

THE
DEEP THINGS
OF
G O D



how the TRINITY
CHANGES EVERYTHING



F R E D S A N D E R S

To Susan,
relentless encourager,
who understands.

The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything

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Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Faceout Studio, www.faceoutstudio.com

First printing 2010

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-1315-2

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-1316-9

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-1317-6

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2414-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sanders, Fred (Fred R.)

The deep things of God : how the Trinity changes everything /
Fred Sanders.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4335-1315-2 (tpb)

1. Trinity. 2. Evangelicalism. 3. Spiritual life—Christianity. I. Title.

BT111.3.S27 2010

231'.044—dc22

2010003951

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10
14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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1

COMPASSED ABOUT BY FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT

*(Or, How Evangelicals Are Profoundly Trinitarian
Whether They Know It or Not)*

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:14

You know me better than you think you know, and you shall come to know me better yet.

ASLAN TO FRANK THE CABBIE,
THE MAGICIAN'S NEPHEW



Reality comes first, and understanding follows it. If you want to cultivate the ability to think well about the Trinity, the first step is to realize that there is more to Trinitarianism than just thinking well. Specifically, the starting point for a durable Trinitarian theology is not primarily a matter of carrying out a successful thought project. Christians are never in the beggarly position of gathering up a few concepts about God and then constructing a grand Trinitarian synthesis out of them. Christians are also not in the position of pulling together a few passages of Scripture, here a verse and there a verse, and cobbling them together into a brilliant doctrine that improves on Scripture's messiness. Instead, Christians should recognize that when we start thinking about the

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Trinity, we do so because we find ourselves already deeply involved in the reality of God's triune life as he has opened it up to us for our salvation and revealed it in the Bible. In order to start doing good Trinitarian theology, we need only to reflect on that present reality and unpack it. The more we realize that we are already compassed about by the reality of the gospel Trinity, the more our Trinitarianism will matter to us. Evangelicals in particular should recognize that we have everything we need to think about the Trinity in a way that changes everything.

THE TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY OF NICKY CRUZ

Nicky Cruz is not famous for his Trinitarian theology. He is famous for having been the “warlord” of a violent street gang called the Mau-Maus in New York City in the 1950s and for the dramatic story of his 1958 conversion to Christianity. At the center of his conversion story was a confrontation between this hard-hearted, knife-wielding teenage gang leader and a young preacher who brought the simple message that Jesus loved him. It was a confrontation, that is, between *The Cross and the Switchblade*, as that young preacher David Wilkerson would put it in a book about his Times Square ministry.¹ Nicky Cruz would retell the story from his own point of view in his 1968 biography, *Run Baby Run*.² Against the dark background of his young life as a victim and a victimizer, Cruz tells about forgiveness, the power of Jesus Christ, and how he was set free from soul-crushing loneliness. That dramatic turnaround is the story Nicky Cruz is famous for. There is not a word about the Trinity in it. Looking back, Cruz would say, “I came to Jesus because I knew He loved me, and still didn’t know anything about God.”

But in 1976 Cruz wrote another book to describe what he called “the single most important fact of my Christian growth.” The book was *The Magnificent Three*, and the fact that had become central to Cruz’s Christian life by that time was the fact of the Trinity:

Something has emerged in my walk with God that has become the most important element of my discipleship. It has become the thing that sustains me, that feeds me, that keeps me steady when I am shaky. I have come to see God, to know Him, to relate to Him

as Three-in-One, God as Trinity, God as Father, Saviour, and Holy Spirit. God has given to me over the years a vision of Himself as Three-in-One, and the ability to relate to God in that way is the single most important fact of my Christian growth.³

