

The Book of Revelation: A Tale of Human Morality or the Unveiling of the Divine Economy?

Revelation and the End of All Things, by Craig R. Koester. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001.

In *Revelation and the End of All Things*, Craig R. Koester, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, offers a commentary on Revelation that aims to respect Revelation's ancient context and to make the book relevant to modern readers. Central to Koester's commentary is a thesis that Revelation was written to unsettle readers from complacency with warnings of judgment and to encourage them to persevere in faith with promises of salvation. In the main, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (hereafter, *The End*), a fruit of decades of teaching courses on Revelation, is a critique of sensationalistic interpretations of Revelation. Yet in an attempt to confute the interpretive method of sensationalistic literature that explains most of the visions in Revelation in terms of future events, *The End* mistakenly denies the prophetic nature of the book, advancing inaccurate and inconsistent claims regarding crucial matters in Revelation such as the man-child, the Lord's coming, the believers' rapture, and the firstfruits. Moreover, in an effort to debunk the hermeneutical principle of sensationalistic interpretations that tend to consider various portions of the whole Bible like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, *The End* endeavors to interpret Revelation in isolation from the rest of the Bible. Because of this artificial approach, the central significance of Revelation is presented as a mere morality tale for first as well as twenty-first century readers, not an unveiling and consummation of the divine economy in the holy Scriptures. In other words, the book becomes only a succession of warnings and blessings to persuade the readers to shun evil and worship God, not a revelation of the Triune God in Christ as the Spirit wrought into the tripartite man for the producing of His corporate expression.

The End and the Interpretive Principle of Revelation

The preface of *The End* states the goal of the book, "to present the message of Revelation in a manner that is accessible, engaging, and meaningful to modern readers, while taking account of the best in recent scholarship" (xi). *The End* considers questions that have baffled readers of Revelation and addresses the issues accentuated by

popular interpretations of Revelation, such as God, the future, death and life, judgment, and hope. The first chapter is devoted to considering the problematic approaches of popular interpretations of Revelation. The rest of the book leads readers through the entire book of Revelation in six sections: "Christ and the Churches" (chs. 1—3); "The Scroll Unsealed" (chs. 4—7); "Trumpets of Terror and Hope" (chs. 8—11); "The Beast and the Lamb" (chs. 12—15); "The Harlot and the Bride" (chs. 15—19); "The End" (chs. 19—22).

The first chapter provides a sketch of how Christians have interpreted Revelation over the past two millennia. It considers a vast range of viewpoints held by various groups such as church fathers, mystics, popes, kings, Reformed theologians, sectarian movements, dispensationalists, musicians, and recent historicist scholars. In this discussion, the book seeks to consider "the assumptions that shaped their reading, and the effects of their interpretations on their communities" (1). According to *The End*, one of the most important of these questions is whether the visions in Revelation refer to future events or to timeless realities. For instance, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Montanus, Victorinus, and many later interpreters understood Revelation to be primarily a message about the future of the world, with its visions revealing events that would transpire in days to come. In contrast, Jerome, Dionysius, Origen, Tyconius, Augustine, and other subsequent scholars insisted that Revelation contains a timeless message with its visions showing how God relates to people of every generation. *The End* seems to lean toward the latter view, and it proceeds to discuss in detail dispensationalists such as John Nelson Darby, Cyrus Scofield, and Hal Lindsey, who hold that world history is divided into a series of dispensations that will culminate with the thousand-year kingdom of Christ on earth. *The End* critiques the dispensationalist approach, including the argument for the rapture of the church, and finds the sharp distinction between Israel and the church unwarranted.

The End then introduces current scholarship related to Revelation, particularly historicist scholarship which holds that Revelation is a book written to communicate with first-century Christians. In contrast, *The End* emphasizes that there are valuable analogies between first-century life and modern life, and considers how Revelation's imagery discloses things that apply to multiple periods of time, not only one. Overall, *The End* underscores that we should take Revelation as a whole by following its message from the introduction in Revelation 1 to the end of Revelation

22, “instead of jumping from Daniel 9 to 1 Thessalonians 4 and then to Revelation 6” (38). According to *The End*, we must first explore how Revelation relates to the situation of the Christians of the author’s own time, and then we can consider how the book addresses the situation of modern readers.

The End contains three salient points worthy of appreciation. First, drawing on the history of interpretation and recent scholarship, the book succinctly informs readers of the diverse approaches to Revelation over the centuries by explaining their origins and impact. For instance, citing the examples of William Miller and the Seventh-Day Adventists, Charles Taze Russell and the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, *The End* exposes how extreme interpretations of Revelation by charismatic figures have produced fanatical and sectarian groups that suffered apocalyptic fever, great disappointments, and tragic consequences. Second, the book properly affirms that “judgment is an integral part of the Christian message” (139). Unlike some modern readers who dismiss John’s vision of eternal torment as unchristian because of its “pitiless vindictiveness,” *The End* shows that John’s vision of judgment is not unique in the New Testament by citing passages in the New Testament that warn about God condemning people to the furnace of fire (Matt. 13:36-43, 47-50; Luke 16:19-31) (139).

Third, the book offers non-materialistic insights into the New Jerusalem. *The End* claims that just as the woman in Revelation 12 is a sign of the people of God from many periods, the holy city as the bride is a sign of the “community of the redeemed in glory, a city that encompasses the whole people of God” (195). According to *The End*, this is indicated by the twelve gates that bear the names of the twelve tribes of Israel as well as the twelve foundations that are named for the twelve apostles of the Lamb (21:12-14). In addition, the book contends that the cubic shape of the New Jerusalem suggests that “the holy city is a holy sanctuary” (196), just as the inner chambers of the tabernacle and the temple were cubic in shape (1 Kings 6:20). Perhaps most significantly, comparing Revelation 3:12 and Ephesians 2:19-22 with the description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and 22, *The End* argues that in its essence the city is “a community of people,” whose “pillars” are the “human beings” belonging to God and the Lamb (195). Corroboration for this claim is demonstrated by showing that references to the church as a “temple” are not unique to Revelation “since it was an important metaphor among Christians of John’s [not the apostle John] time (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:5)” (106). Thus, unlike other expositors, who view the New Jerusalem as a material building, Koester admirably interprets the New Jerusalem as a metaphor for a holy sanctuary and a holy community composed of the aggregate of God’s people.

