scripture may give us useful theology; I see in the doctrine of the Trinity the classic case where inductive argument was vital. That rather obscure methodological difference has significant implications.

Defining Doctrine

My argument begins with a fairly thick definition of what we mean when we say, ‘the doctrine of the Trinity’. Let me start in hearty agreement with some points Sanders makes in criticizing what he calls ‘piecemeal proofs’ of the doctrine. He offers us Warfield or A.H. Strong reducing the doctrine of the Trinity to a series of terse propositions, each of which is then proved exegetically. Sanders is characteristically charitable towards his examples, noting weaknesses in their piecemeal constructions, but refusing to ascribe that to any intentional failing. These examples do, however, invite us to reflect on what we mean when we say ‘the doctrine of the Trinity’.

Sanders offers us Strong as summarizing the doctrine in six heads (173-4), viz:

1. In Scripture there are three who are recognized as God.
2. These three are so described in Scripture that we are compelled to conceive of them as distinct persons.

3. This tripersonality of the divine nature is not merely economic and temporal but is immanent and eternal.
4. This tripersonality is not tritheism, for while there are three persons, there is but one essence.
5. The three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are equal.
6. Inscrutable yet not self-contradictory, this doctrine furnishes the key to all other doctrines.

The last point contains an interesting assertion, that the doctrine is ‘not self-contradictory’, which I suggest is of a subtly different order to the rest. The previous five points are propositions that may, in principle, be proved by Biblical exegesis (I believe each of them can be so proved, indeed). Can the assertion that these five points are ‘not self-contradictory’ be proved from Scripture? Well, it is not theoretically impossible: if we had a biblical text asserting the logical coherence of these various claims, we could appeal to it. Unfortunately, we do not in fact have such a text.

The proof of the claim of non-contradiction lies not in exegesis, but in the assertion of a Scripture principle: because God’s revealing work is perfect, those things which may be proved by appeal to Scripture are each true, and truths cannot stand in contradiction to each other. We should, of course, accept this argument, but we might also at times feel a need, or perhaps a temptation, to engage in apologetic work—accepting as a matter of faith that certain propositions do not contradict each other, we nonetheless want to offer an account of how it is they do not contradict each other, despite appearances to the contrary.

Take for example the twin claims ‘God desires all Christians to flourish’ and ‘God demands sexual abstinence from unmarried Christians’. In a culture—such as the late modern West—which assumes that human flourishing is impossible without erotic fulfilment, these two propositions appear to many to be flatly contradictory. We could of course simply rely on exegesis to demonstrate the truth of both claims and assert their coherence on the basis of our Scripture principle, but the pressure to do some more work, to offer a deconstruction of cultural accounts of human flourishing and a construction of a different, more Biblical, anthropology, is surely one we can all understand, and one that,

in formal academic writing, or informal apologetic conversations, many of us will have engaged in.

I have argued in various places that much of the patristic development of trinitarian dogma was work like this, attempts to articulate and demonstrate a conceptuality under which apparently contradictory exegetical claims could be shown to cohere.²⁰ Strong gives us Biblical propositions; is this what we should call ‘the doctrine of the trinity,’ or does that doctrine properly contain those conceptual developments offered by fourth-century Fathers to demonstrate the coherence of the biblical claims? Let me propose a rather different proposition: ‘Relational distinctions may exist in a spiritual substance without compromising its ontological simplicity’. Anyone familiar with the fourth-century debates, or with Augustine, will recognize this as a necessary proposition for trinitarianism as it was there defined, stated explicitly in Augustine, and more-or-less explicitly in Gregory of Nazianzus’s *Theological Orations*. Is this claim a part of the patristic doctrine of the trinity or not?

It is possible to answer in the negative: the doctrine of the Trinity consists of those statements, like Strong’s above, which must be believed; the apologetic and explanatory work that makes it easier to believe by demonstrating a route to coherence is helpful, but not properly a part of the doctrine. I suppose, however, that most of us would instinctively answer in the positive: this is part of the doctrine of the Trinity, yes. My argument will proceed on the basis of this positive answer.

Doctrine and Scripture

Sanders offers us three accounts of the possible relationship of doctrine to Scripture, one of which he discards (171). The first is what we might term naive biblicism: only that which is plainly taught in Scripture is to be believed. Sanders rejects this quite quickly—he has to of course; if it is right then there is no hope for trinitarian doctrine, with all its unbiblical language of persons, essence, and, well, ‘trinity’. Let me pause here for a little however, since one of the themes of Sanders’ book is that theologians ought to be particularly responsible to the text of Scripture, and so these straightforwardly biblical propositions ought to be of

²⁰ See particularly my ‘Response: In praise of being criticised’ in Thomas A. Noble and Jason S. Sexton, eds, *The Holy Trinity Revisited: Essays in Response to Stephen R. Holmes* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2015).

particular significance for us. Old Reformed doctrines accounts of the perfections of Scripture stood seriously on these points: Scripture is inspired, truthful, authoritative, sufficient, and perspicuous, and so the humble reader who believes what is plainly taught in its pages attains all knowledge necessary to salvation. When the *Quicumque vult* begins its account of technical trinitarian theology with the assertion that *quicumque vult salvus esse ... ut teneat catholicam fidem* its basic error is a denial of the proper doctrine of Scripture. We do not need to believe what the church teaches about the Trinity to be saved; we do need to believe what the Bible teaches about the way of salvation.