The Magnificent Three is Nicky Cruz's personal testimony to the power of the Trinity in his life. It never sold like *Run Baby Run*, but it is vintage Nicky Cruz, from the chapter about the salvation of a drug addict named Chico, to the healing of a nameless prostitute, to the chapter about Cruz being ambushed by rival gang members a few weeks after his conversion. As a theologian whose specialty is Trinitarian theology, I have several hundred books about the Trinity on my shelves, but only one of them includes a knife fight: the one by Nicky Cruz. "Dynamite! A real turn-on!" say the publishers in a prefatory note. "Nicky lays it on you with his hard-hitting straight talk. You are there with him—in the tenement, in the jail."⁴

Cruz's testimony to his experience with the Trinity is indeed powerful. He praises the three persons in turn, beginning with several chapters about Jesus as his "magnificent saviour." He especially emphasizes Christ's presence, reality, and power to save. Cruz has already told us, "When I first became a Christian, I knew nothing about anything. So far as the things of God were concerned, I was a totally ignorant man. I knew nothing. But Jesus reached me despite my ignorance of Him."⁵ In these chapters he tries to look back and describe that strange knowledge he gained in his first encounter with Jesus, before he had learned any details. In prose that turns to prayer, Cruz says:

I remember when I saw the real Jesus for the first time. Suddenly I saw You as You really were. I saw that You were human, just like me. . . . I saw that You had courage, You had guts. You had something I couldn't describe, something I had never seen before, something incredibly strong and tender all at the same time. I saw that You had the power to squash me like a bug, and instead You poured out Your blood to save me, to love me, to heal my aching heart.⁶

This is the heart of Cruz's message, and he moves effortlessly from the language of prayer to the language of invitation, directing his readers

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to the presence of Christ: “He wants to forgive you of your sin. He wants to heal you of your sickness. He wants to keep you from anxiety and fear and guilt. He wants to free you from every kind of bondage. And He is there with you now to do it. He is a wonderful, magnificent Saviour!”⁷

But this intense focus on Jesus does not keep Cruz from celebrating “the Magnificent Father,” whose fatherhood “is not simply a figure of speech.” God is not our father merely in a “universal and impersonal” sense of having created us but “also in a new, personal, special kind of fatherhood that is reserved for born-again Christians only. He is my Father not just because He created me but now also because He adopted me as His child! I am His creature, but more than that I am His adopted son!”⁸ Cruz is no less eloquent and impassioned about God the Father—his fatherly intimacy, his protection, his generosity, and his discipline—than he is about Jesus.

Nicky Cruz does not say very much about how his experience of Jesus and his experience of the Father are related to each other. But when he turns to the third person, “the Magnificent Holy Spirit,” he begins tying the three together in one unified view of salvation. He accomplishes this by pointing out the absolute necessity of the Spirit’s work in bringing us into contact with the Father and the Son:

God is a magnificent Father. God is a magnificent Saviour, Jesus Christ. But if it were not for the magnificent Holy Spirit, I would still be a wretched, hateful sinner! It is not enough to have a Father-God who loves and provides for me. It is not enough even to have a Saviour who died for my sins. For any of those blessings to make a difference in our lives, there must also be present in this world that Third Person of God, the Holy Spirit.⁹

In what sense is the ministry of the third person necessary? The Spirit’s work is necessary because he is the one who actually brings us into contact with the Son and the Father. It does not take away from the Father and the Son to say that their work depends on the work of the Spirit. As Cruz argues, though Jesus died for us and the Father forgives us, we need to ask ourselves, “But why did you come to Jesus in the first place?” and answer, “Because you were drawn by God the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus saved me; the Father forgave me. But the Holy Spirit convicted me, brought me to my knees, and showed me God. . . . He showed me Jesus Christ, and I was gripped by His strong, sweet love. And then He shoved me toward God, and I gladly fell into the arms of my loving Father.¹⁰

In the work of the Spirit, the purposes of God are fulfilled, and all the salvation, forgiveness, and fellowship are realized.

