

Fountain of Salvation: Trinity and Soteriology. By Fred Sanders. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021, vii + 221 pp., \$24.77 paper.

Fountain of Salvation: Trinity & Soteriology is Fred Sanders's latest addition to his growing publishing footprint that includes *The Deep Things of God*, *The Triune God*, and numerous articles, book chapters and theological comic books. Sanders is professor of theology at Biola University's Torrey Honors College. In this book Sanders explores the relationship and connections between the Trinity and the doctrine of salvation. He argues that God reveals his immanent, internal life in his salvific action. The book also sounds an alarm for contemporary evangelical theology concerning the dangers of distorting a proper understanding of soteriology. A doctrine of the Trinity divorced from any significant connection to human salvation can become meaningless, arid and disfigured. Conversely, a doctrine of salvation treated in isolation from the Trinity can become detached from the immanent and eternal God and devolve into dealing with him on the level of historical interpretation and experience alone. Sanders goal in *Fountain of Salvation* is to present an approach to the mega-doctrines of Trinity and Salvation that moves in the arena of a "Goldilocks zone" where values, relationships and expositions are mutually advantageous and "just right."

From the opening chapter Sanders interweaves two major themes that work in tandem. The first—the doctrine of the Trinity—encompasses all of who God is and what God does. Sanders creatively introduces this theme through a discussion of the art on a "portable altar" designed by Elibertus of Cologne (ca. 1160). Photos of the alter are provided on pages 11 and 12. The lid of the altar is analyzed thematically to demonstrate the all-encompassing nature of Trinity doctrine. The left side of the lid tells the story of the crucifixion in sequential pictures

while the right follows the story of the resurrection, all in full, “baked in” color, with the activity of the Father, Son, and Spirit in concert throughout. The elegant portrait in pictures—accompanied by Sanders’s own commentary—sets the tone for *Fountain of Salvation*. It offers a running and balanced storyline depicting the unity of essence and distinction of persons in the doctrine of the Trinity. The second theme Sanders traces in the Elibertus altar is the Gospel. The visual depiction of the incarnation of the Son, the blood of Christ spilled for human sin, and the resurrection by the Spirit, all combine to display the atonement in a pictorial story. Sanders sees the theology resident in this altar as displaying a theme that runs through many of his previous publications—particularly *The Deep Things of God*—that the doctrine of the Trinity and the Gospel belong together.

Striking a balanced view of God who is both a unity of divine essence and distinction of persons is a theme Sanders continually returns to throughout *Fountain of Salvation*. Balance is essential, according to Sanders, due to the vast nature of Trinity doctrine that encompasses so many other fields of theology proper. He begins in chapter one with two simple diagrams. The first shows the danger of misinterpreting the activity of the Trinity in the economy with respect to its efficacy for disclosing the immanent life of God as either “nothing” or “everything”. On the side of nothing, the divine persons become relations of authority—on the side of everything, an eternal Cross with a suffering deity results. The balanced interpretation highlights an immanent life of God with one essence and distinction of persons by relations of origin. The second diagram is an axis constructed of a horizontal line intersecting with a vertical line creating a matrix with four quadrants. The horizontal line delineates God’s immanent life above and economic life below. The vertical line creates a visual separation between the Son on the left and the Holy Spirit on the right. This simple diagram opens the way for discussing “the personal

identity of the Son and the Holy Spirit at either end of the immanent–economic axis” (p. 29).

Sanders returns to this matrix throughout the book as a guideline for understanding the immanent life of God by the way he reveals himself in the economy. The disciplines of Christology and Pneumatology exist inside the doctrine of the Trinity and the matrix Sanders provides in chapter one acts as a cartography for our understanding a sound relationship—with balanced interpretation—between the immanent life of God through the economy of salvation.