The End and the Prophetic Nature of Revelation

Despite these commendable points, *The End*’s flawed interpretive principles produce numerous errors. Out of its aversion to sensationalistic interpretations, the book mostly rejects a futuristic view of the visions in Revelation and borders on an outright denial of the prophetic characteristic of Revelation. In Revelation 1:3, John identifies the book as a “prophecy.” *The End* is correct in claiming that the meaning of *prophecy* need not be limited to inspired prediction of future events and that it could be understood as a distinctive form of divine communication in which the Spirit conveys the words of God through inspired messengers. Nonetheless, such a claim does not change the fact that most of the visions in the book refer to things to come. Revelation 1:19 clearly sets forth the outline of the book, dividing it into three chronological sections: “Write therefore the things which you have seen [past] and the things which are [present] and the things which are about to take place after these things [future].” In verse 11 John was told to write in a scroll what he was about to see, and in verse 19 he was commanded again to write the things which he had seen. In between verses 11 and 19 he saw the vision of Christ as the Son of Man walking in the midst of the shining churches signified by the seven golden lampstands. Hence, the first section, “the things which you have seen,” is the first chapter. The second section, “the things which are,” comprises the second and third chapters, which describe the condition of the seven churches that existed at the time John was writing the book. The third section, “the things which are about to take place,” stretches from chapter four to chapter twenty-two, as indicated by 4:1: “I will show you the things that must take place after these things.” Since *after these things* refers to the events in John’s time, *the things that must take place after these things* should refer generally to the things in the future, things that will take place beyond John’s lifetime. Hence, most of the visions in Revelation refer to things to come—things that have not yet transpired and will transpire only at the consummation of the age.

The End and Misinterpretations of Revelation

The End’s virtual denial of the prophetic nature of Revelation leads to its misinterpretation of several key components of Revelation, including the man-child and the rapture.

The Man-child

According to the book, the bright woman clothed with the sun in Revelation 12 is the people of God, the child she brings forth is Christ incarnated, and the red dragon attempting to devour the child represents “the forces that oppose Christ and threaten his church” (118). Further, the book contends that the child’s deliverance from the

dragon's threat and enthronement in heaven to rule over the nations points to "Christ's deliverance from death and to his exaltation to heavenly reign through his resurrection" (119). The book proceeds to claim that Christ's resurrection and enthronement serve as the catalyst for an epic battle in heaven in which Michael's assault defeats the dragon and banishes him from heaven so that Satan "no longer has access to heaven" (122). This interpretation of the man-child, however, is hardly tenable, for it contradicts the Bible and particularly the text of Revelation. The man-child cannot refer to the Lord Jesus for two reasons. First, the enthronement of the man-child causes Satan to be evicted from heaven with a triumphant shout in heaven declaring: "Now has come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ"; the subsequent verse then says, "And they overcame him" (12:10-11, emphasis added). This indicates that the man-child that causes Satan to be cast out of heaven and brings in the kingdom of God is not an individual but a corporate entity. Second, the resurrection and ascension of Christ did not precipitate Satan's expulsion from heaven, resulting in his loss of access to heaven. Ephesians 2:6 speaks of the believers' being raised up together with the resurrected Christ and their being seated together with the ascended Christ in the heavenlies. Four verses earlier, however, Paul warns the Ephesian believers that Satan is still "the ruler of the authority of the air, of the spirit which is now operating in the sons of disobedience" (v. 2). Further, engaged in the spiritual warfare against Satan and his evil forces in heaven, Paul in 6:12 charges the believers in Ephesus to wrestle "against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies." Since Satan is still actively operating as the ruler of the evil forces in the heavenlies, the man-child who will cause Satan to be ejected from heaven is a collective agent distinct from the ascended Christ, and Satan's eviction is an event yet to happen.

Closer reading of Revelation indicates that this agent, the man-child, refers to the overcomers in the churches, the stronger ones among God's people throughout all generations who execute the sentence of judgment that the Lord pronounced on the cross (John 12:31; 16:11). *The End* insists on interpreting Revelation in isolation from other books of the Bible. Yet when expounding on the man-child, the book violates its own hermeneutical principle by relying principally on Psalm 2 rather than on verses in Revelation. *The End* argues that the description of the man-child who is to "shepherd" the nations with his iron rod" is taken from Psalm 2, which speaks of Christ as the One who will receive the nations as His heritage and will "break" them (the Hebrew version)—"rule" or "shepherd" them (the Greek version)—with an iron rod (119). Yet *The End* ignores the verses within Revelation itself that show that the man-child refers to overcomers among God's people, a collective unit fighting against His enemy to terminate the age of the church and to introduce the age of the

kingdom. The phrase ascribed to the man-child in 12:5, "to shepherd all the nations," is also used in 2:27 to characterize the reward of the overcomers in the church in Thyatira. The immediate context of 2:27 makes it abundantly clear that the overcomers together with the Lord will receive authority over the nations and will rule them with an iron rod. The Lord's promise to the overcomers in the church in Laodicea in 3:21 confirms that the overcomers will be given to sit with Him on His throne, that is, to rule over the whole earth as co-kings with Him. Further, in 2:10 the Lord calls the overcomers in the church Smyrna to be "faithful unto death." This matches a characteristic of the constituents of the man-child who "loved not their soul-life even unto death" (12:11). Mistakenly identifying the man-child with Jesus, seemingly out of a desire to negate any prophetic connotations within the vision, *The End* fails to see the decisive role of the man-child, the overcomers, in defeating Satan to bring an end to the age of the church and bring in the age of the kingdom (vv. 9-11). Therefore, *The End* does a disservice not only to the believers who must overcome to wage a spiritual war against Satan but also to God's purpose to usher in His kingdom through the overcomers as His dispensational instrument.