Moving on, however, this could be heard as a rather classic evangelical pitting of Scripture against tradition, which of course I do not want to do—and nor does Sanders; the second option he rejects is one in which the doctrine of the Trinity belongs merely to the tradition of the church; let me quote him at some length:

Perhaps because the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly formulated in scripture in the terms that have proven most useful for catechizing, refuting heresy, and making orderly, wissenschaftliche statements of the contents of Christian teaching, defenders can sometimes be found claiming that the Trinity is not so much a teaching of scripture as an artifact of Christian tradition. Certainly the conceptual elaboration of trinitarian theology in the early history of church doctrine is a great intellectual achievement. Nicaea alone is a mighty leap forward in doctrinal understanding, and each of the early centuries has some contribution to make. If, in grateful reception and employment of these theological tools, some advocates of the doctrine of the Trinity make unguarded statements giving the impression that the doctrine itself is the work of the church rather than the teaching of the Bible, we may safely hear them with forbearance. But if the claim is made in earnest, it must be corrected. (80-81)

This, I confess, is the point where I begin to hesitate slightly, a hesitation that turns on my account of the nature of the doctrine above. Of course, the sort of core propositions asserted by Strong are the plain teaching of Scripture; but it is not clear to me how to derive my claim about simplicity

and relations in a spiritual substance exegetically. That would seem to be fairly clearly the work of the church.

Now, Sanders has an answer to this, drawn in one of its formulations from no less an authority than the Westminster Confession which asserts that ‘the whole counsel of God... is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.’ There are, of course, things that are not expressly taught in Scripture but that may be derived from that which is taught therein; in the area of trinitarian doctrine there is, famously, no unambiguous claim in the New Testament that the Holy Spirit is God, but (as Basil argued in *De Spiritu Sancto*) this point is not hard to derive from what is taught in Scripture—or rather, it is not hard to derive if we accept a couple of core assumptions.

Basil’s argument there turns more than once on a particular assumption about ontology. In contrast to a neoplatonic ‘ladder of being’ ontology, where things can occupy all sorts of positions between that which is least real—generally, unformed matter—and that which is most real—the deity, Basil argues for a dualistic ontology.²¹ There are, crudely put, two ways of being: divine, eternal, necessary being and created, timebound, contingent being. The archangel is, in strictly ontological terms, no nearer God than the slug. This is important because all the apparently-pious attempts to say the Spirit (or previously the Son) is the highest of all creatures and the closest to God fall at this hurdle. As Basil puts it, “There is no middle rank: either he shares the divine rule, or he is a slave like me.”

Now, this claim about ontology is interestingly different from the claim about the deity of the Spirit. The latter claim can be fairly easily expressed in a syllogism—in fact, Basil constructs a series of parallel syllogisms, but one will do as an example:

Scripture asserts that only God creates,
But Scripture also asserts that the Holy Spirit is involved in the
work of creation,
Therefore the Holy Spirit is God.²²

²¹ Basil, *De Spir. Sanc.*, 37, 45, 50-51.

²² Basil, *De Spir. Sanc.*, 38.

The argument here is sound and straightforward and fits the extension of naive Biblicism that Sanders found in Westminster: the deity of the Spirit is deduced as a good and necessary consequence of those things taught clearly in Scripture. What, however, of the underlying claim about ontology?

I cannot imagine a similar syllogistic argument based on the clear teaching of Scripture for this claim—and nor can I remember seeing one offered in the literature. Now, the limits of my imagination and reading are not a good source of theological data, and if it were this one proposition, I would shrug and decide that I'd probably missed something obvious, whilst making a mental note to ask someone better read than me. But we repeatedly come across assumptions like this in the development of trinitarian doctrine: propositions that are often basically philosophical, but that become determinative for the way texts are read. My proposition above about how relations and simplicity sit together in a spiritual substance was deliberately one of the more abstruse, but it is fairly characteristic. To list a few others, more or less at random: 'Divine hypostases are distinguished by relationships of origin and not otherwise'; 'God is not a member of any genus'; 'God's relationship to creation is a mixed relation, real on the side of the creature but logical on the side of God'; 'God is *actus purus sine ulla potentia*'; 'human language is incapable of direct reference to the divine essence'.

None of these propositions is unbiblical, in the sense of going against Scripture, and for some of them I can imagine how I might begin to reach for certain Biblical claims which appear to be moving in the right sort of direction, but if claims like this can only be accepted if they can be shown to be deduced as good and necessary consequences of Scripture, then we have a huge exegetical deficit.

Now, Sanders has a weighty argument against imagining that the doctrine of the Trinity is an invention of the church in the sentences immediately following the ones I quoted above:

The church fathers claimed to find the doctrine of the Trinity in scripture. The opponents of the doctrine of the Trinity replied that it was not in scripture, but only in the arguments of the church fathers, imposed on the Bible rather than read there. There is something perverse in latter-day defenders of the doctrine of the Trinity agreeing with the anti-trinitarians of the patristic age while thinking they are defending both the Trinity

and the church fathers. This, rather obviously, will not do. The way to be patristic is to learn to discern the doctrine of the Trinity in scripture, as the fathers did, and not to blame the doctrine on churchly creativity, as their opponents did.

To which I want to say—not quite. As I have pointed out in print before now, one of the characteristic moves on both sides of the fourth-century debate was a certain willingness from time to time to step back from the immediate task of exegesis to propose some conceptual clarifications and distinctions, which would then be brought back to the text in the hope that they would make it easier to receive the whole counsel of Scripture. Most of the propositions I have noted above belong here. They are not so much deduced from Scripture as offered to Scripture in the hope that they will make the task of reading Scripture easier; insofar as they do, they are accepted as useful parts of the doctrine.

Sanders in fact deploys an argument like this himself at least once in the book: in chapter 5, in a section entitled ‘internal actions of the Trinity’, we read the following: “But this scholastic-sounding translation into the conceptuality of internal actions is fruitful in several ways. If we do not unpack trinitarianism using this conceptuality, it will be hard to deal with a number of pressures.” (130) The move here is defended not because it can be derived exegetically, but because making it allows us to better defend those other things that can be deduced by good and necessary consequence.