Nicky Cruz is famous for preaching a simple gospel message in a way that is relevant to street-hardened young people. He is not famous for his Trinitarian theology, and it might even seem incongruous to highlight him early in a book about the doctrine of the Trinity. He goes out of his way to make sure nobody confuses him for a theology professor: “I don’t know everything there is to know about theology. I am not a Greek scholar. I am just a Puerto Rican street kid whom God picked up from the slums in New York and made into a disciple and a minister. But there is one thing I know . . . I know that God is my Father.”¹¹ He also makes sure nobody can mistake his book for systematic theology: “This is not a doctrinal treatise on the Trinity. It is not a theological statement. I am not capable of that. It is a personal statement, a testimony, a simple sharing of how God the Magnificent Three lives in my life every day.”¹² And even though Cruz brings his own voice and his own life experience to his Trinitarian testimony, he is not trying to teach anything novel. His Trinitarian theology is not “his” in the sense of originating with him; it is his personal discovery of something that has been the common faith and experience of Christians since the time of the apostles.

There is nothing in Nicky Cruz’s book on the Trinity that was not already implicit in his previous books. His understanding of salvation and the Christian life did not change between *Run Baby Run* and *The Magnificent Three*. From the moment of his dramatic conversion, he had known that Jesus saves and the Father forgives. In his earliest days of Bible study he came to understand how it had been the sovereign “shove” of the Holy Spirit that had been at work behind the scenes. None of this was new information when he began to describe the Trinity as “the most important element” of his discipleship. In fact, Cruz had

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even affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity from the beginning. It seems as if nothing had changed, yet he began writing about his relationship with the Father, Son, and Spirit with the excitement of having made a life-changing discovery. He called it “the thing that sustains me, that feeds me, that keeps me steady when I am shaky.” Though Cruz had gained no new information, he wrote as if his new grasp of the Trinity had changed everything about his Christian life.

The difference is that he had gotten on the inside of the doctrine. He had moved from accepting it on the authority of Scripture and his trusted elders to understanding it from within. “I didn’t understand it. I believed it was true, though at first only because I had such great confidence in those who taught it to me. Then later I believed it was true because I saw it to be true in the Bible.” This was an important transition in itself, maturing from a necessarily immature trust in human authority, to direct reliance on divine authority. But it was still only authority, and only worked on Cruz from outside. “So I believed it, but I still didn’t understand it.” What Cruz experienced in his Trinitarian awakening was a kind of shift in how he perceived the same idea: first, he saw the Trinity as a difficult doctrine that had to be accepted but could hardly be explained, then he went on to see it as an illuminating doctrine that explained what he read in the Bible and what he experienced in his actual Christian life. Whereas he first encountered the doctrine as a problem, he came to understand it as a solution.

Cruz recalls his early exasperation with the doctrine in a way that probably rings true for many Christians who wouldn’t express it so bluntly: “Why have three persons, I thought, when it confuses me so much? It seemed to me such a totally unnecessary complication. Why couldn’t God just be God? Then I could understand Him. This ‘Trinity’ business I accepted by faith, but I could not relate to it at all.”¹³ The transformation in his life took place when he realized that the things described in the doctrine were things he was already in contact with. He knew Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit through their work in his life. The doctrine of the Trinity was the key to understanding that those three experiences belonged together because the God behind them was the one God, making himself known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit precisely because he eternally exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. “I understand that God is

so much more to me as Three-in-One than He could ever be in any other way,” Cruz wrote. “I know now how much easier it is for me to relate to Him in that day-to-day way because He is three.”¹⁴ He goes on:

I am not talking about theology. What I am describing is something different from merely believing in the doctrine of the Trinity. I have always believed in the doctrine of the Trinity but I had never experienced God personally as Three-in-One. It was at first merely a doctrine in which I believed, but now it has become a truth of everyday life. God has developed in me a sense of the separate relationships which I can have with Father, Saviour, and Holy Spirit. He has shown me the strength that comes from those separate relationships, the power for living that comes from the three faces of God. He has taught me to feed off the Trinity for my daily sustenance, rather than just having some vague feeling that the Trinity is somehow true.¹⁵