The Rapture

The End also advances inconsistent claims regarding the firstfruits and presents erroneous views of the believers' rapture. Commenting on the 144,000 believers standing on Mount Zion as the firstfruits in Revelation 14:1-5, the book emphatically contends that "the redeemed, who are pictured as a group of 144,000, are the whole people of God, not merely one part of it" (136). But when expounding on the gathering of the harvest of the earth in 14:14-16, the book seems to contradict the former claim, arguing that John has described the faithful in heaven as the "first fruits" of "a much larger harvest that will be completed upon Christ's return" (140). After the 144,000 believers who are the firstfruits have been purchased from the earth to Mount Zion in 14:1-5, there are still other people of God who must be harvested later in 14:14-16; thus, the 144,000 believers does not refer to the entire people of God but merely to a portion of them. Further, referring to verses in Revelation that show the saints undergoing affliction during the tribulation (13:7, 10; 14:12; 17:6), the book rightly acknowledges a problem with a widespread notion that all the true believers will be raptured to heaven before the great tribulation. In so doing, however, the book insists that Revelation does not refer to the rapture at all (25). Yet a careful reading of Revelation shows that there are multiple raptures based on the varying degrees of the believers' maturity in the divine life (14:1-5, 14-16).

In contrast to the contradictory and inaccurate claims of *The End*, the Scriptures—including the text of Revelation—

consistently and clearly unveil at least two distinct raptures for the believers: the secret rapture for the mature, overcoming believers and the public rapture for the rest of the believers. These two raptures correspond to Christ's coming in two aspects: His secret coming for the overcoming saints as the morning star (2:28) and His public coming with the saints as the Sun of righteousness (Mal. 4:2). On the one hand, Christ will come secretly as a thief (Rev. 3:3; 16:15). On the other hand, He will come openly with power and glory to be seen by all the tribes of Israel (1:7; 14:14). Whereas the day and hour of the Lord's secret coming are unknown, the day of the Lord's public coming is clearly unveiled—at the last trumpet (the seventh trumpet) at the end of the great tribulation (1 Thes. 4:16; 1 Cor. 15:52; 2 Thes. 2:1-3). With respect to these two raptures, there are two different places to which believers will be raptured. The overcoming believers, who are raptured secretly before the tribulation, are brought to God's throne in heaven (Rev. 12:5; 14:1). But the majority of the believers, who are raptured publicly after the tribulation, are caught up together "in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thes. 4:17).

There is a sharp contrast between the condition of the believers participating in the secret rapture and the condition of those participating in the public rapture. According to Luke 21:36 and Revelation 3:10, to be secretly raptured before the great tribulation, a believer must be "watchful at every time" and keep the word of Christ's endurance. But according to 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, there is no such prescribed condition for the public rapture. In particular, 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 emphatically says that "we will all be changed," indicating that the entirety of the believers who were not raptured in the secret rapture will be eventually transfigured in the open rapture. These two distinct raptures, which depend on the condition of the believers, are congruent with the "firstfruits" (Rev. 14:4) and the "harvest of the earth" (v. 15). At His first coming, Christ sowed Himself as the seed of life into the soil of the believers' hearts (Matt. 13:1-23), making them "God's cultivated land" to grow His divine life within them (1 Cor. 3:9). The first-ripe ones—those who mature in the divine life by being watchful unto His coming and keeping the word of His endurance—will be reaped as the firstfruits to God for His satisfaction before the great tribulation. The majority of the believers, however, will ripen through the intensified suffering of the great tribulation and will be reaped as the harvest of the earth at the end of the tribulation. All in all, the secret rapture offers the believers an incentive to always watch and pray so that they can be matured in the divine life (Heb. 6:1); the open rapture is needed for the Lord to determine who among the believers will receive reward or discipline at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 11:18). In its failure to acknowledge the rapture in both its secret and public aspects, seemingly out of a desire to desensationalize Revelation, *The*

End argues that the rapture of the believers is a baseless notion in Revelation and thus deprives the readers of the incentive to mature in the divine life.

The End and the Authorship of Revelation

Perhaps the most fundamental shortcoming of *The End* is its hermeneutical principle to interpret Revelation in isolation from the rest of the Scriptures. Claiming to "take Revelation as a whole, as a book with its own integrity" (38), the book refuses to juxtapose prophecies in Revelation with those in other books of the Bible that have a direct bearing on unlocking the meaning of prophecies in Revelation. In so doing, the book takes Revelation out of context from other prophecies in the Bible and gives it special interpretations that do not harmonize with the rest of the Bible. This hermeneutical approach runs counter to a cardinal rule of biblical interpretation—interpreting the Bible with the Bible. *The End's* interpretive method thus violates Peter's foremost principle of interpreting Scripture: "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of one's own interpretation; for no prophecy was ever borne by the will of man, but men spoke from God while being borne by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:20-21). If prophecies in the Scripture were written according to the will of individual men, they could be interpreted by themselves and according to their own context. Yet the prophecies in the Bible were written by different men under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—the unique Author of all the prophecies. Hence, all the prophecies can be linked together as one. In this light, Revelation must not be "of one's own interpretation"; rather, it must be confirmed by other portions of the Scriptures. Small wonder that John at the end of Revelation calls the Lord "the God of the spirits of the prophets" (22:6), suggesting that all the prophecies in this book are inspired by the very same God who inspired the spirits of the prophets throughout the Old and New Testaments, and that these prophecies correspond with those in the Old and New Testaments. In particular, as the final book of the Bible, Revelation must be understood as the conclusion, completion, and consummation of the divine revelation unveiled throughout the Scriptures.