The arguments here are, I suggest, in inductive, not deductive, form. They are more nearly the arguments of a historian than of a mathematician. Perhaps suggested by the Bible, perhaps borrowed from elsewhere, they are offered as interpretative schemes that will claim some justification if they are found to help us to read the text better. They are not things that can be ‘by good and necessary consequence deduced from Scripture’ and because of this they are always slightly tentative, open to correction, perhaps by being replaced, more likely by being modified slightly to be made more useful. I propose that much that we would tend to think of as ‘the doctrine of the Trinity’ is more nearly of this form than another. It is a result of ‘churchly creativity’, but not ‘imposed on the Bible’, rather offered in humble expectation that it might help us to better read the Bible. It is imaginative apologetic work that is there to help those of us who faithlessly struggle to accept the naive

Biblical truths because our critical faculties are too well-honed—to help those of us, that is, who are by temperament theologians.

On the Task, the History, and the Topography of Theology:
A Response to *The Triune God*

PAUL T. NIMMO

Professor Systematic Theology,
University of Aberdeen

Introduction

My presentation to you today unfolds in three sections. First, I want to give expression to some of the reasons for my warm appreciation of Fred Sanders in undertaking to write this particular book at this particular time. Second, I want to outline explicitly, if briefly, the areas of broad agreement between my own theological position and the theological claims of his volume. This is an important move, as it will help to locate the occasional questions and hesitations which I have about this work within an over-arching context of broad and enthusiastic affirmation. Third, then, I want to indicate three points at which I would seek to register demurral or uncertainty in respect of his book – one pertains to the task of theology, one pertains to the history of theology, and one pertains to the topography of theology.

Opening Appreciation

To begin with, I wonder if I might express my warm appreciation of this volume as a contribution to the contemporary landscape of systematic theology. We have already heard something this afternoon concerning the purpose of this book and its contents, and I do not want to retread already well-trodden ground. But I do want to affirm at least in brief some central points. First the aim of the book to secure our right thinking and right speaking – and thus right preaching – of the triune God is a deeply important one. This need for clear guidance in respect of our ordering our ‘theological language’ of the Trinity [19] is not only an ever-present one; it is also a particularly compelling one in the current theological setting, where the doctrine of the Trinity is put to at times

surprising and at times questionable use to justify a rather wide variety of Christian thought and practice. Second, the trajectory of argumentation in the book – which effects this securing of the orthodoxy of our understanding by way of attending to the revelation of God – seems to me to be exactly the right trajectory to follow. That this leads the book to what it describes as an ‘unconventional’ structure [19] is no weakness in this regard but a strength, attesting the desire to discipline our understanding of the revelation of God by the content of the revelation. And third, the detailed attention to resources afforded by the book across this trajectory is deeply informed and deeply informative. For all the concision of the book, Sanders has marshalled and mastered an almost dizzying array of material – scriptural, liturgical, and dogmatic – to present a dense yet robust case for knowledge of the Trinity. The host of witnesses upon whom he calls span not only the centuries but also the denominations.

Aside from appreciating the aim, structure, and material of the book, however, I enjoyed particularly the humour of the book. Sometimes in the footnotes, but also elsewhere, there seemed to be a real and to my mind entirely appropriate sense of play within the work. A lament for the ongoing over-use of Rublev’s icon of the Trinity on the cover of theological texts [73n3], an observation that modern students of theology do not expect immediate teaching on heaven and hell on their curriculum [184], and the discourse on Johann August Urlsperger, who popularised the terms essential and revealed Trinity [149–150] – in each there were substantial material points to be made, but also a welcome lightness of authorial touch.

Mutual Terrain

Given that it is of the essence of any response to anything to offer some questions and register some hesitations, it may be as well to affirm clearly my agreement with much of the methodological and material substance of this impressive book. There are broad swathes of material in Sanders’ book to which I would simply want to say ‘Yes’ and ‘Amen’. I have already mentioned the desire to work from where the Trinity is revealed in the economy of God to the doctrine of the Trinity as being both robust and helpful. And to this agreement I would add many of the traditional orthodox affirmations made in the book: that God is one in substance and three in person; that the distinctions between the persons

of the Trinity are truly eternal and not merely economic; that the persons are distinguished by their relations of origin; and that the persons work indivisibly in the divine economy.

Beyond these standard – though nonetheless significant – tropes of agreement, I found much to admire and commend in a range of other points in the book: the lovely use of the terminology of magisterial and ministerial in reflecting upon the sources of theology [92]; the profoundly canonical approach to Scripture unfolded first in theory and later in practice [101 cf. 182]; the genuine questioning of the terminology of immanent and economic Trinity [148]; the heuristic use of the prosoponic method in the exegesis of the Old Testament [229]; and my absolute favourite, a firm rejection of the need for artificial Trinitarian symmetry [244]. In these, as at many other points in the book, I found my own views confirmed and informed by Sanders.

Possible Differences

Rather than spend more time dwelling on the vast array of material with which I agree in the book, let me turn, in intentionally unbalanced fashion, to areas of potential difference. As I heralded at the beginning, I want in what follows to reflect on three areas in which I may have questions or reservations concerning the book. I should note that none of these should be taken necessarily to reflect disagreement with Sanders – at least not ahead of his response! But they may indicate matters in respect of which we have different inclinations, or in respect of which we would allocate attention and emphasis differently – and both not only, perhaps, in respect of our exposition of the Trinity, but perhaps in our theological work more broadly.

