

REVIEWS

Luther Reexamined

Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998.

In a recent publication by Eerdmans Publishing, Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson serve as editors of a remarkable set of papers that details the work of a group of scholars, associated with the Department of Systematic Theology of the University of Helsinki, who are reexamining the theology of Luther in an ongoing effort to determine whether or not common points for ecumenical dialog exist between Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians, especially on the matter of justification by faith. The subtitle declares that *Union with Christ* is a presentation of the "new Finnish interpretation of Luther." In many respects and to most readers, the subtitle is an apt description. The contents of the papers touch upon many themes in Luther's writings that will be new and invigorating to some or novel and overly mystical to others. In either case, the appellation of *new* is fitting. Additionally, extended portions of just Luther's writings are presented throughout the Finnish scholars' papers. This brings readers face to face with Luther himself, and many may be surprised by what they find. By dealing directly with Luther, rather than with his more systematic successors, the resulting interpretations should force a more vigorous engagement of the analysis in *Union with Christ*.

The new interpretation of Luther is presented in seven papers by five Finnish scholars, Tuomo Mannermaa, Simo Peura, Antti Raunio, Risto Saarinen, and Sammeli Juntunen. Brief responses by the editors and other American scholars are interspersed throughout, but these are short and respectfully deferential to the ideas embodied in the Finnish research. The book jacket summarizes the thrust of the research:

Protestant theology has never enjoyed a consensus on how to interpret the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith. In opposition to the traditional forensic understanding of justification, Mannermaa argues that for Luther "Christ is really present in faith itself." Mannermaa's interpretation of Luther's view of justification is thus more ontological and mystical than ethical and juridical.

This ontological, mystical, and even organic view of justification is forcefully presented in the first three papers, two

by Mannermaa and one by Simo Peura. In the course of these papers, Mannermaa and Peura develop an understanding of Luther's view of faith, justification, and theosis that goes well beyond a forensic view of justification which, even though it is based on Christ alone, often leaves believers detached and devoid of any real experience of union with Christ. Without an integrated understanding of the judicial and organic aspects of salvation, most Christians are hindered from entering into a vital relationship with the resurrected Christ. For the sake of review, the first three papers will be highlighted, and extended portions of the Finnish work will be presented for the sake of respectful engagement.

Faith: Participation in Christ or an Act of the Will

Although theological themes may be advanced and discussed at levels of relative abstract discourse, the impacts of theology are not confined to these rarefied realms. Instead, concepts filter down and ultimately affect the views and experiences of every believer. One key concept, thus affected, is faith. Due to an almost exclusive emphasis on forensic justification in post-Reformation Protestant discourse, faith has been stripped of its intrinsic vitality. To most Christians faith is an act of the will, that is, a self-initiated decision to believe. Much of modern apologetics is directed toward convincing unbelievers and even believers of the historicity, plausibility, and rationality of the Christian distinctives of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Even the expression "leap of faith" connotes a decision more than a response. As such, faith has lost its life-giving and transformative power, and, in many ironic respects, it is presented more as a human work than as a demonstration of God's grace. This misappropriation of Luther's themes of grace, or as Peura argues, the separation of gift from grace, has resulted in a view of faith that is little more than a substantiation of things obtained, the conviction of things seen. Faith has become a human construct rather than a divine operation. Braaten and Jenson comment on this tendency in their introduction of the Finnish research:

The Mannermaa school is revising a century of Luther interpretation dominated by German Protestant theologians, who notoriously read Luther under the spell of neo-Kantian presuppositions. This is true of a long line of German Luther scholarship from Albrecht Ritschl to Gerhard Ebeling. On this basis one should ignore all ontology found in Luther; faith is purely an act of the will with no ontological implications. Faith as volitional obedience

rather than as ontological participation is all that a neo-Kantianized Luther could allow. (viii-ix)

From the beginning of *Union with Christ*, a contrast is made between Luther and his subsequent adherents. The thrust of the Finnish work is a reexamination and reconsideration of Luther himself. Their work bears the mark of respect for Luther and genuinely credits him with reformational impact. The Finnish scholars, however, point to the failure of subsequent Reformation theology, especially as it was codified in the Formula of Concord of 1577, to grasp the essence of Luther's understanding of faith. In their introduction, the editors suggest that the Finnish scholars have discovered a deeper ontological emphasis in Luther's treatment of faith.

There they found that for Luther faith is a real participation in Christ, that in faith a believer receives the righteousness of God in Christ, not only in a nominal and external way, but really and inwardly. According to the forensic model of justification, it is *as though* we are righteous, while in reality we are not. But if through faith we really participate in Christ, we participate in the whole Christ, who in his divine person communicates the righteousness of God. (viii)

The justifying faith of Luther is much more than the faith that is promulgated by most of today's Christianity. Faith is not a decisive action per se but a response constrained by the love of Christ, prompted, in turn, by one's hearing of the preciousness of Christ. Paul openly portrayed Christ crucified to the Galatians, and in their hearing there was a receiving and a joining to Christ through the Spirit: "This only I wish to learn from you, Did you receive the Spirit out of the works of law or out of the hearing of faith?" (Gal. 3:2). Witness Lee, in his *Life-study of Galatians*, speaks of faith as the substantiation of our union with Christ.

Faith creates an organic union in which we and Christ are one. Therefore, the expression "by faith in Christ" actually denotes an organic union accomplished by believing in Christ. The term "in Christ" refers to this organic union. Before we believed in Christ, there was a great separation between us and Christ. We were we, and Christ was Christ. But through believing we were joined to Christ and became one with Him. Now we are in Christ, and Christ is in us. This is an organic union, a union in life....

Many Christians have a shallow understanding of justification by faith. How could Christ be our righteousness if we were not organically united to Him? It is by means of our organic union with Christ that God can reckon Christ as our righteousness. Because we and Christ are one, whatever belongs to Him is ours. This is the basis upon which God counts Christ as our righteousness. (74)

Tuomo Mannermaa, in the chapter entitled "Justification and *Theosis* in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective," echoes this thought and finds it as the central thrust of Luther's theology, not as a minor, mystical strain.

Central in Luther's theology is that in faith the human being *really* participates by faith in the person of Christ and in the divine life and the victory that is in it. Or, to say it the other way around: Christ gives his person to the human being through the faith by which we grasp it. "Faith" involves participation in Christ, in whom there is no sin, death, or curse....Because faith involves a real union with Christ and because Christ is the divine person, the believer does indeed participate in God. (32)

Without this ontological aspect, which is ultimately an organic aspect of God's complete salvation in His divine life, it is difficult to understand and enter into the full scope of our salvation. When our organic union with Christ is overlooked and our acceptance before God is regarded as being the result of our volitional exercise of "accepting Christ as our personal Savior," it is easy to regress into fleshly attempts at perfection, even though we, in fact, began in the Spirit. In *Union with Christ*, this ontological view of faith is presented as the foundation of Luther's seminal recovery of truth—justification by faith.

Justification—Imputed Righteousness or the Righteous Christ

In popular presentations of the Reformation dispute, justification by faith is rightly cast in contrast to a justification that purports to satisfy God's demand for righteousness through self-efforts or works. Against a background in which the practice of selling indulgences grossly distorted the gospel, faith as the means of salvation assailed the very foundation of Roman Catholicism. But for Luther, faith was never just a decision but the receiving of grace in which Christ also was present as a gift. "Faith means justification precisely on the basis of Christ's person being present in it as favor and gift. *In ipsa fide Christus adest*: in faith itself Christ is present, and so the whole of salvation" (14-15). The Christ who is present in faith is the righteous One (1 Pet. 3:18), and in Him we become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). Our righteousness is based on Christ. But God's righteousness, which once condemned us, now serves as the eternal security of our acceptance before Him because of our identification with the redeeming Christ. The forensic aspect of salvation is based on the redemption of Christ which satisfies the righteous requirement of the law on our behalf.

Union with Christ argues that the forensic aspect of justification not only has become an overemphasized theme of the Reformation, but it has fostered a separation of the

person of Christ Himself from His work. Forensic justification is substantially based on the concept of imputed righteousness, which is our part of Luther's "happy exchange." In this exchange, Christ's work on the cross dealt with our sin, guilt, punishment, and sentence of death, while at the same time, the imputation of His righteousness to us effected our forgiveness. Hence, justification is "regarded as a reception of the forgiveness that is 'imputed' to a human being because of the obedience and merit of Christ" (28). In effect, our forgiveness is viewed as a judicial pronouncement from a righteous Judge, but in this pronouncement the gulf between God and man at other levels, especially at an ontological level, is not bridged. By separating Christ from His justifying work, the central revelation of our participation in the righteous Christ has been greatly diminished. However, all spiritual blessings—justification being but one—are in Christ. We are chosen in Him, graced in Him, headed up in Him, raised and seated in Him, displayed as the surpassing riches of His grace in Him, created as a masterpiece in Him, and brought near and made one in Him (Eph. 1:3-4, 6, 10; 2:6-7, 10, 13, 15). Separating the person of Christ from His work strips His work of its intrinsic vitality in us. In "Justification and *Theosis* in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective," Mannermaa argues that Luther never intended this kind of separation of the person of Christ from His work.

In Luther's theology, however, the relation between justification and the divine indwelling in the believer is, undoubtedly, defined differently from the formulation of the Formula of Concord....Luther does not separate the person of Christ from his work. Rather, Christ himself, both his person and his work, is the ground of Christian righteousness. Christ is, in this unity of person and work, really present in the faith of the Christian (*in ipsa fide Christus adest*). The favor (*favor*) of God (i.e., the forgiveness of sins and the removal of God's wrath) and the "gift" of God (*donum*, God himself, present in the fullness of his essence) are united in the person of Christ....For Luther *evangelium* is not proclamation of the cross and/or of the forgiveness of sins only, but the proclamation of the crucified *and* risen Christ himself. It is one of the main themes of Luther's theology that only the crucified *and* risen Christ himself as present can mediate salvation. Thus, we must clearly note the organic connection between the doctrine of justification and christological themes in the theology of Luther. (28-29)

In his essay "Christ as Favor and Gift (*donum*): The

When our organic union with Christ is overlooked and our acceptance before God is regarded as being the result of our own volitional exercise, it is easy to regress into fleshly attempts at perfection, even though we began in the Spirit.

Challenge of Luther's Understanding of Justification," Simo Peura finds the seeds of this separation in attempts to forge a theological distinction between the forensic and effective aspects of justification, especially since the forensic aspect was seemingly more expressive of Protestant sentiments while the effective aspect was seemingly more expressive of Catholic sentiments.

One of the most difficult problems to be solved in Lutheran theology concerns the relation between the forensic and the effective aspects of justification....The two aspects of justification are expressed in Luther's theology in his conceptions of grace (*gratia, favor*) and gift (*donum*). One indicates that a sinner is forensically declared righteous, and the other that he is made effectively righteous. (42)

Peura argues that Luther saw a distinction between forensic and effective justification, which he associated with grace and gift, but that these distinctions were never mutually exclusive to the point of separation because he viewed Christ as both grace and gift. Since Christ is, at the same time, both our saving grace and the gift of grace, such a separation was inconceivable for Luther.

Justification is not only a change of self-understanding, a new relation to God, or a new ethos of love. God changes the sinner ontologically in the sense that he or she participates in God and in his divine nature, being made righteous and "a god." This interpretation is based on the thesis that both grace and gift are a righteousness given in Christ to a Christian. This donation presupposes that Christ is really present and that he indwells the Christian. Christ on the one hand is the grace that is given to the sinner that protects him against the wrath of God (the forensic aspect), and on the other hand he is the gift that renews and makes the sinner righteous (the effective aspect). All this is possible only if Christ is united with the sinner through the sinner's faith. So, the crucial point of this interpretation rests in the notion of *unio cum Christo*. (48)

The seeds of separating the person of Christ from His work, Peura further argues, reached their full fruition in the Formula of Concord.

According to the Formula of Concord (FC) the doctrine of justification (*iustitia fidei coram Deo*) includes only God's favor, that is, imputed righteousness. Justification is the same as absolution, the declared forgiveness of sins....The FC then excludes from gift everything else that according to Luther is included in it. Regeneration,

renewal (*renovatio*), vivification (*vivificatio*), and God's presence in the sinner (*inhabitatio Dei*) do not belong to the doctrine of justification but are consequences of God's declarative act (imputed righteousness). According to the FC, the indwelling of God is not that righteousness by which we are declared righteous. The indwelling of God follows the antecedent of justification by faith. This means that God is not really present in a Christian when declaring him or her righteous through faith for Christ's sake. (45)

If faith is grounded only upon the forensic aspect of salvation, rather than on a broader understanding of our ontological union and participation in the Triune God, the work of recovering the central truths of the divine revelation, which were about to die in the Dark Ages and which now are commonly associated with the Reformation, remains incomplete (Rev. 3:2). Without an organic view of salvation to complement and complete the forensic view, all subsequent matters of Christian experience, such as regeneration, shepherding, dispositional sanctification, renewing, transformation, building up, conformation, and glorification, also are further from the Triune God and subsequently imbued with limiting, legalistic connotations. The path of the Christian life has been reduced to an ever-increasing obedience of the human will to the divine will, rather than as our ever-increasing participation in the divine life and nature of the Triune God. Without the truth that God became man to make man God in life and nature but not in the Godhead, there is no high peak to Christian living. In the Finnish scholars' research into Luther's texts, this theme is not only present but also intimately associated with the Christ who is present in justifying faith.

Theosis (Deification)

Athanasius's aphorism that God became man in order to make man God is given some amount of respectful treatment in Protestant theological circles. However, the suggestion that man has any ontological participation in God based on our union with Christ still draws considerable condemnation from more popularized ministries. For them, it is almost too much to bear; it is too mystical and too subjective—but apparently not for Luther. The Finnish research on this point is impressive. In "Why Is Luther So Fascinating?" Mannermaa draws the following connection:

The indwelling of Christ as grasped in the Lutheran tradition implies a real participation in God, and it corresponds in a special way to the Orthodox doctrine of participation in God, namely the doctrine of *theosis*. . . . According to Luther, Christ (in both his person and his work) is present in faith and is through this presence identical with the righteousness of faith. Thus, the notion that Christ is present in the Christian occupies a much

more central place in the theology of Luther than in the Lutheranism subsequent to him. (2)

In "Justification and *Theosis* in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective," he further states, "The Lutheran understanding of the indwelling of Christ implies real participation in God and is analogous to the Orthodox doctrine of participation in God, or *theosis*. When seen in the light of the doctrine of *theosis*, the Lutheran tradition is born anew and becomes once again interesting" (25).

What is most interesting about Mannermaa's essays is not just that he sees a link between justification and theosis, but that he sees a profound link between theosis and the very being of the Triune God. Most skeptics of theosis tend to regard it as a blasphemous invention of the human mind, an unpardonable transgression upon God's holy and exalted nature, even in the face of Peter's unambiguous assertion that we are partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). These efforts to uphold and safeguard the glory of God, while well-intentioned, affront the essence and economy of the Triune God in many respects.

Theosis is based causally on the divinity of God. According to Luther, the divinity of the triune God consists in that "He gives." And what he gives, ultimately, is himself. The essence of God, then, is identical with the essential divine properties in which he gives of himself, called the "names" of God: Word, justice, truth, wisdom, love, goodness, eternal life, and so forth. The *theosis* of the believer is initiated when God bestows on the believer God's essential properties; that is, what God gives of himself to humans is nothing separate from God himself. (10)

In the first issue of *Affirmation & Critique*, in an article entitled "Axioms of the Trinity," Kerry Robichaux argues that by virtue of His designation as Father, Son, and Spirit, the Triune God is axiomatically revealed in the Bible as an organic Being, who by virtue of His organic identity is eternally three yet one, and who as an organic Being exists as an eternal dispensing (7-8). In this eternal dispensing, this self-giving of God, there must be an undeniable move toward deification in those who receive the organic life of the Triune God through participation and union with Christ. What is given is God, and what is produced is nothing less than God in life and nature but not in the Godhead. Simo Peura also affirms the link between God's eternal dispensing of Himself and the issue of our receiving of His dispensing—deification.

According to Luther, the triune God proves to be the real God when he donates his own being to humanity. Thus, God realizes himself and his own nature when he gives his wisdom, goodness, virtue, beatitude, and all of his riches to the Christian, and when a Christian receives all that he gives.

The self-giving of God is realized when Christ indwells the sinner through faith and thus unites himself with the sinner. This means that the Christian receives salvation *per Christum* only under the condition of *unio cum Christo*. Luther's conviction on this point leads to the conclusion that a Christian becomes a partaker of Christ and that a Christian is in this sense also deified. (50-51)

The suggestion that man has any ontological participation in God based on our union with Christ still draws considerable condemnation. For some, it is almost too much to bear; it is too mystical and too subjective—but apparently not for Luther.

comprehends. His soul is the holy place, with its seven lamps, that is, all manner of reason, discrimination, knowledge, and understanding of visible and bodily things. His body is the forecourt, open to all, so that men may see his works and manner of life. (304)

Even though Luther did not develop this matter much, it is central to apprehending the divine realities, both in under-

Luther's emphasis on deification, as presented in *Union with Christ*, should give many Protestants pause to consider not only how deification relates to their experience but also how it relates to the fulfillment of the eternal purpose of God, which He purposed in Himself. The teaching of deification opens up a view of our destiny that is rooted in God's very being. In view of His self-giving, for example, the making of man in His image and after His likeness assumes the status of an ontological imperative: "He must increase" (John 3:30), and He looks to man for His rest (Isa. 66:1). This is to say that the Triune God, who in Himself is an eternal dispensing, will, in His economical revelation of Himself, seek expressions of Himself that reveal Him to be an eternal dispensing. In this regard, humans who are repeatedly described in the New Testament as vessels generally and who are redeemed, transformed, and glorified specifically, ultimately serve as the highest confirmation that God is eternally dispensing all that He is for His glorious expression.

Effecting Our Union with Christ

God looks to man by looking at the human spirit (Isa. 66:2), and He effects our union with Christ by regenerating and indwelling the human spirit with the Divine Spirit (John 3:6). If there is any shortcoming in *Union with Christ*, it is the failure to see the central role of the human spirit as the locus of our union with Christ. Man is a tripartite being consisting of spirit, soul, and body. Luther refers to this aspect of man in his comment on the Magnificat.

In the tabernacle fashioned by Moses there were three separate compartments. The first was called the holy of holies: here was God's dwelling place, and in it there was no light. The second was called the holy place; here stood a candlestick with seven arms and seven lamps. The third was called the outer court; this lay under the open sky and in the full light of the sun. In this tabernacle we have a figure of the Christian man. His spirit is the holy of holies, where God dwells in the darkness of faith, where no light is; for he believes that which he neither sees nor feels nor

standing and experience. Thankfully, the Bible is more explicit on this matter. Our spirit and soul and body should be preserved in sanctification unto the coming of our Lord (1 Thes. 5:23). This is possible because the human spirit is born of the Divine Spirit (John 3:6), thus causing us to be joined as one spirit with the Lord (1 Cor. 6:17). In this joining, the Spirit witnesses with our spirit (Rom. 8:16), and in our spirit we experience the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 6:18; Phil. 4:23; 2 Tim. 4:22; Philem. 25). Jaroslav Pelikan, the editor of *Luther's Works*, even acknowledges that there is support in Luther's writings for the "trichotomist idea of human nature as made up of body, soul, and spirit; but there are also places in his writings which seem to speak for the dichotomist idea of man's material and nonmaterial nature as the two parts of his being" (303). Given the Finnish scholars' principal interaction with Luther's texts, this oversight is understandable. Rather than seeing the human spirit as the locus of our union with Christ, Peura places primary emphasis on baptism.

According to Luther, union with Christ is effected in baptism. The necessary precondition of baptism is always the preaching of God's word. The sacrament of baptism achieves validity when the Word of God, that is, Christ, joins himself to natural water. When the sacrament is employed according to its purpose, baptism effects that the sins immersed into baptismal water are "swallowed up," the baptized dies in relation to sin, and a newborn Christian is raised up from the water. (53)

There is an aspect of our union with Christ that is related to baptism, but our union is not initiated by baptism; rather, it is sustained by baptism. Union with Christ begins when we respond in faith and are regenerated by the Spirit in our human spirit. If Christ is present in faith itself, we must realize that our union with Christ is effected when we received the Spirit in our spirit through the hearing of faith (Gal. 3:2). In Romans 6:4-5 Paul speaks of baptism and union, but it is in the context of walking and growing in the divine life: "We have been buried therefore with Him through baptism into His death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the

Father, so also we might walk in newness of life. For if we have grown together with Him in the likeness of His death, indeed we will also be in the likeness of His resurrection.”

A Final Note

The content of *Union with Christ* is deserving of a further review and consideration. This review has touched many points only cursorily, completely ignoring others, for the sake of highlighting the major themes in this new Finnish interpretation of Luther. Hopefully, this book will help create an environment in which such vital matters of the faith can be discussed and experienced. And in this regard, experiencing these matters must take precedence in order for the book to be truly effectual. There is some concern that this is not the hope embodied in the publication of *Union with Christ*. As noted in the beginning, this scholarly work is part of an ongoing effort to determine if common points for ecumenical dialog exist between Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians, especially on the matter of justification by faith. Carl Braaten echoes this, stating, “We have reason to hope that there can now be sufficient consensus on ‘justification by Christ alone’ with our major ecumenical partners that holds promise for the continuing quest for visible church unity” (75).

Agreement on matters of doctrine, however, is by no means a guarantee that centuries-old divisions will heal when and if doctrinal reconciliation occurs, because the divisions in the Body of Christ have been nurtured by more than just doctrinal differences. Many things in addition to doctrinal perspectives lay claim to our allegiance and are thus elevated above Christ. Only when we hear Him, as members of His organic Body experiencing the divine dispensing of the Divine Trinity, will there be a willingness to drop all other replacements for Christ. May *Union with Christ* serve to bring us more into union with Christ, rather than bringing us just to a point of doctrinal consensus with others. If this happens, the flowing of the divine life will deal with every replacement, every “temple” that competes with Christ, and in our seeing of Christ alone, the Body of Christ will vitally, organically, express the fullness of the One who fills all in all.

by John Pester

Works Cited

- Lee, Witness. *Life-study of Galatians*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1984.
- Luther, Martin. “The Magnificat.” *Luther’s Works*. Ed. Jaroslav Pelikan. Vol. 21. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956. 295-358.
- Robichaux, Kerry S. “Axioms of the Trinity.” *Affirmation & Critique* 1.1 (1996): 6-11.

God in the Image of Man’s Needs

The God You’re Looking For, by Bill Hybels. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997.

In *The God You’re Looking For*, Bill Hybels seeks to introduce the true identity, personality, and nature of God to believers and unbelievers in an attempt to bring them into an affectionate relationship with Him. In the main it depicts God as a loving and caring person with genuine affection who has been misconstrued as an impassive and stringent Being with a “list of duties and prohibitions” (27). Although the book dislodges some misconceptions of God, its portrait of God falls woefully short of the divine revelation in the Scriptures. In its attempt to define “the *real* God of the Bible” (xxvii), the book primarily points the reader to the God who is revealed in the Old Testament, neglecting the New Testament revelation of the Triune God. Since the overall tenor of the book focuses on meeting human needs, it presents a God who is in the image of man’s needs, obscuring the biblical revelation of the Triune God with His eternal purpose.

The book is mostly composed of heartwarming anecdotes garnished with snippets of verses from the Scriptures. It begins with a hypothetical courtroom scene in which a defense attorney attempts to prove the existence of God, relying on tenuous arguments and sentimentalism. This intellectually unsatisfying and overly sentimental defense of God’s existence in the introduction presages the flimsy content of the book that repeatedly surfaces throughout the succeeding chapters. The remainder of the book proceeds to reveal God’s diverse attributes and characteristics: His omniscience (chapter one), His omnipresence (chapter two), His omnipotence (chapter three), His expressiveness (chapter four), His being a refuge (chapter five), His righteousness (chapter six), His grace (chapter seven), His faithfulness (chapter eight), His guidance (chapter nine), His generosity (chapter ten), and His immutability (chapter eleven).

The only worthy feature of this book is its desire to bring the reader into an intimate relationship with God. Recognizing the unhealthy extreme of overly stressing the transcendence of God which causes us to view God primarily with distance and fear, the book shows the reader with biblical data that God is not a stoic, but a person with a gamut of emotion who “passionately yearns to be in a *loving relationship with the people He created*” (26). Not only does He possess a spectrum of feelings, but He also “sent His Holy Spirit to transform us into more accurate reflections of who God is, and that includes mirroring His expressiveness” (71). Even though the techniques that the book advocates so that we may experience such a transformation are highly questionable, such as the self-perfection and the mere exercise of our human mind, the book

should be credited at least for its attempt to bridge the gap between God and man and to usher the reader into an affectionate interaction with God.

Other than this incidental benefit, the book is riddled with errors that deserve critique. This review will focus on three shortcomings. First, the book principally portrays the God of the Old Testament dispensation. This tendency is patently demonstrated in the book's description of our experience of God's "omnipresent reality" (35). In situations where "panic rises," the book enjoins the reader to remind himself that "the Lord is in this place" and to "try repeating that, over and over, until its truth begins to comfort you" (35). Acknowledging God's omnipresence may bring a measure of human consolation, but this is an experience that primarily belongs to the Old Testament dispensation in which God remained outside man. One may even wonder how this experience of God differs from a deist's acknowledgment of the omnipresent God. This practice will not bring an unbeliever into contact with the Triune God who is today embodied in Christ and realized as the Spirit. It also has the deleterious potential of misleading believers to seek superficial experiences of God. Following the book's suggestion can cause believers to experientially regress to the Old Testament dispensation, making them Old Testament Christians living in the New Testament age.

The source of this anachronistic notion is the book's neglect of the progressive unfolding of the divine revelation. Building upon the Old Testament, the New Testament reveals that in Christ the Triune God passed through the processes of incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection to become consummated as the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45). Now the processed and consummated Triune God as the breathable Spirit can enter into the redeemed believers so that they can enjoy the pneumatic, indwelling presence of the Triune God (John 20:22; Matt. 28:19-20). This indwelling presence of the Triune God as the Spirit bountifully supplies believers with God Himself who is our unceasing joy, knowledge-surpassing love, genuine peace, and eternal comfort (Phil. 1:19; Gal. 5:22-23; 2 Thes. 2:16). Rather than heeding the book's exhortation to ask God to make David's experience of God's omnipresence in Psalm 139 ours, we must follow the New Testament pattern of Paul (1 Tim. 1:16) by turning to our spirit (2 Tim. 4:22) and enjoying the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—abiding in us to be our life, life supply, and everything (Eph. 4:6; 2 Cor. 13:5; Col. 1:27; Rom. 8:9-11).

According to
the divine revelation,
the foundation upon
which our relationship
with God rests and the means
through which we relate
to God is our life union
with the Triune God.

An Old Testament notion of God also engenders the book's second shortcoming: the characterization of God's relationship with man as objective, devoid of the divine life. Since the book fails to show that the Triune God in His economy underwent a process to indwell man, it portrays a relationship between God and man that is based upon emotional bonds rather than on receiving the divine life. For example, the book

says, "This is Christianity as God intended it—a passionate, willful, and fully emotional relationship" (70). Further, when the book emphatically claims that "the role that Jesus covets most [is] to be my friend" (26), it suggests that the principal role of God in His interaction with man is to meet man's need for strength, sympathy, and guidance. Unquestionably, Christ understands all our daily struggles and cares for our welfare. Yet according to the divine revelation, the foundation upon which our relationship with God rests and the means through which we relate to God is our life union with the Triune God. Prior to His resurrection, Christ called His disciples "friends" (John 15:14-15). After His resurrection, however, Christ addressed them as His "brothers" and also declared that His Father is their Father because they, as the brothers of Christ and sons of God, now shared the same divine life of God the Father (20:17). Chapter seventeen of John further unveils that we can know God and Christ through the eternal life (v. 3), of which we are born as the children of God (1:12-13). Although this book purports to bring the reader into an intimate relationship with God, it fails to touch the pivotal matter of the divine life. Thus, it leaves the readers without a proper basis for understanding their relationship with God and little means of knowing Him subjectively.

Third, the book is fundamentally flawed in its preoccupation with human needs, thus veiling God's heart's desire. The book presents a God who is fashioned to suit man's needs, neglecting the revelation of God's eternal purpose. For instance, the book says that God bestows grace on the believers so that they may receive "a free ticket to heaven" (118). It also claims that if the reader experiences God's faithfulness year after year, he will eventually be able to declare, "I've traveled three decades with God, and He's never let me down. Got me through a job transition. Got me through a tough stretch in my marriage and a bad scare with my daughter's health...He's never let me down" (142). The book defines the pith of Christianity that is wholly man-centered:

If you don't understand what I'm describing, you don't

fully understand Christianity. I don't understand it completely either but at the core of who God is resides a yearning to go through today and tomorrow and forever with *you*. Yes, *you*. He longs to love you, guide you and nurture you and correct you and forgive you and provide you with enough grace and strength to meet every challenge that comes your way. (193)

Christians must have a dawning realization that since eternity past, well before man's needs ever existed, God had a heart's desire (Eph. 1:5). This heart's desire motivated Him to form His will, forge His eternal purpose, formulate His divine economy, and create the universe (vv. 9-10; Rev. 4:11). Since we owe our existence to the good pleasure of His will, we exist solely for the fulfillment of His heart's desire. What then is His heart's desire? In the closing pages, *The God You're Looking For* asks the same question and attempts an answer: "Well then what *does* God want? Micah provides a very simple answer that still applies today: *He wants us to walk with Him*. That's right. Just walk with Him" (189). This denouement proves anticlimactic. The book confidently but disappointingly concludes that God's deep yearning is to have a companion with whom He can walk hand in hand. If this shallow view were indeed the longing in His heart, the sole purpose of God's complete salvation would be to judicially reconcile to God the sinners once alienated from Him. Yet the New Testament reveals that beyond our judicial redemption, there is "much more" in our Christian life—God's organic salvation, in which the processed Triune God joins Himself with man in an organic union (Rom. 5:10).

In sharp contrast to the book's superficial notion of God's desire, the Scriptures reveal that God's eternal economy according to His good pleasure is to work Himself in Christ as the Spirit into man's tripartite being to become their inward element so that He can gain His corporate expression and representation as the Body of Christ today and the New Jerusalem in eternity (Eph. 3:9-11; Gen. 1:26-27). He desires to be one with man (1 Cor. 6:17) in the union of life (Rom. 11:11-22), the mingling of natures (Lev. 2:4), and the incorporation of persons (John 14:17-20). It was for this purpose that at a tremendous price the Triune God in Christ passed through the processes of incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection to be consummated as the Spirit to form an organic union with man. A multitude of human beings walking hand in hand with God as a friend may appeal to human sentiment, but it can never fulfill God's deep longing. Rather, He can be satisfied only with a corporate group of His believers who know Him by having their inward parts saturated and permeated with Himself (Phil. 1:8). Only when we know Him in such a subjective way, thereby fulfilling His heart's desire, will we enter into His joy and taste the profound satisfaction in His being (Matt. 25:21).

By portraying the God of the Old Testament, *The God You're Looking For* induces New Testament believers to regress into experiences more closely associated with the Old Testament dispensation, thus hampering their genuine progress in Christ. By allowing human needs to loom so large as to obscure a view of the Triune God with His economy, the book grossly errs in presenting a God who is cast merely in the image of man's needs. In these failures, the book is a warped mirror that cannot faithfully reflect but can only distort the image of God revealed in the Bible.

by David Yoon

An Incomplete Eschatology

End Times: Understanding Today's World Events in Biblical Prophecy, by John F. Walvoord. Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998.

In his book *End Times* John Walvoord, author of several books on prophecy and chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary, attempts to "clarify and simplify" the study of eschatology (8). Desiring to afford God's people a balanced view of prophecy, the goal of *End Times* is to impose order on this complex subject and in so doing help the student of prophecy sift through what Charles Swindoll, in his foreword, calls the "mind-numbing minutia" (iv) that sometimes consumes those who have an interest in it. The author understands that eschatology is not inherently a basis for dispute but, in concert with the gospel of grace, a blessed hope that is the share of every real believer. This book is measured and deliberate in its approach, as befits the work of a long time professor of eschatology, and it is the most comprehensive treatment in one volume of the various aspects of prophecy that the reviewer has seen.

Superficial understandings of Brethren eschatological writings and their related prophetic passages have done more to bring the study of prophecy into its current state of disrepute than any other single factor. Over a century ago the Brethren prophetic writer Sir Robert Anderson described this condition in his book *The Coming Prince*: "General impressions, derived from a cursory perusal of the prophecies, are seized upon and systematized, and upon this foundation a pretentious superstructure is built up" (134). Commendably, this book does not add to the confusion. Walvoord continues the tradition of closely following the dispensational understanding of the Bible taught by the Brethren in the last century, which is maintained by Dallas Theological Seminary, notably through the writings of Scofield and Ryrie. This book demonstrates why the study

of prophecy must be undertaken with a solid foundation in biblical truth and stresses the importance of a literal hermeneutic, giving a summary of the history of literal versus what is magnanimously called “idealized” prophetic interpretation. In this light *End Times* makes sense of Bible prophecy, clarifying the corresponding views of the succession of Gentile empires seen in Daniel 2 and 7 and rightly dividing the 490 years of Jewish history revealed in Daniel 9. It is also able to place the various covenants God has entered into with man in their proper perspective—in association with the intervals revealed in Daniel 9, not in competition with them.

Brethren Insight

End Times does, in fact, simplify difficult eschatological issues for its reader, including the catalytic events leading up to the commencement of the tribulation and the significance and duration of Antichrist’s reign. It is also effective in less well-known areas. The amplification of Daniel 8:9-26, a typically obscure prophetic passage, is worthy of consideration as it demonstrates the book’s interpretive method. Most reliable expositors agree that the “little horn” of this passage is Antiochus Epiphanes, a descendant of one of the dominant successors of Alexander, who defiled the Jewish temple in 165 BC. The end of the chapter, excluding verse 27, is an interpretation of the prophecy by Gabriel (vv. 15-26).

John Nelson Darby, the famous Brethren writer, says of these verses, “These passages shew us, especially in studying their context, that it will be in the last days that the events of these prophecies will be fulfilled” (*Synopsis* 438-439). He goes on to say, in his own distinctively obscure style, “It appears to me that the prophecy...does not relate so absolutely to the last days as the interpretation does” (439). Inspection shows that Darby’s meaning is that Daniel’s prophecy is of Antiochus, while Gabriel’s interpretation points to Antichrist and the last days. Apart from Darby’s well-known inclination toward chaotic syntax, this is genuine insight, and *End Times* reproduces it and, in almost terse fashion, frees it from the prison of Darby’s convoluted prose (97, 104-105). Buried prophetic truths are made accessible throughout the book in this manner, and thus it can serve as a practical aid to prophetic study.

This is not to say that all the conclusions reached in *End Times* are equally well-supported. The first rider of Revelation 6:2, recognized by most expositors as the

Darby, deeply dissatisfied with the flawed covenant theology of his day, found that previously unknown prophetic truths became distinct and intelligible when he turned to a dispensational understanding of Scripture.

preaching of the gospel, is identified as the Antichrist (127), and the obvious correspondence of the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11:15 with the “last trumpet” of 1 Corinthians 15:52 is disallowed (28). Also, the invasion of Israel by Gog and Magog, shown clearly as occurring after the millennium in Revelation 20, is characterized as a kind of military action performed by Antichrist in defense of Israel prior to the tribulation (124). Notwithstanding, these lapses are not critical.

Prophetic Advance

In chapter twelve of Daniel the prophet was told that “knowledge will increase” (v. 4), indicating, at one level, that the future unfolding of historic events would illumine, define, and ultimately vindicate the revelation given to him. This principle must characterize all inspired prophecy, and it follows logically that it would hold true for the proper interpretation of that same prophecy—witness the reformation of the nation of Israel in 1948, a Brethren prophetic cornerstone from the early nineteenth century. As demonstrated above, this book reproduces, albeit accessibly, the dispensational eschatology of the Brethren teachers and, as a result, borrows the force lent to their writings by the testimony of history. Much help can be rendered the student of prophecy from this approach. Still, it can only be said that the interpretation has been reproduced; no improvement or advancement is forthcoming. The author himself seems a prisoner, held hostage by dependence on revelations seen over a century and a half ago.

Further interpolation of the angel’s declaration suggests that prophetic knowledge must advance in every generation, not only in world events but, more subjectively, within man. Darby, deeply dissatisfied with the flawed covenant theology of his day, found that previously unknown prophetic truths—the second coming, the kingdom, the millennium, rapture, etc.—became distinct and intelligible when he turned to a dispensational understanding of Scripture (*Collected Works* 1-32, 122-165). In the same way present-day prophetic scholars, confounded by revelatory deficiencies in Brethren theology, and unwilling to be misled by the pretentious superstructures of other prophetic schemes, can gain profound insight through application of the vision of God’s organic salvation to the study of prophetic Scripture.

Witness Lee, in his *Life-study of Genesis*, states, “The Bible

is a revelation of Christ as life” (3). Accordingly, he interprets the entire Scripture, including prophecy, with this principle as the energetic center. The believer, as the principal object of all of God’s operations, experiences this truth through the judicial and organic aspects of God’s complete salvation. The former is a procedure whereby sinners are forgiven, justified, reconciled to God, and sanctified positionally, satisfying God’s righteous requirement. The latter is an organic process, based on judicial salvation, composed of regeneration and transformation, and culminating in glorification, the redemption of the believer’s body, the full conformation to the image of the firstborn Son of God. God’s dealings with His elect in the last days are accomplished with a view to complete this process. *End Times* is oblivious to this truth, hence, it is incapable of leading its reader into the deeper distinctions of prophetic Scripture. The lack of insight into the revelation of life in the Scripture, and its crucial application in prophecy, severely limits this book in its ability to assist the reader in deeper, more intrinsic, prophetic subjects. This is its great shortage. Three representative instances follow as illustrations.

The Judgment Seat of Christ

The book’s failure to apprehend the organic aspect of the believer’s salvation leads inexorably to an inadequate understanding of the dispensational implications of the judgment of believers before the millennium. In this line a common thread can be seen throughout. In one place it speaks of the reward of the believers in the last days being “in keeping with what they have achieved on earth” (170). In another, it says that the judgment seat of Christ will “determine...the quality of their [the believers] service for God while on earth” (52). It continues by saying that believers will be judged according to “what we have done for God and how we have used the opportunities for service He has given us” (169). Aside from a curious lack of concern that this concept obviates the operative grace of Christ, it does not indicate that the believer himself can be negatively affected by this judgment. Paul, however, speaking of the judgment of Christians in 1 Corinthians 3:15, says, “If anyone’s work is consumed, he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.” *End Times* quotes this verse (53), but asserts that only the believer’s works (deeds) can be “discarded” (52, 169). This view, however, is deficient in that Scripture indicates that the person of the believer can be negatively affected at that time if he has not gained sufficient maturity.

End Times fails to explain that subjective righteousness, the product of God’s organic salvation, will be the subject of divine scrutiny on that day. The outward righteousness with which the author is familiar is typified by the garment given to the prodigal son in Luke 15. This robe is

Christ as our objective righteousness, the product of the judicial aspect of salvation, enabling us to stand before a righteous God. Nevertheless, this garment alone does not qualify us to receive the reward. For this we need the wedding garment shown in Matthew 22:11 and 12 which differs from that given to the prodigal. This second garment is the work of the Holy Spirit within us and not, as implied in this book, “the quality of [our] service for God while on earth” (52).

These two garments are also seen in Psalm 45 where the queen in gold of Ophir, typifying the church, also has two garments (vv. 13-14). The first is “interwoven with gold” corresponding to the robe given the prodigal in Luke 15 and is our objective righteousness before God. The second is “embroidered work,” signifying the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Although we have the first garment through judicial salvation, our second garment is now being prepared, abetted by our willing cooperation, under the stitching work of the Holy Spirit. Matthew 22:14, referring to the judgment seat, says that some will be chosen and others not; approval on that day will be according to our having sufficiently cooperated with the Lord in His transforming work in this age of grace. This does not mean that a believer can lose his salvation; eternal security is determined by judicial salvation, independent of subjective righteousness. The dispensation of grace in which we live is the opportunity for the believer to enjoy the multiplied grace of Christ, but if he is slothful, God has purposed another dispensation where any shortage will be corrected. The loss a believer may experience at the judgment seat of Christ is not of salvation but a dispensational judgment by God: a punishment determined by the lack of maturity in the divine life. This thought is a profound improvement over existing prophetic scholarship and is entirely absent from *End Times*’ incomplete eschatology.

The Rapture

Understanding God’s organic salvation is also essential in grasping the significance of the rapture in the Bible. *End Times*, again following Brethren-inspired prophetic interpretation, correctly places the rapture before the tribulation, but limited by the objective nature of that same interpretation, fails to convey its intrinsic significance. This shortage is evident when the catching away of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is compared with the transformation of organic salvation. The instantaneous changing of the believers’ body found in that verse is confused with the metabolic process revealed in 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Romans 8:29. It is asserted, “In other words, our sin nature and all tendency to sin will be removed forever, and we will be as perfect in our spiritual state as our position in Christ is perfect now” (27). This removal, according to *End Times*, will be facilitated by “an instantaneous

change" (27). Transformation is a change from one form to another, certainly, but it is a gradual change from a natural disposition to a spiritual one. It is a long process, beginning with regeneration (1 Pet. 1:2-3; Titus 3:5), passing through the whole Christian life (1 Thes. 4:3; Heb. 12:14; Eph. 5:26), and reaching completion at the time of rapture, the maturity of life (1 Thes. 5:23). Witness Lee, in his *Life-study of Revelation*, taking the allegory of the church being God's living crop found in 1 Corinthians 3:9 as a base, shows that the gathering of the firstfruits and the general harvest of Revelation 14:1-5 and 14-16 are the rapture of believers who reach maturity at different times (551-553). Without this vital understanding, the truth of rapture becomes a source of endless contention, causing division in the Body of Christ rather than engendering hope. In spite of its good intentions, *End Times* only adds to this confusion with its incomplete interpretation.

The New Jerusalem

This book also fails to portray the intrinsic significance of the New Jerusalem. Asserting that it is a physical city, the book argues that, although "some expositors have said that the New Jerusalem is not a physical city but is an allegorical presentation of the church or of saints in general...it is repeatedly called a city...and given specific physical dimensions" (208). In the first verse of the book of Revelation the Lord Jesus tells the apostle that He intends to make known the things that must quickly take place by signs. Signs are symbols with spiritual significance. The Lord Jesus does not possess a tail or four feet, but He is, without doubt, the real and genuine Lamb of God. As such, a lamb is a sign conveying great spiritual significance. This interpretive principle must be adhered to throughout the book of Revelation, the New Jerusalem being the greatest and ultimate sign not only in John's writings but in the entire Bible. Just as the Lord Jesus is not a physical lamb, the New Jerusalem is not a physical city: It is the end product of God working Himself into His chosen people in all of His dispensations, resulting in an organic constitution of Himself mingled with His regenerated, transformed, and glorified elect.

All of the specifications of the New Jerusalem illustrate this incorporation, one of which is its transparent wall (21:17-18). As a sign, it is not difficult to see that a wall signifies eternal separation from what is common, but more intrinsically its transparency represents the quality of a believer who has been transformed by the renewing

A critical deficiency
in apprehending the organic aspect
of God's complete salvation
and its application to prophecy
renders this book incapable
of leading its reader beyond
objective, largely
historic insights.

of the mind portrayed in Romans 12:2. This metabolic change, according to 2 Corinthians 3:18, not only separates the believer from what is common but transforms him into the glorious image of Christ, retaining no opacity or defect in character and possessing a fully transparent humanity. All of the dimensions and materials of the New Jerusalem, such as the golden base of the city (Rev. 21:18), the gates of pearl, and the foundation should properly be interpreted in this vitally experiential way. The aggregate of believers who have experienced such a transformation constitute the New Jerusalem as a mutual abode of God and man for eternity. *End Times* does its readers a disservice in not considering the implications of such a marvelous revelation.

Conclusion

John Walvoord's book *End Times*, utilizing a vast knowledge of prophetic Scripture and exhibiting a genuine concern for God's people, is an attempt to simplify and clarify prophecy. It is only partially successful. A critical deficiency in apprehending the organic aspect of God's complete salvation and its application to prophecy renders this book incapable of leading its reader beyond objective, largely historic insights. This shortage ultimately leads to erroneous conclusions concerning crucial, more subjective, prophetic themes. The serious prophetic scholar, desiring a complete view of God's dealings with man in the end times, must go elsewhere for that enlightenment.

by Chuck Hogan

Works Cited

- Anderson, Robert. *The Coming Prince*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1957.
- Darby, John Nelson. *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*. Vol. 2. H. L. Heijkoop, 1970.
- . *The Collected Works of J. N. Darby*. Vol. 2. H. L. Heijkoop. 1971.
- Lee, Witness. *Life-study of Genesis*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1987.
- . *Life-study of Revelation*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1984.