Fountain of Salvation consists of ten chapters with an introduction, acknowledgements, a select bibliography, and indices of authors and subjects. There is no division into “parts” or “sections” and the chapters can be read as standalone on the topics they address. The ten chapters are organized in such a way that the work flows organically and systematically. Sanders begins by dealing with the theme of revelation, moving on to the unity of essence, followed by the distinction of the persons, and closing with application and historical interpretive developments. While every chapter is important to Sanders’s discussion, there is a clear logical progression in the development of the book. In chapters one and two Sanders outlines the revealed doctrine of the Trinity in the economy and the importance of how it reflects and illuminates the immanent life of God. “Trinitarian theology’s task,” Sanders observes, “is always to speak rightly about God in himself on the basis of what God has made known to us in the history of his works and words for us in salvation” (p. 53). God is known by the information he chooses to reveal, and the purpose of doctrinal discourse is to trace the activity of God as revealed in the economy with respect to his immanent life. God is identified by the Gospel. The Father sends the Son and the Holy Spirit through a carefully managed plan dedicated to salvation. The Apostle Paul points to the disclosure of the plan in Eph 1:9-10 when he uses the word *oikonomia* to describe the management and parceling out of salvation. According to Sanders the “task of the doctrine of the

Trinity is to describe the connection between God and the economy of salvation” (p. 33). The framework of this connection begins with—one God (*De Deo Uno*) followed by the triune God (*De Deo Trino*). The single divine essence leads to the relational distinction of the persons that allows for the interpretation of other major theological doctrines such as Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, and revelation. In the first two chapters Sanders critically interacts with seminal theologians such as Karl Barth, Robert Jenson, John Webster, and Karl Rahner.

Chapters three, four, and five, present doctrines that exemplify the unity of the one shared essence (*homoousius*) of the Trinity in the order of Atonement, Ecclesiology, and the Trinity in Christian Life. Directly following these three chapters are two chapters, each individually focusing on the distinction of persons—Son and Spirit. Chapter 6 offers the importance of the eternal generation of the Son (*filiation*) in the act of salvation which is followed by the eternal procession of the Spirit (*spiration*) as a necessary compliment in salvation.

Sanders turns next to the doctrines of Atonement, the Church, and a discussion of the Trinity and the Christian Life. The thread running through these three chapters focuses on the operation of God in one divine essence. In each of these three areas Sanders emphasizes two important points. The first is the danger of interpreting the doctrines either too closely to the immanent life of God or too far away. These tendencies can be seen in many depictions of the doctrine of atonement. If the atonement runs “too close,” or “inside” the doctrine of the Trinity, the result is a suffering deity (Moltmann). If Trinity doctrine is held entirely in the economy, overemphasis is placed on the divine missions and the integrity of God’s own life can be lost to an economic material function. The “synthetic nature of the doctrine of atonement” is “comprised of the doctrines of the Trinity, divine attributes, Christology, hamartiology and

eschatology” (p. 56). The active atoning work in the world offers information for understanding the immanent triune life of God.

The second insight Sanders emphasizes in these chapters is the way in which a particular doctrine of the Trinity is profitably paired with a determinate sort of salvation. The sin and salvation process involves God himself and for us to know and understand God in a determinate way we need Nicene trinitarian doctrine. According to the creedal witness of Nicea the immanent life of God includes one divine essence in relational distinction as Father, Son, and Spirit. Going to this depth alone can effectively allow for the actual absolution of sin. It further allows us to subsequently know God by his free activity in the world, exemplified in the way he gathers the church. “Broadly, the trinitarian deduction of ecclesiology,” notes Sanders, “requires an account of divine action that begins with the divine life itself and then moves outward to God’s free actions by way of a processions–missions structure” (p. 73). The immanent life of God is known by his free self–communicating activity we understand as the doctrine of the church (John Webster). The saving and gathering activity in the world *opera Dei exeuntia* (the works of God go out) originates in the immanent perfections of God’s life.

In chapters six and seven Sanders’s focus transitions to the distinction of persons in addressing the relation of salvation doctrine to the doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit. Soteriology’s “posterior appeal” is the foundation Sanders uses to support eternal generation and procession. On the basis of what we now know we can reason back to the Trinity (Thomas Aquinas). The second person of the Trinity is actually from the first person of the Trinity—known by God’s saving work in the world *and* his self–witness in the Bible. The procession of the Spirit is brought together with the Son through Paul’s explanation in Gal 4:4-6: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son” and

“sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” The establishment of eternal procession of the Spirit submits to the same logic as eternal generation of the Son. In each case this form of Christology or pneumatology advocates understanding the immanent life of the Trinity by distinct acts of the persons. God has life in himself (*a se*). The missions reflect eternal processions, resulting in the salvation of the lost.