Seeking to interpret Revelation in its own terms, *The End* argues against the commonly held assumption that the writer of Revelation was John the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' twelve disciples (47). Revelation does not explicitly mention that John the apostle is the author. Yet if we compare symbolic elements in the Gospel of John with those in Revelation, then we see a remarkable resemblance between the two books. First, both the Gospel of John and Revelation are books of signs—symbols with a particular spiritual significance. In the Gospel of John all the miracles performed by the Lord are called "signs" symbolizing the matter of life (2:11, 23; 3:2; 4:54; 6:2, 14, 26, 30; 7:31; 9:16; 10:41; 11:47; 12:18, 37; 20:30). Likewise, Revelation

from the first verse elucidates the symbolic characteristic of the book, declaring that God made known the revelation of the book by “signs,” half of which are explicitly interpreted, such as the seven lampstands signifying the churches and the seven stars signifying the messengers of the churches (1:20). Second, both the Gospel of John and Revelation use the same signs for Christ: the Word (John 1:1-3; Rev. 19:13), the tabernacle (John 1:14; Rev. 7:15), the Lamb (John 1:29; Rev. 5:6), springs of water (John 4:14; Rev. 7:17), and the Shepherd (John 10:14; Rev. 7:17). The two books also employ the same symbols for the believers as the church: the bride (John 3:29; Rev. 19:7), the temple (John 2:19; Rev. 3:12), the kingdom (John 3:3-5; Rev. 1:6), sheep (John 10:16; Rev. 7:17), and sons (John 1:12-13; Rev. 21:7).

Seeing the intrinsic relationship between these two books is indispensable to understanding the full significance of the crucial signs in Revelation. For instance, in his Gospel, John explicitly states that when Jesus told the thirsty to come to Him and drink, speaking of rivers of living water flowing out of their innermost being, He said this “concerning the Spirit” (7:38-39). Only when we apply John’s insight of rivers of living water as a sign of the Spirit of life to the text of Revelation will we understand that the crystal-bright river of water of life proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem (22:1) is not physical but spiritual, signifying God in Christ as the Spirit flowing into the believers to be their abundant supply and full satisfaction. Further, in his Gospel John records the Lord’s own words that unveil Him as the tree of life: “I am...the life” (14:6); “I am the true vine” (15:1). Apart from this realization, the tree of life producing twelve fruits each month in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:2) can be understood as a literal tree—not as a sign of Christ as the embodiment of the unsearchable riches of the Triune God to become His redeemed people’s life, life supply, and enjoyment. Neglecting the striking similarity and the pivotal link between Revelation and the Gospel of John, *The End* errs in denying John the apostle’s authorship of Revelation and falls short of interpreting the crucial signs in Revelation that unveil the Triune God’s desire to dispense Himself in Christ as the Spirit into man as his food and drink.

Furthermore, *The End* calls into question John the apostle’s authorship of Revelation by arguing that the author does not claim to have seen Jesus during His earthly ministry and makes no reference to His teaching or miracles (48). Far from negating John the apostle’s authorship, Revelation’s conspicuous omission of details of the Lord’s earthly ministry highlights a picture of Christ in His heavenly ministry and a portrait of Christ in the stage of His intensification. Advancing from the Gospel of John’s presentation of Christ in His earthly ministry, Revelation

unfolds that the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Christ has ascended into the heavens to become the worthy and enthroned Lion-Lamb as the heavenly Administrator in God’s universal government, ruling the whole earth and opening the scroll of God’s economy. Progressing from the Gospel of John’s depiction of the Christ who accomplished His judicial redemption in His incarnation and became the life-giving Spirit in His resurrection, Revelation unveils that due to the degradation of the church, Christ as the life-giving Spirit has been intensified to become the seven Spirits, the sevenfold intensified Spirit, to intensify His organic salvation in His believers, to produce them as the overcomers, and to consummate the New Jerusalem as the ultimate goal of God’s eternal economy (Rev. 1:4; 4:5; 5:6). So pivotal is the function of the sevenfold intensified Spirit of God for the carrying out of His economy that according to Revelation 1:4-5, among the three of the Divine Trinity, the seven Spirits are listed in the second place instead of the third—a change in sequence from Matthew 28:19, which lists the Holy Spirit in the third place. The unfolding of these two aspects of Christ, which are hardly revealed in the Gospels but fully unveiled in Revelation, is the fulfillment of a promise the Lord gave to His disciples near the end of His earthly ministry: “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of reality, comes, He will guide you into all the reality;...and He will declare to you the things that are coming” (John 16:12-13). Failing to see the progression of the divine revelation through the guidance and declaration of the Spirit of reality dwelling in the believers, *The End* errs in negating John the apostle’s authorship of Revelation based on Revelation’s omission of scenes of Jesus’ earthly ministry. The misguided effort to deny the authorship of John the apostle seems to be predicated on *The End*’s attempt to study Revelation in isolation in order to separate its “message” from the current vogue of sensationalistic, futuristic interpretations.

Guided more by its aversion to sensationalistic interpretations than its genuine interaction with the text of Revelation, *The End* erroneously denies the prophetic characteristic of Revelation and interprets the book out of context from the rest of the Scriptures. In so doing, *The End* can present the central message of Revelation as being only a moralistic call to eschew evil and persevere in faith, contending that to keep the message of the book is to “worship God” (47). Yet Revelation—indeed the entire Bible—does not end with a charge to worship God (22:9) but with a promise of the enjoyment of Christ as the tree of life (v. 14) and with a call to take the life-giving Spirit as the water of life (v. 17). As the Gospel of John shows, only by exercising our spirit to drink God the Spirit as the living water can we become the true worshippers that the Father seeks (4:9-24). Neglectful of God’s New Testament economy to work Himself into His redeemed people as their life and life

supply to become their very being, the book can only urge its readers to exert their human effort to remain faithful to God; it cannot encourage them to enjoy the divine dispensing of the Triune God to be produced as the man-child, the firstfruits, and the New Jerusalem.

by David Yoon

A Difficult Portrayal of the Love of God

The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God, by D. A. Carson. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000.

Observing that shifting cultural influences and seeming tensions within Scripture make the love of God a difficult doctrine, D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, sets out to resolve some of these tensions in *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (hereafter, *Difficult*). In response to these influences and tensions, *Difficult* advocates a return to a scriptural understanding of God's love characterized by "biblical proportion and balance" (15). The back cover of the book claims that *Difficult* "gets to the heart of this all-important doctrine" and "provides a compelling perspective on the nature of God and why He loves as He does."

Difficult has several worthy features. Dr. Carson should be commended for his pointed identification of the cultural influences that distort the biblical doctrine of the love of God and for his realization that such influences have colored the understanding of many Christians. In addition, in calling for an understanding of God's love founded in and balanced by the totality of Scripture, *Difficult* identifies the antidote to interpretive extremes and extra-biblical influences.

Despite the merit of its cultural critique and its appeal for balance, *Difficult* fails to achieve the very balance it advocates. Instead, *Difficult* is plagued by a consistent and persistent emphasis on extrinsic and objective matters to the almost total exclusion of deeper, intrinsic matters related to the life of God and the subjective experience of believers. This unbalanced emphasis is present in at least three areas of the book: its objective characterization of our relationship to God; its objective portrayal of the love of God, including its communication to us by God and appropriation in our experience; and its limited understanding of God's plan of redemption.

The contents of this relatively short book were initially presented in the W. H. Griffith Thomas Lecture Series at Dallas Theological Seminary in February 1998. Chapter

one, "On Distorting the Love of God," briefly presents the reasons that the doctrine of the love of God can be deemed difficult, along with "five distinguishable ways the Bible speaks of the love of God" (16). According to *Difficult* the doctrine of the love of God can be viewed as difficult for three reasons: cultural influences that unconsciously distort our understanding of God's love; aspects of God's person and plan, including His wrath, transcendence, immutability, and sovereignty, that seem to be in conflict with His love; and the diverse ways that the Bible speaks of the love of God.

Chapter two, "God Is Love," attempts to answer the question: "But what does the predication 'God is love' actually mean?" (25). *Difficult* argues that the answer to this question is found in the relationship of the Father to the Son revealed in John 5:16-30. In this passage God the Father shows the Son everything that He is doing out of love for the Son. In response, the Son remains in the Father's love by doing everything that the Father shows Him and fully obeying the Father's commands. Since the motivation for this eternal relationship is love, *Difficult* concludes that love is "intra-Trinitarian," that is, "bound up in the very nature of God" (39). This, according to *Difficult*, is what the Bible means by "God is love." *Difficult* thus proceeds to argue that our relationship with Jesus mirrors this relationship: Jesus loves us just as the Father has loved Him, so He shows us everything that the Father shows Him and asks us to remain in His love by obeying Him. Thus, the relationships between the Father and the Son and between the Son and the believers both have their source in love and are characterized by the full disclosure of information matched by obedience.

In chapter three, "God's Love and God's Sovereignty," *Difficult* argues that in order to understand how God can be transcendent yet personal, immutable yet full of responsive, affective love, we must see that "all of God's emotions, including his love in all its aspects, cannot be divorced from God's knowledge, God's power, God's will"; furthermore, "all of God's will or choice or plan is never divorced from his love—just as it is never divorced from his justice, his holiness, his omniscience, and all his other perfections" (60). *Difficult*'s basic point in this chapter is that although we may not fully understand how seemingly contradictory divine realities can exist side by side, we must embrace them both. The book explains, "I do not claim that any of this is easy or straightforward. Sooner or later one retreats into the recognition that, so far as we are concerned, there are some mysteries in the very Being of God....God as he has disclosed himself in Scripture is simultaneously sovereign/transcendent and personal" (56-57).

In chapter four, "God's Love and God's Wrath," *Difficult* seeks to reconcile the apparent discrepancies between

God's wrath and God's love, and between the portrayal of God in the Old Testament and the portrayal of God in the New Testament. *Difficult* argues that since wrath is not one of God's perfections, but merely a response of His holiness against sin, God can manifest both love and wrath at the same time and even direct both at the same person with no inner contradiction. Furthermore, *Difficult* argues that the wrath of God and the love of God climax together in the cross.

Difficult has several features worthy of affirmation. In the first chapter of the book *Difficult* demonstrates the author's skill as a cultural observer, pointedly identifying subtle cultural trends that distort the biblical doctrine of the love of God. *Difficult* laments that although the majority of people who believe in God believe that He is a benevolent, loving Being, "this widely disseminated belief in the love of God is set with increasing frequency in some matrix other than biblical theology" (9). *Difficult* continues, "The love of God in our culture has been purged of anything the culture finds uncomfortable. The love of God has been sanitized, democratized, and above all sentimentalized" (11). This distortion is also due in part to what *Difficult* calls "remarkable shifts in the West's epistemology" (13). This is due to developing patterns in postmodernism which reinforce "the most sentimental, syncretistic, and often pluralistic views of the love of God" (14). Under these tides of influence more and more people argue that since God is a God of love, it is profoundly ignorant and even rude to assert that this God would deny salvation to large segments of the world's population. *Difficult* also rightly points out that even Christians can be influenced by these anti-biblical sentiments and states that the sentimentalizing of God is "multiplying in Protestant churches" (13). *Difficult*'s analysis in this first section is very helpful. By being aware of the subtle ways in which the doctrine of the love of God can be distorted, believers can be saved from these negative influences.

Another valuable feature of *Difficult* is its claim that a balanced view of Scripture is the only sure source for understanding the doctrine of the love of God. *Difficult* recognizes that interpreters of the Bible can often elevate certain passages about the love of God to extremes while ignoring other passages altogether. Such interpretations, according to *Difficult*, lead to "fatuous reductionisms" and must be avoided by seeking "a doctrine of God in biblical proportion and balance" (15). "In short," the book says, "we need *all* of what Scripture says on this subject" (23). With the church plagued by distorting cultural pressures and interpretive extremes, *Difficult*'s call for a return to a balanced understanding, accepting, and incorporating of the totality of Scripture is timely and, if heeded, could provide the necessary antidote to this degraded situation.

An Incomplete Understanding of Our Relationship with God

It is disappointing, however, that while *Difficult* aspires to present a balanced understanding of the love of God, it fails to do this. Instead, the book repeatedly loses its balance, emphasizing the objective aspects of God's love and of His relationship with His people while entirely ignoring the deeper aspects related to the divine life. This failing is seen in the book's exposition of John 5:16-30, which it claims "uncover[s] extraordinary insight on the relation between the Father and the Son" (30). *Difficult* begins by stating that sonship is "very often a functional category in the Bible" (31). By functional, *Difficult* means a relationship characterized and created by two parties functioning in the same way. To explain this relationship *Difficult* repeatedly refers to the pre-industrial cultural setting of the New Testament times. (This is ironic, for in the first chapter, *Difficult* argues strongly against allowing cultural elements to color our view of Scripture.) *Difficult* posits that at the time the New Testament was written, sons most often inherited their fathers' vocation. According to *Difficult*, Jesus alluded to this "cultural assumption" (31) when He said, "Whatever the Father does the Son also does" (John 5:19, NIV). *Difficult* also points out that the way sons were able to inherit their fathers' vocation was by the father taking the son into the village or craftsman's shop and carefully showing him all the skills of the trade. According to *Difficult*'s line of thought, this is also the reason Jesus is able to do everything that the Father does. Jesus Himself seems to say as much: "For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does" (v. 20, NIV). Thus, the nature of the relationship of the Father and the Son can be summarized as follows: The Father loves the Son and shows Him everything He is doing; in response the Son imitates the Father, does everything that He does, and fully obeys the Father.

Difficult then argues that "our relation to Jesus mirrors the relation of Jesus to his heavenly Father" (41). This can be seen in John 15 where Jesus says:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.... You are my friends if you do what I command.... I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. (vv. 9-10, 14-15, NIV)

Based on this portion, *Difficult* argues that because Jesus loves us in the same way that His Father loves Him, He makes known to us everything that He has learned from His Father, and He asks us to remain in His love by imitating and obeying Him just as He imitates and obeys the Father. Our relationship to the Son thus mirrors that of the Son to the Father: we receive information from Jesus and

do our best to imitate everything that He does and obey all that He commands us.

This interpretation of the relation of the Father to the Son and of the believers to the Son is woefully short of the New Testament revelation, even in the very passages that *Difficult* attempts to explicate. Both chapters five and fifteen in John reveal relationships based not merely on full understanding and obedience but on a union in which the divine life is received and lived out of the human life. Although *Difficult* advocates studying passages “with great respect for their contexts,” its interpretation of these chapters fails to do this (30).

John 5 reveals a relationship between the Father and the Son that is based, not merely on the Father conveying information to the Son and the Son obeying the Father’s commands, but on the Father giving His very life to the Son and the Son living by the Father’s life. Jesus says, “The Son can do nothing from Himself except what He sees the Father doing, for whatever that One does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing.” Then immediately He continues, “And greater works than these He will show Him that you may marvel. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom He wills....For just as the Father has life in Himself, so He gave to the Son to also have life in Himself” (vv. 19-21, 26).

In these verses Jesus reveals that His relationship with the Father and His ability to do everything that the Father does are based on something more than shared information—they are based on a shared life. The Father gives the Son His life, and the Son lives by this life. This is the thought expressed in 3:35, where John also refers to the Father’s love for the Son: “The Father loves the Son and has given all into His hand.” Here the Father gives the Son not only knowledge concerning His deeds but *all*. Verse 36 then explains that *life* is the main item included in *all*, for it says, “He who believes into the Son has eternal life.” Because the Father has given all to the Son, whoever believes into the Son receives eternal life. Thus, John’s emphasis with regard to the nature of the relation of the Father to the Son and of the Son to the Father is primarily one of life. John reveals that it is because of this shared life that Jesus is able to fully express the Father. In 6:57 Jesus tells the disciples, “I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also shall live because of Me.” The implication here is that just as believers are able to live because of Jesus by eating Him, so also Jesus lives because of the Father by “eating” Him. In the context of this chapter to “eat” is to receive spirit and life (v. 63). Thus, as John emphasizes, the Father and the Son are primarily related to each other by virtue of a shared life; the Son is able to express the Father by living according to the inner power and motivation of this life.

Even the terms *Father* and *Son* point to this critical understanding, for they are organic in nature. *Father* and *Son* are organic terms pointing to a relationship in life. A father is a father by virtue of the fact that he has begotten a son through the impartation of his life element, and a son is a son by virtue of the fact that he has been begotten of a father.

