

THE
DEEP THINGS
OF
G O O D



how the TRINITY
CHANGES EVERYTHING

• 2ND EDITION *with* STUDY GUIDE •

F R E D S A N D E R S

“When faced with dark riddles about our triune God, I turn to books by Fred Sanders for help with seeing the light of Scripture. In this book, deep questions find careful answers in a living theology that breathes and pulses with joy. As Sanders reminds us, God’s inner life, ‘in the happy land of the Trinity above all worlds, is a livelier life than any other life.’ This readable book on God’s undiluted life is fantastically perceptive, and it’s been made more valuable now in a second edition with additional features for personal study, Bible meditation, group discussion, and real-life application. Like never before, *The Deep Things of God* invites new travelers to hike into the glorious terrain of this happy land together.”

Tony Reinke, author, *Newton on the Christian Life*

“What is already an excellent standard work on the Trinity has just become more useful. Like the first edition of his book, Fred Sanders’s second edition aims to show the astonishingly wide relevance of this Christian doctrine to every area of our living and thinking—but now, with the addition of a helpful study guide, study questions, and other aids, the book deserves the widest circulation.”

D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; Cofounder, The Gospel Coalition

“Sanders has a gift for making the deep things of theology—in this case, the doctrine of the Trinity—clear and compelling rather than shallow and simplistic. This is as good an introduction to the essentially Trinitarian shape of evangelical faith and practice of which I’m aware. Every evangelical should be able to explain how the gospel is Trinitarian and the Trinity a summation of the gospel, and Sanders shows us how. He makes a convincing case that there is nothing wrong with the evangelical church in North America that a good dose of Trinitarian theology, if absorbed into the bloodstream of the body of Christ, could not cure. So take, drink, and prepare to be edified.”

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; author, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* and *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine*

“‘The Trinity’ is not just a doctrine to which the church gives formal assent, nor is it one doctrine among many. It refers to the God who exists eternally and has created and redeemed us, the God of our trust and love, to whom we offer our worship and lives of thanksgiving. There are well-informed books on the Trinity and many accessible ones—but these characteristics don’t always converge in the same volume. They do in *The Deep Things of God*.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; author, *Core Christianity: Finding Yourself in God’s Story*

“Sanders’s book should be required reading for anyone involved in the work of the gospel. It will help readers catch a fresh vision of the depths of the message they strive to proclaim and foster a renewed sense of the grandeur of the Christian life they invite people to enjoy.”

Mark Hopson, President, National School Project

“As it is with other biblical truths, I’m often asked by people about the Trinity, ‘Does it really matter?’ One might conceivably respond, ‘Apart from the truth of the Trinity, nothing else does!’ If that sounds like an overstatement, this book is precisely what you need. If you’ve been puzzled by the assertion that God is one divine being who subsists in three coequal persons, this book is precisely what you need. If you want to understand how the reality of our triune God affects every dimension of Christian truth and life, this book is precisely what you need. It is remarkably accessible, altogether persuasive, and urgently needed in today’s church. I’m thrilled to see it released in a second edition. If you missed it the first time around, don’t let it happen again. I can’t recommend it too highly.”

Sam Storms, Lead Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bridgeway Church,
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

The Deep Things of God

THE
DEEP THINGS
OF
G O D



how the TRINITY
CHANGES EVERYTHING

• 2ND EDITION •

FRED SANDERS

 **CROSSWAY®**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything (Second Edition)

Copyright © 2017 by Fred Sanders

Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design: Faceout Studio

First printing 2017

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are from The New American Standard Bible®. Copyright © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995. Used by permission.

Scripture references marked NIV are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture references marked NLT are from The Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Ill., 60189. All rights reserved.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-5637-1

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-5640-1

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-5638-8

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-5639-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sanders, Fred (Fred R.), author.

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

Description: 2nd Edition. | Wheaton : Crossway, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016041218 (print) | LCCN 2017005644 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433556371 (tp) | ISBN 9781433556388 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433556395 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433556401 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Trinity. | Evangelicalism. | Spiritual life—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BT111.3 .S27 2017 (print) | LCC BT111.3 (ebook) | DDC 231/.044—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016041218>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP	27	26	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	18	17			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

To Susan,
relentless encourager,
who understands.

CONTENTS

List of Charts and Diagrams	11
Introduction: Evangelicals, the Gospel, and the Trinity	13
1 Always Already Trinitarian	33
2 Compassed About by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit	51
3 Within the Happy Land of the Trinity	67
4 The Eternal Life of These Three	89
5 Lost in the Fullness of God	103
6 So Great Salvation	113
7 The Shape of the Gospel	131
8 Behold What Manner of Love	155
9 Into the Saving Life of Christ	173
10 Anchored in Jehovah: Experience and Assurance	191
11 Hearing the Voice of God in Scripture	201
12 Praying with the Grain	219
13 What Makes Christian Prayer Possible	229
Study Guide	249
General Index	287
Scripture Index	299

LIST OF CHARTS AND DIAGRAMS

Chart 2.1: Tacit Trinitarianism of Evangelical Practices	65
Chart 7.1: The Work of the Son and the Spirit	144
Diagram 3.1: The Logic of Salvation	79
Diagram 3.2: The Logic of Theology	80
Diagram 3.3: Relation of the Doctrines	81
Diagram 4.1: The Immanent Trinity	95
Diagram 4.2: The Immanent Trinity with Relations of Origin	97
Diagram 6.1: Elements of the Soul	121
Diagram 6.2: The Life of God in the Soul of Man	122
Diagram 7.1: The Work of the Trinity Centered on Jesus	140
Diagram 7.2: The Economy as the Two Hands of the Father	142
Diagram 8.1: The Son and the Spirit in the Economy	156
Diagram 8.2: Eternal Processions and Temporal Missions	160
Diagram 8.3: Trinitarian Adoption	163
Diagram 10.1: God in Salvation History and Experience	192
Diagram 10.2: The Engine, Car, and Caboose of Salvation	193

INTRODUCTION

Evangelicals, the Gospel, and the Trinity

*(Or, How the Trinity Changed Everything
for Evangelicalism and Can Do It Again)*

I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it. . . . Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father.

1 JOHN 2:21-24

The religious terrain is full of the graves of good words which have died from lack of care . . . and these good words are still dying all around us. There is that good word “Evangelical.” It is certainly moribund, if not already dead. Nobody any longer seems to know what it means.

B. B. WARFIELD (1916)



The doctrine of the Trinity has a peculiar place in the minds and hearts of evangelical Christians. We tend to acknowledge the doctrine with a polite hospitality but not welcome it with any special warmth. This book shows why we ought to embrace the doctrine of the Trinity wholeheartedly and without reserve, as a central concern of evangelical Christianity.

How has it come about that so many evangelicals today are cold toward the doctrine of the Trinity, confused about its meaning, or noncommittal about its importance? Even though solid biblical and theological teaching on the subject is available, the doctrine of the Trinity continues to be treated as an awkward guest in the evangelical household. The very

terminology of Trinitarianism sounds vaguely Roman Catholic to our ears: isn't Trinity, after all, a Latin word not found in the Bible but devised sometime in the Dark Ages? And though it was assembled (so the story goes) by clever theologians rather than apostles, isn't it of dubious status as a specimen of logic? Above all, isn't it a speculative distraction from the serious business of the gospel?