In chapter eight Sanders underscores the enormity of the doctrine of the trinity. Three times in this single chapter he puts the matter bluntly. “(T)he doctrine of the Trinity,” he reiterates, “is big” (pp. 129, 134, 151). While it may seem odd to place a strong application chapter prior to the closing of a book, it’s here he offers how this doctrine is interactive with human living, ministry, and theological education. The full doctrine of the Trinity is intuitively on display in Irenaeus’s “two-handed theology” that teaches when the influence of the Son and Spirit are experienced the connection to the Father exists as well. The Son and Spirit are on divine mission to the world, “and it is equally remarkable how much the Father’s presence and power are discernable in the work of his two emissaries, because to be in the grip of Christ and the Spirit is to belong to God the Father” (p. 138). By recognizing essential unity and distinguishing the diverse divine action of the three persons the inseparability of divine operations is affirmed. Sanders promotes “essential divine unity” over mutual indwelling (*perichoretic unity*). Father, Son, and Spirit are in unity through one single divine essence shared equally by the three. The essential unity of divine action draws worship of God in human activity that honors God—pursuit of theological education is an example Sanders uses. Gospel ministry is initiated from the Father, through the Son, and perfected in the Spirit who conforms the believer to the image of the Son in two-handed action.

Fountain of Salvation closes with two chapters traversing the development of trinitarian doctrinal views over the course of history. Primary emphasis is placed on the influence of Enlightenment Rationalism to the present day with special attention given to the impact of Hegel. The influence of Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Robert Jenson, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Catherine Mowery LaCugna, Elizabeth Johnson, and others in this period are placed under the critical lenses of Classic Orthodox Theology.

Sanders continually reinforces the importance of doctrinal support running in step with Scripture in order to successfully understand the truth of God's immanent life. Athanasius believed in the Trinity because it is biblical, and our belief in this doctrine needs to be for the same reason. Sanders reinforces the biblical grounding for the Trinity throughout *Fountain of Salvation* with intuitive, convincing use of Scripture, and helpful interpretive work provided on the original Biblical languages and the Latin of the Church Fathers from the west. The eternal generation of the Son is supported by Matt 11:27; John 1:18; 1 Cor 2:11 and eternal procession of the Spirit through interaction with John 15:26 specifically. Support from the biblical canon is readily available for all the major positions this book endorses.

Fountain of Salvation contains extensive interaction with major patristic voices and scholars from the modern era to present day. The positions endorsed find connection, agreement, and disagreement with charitable summaries provided for Robert Jenson, Karl Barth, John Webster, Jürgen Moltmann, Karl Rahner, William Burt Pope, and others. Sanders's interaction with reformed scholastic theologians Petrus van Mastricht and Francis Turretin are particularly helpful, and conversations with the monumental figures of Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus and the creedal witness of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381) provide valuable context.

Understanding and knowing the God of the evangelical church is the beginning point of healthy ministry. For this reason the content of *Fountain of Salvation* is critical to current ministry practice and the help for orienting the church with respect to current ministry challenges. Knowing and understanding the un-abounding grace that connects humanity to the Father by the mission of the Son and Spirit can change lives. Ministry leadership in the areas of soul care, counseling, and those supporting the homeless and addicted need to understand the triune God they serve if they are going to build impactful ministries. *Fountain of Salvation* is a resource for supporting multi-level ministry leadership. One area that could be further explored is the many implications for concrete ministry settings that follow from the insights offered in this book. A next step, then, that awaits to be developed are the many applications suggested by the *Fountain of Salvation*. Sanders has provided a provocative and informative in-road for individual and formal course work in understanding the all-encompassing nature of Trinity doctrine. His writing style, constructive presentations, and carefully crafted language allows for accessibility of this volume to any person with some experience in current Trinity exposition. Sanders has provided an insightful, balanced, carefully reasoned, and expertly articulated addition to the study of the Trinity that will surely become an essential part of our contemporary understanding and discussion.

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