On the Task of Theology

The series editors – Dr. Allen and Dr. Swain, who are to be warmly commended for their initiative in formulating and advancing this worthy series of *New Studies in Dogmatics* – state in the series preface that “Dogmatic theology ... is a conceptual representation of scriptural teaching about God and all things in relation to God” [15]. More particularly, Sanders intimates early in the book that Trinitarian theology, in particular, is a ‘doxological movement of thought that gives glory to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by beginning with confession of the work of God in salvation history and then reasoning back to its

antecedent principles in God” [20]. Or again, more concisely, he writes that “All theology ought to be doxology, but Trinitarian theology in particular is essentially a matter of praising God” [25]. Indeed, for Sanders, “Theology is not itself if it is not also praise” [28]. And there is much in all this that seems wise. But I do have a slight reservation about this doxological construal of theology.

My hesitation about affirming this construal of theology as praise lies in the danger of conflating third-order speech about God with fourth-order speech about God. To explain: we might take the conversation of Father, Son, and Spirit to be the original, first-order speech about God – here, in line with the intention of the book as I see it [74], I do not over-differentiate so-called immanent from so-called economic. And we might take second-order speech about God to refer to the divine address to humanity, indicatively exemplified by Incarnation and Pentecost and narrated and exemplified in Scripture – again, I hope, in line with the book [100]. If this is right, it would mean that third-order speech about God might be construed as our response directly to the Trinitarian God in praise and worship, in prayer and confession, in lament and in exultation – a direct communication with God, a vertical transaction. And here, I think, we begin to differ.

For it seems to me that Sanders would locate theology as third-order speech, belonging precisely to the genre of praise. But I am not fully persuaded about this, and instead, I think I would rather construe theology as fourth-order speech. Now I do not deny that theology can flow or be required by from worship or that worship can lead into or further require theology. Nor do I pretend that fourth-order speech about God can take place without the grace and mercy of God or that it is somehow a purely human activity, whatever that might mean. And I certainly recognise that in its own way theology is surely a response to God and the address of God.

But I do struggle to consider theology itself as primarily a third-order event of the order of praise and worship. It seems to me that in terms of its habitual contexts, and in terms of its intended addressees, it is rather different. So, for example, when Peter writes that we should “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have,” (1 Peter 3.15), it is clear that to give such an answer would be to give a quasi-theological account whose giving and whose content would praise God. But the praise of God would not seem

to be the primary thing in view here. Theology can take place for a host of reasons that serve the purpose of worship and of truth in worship – it can correct the preaching of the church, for example, or serve as normative rule of faith for exegesis. But I think that there is always a movement from worship to theology or from theology to worship. Otherwise, the danger is that everything is worship, and where that is true, perhaps nothing is truly worship.

To render this point in a very basic, concrete, and personal way, I have a different feeling when I am worshipping God than when I am doing theology. And I am not sure I am doing it wrong ...

On the History of Theology

Sanders is quite clear from the outset that his task is not to write a history of theology – he readily acknowledges that “the history of doctrine receives little direct attention in this outline” [23]. And that is entirely fair: I am sure the word limit for the volume was pressing and acute! And yet there is a potential downside to this. The book offers a lovingly crafted and deeply contemplated account of the divine missions of Incarnation and Pentecost and indicates how on scriptural grounds the orthodox Trinitarian account of God as three persons in eternity is what arises. And as noted above, I do not want to disagree with this conclusion materially.

But as Sanders knows well, the journey of the Christian churches of the patristic era towards this conclusion was anything but serene. He acknowledges clearly that “Clarity and precision on this matter were gradual accomplishments, of course, and much could be said about the various paths followed by patristic theologians arguing from their diverse theological cultures” [115–116]. And, indeed, as is well known to historians of theology, for almost the entirety of the first three centuries of the church, theologians – even the best and still cited ones – tended to be either economic Trinitarians such as Irenaeus or subordinationist Trinitarians such as Origen. And I wonder in this light whether Sanders is being rather generous when he writes of “the naive subordinationism that crept in at the edges of otherwise orthodox authors before Nicaea” [96n2]. After all, even after Nicaea, there was dispute enough about these theological matters.

In other words, even with Scripture in hand, the same Scripture that we have today and to which we must always return, and even with

Incarnation and Pentecost as present realities in mind, arguably far more present than to many Christians today, the early church and its theologians truly struggled to reach the doctrine of the Trinity which we know and cherish. It may well be a scriptural doctrine [92] – in fact, I agree entirely with Sanders that it is – but it was one which took deeply spiritual and biblically informed and highly ascetic believers more than three centuries to reach its settled and conclusive form. To write, then, that “the Trinity is ‘not so much inculcated as presupposed’ in the New Testament” [76] seems to be able to refer only to the simple fact that God is Father, Son, and Spirit, and not to the doctrine of the Trinity as such.

All of this is to say that while Sanders attends eloquently to the criticism and rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity in the modern era, it would have been fascinating to have some account from him of this difficulty between orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and heresy in the early church.

And this leads me, rather mischievously, to consider what confession of the Trinity is necessary for salvation. We are told by Paul that ‘if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved’ [Romans 10.9], and we are also told by Paul that ‘no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit’ [1 Corinthians 12.3]. So if we were to believe in a purely economic Trinity, as so many of the Christians and theologians of the early church did, would that be sufficient – or is belief in the eternal hypostatic distinction of the persons of the Trinity necessary for the Christian in addition?

On the Topography of Theology

One of the interesting decisions that Sanders makes is to focus within salvation history on the events of Incarnation and Pentecost [95]. If I am right in discerning his intentions, the principal reason for doing this is that it allows him to focus on the missions of the Son and Spirit – the ‘central events of the economy’ – and to see in these temporal sendings the eternal processions of the Godhead [114]. And the focus in his doctrine of the Trinity on missions and processions is one way for him to achieve his goal of steering us away from the conceptuality of the immanent and economic Trinity [153] to more helpful and fertile dogmatic terrain.

