

# REVIEWS

## Profane Visions of the New Jerusalem, the Consummation of the Corporate Christ

“The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1—22:5: Consummation of a Biblical Continuum,” by David L. Turner. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992.

“The New Jerusalem: People as Place, Not Place for People,” by Robert H. Gundry, *Novum Testamentum* XXIX, 3 (1987): 254-264.

The final and ultimate sign in the book of Revelation, the New Jerusalem, is the consummating vision in the Bible. It is a vision of the Christ, the One who has passed through the process of incarnation, death, and resurrection so that the chosen, redeemed, and regenerated tripartite elect could be incorporated into Himself through faith, fulfilling the eternal and positive will of the Triune God. As such, the New Jerusalem is the consummate expression of the corporate Christ. This view is not common, but by definition then neither is it profane. In most interpretations of the New Jerusalem, there is a tendency toward profaneness, that is, a tendency to posit common, culturally bound interpretations that speak more of our fallen social, political, economic, and religious anxieties than of the high and awesome economy of our Triune God. Two articles, one of more recent origin and one of critical, theological acclaim, aptly demonstrate this profaneness.

As employed in this review, *profane* does not refer to moral turpitude, which is a common association, but rather to its more precise connotation, that of being characterized by lack of reverence for the sacred things of God. It derives from the Latin word *profanus*, which literally means “before or outside of the temple.” The choice of this descriptor is intentional because Revelation 21:22 reveals that one of the most striking features of the New Jerusalem is the lack of a physical temple because “the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” Ultimately, the Triune God Himself is the destination and dwelling place of the redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified tripartite elect. Physical interpretations of the New Jerusalem, which ignore the divine and mystical aspects of this consummate sign in the Bible, therefore, have no place in the eternal economy of the Triune God. They are outside the gates now, and they will be

outside the gates when the reality of the New Jerusalem is manifested.

## Two Views of the New Jerusalem

David L. Turner in “The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1—22:5: Consummation of a Biblical Continuum” and Robert H. Gundry in “The New Jerusalem: People as Place, Not Place for People” present interesting interpretations of the New Jerusalem, even ones that seemingly are at odds with each other. Even though there is interpretive tension between Turner and Gundry, both present views of the New Jerusalem that are equally profane.

## Turner’s New Jerusalem

Turner’s essay is divided into four major sections: The New Jerusalem Anticipated: The City in the Bible; The Hermeneutics of the New Jerusalem; The New Jerusalem in Literary Context; and Key Exegetical Issues in the New Jerusalem. For the sake of this review, only the second and fourth sections will be considered in detail. The first and third sections primarily provide the reader with an extended list of references in the Bible to both Jerusalem and the New Jerusalem. At the root of this exercise is an apparent attempt to convince readers of the importance of the New Jerusalem in the divine revelation. The fact that the Bible ends with this consummate sign, in and of itself, however, should convince believers that our ultimate destiny is inextricably intertwined with the details of this city.

Turner begins his examination of the hermeneutics of the New Jerusalem in the second section with a question: “How should one interpret the pervasive symbolic imagery of apocalyptic literature in general and of the book of Revelation in particular?” (275). He answers this question by positing two extremes that should be avoided: the extreme of hyperliteralism and the extreme of hypoliteralism. By hyperliteralism he means those interpretations which “take the imagery quite literally, at face value” (275). By hypoliteralism he means an approach that “argues from the visionary nature of the passage that its details do not correspond to earthly reality” (275).

Simplicity, Turner suggests, limits the first view. Ultimately, he argues that a literal interpretation diminishes the consummation of the divine revelation by relegating it to just one actual and literal possibility, the possibility that John portrays: “The approach that limits the glory of the

---

city to John's finite imagery is the approach that is guilty of diminishing its magnificence" (276). While challenging hyperliteralist interpretations as inadequate and, at times, being overtly derisive of such views<sup>1</sup>, Turner does not distance himself from the view that the New Jerusalem is a sign that points to a literal city. In responding to P. L. Tan's hyperliteralist position in *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, Turner comments:

Tan, who argues that an actual literal city is portrayed just as it is, never seems to grasp the fact that an actual literal city may be portrayed through symbols....The new Jerusalem does not literally correspond to the imagery of Revelation 21—22. Though it is an actual literal city, its glory will far surpass the language that John uses to portray it. John's language is an attempt to describe what is in one sense indescribable. (276)

More than he is willing to admit, Turner is a hyperliteralist. He believes that the consummation of the divine revelation is inherently physical. Rather than being content with literal streets of gold, Turner envisions a physical environment that far exceeds our ability to imagine. His view seemingly corresponds to the thought of Paul in 1 Corin-

"spiritualizing the imagery in a Platonistic dualism between matter and spirit" by engaging in "imaginative speculation" (278, 277):

To interpret Revelation 21:1—22:5 merely as a symbolic picture of the church's blessings is to remove the church from its redemptive historical context in space and time history on the earth. As Adam's disobedience wrought catastrophe upon the earth, so the second Adam's obedience will accomplish reconciliation upon the earth. To take the vision of the new Jerusalem merely as an ideal symbol of the church's blessing fails to reckon with the earthly character of Old Testament eschatological hope and the full cosmic effects of Christ's redemption. (278)

A hermeneutic based on a dualism between matter and spirit, Turner believes, ignores the broader biblical hermeneutic of redemption which draws its efficacy from the death and resurrection of Christ. Throughout most of his essay, Turner explores the effects of Christ's redemption upon our sin-marred creation as much as he explores the effects upon humankind. "Revelation 21:1—22:5 portrays the ultimate destiny of the present universe when it is renovated by the redemptive power of the death and

---

---

*In most interpretations of the New Jerusalem, there is a tendency toward profaneness, that is, a tendency to posit common, culturally bound interpretations that speak more of our fallen social, political, economic, and religious anxieties than of the high and awesome economy of our Triune God.*

---

---

thians 2:9: "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." The context of this verse, however, clearly reveals that the things that God has prepared for us are of the Spirit and are spiritual in nature. Ultimately, it is our participation in Christ, who is God's wisdom and power, not some unimaginable physical destiny, which has been prepared for us. This preparation has been hidden in the mystery of God's New Testament economy, which also centers on Christ. This mystery is Christ who has been made wisdom to us from God with respect to righteousness in our spirit, sanctification in our soul, and redemption in our bodies (v. 2:7; 1:30). This is the progressive realization of our incorporation into the Triune God which consummates in the mutual indwelling of God and man in Christ to express God's image and dominion through the New Jerusalem, the corporate Christ.

Shortsightedness, Turner suggests, limits the second approach to interpreting the symbolism of the New Jerusalem. The hypoliteralist, in effect, argues that the details of the New Jerusalem "do not correspond to earthly reality" (275). In such an approach, Turner sees a danger of

resurrection of Jesus Christ" (265). Cosmic renovation, at all levels of creation, Turner believes, is the ultimate significance of the symbolism of the New Jerusalem. Consequently, he argues for a balance between the hyperliteralist and hypoliteralist approach:

The hermeneutical approach to Revelation 21:1—22:5 must be informed by sensitivity to apocalyptic imagery and acceptance of the cosmic nature of eschatology and redemption....Biblical eschatology involves an ethical renewal, not an ontic renewal. The eschatological hope of the Bible is not for deliverance from the earth, but from sin. (278)

Turner faults the hypoliteralists for their "inadequate grasp of the biblical theology of creation and redemption" (276). In effect, he argues that any interpretation of the New Jerusalem must be based on a broader hermeneutical principle of redemption, one that he believes informs the entire divine revelation. This view is commendable in that straightly cutting the word of the truth necessarily involves the avoidance of profane, vain babblings (2 Tim. 2:15-16), which are principally speculations that emanate from fallen human opinions.

Turner, however, misses out on a clearer understanding of the symbology of the New Jerusalem because of his shortsighted understanding of the kernel of the divine truth. This shortsightedness, however, cannot fairly be ascribed to Turner alone; it is the shortsightedness of much of Reformed theology, a theology which emphasizes our need for a judicial salvation, involving redemption and reconciliation, due to the fall of humanity into sin. In Turner's theology, the ultimate goal of the divine economy is to overcome the negative consequences of sin, and it is for this cause that he bows his knee and lauds the death and resurrection of Christ.

The cause for which the apostle Paul bowed his knee, however, included more than overcoming the negative consequences of sin. It involved the positive goal of incorporating the believers into the Triune God, by their being strengthened into the inner man with the resurrection power of Christ through the Spirit so that Christ could fully indwell them and make His home in their hearts. It involved the corporate apprehension of the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ by the believers, who subsequently can know the knowledge-surpassing love of Christ and be filled unto the fullness of God (Eph. 3:14-19). In the prayer of Paul in Ephesians 3, there is no mention of redemption, no cry for deliverance from sin, and no longing for a judicial pronouncement of our reconciliation with God. There is only a positive and succinct statement of the positive and eternal economy of God, which has as its goal the incorporation of humanity into divinity and divinity into humanity. This incorporation has been made possible through our organic union in faith with the Triune God. The positive apprehension of the length and breadth and height and depth of Christ is the believers' progressive realization of their incorporation into a full and multi-dimensional Christ, a cubic Christ, a Christ who symbolically is depicted elsewhere as being a city which "lies square," the "length and the breadth and the height of it" being equal (Rev. 21:16).

**B**y associating only a negative purpose with the divine will, the eternal purpose of God is, in many ways, made subservient to an ontological and *a priori* necessity of sin. It is this ontological subservience of God to the existence of evil that profanes the eternal economy of God. Turner's view of the New Jerusalem would change dramatically if he could see the dispensing of the life of the Triune God into His chosen, redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified tripartite elect. Turner's limited hermeneutic of redemption, even in its most expansive reach of cosmic and universal renovation, ultimately desecrates the holy nature of this consummate sign. With only "ethical rather than ontological transformation" (286), God's work is limited to restorative and corrective actions. Thus God Himself has no eternal or ontological

preeminence above that which causes Him to act in love and mercy on our behalf, namely the presence of sin.

Turner's dismissal of any ontological transformational significance to the sign of the New Jerusalem forces his exegesis in the fourth section to primarily focus on physical matters. In any explication of the New Jerusalem that takes the physical realm as its point of departure, place always will assume a larger significance than persons, and the inorganic will subsume the organic. Turner's redemptive historical perspective focuses less on spiritual interpretations that draw upon the full imagery of the Bible to explicate the manifold features of the New Jerusalem and more on legalistic and physical interpretations that pay perfunctory homage to the work of Christ in His death and resurrection. It is interesting to note, therefore, Turner's response to Robert Gundry's acclaimed essay, "The New Jerusalem: People as Place, Not Place for People," in which Gundry argues that the New Jerusalem should more properly be understood as a sign of God's people rather than a place for God's people. Gundry's arguments will be addressed in the following section, but note the intense physicality inherent in some of Turner's rebuttals:

Gundry asserts that 'Rev. 21:1—22:5 does not describe the new earth,...it only mentions it.' This is not true, however, for 21:22—22:5 describes several features of the new earth, the Water of Life and the reappearing pre-Fall Tree of Life being particularly noteworthy. The Water of Life was mentioned previously in 21:6 as a reward of God's people, part of the inheritance promised to them in 21:6. This inheritance is no doubt connected to the new earth. Thus Gundry's assertion that the new earth is not described is overstated. (287)

Gundry's view results in a truncation of the cosmic effects of Christ's redemptive work, since the renewal of creation itself is minimized if not omitted entirely (whereas Revelation leads us to expect such renewal by numerous references to the earth prior to chapter 20). (287)

In Turner's effort to preserve a physical universe, albeit one that has undergone a cosmic renewal through the application of the redemptive power of Christ's death and resurrection through grace, he is forced to argue for a physical interpretation of such intensely spiritual signs as the "Water of Life" and the "Tree of Life." In doing so he overlooks the prevailing biblical association of this imagery with the very Triune God Himself. Christ is life (John 14:6). He has come that we may have life (10:10). Those who believe into Him have eternal life (6:40). He who has the Son has the life (1 John 5:12), and those who come to Him will have rivers of living water flowing out of their innermost being (John 7:38). Lest this image be misinterpreted, the apostle John provides his own explication in the very next verse—the river is the Spirit

---

(v. 39). Since John has provided both the sign and its spiritual interpretation in his Gospel, it is difficult to imagine that, when recording his visions in Revelation, he would expect his readers to interpret the river of water of life that flows through the New Jerusalem as anything other than a spiritual sign. But this is what Turner is forced to argue. None of Turner's arguments against Gundry carry significant weight, and neither does his explication of the symbology of the New Jerusalem. In his conclusion he presents a physical destiny for God's elect that is reminiscent of More's Utopia. It seemingly is the best of all possible worlds:

When all evil supernatural powers and all humans who were subject to these powers are removed from God's new heaven and earth, the people of God will be freed to live in mutually loving harmonious relationships with God, neighbors, and nature. Gone will be all social, ethnic, and sexual biases. The removal of the curse (Rev. 22:3) will mean that the physical universe will no longer terrorize humans with earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, blizzards, plagues, famines, and the like. Instead, harmony will be the rule, and there will be absolutely no exceptions. In this age of total newness, believers will finally be able to realize the

Turner, Gundry acknowledges the need for selecting a valid hermeneutical method. By regarding textual interpretations as hypotheses, Gundry argues that interpretative hypotheses should be scrutinized and "validated" before being accepted:

Proofs lie in the power of the interpretative hypothesis to explain the data of the text coherently yet completely, naturally yet deeply, with a minimum of strain yet a maximum of detail, with what mathematicians call elegance—a blend of simplicity and richness. Without simplicity and naturalness, the suspicion will arise that the interpretation is being foisted on the text. Without richness and detail, the suspicion will arise that the interpretation does not penetrate the text. (255)

For Gundry, "The path to discovery lies along the line of historical-grammatical interpretation, which assumes that the language of the biblical text, including its symbolic language, grows out of and speaks to the historical situation of the writer and his readers" (255). There are flashes of real insight in Gundry's article, but these flashes do not, I think, grow out of his application of the historical-grammatical method. Rather, they spring forth when he

---

---

*By associating only a negative purpose with the divine will, the eternal purpose of God is, in many ways, made subservient to an ontological and a priori necessity of sin. It is this ontological subservience of God to the existence of evil that profanes the eternal economy of God.*

---

---

unhindered use and blessing of their God-given skills (Rev. 21:24—22:2). There will be unending growth in creaturely godliness as each person becomes in the end what God had intended from the beginning. (291-292)

Turner's new heaven and new earth speak more of the absorption of current socio-economic problems than they do of the Triune God's eternal purpose, which He purposed in Himself, to head up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens and the things on the earth, in Him (Eph. 1:9-10). The realm of redemption, the realm of reconciliation that Turner longs for, can be found only "in Him." To be "in Him" is to be in the corporate Christ. This is a realm of mutual indwelling and incorporation, in which the Triune God supplies Himself to and expresses Himself through His many sons who have been glorified in His Son.

### *Gundry's New Jerusalem*

Like Turner, Gundry acknowledges the symbolic nature of the New Jerusalem: "Symbolic language fills the Book of Revelation as it fills other apocalyptic literature. We may therefore presume that the description of the New Jerusalem in Rev 21:1-22:5 deals in symbolism" (254). Like

relies upon the text of the Bible to explain the text of the Bible. Gundry grossly errs when he chooses history as the referent for interpreting the multiplicity of signs in Revelation 21—22, rather than choosing the Bible itself. All of the elements in the last two chapters of the Bible, for example, are present in the first two chapters of the Bible. The flowing river and the tree in Genesis 1 and 2 are present in Revelation 21 and 22. And this river and tree reappear throughout the intervening chapters, especially as their appearance in the types and shadows of Christ in the Old Testament give way to the reality of the incarnated Word who became flesh through incarnation and the last Adam who became the life-giving Spirit in resurrection.

**G**undry's fundamental insight that the New Jerusalem is a symbol of the saints, not a symbol, especially a hyperliteral symbol, of a place for the saints, is not a product of his historical-grammatical method. Rather, it comes forth from his reading of the Bible that speaks of God's desire for a dwelling place on earth and especially within His saints.

[John] also transforms Jerusalem into a symbol of the saints themselves....But John is not describing the eternal

---

dwelling place of the saints; he is describing them, and them alone....The New Jerusalem is a dwelling place, to be sure; but it is God's dwelling place in the saints rather than their dwelling place on earth. (256)

Gundry must be given credit for his willingness to disassociate the New Jerusalem from the prevailing notion in Christianity of heaven. Almost all of Christianity is taken with a leavened understanding of the New Jerusalem, regarding it as a physical place in which all of our human needs are met, no matter how impure or overtly covetous those "needs" are in reality. It is a disgrace that Christ is replaced with a hope for a luxurious mansion, individualized to one's personal tastes. Nothing is more profane than this, and Gundry goes far in forwarding a needed re-interpretation of New Jerusalem within the Body of Christ. He strengthens his argument that the New Jerusalem is a sign of the saints rather than a place for the saints by drawing upon John's allusions to the city as a bride:

John first compares the city to a bride adorned for her husband and then calls the city "the bride, the wife of the Lamb." We already know from 19:7-8 that the Lamb's bride is the saints, arrayed in their righteous acts....Therefore the city = the bride-wife = the saints, whose dwelling place John has already introduced. That dwelling place is the earthly part of the new universe (21:1), down to which part they descend to take up their abode (21:2). (257)

Perhaps Gundry's most insightful contribution is contained in his description of the relationship between God and His saints, as depicted in the New Jerusalem. This insight, it should be pointed out, is little derived from his reliance on the historical-grammatical method, which elsewhere in this essay produces gross and profane visions of the New Jerusalem. Instead, his contribution is supported by his reliance upon the Word of God to interpret the Word of God:

And just as the city is God's tabernacle, he and the Lamb are the temple of the city (21:22). Ordinarily, God dwells in the temple and the temple is located in the city. Here, he and the Lamb are the temple, so that the city, since it is the cubically shaped Holy of holies, is located in the temple—a striking reversal which means that the saints will dwell in God and the Lamb just as God and the Lamb will dwell in them....We might compare the reciprocal indwelling of God, the Lamb, and the saints in the *futuristic* eschatology of the New Jerusalem with the reciprocal indwelling of God, his Son, and believers in the *realized* eschatology of John 14-17. (262)

If Gundry had explored further the notion of a reciprocal indwelling of God in Christ and in the believers, a very different essay might have emerged. Indeed, the central tenet

of his thesis would have been fundamentally altered. Since the New Jerusalem involves the reciprocal indwelling of God, the Lamb, and the saints, it is inadequate to state that the New Jerusalem is a just symbol of the saints; it is also a symbol of the Triune God. The realized eschatology in John 14—17 is an eschatology of incorporation:

In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. (14:20)

Abide in Me and I in you. (15:4)

That they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that You have sent Me....I in them, and You in Me, that they may be perfected into one, that the world may know that You have sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me. (17:21, 23)

The *futuristic* eschatology of the New Jerusalem will be nothing less than the full expression of the *realized* eschatology in the verses above. As such, the New Jerusalem is more than just a sign related to the saints of God; it is a sign of the saints who indwell the Triune God and who are indwelt by the Triune God.

Given these fundamental contributions by Gundry, most readers would reasonably expect the remaining portions of the essay to be equally insightful.<sup>2</sup> Sadly, this is not the case because Gundry quickly deviates from the Bible as a source for interpretation and relies almost exclusively on his historical-grammatical method to explicate the details of the New Jerusalem.

The historical background that Gundry associates with the writing of Revelation is a background of poverty, suffering, insecurity, persecution, and dispersion within the early church. He sees these elements primarily in John's reference to the condition of the church in Smyrna, and consequently chooses to interpret the specific details of the New Jerusalem according to his historical understanding of the condition of the church at the time that John was writing the book of Revelation. The results are indeed profane and in some instances laughable. The extent of Gundry's profane digressions cannot be fully understood without an examination of the inherent physicality of his view of the New Jerusalem.

While he is willing to argue that the New Jerusalem is people, not place, he does not eschew a predominantly physical destiny for the saints; he simply chooses to locate it on earth, rather than in heaven: "The new earth—the whole of it so far as we can tell, not just a localized city no matter what megalopolitan size it might attain—is the saints' dwelling place" (256). Given the historical condition of the church and the latent physicality of the

---

church's destiny, Gundry proceeds to interpret the features of the New Jerusalem from a physical perspective.

The newness of the New Jerusalem and the newness of the earth, in light of the saints' historical poverty, can only mean the attainment of wealth and property. "By putting the newness of Jerusalem in conjunction with the newness of the earth, John promises a redistribution of property, an exclusive redistribution of property to the saints" (258). Even the presence of gold, which the Bible commonly associates with the nature of God, and the prevalence of all manner of precious stones, which the Bible commonly associates with the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, are interpreted as material promises: "Now at outs with the world, the saints are suffering poverty. So in addition to the promise already given of landed property (the new earth), John promises the saints incalculable wealth of precious stones and precious metal" (261).

Gundry regards the references to God wiping away every tear (Rev. 21:4) as a historically rooted reflection of the suffering and persecution of the saints. Thus John's reference to a lack of tears is interpreted as John signaling the suffering saints of a brighter future, no doubt associated

It is difficult to reconcile Gundry's insight concerning the New Jerusalem with the utter profaneness of his interpretation of its details. There is no compatibility. The only explanation appears to be in an unconscious separation of the saints from the indwelling Triune God. If the saints, as the New Jerusalem, are separated from the Triune God, then it does not require much of an interpretive leap to separate the details of the New Jerusalem from the saints, and subsequently to find realization of these details in physical and material manifestations. Near the end of his essay, Gundry expresses satisfaction with his interpretive foray and exclaims that he feels as if nothing has been left out which could cast doubt on his findings (264). Contrary to his self-congratulatory exclamation, at least two points must be raised.

First, there is an internal inconsistency within his own essay, namely in his failure to recognize that the New Jerusalem is a sign of both the consummated Triune God and the saints. He points out this fact when he speaks of the realized and future eschatology of the reciprocal indwelling of God, the Lamb, and the saints, but it comes too late in the essay to inform his prior profane interpretations. Second, he almost completely ignores the biblical

---

---

*In Revelation the New Jerusalem is described as the tabernacle of God, but throughout the Bible, the tabernacle is associated with Christ, the Word who became flesh and tabernacled among men in the days of His flesh.  
For the New Jerusalem to be the tabernacle, the believers must be incorporated into Christ.*

---

---

with a blissful enjoyment of one's earthly property in the new earth. "Sheer happiness characterizes the city, a happiness unadulterated by tears, pain, or death—elements in the old creation that have peculiar poignancy for those facing persecution to the death by the Beast" (259).

Given the troubled and insecure position of the early church, being cast about by persecution and its associated and unavoidable anxieties, Gundry interprets the wall and gates as being indicative of a total sense of security and release from worldly anxieties in the new earth: "John is not describing an eternally secure place. He is describing eternally secure peoples....To troubled saints John promises total absence of anxiety over persecution such as looms on the horizon of the old earth" (260). Gundry also regards the dimensions of the city merely as a symbolic message from John to the early church and, by extension, to us that all sense of personal isolation will vanish in the new earth:

Twelve thousands of stadia, though numbered, represent the innumerability of the saints. Sufferers naturally tend to think of themselves as few, often as even alone. John aims to lift the suffering saints out of their sense of isolation by pointing to the immense number of the redeemed. (260)

data related to the tabernacle in his discussion of the New Jerusalem as the tabernacle and temple of God.

Revelation 21:3 announces the arrival of the New Jerusalem as it comes down out of heaven with the following proclamation: "And I heard a loud voice out of the throne, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men." In Revelation the New Jerusalem is described as the tabernacle of God, but throughout the Bible, the tabernacle is associated with Christ, the Word who became flesh and tabernacled among men in the days of His flesh (John 1:14; Heb. 5:7). For the New Jerusalem to be the tabernacle, the believers must be incorporated into Christ. He is in us and we are in Him; this is the realized eschatology of John 14—17. The New Jerusalem more properly must be understood as a sign of our realized and expressed incorporation in Christ. As such, the New Jerusalem is the corporate Christ enlarged and displayed, positively expressing God's image and exercising God's dominion in a wise display of all that God is.

*by John Pester*

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Turner's most derisive comment comes in his discussion of two of the favorite hyperliteralist images—the pearl gates and the street of gold: “Perhaps the absence of oysters large enough to produce such pearls and the absence of sufficient gold to pave such a city (viewed as literally 1,380 miles square and high) is viewed as sufficient reason not to take these images as fully literal!” (277).

<sup>2</sup>Gundry's assertion that the New Jerusalem is a sign of the saints occurs quite early in his essay and thereby establishes a positive expectation for his audience. Shortly thereafter, however, he veers into profaneness, only partially recovering a foothold on the central significance of the New Jerusalem by pointing out the relationship between the futuristic eschatology in Revelation and the realized eschatology in the Gospel of John near the end of the article.

### Theology and Spiritual Nurture

“Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity,”  
by Ellen T. Charry. *Theology Today*. 54:3 (Oct. 1997):  
367-380.

The thesis of this important essay, written by Ellen T. Charry, Margaret W. Harmon Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, is that the doctrine of the Trinity is an instrument of spiritual formation and a means of spiritual nurture. Arguing that theology has neglected spiritual nurture—“helping Christian teachings help people know, love, and enjoy God” (368)—and claiming that Christian doctrine has the ability to sponsor a godly life, Charry undertakes “an intentionally pastoral exegesis of the doctrine of the Trinity” as “a test case of a fresh direction for doctrinal exegesis whose task is spiritual formation” (367). With skill and insight, Charry counters the objection to Christian theology as an instrument of spiritual formation, an objection which, in her view, “arises from both a distrust of Christian doctrine and a distrust of formation, especially spiritual formation” (369). Charry's task, as she defines it, is “to demonstrate how the identity of God expressed by the doctrine [of the Trinity] maps a coherent, morally reasonable, unified, and godly—that is to say, happy life” (379). The focus here is not on the doctrine of the Trinity but on the needs of believers. “Spiritual doctrinal exegesis does shift the focus of attention from the intelligibility of the doctrine itself as a set of ideas to the spiritual benefits conveyed to the believer” (379).

The heart of this essay, a section bearing the subtitle “Life

with the Triune God,” considers some of these spiritual benefits. Charry asserts that Christian identity begins, or assumes definite shape, at baptism, which she regards as “the beginning of new life in Christ inaugurated by the Holy Spirit” (371). Through baptism one is grafted into the divine life, and to be baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is to be “set into the Trinity” (372). Viewing the Trinity not as a puzzle to be solved but as “an enigma to be dwelt in” (372), the author asserts that baptism “sets Christian identity into the Trinity experientially” (372). As a result, the believer has “an internalized God-given identity” (372).

This identity is enriched when one recognizes the value both of not knowing and of knowing God. “That God is both one and three, a complete unity and yet encompassing eternal inner distinctions is one of the great paradoxes of Christian doctrine” (372). This great paradox points to the impenetrability or unknowability of God and leads to a humble dependence on God's self-disclosure and to a recognition of the fact that we have been baptized into One whom we cannot fully understand. All this may save us from what Charry aptly calls “a cognitive concupiscence in human nature” (373), a craving for knowledge that exceeds what is spiritually beneficial for us. The value of not knowing God is balanced by the value of knowing God. We know God in order to love God and enjoy God better, and this knowledge, love, and enjoyment issue in mature self-understanding and godly living. Through our knowing the incorporeal essence of God, our understanding the beauty, truth, and goodness that are God, and our yearning for God, “our desires are directed in a godly and noble manner” (374).

Charry advances her argument by remarking that “our theological identity” is strengthened through our recognition of “the divine triplicity” (377). God's being Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier indicates to Charry that God has a full understanding of our needs and the means to fulfill them. In what may be called a theological version of the anthropic principle, Charry goes so far as to claim, “To this end, God's own being is structured around our needs” (377). This seems to suggest the belief that what God is in His being is determined by what we are in our needs. Since, from Charry's perspective, “the divine triplicity is for our well-being” and since we “recognize the divine triplicity as an opportunity to see God's perception of our own needs,” we should affirm that “the divine triplicity anticipates the full force of human need from eternity” (377-378). If we know that God is triune, we will understand our human needs and realize that only “the divine triplicity” can meet them. As Charry notes in her conclusion, “The belief is that knowing and loving God the Holy Trinity is genuinely salutary for people because we really need God and God is really good for us” (379).

---

Charry's significant essay is an invitation to reconsider the doctrine of the Trinity subjectively from the perspective of the believers' human needs and spiritual experience. In the remainder of this review, I would like to suggest some matters that merit attention in this regard.

The New Testament reveals that God is triune—Father, Son, and Spirit—and that human beings are tripartite—spirit, soul, and body. We are tripartite because God is triune. The Triune God is a God of life, and we were created to receive Him as life. The Father has life in Himself, the Son has life in Himself and even is life itself, and the Spirit is the Spirit of life. As chapter eight of Romans indicates, God's intention in His economy is to dispense Himself as life into our tripartite being, thereby imparting the divine life into our spirit, soul, and body. Each "person" of the Triune God is for the divine dispensing of the divine life, and each part of our tripartite being needs the Triune God as life.

That we were designed and created by God to receive His dispensing brings us to a crucial matter related to our humanity: Human beings are vessels designed to contain God, a fact to which the Bible bears repeated and emphatic witness. We are not mainly instruments to be used by God but vessels to be filled with God. As vessels created by God, we need to be filled with God for the expression of God. It is human to be filled with God, and it is inhuman to be filled with something other than God. On the one hand, fallen human beings are plagued by an emptiness that only God can fill, a thirst that only the Triune God can quench. On the other hand, lost human beings are filled with all sorts of things—idols in the heart as Ezekiel would say—that replace God. We were designed to contain God, and we can be truly happy only when we are filled with Him. The more we are saturated with the Triune God as He makes His home within us (Eph. 3:17), the more human we become and the more we rightly understand ourselves as vessels created and redeemed to receive and enjoy the Triune God through the divine dispensing.

This dispensing begins with the regeneration of our spirit and continues with the transformation of our soul. If we do not know that we have a human spirit, we cannot know God and we cannot know ourselves. If our spirit

has not been regenerated, we cannot contact God or be filled with God. If we would undergo the kind of spiritual formation revealed in the New Testament, we need to advance from the regeneration of our spirit to the transformation of our soul, which is the organ of enjoyment and expression. We experience God in our spirit, but we enjoy Him and express Him with our soul. Spiritual formation requires that we be transformed by the renewing of the mind and by beholding the glory of the Lord with an unveiled face (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). In essence, spiritual formation involves regeneration and transformation.

For us to be transformed by the Lord Spirit is for Christ to be formed in us. That Paul was burdened for this kind of spiritual formation is indicated by his words in Galatians 4:19: "My children, with whom I travail again in birth until Christ is formed in you." When we were regenerated, Christ was born into us and we became children of God. As Christ is formed, fully grown, in us, we become sons of God. Thus, our spiritual formation, a process by which the children of God develop into mature sons of God, depends on another kind of formation—the formation of Christ in us until we are fully conformed to His image as "the Firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:29).

All these matters are, of course, aspects of God's New Testament economy, which is the central line of the divine revelation in the Scriptures. The Bible is a book of the divine economy, and only in relation to the divine economy can we truly know the Triune God and understand why He created us in His image with a tripartite humanity. For the fulfillment of His economy, the Triune God needs us and we need Him. In Christ the Triune God dwells in us, and in Christ we dwell in the Triune God. His formation is in us, and our formation is in Him, with Him, by Him, and through Him. God's goal is achieved and our needs are met only as our tripartite humanity is filled with the Triune God. This is genuine spiritual formation, a formation that is caused not merely by the doctrine of the Trinity but by the dispensing of the Divine Trinity for the fulfillment of the divine economy.

*by Ron Kangas*

---

---

*We are tripartite because God is triune. The Triune God is a God of life, and we were created to receive Him as life. The Father has life in Himself, the Son has life in Himself and even is life itself, and the Spirit is the Spirit of life. God's intention in His economy is to dispense Himself as life into our tripartite being, thereby imparting the divine life into our spirit, soul, and body.*

---

---