People can become Christians after learning a very small amount of doctrine and information. As they grow in discipleship, they read more of the Bible and come to understand more than they had understood before. But what Nicky Cruz’s Trinitarian testimony highlights is that the decisive factor is not a transfer of information. There was no brand-new data put into his thought process, and he did not have to change his mind about any of his beliefs. He had already been believing in the Trinity for some time when he woke up to the difference the Trinity makes for every aspect of his Christian life. His radical Trinitarianism did not come from an advanced theology lesson; it came from the gospel and then led him to an advanced theology lesson. He was like a man who found a treasure hid in a field that he didn’t have to buy, because he already owned it. He heard God calling him to dig into the depths, and what he found there changed everything for him.

SOMETHING MORE THAN WORDS

The kind of Trinitarianism that we need is not simply the acceptance of a doctrine. The doctrine of the Trinity is not, in the first instance, something to be constructed by argument from texts. At best, that method will lead to mental acknowledgment that “the Trinitarian theory” best

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accounts for the evidence marshaled. The first step on the way to the heart of the Trinitarian mystery is to recognize that as Christians we find ourselves already deeply involved in the triune life and need only to reflect rightly on that present reality. Most evangelical Christians don't need to be talked into the Trinitarian theory; they need to be shown that they are immersed in the Trinitarian reality. We need to see and feel that we are surrounded by the Trinity, compassed about on all sides by the presence and the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. From that starting point, truly productive teaching can begin.

There is certainly a time and place for introducing the words, concepts, propositions, and truth claims of Trinitarian theology. But too often in contemporary teaching about the Trinity, those words not only come first; they come first, last, and exclusively. The Trinity seems to most evangelicals like a doctrinal formula to be received and believed by a mental act of understanding. In short, it is at best a true fact about God that we hold in our minds in the form of words. Teaching about it is then a matter of using words to lead learners to more words. "Words, words, words," was Prince Hamlet's reply when he was asked what he was reading, but that was hardly a sign of a balanced mind or a generous spirit. A Christian who is reading about the Trinity ought to be able to say he is reading more than "words, words, words." Evangelical commitment to the Trinity should not stay confined to the realm of verbal exercises; it ought to dive deeper and rise higher than the power of words. It ought to begin from the experienced reality of the Trinitarian grace of God and lead us to a deeper encounter with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

A merely verbal approach to the Trinity is doomed to be shallow, weak, and brittle, because it will be no stronger than our own ability to understand and articulate what we are thinking about. This is in fact the plight that much evangelical Trinitarianism finds itself in at the popular level. As I have taught in various churches about the doctrine of the Trinity in the past twelve years, I have tried to answer the top three questions that evangelicals bring with them: Is it biblical? Does it make sense? And does it matter? These are all good questions and deserve the most helpful answers a theologian can bring to a congregation.¹⁶ But I have learned that if the first two questions are answered only at the

level of verbal maneuvers, the third question has a tendency to loom impossibly large.

The question, Is it biblical? can be answered by a congeries of Bible verses proving various elements of the doctrine. First we provide biblical proofs of the deity of the Son, then the deity of the Spirit, then the personhood of the Spirit, then the distinction between the Father and the Son, then the distinction between the Son and the Spirit, and so on, either beginning or ending with biblical proof of the unity of God. It is possible to catch a glimpse of the deeper Trinitarian logic of the Bible's total message through this approach, but when time is short, the biblical proof of the Trinity is reduced to a verse-by-verse affair.

