

BOOK REVIEW

Fred Sanders, *Union with Christ and the Life of Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2025, xiv + 157pp. \$22.99

The prolific theologian Fred Sanders has contributed a thought-provoking and helpful work in authoring *Union with Christ and the Life of Faith*. Recognizing that his contribution speaks 'in a somewhat Protestant idiom, and with a rather evangelical accent' (p. 140), Sanders very much has Christian unity in mind and appeals to all Christians to recognize the centrality of salvation as union with Christ. Sanders keeps our attention on the shared 'geography' of union with Christ, while recognizing differences in 'real estate' of soteriological disagreements (p. 5). The book fits perfectly within the 'Soteriology and Doxology' series, whose primary audience is 'theologians-in-formation, meaning that the pedagogical aim of each volume is to train student-readers in a form of theological reasoning that unites what often remains painfully separate in Christian theology: doctrine and spirituality, theology and prayer, the church and the academy, the body of Christ and the individual theologian' (p. viii).

The book opens with a preface and what Sanders calls a doxological prelude. Echoing A. T. Pierson, who stressed the fundamentals of the Christian faith in his evangelical mission in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the preface states that salvation 'has two moments: *In* and *Christ Jesus*' (p. xi). Sanders then articulates the purpose of his brief book: 'Our goal is to indicate how the reality of union with Christ shapes the entire doctrine of salvation' (p. xii). By emphasizing this broad and basic purpose that transcends confessional differences, Sanders argues that 'the doctrine of union with Christ belongs at the controlling center of soteriology' (p. xiii). After reading the preface, I was stunned to find the one-page doxological prelude, a form of the *Anima Christi*. Every day I pray that prayer, which dates to the early fourteenth century, after receiving Holy Communion. I had never seen the Anglican Lancelot Andrewes's arrangement of the first lines of the prayer, which Sanders provides to his fortunate readers: three columns, with the first column displaying the single opening word of each petition, after the header of Soul of Christ (body, blood, water, stripes, sweat, wound), the second column giving the corresponding verb of petition (hallow, strengthen, ransom, wash, heal, refresh, hide), and the third column containing – one simple word from the prayer: 'me'. It is beautiful.

Chapter 1, 'The Creed in Christ', grounds the book's argument in the most basic Christian teachings as found in the Apostles' Creed and the

Nicene Creed. To do so, Sanders unpacks the ‘geography’ of union with Christ, the fundamental ground, over against the ‘real estate’ of soteriological differences by considering what he presented in the doxological prelude: the *Anima Christi*. This medieval prayer has an extraordinary reception not only among Catholics but also in Protestant traditions. The previously mentioned Lancelot Andrewes arranged the first part of the prayer in his *Private Prayers*. The *Anima Christi*, moreover, was translated into German and prayed in the Lutheran Pietist movement, which in turn influenced John Wesley, who took it up and gave it his own twist in English as ‘Jesu, Thy Soul Renew My Own’, a classic in the Methodist tradition. From those distinct perspectives, we can then see how the creed centers on Christ, whose soul sanctifies. Sanders observes that many theologians would not claim a different trinitarian or christological teaching from other Christian communities, but so many do claim soteriological differences. What if we were to recognize a shared soteriology of union with Christ as articulated in the creed (and prayed in the *Anima Christi*)? The world would be more likely to ‘find Christian claims plausible if they are set forth with some degree of unanimity. That is all – the more creedal, the more credible’ (p. 11).

Between the book’s chapters, Sanders gives doxological interludes. Before Chapter 2, ‘Scripture in Christ’, we have the doxological interlude of Ephesians 2:4–7. We are treated to Adolph Saphir’s ‘Three Mysteries’ before Chapter 3, ‘Variations on a Soteriological Theme’, which is in turn followed by the interlude of Edward Polhill’s ‘Three Unions’. Between Chapter 4, ‘Union with Christ as Trinitarian Soteriology’, and Chapter 5, ‘Union with Christ and the Christian Life’, we find Horatius Bonar’s ‘I Cannot Nearer Be’. The book concludes with a doxological postlude: Charles Wesley’s ‘Thou Hidden Source’. Sanders’s work is designed for meditation and praise – it does not have too many footnotes, nor does it press too many intractable disputes to the surface.

Within his overarching argument, developed attractively with insight and verve, Sanders analyzes the contributions of some familiar and some not-so-familiar Western theologians since the Protestant Reformation: Isaac Ambrose, John Calvin, Thomas Goodwin, John Murray, Petrus van Mastricht, John Owen, Girolamo Zanchi, and still others. Sanders writes, ‘For a theology of the Christian life that is consistently and self-consciously grounded in union with Christ, we can do no better than to turn to the Puritan pastoral theologian Walter Marshall (1628–80)’ (p. 129). I disagree – I find Sanders’s book far superior to that Puritan’s work. Sanders leaves behind the polemics of the theologians that he selects. At least in the edition accessible to me (Sanders notes the ‘tortuous editorial history’ [p. 129n11]), Marshall’s *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* accuses ‘Papists’ of idolatry concerning certain teachings, and in his articulation of faith, Marshall contrasts his approach to the ‘heathens’ and the ‘Papists’. Sanders writes of Marshall’s work as ‘frequently praised in superlatives by those who know it’ (p. 129), but I cannot join Sanders and those others in that assessment.

Still, I can praise Sanders and his work. This book should not only be read by wide audiences with interest; it should be prayed over and discussed – especially by Christians of different doctrinal and spiritual traditions. To conclude his book, Sanders draws upon Irenaeus of Lyons and poignantly comments: ‘we ought to consider how we can support his witness to reality rather than he ours’. Sanders continues: ‘For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving adoption, might become the son of God. For by no other means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality’ (p. 141). In this last chapter’s last paragraph, Sanders connects Irenaeus with none other than Walter Marshall, quickly distinguishing the approach of each, and concluding with what he sees that they share: ‘between them they stake out the vast expanse of the one Christian doctrine of salvation by union with Christ’ (p. 141).

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