To turn to the mission of the Son in particular, however, it is striking to me how Sanders seems to say very little in his doctrine of the Trinity

about the cross. Now I know full well that this book is not an account of the atonement or even of salvation. But even so, it seems to me that the event of the cross might be a core terrain for theological reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity. The book does acknowledge that 'The desire to point to the cross as the center of all theological action is in itself understandable and may derive from a healthy intuition' [135]. And this certainly offers encouragement in respect of my instincts here. Yet the succeeding sentence continues 'But failure to recognize the antecedent activeness in the life of the living God is debilitating for attempts at thoroughly Trinitarian theology' [135]. And the example of Moltmann is cited as a clear example of how staurocentric theology can go astray.

Yet it remains a matter which causes me to hesitate that the revelatory potential of the doctrine of the cross for a Trinitarian theology is so little exploited here. Or even, given the limits of space both here in the text and in the later chapter of New Testament exegesis, that the cross is so little referenced. Again, perhaps, the sense that emerges from the text is one of serenity – the missions smoothly follow from the processions, and salvation is affected smoothly by the missions. Yet the scandal of the cross, the depths of the incarnation, the gravity of the abandonment, the despair of the disciples, the rending of the Temple – these more disruptive, chaotic, visceral aspects of salvation history seem to be downplayed when incarnation and not crucifixion becomes the focus of the doctrine of the Trinity. It is not that they are denied or excluded, of course ... but they are not quite centre-stage. And one need not argue that the historical event of the cross constitutes the being of the Trinity in the manner of Moltmann to acknowledge that the cross reveals something about the being of the Trinity which goes beyond the act of incarnation.

Now it may be that Sanders would agree with all of this, and counter that it is simply the case that none of this is directly pertinent to the particular focus of his work on the doctrine of the Trinity and that such considerations have more to do with other dogmatic loci. And if so, he may be right, and he may have much of the theological tradition on his side. But I have a lingering hesitation at just this point. I am not quite so sure that the life of the Trinity – however it be construed, and in line with Sanders' intention to sideline the awkward distinction between immanent and economic Trinity – can remain so isolated from consideration of the cross. If the incarnation is a necessary dimension of

Trinitarian reflection, then surely the crucifixion as the necessary and inexorable culmination of the incarnation, is similarly necessary, at least in some sense. Or even more than necessary – it is not simply one episode of salvation history, after all.

God is certainly revealed in the Incarnation – and of course at Pentecost. But we are told to preach Christ crucified, a God who did not think it unworthy not only to take on human flesh but also to die on a cross. And I am not quite sure that we can treat such material only under the rubric of Christology and soteriology without accounting for it more directly in the doctrine of the Trinity, as if the Trinity has a sanctuary utterly untouched by any involvement with the economy. The danger in view is that we risk rendering the Trinity a rather abstract doctrine, in just the kinds of way Sanders himself fears can happen if it is not handled correctly [148].

Conclusion

I suspect that I have said enough to give you an indication of some of the main places where I harbour reservations and questions for this work *The Triune God*. And as I noted at the start, I have focused on these rather than the vast areas of agreement which I would register with Sanders. The perceptive will note that in the case of each of my reservations, I have asked for more from the author – more on the relation between worship and theology, more on the history of theology, and more on the cross and theology. But such is the curse of having written such an excellent book on the Trinity – the reader is left wanting more. And that surely is not only a high compliment to its author, but also a testimony to the great success of the author in his quest to encourage us to seek a greater understanding of the triune God whom we worship.

Catching Trinitarian Theology from the Bible:
A Response to Some Very Good Readers

FRED SANDERS

Professor,
Associate Director, Torrey Honors Institute
Biola University

In the seasons of academic life, there may be no season longer, more filled with foreboding, or riddled with worry than the season that stretches between publishing a book and reading the first public reviews from peers. I feel extremely fortunate that my book *The Triune God* drew these early responses from such accomplished colleagues as Wesley Hill, Stephen Holmes, and Paul Nimmo. These are keen and sharp-eyed scholars, each deeply involved in precisely the theological matters that my book is devoted to expounding. Together they represent the world of sympathetic scholarly interlocutors that are capable of estimating a book's contribution to the field. While a book of this sort was written with a broader audience in mind, and needs to find and serve that audience in order to justify its publication, it would almost be worth writing a book just to earn the expert scrutiny and articulate assessment of a select set of readers like this. At any rate, I am honored that *The Triune God* has gained the attention of these scholars, and it nearly goes without saying that I am relieved and gratified at the generally positive reception they gave the work.

In all three responses, what is most prominent is a set of methodological concerns. Those concerns have mostly to do with the question of how the doctrine of the Trinity is related to the form and content of scripture. That is especially appropriate because *The Triune God* is an attempt to draw out the scriptural element of trinitarian theology. That is, although I intended the book as a piece of systematic theology (in particular a study in dogmatics, as the series title *New Studies in Dogmatics* has it), I deliberately included a great deal of reflection on biblical theology, interpretive strategies, and hermeneutics. The point of doing so was to insist that biblical matter needs to be prominent in doctrinal theology, and to enact the kind of systematic theology that doesn't hold itself aloof from biblical work. As a rough goal during the writing of the book, I wanted about half of the finished volume to be

devoted to dealing directly with the biblical element of trinitarianism. Holding to this goal made the book a little bit eccentric among modern trinitarian theologies written in an academic register, and gave it some formal similarities to patristic treatments of the doctrine (and, not coincidentally, to the raft of devotional works on the Trinity written in a more popular idiom). Handling the doctrine of the Trinity as a doctrine that arises from scripture raises questions, of course. I tried to raise and answer a lot of those questions in the book itself. One of the things that becomes obvious in these responses is that no matter how successfully I may or may not have answered some of the questions I posed for myself in the book, nevertheless I raised more questions than I could answer! In their responses, Hill, Holmes, and Nimmo continue the book's project by addressing some of those unanswered questions and providing some of their own solutions. In what follows I offer a few thoughts on those responses.