That leads to the second question, Does it make sense? There are a few satisfying, logical distinctions to make here, especially in pointing out that God is not one something and also somehow three of the same somethings (which would be a strict, logical contradiction), but one being in three persons (which still requires further explanation, but is not simply a contradiction). But the apparently inevitable next step in pursuing the question, Does it make sense? is the sub-question, What is the best analogy for the Trinity? This sub-question is usually the death-knell for Trinitarianism's relevance. Analogies can play a useful role in thinking about God, but when the hankering for an analogy arises right here, on the border between "Does it make sense" and "Does it matter," it is usually a sign that Trinitarian thinking has devolved into a verbal project for its own sake. It has become a matter of getting the right words, so they can lead us to more of the right words. Serial proof-texting gives way to broken analogies, confronting us with an unanswerable "so what" question. How do we fall so quickly from three perfectly good questions (Is it biblical? Does it make sense? And does it matter?) to a form of discourse as hollow as an echo chamber? What is the difference between a belief in the Trinity that simply doesn't matter and one that changes everything?

What is needed is an approach to the doctrine of the Trinity that takes its stand on the experienced reality of the Trinity, and only then moves forward to the task of verbal and conceptual clarification. The principle is, first the reality, then the explanation. What goes wrong in so much popular discussion of the Trinity is that Christians approach

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the doctrine as if it were their job to construct it from bits and pieces of verses, arguments, and analogies. The doctrine itself seems to lie on the far side of a mental project. If the project is successful, they will achieve the doctrine of the Trinity and be able to answer questions like Why have three persons? and What is the Trinity like? But the right method would begin with an immersion in the reality of the triune God and only then turn to the task of explaining. The words and concepts would then find their proper places in the context of a life that is marked by the recognized presence of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This kind of teaching about the Trinity would not be a project of constructing a complex idea but of unpacking a comprehensive reality that we would already find ourselves in the midst of as Christians.

What can be done to make the doctrine of the Trinity flourish in evangelical theology as if this were its own native soil? What would it take to inculturate Trinitarianism in the culture of evangelicalism? I am arguing that we need to start with the resources at hand, right where we are. We know more than we can say about the Trinity, and we should not let ourselves be trapped into thinking that everything depends on our ability to articulate the mystery of the triune God. But we do need to be reminded that we are immersed in a Trinitarian reality. It is possible to be radically Trinitarian without knowing it or to have amnesia about one's real status. We may be formed and schooled by a movement that came into being as the most consistently Trinitarian force in the history of Christianity, but we can live in a way that is alienated from those Trinitarian riches.

However impoverished its articulation may be, the Trinitarian reality itself is there in the lives of evangelical churches. Evangelicalism as a movement is unthinkable without a certain underlying Trinitarian logic of experience. Robust Trinitarian theology never occurs in a vacuum; it always flourishes in the context of a rich experiential and cultural setting that provides the background against which the doctrinal formulations register as meaningful. Robert Louis Wilken has celebrated the way the doctrinal theology of Christianity's formative period reasoned "from history, from ritual, and from text," so that "concepts and abstractions were always put at the service of a deeper immersion in the *res*, the thing itself, the mystery of Christ and the practice of the

Christian life.”¹⁷ It is common (as we will see below) to argue that a self-consciously high-church setting, well stocked with tradition, liturgy, and sacramental realism, is the proper soil in which Trinitarianism can be best cultivated.

Without denigrating those resources or denying that they can fund a vigorous Trinitarian theology (also among some high-church evangelicals), I want to argue that there is other soil in which the doctrine of the Trinity can thrive. The kind of low-church evangelicalism that is spreading so rapidly around the world in our era contains deep resources for effective Trinitarian theology. Evangelicalism may be the sleeping giant of renewed Trinitarian theology in the life of the church, if it comes to understand itself aright. The “if” is important, and it also figures prominently in the recent assessment by Mark Noll, speaking not of Trinitarian theology but of the life of the mind in general: “For evangelicals (as for other Christians) the greatest hope for learning in any age . . . lies in the Christian faith itself, which in the end means in Jesus Christ. Thus, if evangelicals are the people of the gospel we claim to be, our intellectual rescue is close at hand.”¹⁸