This view is critical for our understanding of our relationship to the Triune God because as *Difficult* correctly states, our relationship “mirrors the relation of Jesus to his heavenly Father” (41). Our relationship with Jesus is not based merely on His making known to us all that He has learned from His Father and on our trying our best to obey His commands but, rather, on the Son’s imparting of His life into us and our living by His life. Although overlooked by *Difficult*, this relationship is also clearly revealed in the portion that it uses to define our relationship to Jesus. John 15 presents the vision of a vine and branches. Jesus tells His believers, “I am the vine; you are the branches...for apart from Me you can do nothing” (v. 5). Consider the relationship of a branch to a vine. This is a relationship defined by a shared life essence. When a branch is attached to a vine, it receives the continual dispensing of its life essence. This is a theme in the book of John. John tells us that Jesus came as life (14:6), the bread of life (6:35), and the water of life (4:14) that we might have abundant life (10:10) by believing into Him (1:12), by being born of Him (v. 13), by drinking Him (4:14), and by eating Him (6:57). Thus, as believers in Christ, we have received Christ’s very life into us, and through our partaking of Him we receive a continual flow of life from God. Then, just as a branch spontaneously expresses the rich life of the vine, by staying attached to Christ we receive His life dispensing, and this life dispensing causes us to automatically, effortlessly, and even unconsciously express Him. This is the context in which the Lord tells the disciples to keep His commandments and remain in His love. Apart from the union in life depicted by the vine and the branches, this word is impossible to keep. Unfortunately *Difficult* overlooks the organic relationship shared by the Father, the Son, and the believers. As a result, readers of this book are left with an incorrect impression that they must do their best to imitate the functional relationship of the Father and the Son. This effort is doomed to failure, for apart from Him—apart from a living and vital organic relationship—we can do nothing.

An Unbalanced Presentation of the Love of God

The second defect of *Difficult* is its failure to provide a balanced scriptural presentation of the love of God, one that highlights both its objective and subjective dimensions. *Difficult*’s overall portrayal of the love of God focuses on the outward manifestations of God’s love and ignores the inherently subjective quality of love repeatedly mentioned throughout the New Testament. The first chapter of *Difficult*

identifies five ways that the Bible speaks about the love of God: the peculiar love between the Father and the Son; God's providential love over all that He has made; God's salvific stance toward His fallen world; God's particular, effective, selecting love toward His elect; and God's provisional, conditional love toward believers based on their obedience. Other than the first aspect, which touches on God's nature of love, all these aspects point to ways in which this love is expressed in extrinsic actions on the part of God. In the fourth chapter *Difficult* attempts to depict how the love of God is communicated to us in light of these five aspects, but in each case the book stresses outward acts of love. God's love caused Him to die for us. God's love causes Him to feed, clothe, and protect us. God's love causes Him to discipline us, as a father disciplines his children. The strong impression made by this kind of presentation is that God's love is primarily communicated to us through external actions of love.

The New Testament, however, clearly presents a different picture. In the New Testament God's love is meant to be subjectively experienced by the believers and is communicated to us through the outpouring and infilling of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament repeatedly affirms that the love of God is meant to be with us (1 Cor. 16:24; 2 Cor. 13:11, 14; Eph. 6:23) and in us (John 17:26; 1 John 4:12, 16; cf. John 5:42; 1 John 2:15; 3:17). Moreover, while *Difficult* ignores the Spirit (failing to mention the Spirit even one time in the whole book), the New Testament reveals that the Triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit—is a God of love. The Bible speaks of the love of God (2 Cor. 13:14; Rom. 5:5; 8:39), the love of Christ (2 Cor. 5:14; Eph. 3:19), and the love of the Spirit (Rom. 15:30). Love is not merely an act of God or even one of His many attributes; love is God's essence, His inner substance, for "God is love" and "he who abides in love abides in God" (1 John 4:8, 16). Because God is a constitution of love, love continually flows within His triune being. God the Father is ever pouring His love into God the Son; God the Son is continually receiving and returning His Father's love; and God the Spirit, as the loving essence, "the hypostatic Love," is unceasingly flowing between the Father and the Son (Robichaux 9). In addition, the flowing love of God is also poured into our hearts *through the Holy Spirit* (Rom. 5:5). In his classic work, *The Spirit of Christ*, Andrew Murray develops this thought:

God is love. He is love as seen in the Father giving all He has to the Son and the Son seeking all He has in the Father. In this life of love between the Father and the Son, the Spirit is the bond of fellowship. The Father is the loving One, the fountain. The Son is the beloved One, the great reservoir of love, always receiving and giving back. The Spirit is the living love that makes them one. In Him the divine life of love has its ceaseless flow and overflowing....It is through the Spirit that this love of God is

revealed and communicated to us....The Spirit comes to us with all the love of God and of Jesus. The Spirit is the love of God....The outpouring of the Spirit is the inpouring of love. (224-225)

God's providential care, Christ's all-inclusive death, and the Father's loving discipline manifest God's love to us, but only through the Spirit's dispensing, His pouring out, can the love of God become subjective to us in our experience.

Fairly speaking, *Difficult* does acknowledge that the love of God should be incorporated into the experience of the believers: "The love of God is not merely to be analyzed, understood, and adopted into holistic categories of integrated theological thought. It is to be received, to be absorbed, to be felt" (80-81). Nevertheless, *Difficult's* definition of the strikingly subjective words *received*, and *absorbed* turns out to be primarily in the realm of mental apprehension. *Difficult* portrays our receiving of God's communicated love in the following terms: In response to God's benevolent acts of kindness toward us and His ultimate act of love—death, we "perceive the sheer rightness of the first commandment—to love God" (84); we try to "adequately grasp the love of God in Scripture" (82); and we "grasp that God has not drawn us with the savage love of the rapist, but with the compelling wooing of the lover" (83). According to *Difficult*, this is what it means to receive and absorb God's love. Again, this is short of the revealed biblical way for believers to appropriate God's love.

God's people receive and absorb His love not merely through apprehending or grasping the magnitude of it with their minds but through exercising their human spirit to know experientially the knowledge-surpassing love of Christ. Second Timothy 1:7 tells us that God has given us a spirit of love. Thus, within our spirit we have the capacity to substantiate and participate in God's love. This is why Paul prayed that the Ephesian believers would be strengthened "into the inner man" (Eph. 3:16). When they were strengthened into the inner man, Christ would make His home in their hearts. As a result, they would be "rooted and grounded in love" (v. 17) and be made full of strength "to know the knowledge-surpassing love of Christ" (v. 19). Thus, rather than looking for an increased mental understanding of the love of God as the means to absorb and receive the love of God, believers should echo Paul and pray to be strengthened into their inner man that Christ would make His home in their hearts that they would begin to know what is otherwise knowledge-surpassing.

A Limited View of God's Plan

Difficult's extrinsic and objective emphasis also frustrates one's ability to realize the extent of God's full salvation and the critical role of love in its accomplishment. This is another major shortcoming of the book. *Difficult* encourages

its readers to study “themes in the Bible with great attention devoted to their place in the unfolding drama of redemption” (30). But in order to do this one must have a proper understanding of the scope of this “unfolding drama,” an understanding that *Difficult* does not seem to possess and definitely never presents. *Difficult* speaks of “this project of redemption” (72), “the entire plan of redemption” (83), and God’s “salvation of his people” (83), but in each case *Difficult*’s discussion ends with Christ’s death on the cross. As a result, readers of this book receive the strong impression that God’s “entire plan of redemption” and His “salvation of his people” ended at the cross and, further, that God is no longer working to save His people. This is contrary to the divine revelation in the Bible. While Christ’s death on the cross accomplished the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47), the purification of sins (Heb. 1:3), justification (Rom. 3:24-25), reconciliation (5:10), and positional sanctification (1 Cor. 1:2; Heb. 13:12), Christ’s complete salvation also includes His salvation in and through His divine life (Rom. 1:17; Acts 11:18; Rom. 5:10, 17-18, 21). Romans 5:10 states that in addition to being “reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more we will be saved in His life.” This organic aspect of God’s salvation includes regeneration (John 3:3; 1 Pet. 1:23), shepherding (John 10:10-11), dispositional sanctification (Rom. 15:16), renewing (12:2), transformation (2 Cor. 3:18), building up (Eph. 4:15-16), conformation (Rom. 8:29), and glorification (v. 30).

Difficult’s failure to even mention the notion of our further salvation in the life of Christ not only limits the reader’s understanding of God’s plan of salvation but also limits the reader’s appreciation for the love of God. To fully appreciate the love of God we must realize that the love that motivated Christ’s redemption does not end at the objective accomplishment of Christ on the cross. God’s love also motivates Him to save His believers, not only judicially through His death but also organically through His divine life (5:10). John 3:16 tells us that God so loved the world that not only did He give His only Son, but He also gives His eternal life to all those who believe in Him. Ephesians 2:4-5 reveals that because of His great love for us, God makes us alive. In his first Epistle the apostle John marvels at the extent of the Father’s love—because of this love we are made the children of God, those who possess God’s life and nature (3:1). And in chapter four of the same Epistle John tells us that the love of God was manifested in His sending His Son into the world for the purpose that “we might have life and live through Him” (v. 9).

In fact, God so loves us that He not only died for us and gives us His life, but He also saves us to the uttermost (John 13:1; Heb. 7:25). The scope of God’s love for us is actually the scope of the entire Bible, for the whole Bible is a story of God’s love. In eternity past God chose us in love (Eph. 1:4). Immediately following the creation of humanity

God presented Adam with a wife, typifying His own desire for a counterpart (Gen. 2:18, 21-24). Throughout the Old Testament God refers to Himself as a Husband and to His people as a wife (Isa. 54:5; 62:5; Jer. 2:2; 3:1, 14; 31:32; Ezek. 16:8; 23:5; Hosea 2:7, 19). When God became incarnated as a man in the Gospels, He came as a Bridegroom seeking a bride (Matt. 9:15; Mark 2:19; Luke 5:34; John 3:29). Motivated by love, this incarnate God-man Bridegroom laid down His life for the church (Eph. 5:25), and in love she is made alive (2:4-5), grows up into Christ in all things (4:15), is built up (v. 16), knit together (Col. 2:2), and sanctified until she becomes glorious—fully expressing and matching her Bridegroom (Eph. 5:26-27). In Revelation, at the end of this age and the consummation of God’s full salvation, this couple is married, and God’s people become His wife for eternity (19:7; 21:2, 9). This is a marriage of the Spirit, the realization and consummation of all that the Triune God is, has, and has accomplished, and the bride, God’s redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified people. This will be the consummate and ultimate manifestation of the love of God for all eternity.

God’s Love and God’s Being

How we understand God’s love is critical, for the whole Bible is a story of love, and God’s entire plan of salvation for humanity has its source in and is carried out in the sphere of love. Our understanding of God’s love, however, is shaped by our understanding of God Himself, for as the apostle John so profoundly states, “God is love.” *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* is unable to provide a clear and biblically balanced presentation of the love of God because its understanding of the being of God is incomplete. God is a God of life (John 1:4; 5:26; 14:6). Thus, to fully understand His triune being and our relation to Him, we must have an organic perspective. Moreover, the God of the New Testament is a God who desires to be experienced by His people (2 Cor. 13:14). A balanced presentation of the love of God must give adequate attention to the love of God as it functions in the subjective experience of the believers. *Difficult* begins with a highly insightful critique of the cultural influences that distort our understanding of the love of God and with an encouraging call for a return to a balanced interpretation of God’s love based on Scripture. Yet the book’s persistent emphasis on objective matters undermines its own aim.

by Nathan Vigil

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