

## Seeing but Not Seeing the Two Women, the Two Cities, in Revelation

*The Choice between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse*, by Barbara R. Rossing. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999.

Drawing upon and considering most of the recent scholarship on the city visions in Revelation, Barbara R. Rossing, Associate Professor of New Testament at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, presents a well-researched analysis of the significance of Babylon and the New Jerusalem in relation to their association with the visions of the two women in Revelation, the harlot and the bride. While certainly more than just a survey of recent scholarship, *The Choice between Two Cities* (hereafter, *Choice*) provides an excellent summary of divergent interpretations of these signs in its attempt to come to some deeper understanding of the significance and relevance of John's visions to the people of God. This is one of the book's great strengths and also its greatest weakness, for in seeking to acknowledge, engage, and respond to this amalgam of competing interpretations, *Choice* has little space to offer an alternative, attractive, and biblically consistent interpretation of these concluding and consummating signs in the holy Scriptures. In addition, its method of finding significance, that of relying upon the presence or absence of close dictional and lexical correspondence between various portions of Scripture, ultimately proves to be incapable of providing an entrance into a deeper understanding of the mystery of God's *oikonomia*, of which the two women and two cities in Revelation play a central part.

### Surveying the Cities

Rossing devotes the first two chapters of *Choice* to a survey of interpretive approaches to the two women and two cities in Revelation, including hers, and the final three chapters to the development of the interpretation that she feels is best suited to understanding the visions in Revelation. Chapter one very thoroughly lays out the current state of scholarship in regard to Revelation. Rossing not only surveys these approaches for her readers but also effectively engages in a discussion of their perceived merits and shortcomings. The information contained in this chapter alone is worthy of the book in that it provides a fairly comprehensive overview of the

state of current theological discussion of Revelation. She notes:

Previous scholars have interpreted Revelation's city visions as structured according to a number of models for a variety of purposes. Some view the Babylon vision as anti-Roman polemic, others as inner-biblical exegesis of Hebrew prophets, others as inter-Christian polemic or liturgical catharsis, still others as misogynist rantings. How one interprets the anti-Babylon polemic shapes one's interpretation of New Jerusalem as the contrasting vision: whether New Jerusalem is a liberative political economy, a heavenly or spiritual reinterpretation of biblical traditions, a eucharistic liturgy, or even a male bridal fantasy. (2)

Following this statement, Rossing discusses these interpretive approaches in detail, providing useful bibliographic references in each instance to the major proponents of each view. She first speaks of the interpretive approach, quoting Iain Provan, that views the city visions as a prophetic reappropriation composed "in intimate conversation with the Old Testament" (2). The second interpretive method views Revelation as a critique of imperial Rome. This approach serves as the starting point for her own analysis, which begins in chapter two. She states,

The majority of scholars read the primary polemic of the Babylon vision as a critique of Rome and its imperial oppression. I follow their interpretive line. Within this group are scholars who employ a wide range of approaches and who interpret the New Jerusalem vision as a response to the critique of Rome in quite different ways. (6)

Other approaches include the view that Revelation is an indirect critique of other Christians, especially when the contents of the seven letters in chapters two and three are contrasted with the Babylon vision in chapters seventeen and eighteen. *Choice's* predisposition to view the two cities in the context of an imperial critique in many respects accounts for its failure to give much credence to this approach: "More is at stake for the author of Revelation than simply vilifying other Christians and proving that 'Jezebel' is a false prophet. Anti-Jezebel polemic...does not overshadow the book's primary anti-imperial polemic against Rome" (11). At first glance, abandoning this approach does not seem significant, but the consequences of this abandonment become more

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apparent in chapter five through *Choice*'s inability to view the New Jerusalem as anything other than a physical city, thereby denying its vital relationship to the church as the bride of Christ.

The next approach views the New Jerusalem as an apocalyptic transformation, that is, quoting Edith Humphrey, as "a symbol of the faithful as a whole, either Jewish or Christian" (11). This view is dismissed by Rossing, who does not acknowledge an intrinsic relationship between the church as the bride and Christ as the Bridegroom, who in a union of the divine life, are consummately depicted as a city, the New Jerusalem. She states rather bluntly, and perhaps precipitously, "I do not assume that the bride of Revelation 19—22 is identical to the mother of Revelation 12, nor that the bride represents the people of God" (12). The final approach that Rossing surveys is less of an approach than a critique that Revelation is an effort to marginalize and disenfranchise the feminine. *Choice* avoids this approach largely by arguing that the marginalization that seems to occur through the transformation of the bride into a city should be viewed within the framework of a two-women *topos* common to audiences familiar with classical literature and literature that draws upon biblical wisdom traditions. This argument is laid out in detail in chapter two. According to *Choice*,

Revelation employs the two-women *topos* for the purpose of political critique and exhortation. By filling out the contrasting feminine figures as two powerful empires—God's empire versus Babylon—the author constructs a comprehensive indictment of the Roman empire and an invitation to citizenship in God's alternative realm. (15)

The two-women *topos* harkens to the philosopher Xenophan's retelling of the tale of Heracles, who, when young, was confronted by two women at a crossroads, each in remarkable contrast to the other and each representing in wooing words a choice between a life of vice or virtue. The descriptions of their attire and bearing figure prominently in shaping a reader's perception of the ethical contrast in the choice. "The central and most consistent element of the *topos* is the visual contrast of two feminine figures....The second essential element of the Heracles *topos* is the exhortation to 'choose between the two'" (37-38). *Choice* points out that usage of the two-women *topos* by Jewish writers can logically be concluded. "Since the language world of Revelation is primarily Jewish, it is probable that the author of Revelation was familiar with this *topos* not directly from the Heracles story but via Proverbs 1—9 and the broad stream of Jewish wisdom tradition" (41).

By viewing the two women in Revelation, the harlot and the bride, as transformational signs of two cities, Babylon and New Jerusalem, *Choice* suggests that the same ethical

guideposts in the Heracles story and in Proverbs are operating in Revelation to demarcate for its audience the ethical necessity of choosing between two very differing and competing political economies—the avaricious economy of Babylon patterned after Imperial Rome, and a more egalitarian, even utopian, political economy signified by the New Jerusalem.