In Response to Wesley Hill:

There was a time in the 1990s when theologically sophisticated work by New Testament scholars was extremely scarce. I vividly remember reading Francis Watson's *Text and Truth* (1997) and thinking how unusual it was to see a biblical scholar who could reach so far into the territory of systematic theology. I found that kind of interdisciplinary reach truly inspirational, and often considered what it would take for a systematic theologian to reach out toward the territory of biblical studies. It's tempting to think of that kind of interdisciplinary work primarily as a matter of a scholar's range of competence, or intellectual capacity for breadth of thinking. But the boundaries between disciplines are also more or less policed in both directions by gatekeepers who turn away trespassers. So those who would work across boundaries need not only intellectual scope but also courage, stealth, and the creativity to negotiate a safe crossing. I have no doubt that it is more costly for a biblical scholar to reach out toward systematics than it is for a systematician to reach out toward biblical studies; and my admiration has only grown for Bible people who make the stretch. I am greatly cheered to note that such scholars are easier to find at present than they were fifteen or twenty years ago.

I count Wesley Hill among them; his 2015 book *Paul and the Trinity* not only made bold to use the T-word in its very title, but did so in

support of the claim that categories like “person” and “relation” are, even today, apt tools for actual exegetical work. Of course, the proof of such a claim rests almost entirely in the details. In his book, Hill demonstrated his trinitarian hypothesis by close investigation of Pauline texts about God, Christ, and the Spirit. In carefully chosen texts, he showed that in order for us to make sense of the things Paul said, an alert reader would find it very helpful to appeal to categories like person and relation. These trinitarian ways of thinking, he argued, are not to be carried back from the fourth century and projected onto the Pauline text; nor are they to be built up on top of the Pauline text as a permissible superstructure that rises from the textual bedrock. Trinitarian categories like person and relation are instead ways of naming what is going on in, with, or under the words of Paul. As Hill says in his response to *The Triune God*, discerning these theological realities is not so much building up a new superstructure as indicating an existing substructure, one “embedded and submerged within the Bible.” Such a substructure is not explicitly stated in scripture (that is the force of the prefix sub-), but its presence, so the argument goes, is presupposed in what is said. To say more explicitly trinitarian things than the Bible says is to say what must be true if what the Bible says is to hold together.

We might say that what Hill recommends methodologically for biblical trinitarianism is a shift from architectural metaphors to archeological metaphors. We do not build something up synthetically on top of the biblical foundation; we dig down analytically into the buried presuppositions under the biblical surface. Notice that Hill does not actually use the terms architectural or archeological in his argument; my use of them is itself an attempt to employ the method in question, by naming what Hill was presupposing when he spoke of superstructure and substructure. At any rate, I am entirely in favor of this shift. With regard to my own work, as I look through *The Triune God* I see both metaphors at work here and there, and I wonder if the constructivist idiom is something I picked up from contemporary theological culture. There is, after all, such a thing as a thoroughly constructivist methodology in modern systematic theology, as is signaled by the Workgroup on Constructive Theology, or the recent book that doubles down on the

metaphor: *Constructing Constructive Theology*.²³ Some people, myself included, use the word constructive not to indicate that new theology is being produced, but rather to indicate that substantive rather than merely descriptive claims are being made.

When I invoke B. B. Warfield's argument that the Trinity is revealed between the testaments, not in verbal arguments but in the personal, historical presence of the Son and the Holy Spirit, my goal is to evoke the already-accomplished character of the realities confessed by trinitarian theology. Given the incarnation and Pentecost, New Testament authors can be read as themselves identifying what must be true if all God's ways have been manifested in the missions of these two persons. The mode of argument used by Paul, John, and Hebrews when they are speaking of God, Christ, and the Spirit is very often the mode of biblical interpretation; that is, reading the Old Testament and naming the ways in which Christ and the Spirit must be present in these texts since the incarnation and Pentecost have happened. When they engage in prosoponic exegesis of the Old Testament, they are discerning the substructure of prior biblical revelation. When the church fathers, or contemporary theologians, follow their lead in prosoponic exegesis and other forms of retrospective reading, they are doing likewise. And when we read the New Testament in order to articulate trinitarian theology, we are once again seeking insight into the substructure that must be there in order to support the things said in the New Testament.

One of the questions Hill is well positioned to ask is whether I present too optimistic a view of the things that are novel in contemporary trinitarian Bible interpretation. When I offer a representative survey of some recent exegetical arguments that reach trinitarian conclusions, I admit that I tend to count them all as contributing to the cause of confessing a biblical trinitarianism. Early high Christology, for example, comes in a number of varieties, but in my reportage they all seem to harmonize, and furthermore to converge on supporting the doctrine of the Trinity. Hill is right to point out that some of these arguments presuppose a different metaphysical framework than the actual pro-Nicene culture of classical trinitarianism. Some of them are in fact intentionally revisionist in their metaphysic, or antimetaphysically

²³ Jason A. Wyman, *Constructing Constructive Theology: An Introductory Sketch* (Augsburg Fortress, 2017).