Doubts like these are hardly dispelled by the haunting thought that it is mandatory for Christians to believe it at peril of damnation. Perhaps you have heard the frightful admonition:

The Trinity:
Try to understand it
and you'll lose your mind;
try to deny it and you'll lose your soul!¹

Heavy-handed theological pressure like that is about as helpful, in the long run, as tying shoelaces tighter to make up for a bad-fitting shoe. Wherever this pressure is felt, it turns us from negligent Trinity-ignorers to motivated Trinity-phobes. If we know nothing else about the Trinity, we at least know that explicitly denying it will put a church on the list of non-Christian cults. To many evangelicals, the stakes of thinking about the Trinity seem too high and the payoff too low—and we are not gamblers. No wonder the word *Trinitarian* is conspicuously absent from the list of adjectives that leap to mind to describe the theological character of evangelicalism. No wonder many of our congregations drift from year to year with only the vaguest apprehension of the fact that their Christian life is one of communion with the Father in the Son and the Spirit. No wonder we have become so alienated from the roots of our existence as evangelicals: our Trinitarian roots.

TRINITARIAN DEEP DOWN

Evangelicals do have Trinitarian roots, after all, and those roots reach deep; not just into the history of the movement but into the reality of who we are in Christ. Deep down it is evangelical Christians who most clearly witness to the fact that the personal salvation we experience is reconciliation with God the Father, carried out through God the Son, in the power

1. This widespread saying is usually introduced with the vague reference, "As somebody has said . . ." I have found a slightly more polite version of it in Harold Lindsell and Charles J. Woodbridge, *A Handbook of Christian Truth* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1953), 51–52, though it is surely not original there.

of God the Holy Spirit. As a result, evangelical Christians have been in reality the most thoroughly Trinitarian Christians in the history of the church. This is a strong claim and one not often heard these days, but I hope to make good on it in the course of this book. The characteristic beliefs, commitments, practices, and presuppositions of evangelicalism were all generated by a spiritual revolution: an applied Trinitarian theology that took more seriously than ever before in Christian history the involvement of Father, Son, and Spirit in the Christian life.

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. Forget the Trinity and you forget why we do what we do; you forget who we are as gospel Christians; you forget how we got to be like we are.

The central argument of this book is that the doctrine of the Trinity inherently belongs to the gospel itself. It is not merely the case that this is a doctrine that wise minds have recognized as necessary for defense of the gospel,² or that a process of logical deduction leads from believing the gospel to affirming the doctrine of the Trinity, or that people who believe the gospel should also believe whatever the God of the gospel reveals about himself. No, while all those statements are true, they do not say enough, because there is a Trinity-gospel connection much more intimate than those loose links suggest. Trinity and gospel are not just bundled together so that you can't have one without the other. They are internally configured toward each other. Even at risk of being misunderstood before the full argument emerges in later chapters, let me say it as concisely as possible: the gospel is Trinitarian, and the Trinity is the gospel.³ Christian salvation comes from the Trinity, happens through the Trinity, and brings us home to the Trinity.

Because the gospel is Trinitarian, evangelicals as gospel people are

2. This was the view of Emil Brunner, who called the Trinity a "theological doctrine which defends the central faith of the Bible and the Church" but cautioned that it must not be preached or taught to the faithful, lest it present "an artificial stumbling-block." See *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), 1:206, 238.

3. This is another untraceable statement about the Trinity that we keep in circulation via the phrase "As someone has said . . ." I have seen it most recently, introduced thus, in Clifford Pond's keenly gospel-centered little book *This God Is Our God: Enjoying the Trinity* (London: Grace Publications Trust, 2000), 58.

by definition Trinity people, whether or not they think so. It only makes sense that if the gospel is inherently Trinitarian, the most consistently and self-consciously Trinitarian movement of Christians would be the movement that has named itself after the gospel, the *evangel*: evangelicalism. This is not the conventional wisdom we usually hear. We are more likely to hear the kind of lament this introduction began with, the lament that evangelicals have at best a precarious and tentative grip on the Trinity. But the lamentations and warnings derive their force from the fact that our recent poor performance as Trinitarians stands in such stark contradiction to our actual existence as Christians who are in fellowship with the Trinity. Evangelicals are too Trinitarian to be so un-Trinitarian!

Although not everybody knows that evangelicals are Trinitarian deep down, it has not been a complete secret. One of the theologians who has, in recent decades, most faithfully and articulately insisted on the essentially Trinitarian character of evangelicalism is Gerald Bray, who says that “the belief that a Christian is seated in heavenly places with Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:6), sharing with Him in the inner life of the Godhead, is the distinctive teaching of Evangelical Christianity.” No matter how much the doctrine may have become nonfunctional in the self-understanding of contemporary evangelicals, a robustly Trinitarian view of salvation has been the core, “the distinctive teaching” of the historic evangelical faith, according to Bray. In fact, though we have no grounds to be smug or triumphalist about it, we ought to testify clearly to our distinctively evangelical Trinitarian roots:

Without pride in our own tradition or prejudice against other forms of Christianity, we must surely proclaim that the experience of a personal relationship with God, sealed by the Spirit in the finished work of the Son from Whom He proceeds, is a deeper and more satisfying faith than any other known to man. . . . Evangelical Protestants are not wrong in insisting that theirs is a deeper, more vital experience of Christ than that enjoyed by Christians of other traditions. We have not received the grace of God in vain and we must not be ashamed to own the Christ we know as the only Lord and Saviour of men.⁴

Bray is a historian of ideas, so he is taking the long view of evangelical history. When he says that evangelical experience is marked by “a deeper

4. Gerald Bray, “The Filioque Clause in History and Theology,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 34 (1983): 91–144.

and more satisfying faith than any other known to man,” he is thinking in terms of five centuries of evidence, not the most recent five decades. He is not reporting current events but history; not today’s headlines but the volumes and volumes of spiritual theology that fill well-stocked Protestant bookshelves. Similarly, the argument of this book is that evangelicalism is Trinitarian deep down, even if surface appearances are less promising.

OUR RELATED PROBLEMS: WE ARE SHALLOW AND WEAKLY TRINITARIAN

Anybody who stays on the surface of contemporary evangelical Christianity is unlikely to encounter profound Trinitarianism, either in teaching or in spirituality. Though most of this book will be about what evangelical churches do well, perhaps it’s best to start by admitting two problems that any observer could see. First, evangelicals are not currently famous for their Trinitarian theology. Second, the evangelical movement is bedeviled by a theological and spiritual shallowness.

First, there is evangelical coldness toward the Trinity. Above, I said that everything about evangelicalism presupposes that life under the gospel is life in communion with the Trinity and that if you forget the Trinity, you forget why we do what we do, who we are as gospel Christians, and how we got to be like we are. Forgetfulness on that scale is, however, both possible and widespread. Forgetting where our evangelical commitments and practices originated, our churches are in constant danger of forgetting why we do any of the things we do. Our beliefs and practices all presuppose the Trinity, but that presupposition has for too long been left unexpressed, tacit rather than explicit, and taken for granted rather than celebrated and taught. We have systematic theology books that argue for the fact that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but that fact seems like an item on a list, one of the many affirmations we make when summarizing the Bible. In every area of evangelical existence, our tacit Trinitarianism must be coaxed out, articulated, and confessed. We may be the most consistently Trinitarian Christians in the world, but it does us little good if we continue to be radically Trinitarian without knowing it. We are at risk of denying in our words and actions the reality that our lives are based on. We are at risk of lapsing into sub-Trinitarian practices and beliefs, of behaving as if we serve a merely unipersonal deity rather than the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit of the Bible. We are at risk of staying in the shallows when God calls us to the deep things.