Once the ethical contrast structure has been established via the women's contrasting visual appearances, the women themselves usually are relegated to the sidelines. Often the author's primary interest is in some unrelated topic such as entertainment, careers, politics, or morality. For Revelation the primary topic of concern is the two cities—the contrasting political economies represented by Babylon and New Jerusalem. (82-83)

*Choice* concludes its survey of interpretive approaches at the end of chapter one by underscoring its application of the two-women *topos* to the New Jerusalem: "Glimpsed first as the stereotypical white-robed good woman of the *topos* (Rev. 19:7-10), New Jerusalem subsequently is filled out along political lines as a wondrous utopian city" (16). In the subsequent three chapters, *Choice* seeks to draw and reinforce the exhortations inherent in the contrasting choices between harlot and bride, Babylon and New Jerusalem.

### Viewing the Cities

In chapters three through five Rossing views both the women and the cities in Revelation as precursors to a political and economic critique, and she attempts to show the relevance and significance of this approach. In chapter three, "Rome as the Evil Woman in Revelation 17," *Choice* begins to examine the harlot in Revelation as an exemplification of the two-women *topos*. In chapter four, "Rome as the Imperial City in Revelation 18," the transformation of the harlot into a city, Babylon, is examined. Lastly, in chapter five, "Invitation to God's City of Life: The New Jerusalem," *Choice* considers the bride. In its consideration, each of these cities assumes the corresponding vices and virtues of the women from whom their intrinsic political economies are typified.

By introducing Babylon in terms of these two negative interactions—fornication and intoxication—the author of Revelation constructs Babylon as a dangerous and enticing figure who has lured the world into its sphere of influence and now must be judged. This introduction functions to warn the audience of Babylon's dangerous power, and it also lays the groundwork for the choice that readers will be asked to make: interaction with Babylon or interaction with Jerusalem. (71)

In the course of reviewing the prominent features of the

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harlot and the corresponding city, Babylon, *Choice* focuses on the detailed economic descriptions in Revelation 18 to conclude that the inherent critique in Revelation is a critique against oppressive economic arrangements. Correlated to this critique, there is a call for people to disassociate themselves from these entanglements.

The call to come out of Babylon in Rev 18:4 is the rhetorical key to the entire Babylon vision. Readers must come out of Babylon in order to enter into God's New Jerusalem. This call to come out has been the subject of widely differing interpretations, as scholars debate whether the command is to be read literally or metaphorically, as an appeal to the audience to withdraw from economic interaction with Babylon, to cease participation in the imperial cult, or to withdraw spiritually from participation in evil. (119-120)

*Choice's* emphasis on the call to come out of Babylon, however, loses some of its imperative appeal because it is difficult to determine who is being called out. Its references to the "readers" and the "audience" provide no clear indication of the readers' identity other than the fact that they are readers (120, 122). If the audience is assumed to be a reading audience of society in general, either at the time of its writing or today, then Revelation is nothing more than a polemic against the dangers of self-aggrandizing economics. If, however, the "My people" in Revelation 18:4 are in fact the elect, the church, then the vision of Babylon the Great speaks of the problematic and prophetically significant involvement of the church with the religious and material harlotries associated with the city of Rome, an involvement which frustrates not the development of a utopian society but the fulfillment of God's eternal plan and will.

As stated earlier, once a discussion of the bright woman in Revelation 12 and the harlot in Revelation 17 has been used to establish a framework of ethical contrast in accord with the two-women *topos*, *Choice* asserts that this contrast is then transferred to the cities of Babylon and New Jerusalem. In discussing Babylon, especially the description of its destruction, *Choice* draws upon city-lament literature to underscore the physical nature of the city, a physicality which is then equally assumed for the New Jerusalem:

The river of life flows from the throne of God and the lamb, a political image. Unlike the political economy of Babylon, with its merchants' frenetic buying and selling, New Jerusalem offers a gift economy. Water, fruit, and medicine (the tree's "healing leaves," Rev. 22:2) are

offered freely to everyone in New Jerusalem, even to those with no money. (152)

With this contrast in place, as its subtitle suggests, a choice is presented to the reader of Revelation. Unfortunately, in its discussion of the whole notion of choosing, *Choice* provides very little indication of who must choose. It seems to go to great lengths to demonstrate that the choice is one that must be universally made by every person rather than one which is confined to the church, the people of God: "For those who make the choice to follow the ethical path of faithfulness to God and rejection of Babylon, the bride represents the promise of a share in the New Jerusalem and an inheritance 'in the tree of life and God's holy city'" (161). The antecedent of *those* is not clearly stated, and there is no clear sense that the New Jerusalem is an aggregate sign of the union of God with His chosen and redeemed elect.

### If "My people" in Revelation 18:4 are in fact the elect, the church, then the vision of Babylon the Great speaks of the problematic and prophetically significant involvement of the church with religious and material harlotries.

To be sure, there is a physical component to Babylon, the city on the seven mountains (17:9), because there is an emphasis in Revelation on the degradation of the church through its idolatrous fornication in both a spiritual, religious aspect and a material aspect. But to ascribe this same degree of physicality to the New Jerusalem vastly understates the spiritual dimensions of this consummate sign, especially when the New Jerusalem is presented merely as a political-economic arrangement that offers, through its "gift economy," primarily material promises. In order to bolster this view of the New Jerusalem, *Choice* is forced to rely upon contradictory, narrowly constructed arguments about the identity of the woman in Revelation 12 and the bride in Revelation 21 and 22. Ultimately, these arguments simply fail to convince or foster a deeper seeing of the things which are about to take place (1:19).

#### Seeing but Not Seeing the Cities

In the Gospels the Lord speaks of seeing but not seeing and of hearing but not hearing or understanding (Matt. 13:13; Luke 8:10). While *Choice* clearly associates Rome with Babylon's corrupting, material influence, it offers little discussion of its religious corruption, which is spoken of in Revelation 2:20-24 and 17:1-6. Similarly, its discussion of the New Jerusalem is limited to its determination that the New Jerusalem signifies a physical manifestation. In essence, little is really seen in what it sees. This paucity of insight is clearly evident in its insistence upon close dictional correspondence in order to link various portions

of the holy Scriptures for the purpose of establishing thematic relationships (138). It implicitly insists upon the necessity of this correspondence and then conveniently fails to find it in relation to the New Jerusalem. Consequently, *Choice* then avoids a serious discussion of the biblical references that link the woman in Revelation 12 and the bride in Revelation 21 and 22 with the church. Related to its insistence on dictional correspondence, *Choice* often relies upon instances of lexical correspondence to buttress weak arguments. Both methods of analysis undermine the significance of the sign of the New Jerusalem.