historicist. These important differences become most evident when the kind of trinitarianism they yield is a strong social trinitarianism, or some other form of trinitarian confession that confesses a very different notion of the Trinity than the classical one. Readers of Steve Holmes' *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* will recognize here the gap between the classic doctrine of the Trinity and the modern doctrine. In terms of our exegetical investigation, we could ask whether the new methods I am so eager to welcome may after all produce a new doctrine of the Trinity rather than a reaffirmation of the classic one. It is an excellent question, deserving further study. I confess to being harmonistic in my reading of recent exegetical work that is in any way favorable to trinitarian doctrine. And I am grateful for Hill's warning that the tools and aims of modern exegesis need to be handled with due vigilance and with wide-awake critical scrutiny. Prosoponic exegesis, to cite again only the most prominent example, is a technique which, when handled by the apostles and the pro-Nicenes, may have indicated the triunity of persons within the one God. But when isolated and abstracted from its original theological framework and presuppositions, it could produce a social trinitarianism so drastic as to be indistinguishable from tritheism. On reflection, the tool itself almost seems to have that bias built in: philosophical interpreters of Homer used this technique to identify the presence of multiple gods in texts.²⁴ We do well to be alert to the differences between ancient theological cultures and our own. All the tools and techniques that I celebrate in my survey of recent trinitarian interpretation are subject to misuse.²⁵

There are numerous places where Wesley Hill remarks that he looks forward to reading further reflections from me on the exegetical dimensions of trinitarian theology. I, too, want to read further reflections on these matters, but I am especially eager to read them from

²⁴Matthew Bates' celebrated book *The Birth of the Trinity* shows how prosoponic exegesis was employed in the New Testament and in early Christian thought, but he had already traced some of the pagan background of the technique in his earlier book *The Hermeneutics of the Apostolic Proclamation: The Center of Paul's Method of Scriptural Interpretation* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012).

²⁵ Hill himself contends that the fundamental categories of the early high Christology movement are in important ways discordant with the New Testament's underlying categories for speech about Jesus and God; that is one of his key motivations for offering instead the categories of person and relation.

Wesley Hill and from a host of other biblical scholars who are conversant with classic Christian doctrine. While I have more to say about the Trinity in the Bible, I hope my work stirs up colleagues in biblical studies to do the detailed and rigorous work for which only they are qualified.

In Response to Stephen R. Holmes

That Stephen Holmes raises a similar issue, from his own perspective as a systematic theologian with well-developed historical judgment, is a fact that definitely puts me on the alert. Something about my description of the relation of trinitarian theology to the Bible seems to invite further specification, or more careful reckoning. Nor is this merely an instance of academics doing their predictably academic thing, suggesting nuance and insisting on comprehensiveness. No: although Holmes is generously appreciative and commendatory about much of the book (whew!), where he begs to differ has something to do with the whole direction of the argument. *The Triune God* suggests a deductive method precisely where an inductive method is demanded.

The deductive method is the one commended by the Westminster Confession, according to which the full counsel of God consists not only of what is explicitly set down in scripture, but also those things which may “by good and necessary consequence... be deduced from Scripture.” I believe there are such truths, and I suppose Holmes does as well. Anywhere scripture provides propositions which can be used syllogistically in valid reasoning to produce true conclusions, we have the sort of things envisaged by Westminster. But just here Holmes presses a distinction. There are propositions that we can find in scripture. Then there are deductions we can draw from them. But then there are still other things, and these turn out to be some of the most important elements of what we usually think of when we think of trinitarianism. Some of them we might call presuppositions or metaphysical frameworks. Some are networks of apologetic or philosophical argumentation in support of the explicit claims of scripture. Some are accounts of “a conceptuality under which apparently contradictory exegetical claims could be shown to cohere.” The question Holmes presses is whether all these sorts of things count as the doctrine of the Trinity, or whether what we mean by the doctrine of the Trinity is the bare claims without any of the conceptual matrix developed in support and explication of them.

It seems that in at least some cases we need to admit that the conceptual matrix is also what we mean by the doctrine of the Trinity. It is not enough to say that the Father is God and the Son is God and yet there is only one God, and then act as if we have stated the doctrine of the Trinity and can leave it up to various believers and theologians to work out for themselves, with fear and trembling, how these things can be reconciled to each other. Some account of how these claims are connected must also belong to the essence of trinitarianism. And here is the point: if we say the Trinity is in the Bible, we must mean that the most important of those connections are also, somehow, in the Bible. Yet by common consent those things are not verbatim in the Bible, so anybody who wants to make good on the claim that the Trinity is in the Bible must, once again, speak in terms of discerning an underlying substructure that supports the explicit claims.

But instead of repeating our previous language about how the doctrine of the Trinity is in the Bible, Holmes offers another, more methodological description. Perhaps any element of developed trinitarian theology ought to be thought of as a hermeneutical hypothesis suggesting a concept that would make it easier to understand what the Bible is saying. On these lines, any bits of trinitarian theology “are offered as interpretative schemes that will claim some justification if they are found to help us to read the text better.” Doctrinal proposals of this nature could relate to all sorts of things: the claim that persons are distinguished by relations of origin; the claim that the basic metaphysical divide is between God and everything else, with nothing in the middle; the claim that all the myriad names of the Spirit point to one person rather than many; and so on. The test of their quality would be exegesis: Good doctrinal ideas improve our reading of the Bible, yielding a clearer, more cohesive and compelling understanding of what scripture says and why it says it. Bad doctrinal ideas may have some plausibility when looking at a few texts but will fail to pay off by producing a richer reading of the full range of scripture. It is these doctrinal hypotheses that Holmes identifies as more inductive than deductive. And it is these that Holmes says are devised by the church in the course of theological history. Indeed, the chief objection he wants to register against my formulations is that in seeking to safeguard the revealed character of trinitarianism, I come too close to denying the creative activity of churchly theologians of later ages; in some sense the doctrine of the

Trinity is more a “work of churchly creativity” than I want to admit. Yet Holmes also insists that these things are “not imposed on the Bible.”

What I think Holmes is getting at is, to put it somewhat abstractly, a tension in theological method between poesis and mimesis; when we speak the Trinity, are we crafting a doctrine or imitating what the Bible says? Considering trinitarian doctrine as an exegetical hypothesis may permit us to recognize elements of both. Based on an initial reading of scripture, we assemble a conceptual proposal that seems promising for enabling a deeper reading; we then re-read scripture through that proposal to see if it lights up or picks out more than we would have seen in the text without the aid of the proposal. This is neither pure poesis nor simple mimesis. It involves both the crafting of concepts and the reception of something given; the former for the purpose of the latter. An interpretive undertaking of this subtlety and complexity was evoked by Hans Georg-Gadamer when he began his monumental book *Truth and Method* with a short poem by Rainer Marie Rilke. The poem contrasts the empty sport of catching a ball you toss to yourself with a vision of becoming “suddenly the catcher of a ball thrown by an eternal partner” who throws something to you “with accurate and measured swing” so that it flies to you “in an arch from the great bridge-building of God.” Catching is a receptive activity, but the kind of interpretive catching called for in so earnest a sport is nevertheless really an activity rather than a passivity; it is a power that requires us to summon all that is in us in order to receive what is given. Trinitarian theology committed to its exegetical task may well be that kind of active receptivity, as we catch the doctrine of the Trinity from the Bible.

In Response to Paul T. Nimmo:

Paul Nimmo expresses substantial agreement with *The Triune God*, and in those places where he registers some differences of opinion, I am inclined to capitulate altogether, or at least to admit that his suggestions would probably all lead to substantial improvements in the book. Where I describe trinitarian theology as operating according to the same logic of praise, Nimmo helpfully distinguishes between four levels of theological discourse. At the very top, highly exalted indeed, is the conversation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Second-order discourse is divine speech to humanity; third-order the return speech from humanity to God; and fourth-order speech is theology. This is a lovely account of the levels of

theological discourse, recapitulating among other things the Protestant scholastic distinction between archetypal and ectypal theology, and I intend to simply adopt it. I think, however, that I can continue with my claim that trinitarian theology follows the logic of praise if I simply distinguish clearly between the addressee in mind. The response of praise is directed toward God, while theology is directed to our peers. But they can have the same essential content and, more to the point, the same form: gratitude to God for the work of salvation. In writing theology, the theologian speaks not to God but about God, which does introduce another step of distance into the articulation of the praise. But in defense of my inclination to continue to identify praise as the dynamic of even this fourth-order discourse, I could call a few witnesses. Augustine and Anselm, in the *Confessions* and *Monologion* respectively, demonstrate that theology can be taught in the form of sentences that are all directed to God with the intention of being overheard by fellow worshipers. Second, I would point to the Protestant distinction between the confessing church and the teaching church: one emphasizes the responsibility of the church toward God, the other emphasizes the responsibility of the church to its members. But the content of the message is not different in the two contexts: what the church is summoned to say to God in response to his word cannot differ from what it teaches its members. Finally, biblical praise frequently takes the form not of praising God directly, but of telling others to praise God. It is more often "praise the Lord" in the imperative than "I praise you, Lord." Enjoining praise is praise. Although I mean to make a large claim about the Bible when I say that trinitarian theology is a conceptually extended *Gloria Patri*, I should also admit that the main impetus for my theological work is Ephesians 1:3-14. This passage runs through everything I have written on the Trinity, and it is an extended blessing of God. That it is also theologically informative, doctrinally rich, and spiritually nourishing may go a long way toward explaining the doxological contours of my trinitarian teaching.

Nimmo is also right to point out the way *The Triune God* tells the history of the doctrine of the Trinity in too smooth and serene a way. Nobody could tell, from my narration of the history of theology, that there was ever much of a fight involved in establishing trinitarian theology. Not only are the conflicts under-narrated in my version of the story, but the sheer contingency and unpredictability is also somewhat

suppressed. Who would have imagined in advance that Proverbs 8 would become a central text in the development of the doctrine? And yet it did. As for the major turning point from pre-Nicene to Nicene theological cultures, I freely admit that even the best church fathers spoke inconsistently and sometimes ill-advisedly before the great clarification and consolidation of Nicaea. I do not think this counts against the claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is older than Nicaea. The fourth-century situation is complicated, and nearly every century includes some confusing bits of evidence. In my defense I would only point out that there are a lot of fine books available that tend the other direction, over-narrating the conflict and suggesting that continuity is an illusion. The Triune God is partly intended as a counterweight to that tendency, so prominent in historical accounts of the Trinity. There is continuity and discontinuity aplenty; I've highlighted the continuity partly because my emphasis on the revealedness of the doctrine of the Trinity produces some foreshortening of the historical development. Something recognizably Trinitarian was there from the very beginning.

Finally, there is the matter of failing to mention certain important doctrines. One of the minor arguments of *The Triune God* is that we need not be overly anxious about introducing the Holy Spirit into all of our formulations; after all, the Bible doesn't. Paul, and John, and the Lord himself all seem equally likely to mention two terms (Father and Son) as they are to mention three (adding the Spirit, as they do often enough). Nimmo accepts, and even celebrates, this sort of argument for when it may be appropriate to leave out a reference to the Holy Spirit. But he also calls attention to what I can only confess is an embarrassing omission in the book: there is almost no mention of the cross. One might imagine all sorts of reasons a book on the Trinity might not have much to say about the cross, but this book is intentionally centered on the accomplished realities of salvation, and there is considerably less warrant for a book on salvation that omits the cross. So, let me say simply that I wish I had devoted more time to discussing the cross, and the atonement in the narrower sense. But then, I do have two defenses to offer that I think are not merely reflexive jerks of self-defense. First, I use the term incarnation through *The Triune God*, usually in the pair "incarnation and Pentecost," to indicate the mission of the Son of God for our salvation. What I hope that term invokes is not simply the beginning of Christ's mission, but the entirety of it. That is to say, for the argument of this

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