This brings us, second, to evangelical shallowness. The evangelical movement is booming, but it often seems to be ten miles wide and half an inch deep. This shallowness is not only how things look from the outside, to the cultured despisers of evangelical religion. It also describes the way many evangelicals feel about their own churches and spiritual lives. Many evangelicals seem haunted by a sense of not being about anything except the moment of conversion. When they stop to ask themselves where they are taking their converts, they fear that when they get there, there will be no *there* there. When they sense that God is calling them to a deeper communion with him, they are unable to say what that would be. After all, you can't get any more saved than saved. When serious-minded evangelical Christians feel the desire to go deeper into doctrine or spirituality, they typically turn to any resources except for their own properly evangelical resources. A strange alienation of affections sets in. They cast about for something beyond what they already have, which leads them to look for something beyond the gospel. What sounded like such glad, good news at the outset (free forgiveness in Christ!) begins to sound like elementary lessons that should have been left behind on the way to advanced studies. What they embraced as the sum of wisdom when they first turned to God ("cultivate a personal relationship with Jesus by reading your Bible, praying, and going to church") begins to sound like Sunday school answers that never quite address the right questions. What has gone wrong when evangelicalism not only looks shallow from the outside but feels shallow from the inside?

These two problems, our forgetfulness of the Trinity and our feeling of shallowness, are directly related. The solutions to both problems converge in the gospel, the *evangel* which evangelicalism is named after and which is always deeper than we can fathom. Our great need is to be led further in to what we already have. The gospel is so deep that it not only meets our deepest needs but comes from God's deepest self. The salvation proclaimed in the gospel is not some mechanical operation that God took on as a side project. It is a "mystery that was kept secret for long ages" (Rom. 16:25), a mystery of salvation that goes back into the heart of God, decreed "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:20). When God undertook our salvation, he did it in a way that put divine resources into play, resources that involve him personally in the task. The more we explore and understand the depth of God's commitment to salvation, the more we have to come to grips with the triunity of the one God. The deeper we dig into

the gospel, the deeper we go into the mystery of the Trinity. The Puritan theologian Thomas Goodwin taught that the proclamation of the gospel was the “bringing forth and publishing” of a mystery that God had treasured from all eternity and that “the things of the gospel are depths—the things of the gospel . . . are the deep things of God.”⁵

If the two problems of weak Trinitarianism and shallowness are related, there is also a single solution: we must dig deeper into the gospel itself. Instead of staying on the surface of it, satisfied with its immediate benefits to us and its promises of future blessedness, we can look into the essence of the gospel and find much more contained within it. Inevitably, what we will find in the depths of the good news is the character of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we call to mind how the gospel is inherently Trinitarian, we will find that we are being called back to the depths of the encounter with God that brought about the movement called “evangelicalism.” The more deeply Trinitarian we become, the more Trinitarianly deep we become. We are who we are because of the triune God’s work for our salvation, and it is high time for us to grasp this truth more firmly and bind to ourselves the strong name of the Trinity.⁶

EMPHATIC EVANGELICALISM

This introduction opened with the question, How has it come about that so many evangelicals today are cold toward the doctrine of the Trinity, confused about its meaning, or noncommittal about its importance? If evangelicalism is really Trinitarian deep down and came into existence because of a deep encounter with the gospel of the Trinity, its alienation from those Trinitarian roots is especially puzzling. But I think it can be explained by noting one of evangelicalism’s primary characteristics: evangelicalism is emphatic.

Protestant evangelicals stand in a great tradition of Christian faith and doctrine: we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses to the one Lord, one faith, and one baptism—the things that make Christianity Christian. No matter how defective your contemporary evangelical church experience may be, you can start there and pick up a trail to the great, confident evangelicalism of the nineteenth century and follow it back through the Wesleyan revivals and the Puritans, to the Reformation and its grounding

5. “The Glory of the Gospel,” in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace, 2000), 4:227–346. Goodwin says this repeatedly, at 238, 272, 281, 288.

6. Echoing Cecil F. Alexander’s translation of the Old Irish poem known as “St. Patrick’s Breastplate.”

in medieval Christendom, and behind that to the first heirs of the apostles, the earliest church fathers. All this is ours. Evangelicalism, in all its denominational manifestations, is an expression of that great tradition, and while it has nothing absolutely unique to offer, it does have distinguishing features. Chief among its distinguishing features is that it is emphatic. It has made strategic choices about what should be emphasized when presenting the fullness of the faith.

J. C. Ryle, the Anglican bishop of Liverpool, tried to put his finger on this distinctive trait in a tract called “Evangelical Religion.” First, he presented a list of the various doctrines that characterized the evangelical side of the Anglican tradition: the supremacy of Scripture, the depth of sin, the importance of the work of Christ, and the necessity of both an inward and outward working of the Holy Spirit. But, second, he admitted that many Anglicans who were “outside the Evangelical body, are sound in the main about the five points I have named, if you take them one by one.” What was missing, according to Ryle, was the emphasis:

Propound them separately, as points to be believed, and they would admit them every one. But they do not give them the prominence, position, rank, degree, priority, dignity, and precedence which we do. And this I hold to be a most important difference between us and them. It is the position which we assign to these points, which is one of the grand characteristics of Evangelical theology. We say boldly that they are first, foremost, chief, and principal things in Christianity, and that want of attention to their position mars and spoils the teaching of many well-meaning Churchmen.⁷

Especially in times of religious uncertainty, it is emphasis that makes all the difference. The evangelical laymen who edited the *Fundamentals*, that interdenominational publication that marked the conservative evangelical revolt against modernism in the early years of the twentieth century, knew this. Published serially in twelve volumes between 1910 and 1915, the publications were sent free of charge to Christian workers around the world. The 1917 republication of *The Fundamentals*, under the editorial hand of R. A. Torrey, consisted of ninety essays printed in four volumes.⁸

7. J. C. Ryle, *Knots Untied: Being Plain Statements on Disputed Points in Religion from the Standpoint of an Evangelical Churchman* (London: William Hunt, 1885), 8. Notice also that Ryle's list has the profile of an experiential grasp of Trinitarianism.

8. This four-volume edition, *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (Los Angeles: Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1917), has been reprinted frequently, most recently by Baker in 2000.

Torrey put the essays into an orderly sequence in this edition, making the *Fundamentals* a popular synthesis of conservative biblical scholarship, theology, and apologetics.

In the twelfth and final volume of the series, having published eighty-three chapters on important contemporary doctrinal issues by an all-star team of authors, they published an essay by evangelist L. W. Munhall entitled “The Doctrines That Must Be Emphasized in Successful Evangelism.”⁹ Munhall’s list was not reductionist. It included the doctrines of sin, redemption, resurrection, justification, regeneration, repentance, conversion, obedience, and assurance. Beyond these ten points of emphasis, Munhall obviously believed a great many other things and was prepared to defend them in feisty style against all opponents. But not everything can be said at once, and Munhall, speaking for those early fundamentalists, knew that the most strategic decision we ever make is the decision of what to emphasize.

Evangelicalism has always been concerned to underline certain elements of the Christian message. We have a lot to say about God’s revelation, but we emphasize the business end of it, where God’s voice is heard normatively: the Bible. We know that everything Jesus did has power for salvation in it, but we emphasize the one event that is literally crucial: the cross. We know that God is at work on his people through the full journey of their lives, from the earliest glimmers of awareness to the ups and downs of the spiritual life, but we emphasize the hinge of all spiritual experience: conversion. We know there are countless benefits that flow from being joined to Christ, but we emphasize the big one: heaven.

Bible, cross, conversion, heaven. These are the right things to emphasize. But in order to emphasize anything, you must presuppose a larger body of truth to select from. For example, the cross of Christ occupies its central role in salvation history precisely because it has Christ’s preexistence, incarnation, and earthly ministry on one side and his resurrection and ascension on the other. Without these, Christ’s work on the cross would not accomplish our salvation. But flanked by them, it is the cross that needs to be the focus of attention in order to explain the gospel. The same could be said for the Bible within the total field of revelation, for conversion within the realm of religious experience, and for heaven as one of the benefits of being in Christ. Each of these is the right strategic

9. See *The Fundamentals*, vol. 3, chap. 12, for more on the *Fundamentals* as a witness to evangelicalism at large and to evangelical Trinitarianism in particular.

emphasis but stands out properly only when it has something to stand out from.

When evangelicalism wanes into an anemic condition, as it sadly has in recent decades, it happens in this way: the points of emphasis are isolated from the main body of Christian truth and handled as if they are the whole story rather than the key points. Instead of teaching the full counsel of God (incarnation, ministry of healing and teaching, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and second coming), anemic evangelicalism simply shouts its one point of emphasis louder and louder (the cross! the cross! the cross!). But in isolation from the total matrix of Christian truth, the cross doesn't make the right kind of sense. A message about nothing but the cross is not emphatic. It is reductionist. The rest of the matrix matters: the death of Jesus is salvation partly because of the life he lived before it, and certainly because of the new life he lived after it, and above all because of the eternal background in which he is the eternal Son of the eternal Father. You do not need to say all those things at all times, but you need to have a felt sense of their force behind the things you do say. When that felt sense is not present, or is not somehow communicated to the next generation, emphatic evangelicalism becomes reductionist evangelicalism.

Emphatic evangelicalism can be transformed into reductionist evangelicalism in less than a generation and then become self-perpetuating. People who grow up under the influence of reductionist evangelicalism suffer, understandably, from some pretty perplexing disorientation. They are raised on "Bible, cross, conversion, and heaven" as the whole Christian message, and they sense that there must be more than that. They catch a glimpse of this "more" in Scripture but aren't sure where it belongs. They hear it in the hymns, but it is drowned out by the repetition of the familiar. They find extended discussions of it in older authors, but those very authors also reinforce what they've been surrounded by all along: that the most important things in the Christian message are Bible, cross, conversion, and heaven. Inside of reductionist evangelicalism, everything you hear is right, but somehow it comes out all wrong.

That is because when emphatic evangelicalism degenerates into reductionist evangelicalism, it still has the emphasis right but has been reduced to nothing but emphasis. When a message is all emphasis, everything is equally important and you are always shouting. Your powers of attention suffer fatigue from the constant barrage of emphasis. The other problem is that a gospel reduced to four points ceases to make sense unless its broader

context can be intuited. “The Bible says Jesus died so you can get saved and go to heaven” is a good start, the right emphasis, and a recognizable statement of the gospel—provided it is securely lodged in the host of other truths that support and explain it. The comprehensive truth of the Christian message needs to be sharpened by having these points of emphasis drawn out, but these points of emphasis need the comprehensive truth of the Christian message to give them context.

Knowing what to emphasize in order to simplify the Christian message is a great skill. It is not the same thing as rejecting nuances or impatiently waving away all details in order to cut to the main point. There is a kind of anti-intellectualism that is only interested in the bottom line and considers everything else disposable. Certainly that kind of anti-intellectualism can be found in evangelical history, but it is a deviation from the true ideal. Emphatics are not know-nothings. The emphatic approach to Christian witness has a different impulse. It knows that the only way to emphasize anything is precisely to keep everything else in place, not to strip it away. The most proficient communicators always know that they are leaving something out to make their point more clearly and have a residual awareness of what is being left in the background as they direct attention to the foreground. The whole vast network of interconnected ideas left in shadows in the background is what makes the bright object of our focused attention stand out so strikingly, make so much sense of everything else, and point us to the total truth.

The best evangelical communicators have always been skillful emphaticizers. John Wesley, for example, pointed to the sufficiency of Scripture by describing his desire to be *homo unius libri*, a man of one book¹⁰—although as an Oxford graduate, the author of dozens of works, and the editor and publisher of a comprehensive Christian Library, he was conspicuously a man of many books. “Man of one book” was a motto that emphasized Scripture, not a slogan for anti-intellectualism.

The best example of someone who struck the right balance between depth and emphasis is the apostle Paul. When the jailer in Philippi asked him, “What must I do to be saved?” he did not hem or haw, mumble or ramble. He did not stop to search his memory, pondering which passages of Scripture or trajectories of argument might be relevant to this question. He did not correct the jailer by saying, “It would be better if

10. John Wesley, “Introduction,” in *The Sermons of John Wesley: The Standard Sermons*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 1872 edition.

you asked me, ‘What has God done to save me?’” He did not take out a piece of chalk and diagram the history of salvation on the walls of the prison, or talk about predestination, or explore the spiritual dynamics of the jailer’s quest for meaning. He said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). On the other hand, when writing to the Ephesian church, to whom he had declared “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), he did not just keep repeating, “Believe in the Lord Jesus,” over and over, as if he had nothing more to say. For them, he described the eternal purposes of God the Father in choosing us to receive redemption through the blood of his beloved Son and to be sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (Eph. 1:3–14).¹¹ Paul was hardly a know-nothing, even when he resolved, for strategic reasons, to “know nothing” in Corinth “except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Paul knew how to be emphatic, but he also knew how to lead believers deeper into the mystery that had been made known to him by revelation (Eph. 3:3). He could make the simple point about salvation in a few words, and he could describe the deep background of that emphatic message in all its features. When he turned to the task of exploring that background, he turned to the doctrine of the Trinity: the Father’s choosing, the Son’s redeeming, and the Spirit’s sealing.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the classic statement of the comprehensive truth of the Christian message. It is a summary doctrine, encompassing the full scope of the biblical revelation. When the early church tried to summarize the main point of the Bible in short creeds (such as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed), they inevitably produced three-point outlines about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When emphatic evangelicalism degenerates into reductionist evangelicalism, it is always because it has lost touch with the all-encompassing truth of its Trinitarian theology. What is needed is not a change of emphasis but a restoration of the background, of the big picture from which the emphasized elements have been selected.

A blade is not all cutting edge. In fact, the cutting edge is the smallest part of the knife. The rest of the knife is the heavy heft of the broad, flat sides and the handle. Considered all by itself, the cutting edge is vanishingly small—a geometric concept instead of a useable object. Isolated from the great storehouse of all Christian truth, reductionist evangelicalism is a

11. See below, chap. 3, for more on this passage.

vanishingly small thing. It came from emphatic evangelicalism, and it must return to being emphatic evangelicalism or vanish to nothing.

Does the doctrine of the Trinity belong to the cutting edge of emphatic evangelicalism? No, it does not. It constitutes the hefty, solid steel behind the cutting edge. We do not need to use the T-word in evangelism or proclaim everything about the threeness and oneness of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in every sermon. But the Trinity belongs to the necessary presuppositions of the gospel. In this book, we will emphasize the doctrine of the Trinity constantly. It will be the continual focus and the explicit subject of our study as we examine how the Trinity changes everything. We will triple-underline it. The reason for doing this lies in our current plight of Trinity forgetfulness. Because current evangelicals have ceased to be aware of the deep Trinitarian background that previous generations of evangelicals presupposed, an extended exercise in calling the Trinity back to remembrance is necessary. But if the exercise is successful, the doctrine of the Trinity can and should subsequently recede from the foreground of our attention, back into the background. When evangelical Christianity is functioning properly, and its Trinitarian roots are nourishing its life, the evangelicals are busy telling the gospel, not talking constantly about the doctrine of the Trinity. May that time come! But it is not now; for the foreseeable future, we have a lot of remembering to do if we are to strengthen the bruised reed, or rekindle the smoking flax, of evangelical Trinitarianism.

It would be a false dichotomy to say that we will talk either about the gospel or about the Trinity, but as the genius of evangelicalism instructs us, we know that we can't emphasize everything all at once. We will continue to emphasize Bible, cross, conversion, and heaven. But in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we will do it without forgetting the dimension of depth behind it and without lapsing into reductionism.

GOING FOR GOLD AT THE ECUMENICAL OLYMPICS

Imagine an ecumenical Olympics in which all the branches and denominations of the Christian church came together in friendly, worldwide competition. Some churches would be naturally positioned to take home gold medals in certain categories, leaving other churches to take gold in their own natural strengths. How would the evangelical churches fare? Most of them would probably be well advised not to try for the gold in categories such as stately liturgy, historical awareness, or sacramental saturation. It

might even be sardonically amusing to watch badly trained and disadvantaged teams do their pitiful best in sports they have no chance of winning, like snowless nations fielding bobsled teams. The literature of contemporary evangelical self-mockery is full of that sort of humor.

But what about the contests in which the evangelical teams would do well? What about the categories in which the evangelicals would, in fact, dominate all other competitors, sweep the field, take home the gold, and show the world what excellence looks like? The list of possibilities is a fun one to make: evangelicals have traditionally excelled in areas such as conversion to a personal relationship with Jesus, devotional Bible study, conversational prayer, world missions, biblical literacy, and cooperation across denominational lines for the work of spreading the gospel. This list is neither exhaustive nor uncontroversial. But these six, among others, would be the strong categories for evangelical competitiveness in the imaginary ecumenical Olympics.

In my opinion, Trinitarianism belongs on that list. When evangelicals are being true to the underlying realities that brought the movement into being, they are the advocates of a particularly intense variety of Trinitarian knowledge and experience. When they are not self-forgetful, they know that participation in the life of the triune God is “the distinctive teaching of Evangelical Christianity,” as Gerald Bray said. But we cannot simply add Trinitarianism to the list of evangelical strengths as a seventh category, mainly because in the current situation it is not among our conspicuous strengths. Nobody would believe it to be true, least of all most evangelical Protestants with their current self-understandings.

The Trinitarian theology that drives evangelical experience, however, is to be found deep down, underneath each of the half-dozen strengths that are characteristic of evangelical Christianity. In fact, each of the strengths is inherently Trinitarian and can be explained only by reference to the way evangelicals experience the work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we read the Bible as if these inspired words carry the living voice of God, or when we pray to the Father in the name of the Son, or when we testify about Jesus in the power of the Spirit, we are always encountering a Trinitarian reality. This book is an excavation into the ground of each of these practices, digging into each until we find the Trinitarian gold buried beneath them. Above all, since the gospel itself is so Trinitarian that the Trinity simply is the gospel, salvation in Christ is an immersion into a Trinitarian reality. When it becomes evident that the factors which most

clearly mark evangelicals as evangelicals are also the most elaborately Trinitarian, it will also become evident that the people of the gospel are the people of the Trinity.

CALLING ON EVANGELICAL WITNESSES

Before outlining the chapters of the book, I want to explain something unusual about the method I follow here. Whenever possible, I have quoted, appealed to, and engaged authors who are evangelical Protestants. I have gone out of my way to bring in as many evangelical witnesses as I could find, and I have usually avoided interaction with thinkers from other traditions within Christianity. I did this not because I am unaware of or unimpressed by those other traditions, or because I think that only evangelical voices are worth listening to. No, the reason for giving preferential treatment to these authors rather than others is that I am trying to reintroduce evangelical Protestants to what is best in our own tradition. Here in the introduction I have asserted that the evangelical tradition is a profoundly Trinitarian tradition within Christianity. The book presents an argument to support that assertion, and along the way, the witnesses I call will also help build the case, example by example, that evangelicals have historically been not only subliminally Trinitarian but often self-conscious in their passionate commitment to the doctrine of the Trinity and their spiritual experiences with the three persons. The result, I hope, is an extended testimony service in which five centuries of evangelical Protestants stand up and bear witness to the gospel of the Trinity. Every reader can close this book with a long list of great, older evangelical authors on the Trinity to go and read.

Throughout the book there are a number of brief case studies of influential evangelical figures, usually entitled “The Trinitarian Theology of . . .” At thematically appropriate places we will explore the Trinitarian theology of C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Susannah Wesley, J. I. Packer, Oswald Chambers, contributors to the *Fundamentals*, and so on. Some of these authors have been quite eloquent about the depth of their Trinitarian commitments, and these authors need only to be quoted. J. I. Packer does not need anybody else to write out his Trinitarian theology for him! Billy Graham, on the other hand, has been an active evangelist who was too busy doing his life’s work to stop and explain, at a theoretical level, how everything he did in his evangelism and discipleship presupposed the Trinity. He did, in fact, have more to say about the Trinity than most people

would expect, and following the lead of what he said on the subject, it is easy enough to connect the dots in his practice. The Trinitarian presupposition is there to be seen just below the surface. Graham is a perfect example of an evangelical who is focused so much on being Trinitarian in practice that he somewhat under-explains the theological presuppositions of what he is doing.

The evangelical heritage, in other words, already has all it needs in order to be robustly Trinitarian. Speaking for myself, what I am teaching here is a doctrine of the Trinity that I first learned in a variety of evangelical settings: a Foursquare Gospel church, then a Methodist youth revival, followed by a community church, nondenominational charismatic retreats, and parachurch groups such as Campus Crusade for Christ. I have honed, deepened, and enriched that theology quite a bit through graduate studies and broader reading, but the thing itself did not come to me from academic study of theology. It was given to me at an early age by my evangelical church culture. I do not want to cover those first tracks lest I throw today's young evangelicals off the scent of the Trinity at the point where they are most likely to pick up that trail. That is why quotations from evangelical authors dominate this book. Consistently pointing out these "local" saints is another way of showing evangelicals that they are already surrounded by the Trinitarian reality. The books we already have on our shelves are sufficient to teach us this Trinitarian way of being Christian, and they always have been. The word of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is not far from you; if you are an evangelical Christian reading this book, you are soaking in it.

The term *evangelical* is, everybody knows, a disputed one historically and sociologically. Whatever else it may mean, and whatever extended meanings it may accommodate, one of the things I mean by it is "Protestant." As a result, the decision to interact primarily with evangelical witnesses means that few of my sources are older than the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The limitation to evangelical sources, remember, is only to make a point. But even to make my point about the depth and richness of evangelicalism, the restriction to the past five hundred years was a little too restrictive. So here and there in the book I have cited some older sources that predate the Reformation. It would be shortsighted to limit ourselves to the most recent one-fourth of the great Christian tradition, even if this is where we are most at home. My principle of selection is clear enough, but "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,"

and the doctrine of the Trinity is no place for small-mindedness. There are 1,500 more years of great Christian thought and life stretching off behind these recent centuries (as the Reformers themselves, those great interpreters of the patristic and medieval heritage, were quick to point out).

Even to make a point, there is no avoiding Irenaeus (second century), no getting around the great Athanasius (fourth century), and no skipping Augustine (fifth century). Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth century) is so illuminating that it would be obstinate and sectarian to refuse his help in our contemporary project. These classic theologians are important as background for evangelical Trinitarianism, but I have left them mostly in the background, unquoted. Even in more recent centuries, I have occasionally accepted help from nonevangelical authors whose contributions are irreplaceable. The better grasp we have of the Trinity, the more at home we will be in the great Christian tradition, and the more all those Christians from all those centuries will belong to us.

Because the word *evangelical* is disputed, it has become customary to say it can hardly mean anything. Certainly the poor word has been abused and stretched. It has been pressed into service to maintain social boundaries. It has been deconstructed, and its redefinitions have been redefined; it has been co-opted for political uses in the stylebooks of the secular media. It continues to be used as a badge, a thought stopper, a sneer, a weasel word, a self-congratulation, a marketing gimmick, and a billy club. Is the poor word dead, then? No, it is no more dead than usual. In fact, it is not even especially sick. We can take some comfort in knowing that B. B. Warfield declared it “moribund, if not already dead” from “lack of care” as long ago as 1916. “Nobody any longer seems to know what it means.”¹² Yet Warfield himself left a legacy of great evangelical writing, and however we may draw the confessional boundaries, we recognize evangelicalism when we see it.

For the purposes of this book, I have no intention to fight about what an evangelical is or even to define the term very closely, except to alert the reader here that I am indulging in an expansive use of it within certain boundaries. I include in my cast of characters all sorts of pietists, revivalists, charismatics, Pentecostals, Baptists, and holiness preachers, right alongside the magisterial Reformers, the high Reformed, and the evangelical Anglicans. It may be hard to imagine a conversation between

12. B. B. Warfield, “Redeemer and Redemption,” in *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1950), 345.

the Princetonian B. B. Warfield and Amanda Smith the holiness preacher, but here it is, and it's a conversation about the Trinity. The Calvinists and the Arminians are in league here, along with the strict old fundamentalists and their neoevangelical descendants who would prefer not to be seen with them in public. Some readers may wish to exclude some of these witnesses from the category of evangelical, and that is their right. But we will cast the net as wide as possible first, with less interest in defining evangelicalism than in carrying out a public performance of it, especially in its Trinitarian character.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The Deep Things of God explains how the Trinity changes everything, and it does this by explaining how the Trinity and the gospel are connected. After some introductory matters (chapters 1–4), the book has two major sections. The first major section is a six-chapter study (chapters 5–10) of the Trinity and salvation, showing salvation's size, the gospel's shape, and our point of access into it. Chapter 5, "Lost in the Fullness of God," sets salvation in the broader context of God's purposes. Chapter 6, "So Great Salvation," shows how the Trinity expands our ideas about the sheer size of salvation by exploring the biblical idea of God's self-giving love. Chapter 7, "The Shape of the Gospel," traces the Christian experience of salvation back from our own lives into the life of God as the Father who begets the eternal Son and breathes the eternal Spirit. Chapter 8, "Behold What Manner of Love," concludes that the Trinitarian shape of the gospel comes from the fact that God, by grace, gives himself to us by opening that eternal triune life to us. Chapter 9, "Into the Saving Life of Christ," shows how the emphasis of this Trinitarian view of salvation rightly falls on Jesus Christ, in whose life and death we find salvation. This six-chapter core of the book is the most important section because it is devoted to the "things of the gospel," which, Thomas Goodwin has reminded us, are "the deep things of God."

The last three chapters take up, from among the many practices that characterize evangelical churches, the two that are most marked and most profoundly Trinitarian: Bible reading and prayer. Because this part of the book is about Christian practices, chapters 11 and 12 begin with verbs: hearing and praying. Chapter 11, "Hearing the Voice of God in Scripture," begins with the practice of reading Scripture as the word of God and argues that whenever believers handle the Bible as a means of grace,

the Spirit is carrying the word of the Father to them. Chapter 12, “Praying with the Grain,” explains the Trinitarian things actually going on in Christian prayer, and chapter 13 is a meditation on the communion with God made possible by Trinitarian prayer. These chapters on prayer are an encouragement to pray intentionally in a way that lines up with the underlying Trinitarian reality. Overall, this section of the book forms an essay on communion with the Trinity. Each of these evangelical practices (hearing from God and talking to God) could be engaged in without any attention to the presence of the Trinity in them, and, in fact, this is how too many evangelical churches currently engage in them. Each is inherently Trinitarian, though, and to direct our attention to this fact is to see what is really going on. Attending to the work of the Trinity restores the dimension of depth to these practices. That is how the Trinity changes everything.

Before the section on the gospel (chapters 5–10) and the section on evangelical practices (chapters 11–13), there are two preliminary matters that demand our attention. For one thing, in a book about how eminently practical the doctrine of the Trinity is for Christian experience, it is important to take a step back and remind ourselves that God is first and foremost Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for himself, not for us. So chapters 3 and 4, “Within the Happy Land of the Trinity” and “The Eternal Life of These Three,” are a meditation on what triunity means for God before it makes any difference to us.

And even before beginning that meditation, we can take one further step back and remind ourselves what we are doing when we take up the task of thinking about the Trinity. So chapters 1 and 2, “Always Already Trinitarian” and “Compassed About by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” are an opening reflection on the methodology of doing Trinitarian theology. Like all methodological discussions, it is either the most important part of the book (because it lays out the entire subject in the most general and abstract way) or the best part to skip over (because it is not the main subject, but the approach to the main subject) and perhaps come back to. Whether you read it in order or not, the first chapter reminds us that Christians are never starting from scratch when they begin doing Trinitarian theology. A Christian, and especially an evangelical Christian, is somebody who is already immersed in the reality of the Trinity, long before beginning to reflect on the idea of the Trinity.

ALWAYS ALREADY TRINITARIAN

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

We have received . . . the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.

1 CORINTHIANS 2:12

I believed it, but I still didn't understand it.

NICKY CRUZ



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 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 famous not for his Trinitarian theology but 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.”³

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 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.⁴

1. David Wilkerson with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Cross and the Switchblade* (New York: Pyramid, 1963). The book was a best seller well into the 1970s in the Christian market. It was also the basis of a 1970 movie starring Pat Boone and Erik Estrada, and a 1972 comic book.

2. Nicky Cruz with Jamie Buckingham, *Run Baby Run* (New York: Pyramid, 1968).

3. Nicky Cruz with Charles Paul Conn, *The Magnificent Three* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976), 14.

4. *Ibid.*

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."⁵

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."⁶ 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.⁷

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 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!"⁸

But this intense focus on Jesus does not keep Cruz from celebrating

5. *Ibid.*, 9.

6. *Ibid.*, 13.

7. *Ibid.*, 24–25.

8. *Ibid.*, 51.

“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!”⁹ 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. 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

9. *Ibid.*, 64.

10. *Ibid.*, 103.

11. *Ibid.*, 105.

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.”¹² 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.”¹³ And even though Cruz brings his own voice and 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 knew 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 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 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 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.”¹⁴ Though Cruz had gained no new information, he wrote as if his new grasp of the Trinity had changed everything about his Christian life.

12. *Ibid.*, 70.

13. *Ibid.*, 18.

14. *Ibid.*, 16.

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.”¹⁵ 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 it worked on Cruz only from outside. 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.”¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ 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

15. *Ibid.*, 15.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 17.

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.¹⁸

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 hidden in a field a treasure 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 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 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.

18. Ibid.

There is certainly a time and a 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 in which much evangelical Trinitarianism is found at the popular level. As I have taught over the past several years in various churches about the doctrine of the Trinity, 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.¹⁹ 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 mes-

19. Millard J. Erickson addresses precisely these questions in his short, incisive book *Making Sense of the Trinity: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000). His title for the third question, which he calls the “So What?” question, is, “Does It Make Any Difference?”

sage 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 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 such as, Why have three persons? and, What is the Trinity like? But the right method begins with an immersion in the reality of the triune God and only then turns to the task of explaining. The words and concepts then find their proper places in the context of a life marked by the recognized presence of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This kind of teaching about the Trinity is not a project of constructing a complex idea but of unpacking a comprehensive reality in which we already find ourselves 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 enculturate 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."²⁰ 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

20. Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), xviii.

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.”²¹

The doctrine of the Trinity flourishes, not when it is merely stated accurately, but when it is affirmed in the context of a prediscursive, non-thematic 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 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 such as Karl Barth and Karl Rahner, is frequently told in histories of the doctrine.²² 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

21. Mark Noll, “The Evangelical Mind Today,” *First Things* 146 (October 2004): 34–39.

22. See esp. Bruce D. Marshall’s critique of this story in his article “The Trinity,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2004). His warning about exaggerating the importance of Protestant liberalism and Catholic manualism is especially relevant for evangelicals, who were not directly formed by those traditions and so did not directly profit when Barth and Rahner undermined them.

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. He famously placed the doctrine in the last few pages of his influential work *The Christian Faith*, making it something of an appendix to the main work.²³ One could make too much of a doctrine's location in a book, but in the case of a thinker so consummately systematic as Schleiermacher, location does signify a great deal. Since Christianity is "essentially distinguished from other faiths by the fact that in it everything is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth,"²⁴ Schleiermacher's theology is entirely centered on that redemption, or rather on the knowledge of that redemption, the contents of the self-consciousness of the redeemed. "We shall exhaust the whole compass of Christian doctrine if we consider the facts of the religious self-consciousness, first, as they are presupposed by the antithesis expressed in the concept of redemption, and second, as they are determined by that antithesis."²⁵

23. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. MacKintosh and J. S. Stewart (1830; repr. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928).

24. *Ibid.*, 52.

25. *Ibid.*, 123.

To “exhaust the whole compass of Christian doctrine” by analyzing redemption may seem to run the risk of reducing theology to a study of salvation, but Schleiermacher’s method is expansive enough to include much besides salvation. The Christian consciousness of redemption presupposes concepts such as God’s holiness, righteousness, love, and wisdom; the opposing negative states of evil and sin; and the transition between them by way of Christ and the church through rebirth and sanctification. These concepts, further, presuppose others: creation and preservation; an original state of human perfection; and the divine attributes of eternity, omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience. Even angels and devils can be given a place within the redemption-centered project of *The Christian Faith*, although only a bit tentatively, since their alleged operations are so far at the periphery of the Christian consciousness of redemption that angelology “never enters into the sphere of Christian doctrine proper.”²⁶

The Trinity, however, could not be admitted to the doctrinal system proper, because it could not be related to the gospel, or, in Schleiermacher’s terms, it is not directly implicated in redemption: “It is not an immediate utterance concerning the Christian self-consciousness but only a combination of several such utterances.”²⁷ Piecing together doctrines to construct more elaborate doctrines was something Schleiermacher regarded with horror, because it led out from the living center of the faith to the arid regions of *theologoumena* (words about words!), where dogmaticians do their deadening work. Schleiermacher had long since rejected that approach in his early speeches in *On Religion*: “Among those systematizers there is less than anywhere, a devout watching and listening to discover in their own hearts what they are to describe. They would rather reckon with symbols.”²⁸

The young Romantic may have grown up to write a big book of doctrine, but he continued his “devout watching and listening” and never betrayed his basic insight or became one of “those systematizers” content to “reckon with symbols.” Because the Trinity could not be directly connected to redemption, Schleiermacher placed it well outside the life-giving core of *The Christian Faith*. In the heading of the section where he finally treated it, Schleiermacher pointed out that the doctrine of the Trinity could not be considered an issue that was “finally settled,” because after

26. *Ibid.*, 156.

27. *Ibid.*, 738.

28. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799; repr. New York: Harper, 1958), 52.

all it “did not receive any fresh treatment when the [Protestant] Church was set up; and so there must still be in store for it a transformation which will go back to its very beginnings.”²⁹ Schleiermacher considered it obvious that if the Trinity were implicated in the *evangel*, the *evangelisch* (that is, Protestant) awakening of the sixteenth century would have transformed and deepened it as it had everything central to Christian redemption.

The whole point of our book is to insist that gospel and Trinity are internally linked, so we obviously dissent from Schleiermacher’s judgments about Trinitarianism. However, we are tracing the story of what goes wrong that makes this doctrine stop mattering to evangelicals. And Schleiermacher’s assessment that there is nothing Trinitarian to be discerned in the Christian consciousness of redemption has had its forecasts and echoes throughout the evangelical tradition. The characteristic evangelical response, however, has not been to deny the doctrine, or even to move it to an appendix of the systematic theology texts, as Schleiermacher did. The evangelical tradition at large has not usually been as phobic about propositional revelation as Schleiermacher was nor as allergic to the clear doctrinal statements that propositional revelation makes possible. Indeed, connecting discrete propositions found in Scripture, and believing them on the basis of the authority of Scripture as the word of God, has been a crucial method in evangelical theology all along. Our path has been different from Schleiermacher’s, though we started from the same blind spot. When a theologian has to function under the salutary pressure of authoritatively revealed sentences, but in the debilitating absence of a lively sense of the connection between gospel and Trinity, Trinitarian commitments take on a particular pathos. This tension is pervasive in evangelical history, but its workings can be seen instructively in three examples from three centuries: John Bunyan, Isaac Watts, and Amanda Smith.

John Bunyan (1628–1688) devoted only one extended meditation to this doctrine, “Of the Trinity and a Christian,” the title of which suggests an interest in something practical and perhaps edifying. The descriptive subtitle specifies what it is about: “How a young or shaken Christian should demean himself under the weighty thoughts of the Doctrin of the Trinity.” The problem Bunyan wants to solve for the “young or shaken Christian” is that the Trinity is a difficult doctrine, seeming to contradict reason by proposing that one is three or vice versa. This intellectual con-

29. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 747. I have changed the standard translation here and substituted “Protestant” for “Evangelical,” which is what Schleiermacher manifestly meant.

flict could lead the believer to question what is clearly revealed in Scripture, which is tantamount to questioning God himself. But Bunyan warns: “It is great lewdness, and also insufferable arrogancy to come to the Word of God, as conceiting already that whatever thou readest must either by thee be understood, or of it self fall to the ground as a senseless error.” The proper response to this hard doctrine is to submit one’s human judgment to God’s greater wisdom: “But God is wiser than Man, wherefore fear thou him and tremble at his Word, saying still, with godly suspicion of thine own infirmity, what I see not teach thou me, and thou art God only wise; but as for me, I was as a beast before thee.”³⁰

Surely Bunyan strikes the appropriate human posture in the face of God’s wisdom, but we might ask why it is the doctrine of the Trinity in particular that spurs his reflection on humility of mind. Why is it precisely here that we are invited to yield our understanding before the incomprehensibility of God and his secret counsels? The answer, sadly, seems to be that when Bunyan thought about the doctrine of the Trinity, he thought of something remote from the business of salvation but authoritatively revealed and necessary to be believed. The doctrine seems to have turned from a mystery of salvation to a problem of intellectual coherence.³¹

Isaac Watts (1674–1748) felt the same tension, but by his era there had been considerable debate about whether this hard doctrine was in fact scriptural.³² The debates took their toll on Watts, and although most of his hymns and sermons are a glorious legacy of Trinitarian worship, he became much less confident about the traditional form of the doctrine later in his life. Watts was as submissive to scriptural revelation as Bunyan but was deeply troubled about what doctrine he was being asked to submit his understanding to: “Dear and blessed God, hadst thou been pleased, in any one plain scripture, to have informed me which of the different opinions about holy Trinity, among the contending parties of christians, had been true, thou knowest with how much real satisfaction and joy, my unbiased heart would have opened itself to receive and embrace the divine discovery.”

If only God had shown “plainly, in any single text, that the Father,

30. John Bunyan, “Of the Trinity and a Christian,” in *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. W. R. Owens (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 12:403–5.

31. Bunyan in fact had a much better grasp of the actual dynamics of biblical Trinitarianism than he gave himself credit for. See below (chap. 12) for his Trinitarian definition of prayer. I would even say Bunyan is a typical evangelical in that he is more Trinitarian than he thinks he is.

32. For background, see Philip Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes: The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century* (London: T&T Clark, 2003).

Son, and Holy Spirit, are three real distinct Persons” in one divine nature, Watts says, “I had never suffered myself to be bewildered in so many doubts, nor embarrassed with so many strong fears of assenting to the mere inventions of men, instead of divine doctrine; but I should have humbly and immediately accepted thy words, so far as it was possible for me to understand them, as the only rule of my faith.” Nowhere in his impassioned prayer does Watts give the impression that he is grappling with a mystery of salvation; his angst all stems from the situation of being faced with a doctrine lacking the kind of direct biblical support that would bind it on his conscience as an article of faith, and its sheer intellectual difficulty. “How can such weak creatures ever take in so strange, so difficult, and so abstruse a doctrine as this?”³³

The way this tension has come to expression in the devotional life of evangelicals is startlingly expressed by the Holiness evangelist Amanda Smith (1837–1915) in her autobiography *The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist*.³⁴ Without explaining what provoked her, Smith records that she “became greatly exercised about the Trinity. . . . I could not seem to understand just how there could exist three distinct persons, and yet one. I thought every day and prayed for light, but didn’t seem to get help. I read the Bible, but no help came.” Smith records the two weeks during which her anxiety mounted and she felt guided toward a definite experience of personal revelation, a kind of intellectual counterpart to the experience of entire sanctification expected by Holiness people in America. Encouraged that “every blessing you get from God is by faith,” Smith asked herself, “If by faith, why not now?”

I turned around and knelt down by an old trunk that stood in the corner of the room, and I told the Lord that I wanted to understand the Trinity, and that I was afraid of fanaticism, and I wanted Him to make it clear to me for His own sake. I don’t know how long I prayed, but O, how my soul was filled with light under the great baptism that came upon me. I came near falling prostrate, but bore up when God

33. This long prayer, entitled “The Author’s solemn Address to the great and ever-blessed God on a Review of what he had written in the Trinitarian Controversy,” can be found as sec. 21 of “Remnants of Time Employed in Prose and Verse, or Short Essays and Composures on Various Subjects,” in *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts in Nine Volumes* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, 1813), 9:505–12. The quotation is from p. 507. These remarks by Watts need to be taken in the total context of his work, in which Trinitarian commitments are evident and, as in the hymns, warmly affirmed.

34. Amanda Smith, *The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist* (Chicago: Meyer & Brother, 1893); reprinted from original typesetting in the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

revealed Himself so clearly to me, and I have understood it ever since. I can't just explain it to others, but God made me understand it so I have had no question since. Praise the Lord! Then He showed me three other things.³⁵

Smith undeniably had a powerful spiritual experience centered on the doctrine of the Trinity, but it is equally undeniable that the problem her experience solved for her is how the doctrine itself can make sense. In a single ineffable moment, a “great baptism,” she leapt the divide between doctrine and life. Perhaps if she had been able to “explain it to others,” her explanation would have laid bare the evangelical substructure of Trinitarian commitment; perhaps this is what God made her understand to her own intellectual satisfaction. As it stands, however, the implicit advice from Smith's experience seems to be that troubled believers should likewise “pray through” to an ineffable moment of inward clarity and peace over this teaching.

For evangelicals, then, from Bunyan to Smith and down to the present, the doctrine has shrunk to a set of propositions that are to be held in the mind as verbalisms, remote from any possible direct experience or relevance. Because we believe in God's power to reveal truth, we believe that this is a revealed truth: God is triune. There seems to be no intrinsic reason God could not have revealed some other proposition to us, for instance, that God is quadrune, quintune, or blue. Karl Rahner famously lamented the parallel situation in Roman Catholic theology, in which it seemed as if “this mystery has been revealed for its own sake. . . . We make statements about it, but as a reality it has nothing to do with us at all.”³⁶ Although the doctrine may still be dutifully taught and just as dutifully learned, it has long been viewed as an abstract series of propositions, an undigested lump of tradition or of revealed ideas. Like anything that should be living but is dead, it stays in its place and decays.

35. *Ibid.*, 141–42.

36. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (1967; English trans. New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 14.

“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

“This readable book on God’s undiluted life is fantastically perceptive, and it’s been made more valuable now in a second edition with additional features for personal study, Bible meditation, group discussion, and real-life application. Like never before, *The Deep Things of God* invites new travelers to hike into the glorious terrain of this happy land together.”

TONY REINKE, staff writer and researcher, desiringGod.org; author,
12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You

“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, Research Professor of Systematic Theology,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

FRED SANDERS (PhD, Graduate Theological Union) is professor of theology at Biola University’s Torrey Honors Institute. A popular blogger and speaker, Sanders has authored numerous journal articles and written or contributed to several books, including *The Triune God*.

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY