Sanders, Fred. *The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner's Rule and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture.* New York: Peter Lang, 2005.

Introduction

Fred Sanders is Assistant Professor of Theology in the Torrey Honors Institute at Biola University, La Mirada, California. He is the recent editor of *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective* (Broadman & Holman, 2007) and is working on a more popular-level book entitled *The Deep Things of God: The Trinity and Evangelical Experience.* His book *The Image of the Immanent Trinity* is a republication of his 2005 doctoral dissertation by the same title from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. In this review, I will summarize each chapter and offer an evaluative critique at the end.

Evaluation

Chapter 1. Sanders opening chapter is a short summary of the last one hundred years in Trinitarian thought. With modern theology, the Trinity fell to a "doctrine of second rank," according to Claude Welch (1), but with the rise of two Karl's, Karl Rahner and Karl Barth (53), the doctrine of the Trinity made a "surprising comeback" during the last half of the twentieth century. Consequently, the volume of Trinitarian literature in the last fifty years is substantial and in need of "sorting, categorizing, and discriminating" (2). Sanders' book aims to tackle that need, and it utilizes Rahner's Trinitarian axiom to do so. He writes, "This book takes its pointof departure from the idea that the most helpful way to sort out Trinitarian theologies is based on the their responses to the influential thesis put forth by Karl Rahner, "The economic Trinity is

the immanent Trinity, and *vice versa"* (3). The rest of his book goes on to demonstrate how Rahner's Rule is both helpful and misleading, and thus in need of modification.

After introducing his subject and the aim of his study, Sanders goes on to clarify term. He distinguishes between the economic and immanent Trinity, citing the development of both concepts in church history. He writes of the early church fathers, "As soon as the category *oikonomia* was clearly delimited, patristic thinkers found it necessary to play it off against *theologia,"* i.e. the immanent Trinity (3). Establishing these terms, Sanders moves to consider Rahner's *Grundaxiom.*

In short, Sanders both commends and critiques Rahner's Rule. As it seeks to relate God *ad extra* to God *in se,* he believes that Rahner's adage "successfully encapsulates the concerns which have always been central to the doctrine of the Trinity" (5). Simultaneously, he asserts that "Rahner's Rule is inherently unstable, leaning sometimes toward a strict and total identification of economic and immanent Trinity, and sometimes toward a more carefully circumscribed account of the relationship between them" (6). Thus, he will argue that Rahner's Rule is full of theological promise, but desperately in need of further biblical definition. Sander's corrective is to reject the "vice versa" in Rahner's formulation, and to replace it with the language of image-bearing, so that the Economic Trinity becomes the historically revealed image of the Immanent Trinity (7-9). His goal is to make the Trinity more accessible, and in a sense more visible (13-14), to the everyday Bible reader.

One other noteworthy item from the first chapter is his disclaimer concerning gendered-language. Sanders makes apology for his use of masculine terminology and pines for the days of older theologians, like Barth, who could use simpler, masculine language to express realities about the Godhead. Sanders wants to make sure that his readers know that his choice to

employ "he," "Him," and "Himself," is not some kind of push for patriarchy, but rather a simplification of language. This appeal is unfortunate, but does not ultimately invalidate the results of his study.

Chapter 2. Grounding his study in the history of the church, Sanders spends thirty pages tracing "Trinitarian theology and the History of Exegesis" (15-46). He suggests that the biblical development of doctrine typically includes three components: (1) polemical response to heresy, (2) defining scriptural terminology, which usually included "Greek philosophical categories to [help] bring their faith to fuller expression," and (3) biblical interpretation (16-17). For the purposes of his study, which leans toward biblical theology and away from philosophical formulation, he aims to focus on this third factor because he feels that over the course of time theologians "obscur[ed] the image of the image immanent Trinity in theological exegesis" (18). In other words, biblical data was covered over by philosophical terminology and abstraction.

To prove his point, Sanders outlines the development of Trinitarian doctrine in the theology of five schools of thought—Athanasius, Augustine, Gregory Palamas, Thomas Aquinas, and Luther, Calvin and the Reformers. Without adducing every detail, Sanders basic argument is that, as time went on, Trinitarian doctrine was more and more saturated with philosophy. So that Sanders questions Augustine's use of philosophy and analogy to better understand the Trinity, writing, "the tension between these two sources, biblical and neoplatonic, accounts for the awkwardness of Augustine's exegetical acrobatics" (32). And later, Sanders dismisses Aquinas on the basis of his dependence on natural theology to discern the nature of God. Of Aquinas, he writes that the "economic Trinity become[s] opaque" in relationship to the immanent Trinity (40). Instead of Trinitarian theology dependent on philosophy and logical deductions, Sanders prefers a doctrine of the Scipture that comes straight from the Bible. Thus

he concludes the chapter showing how such a historical trajectory eventually marginalized the Trinity in modern theology (44). He judges that those formulations which go to Scripture to "see there the image of the immanent Trinity…can be judged fruitful," but those that rest on extra-biblical postulation only "marginaliz[e] the doctrine" (44-45). This leads him to examine Rahner's Rule.

Chapter 3. Sanders third chapter examines the "background and origin of Rahner's Rule" (47-82). Since chapters 4-5 are dependent on his analysis of Rahner's "inherently unstable" maxim, he spends considerable time addressing Rahner's trinitarianism and the neo-orthodox milieu that influenced Rahner. He writes, "The central purpose of this chapter is to exposit the meaning of Rahner's Trinitarian *Grundaxiom* in the context of his own theological system," and to do this "we must take a slightly broader view of the forces which put the doctrine [of the Trinity] back on the theological agenda in the twentieth century" (47).

First, Sanders considers the impact of Karl Barth's Trinitarian theology, earmarking him as the only neo-orthodox theologian with trinitarian commitments (50). Significantly, for Barth, the Trinity "stop being a rarefied riddle and becomes instead the hermeneutical key for opening up questions in all theological loci" (51-52). Thus, following Barth theologians were more attuned to the centrality of doing Trinitarian theology. Yet, as Sanders compares Barth and Rahner, he shows that despite their "similar conclusions about the Trinity" (54), these two men "lived in different thought-worlds and expressed themselves in very different theological vocabularies" (53). Hence, Rahner's Rule developed parallel to and not dependent upon the theology of Barth.

Moving from the setting to the substance of *The Trinity,* Sanders outlines Rahner's book. The impetus behind Rahner's work was the deplorable disregard for the doctrine of the

Trinity in the life of the church. His aim in the book, says Sanders, was to diagnose and treat the doctrinal malady (57). Thus when he introduced his famous axiom, "the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity" and vice versa, he was attempting to show the practicality of the doctrine for Christian life (57-58). As his axiom rests in the beginning of his work, the remainder of his short book consists of defending his position. Sanders follows his train of thought, highlighting three areas of special attention.

First, Sanders shows that Rahner rejected any sort of accidental relationship between the Economic and Immanent Trinity as it concerns the incarnation (60-69). He vehemently argues against the likes of Peter Lombard and Augustine—though this point is disputed as to Augustine's own position—that any member of the Trinity could have become the son. Likewise, his position contends with Barth, for whom divine freedom is primary. Instead, Rahner unites the Trinity *in se* and *ad extra.* Sanders comments, "the temporal mission of the Sone must necessarily correspond to and reveal his eternal procession from the Father" (69).

Second, Sanders shows how Rahner understood the relationship between nature and grace (69-74). Contra theologians in the neoscholastic tradition, Rahner posited an "uncreated grace" that was nothing other than God himself mediated to humanity through the presence of the Spirit. Rahner's resultant pneumatology subsumed grace into the Spirit, where the benefits of salvation in history were in fact nothing other than the presence of the uncreated, eternal Spirit. Third, Sanders points at the way Rahner understood metaphysics, ontology, and the *Realsymbol.* It seems that for Rahner, every being has a dimension of plurality, with God himself being the greatest of all beings (75), and that the way in which an ontological being relates to its existential representation is through the logic of the *Realsymbol* (76). In this sense, ontological and economic categories are possessed by all sentient beings, and they are united by

a self-awareness of self *in se* and self *ad extra.* Or to put it another way, "a being expresses itself immanently for its own self-realization, and this very act makes possible a revelation of being to that which is outside" (76). In short, "the economic Trinity becomes the symbol of the immanent" (78). This unidirectional communication accords with Sanders proposal; however, as Sanders points out, Rahner's rule includes the reverse relationship too. Not only is there a communication of being from immanent to economic, there is also the reciporical communication from economic to immanent, which poses a problem. Sanders concludes his chapter, once again stressing the instability of Rahner's Rule. He writes, "Any theologian who attempts to implement Rahner's Rule in a comprehensive theological project will be forced to imposes an interpretation on it" (82). And so, Sanders turns in chapters 4 and 5 to consider two kinds of interpreters—Radicalizers and Restricters.

Chapters 4 and Chapter 5. Proving his thesis that Rahner's Rule demands interpretation in order for it to be used in larger theological systems, Sanders spends two chapters outlining the way in which theologians after Rahner have reacted to his *Grundaxiom.* In the first camp are those who "argue that the 'is' in Rahner's Rule should be interpreted as 'a strong identity' between economic and immanent Trinity" (83). These, Sanders calls "Radicalizers" and they include the likes of Piet J.A.M. Schoonenberg, Hans Kung, Jurgen Moltmannn, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Robert Jenson, and Catherine Mowry LaCugna. In the second camp are the "Restricters" who "are happy to affirm Rahner's Rule and to pursue its implications throughout their work, so long as certain misinterpretations of the axiom are exposed and repudiated" (123). On the list of Restricters are Yves Congar, Walter Kasper, Hans Urs von Balthasar, T.F. Torrance, and Paul Molnar.

So chapters 4 and 5 survey the Trinitarian works of each author-theologian listed above. They illustrate ways in which Rahner's Rule has been co-opted and adapted to engage in further theological discussion. Yet, it would be incorrect to think that there are merely two ways to respond to Rahner. It is more appropriate to say there are two tendencies, and that in general the tendency of the Radicalizers is to minimize the immanent Trinity and to stress the action of the economic Trinity. For some in this group that means that the immanent Trinity is entirely subsumed by the Economic, without remainder; for others, there is a traditional or doctrinal commitment to maintain a place for the immanent, all the while giving pride of place to the Trinity *ad extra.* One thing is congruent for these Radicalizers: they have built there theological systems from Rahner's Rule. In other words, they are self-consciously Rahnerian. On the other hand, most Restricters are working with other doctrinal and traditional priorities. As Sanders comments, "The restricters …have not generated significant theological projects on the basis of their restrictions on the axiom in question" (123-24). Whereas, the Radicalizers, who are aiming to go beyond Rahner, have clearly shown a dependence on his reciprocal axiom. Sanders survey gives an enlightening taxonomy of these views and demonstrates the positive and negative results of appropriating Rahner's Rule. In the end, he concludes that both approaches have generated doctrinal problems (158).

Chapter 6. Finally, Sanders asserts his own model for the relationship between the Economic and Immanent Trinity in his last chapter, "Rahner's Rule and Theological Interpretation of Scripture." To get a sense of his proposal and method, I will quote him at length. Sanders begins,

> Having surveyed some of the most important projects spawned by radicalization or restriction of the axiom, in this chapter we will draw together the various threads of the discussion with a view to identifying the core concerns of the two broad groups of interpreters of Rahner's Rule, and then attept to address these core concerns as fully as

> possible with a new proposal for interpreting Rahner's Rule: *the economic Trinity is the image of the immanent Trinity.* After specifying the meaning of this revised *eikonic* interpretation of Rahner's Rule, we will test its fruitfulness for theological interpretation of scripture by revisiting some of the classic problems of the history of exegesis, and conclude by describing some implications of the formula for theological method, for various loci within systematic theology, and for ecumenical discussions (159).

In his summarizing chapter, Sanders finds looks for mediating ground between the Radicalizers and Restricters (160-66). Though he admits that even his proposal must fall on one side or the other (160), he does not suggest which side that is. In fact, in apparent contradiction with himself, he seems to assert a mediating position that seeks to bridge the gap.

He lists the distinctive contribution that each group makes to the discussion. He shows that Radicalizers display a concern for making the Trinity relevant, finding the actual presence of God in time and space, and a dismissal of transcendental metaphysics. On this last point, it shows again Sanders predilection for a purely biblical formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, one that is not encumbered by philosophical speculation. Then for the Restricters he lists commitments to preserving God's freedom and aseity, as well as maintaining Creator-creation distinctives with a polemic against making God dependent on his creation. Sanders also denotes that ultimately these two camps are separated by competing soteriological visions—the Radicalizers' emphasizing God's commitment to humanity (cf. La Cugna's *God For Us*) and the Restricters' emphasis on God's total independence from creation and his corresponding freedom in saving humanity.

Moving on, Sanders attempts to take mediate these positions by suggesting that the Economic Trinity "images" the Immanent Trinity. He writes, "In order to satisfy the core concerns of both groups, what is needed is a way of describing the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity which links them closely enough to satisfy the radicalizers, but not so closely as to violate the distinctions which the restricters want to see maintained" (166).

Sanders realizes the impossibility of such a mediation, but hopes, as a restricter himself, to appropriate as much as possible from the radicalizing camp (167). His proposal then aims to make inseparable economic and immanent understandings, yet without collapsing the immanent into the economic, or distorting the economic with conjecture about the immanent.

Sanders takes time to develop the idea of "image." He defines his terms and qualifies the ways in which the term is used in Christology and anthropology, and then makes application to the Trinity. The benefit he sees to this formulation is the unidirectional relationship between from the economic and to the immanent means that the Trinity in redemptive history is a true reflection and representation of the ontological Trinity. At the same time, again borrowing concepts from Christology, the consubstantial relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity rejects any notion of "independent 'Trinities'" (173). Moreover, like in Christology where the incarnate Son images the Father and not the eternal Son, Sanders points out again that the iconic revelation is that of Triune relations. "In seeing the Son, therefore, we see the Father-Son relationship, the cornerstone of triune perichoresis" (173). He continues,

> This personal presence of the Son in the economy of salvation, as the presence of that person who is the perfect self-expression of the Father, makes possible the presence of the Trinity in the economy of Salvation. Because the Son is the image of the Father within the immanent Trinity, the Son's presence in salvation history makes the economic Trinity the image of the immanent Trinity (173).

Sanders continues his argument with an appeal to Barth's understanding of primary and secondary objectivity (173-76), and goes on to root his findings in the church's historic dictum, *opera trinitas ad extra indivisa sunt* (176). In short, Sanders argument is that the Trinity seen in Scripture is really and truly the revelation of the Triune God, yet what is seen in Scripture does not exhaust who God is. In this way, much reflection upon the immanent Trinity is possible, but such reflection must be concretely defined by the revelation of the Triune God in

the economy of salvation (177). In his concluding remarks, Sanders outlines way in which this *eikonic* relationship impacts theological method, systematic doctrines, and relationships between Eastern and Western theologians (182-88). And Sanders also broaches the subject of his proposal for the theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS), a current buzzword in hermeneutical discussions. However, it should be noted that he does not define his terms concerning TIS and, in light of more recent publications (i.e. *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of Scripture* and the works of Daniel Treier and Stephen Fowl), Sanders does not appeal to this brand of interpretation. Rather, he makes the case that as the Bible is read, Christian theologians and others should be more aware of the immanent Trinity reflected in the New Testament (188-90).

Conclusion

Overall, *The Image of the Immanent Trinity* is a fine work that helpfully constructs the tension between the economic and immanent Trinity. Sanders engagement with Rahner is fair and thorough, showing both his positive contributions to trinitarian theology and the problems of his *Grundaxiom.* Sanders research into the literature that has followed Rahner is very helpful in displaying the implications and applications of his rule. Moreover, his taxonomy of Radicalizers and Restricters helpfully distinguishes the kinds of responses that Rahner's Rule has evoked.

In terms of his own proposal, I believe there is much merit in it. The balance he strikes between ontology and economic revelation is helpful. Unlike the more radical interpreters, he maintains a place for the immanent Trinity. The Trinity *in se* is ultimate and independent from creation. This rightfully preserves God's place in the cosmos as sovereign Creator and Lord. Yet, he also demonstrates the immanent reality of God's triune work in the universe, that the God who is eternally also interacts with his *imago dei* in space and time.

Consequently, his proposal provides a plausible relationship for understanding the relationship between God's being and action in redemptive history.

Nevertheless, Sanders proposal does seem a bit reductionistic and perhaps unnecessary to firmly committed evangelicals. First, Sanders has shown that the doctrine of the Trinity experienced increasing obscurity over the course of church history. He seems to blame this on the encroachment of philosophy into biblical reasoning (see chapter 2). He concludes that the doctrine of the Trinity should arrive only from a study of the Bible and not from metaphysical, ontological, or philosophical considerations. In making this case, I think he has gone too far. For it is not the use of philosophy that is in error, as much as it is philosophy separated from the Bible. Emphasis on philosophy then not necessarily lead to theological error, as much as de-emphasis on the whole counsel of Scripture and superimposition of false philosophies (i.e. neoplatonism or deism).

Ironically, Sanders argues against his own skepticism of philosophy when he resorts to a kind of philosophizing to prove his thesis. When he imports "image" from Christology to Theology Proper, he is making a kind of analogy that is not found in the Bible, but rather a legitimate, constructive use of logic and reason that is part and parcel of philosophy. In this way, he aims to minimize abstraction, but is forced to it in order to explain how the immanent and economic Trinity relate (he says as much on p. 160). While I appreciate his biblical commitment, I think his derision of philosophy does not stand.

Second, Sanders primarily interacts with modern theologians, theologians who stand outside of the evangelical tradition. Thus his argument fails to take two things into account—one historical, one theological. Historically, the doctrine of the Trinity was never abandoned by Bible-believing Christians. Theologians like John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, B.B. Warfield,

Herman Bavinck and others on the evangelical side of the modernist controversy maintained a Trinitarian focus in their theology. While it is true that Rahner and Barth pushed to the fore the doctrine of the Trinity in the twentieth century, which has given rise to a resurgence inTrinitarian hermeneutics, his thesis should be delimited to modern theologians.

Theologically, Sanders mediating position is not altogether different from what classic Trinitarian theologians have said, even if he has incorporated new terminology. Sanders has argued against those who collapse the immanent into the economic Trinity, and has argued for a real knowledge of the immanent Trinity based upon his revelation in Scripture. On both accounts, the theologians listed above have said something similar. In fact, in Sanders-like language, Bavinck says that the economic Trinity "mirrors" the immanent Trinity (*Reformed Dogmatics* 2:318). In other words, Sanders argument is not significantly different from earlier Christians committed to the Bible. That being said, Sanders argument does make inroads against modern theologians and their claims. Still, I am doubtful that his proposal will gain much ground against someone like Mary LaCugna, whose systematic commitments lay outside of the biblical revelation alone.

Finally, Sanders proposal, like Rahner's before it, possesses inherent instability without further qualification. For instance, if the economic Trinity is the image of the immanent Trinity, it must be determined what aspects of the Trinity this is the case. All of them, or just some? Is it only the incarnation? Or is it also the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and glorification? At each point of Christ's life there is a different reflection of who God is, yet the Trinity *in se* is unchanging. So, if we are to find all our data from biblical text, what takes precedence? The Son's pre-existence, his life in the flesh, or his eternal state? Moreover, since in the incarnation you have the Spirit effecting Jesus conception and the Spirit empowering

Jesus, in what sense does this reflect the eternal *taxis* in the Godhead? Or more generally, are there things revealed of Jesus that are temporary or merely human that should not be taken up in the immanent Trinity? Until these types of questions are answered, there remains uncertainty even in Sanders proposal, which I concede is a helpful improvement over Rahner.

Again, these kinds of answers will only be found as biblical data interacts and is processed by certain kinds of philosophical considerations, which brings us back to my first critique. Sanders book is a helpful and creative proposal to take with greater seriousness the biblical data concerning the economic and immanent Trinity. In this it advances the discussion of the Trinity. However, in and of itself it is incomplete and requires further deliberation and delineation—which is to be expected with any book on our infinite triune God who has revealed himself to us.