### Dictional Correspondence

As Rossing forthrightly states in chapter one, she does not “assume that the bride of Revelation 19—22 is identical to the mother of Revelation 12, nor that the bride represents the people of God” (12). This position, I believe, is thrust upon it by the method of analysis and by the conclusions derived from an analysis of political-economic arrangement, which, by definition, inherently entail materialistic formulations. Since the framework of *Choice*’s analysis is the two-women *topos*, which only functions rhetorically to establish a framework of ethical contrast for the reader, there is no need to attach any further significance to the two women, particularly spiritual significance, once the framework has been established. In fact, if there is further significance, then more must be at stake in the argument of the writer of Revelation than just the desire to establish an ethical contrast. Thus, the validity of Rossing’s whole argument in *Choice* depends upon not finding any deeper significance to the two women.

This denial of deeper significance is aided by *Choice*’s implicit insistence on “close dictional correspondence” (138). *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, Second Edition, defines *diction* as “the manner of expression in words; choice of words; wording.” Throughout *Choice*’s argument, particular descriptive elements are noted as not having a “clear-cut biblical antecedent” (73, 99). Given this seeming lack of a clear-cut antecedent, *Choice* is able to support its interpretation, free from the encumbrances of more traditional interpretations of Revelation. This seems innocuous at first, but the implicit force of this approach is seen in *Choice*’s attempt to disconnect the bride from the church. There are numerous references to the people of God as His bride in both the Old and New Testaments, many of which *Choice* acknowledges (e.g., Isa. 54:5; 62:5; S. S.; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25, 32; Rev. 21:9). To counter such verses, however, *Choice*, in dialogue with arguments presented by Jan Fekkes in an article entitled “His Bride Has Prepared Herself’: Revelation 12—21 and Isaian Nuptial Imagery,” states,

Details of the bride’s description in Rev 19:7-9 such as

her “purity” and “fine linen” garments, however, cannot be fully explained in terms of Isaiah. Within his argument Fekkes is forced to concede the absence of “close dictional correspondence” between Rev 19:8 and Isa 61:10. (137-138)

Apparently, it is *Choice*’s contention that the lack of a “clear-cut biblical antecedent” and “close dictional correspondence,” that is, the lack of one-to-one correspondence in the manner of wording and expressions in scriptural texts, obviates the need for a serious examination of possible thematic connections, even connections that have long-standing recognition and acceptance within circles of biblical scholarship such as Fekkes’s.

*Choice* employs this method unevenly and even contradictorily in regard to its own arguments. When discussing Babylon as an empire, it finds referential support in Jeremiah 51:

Condemnation of the hated empire Babylon via the cup of wrath is frequent in the Hebrew prophets. In Jeremiah 51, Babylon herself is a ‘golden cup in the Lord’s hand, intoxicating the whole earth; the nations drank of her wine’ (Jer 51:7, only LXX 28:7). (64)

Later, when arguing against Albert Vanhoye’s view that “Revelation’s harlot figure is modeled on Ezekiel’s indictments of Jerusalem as God’s whoring wife in Ezekiel 16 and 23” (73), *Choice* states,

What is the source for this ensemble of jewelry and colors? This a matter of scholarly debate, since there is no clear-cut biblical antecedent for Revelation’s vivid description of the prostitute of Rev 17:4 as “arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup.” (73)

While *Choice* finds an antecedent for Babylon as an empire that has made the nations drink of her wine from a golden cup in Jeremiah 51:7, it fails to see these very verses as a precedent for the description of Babylon as a prostitute who has made those who dwell on the earth drunk with the wine of her fornication from a golden cup full of abominations (Rev. 17:2, 4). Having stated that there is no clear-cut antecedent for the harlot with a golden cup, *Choice* is unencumbered with the need to examine the harlot from any viewpoint other than that of the two-women *topos*, even though this harlot is subsequently named “Mystery, Babylon” in obvious reference to actions of spiritual fornication and religious idolatry, which are a concern to God primarily in relation to His chosen people, the church (v. 5; 2:14, 20-24). What is perhaps most ironic is that there is not a reliance on dictional correspondence in *Choice*’s effort to show a relationship between the two-women *topos* in classical



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literature and in the biblical text. Rather than similarity of diction in this instance, similarity of *topos* is sufficient.

### Lexical Correspondence

*Choice* does not use the term *lexical correspondence*, but it relies on this method to support its argument. *Webster's New World Dictionary*, Second Edition, defines *lexical* as "of words as isolated items of vocabulary rather than elements in a grammatical structure." Throughout *Choice*, lexical similarity is used to argue an interpretive point, often to the exclusion of the context of the immediate passage, elements of which would argue for a different interpretation. In comparing the significance of the city of Babylon with the New Jerusalem. *Choice* states,

That such a city lament or cult-statue connotation may be intended for the stripping of Babylon (Roma) in Rev 17:16 is suggested by the fact that the "wife" (γυνή) of the lamb appears later in Rev 19:8 wearing the same fine linen (βύσσινος) that had formerly belonged to Babylon (Rev 18:12, 16). (96)

Only a few verses later (Rev 19:7-9), the "radiance" (λαμπρός) that was taken from Babylon is glimpsed again as the apparel of the bride. "Fine linen" (βύσσινος) appears in the cargo list of Babylon's merchants in Rev 18:16 and then in the evil city's decor in Rev 18:12. Along with Babylon's radiance (λαμπρός), her fine linen is also given to the bride in Rev 19:8. (132)

The mere presence of the same lexical elements should not be considered as being strong evidence for such a ludicrous assertion. Consider that in Revelation 19:8, the fine linen is clearly identified as the "righteousnesses of the saints." No such righteousness is present with the harlot; rather, there is only unrighteousness (18:5), and nothing of unrighteousness would be accepted by the bride. Consider that the harlot-city is "utterly burned with fire" (v. 8). After God's judgment there is nothing to give away; all the sumptuous and splendid things have perished (v. 14). And consider that there is no verse in Revelation that indicates that anything of Babylon has been appropriated by the bride. What fellowship has light with darkness? It is not clear why *Choice* sees a need to argue that the fine linen that adorns the bride is the same fine linen that once covered the harlot, unless it is implicitly making the case that in a transformation from an imperialistic to a more egalitarian political economy only the mode of the distribution of goods needs to be adjusted rather than the goods themselves.

### Not Seeing the New Jerusalem

By utilizing a method of interpretation that requires close

dictional correspondence on the one hand and that is based on lexical correspondence on the other hand, the significance of the New Jerusalem is both diminished by *Choice's* failure to make obvious biblical connections and exaggerated by its willingness to ascribe properties to the New Jerusalem that have no basis in the biblical revelation. It is difficult, apart from this strained methodology, to find support for the significance attributed to it by *Choice*, which claims,

First, New Jerusalem is a city. There is no feminine or bridal reference in this letter [to the church in Philadelphia in Revelation 3:7-13], nor any hint that the city will later become a personified woman. Second, the new city will descend from heaven as a gift from God. It is clearly not identical with the audience or the church that is located on earth. (159)

In a footnote to the word *earth* at the end of the above quotation, *Choice* says, "Contra Robert Gundry, 'The New Jerusalem: People as Place, Not Place for People,' *NovT* 29 (1987) 254-65" (159). *Choice* clearly wants to draw a distinction between its view of the New Jerusalem as a utopian political-economic arrangement and Gundry's influential article which argues that the New Jerusalem is a sign of God's people, not a place for them. *Choice* is unwilling to concede that the New Jerusalem is not representative of a place. Going even further, it suggests that this place is not limited to the people of God, the church.

The assertion that the New Jerusalem is "clearly not identical with the audience or the church that is located on earth" simply ignores the biblical text. John is taken to a high mountain and told that he will be shown the bride, the wife of the Lamb, and what he is shown is a city, the New Jerusalem, descending out of heaven (21:9-10). The city is prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (v. 2). Contrary to the assertion that the city is an inviting realm for everyone, *Choice* ignores the text that speaks of the nations bringing their glory and honor into it, of the need for washed robes to enter into it, and of the separation from the dogs, the sorcerers, the fornicators, the murderers, the idolaters, and everyone who loves and makes a lie, who are outside the city (v. 26; 22:14-15). And contrary to the assertion that women in the two-women *topos* are quickly relegated to the sidelines once an ethical contrast has been established, the church as the bride is one of the final images of the Bible. It is the Spirit and the bride who issue the final call to take freely of the water of life (v. 17). It is a mistake to assume that the bride and the city are necessarily mutually exclusive signs. If the Bible does not draw this strong distinction, as in 21:9-10, then there should be no need to impose it on the Bible from without. The choice in Revelation is not a choice between competing political-economies but a

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choice between us as God's people participating in the idolatries and spiritual fornication of the degraded church or of coming out of its spiritual and material degradation in order to be prepared as a bride for our Maker, our Husband, our Christ, the redeeming Lamb, which will consummate this age by causing the Lord to quickly come for His adorned bride.

by John Pester

## God's Will for Your Life

*The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*, by Bruce Wilkinson. Sisters: Multnomah, 2000.

*Secrets of the Vine: Breaking Through to Abundance*, by Bruce Wilkinson with David Kopp. Sisters: Multnomah, 2001.

Over nine million copies sold, forty-nine weeks on *The New York Times*' list for best-selling advice and how-to books, and winner of the Retailers Choice "Book of the Year" award—*The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* (hereafter, *Prayer*) has found broad appeal among American Christians. Its sequel, *Secrets of the Vine: Breaking Through to Abundance* (hereafter, *Secrets*), has also gained much acclaim and has sold over three million copies in less than a year. Due to their widespread popularity, the two books—both written by Dr. Bruce Wilkinson, founder of Walk Thru the Bible Ministries—have been the subject of numerous articles and reviews. This review does not intend to restate the arguments and analyses presented in these prior works but aims to examine these two books from a very particular perspective—God's will, the desire of His heart (Eph. 1:5, 9).

### The Good Pleasure of God's Will

God's will is the source of the entire universe. Revelation 4:11 says, "For You have created all things, and because of Your will they were, and were created." Humankind exists because God has a will. Ephesians 1 reveals that God's will is related to the desire of His heart. Verse 5 speaks of "the good pleasure of His will." The Greek word *will* in this verse indicates "a desire which proceeds from one's heart or emotions" (Wuest 37-38), while the Greek word for the phrase *good pleasure* includes the thought of "delight, satisfaction" (37). Thus, God's will has its source in the desire of God's heart and is for God's own satisfaction and delight.

### God's Will—Christ as the Center and the Body of Christ as the Goal

What then is God's will? The divine revelation in the Scriptures reveals that God's will is that Christ would be reproduced and enlarged in His believers that, as God's many sons and Christ's mystical Body, they would express God in life for eternity as the New Jerusalem. In God's will Christ is the center, and the Body of Christ is the goal. Christ—the only begotten Son of God—brings deep satisfaction to the heart of God. In Matthew 3:17 the Father declares, "This is My Son, the Beloved, in whom I have found My delight." It also gives God great pleasure to see His only begotten Son reproduced in His many sons. Ephesians 1:5 states that it is the "good pleasure of His will" to predestinate us unto sonship. Verse 10 further reveals that it is God's plan to head up all things in Christ and that toward this end, God has given Christ to be Head over all things to the church, which is His Body (vv. 22-23). Ephesians 3 unveils that God's purpose was made in Christ, indicating that Christ is "the center, circumference, element, [and] sphere" (Lee, *Conclusion* 17) of this purpose and that God's purpose is accomplished by manifesting His multifarious wisdom through the church (vv. 10-11). Romans also presents Christ in His person and work as the center of the gospel of God and reveals the Body of Christ as God's will (1:3-4; 12:2). Thus, the center and goal of God's will for Himself is the firstborn Son and the many sons, the Head and the Body, Christ and the church.

### The Will of God as Presented in Prayer

The emphasis of God's will as it is portrayed in *Prayer* is strikingly different from the revelation of the Bible. According to *Prayer*, God's will is encapsulated in the prayer of a man named Jabez: "And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, 'Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be with me, and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain!'" (1 Chron. 4:10, NKJV).

*Prayer* asserts that Jabez's petition "distills God's powerful will" (12) for a believer's future and promises that "[when you] take the little prayer with the giant prize...at that moment...God's great plan for you will surround you and sweep you forward into the profoundly important and satisfying life He has waiting" (17). In *Prayer*, God's will is broken into four aspects—receiving blessing, having our territory enlarged, having God's hand upon us, and being kept from evil. To seek God's blessing is to ask Him to "impart supernatural favor" (23) to us. This, *Prayer* assures us, is God's will: "When we seek God's blessing...we are throwing ourselves entirely into the river of His will and power and purposes for us" (24). To ask God to enlarge our territory is to ask Him to grant

us more influence, responsibility, and opportunity so that we can make a mark for Him in the world. This also is God's perfect will for us. *Prayer* asks, "If the God of heaven loves you infinitely and wants you in His presence every moment, and if He knows that heaven is a much better place for you, then why on earth has He left you here?" (33-34). *Prayer* answers, "Because God wants you to be moving out your boundary lines, taking in new territory for Him" (34). The third aspect of God's will in *Prayer* is that God's hand would be with us. According to the book God's hand means "God's power and presence in the lives of His people" (54), "a fresh spiritual in-filling of God's power" (56). By praying for God's hand to be with us, "we release God's power to accomplish His will" (48). The final aspect of God's will in *Prayer* is for us to be kept from evil. *Prayer* explains, "As we move deeper into the realm of the miraculous, the most effective war against sin that we can wage is to pray that we will not have to fight unnecessary temptation" (68). Thus, according to *Prayer*, God's will is to give His people supernatural favor, enlarge their influence and responsibility in the world, supply them with power to match their increased opportunities, and keep them away from evil.

### *Christ Replaced by Blessing, Influence, and Power*

*Prayer's* presentation of God's will does not match the New Testament revelation of God's will in its center, focus, and emphasis. Christ is absolutely not the center of the "will of God" that is presented in *Prayer*. In fact, for the most part Christ is conspicuously absent from the book. Christ has been entirely replaced by blessing, influence, and power. *Prayer* encourages its readers to "seek God's blessing as the ultimate value in life" (24), to pray for "greater influence" (33), and to "reach boldly for the miracle" (82), but never once does it encourage them to seek Christ, to pray to know Christ, or to reach for more of Christ. *Prayer* does not exalt Christ, promote Christ, or center on Christ, and as a result, the message conveyed in *Prayer* concerning God's will is contrary to the revelation of the Scriptures.

One example of *Prayer's* propensity to substitute other things for Christ is its interpretation of Jabez's prayer for his territory to be enlarged. *Prayer* asserts that at Jabez's time the amount of land that a person owned reflected that person's influence. *Prayer* then concludes that for a New Testament believer, to pray for more land equals praying for God to grant him more influence and responsibility. This interpretation does not measure up to the revelation of the rest of Bible. (In fact, *Prayer* fails to offer a single verse to support it.) The Bible reveals that

the good land in the Old Testament is a type of the all-inclusive Christ. In the Old Testament, God gave the good land to His people for their sustenance and enjoyment; in the New Testament, God gives His people Christ. The way that God gave the good land to the children of Israel was by allotting each tribe a portion. Colossians 1:12 links the allotment of the good land with our participation in Christ, telling us that God has qualified us for "a share of the allotted portion of the saints in the light." This allotted portion is the Christ who is revealed in the remainder of the chapter. Moreover, Colossians 2 reveals that Christ is a realm in which we can walk and the land in which we are rooted (vv. 6-7). Thus, in the New Testament the territory that we should endeavor to have enlarged is Christ Himself. Witness Lee rightly stresses this thought in interpreting Jabez's prayer when he writes:

*The Prayer of Jabez's* presentation of God's will does not match the New Testament revelation of God's will in its center, focus, and emphasis. Christ is absolutely not the center of the "will of God" that is presented in *Prayer*.

I hope that all of us would have such a prayer, a prayer that God would enlarge the border of the enjoyment of the good land; that is, enlarge the border of our enjoyment of Christ. We all need to pray, "O God, enlarge my border in the gaining of Christ and in the enjoyment of Christ." (*Life-study* 18)

A prayer with such a view places Christ at the center of our pursuit, thus matching God's heart's desire. Without Christ and apart from Christ, God has no will, no desire, and no eternal plan. Thus, a Christless depiction of God's will—like the one found in *Prayer*—is not, and can never be, a faithful representation of God's heart's desire.

### *The Body of Christ Neglected*

Another major failure of *Prayer* in its attempt to portray God's will is its neglect of the Body of Christ—the goal of God's heart's desire. *Prayer* does not mention the Body of Christ even once in the entire book. This neglect of God's goal—the Body of Christ—is reflective of the book's persistent emphasis on God's will as it pertains to the individual believer and his or her personal gain, rather than on God's will for Himself and His desire to satisfy His own heart. Consider the way *Prayer* encourages its readers to pray: "O Lord, I beg You first and most...please bless...me!" (18); "Lord, increase the value of my investment portfolios" (31); "Lord, add to my family, favor my key relationships" (32). This selfish stress on man's need over that of God is also manifested in the way *Prayer*

speaks of God's will. Nearly every time *Prayer* mentions God's will, it is in the context of God's will *for us*. Consider the following: "God's powerful will for your future" (12); "His loving will for your life" (17); "God's great plan for you" (17); "what God wants for us" (24); "His will and power and purposes for us" (24); "God's plan for His most-honored servants" (48); "all that God had in mind for us" (88); "His complete will for us" (89). If we focus solely on our own needs and seek only to ascertain "God's will for our lives," we will miss the real significance of God's will. The Bible reveals that God's will is first and foremost related to His own desire and satisfaction. If readers adopt the narrow, self-centered, and individualistic view presented in *Prayer*, they will be hindered from seeing God's ultimate goal—the Body of Christ, His corporate expression—and will be frustrated from ever participating in it.

### The Will of God as Presented in *Secrets*

*Secrets* also claims to unfold God's desire and plan. However, *Secrets* is very different than *Prayer* both in its tone and in its content. While *Prayer's* concern is God's mighty working as manifested in miracles and displays of power, *Secrets* speaks of "God's invisible hand" (27) and His "still small voice" (113). While *Prayer* highlights outward blessing, outward influence, and outward power, *Secrets* states that "what happens on the surface doesn't count; what's happening inside does" (105). Moreover, while *Prayer* consistently encourages its readers to seek something other than Christ, *Secrets* ultimately admonishes them to "seek the Lord until you find Him" (108).

Taking John 15 as its primary text, *Secrets* concludes that God "has left us on this planet for one compelling reason—and it has everything to do with fruit....We are here to fulfill God's dream—that *we will bring Him glory through a remarkably abundant life*" (18, 22). In chapter two, "What God Wants," *Secrets* defines fruit. *Secrets* states that bearing fruit is not limited only to bringing others to Christ but includes all good works—both outward and inward. *Secrets* explains:

Fruit represents good works—a thought, attitude or action of ours that God values because it glorifies Him....You bear inner fruit when you allow God to nurture in you a new, Christlike quality: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."...You bear outward fruit when you allow God to work through you to bring Him glory. (21)

With this understanding as its base, *Secrets* proceeds to trace the ways in which God deals with His people to enable them to bear fruit. *Secrets* speaks of three stages to God's dealing—discipline, in which God works to

remove sin from our lives; pruning, in which He touches "self-oriented behaviors" (62); and mature pruning, in which God deals with our inner values and personal identity in order to make Christ "Lord of all [we] desire" (80).

### Christ Promoted

In comparison to *Prayer*, *Secrets* does a better job at recognizing the centrality of Christ in God's will, even linking God's goal to the expression of Christ. *Secrets* states, "His goal is to bring you closer to the 'perfect and complete' image of Christ" (73). In chapters seven and eight of the book—"More of God, More *with* God" and "Living in the Presence"—*Secrets* repeatedly exhorts its readers to value the Lord above any outward activity or service for Him. *Secrets* rightly states:

In abiding, you seek, long for, thirst for, wait for, see, know, love, hear, and respond to...*a person*. More abiding means more of God in your life, more of Him in your activities, thoughts, and desires.

In our Western-style rush to do and perform for God, we often falter at the task of simply enjoying His company. Yet we were created to be dissatisfied and incomplete with less. (103)

In keeping with this exhortation, *Secrets* admonishes its readers to cultivate a personal relationship with Christ by seeking Him in the Word:

Abiding begins with visible spiritual disciplines, such as Bible reading and prayer. Yet it may shock you to find out that *we can do these things for years without abiding*. After all, reading about a person isn't the same thing as knowing the person who wrote the book....When you read your Bible, receive it and savor it like food, like a treasure, like a love letter from God to you. Remember, you're reading in order to meet Someone....Let it go down into the core of your being....Decide to seek the Lord until you find Him. (105, 108)

*Secrets* also encourages its readers to maintain an "ongoing, vital connection" (96) with the vine so that the "life-giving nutrients in the sap [can] flow through to the developing fruit" (95). It asserts that we can never make an eternal impact for the Lord without the one thing we are most likely to forget—"more of Him" (97). This emphasis on seeking Christ, loving Christ, and valuing Christ is a significant improvement over *Prayer* in approximating God's will that Christ would be our unique center.

### The Body of Christ Ignored

Although *Secrets* directs its readers to seek Christ—the



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center of God's will—the book entirely ignores the Body of Christ—the goal of God's will. *Secrets* speaks of fruit born by individual believers and their experiences, but never once does the book even mention the Body of Christ. Without the Body of Christ as the goal, all spiritual pursuit, even the pursuit of Christ, is aimless and does not contribute to the accomplishment of God's eternal desire.

*Secrets'* failure to highlight the Body of Christ, the goal of God's will, is particularly inexcusable in light of its title—"Secrets of the Vine"—because the vine in John 15 is a striking revelation of this very reality. The vine not only points to the relationship of Christ with His individual believers, but even more it unveils

a great, corporate, universal organism—the organism of the Triune God....The true vine, which is Christ the Son, with its branches, which are the believers in the Son, is the organism of the Triune God in God's economy to grow with the Father's riches and express His life. (Kangas 21)

In this organism, the Father is the Husbandman who cultivates the vine, Christ the Son, so that the Spirit, as the life-sap within the vine, will flow into the branches, the believers, causing this organism to grow "with the growth of God" (Col. 2:19). This growing organism is the Body of Christ—the goal of God's divine enterprise throughout the ages (Eph. 4:12-13, 16). Christ, the Head of the Body, is the vine, and we, the members of the Body, are His branches. Thus, all the fruit borne by the vine is for the building up of the Body, and all the experiences of the individual branches are for the growth of the Body.

### God's Will for Himself

God's will has its source in God's good pleasure—the desire of His heart. First and foremost, God's will is about God Himself. He is the source, Christ is the center, and Christ's Body is the goal. We all must realize that we are not the source, we are not the center, and we are not the goal. At the end of the book, *Secrets* concludes, "The message of *Secrets of the Vine*, like *The Prayer of Jabez* before it, is grounded in a simple but profound assertion: that we unlock change in our lives and in our world when we choose to do God's will" (120-121). This statement succinctly captures the chief concern of both books. Ultimately, *Secrets* and *Prayer* are more about "our lives" and "our world" than they are about God and His will.

by Nathan Vigil

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### Coming Short of the True Marks of a Healthy Church

"Marks of a Healthy Church," by Kenneth O. Gangel. *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (October-December 2001): 467-77.

Apprehensive that Christian leaders are occupied more with the church's numerical increase than her spiritual quality, more with the church's accommodation to the world than the preservation of her purity, Kenneth O. Gangel, Scholar in Residence, Toccoa Falls College, Toccoa Falls, Georgia, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Christian Education at Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas, seeks to present in "Marks of a Healthy Church" (hereafter "Healthy Church") scriptural yardsticks that measure a church's health. Critiquing the inroads that contemporary culture and sociology are making into modern Christianity, "Healthy Church" calls for a return to a biblical pattern of worship, ministry, theology, and leadership. Quoting Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., in upholding the Bible as the "completely true and trustworthy" Word of God, the article overall accords primacy to the church's spiritual maturity rather than statistical growth, and promotes the mutual ministry and fellowship among the believers (475). Yet despite its attempt to expose and remedy matters that are detrimental to a church's health, the article lays bare only the external symptoms of sicknesses evident in modern Christianity. It fails to diagnose the internal cause of the diseases—different teachings that destroy the oneness of the church and distract the believers from their experience of the Triune God as life. It also fails to provide the unique cure to the diseases—healthy teaching that ministers the Triune God into the believers to be their life supply. As a consequence of these deficiencies, the article's criteria for measuring a church's health fall far short of God's supreme standard for the church—a glorious corporate expression.

At the outset "Healthy Church" voices the concern that

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Christian leaders must not mistake “church size” for a “guarantee of a spiritual quality” and that churches should exercise caution to “avoid marrying [churches with] the spirit of this age and becoming a widow in the next” (467). In reconsidering the priorities of churches, “Healthy Church” suggests five marks of a healthy church. First, healthy churches are measured in spiritual rather than numerical terms because numerical growth can occur for the wrong reasons. In fact, it states that believers in

role in spiritual warfare, that is, the church’s responsibility to deal with the devil and his kingdom by the Word, prayer, and truth.

Despite these merits, “Healthy Church” suffers from four main deficiencies. First, the article fails to discern the root cause of the sickness afflicting Christianity—different teachings that sow seeds of death, poison, and division, which damage the Body of Christ. The article rightly cites Acts 2:42-47 as a passage that reveals “the formula for healthy churches” (468-469). Unfortunately, however, the article comes short of highlighting the foremost factor upon which a church’s vitality, mutuali-

ty, growth, and one accord hinge: her continuing steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles (v. 42). In essence, what determines the health of a church is the health of her teaching (2 Tim. 4:3). Hence, in Titus, an Epistle that discusses the maintenance of order in the church, Paul identifies healthy teaching as the faithful word, which is according to the teaching of the apostles (1:9). When referring to healthy teaching or the teaching of the apostles, the New Testament never speaks of *teachings* in the plural but invariably of *the teaching* in the singular (Acts 2:42; Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 1:10; 4:6; 6:1, 3; 2 Tim. 3:10; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1), whereas each time the New Testament speaks of *teachings* or teaching different things, its usage and context are unequivocally negative, referring to the degraded state of the church (Eph. 4:14; Col. 2:22; 1 Tim. 1:3-4; 4:1; Heb. 13:9). Hence, in 1 Timothy 1:3-4, Paul exhorts Timothy in the church in Ephesus to prohibit different teachings, that is, any teachings different from and other than God’s economy, which is in faith. The singular teaching allowed by the apostles and thus recognized by God is the teaching of God’s New Testament economy, the healthy teaching that unveils, embodies, and dispenses the Triune God as life into the believers for their growth in the divine life unto maturity to build up the church as the Body of Christ. Any teachings other than God’s economy, however scriptural and spiritual they may seem, deprive the believers of their experience of Christ and distract them from the building up of the church as the corporate expression of Christ. Since Paul repeatedly avers that his teaching is the same universally in every church (1 Cor. 4:17; 7:17; 11:16), the apostles’ teaching, the unique teaching of God’s New Testament economy, should be the constitution of the church which all the churches must hold. All the spiritual diseases, darkness, and divisions rampant in Christianity stem from a single source: neglecting the teaching of the apostles, the healthy teaching of God’s economy. “Healthy Church” does not identify this prime cause of Christianity’s sickness.

## What determines the health of a church is the health of her teaching. Hence, in Titus, an Epistle that discusses the maintenance of order in the church, Paul identifies healthy teaching as the faithful word, which is according to the teaching of the apostles.

small churches may exhibit more spiritual maturity than those in large churches. Second, healthy churches follow biblical rather than cultural patterns of ministry. The article bemoans Christianity’s practice of culturally contextualizing the gospel which has led to the loss of Christianity’s distinctiveness and the “abandonment of *sola Scriptura* as the regulative principle” (470). Third, healthy churches are based on theological rather than sociological foundations. The article laments that in the church growth movement, methodology and sociological pragmatism occupy center stage and take the reins, thereby marginalizing theology to irrelevance. Fourth, healthy churches focus on a ministry rather than a marketing model. In other words, healthy churches reject a culture driven by an infatuation with economy; instead they embrace “functioning in God’s grace and power” in accord with “the resources He has provided” (475). Fifth, healthy churches adopt scriptural rather than secular models of leadership. An autocratic model of oppressive leadership, which he acknowledges is widespread in contemporary Christianity, should give way to a servant model of shared leadership shown in the New Testament.

Three features in “Healthy Church” warrant affirmation. First, rejecting a post-modern denial of absolute truth, it affirms the supremacy of the Bible as the sole standard of God’s absolute truth by which everything must be tested. It also honors the Bible as the unique guide for believers’ lives and practices as well as the only basis for forming a valid theology and worldview. Second, recognizing God’s desire for all His people to be “a kingdom of priests” (Exo. 19:5-6), the author encourages the mutual ministry among the believers, an admirable step toward the practice of the universal priesthood. “Healthy Church” asserts, “Central to healthy congregational life is the biblical mandate of mutual ministry (Rom. 12:5) and the willing and joyous participation of believers ministering to each other (1 Pet. 2:4-9)” (468-469). Third, the article should be credited for its insight into the church’s

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Since the healthy teaching of the apostles, focused on God's economy, is the constitution of the church, it is the vital mark of a healthy church—a mark the article completely misses. Although the article admirably advocates returning to the Bible, it fails to present the unique teaching revealed in the New Testament, which is God's desire to dispense Himself in Christ into His redeemed humanity for the producing of His enlarged expression. The healthy teaching is certainly scriptural because it is based upon and sourced in the Scriptures, but scriptural teachings can become unhealthy if they are given undue emphasis, becoming major doctrines that deviate from the central revelation of God's economy and forming the basis of divisions and sects (Rom. 16:17).

A second shortcoming of the article is the condoning of sectarian division within the Body of Christ. Several times "Healthy Church" underscores the importance of the unity of the church: "first-century believers were marked by unity" (470); "believers must first develop a spirit of unity" (472). At the same time, however, the article countenances the system of denominationalism. When speaking of "a small evangelical denomination," "denominational leaders" (467), and "each denominational official" (477), the article fails to critique the damage denominationalism has caused to the oneness of the church. An example of the damage of denominationalism is prominently displayed in the preface of Today's New International Version of the Bible (Preview Edition), which says,

The NIV was a completely new translation made by over a hundred scholars working directly from the best available Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts....That [participants] were from many *denominations*—including Anglican, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Brethren, Christian Reformed, Church of Christ, Evangelical Free, Lutheran, Methodist, Nazarene, Presbyterian, Wesleyan and other churches—helped to *safeguard* the translation from *sectarian bias*. (v, emphasis added)

This preface clearly associates and identifies denominations with sects. Second, it tacitly acknowledges the inherent peril denominationalism imposes on the Body of Christ, the peril that must be remedied to *safeguard* against *sectarian bias*. A sect is not merely an aberrant offshoot of Christianity that adheres to heretical teachings; it is tantamount to any division in the Body of Christ, albeit founded on apparently biblical grounds. Although "Healthy Church" condones sectarianism, the Bible condemns it. The Bible's unqualified indictment against sectarianism is evident in Paul's characterization of factions, divisions, and sects as works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-20). When the Corinthian believers ever-so-slightly tended toward divisions by forming factions according to Paul, Apollos, and Cephas, Paul rebuked them as "infants

in Christ" and "men of flesh," and protested with the piercing question: "Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor. 1:10-13; 3:1, 3-4). Certainly Christ is not, and cannot be, divided, nor His Body, the church (Eph. 4:4). Thus, the Bible allows no base, reason, excuse, justification, or vindication for any division. To preserve the vital unity of the Body of Christ, the New Testament forbids all grounds of division, including spiritual leaders (1 Cor. 1:12), doctrinal differences (Gal. 5:20), racial or national differences (1 Cor. 12:13), and social distinctions (Col. 3:10-11).

All divisions, denominations, and sects originate from the believers' ignorance, or neglect, of the church's divinely ordained ground of oneness. The church as a spiritual house is built upon Christ as the unique foundation, which is laid on the genuine ground of oneness—the oneness of the universal Body of Christ, kept and expressed in each local church at its locality (1 Cor. 3:9-11). The New Testament reveals two principal aspects of the unique oneness of the church ground: the constitutional aspect and the practical aspect. First, the constitutional aspect of the unique oneness for the church ground is the oneness of the universal Body of Christ, which is the oneness of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3) and the oneness of the divine constitution by the Divine Trinity (John 17:21-23). This divine oneness separates all the believers from the unbelievers and unites all the believers together to be the one Body of Christ; this spiritual unity transcends all social, racial, and national distinctions and accounts for the impossibility of division between believers. Second, the practical aspect of the unique oneness for the church ground is the locality in which a local church is established and exists. The Word of God allows only one factor to circumscribe all of the believers living and meeting together: geography. Though spiritual oneness overcomes all barriers of time and space, physical limitations make it impossible for all Christians to gather in one locality. According to God's wisdom in preserving the oneness of the church, the New Testament establishes a consistent pattern of one church in each city under one administration as the one practical expression of the unique Body of Christ (Acts 8:1; 13:1; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Rev. 1:11). The sphere, boundary, and jurisdiction of the church are identical to those of the city in which the church is located. In short, the ground of the church is the city in which the church exists. Any group of believers who divides itself from others by taking different names and thus departs from the God-ordained ground of oneness cannot be regarded as a church but a sect. Oneness is the governing principle of the Body of Christ; thus a "church" that is a division can never be a healthy church. Neglecting this principle, the article misses an indispensable mark of a healthy church: a church that stands on the unique ground of oneness of the Body of Christ.

Third, “Healthy Church” misses the inner content of the church. Rightly esteeming a church’s spiritual quality higher than her numerical growth, the article discusses the need for the “spiritual maturity” of the church (468, 476). Citing Ephesians 4:2-6, “Healthy Church” correctly recognizes Ephesians as a book that “identifies biblical goals for the church and describes how they can be achieved” (472). Yet due to its neglect of the intrinsic constitution of the church, the article fails to define the spiritual maturity of the church. The New Testament on the whole, and Ephesians in particular, reveals that the intrinsic constitution of the church as the Body of Christ is the Triune God—the Father, Son, and Spirit—united, mingled, and incorporated with a group of His tripartite believers (Eph. 4:4-6). Thus, in 1 Corinthians 3:12, Paul presents the touchstone of God’s judgment upon the proper building materials of the church as God’s building—the Triune God wrought into His believers as gold signifying the Father with His divine nature, silver signifying the Son with His redemption, and precious stones signifying the Spirit with His transforming work. Only Christ Himself dispensed into His believers is the life of the church (Col. 3:4), the constituent of the church (vv. 10-11), and the content of the church (Eph. 3:17); in turn, the church is the fullness of Christ (1:23), the increase of Christ (John 3:29-30), and even the enlarged Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). Thus, the genuine spiritual growth of the church is the growth of God, the increase of Christ, and the saturation of the Spirit within the believers (Col. 2:19; Gal. 4:19; Eph. 4:15, 30). Only when the church as the Body of Christ “grows with the growth of God” and thus “causes the growth of the Body,” will we “arrive at...a full-grown man, at the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Col. 2:19; Eph. 4:16, 13). Due to its deficient understanding of the spiritual maturity of the church, the article misses the intrinsic criterion of a healthy church: the measure of the increase of Christ Himself within the believers.

Finally, the article’s yardsticks for measuring church health come short of God’s transcendent requirement for the church—His glory. God’s supreme standard of measurement is glory (Rom. 3:23). Glory is God expressed in splendor through the release, impartation, and multiplication of the divine life (John 12:23-28). The church that meets God’s need, fulfills His eternal purpose, and satisfies His heart is not merely a healthy church but, much more, a glorious church, the masterpiece of God that exhibits His multifarious wisdom, Christ in His unsearchable riches (Eph. 2:10; 3:10-11, 8). It must be noted that in Ephesians 5:27, when characterizing the church in her consummate state—the holy and blemishless bride of Christ worthy to be presented to Christ at His advent for the delight of His heart—Paul is inspired by the Spirit to use a term that matches God’s ultimate requirement for the church: *glorious*. Verse 26 elucidates

how the church becomes glorious: Christ cleansing her by the washing of the water in the word, that is, Christ as the Spirit speaking to the believers words of spirit and life to wash away the old and flow Himself as the new element into them (John 6:63; Eph. 6:17; 1 Cor. 15:45). Nothing less than *God Himself* wrought into and reflected through His transformed believers can meet God’s supreme standard of glory (Eph. 1:3-14; 2 Cor. 3:18). Ephesians 3 thus reveals that what prompts Paul’s doxology to God—“To Him be the glory in the church”—is his faith in the all-powerful God who is more than equal to the task of working out the apostle’s prayer for the believers in the church in Ephesus—that Christ would make His home in their hearts to permeate their inward parts with Himself so that they may be filled unto all the fullness of God, the overflowing expression of the riches of Christ constituted into their being (vv. 14-21). The New Jerusalem—the ultimate consummation of the church—as a bride adorned for her husband has the glory of God, which shines brightly as the divine light in Christ the Lamb as the lamp through the glorified believers as the transparent jasper wall for the eternal, consummate, corporate expression of the Triune God (Rev. 21:2, 11, 23). The glory of God is wrought into and radiates through the constituents of the holy city because God in Christ as the Spirit is ever saturating them as the crystal-bright river of water of life and feeding them as the abundantly fruitful tree of life to be their life, life supply, and everything (22:1-2, 14)

Despite its genuine intention to remedy sicknesses afflicting Christianity, “Healthy Church” neither discerns their root cause nor supplies the solution. The article concludes by exhorting the believers to “target God’s priorities and then allow Him to produce in those churches what He wants—from the inside out” (477). But the article misses God’s paramount priority: His desired purpose to produce glory in the church by working Himself as life into the believers’ inner being for the building up of the one Body of Christ practically expressed in many local churches. In so doing, “Healthy Church” neglects the healthy teaching of God’s economy, tolerates denominational divisions in the Body, and fails to reveal the intrinsic content of the church. Because of these failings, the marks presented in the article to measure church health come short of God’s transcendent demand of glory for the church.

by David Yoon

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