The doctrine of the Trinity flourishes, not when it is merely stated accurately, but when it is affirmed in the context of a pre-discursive, nonthematic background awareness of the reality of the Trinity. This noncognitive background (or tacit dimension) is necessary to fund productive, thematic, theological reflection on the doctrine. There are in fact gospel resources for robust Trinitarianism that have yet to be articulated in a recognizably evangelical idiom. We need to beware the danger of evangelical self-misunderstanding and highlight instead the properly evangelical resources which are in danger of being overlooked. The evangelical saints are already living out the primary Trinitarianism, this communion with the Holy Trinity. But evangelicalism’s theorists have often failed to give voice to the things their people are experiencing. There is already something deeply Trinitarian going on in evangelical churches, and when that something begins to fund theological reflection, we can expect a significant contribution from these churches. “If evangelicals are the people of the gospel we claim to be,” to extend the implications of Noll’s conditional, then all that is required is for evangelical theologians to grasp the way gospel and Trinity mutually

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presuppose each other, in order for them to become manifestly what they are tacitly: people of the Trinity.

HOW A DOCTRINE STOPPED WORKING

It is now a commonplace to note how poorly the doctrine of the Trinity fared when the world turned modern. The regime of rationalism and this-worldliness that took hold of intellectual culture sometime around the late seventeenth century was not kind to this central Christian doctrine. That story, along with the tale of the doctrine's supposed rescue by theologians like Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, is frequently told in histories of the doctrine.¹⁹ But there is a distinctively evangelical version of the quiescence and ineffectiveness that took hold of Trinitarianism for so long. In this community, the doctrine has been hung on the horns of a dilemma: one horn is subjective religious experience and the other is reduction to mere propositional formula. The tiresome oscillation between pietism and rationalism, not especially healthy for any aspect of Christian life, has been especially hard on the doctrine of the Trinity. From neither place, head nor heart, can the doctrine be articulated as it must be, with an inherent connection to the gospel. A quick survey of how the evangelical tradition has handled the doctrine of the Trinity will show that evangelical Trinitarian theology has an unfinished task: to describe how the Trinity is connected to the gospel and avoid the extremes of subjective religious experience and mere propositionalism.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) grappled seriously with the problem of how to show a connection between gospel and Trinity. Perverse though it may be to start an enquiry into evangelical theology with a glance at the father of Protestant liberalism, it is necessary. His way of handling the doctrine of the Trinity is the right point of departure for the evangelical story, and his major decisions about this doctrine were driven by the evangelical instincts he inherited from his family. He came from an evangelical background in the pietist theology of Herrnhut, Moravia. But he resolutely developed that pietistic evangelicalism into a thoroughly modern system of thought.

In standard accounts of how the Trinity came to be neglected in modern thought, Schleiermacher typically receives much of the blame.

“Nothing we do as evangelicals makes sense if it is divorced from a strong experiential and doctrinal grasp of the coordinated work of Jesus and the Spirit, worked out against the horizon of the Father’s love. Personal evangelism, conversational prayer, devotional Bible study, authoritative preaching, world missions, and assurance of salvation all presuppose that life in the gospel is life in communion with the Trinity. . . . The gospel is Trinitarian, and the Trinity is the gospel. Christian salvation comes from the Trinity, happens through the Trinity, and brings us home to the Trinity.”

From the Introduction

“At last, a practical guide to the most fundamental doctrine of them all. Sanders shows us how the Trinity is the essential framework on which our faith is built, the hidden skeleton that gives shape and meaning to the flesh and blood of daily experience. Highly commended!”

GERALD BRAY, Research Professor, Beeson Divinity School;
author, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present*

“This is as good an introduction to the essentially Trinitarian shape of evangelical faith and practice of which I’m aware. Take, drink, and prepare to be edified.”

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER, Blanchard Professor of Theology,
Wheaton College Graduate School

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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY