

MISAIMINGS

“Who concerning the Truth Have Misaimed” — 2 Timothy 2:18

Misaiming concerning the Trinity

Misaiming: “Trinitarianism is often defended as a biblical idea, but it is not the Bible’s interest. Expressions that include all three persons of the trinity (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:13 [sic]) do not make the claim that these three are all equal elements of God. Such passages never aspire to the clarity of a passage like 1 Corinthians 8:5-6: ‘for us there is one God...and one Lord, Jesus Christ.’ This echoes Deuteronomy 6:4: ‘the Lord is our God; the Lord alone.’

“The Bible as a whole seems most clearly to assert that God is one” (Jon L. Berquist, “Counting beyond Three,” *The Living Pulpit*, April—June 1999, p. 24).

Truth: In an effort to explore alternative “metaphors” of God, this passage challenges a foundational notion of orthodox Christianity by asserting that a view of God as one is sufficient for faith and experience. Thus, it denigrates the biblical revelation of God in His trinity, and it does so by denying the eternally co-equal status of the Father, Son, and Spirit in the Godhead. It argues that the eternal co-existence of the Father, Son, and Spirit, here characterized as Trinitarianism, “is not the Bible’s interest,” and that a view of God as one is sufficient. As a proof text, the passage offers an elided portion of 1 Corinthians 8:5-6. But consider the full text of 1 Corinthians 8:6: “Yet to us there is one God, the Father, out from whom are all things, and we are unto Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we are through Him.” This verse, taken in its entirety, stresses a *distinction* between the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, but does not deny the deity of either. Nevertheless, the above passage elliptically distorts the sense of this verse, implying that the apostle is identifying Jesus Christ as the one God and one Lord, when he is actually distinguishing here between the Father and the Son. Interestingly, the other text proof employed above (Deut. 6:4), when coupled with the entire previous verse, actually corroborates their eternal co-existence. While on the one hand, 1 Corinthians 8:6 distinguishes between the Father God and the Lord Jesus Christ, Deuteronomy 6:4, on the other hand, tells us that the Lord (Jesus Christ) is God, stressing their identity.

This quotation errs in overemphasizing the oneness among the Godhead to the neglect of the co-equal status of the Father, Son, and Spirit. This error has historically led to the assumption that a kind of hierarchy exists within the Godhead. One example of such a notion was found in the ancient Arian heresy. Yes, it is categorically true that God is one. We Christians are certainly monotheists, not tritheists. We must uncompromisingly maintain the truth that there is one God. However, we must also embrace uncompromisingly the Bible’s revelation that the Father, Son, and Spirit eternally co-exist and coinhere. Our one God is Father, Son, and Spirit; that is, He is triune.

This twofold truth is clearly illustrated in John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” This verse presents the mystery of the Trinity. The Word, Christ the Son, is eternally with God, yet He is simultaneously God Himself. He is distinct but not separate from God. Further, the Bible stresses that all three of the Godhead are God. According to Ephesians 4:6, the *Father* is God. Hebrews 1:8 proclaims that the *Son* is God, and Acts 5:3-4 similarly identifies the *Holy Spirit* with God. The Bible never suggests that either the Father, the Son, or the Spirit is less than God. They are fully God.

Distinction (not separation) within the Godhead is consistently maintained and exemplified throughout the Bible. For instance, regarding Christ’s resurrection, the Bible states that the Father raised Christ from the dead (Gal. 1:1), that Jesus raised *Himself* from the dead (John 2:19-22), and that the Spirit also raised Him from the dead (Rom. 8:9-11). Additionally, the Bible says that the Father raises the dead (Rom. 4:17), that Jesus raises the dead (John 6:44), and that the Spirit also gives resurrection life to the believer’s mortal body (Rom. 8:11). Both the Father and the Son answer prayer (John 15:16; 14:14), and both impart the Holy Spirit (v. 16; 15:26; 16:7). The Father draws all men to the Son (6:44), yet the Son also draws all men to Himself (12:32). The Father, Son, and Spirit simultaneously indwell the believer (Eph. 4:6; 2 Cor. 13:5; John 14:17). Both the Son and the Spirit are called the “Comforter” (Greek—*parakletos*, v. 26; 1 John 2:1). Both the Son and the Spirit intercede for the

believers (Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:26), and both are sanctifiers (Eph. 5:26; 1 Pet. 1:2).

Christian teachers must be careful, while faithfully maintaining the oneness of God, that they likewise maintain the co-equal distinction within the Godhead—not because we fully understand or can adequately explain this truth, but simply because the Bible reveals it. Rather than discarding the Trinity as a divisive metaphor and denigrating the divine status of the Son and Spirit, the readers of the above passage would be better served by being encouraged to explore the rich relational realities that are inherent in the apostles' teaching concerning our Triune God.

Misaiming concerning the Overcomers

Misaiming: “Revelation 2:7 *him who overcomes*. According to John’s own definition, to be an overcomer is to be a Christian (*see note on* 1 John 5:5; cf. vv. 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).

“First John 5:4 *overcomes*. John clearly defines who these overcomers are: They are all who believe that Jesus is God’s Son, and all that means. The overcomers are believers—all of them.” (footnotes from The MacArthur Study Bible, 1997, pp. 1994, 1973).

Truth: This footnote misaims in asserting that all Christians, merely by virtue of believing in Jesus as the Son of God, are overcomers. If this were true, there would be no need for the Lord to issue a call for overcomers at the end of each of the seven epistles to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3. If all believers are overcomers, why is there a need to call for a distinct group of overcomers from among the church, which is the Body of Christ, and as such can be comprised only of genuine, regenerated believers in Christ (Eph. 1:22-23)? And further, why is a particular reward offered for overcoming?

Eternal life is a gift (Rom. 6:23), the common portion of all genuine believers, received through faith and not by works (Eph. 2:8-9). However, the overcomers are not offered a *gift* in Revelation but rather a *reward* for faithful service and living. This is the particular reward that is presented in 1 Corinthians 3:14-15 for a living and service that passes through the testing fire of the judgment seat of Christ. Verse 15 clearly says that a believer can be saved yet suffer the loss of this reward. While all believers receive eternal life, not all believers are guaranteed the rewards spoken of in Revelation 2 and 3. God’s gift of eternal salvation received by faith is unconditional, but the overcomer’s reward in the millennial kingdom is by definition conditional—which is why it is termed a *reward* and not a *gift*.

Certainly the initial and most fundamental step of overcoming is belief in the Son of God. However, in writing his first Epistle, John was specifically addressing the contemporary heresy of Gnosticism and the false teaching of Cerinthus. Therefore, for the believers of his day to confess that Jesus is the Son of God was their overcoming of a degrading heresy. In order to be an overcomer one must surely be a believer, especially in the aspects of Christ’s person as revealed in Revelation 2 and 3, which alone can empower us to overcome every element of degradation that the Spirit reveals is present within the church. Nevertheless, one’s mere status as a believer does not guarantee the status of overcomer. To believe in Christ is the first step of overcoming. Following that initial step is the Lord’s call to all believers for faithful living and service as a qualification for the overcomer’s kingdom reward.

Happily, we can say that all believers will eventually be manifested in maturity and will enjoy God as their eternal portion (Rev. 21:7). However, the question of overcoming pertains not to eternity, but to the particular reward during the millennial kingdom offered in Revelation 2 and 3. Faith in Christ qualifies one for the eternal enjoyment of God, but only faithful living and service qualify one to receive the kingdom reward as an overcomer—to rule and reign with Christ for a thousand years and thus enjoy the millennial marriage feast of the Lamb.

Misaiming concerning the New Jerusalem

Misaiming: “Henry Morris makes some intriguing observations about the city and its population. He suggests that the city will include both horizontal and vertical avenues and that the city blocks could be cubical blocks rather than square blocks as in our present-day cities. He also estimates that the total population of the world, past, present, and future, will be about one hundred billion. If 20 percent ultimately become residents of the New Jerusalem, then the city will have to accommodate twenty billion people. If residences occupy 25 percent of the space in the city (leaving 75 percent for avenues, parks, public buildings, and other areas), then each residence, or cubical block, would be about one-third of a mile on each face of the cube.... Obviously, there will be more than ample room for all who will live in the New Jerusalem” (Charles C. Ryrie, *Revelation*, 1996, pp. 140-141).

Truth: The central error underlying this passage is its misinterpretation of the New Jerusalem as a physical city. The apostle John laid out the governing principle for our understanding of the book of Revelation in his opening sentence: “He made it known by *signs*”

(1:1, emphasis added). This book of prophecy was revealed in the way of signs, each of which points to a spiritual reality. As two examples, the lampstands in chapters one through three signify the local churches, and the beast in 13:1-10 signifies the Antichrist.

In keeping with this principle, the New Jerusalem should likewise be interpreted not as a physical city but as a sign, signifying a spiritual reality. Accordingly, it is illogical as well as unscriptural to view this heavenly city as a physical structure. Revelation 21:9-10 describes this city as the bride of the Lamb. Just as Bible teachers concur that this “Lamb” is not a literal lamb, but is instead a typification of Christ, we should likewise regard His bride as a spiritual reality rather than as a physical city. Christ, a real person, is not betrothed to a material edifice.

Rather, both the Old and New Testaments are pervaded with the truth that the Lord’s bride is His people. For example, Isaiah 54:5 proclaims, “Your Maker is your Husband,” and Ephesians 5:27 foretells that Christ will present the church to Himself as His bride. Consonant with the view of the entire Bible, then, this city (the bride of the Lamb) must be the aggregate of God’s redeemed people who have been built together with the Triune God to be His enlarged and expanded expression.

The author of the above passage also mistakenly imagines this heavenly city to be similar to an earthly community of physical dwelling places, which may be due to the traditional misinterpretation of *abodes* in John 14. When Jesus said, “In My Father’s house are many abodes” (v. 2), He was not referring to physical houses. In fact, He explained this reference in the next verse when He reassured His disciples, “Where I am you also may be” (v. 3). Then when Thomas asked where He was going (v. 5), the Lord took the opportunity to reveal the truth that our common destination is the Father Himself (v. 6). He declared to them, “I am in the Father and the Father is in Me” (v. 10) and also said plainly, “I am going to the Father” (v. 12). Thankfully, our eternal destiny is not a material metropolis but a glorious mutual abode with and in the Triune God.

Further, the Bible makes no mention of any permanent physical inhabitants of the New Jerusalem, let alone “parks, public buildings, and other areas.” Revelation 21:24 does tell us that the unregenerated nations inhabiting the new earth will walk by the light of the New Jerusalem and that their kings will “bring their glory into it.” Although they will benefit from the city of God, they clearly do not dwell there. The absurdity of attempting to calculate the population of the city

and the number and size of its dwelling places graphically illustrates the error of interpreting the book of Revelation according to human tradition rather than according to the divine view of the entire Bible.

Misaiming concerning the Purpose of “Higher Gifts”

Misaiming: “If a man...is also zealous for perfection according to the words of the holy apostle Paul who said, Be zealous for higher gifts, he will live in the purity of the angels. Then the Holy Spirit will dwell in him and sanctify him; he will go and become a monk and serve the Lord in all purity and uprightness” (*Again*, Vol. 20, No. 2, p. 6).

Truth: This argument for the preeminence of monastic purity as the believers’ goal is only shakily propped up by a few scarcely recognizable paraphrases of I Corinthians 14. What Paul is plainly exhorting the believers to do here is to “pursue love, and desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy” (v. 1). He further directs them, “Since you are zealous of spirits, seek that you may excel for the building up of the church” (v. 12). The above exhortation, however, presses poetic license beyond the limit by alluding to these passages out of context in an attempt to justify a monastic system of perfection, a concept not even remotely suggested by Paul.

The “higher gifts” in I Corinthians 14 are not given to the believers for their pursuit of “the purity of the angels” or of “perfection.” Rather, the more excellent gifts emphasized in this chapter are love and prophesying (v. 1), both of which build up of the Body of Christ (v. 4). Perfect love (which is God Himself) unfailingly draws the believer from individual spiritual seeking and self-centeredness to Body-consciousness. Then spontaneously, for the sake of the Body, the believer desires to prophesy (to speak for Christ and to speak forth Christ) in order to build up the church. The succeeding verses drive this point home: “he who prophesies speaks building up” (v. 3), and “he who prophesies builds up the church” (v. 4). Such seeking echoes the consistent, pervasive theme of the apostles’ teaching: the carrying out of God’s New Testament economy for the building up of the church as the organic Body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23; 3:10-11). How then could the “higher gifts” of love and of speaking for and forth Christ not also serve this same end?

We should indeed heed Paul’s exhortation to be zealous for these gifts that we might excel—not in individual, isolated monastic spirituality, but in the building up of the church.

by the Editors