

## Seeking Unity

*Your Church Is Too Small* by John H. Armstrong.  
Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.

In *Your Church Is Too Small* (hereafter, *Church*) John H. Armstrong, president of ACT 3 Ministries and adjunct professor of evangelism at Wheaton College Graduate School, recounts his personal journey from sectarian pride to ecumenical relationship-building and details his vision for achieving the practical, visible unity of the church today. Armstrong's "journey to catholicity" (26) is encouraging, and there is much in his book that deserves the attention of all who earnestly love the church and seek the advancement of its mission on earth. But can Armstrong's model of "missional-ecumenism" (154), as he terms it, accomplish the oneness for which Christ prayed (John 17), as he fervently believes that it can? While this review will highlight important and refreshing points to be affirmed, it will also offer a respectful critique<sup>1</sup> of *Church's* view concerning the practical expression of the church and of the missional-ecumenical model itself.

The title of the book is appropriately catchy, and Armstrong's explanation of why he has chosen it sets the stage for the pages that follow.

Do not allow the title of this book to mislead you. I freely admit I borrowed the idea from J. B. Phillips's classic book *Your God Is Too Small*. By saying your church is too small, I am not referring to the physical size of a church building or to the number of people who attend services in your church building. I am referring to our all too common penchant for placing limits on Christ's church—limits that equate the one church with our own narrow views of Christ's body. When our church is too small, we adopt a desperately flawed image. The image shrivels our spirit and hinders Christ's mission. Please understand that the "small church" I refer to is a mind-set in believers that hinders the work of the Holy Spirit in mission and is contrary to the prayer of Jesus for our unity. (13)

Further, he writes,

My thesis is simple: This "small" view of the church harms the mission of Christ. It spreads the seeds of **sectarianism** and forces us to choose our friends and enemies based on whether or not we are in complete agreement with one

another on specific matters of doctrine. Sectarianism has kept Christians from working toward visible expressions of unity in the twenty-first century. (36)

From the outset *Church* exposes the bane of narrowness that infects much of Christian thinking today, encourages the aspiration for unity that characterizes the life of a Christian, and locates the effectiveness of mission within the context of the church's condition as a divided or united community. The book develops these themes in nineteen chapters arranged in three sections: "Past: The Biblical and Historical Basis for Christian Unity" (chs. 1–7), "Present: Restoring Unity in the Church Today" (chs. 8–13), and "Future: The Missional-ecumenical Movement" (chs. 14–19). Each of these sections will be addressed as a thematic unit below with corresponding attention to the larger message that the book conveys.

In communicating his view of the church in both its universal existence and its history and practice in time, Armstrong writes in a style that is both intimate and informative, whether he is relating his own experiences as a student, pastor, and ministry leader, or addressing topics of church history and biblical exposition. The clarity of Armstrong's writing makes the volume accessible to a wide range of readers, and *Church* amounts to an engaging and thoughtful text whether or not one agrees with every proposal that it sets forth.

### "Past: The Biblical and Historical Basis for Christian Unity"

Stating that "the way forward for the church lies in the past—in a return to the prayer of Jesus [in John 17] and core orthodoxy"<sup>2</sup> (51), the first section of the book, concerning the past, consists of seven chapters: "The Road to the Future," "My Journey to Catholicity Begins," "Searching for the Elusive Truth," "The Jesus Prayer for Our Unity," "Our Greatest Apologetic," "Christ the Center," and "The Four Classical Marks of the Church." Particularly striking in this section is the author's moving account of being convicted by the Holy Spirit concerning his own narrowness and the way that encounter changed his life and set him on a course to know the church as the "one Body" of Christ (Eph. 4:4).

### A Journey Worth Taking

Armstrong's consideration of the church and the unity

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that it demands was progressive. By his own account, he “had been quietly meditating on the unity of the church” for most of his life (26-27). In his forties he “became deeply immersed in the question behind this book: What is the church?” (29). He writes,

I sincerely wanted to understand John 17 and Ephesians 4. I confess I held a rather simplistic view of the church. For me, this meant I believed the church was primarily an *invisible* reality that consisted of those born of God’s Spirit. I secretly doubted this exclusively “invisible” church concept. It appeared to fall short of the New Testament description of a vibrant and visible community. But out of fear of ridicule and misunderstanding, I rarely discussed these questions with peers. (29)

The defining moment—his “third conversion”<sup>3</sup> (29)—came in 1995 while he was reciting the Apostles’ Creed during a worship service.

As I said the words “I believe in the holy catholic church” from the Apostles’ Creed, something stopped me. At that moment, the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart: “Do you *really* believe these words? If you believe them, then why don’t you act like it?” The conviction was powerful and true. I was so shaken that I had to sit down. I wept. Questions flooded my mind. I knew God had spoken. (26)

As Armstrong began to deeply consider Jesus’ prayer for oneness in John 17, his “vision for the unity of the church increased” and “became more than love for a concept; instead, it developed into a deep, growing love for the church as God’s people” (30). As a result, he writes, “I knew that I couldn’t be satisfied with loving a *concept* of the church. So I set out to find God’s people, to get to know people outside of my own tradition” (30). In a remarkable display of openness, Armstrong “read materials from various churches, traditions, and theologians” and “tried to read what churches had written about themselves rather than what others had written against them” (30). As he pursued contacting Christians of varying persuasions and building relationships with them, he discovered, “What united all of us, despite our differences, was the one Christ we knew and loved as brothers and sisters. I had no category for this kind of love and the way it brought an immediate sense of unity to our relationships” (31).

**I**t is impossible to grasp Armstrong’s ecumenical fervor without first understanding the impetus that drives it. His dynamic experience in 1995 was the catalyst for his ministry and work since that time, and his strides to overcome pride in his own “evangelical, Reformed, Protestant” tradition should garner the admiration of his peers (94). It is clear, however, that his “journey to catholicity”

came with its share of pain both at having to face the ugliness of sectarianism in himself and at having to be confronted by critics who interpreted his journey as a kind of evangelical apostasy.<sup>4</sup> That he has suffered the attacks and not compromised his stand lend further credibility to his convictions.

### *Unity in the Divine Life of the Trinity*

The section of the book concerning the past contains instructive observations concerning the church’s oneness as it relates to the Triune God, and the book’s Trinity-centered view of the church is one of its strong points. Armstrong’s view of the essential and “relational” aspects of the Trinity undergirds his understanding of the oneness that Christ prayed for in John 17.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in essence (being). According to John 17, the goal of our unity is the same as that of the triune God: to reveal God’s love to the world (verse 21). With this in mind, Jesus’ prayer raises an important question for us: In what sense can our unity as Christians be compared to the unity we see in the Godhead?

It should be apparent that Jesus is not praying for our essential oneness. As I have argued, we already possess this spiritual oneness because all who know Christ participate in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). The oneness Jesus prayed for assumes this spiritual participation in his death and resurrection life and goes further to address the functional oneness I have referred to as *relational unity*—a oneness that is the expression of the eternal, spiritual unity of the Father and Son. (52)

**C**hurch further states that the life of the early church “was founded on an experience of unity that was anchored in the Trinity—the eternal, interpersonal communion of God—and thus the New Testament sees unity as a reality to be protected” (35). *Church* asserts that oneness is also a reality to be advanced relationally by being “brought’ into it through a day-to-day interaction with Jesus” and through developing relationships with other Christians (44). The basis for this oneness and the relational development of it is rightly defined as the divine life.

Spiritual unity, while real and true, must be experienced relationally, which opens up a dynamic, ongoing movement toward unity—in our lives as individuals and in our relationships with one another—as we share in the divine life of the Trinity. When Christians live out their spiritual unity with Jesus in the way that he prayed for, the results will be exactly what Jesus asked the Father to give us: “Then the world will know that you [the Father] sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (verse 23).

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The church will be a visible example of the relational and spiritual unity of the triune God. (44)

Armstrong's emphasis on the believers' relational unity with the Triune God and with other believers based on the divine life is the right starting point for any discussion of the oneness of the church. Moreover, *Church* recognizes that the spiritual, essential unity between believers cannot be broken but that the relationships between believers, and therefore the Lord's testimony, can be damaged when peripheral doctrines are overemphasized. Serious Christians will do well to prayerfully consider Armstrong's genuine insights on these important matters.

### *A Regrettable Compromise*

*Church* notes that the New Testament and the subsequent postapostolic record reveal that "there was still a deep commitment among the leaders to preserve the church as one family" despite doctrinal differences (35), and Armstrong appeals to their pattern as the model for the church today. In *Church's* view, the issue of a living that lays aside doctrinal differences and enjoys oneness in the Trinity should be a mutual cooperation in mission.

If God's love is at the center of church life and is an expression of the spiritual unity of the Trinity and our inclusion in Christ, then we are compelled to consider how we can work together in Christ's mission. Relational unity with Christ should lead us to embrace a cooperational unity with other Christians. (54)

The desire for "cooperational unity" is admirable, and efforts to achieve mutuality in mission are based on a noble intent. But for all that is to be commended in its big-picture view, *Church* eventually falters because it promotes cooperation across dividing lines but does not offer a viable remedy for the divisions themselves: "I believe the solution is for Christians to first cultivate a love for catholicity and then prayerfully reach across our divisions, challenging each other to embrace the mission of Christ together" (105.) The shortage is regrettable, but it is not without cause. In its middle section, *Church* rightly laments the divided state of denominational Christianity but then seems to settle for the situation as unchangeable in the present age. Most consequential, however, is *Church's* mistaken notion concerning the local church. By misinterpreting the New Testament blueprint for the practical expression of the church based on the ground of locality, *Church* is ultimately forced to compromise with the strands of institutionalized division that it strives to overcome.

### *"Present: Restoring Unity in the Church Today"*

The second section of the book, concerning the present,

is composed of six chapters, respectively titled "How Can We Restore Unity?" "The Cause of Our Disunity," "Sectarianism: Our Enemy," "Thinking Rightly about the Church," "The Servant Church and the Kingdom," and "What Place Should We Give to Tradition?" The section opens with a proposal for how to begin restoring unity in the church, and the suggestion is in keeping with *Church's* view, expressed in section one, that "new patterns of Christian faith and life...emerging in the church...desperately need to be rooted in the past" (17). Specifically, *Church* turns to the Apostles' Creed as the model expression of "core orthodoxy" that should serve as the common ground upon which believers can base their unity despite doctrinal distinctives (81).

The Apostles' Creed is a dynamic treasure. When we fail to utilize it as a basic guide for teaching the essentials of our faith, we practically invite disunity. Those who ignore the creed are generally left to focus on the truths they prefer to major on rather than the essential beliefs that have been universally believed and taught by all Christians. (79)

In principle, Armstrong's counsel is wise, and his caution should be heeded. The history of the church is rife with corroborating evidence that an overemphasis on doctrines other than those that are essential to the faith—what we may refer to as peripheral or secondary doctrines—invites disunity and leads to division. But even a consensus among Christians to adhere to the Apostles' Creed<sup>5</sup> and to peacefully agree to disagree on matters of peripheral importance does not achieve the oneness that compels the world to believe (John 17:21). Apart from the proper expression of the universal church in its local aspect, such endeavors at unity, while noble, are of only limited effect.

### *Defining the Local Church*

*Church* rightly identifies "two traps to be avoided" in seeking to live as the community of God's redeemed: "(1) pseudo-pious *sentimentality* in which we fail to see that the church must have organization and (2) *institutionalism* in which we fail to see that the church is a living organism" (106).

The New Testament provides compelling evidence that the way for the church to meet is on the ground of locality, and it is this pattern that guards against these two extremes. Significantly, *Church* recognizes the aspect of "the church in the city" (109), but its application of the principle is too broad to be considered strictly scriptural. In *Church's* estimation, the existence of many unrelated congregations within a local boundary, under the loose designation of "the church in (city)" and identified by their respective denominational designations, is a

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legitimately scriptural expression of the church in a specific place.

The church is also addressed in the New Testament as existing in one city or region, such as the church in Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, or Ephesus. As I read the New Testament, I see three dimensions of the church. The most frequent use is with reference to a local congregation that meets in a specific place (often a single house church). The second use is that of the universal church, or all those who believe. But a third dimension offers incredible practical possibilities. The church was the collection of all the house churches in one city, such as in Rome, where several such gatherings are referenced (cf. Romans 16:3-5, 14-15). It seems evident that a simple reading of the text will lead one to conclude that *local church* had two meanings: (1) a single congregation gathering in a certain place (a home or later a building) and (2) a group of congregations in a particular city that may have met together on occasion but likely met as different congregations most of the time. (109)

While it is right to acknowledge the universality of the church, it seems equally right that we recover the biblical emphasis on all the congregations in our particular community. Rex Koivisto convinced me that this way of thinking can bear incredible fruit if Christian leaders begin to lead their congregations (and ministries) to think of themselves as part of a larger whole. (110)

A diagram taken from Koivisto is provided as a visual representation of what the local church composed of many independent congregations looks like (110).<sup>6</sup> The diagram consists of a large circle labeled “The Church at Portland, Oregon.” Within the large circle are smaller circles, representing “house (local) church[es],” arranged in groups bearing the labels Wesleyan Methodists, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Conservative Baptist Association, Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, “Plymouth” Brethren, and Denominationally Unaffiliated Congregations. In other words, the denominational and “denominationally unaffiliated” congregations are subsumed under the broader designation of “The Church at Portland, Oregon.” But does Koivisto’s diagram, which *Church* commends, match the New Testament revelation?

The New Testament indicates that the church in earliest times, for the preservation of its oneness on earth, congregated according to a prescribed pattern according to which the believers within a city met simply as the church in that city apart from division, that is, as the expression of the universal church within a local boundary. While some of the early believers who met as the church in a specific locality did so in homes and not necessarily in one central location (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 1:11; 16:19; Col. 4:15;

Philem. 1:2), there is no viable reason to assume that these were autonomous assemblies that retained distinctions from one another but perhaps met together on occasion. Rather, the congregations within a city, as well as the congregations from city to city, evidently were related to one another (Rom. 16:16; Col. 4:16), enjoyed mutual care for one another (Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:1), were under one local administration appointed by the apostles (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), received the same instruction and teaching (1 Cor. 4:17; 7:17; 11:16), that is, the teaching of God’s New Testament economy (1 Tim 1:3-4), and were inclusive of all those whom God had received (Rom. 14:1, 3; 15:7). Today’s denominational congregations, contrary to the New Testament pattern, are independent of one another, are different in practice, administration, and teaching, and tend to exclude those who do not subscribe to their respective programs. Therefore, they have no practical way to be built up together as the one undivided testimony of the universal church in a locality. To suggest that such assemblies can approximate the New Testament ideal of the local church by basing their communion on the Apostles’ Creed and fostering relational unity for the sake of mission while retaining their respective denominational affiliations is to stray from the biblical model.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, the universal church is composed of all the believers in Christ. Thus, all genuine Christians, regardless of denominational affiliations or doctrinal persuasions, are members of the one true church of God and are considered members of the local church in the city where they reside, even if they do not meet according to the local church model exemplified in the New Testament. However, the institutions that define themselves according to natural distinctions or personal preferences, such as those in Koivisto’s diagram, cannot properly be considered legitimate local expressions of the universal church, which has no such distinctions and is not divided along natural or preferential lines (1 Cor. 1:10-13; Gal. 3:26-28; Col. 3:10-11). As there is one Spirit, one Lord, and one God and Father of all (Eph. 4:4-6), so there is one model ordained by God for the practical expression of the one Body (v. 4). To practice the church life according to that model is to drop our choice and pick up God’s choice (cf. Deut. 12:5, 11).

### “Future: The Missional-Ecumenical Movement”

The third section of the book, concerning the future, concludes the volume with the chapters “Searching for the True Church,” “Who Is a Real Christian?” “The Missional-Ecumenical Church,” “A New Paradigm,” “What Does the Missional-Ecumenical Paradigm Look Like?” and “Disturb Us, Lord!” *Church*’s view of mission, like its view of relational unity, is intimately related to the Triune God and is rightly concerned with fostering the proper expression of Him in the task of mission.

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The mission of the church is not to solve society's problems or to gain political influence in order to change culture. And as important as adding members to a church is, recruiting new members for the church is not the church's mission either. The mission of the church is "to participate in the reconciling love of the triune God who reaches out to a fallen world in Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit brings strangers and enemies into God's new and abiding community."<sup>8</sup>

Mission is not what *we* do so much as what *Jesus Christ* is doing in seeking and saving the lost (Luke 19:10) through us. Our part is to discover our unique context and calling within the larger community so that we can be an active part of Christ's mission. A missional church is powerfully shaped by the incarnation and the holy Trinity and exists to *be* Christ's mission, not simply to *support* mission(s). A missional church will never be satisfied simply to send people overseas or give sums of money for mission programs.

...The idea that the church is "missionary by her very nature"<sup>9</sup> is the critical reason for using and understanding the word *missional*. I believe when we grasp the real significance of this term, we are forced to understand how the character of God and the nature of the church are eternally related. (153-154)

**T**he section of the book concerning the future offers several testimonies of what the missional-ecumenical model looks like in practice, and the fact that individual believers and even entire congregations are overcoming suspicions, conceits, and the fear of being misunderstood in order to seek rapprochement with estranged brothers and sisters in Christ is certainly encouraging. Where these examples are less promising, however, is in the fact that the institutional distinctives that define the various congregations remain intact despite the groups' efforts to find common ground for the sake of cooperation in mission. While *Church* does not advocate denominationalism and recognizes that the denominational system is unscriptural, saying, "Denominations are clearly not found in the Bible, and it is time everyone admits this fact" (135), *Church* regrettably tolerates denominationalism.

Divisions plague the American church. We are "rent asunder" by schism, thus we are not "all one body." But I do not think the real problem has anything to do with denominations...Our real problem is sectarianism. (83)

Are denominations helpful or harmful to pursuing the unity of Christians? I do not believe denominations are the formal problem, though often they are a real problem.

I believe Protestant denominations are irregular but not invalid. While they may help us pursue obedience to the

mission of Christ, we ought to recognize that there is much more to our unity than these structures. (141)

Denominations are sub-biblical, interim structures. I believe we should pray that this whole arrangement might be wonderfully altered by the sovereign work of the Spirit. (142)

I believe the three great divisions within historic Christianity [i.e., Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox] were never desirable and quite likely were not truly necessary. But regardless of how these divisions came about, we can begin a healthy new conversation, a conversation that can lead to reconciliation in a context where the truth is profoundly important. This conversation could well become one of the Holy Spirit's primary ways of pushing forward the "new ecumenism"—an ecumenism rooted in core orthodoxy and deeply shared love for Christ and his mission. (167)

**D**enominations are typically defined by adherence to particular doctrines, specific practices, or a common history, and an over-reliance on such preferences can easily harden into the kind of exclusivity that *Church* rightly condemns. The peril in tolerating denominationalism as a system (as distinct from the believers who are within the system) is that one may unwittingly encourage the divisions to remain even while seeking to build relationships across the lines of separation. In a question for study and reflection following the chapter "What Does the Missional-Ecumenical Paradigm Look Like?" *Church* asks, "How can missional-ecumenical models be encouraged while you remain faithful to the doctrines your church/mission/school believes are nonnegotiable because of your particular history and calling?" (190). The intent of the question is positive in that it desires to foster relationship-building and cooperation in mission for the sake of the Lord's testimony on earth, but the effect may run counter to the intent if the issue of division based on denominational preferences remains undealt with.

### *A Common Expression*

Perhaps what motivates *Church's* forbearance toward denominations is a fear of enforced uniformity (139). The fear is not misguided. Any attempt to create uniformity, by compulsion or otherwise, will always foster a disdain for others who differ and, thus, will cultivate a sectarian spirit that undoubtedly harms the church and its mission. But the unique divine life that makes all believers one must produce a unique expression, and it appears that the New Testament pattern of the local church is the God-ordained wineskin to contain the new wine (Matt. 9:17). It is interesting that the seven golden lampstands in Revelation 1, symbolizing seven churches in seven cities, were identical as expressions of the Divine

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Trinity.<sup>10</sup> Their differences, as recorded in chapters 2 and 3, were all of a negative nature; it was in their failures that they were different and separate from one another. A sameness of expression is not something to be feared; rather, the churches exist to express the one Christ, the unique Head of the Body, and their commonality in that expression, rightly realized, glorifies the Lord, whose indivisible life they share.

## Conclusion

*Church* is the product of John Armstrong's earnest desire to see the purpose of God accomplished on earth through the church, the community of the redeemed that Christ purchased with His shed blood. In an age that has seen much mean-spiritedness<sup>11</sup> among Christians and a conspicuous tendency to judge others in the household of the faith, *Church* is a refreshing reminder that what the Lord desires for His church is oneness. Whether or not one fully accepts the book's conclusions as to how that oneness can be achieved in practice today, it is no less heartening to find in *Church* an affirmation of the life-impulse for oneness very much in operation today.

by Tony Espinosa

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Armstrong notes that the opinions in *Church* are "clearly subject to criticism" (9). Although he is adamant in his enthusiasm for the missional-ecumenical model, he is genuine in his willingness to receive constructive criticism, as he expressed to me when the idea of reviewing *Church* was brought up in a personal conversation.

<sup>2</sup>Later in the book, the Apostles' Creed is cited as being representative of "core orthodoxy" (81), although Armstrong advocates a return to more than the Apostles' Creed. He writes,

New patterns of Christian faith and life are emerging in the church. I welcome these patterns, but I believe they desperately need to be rooted in the past—the creeds, the Word of God understood as the story of grace, life as a sacramental mystery, and deeply rooted **spiritual formation**. (17)

He also strongly encourages believers to read the patristic writings, and his enthusiasm is infectious.

<sup>3</sup>Armstrong recounts a friend's observation that he "experienced three great spiritual conversions" (28). The first was when he began to follow Jesus as a child. The second came when he "embraced the insights of some of the church's greatest theologians regarding divine sovereignty and human responsibility" (28). The third conversion came when the Holy

Spirit convicted him concerning the oneness of the church (29). He comments that this observation, while not entirely accurate, was still useful.

<sup>4</sup>The personal toll on the author was not insignificant:

But what gave me the greatest anxiety was not my attempt to figure it all out; the biggest problem was the personal ramifications I'd experience by acknowledging that I fellowshipped with Christians in different Christian churches. Friendships would be challenged, and people would question my faith. For as long as I could, I tried to play it safe, denying what I was seeing and experiencing. (39)

<sup>5</sup>The creeds are useful as concise summations of the essential doctrines of the Christian faith, but they have also been abused when others have insisted upon using them as the only yardstick for measuring orthodoxy. John Armstrong is not suggesting that the Apostles' Creed be used to determine who and who is not a genuine Christian; he is proposing that it can be useful as a common ground statement that will foster unity among believers from varying traditions.

<sup>6</sup>The diagram is taken from Koivisto (120).

<sup>7</sup>Some have misinterpreted the local church pattern as being exclusive. On the contrary, it is characterized by an inclusiveness that is according to God. Two footnotes from the Recovery Version of the Holy Bible are particularly helpful here:

Except in the matters of idol worship (1 John 5:21; 1 Cor. 8:4-7), fornication, rapaciousness, reviling, and other such gross sins (1 Cor. 5:9-11; 6:9-10), division (16:17; Titus 3:10), and the denial of the incarnation of Christ (2 John 7-11), we must learn not to pass judgments on the doctrinal views of others. As long as one is a genuine Christian and has the fundamental faith of the New Testament, we should not exclude him, even though he may differ from us with respect to doctrine; rather, we should receive him in the same one Lord. (Rom. 14:1, note 3)

The basis on which we receive the believers is that God has received them. God receives people according to His Son. When a person receives God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, as his Savior, God receives that person immediately and ushers him into the enjoyment of the Triune God and of all He has prepared and accomplished in Christ for us. We should receive people in the same way and should not be more narrow than God. Regardless of how much they differ from us in doctrinal concepts or religious practices, we must receive them. When we receive people according to God and not according to doctrine or practice, we demonstrate and maintain the oneness of the Body of Christ. (v. 3, note 2)

<sup>8</sup>Armstrong quotes Migliore (21).

<sup>9</sup>Armstrong quotes from the Vatican II decree.

<sup>10</sup>The interpretation is Witness Lee's and appears in publications too numerous for citation. The following portion from a

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footnote in the Recovery Version of the Holy Bible gives the essence of the interpretation:

The lampstand signifies the Triune God embodied and expressed. Pure gold as the substance of the lampstand (v. 31) signifies God the Father in His divine nature; the form of the lampstand signifies God the Son as the embodiment of God the Father (John 14:9-11a; 2 Cor. 4:4b; Col. 1:15; 2:9); and the seven lamps (v. 37) signify God the Spirit being the seven Spirits of God for the sevenfold intensified expression of the Father in the Son (Rev. 4:5; 5:6)...[T]he lampstands in Rev. 1 signify the local churches as the reproduction of Christ and the reprint of the Spirit (Rev. 1:11-12, 20). (Exo. 25:31, note 1)

<sup>11</sup>Armstrong expresses a disdain for mean-spiritedness that we hope will resonate with all believers in Christ:

Christian publishers ought to know better, but time and again they allow authors to slander fellow Christians without [sic] impunity. We have heard a lot about culture wars in the United States for thirty years. I am far more concerned about the truth wars waged by polemicists inside the church. This is the bitter fruit of sectarianism. It lacks charity and leads to mean-spiritedness. (150)

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## Seeking the Depths of God

*The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* by Fred Sanders. Wheaton: Crossway, 2010.

In *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (hereafter *Deep Things*), Fred Sanders, an Associate Professor of Theology at Biola University, emphasizes the connection between the Trinity and the gospel in order to show how the Trinity changes everything in Christian understanding and experience, reversing a trend of growing neglect of the doctrine of the Trinity among present-day Evangelicals. Although *Deep Things* sets out a praiseworthy goal, it weakens its argument by missing points that are central to its claim.

## An Overview

In the introduction *Deep Things* contrasts the general attitude among Evangelicals today with the strongly Trinitarian writings of Evangelicals in the past, in order to highlight the current trend of being cold toward the doctrine of the Trinity. In chapter 1, "Compassated About by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," *Deep Things* states that in regard to the Trinity "reality comes first, and understanding follows it" (27). It points out that "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" (27-28). Regarding the Trinity, *Deep Things* introduces the "top three questions that evangelicals bring with them: Is it biblical? Does it make sense? And does it matter?" (34). It points out that a proper approach to these questions is not one that involves verbal maneuvers to form a logical discourse but one that "takes its stand on the experienced reality of the Trinity, and only then moves forward to the task of verbal and conceptual clarification" (35). Even though our understanding of the Trinity begins from experience, *Deep Things* points out that we must avoid "the extremes of subjective religious experience and mere propositionalism" (38). It illustrates this matter in the experience of conversion, saying,

Because God saves us by opening himself to us and making the divine life available for our restoration and rescue, salvation occurs according to a Trinitarian order. The sentence of salvation is coherent and correct because it operates according to an underlying Trinitarian grammar...All who are born again are born again by the power of the Trinity, as the Father sends the Spirit of his Son into their hearts. When the rules of this grammar of salvation are made explicit, what emerges into understanding is the doctrine of the Trinity. (57)

In the second chapter, "Within the Happy Land of the Trinity," *Deep Things* tries to show that God is first God in Himself before He is God for us (62). In other words, we need to consider the Triune God in the context not only of what He does but also of who He is. In particular, *Deep Things* argues that a proper consideration of God in both aspects helps to bring in a realization that God is triune not only in His salvation but also in His eminence.

The Trinity isn't for anything beyond itself, because the Trinity is God...God's way of being God is to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit simultaneously from all eternity, perfectly complete in a triune fellowship of love. If we don't take this as our starting point, everything we say about the practical relevance of the Trinity could lead us to one colossal misunderstanding: thinking of God the Trinity as

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a means to some other end, as if God were the Trinity in order to make himself useful. (62)

*Deep Things* establishes this claim by pointing to Paul's word in Ephesians 1:4 that the Father chose the believers in the Son before the foundation of the world, which indicates that God was the Trinity from all eternity (63-64). It further says, "When we praise God for being our creator and redeemer, we are praising him for what he does. But behind what God does is the greater glory of who he is: behind his act is his being"; in essence "God's being is the ground of his actions" (70). *Deep Things* then elaborates on the distinction between God in His being and God in His actions by showing how "faith seeking understanding moves directly to the biggest doctrines of Christian theology: soteriology, atonement, the incarnation, and the Trinity" (74) and how Trinitarian theology helps to bring a sense of proportion so that the believers realize that God, the Trinity, is bigger than man's salvation (74). *Deep Things* argues that a proper consideration of the Trinity and the inner life of the Triune God helps to safeguard the believers from self-centered thinking, from settling for a "grudging" acknowledgment of the fact of the Trinity, from building up a knowledge of the Trinity by mere negatives, and from filling out the knowledge of the Trinity with mythological imaginings (81). It summarizes its argument, saying,

The Christian experience of salvation is an encounter with the true God as he truly exists: as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We certainly do not know everything about the persons of the Trinity, but what we do know extends all the way into who God is, internally, eternally, and essentially. (91)

In chapters 3 through 5 *Deep Things* examines the size of the gospel, the shape of the gospel, and the point of entrance through which people are brought into the gospel in order to make evident the connection between the Trinity and the gospel. *Deep Things* begins chapter 3, "So Great Salvation," by stating its thesis and method:

The central claim of this book is that the Trinity is the gospel. Seeing how closely these two go together depends on seeing both Trinity and gospel as clearly as possible, in a large enough perspective to discern their overall forms. When the outlines of both are clear, we should experience the shock of recognition: Trinity and gospel have the same shape! This is because the good news of salvation is ultimately that God opens his Trinitarian life to us. (98)

The book continues by evaluating Ephesians 1:3-14 as the place in the Bible where the "sheer greatness of the gospel is most profusely described" (99). *Deep Things* points out that the "Trinitarian contour" of Ephesians 1:3-14 along with its large and complex structure indicates that

"the blessing of the gospel...is big and God-shaped" (100). Furthermore, it asserts that Paul's word in this portion snatches its listeners out of their own lives and drops them into Christ so that they can start their thinking from a center in God, not in themselves (101). It argues that since Paul's intention was to have the believers reoriented in their thinking, "he prays for a divine gift of spiritual revelation and illumination" (102), concluding,

The strategy of Ephesians is to give us a bird's-eye view of the gospel, which is only available from a vantage point far above all created powers. When by the grace of God that miracle of reorientation happens, we are not just ready to read Ephesians, but we are already taken in to the spiritual blessing of God in Christ. After all, the only "standing outside of ourselves" that really results in salvation is standing "in Christ," a phrase which Paul hammers home at least once in each verse of the sentence. (102)

In contrast to the gospel presented in Ephesians, *Deep Things* denounces "a gospel which is only about the moment of conversion but does not extend to every moment of life in Christ," "a gospel that gets your sins forgiven but offers no power for transformation," "a gospel that isolates one of the benefits of union with Christ and ignores all the others," "a gospel that must be measured by your own moral conduct, social conscience, or religious experience," and "a gospel that rearranges the components of your life but does not put you personally in the presence of God" (106). It proclaims that salvation is more than these items.

Our salvation and our existence as Christians come from and consist in the union of that divine life with what we are in ourselves. Salvation comes from it: this is the point of contact that brings about salvation. Christian existence consists in it: this is the state in which we have our ongoing being. (116)

*Deep Things* concludes that "the gospel is God-sized, because God puts himself into it. The living God binds himself to us and becomes our salvation, the life of God in the soul of man" (117).

With this analysis as a base, *Deep Things* draws a stronger relationship between God and the gospel by defining grace as God's self-giving. After denouncing two misconceptions of grace—God being nice to us and a God-given power that enables us to transform our lives—*Deep Things* argues from Thomas Oden's writings that grace is God's own self-giving (117-118). It declares, "The hidden center of the great blessing of Ephesians 1:3-14, the fact that God gives us 'every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places' by giving us first and foremost himself" (119). It then states that "God's self-giving for human

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salvation is a motif that pervades not just Ephesians but the whole Bible and is particularly prominent in parts of the Old Testament” (119). *Deep Things* points out that the way God gives Himself to us is by the Father giving the Son (121). Hence, “when we consider the gospel of salvation in Christ, we are not dealing with the outer fringes of God’s ways but with the very core and center of who God is” (122).

In chapter 4, “The Shape of the Gospel,” *Deep Things* resumes the consideration of the shape of the gospel mentioned in the previous chapter. It begins with an analysis of the Greek word *oikonomia* as used by Paul in Ephesians 1:10 and points out that the “economy of salvation is the flawlessly designed way God administers his gracious self-giving” (128). It further states that “we can understand the eternal purpose of God, framed in his unfathomable wisdom, by paying close attention to this economy of salvation” (130). *Deep Things* points out that God’s intention in the economy of salvation is not only to save man but also to reveal Himself through the history of salvation. Hence, the economy of salvation has a particular form with its central point being the sending of the Son of God anointed by the Holy Spirit, its beginning being in the garden of Eden and continuing until now (133). While the focus on the economy of God in *Deep Things* is laudable, its assignment of a starting point in the garden of Eden is misplaced. God’s economy is an eternal economy that is based on the eternal life of the Triune God. With this background, *Deep Things* begins to evaluate the relationships and distinctions of the activity or “missions” of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation. In its examination of these relationships, *Deep Things* points out that even though Christ is the center of the history of salvation, Christ and His work must be seen in a Trinitarian context in order to have the total form of the economy of salvation. In other words, Christ was sent by the Father, did the work of the Father, and was sustained by the Father (133); and the Spirit was involved in the virgin conception of Christ, His death, resurrection, and ascension (134-135). Furthermore, “it is through the Holy Spirit that the work of Christ is applied to believers” (135). In its examination of these distinctions, *Deep Things* portrays the Son and the Spirit as the two hands of the Father in an attempt to characterize the Father as the source of all things, and the work of the Son and Spirit as complimentary.<sup>1</sup> Regarding the Son and Spirit, it says that they are

always together in carrying out the work of the Father. They are always at work in an integrated, mutually reinforcing way, fulfilling the Father’s will in unison. Yet they are not interchangeable with each other, and they are not duplicating each other’s work. In fact, the Son and the Spirit behave very distinctively in carrying out the concerted work of salvation. (138)

In chapter 5, “Into the Saving Life of Christ,” *Deep Things* seeks to bring the notion of the believers’ personal relationship with Jesus into a Trinitarian context. It points out that the gospel of the Trinity is not an alternative to the experience of salvation through Jesus Christ but a gospel that is both Christ-centered and Trinity-centered, as opposed to a gospel that is Christ-centered, but Father-forgetful and Spirit-ignoring (168). In order to establish a Trinitarian experience, *Deep Things* speaks of the role of the Father and the Spirit in the believers’ experience of Christ, saying, we need to look to Jesus “in a way that he lets us see him situated in his relationships to the Father who sent him and the Spirit whom he sends” (169). *Deep Things* explains that salvation in the New Testament is not only a matter of being joined to Christ but also a matter of the Spirit uniting us to what the Father has done in the life of the Son.

In the last two chapters *Deep Things* attempts to show the underlying Trinitarian context in the practices of reading the Bible and prayer. Chapter 6, “Hearing the Voice of God in Scripture,” presents a contrast between the high view of the authority of the Bible and a devotional reading of the Bible.

Evangelicals developed their high view of Scripture’s authority out of the conviction that in these writings the voice of God is heard and that contemporary readers can hear that voice precisely because the mode of original inspiration was likewise a divine speech act with a Trinitarian cadence. In chronological order, then, Trinitarian inspiration of the text underwrites Trinitarian encounter through the text, which is finally recognized in a confession of verbal inspiration. (194)

In the final chapter, “Praying with the Grain,” *Deep Things* suggests that

the act of prayer has, metaphorically speaking, a grain to it. Prayer has an underlying structure built into it, complete with a directionality that is worth observing. This grain is Trinitarian, running from the Spirit through the Son to the Father. (212)

It encourages the believers to pray according to this “grain,” that is, to pray “to the Father, in the name of the Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit” (224), since most New Testament prayers follow this pattern.

### Missing Items

In *Deep Things*’s treatment of the Trinity and the gospel, several matters are missing that are crucial in relation to both truth and experience, including a broader view of the economy of God, an organic understanding of sonship that is rooted in the divine life of our self-giving God, and an

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acknowledgement that Christ, as the life-giving Spirit, now dwells in our regenerated human spirit.

### *A Broader View of God's Economy*

While this book presents an agreeable and even refreshing analysis of the Greek word *oikonomia* in Ephesians 1:10, it does not speak of the goal of God's economy. Instead, it restricts the term *economy* mainly to redemption and Christian living. God's economy includes redemption but also goes beyond redemption to encompass the fulfillment of the goal of God's eternal will. When *Deep Things* approaches the question of the goal of God's economy, however, it finds no answer and even suggests that seeking such an answer is something of a distraction. *Deep Things* says,

Perhaps the soteriology of divine self-giving gives us a glimpse of what unfallen humanity is for in the first place. But that too is a road not taken, indeed the most epochal road ever not taken, but nevertheless one about which we can only speculate. Speculation of that sort can only take our eyes off the actual economy of salvation, which is clear and evident: God has given himself to us to be our salvation and has done so at great cost. (120-121)

This reticence is utterly misplaced, because there is no need for speculation. The Bible in its entirety is a revelation of God's plan, purpose, and will for man, a revelation that has been made known. Even the verse that is referenced in the title of this book conforms to this point. First Corinthians 2:10 says, "To us God has revealed them through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God." What is deep within God has been revealed through His economy in the Bible. According to the revelation of the Bible, God's economy is His household administration to dispense Himself in Christ as the Spirit into His chosen, redeemed, and regenerated people for their experience, enjoyment, and building up so that He may have a unique corporate expression in the universe—the church (Eph. 1:22), which is the Body of Christ (v. 23), the new man (2:15), the kingdom of God with the saints as citizens (v. 19), the household of God (v. 19), the dwelling place of God in spirit (vv. 21-22), the bride of Christ (5:24-25), and the corporate warrior (6:11-12). The Triune God dispenses Himself into us in the Son as the Spirit based on the Son's incarnation (John 1:1, 14), human living (Luke 2:40-42, 52), crucifixion (Acts 2:23), resurrection as the life-giving Spirit (vv. 24, 32; 1 Cor. 15:45), ascension (Acts 2:33; Eph. 4:8-10), breathing out (John 20:22), and being poured out for the formation of the Body (Acts 2:1-4; 10:44-48). The believers are brought into His dispensing through regeneration (1 Pet. 1:3), sanctification (Rom. 6:19, 22; 15:16), renewing (2 Cor. 4:16; Titus 3:5; Eph. 4:23), transformation (2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 12:2), conformation (8:29), and glorification

(v. 30). To speak of salvation outside the context of the goal of God's economy diminishes the significance of salvation and leaves room for error in the understanding and experience of God's full salvation.

### *An Organic Understanding of Sonship*

In addressing the believers' relationship to the Father, *Deep Things* repeatedly uses the term *adoption*<sup>2</sup> or one of its derivatives. In its section, "Adoption into the Trinity," devoted to the definition of adoption, *Deep Things* displays a great lack in the understanding of sonship as it is revealed in the New Testament. It says, "When we [the believers] become sons of God, we are joined to the sonship of the incarnate Son, which is in turn the human enactment of the eternal sonship of the second person of the Trinity" (157), ultimately meaning, "Christ, and Christ alone, is the Son of God by nature and from eternity. Believers, on the other hand, are made to be sons by adoption, through the gracious decision of God, for the sake of Christ the Son" (160). It concludes,

Adoption is the mightiest of God's mighty acts of salvation, and without transgressing the line between the divine and the created, God does reach across it and establish a relationship more intimate than we could have imagined...Eternal sonship becomes incarnate sonship and brings created sonship into being. (162)

Using the term *created sonship* to describe the sonship of the believers opens the door for error. When a person is regenerated, he receives the uncreated, divine life of God into his spirit (Rom. 8:10). The uncreated, divine life of God, along with the divine nature, are the basic organic factors of sonship (2 Pet. 1:4). Hence, to describe the sonship of the believers as a "created sonship" is contrary to logic, for the life we have received is uncreated and is not something separate from God. Second, when a believer receives the divine life, he is no longer merely human but human and divine just as Christ is divine and human (Rom. 8:6, 10-11; 1 John 5:11-12). The sonship described in the New Testament involves the spreading of the divine life from a believer's spirit into his entire being. When the believers' mortal bodies are swallowed up in the divine life, the sonship of the sons of God will be revealed in glory as described in Romans 8:18-23. The sonship of the believers is predicated upon the status of the Lord Jesus as both the only begotten Son of God from eternity (John 1:14, 18; 3:16) and the Firstborn among many brothers, the Firstborn from the dead (Rom. 8:29; Heb. 1:6; Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5). When Christ was crucified, He was the only begotten Son of God, but after His resurrection, in addition to being the only begotten Son of God, He became the firstborn Son of God. In particular, by passing through death and resurrection, Christ's humanity was uplifted into His divinity so that

He was begotten in resurrection as God's firstborn Son (Rom. 1:3-4; Acts 13:33), with His many brothers who were begotten at the same time (1 Pet. 1:3). Christ as the firstborn Son is the prototype for God bringing forth many sons. Reducing the sonship of the believers to something that is created diminishes the status and impact of Christ being the Firstborn.

### *Christ as the Life-giving Spirit*

In its effort to correct the extreme of being focused on Christ while forgetting the Father and ignoring the Spirit, *Deep Things* pushes the distinction in the operation of the Triune God to another extreme. It says,

Once again, there is a grain of truth to this: Jesus does dwell in the hearts of believers, and a handful of passages in the New Testament describe our relationship to Jesus this way (especially Eph. 3:16-17). But the dominant message of the Bible is that we are in Christ, not that Christ is in us. And on those few occasions when Christ is said to be in us, the work of the Spirit is nearly always mentioned. (169)

**H**ere *Deep Things* diminishes the role of Christ's indwelling of the believers. Instead, it leans toward the idea that the Spirit is an agent of Christ dwelling in the believers instead of Christ or that Christ dwells in the believers through the Holy Spirit. This thought neglects the fact that Christ became a life-giving Spirit in His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17). Thus, the revelation in the Bible is not merely that Christ dwells in us through the Spirit but that He dwells in us as the Spirit.

### *The Human Spirit*

The last major item that is missing is the human spirit. *Deep Things* barely mentions the human spirit, and it describes the initiation and existence of the Christian life

as the life of God in the soul of man (116). According to the New Testament, the initiation, continuation, and consummation of the believers' experience of salvation is a matter intimately related to the human spirit; our human spirit is born of the divine Spirit and mingled<sup>3</sup> with the divine Spirit so that both spirits become one (John 3:6; 1 Cor. 6:17; Rom. 8:16). We need to live in this mingled spirit just as the apostles did so that our mind and even our entire being—spirit, soul, and body—are swallowed up by life (Acts 17:16; 19:21; 20:22; Rom. 1:9; Rev. 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10; 1 Thes. 5:23; Rom. 8:4-6; Eph. 4:23; Rom. 8:11).

**K**nowing Christ as the life-giving Spirit in our human spirit for the fulfillment of God's eternal economy, which is the producing of sons in His life and according to His nature, is central to the truth and experience of the Trinity through God's self-giving as grace. *Deep Things* picks up on this latter point but misses the former points. These missing items in this treatment of the Trinity weaken the noteworthy points of the book.

by Joel Oladele

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Deep Things* uses and sometimes strains the metaphor that characterizes the Son and the Spirit as the two hands of the Father. If this metaphor is pushed too far, it may wrongly introduce a notion of hierarchy in the Godhead.

<sup>2</sup>The Greek word translated "adoption" by *Deep Things* literally means "setting someone as a son" and implies a process of becoming a son. Although this Greek word may be translated "adoption," a better word that still does not give the full sense of the Greek word is "sonship."

<sup>3</sup>The word *mingle* is used here according to the definition in Webster's Third New International Dictionary: "To bring or combine together or with something else so that the components remain distinguishable in the combination."

### Footnote from the Recovery Version of the Bible

"But as it is written, 'Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard and which have not come up in man's heart; things which God has prepared for those who love Him'" (1 Cor. 2:9).

**love:** To realize and participate in the deep and hidden things God has ordained and prepared for us requires us not only to believe in Him but also to love Him. To fear God, to worship God, and to believe in God (that is, to receive God) are all inadequate; to love Him is the indispensable requirement. To love God means to set our entire being—spirit, soul, and body, with the heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30)—absolutely on Him, that is, to let our entire being be occupied by Him and lost in Him, so that He becomes everything to us and we are one with Him practically in our daily life. In this way we have the closest and most intimate fellowship with God, and we are able to enter into His heart and apprehend all its secrets (Psa. 73:25; 25:14). Thus, we not only realize but also experience, enjoy, and fully participate in these deep and hidden things of God.