

Misrepresented Goal: Heaven as a Restoration of the Garden of Eden

What the Bible Reveals about Heaven: Answers to Your Questions, by Daniel A. Brown. Ventura: Regal Books, 1999.

In *What the Bible Reveals about Heaven: Answers to Your Questions* (hereafter *Heaven*), Daniel A. Brown, the founding pastor of The Coastlands in Aptos, California, seeks to critique anthropocentric notions of heaven based upon human culture and to provide a theocentric “primer on Heaven” founded upon the Bible (16). To disabuse believers of the unbiblical notions of life after death that permeate the current culture, Brown endeavors to present a biblical picture of heaven by building “a systematic yet simple understanding that explains the incredible physical and spiritual realities of our promised afterlife” (16). Yet *Heaven* is constructed upon a speculative cosmology of heaven that is not corroborated by the Scriptures. The book then builds its eschatology upon this dubious cosmology, claiming that God’s ultimate intention is to restore His relationship with man to its uncontaminated state prior to the fall, and that the believers’ eternal destiny is to dwell in “Heaven,” a distinct part of the new cosmos in which physical and spiritual dimensions merge. Such assertions run counter to the heart of the divine revelation in the Scriptures—God’s desire to make Himself one with man by working Himself into man as life for the producing of a corporate counterpart for Christ. Therefore, *Heaven* defrauds the believers of a proper understanding of the center, the goal, and the consummation of God’s eternal purpose, and deprives the believers of the present experiences of Christ required for the preparation of His counterpart.

Heaven’s Cosmology and Eschatology

In the introduction, Brown observes that most readers of the Bible are left with “only sketchy details and a partial picture of what awaits us after this life” (15). Thus, he intends to “piece together in a coherent fashion” passages regarding heaven scattered throughout the Bible in order to present a “full picture of Heaven” (17). In chapter one, “Eternity in Our Hearts,” the book asserts that according to Ecclesiastes 3:11, God has put eternity in our hearts so

that everyone longs for a “forever state” (29). This innate sense of the eternal begets in our hearts a “sincere expectation of someday enjoying a life of perpetual good and bounty,” which is a “foreshadowing of Heaven” (30).

In chapter two, “The Heavens and the Earth,” *Heaven* proceeds to present and define its understanding of a biblical cosmology containing three heavens: the first heaven—“what we call the sky and outer space”; the second heaven—“the invisible spiritual dimension”; and the third heaven—“the place where God lives and where believers in Jesus Christ will live for eternity” (53). In each of the three realms of the cosmos, the inhabitants’ bodies are made of substances suitable to the respective realms. The first heaven is comprised solely of a physical substance and populated exclusively by natural beings such as birds of the air and the starry hosts. In contrast, the second heaven is spiritual in nature and is inhabited mostly by “spirit-beings” such as the legions of God’s angels and spirits of evil (72). The third heaven is a particular section within the second heaven. It is the dwelling place of God from which the devil was banished and to which only obedient spirit-beings have access.

In chapter three, “Natural and Supernatural,” the book argues that there is a constant interaction between the invisible spiritual world (the second heaven) and our visible physical world (the first heaven and earth). Just as the hosts of the first heaven determine earth’s seasons and tides, the hosts of the second heaven “can affect the turning of lives and the very tides of human history” (81). Brown highlights that God created man with a body, soul, and spirit. The spirit, in particular, is a substance that is part of the second heaven, connecting man to the spiritual realm. Brown laments that by confusing soul with spirit, many people have made staggering technological advances and discoveries by the exertion of their soul yet have failed to see their need to be spiritually reborn by the Spirit of God.

In chapter four, “Death: One Foe Remaining,” Brown contends that when believers die, their body and their soul and spirit separate from each other and pass into their respective dimension of the cosmos—their body returns to dust, and their spirit ascends into the heavens. In chapter five, “Life after Death,” Brown considers our life after death by examining the death and resurrection of Jesus. Upon death, Jesus left the physical realm of the earth and descended into Hades, where He liberated His

people who were imprisoned by the power of death; then in His resurrection and ascension He took them into the heavens, where His followers will go after their death. By contrast, the dead unbelievers will stay in Hades until the great judgment day when they, with Hades, death, the demons, and the devil, will be thrown into the lake of fire for eternity.

In chapter six, “The New Heavens and Earth,” *Heaven* describes the end times when God will recondition the cosmos to return to the condition of the garden of Eden in the beginning in which the physical and the spiritual worlds were integrated. Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, the natural world has become worn out and sullied. Through a series of cataclysmic events that will culminate in the day of the Lord, the righteous God will judge the world yet will keep His children intact and deliver them into a spiritual kingdom. The second coming of Christ will mark the turning point for the renewal of the cosmos through which the spirit realm will be utterly interconnected with the physical realm and the believers will leave behind their earthly bodies and join Him in the realm of spirit.

In chapter seven, “The ‘Place’ Called Heaven,” the book discusses “Heaven” as a wonderful place in the new heavens and earth. “Heaven,” the believers’ eternal dwelling place, is not a state of mind but a real and substantial place as a part of the new cosmos. In fact, Brown equates it with the New Jerusalem. As a place of perfect fulfillment, the New Jerusalem is not a sign but an actual place where we will find perpetual delight, worship God, and sing His praises throughout eternity.

Upholding the supremacy of the Bible, *Heaven* critiques astrology and practices of occult and New Age religions that emphasize transporting people out of the limitation of the physical plane. According to Brown, “the way that stars, planets, or comets may line up or move through the nights has no meaning at all for what happens in our personal, earthly experience” (57). Brown also asserts that near-death experiences “can easily mislead us from the more profound truths about the life we can expect after death” (132). The book admirably insists that all revelation of heaven “must align with the revealed word of God found in the Bible” (90).

Brown recognizes the tripartite nature of man. He claims that man is composed of body, soul, and spirit—“bodies are physical; souls are natural; spirits are supernatural” (96). The book underlines the distinction between soul and spirit by quoting Hebrews 4:12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23. Cognizant of the limitations of the soul and the primacy of the spirit, Brown repudiates the false notion that “the human soul is intrinsically divine, able to reconnect with its immortal beginnings by transcending earthly

limitations through discipline, knowledge, meditation or some other means” (98). He underlines Jesus’ words in John 3, saying, “If you haven’t been made alive in your spirit, then you cannot see the things of the Spirit of God” (97). Brown’s recognition of the trichotomous nature of man, the limits of the human soul, and the primacy of the human spirit is a right step toward understanding the tripartite constitution of man for his subjective interaction with the Triune God.

Despite these few merits, *Heaven* suffers from some serious shortcomings that grow out of its unreliable cosmology. What the book offers as a “biblical view of the cosmos” (52) centered on three heavens cannot be substantiated by the Scriptures. Undoubtedly Paul’s mention of the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12:2 assures us of the existence of the third heaven and implies a first and second heaven.¹ Yet nowhere does the Bible mention the terms *first heaven* and *second heaven*, much less give a detailed description of them. Without a definitive understanding of the first and second heavens’ nature, occupants, and role in the scheme of God’s plan, it is dangerous to build a theological superstructure upon such a shaky cosmological foundation. *Heaven’s* theology heavily—if not entirely—relies on its view of the second heaven as the spiritual realm whose elements are “spirit in nature” (61). But the book offers no verses that definitively corroborate these assertions. In an attempt to substantiate its claim regarding the second heaven, the book cites Ephesians 2:2, which speaks of “the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (72); it also mentions 6:12, which speaks of spiritual forces of evil in “heavenly places” (63). While these Scriptures affirm that angels are spiritual beings in the air or in heavenly places, they by no means prove that the angels’ abode in itself is spiritual in nature or that this “air” is the second heaven.

In fact, the paucity of description related to the three heavens in the Scriptures may bespeak their insignificance in the accomplishment of God’s eternal purpose. A proper biblical cosmology is unveiled in what Zechariah emphatically calls “the burden of the word of Jehovah”: “Thus declares Jehovah, who stretches forth the heavens and lays the foundations of the earth and forms the spirit of man within him” (12:1). This succinct depiction of God’s creative act intimates the priority in God’s mind concerning the universe: the heavens exist for the earth, the earth exists for man, and man with his human spirit exists for God to fulfill His purpose. Disclosing His heart’s longing through the prophet Isaiah, God also declares that although heaven is His throne and the earth His footstool, He ultimately looks to man’s spirit for His place of rest (66:1-2). These verses reveal that the heavens do not occupy a central place in God’s intention; rather, they merely serve as a setting in which God carries out His

desired purpose to be joined to man within his spirit as the focal point of His interaction with man (1 Cor. 6:17).

The Focus of God's Plan: Heaven versus Christ

Governed by a cosmology that takes "Heaven" as the believers' final destiny, the book errs in presenting their dwelling in "Heaven" for eternity as the focal point of God's eternal intention. In so doing, *Heaven* distracts the believers from their present experience of abiding in Christ. The book declares that "God's ultimate plan is for us to spend life with Him forever in a 'place' called Heaven" (158). The book's erroneous view of "Heaven" as "our eternal home" is predicated upon its misinterpretation of the Lord's promise to prepare a dwelling place for His believers in John 14:2-3 (59). *Heaven* also posits that each dwelling place in "Heaven" for every believer is prepared, "custom-designed and built," by Jesus (193). Although the book infers from John 14:2-3 that Jesus promised "to prepare a place for His followers in Heaven" (35), the context of the verses indicates that the dwelling place He promised to prepare for His believers is not heaven—it is Himself. John 14:2-3 must be understood as a part of, and in light of, John 14—16, the Lord's address to His disciples prior to His crucifixion. In these three chapters the Lord did not once mention the term *heaven* or *heavens*; instead, He repeatedly spoke of His believers abiding in Him. In 14:1 the Lord consoled the perplexed disciples by unveiling Himself as the divine and mystical realm for them to enter: "Do not let your heart be troubled;...believe also *into Me*" (emphasis added). In verse 20, speaking of the day of His resurrection, the Lord prophesied to the disciples, "In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you *in Me*, and I *in you*" (emphasis added). In 15:1-2 the Lord revealed Himself as the true vine and each believer as a "branch in Me." Based upon this revelation, He commanded: "Abide in Me and I in you" (vv. 4-5). In the last verse of the Lord's discourse to the disciples, He contrasted Himself as the divine and mystical realm with the physical world: "In Me you may have peace. In the world you have affliction" (16:33). It is a small wonder that in John 14:3 the Lord said to the disciples, "If I...prepare a place for you, I...will receive you to Myself." *Heaven* fails to see that Christ Himself, not heaven, is the Father's house, our true abode—the realm in which we abide to enjoy comfort, life supply, and peace (2:19, 21). This failure springs from the book's misplaced focus on "Heaven," rather than on Christ, as the centrality of God's economy.

The Goal of God's Plan: Restoration versus Deification

Because *Heaven* is based on a speculative cosmology, it cannot see the goal of God's central purpose, the deification of humanity for His eternal, corporate expression. Though mysterious, this is clearly revealed in the New Testament. *Heaven* asserts that "God's whole interest is in restoring our relationship with Him, which was lost when sin broke our worlds apart" (195). According to this book, God's ultimate plan is to restore His relationship with man to its unsullied condition before the sin of Adam and Eve. The book claims that "the greatest outcome of eternal life will be restored relationship with God in the heavens" (122). According to *Heaven*, "the essence of true life" is that "we who were once far off, excluded from God and without hope, have been brought near to God through the blood of Jesus Christ" (231). The book's core concept of a "restored relationship with God" is succinctly revealed in the following excerpt:

God's original purpose in His creation of man is not fulfilled by having immaculate yet empty human vessels that are cleansed from sin but also devoid of God, residing with God in some restored spiritual environment.

We are like expensive antique bureaus that years ago were finely detailed and hand-crafted by a famous woodworker. Since our creation we have been gouged by many things; we have been spilled upon, burnt by hot wax, water-stained and repainted in garish colors. Our hinges are loose, the drawers do not slide like they used to and one of our edges has been stripped of its molding. When such antique pieces *get restored* and refinished, they are *not fundamentally altered*; rather, they are renewed *to what they have always been*, despite the wear and tear. (224, emphasis added)

Whereas *Heaven* compares created human beings to antique bureaus finely detailed and hand-crafted by a famous woodworker, the Bible consistently likens them to vessels molded by the hands of the skilled and purposeful Potter (Isa. 64:8; Lam. 4:2; Rom. 9:20-23; 2 Tim. 2:20-21; 1 Pet. 3:7). As a vessel of mercy fashioned according to God's image and prepared unto glory, man was created to receive and contain God as his unique content and to be filled and overflow with God for His radiant expression that "He might make known the riches of His glory" (Rom. 9:23; Gen. 1:26; Isa. 43:7). Through the fall of Adam, these human vessels were damaged, contaminated, and corrupted by sin, Satan, and death, but through the redemption of Christ, the last Adam, the chosen vessels were washed, purified, and sanctified by the precious blood of the spotless Lamb of God (Rom. 5:12-16; Rev. 7:14; Heb. 9:14; 13:12). Yet God's original purpose in His creation of man is not fulfilled by having immaculate yet empty human vessels that are cleansed from sin but also

devoid of God, residing with God in some restored spiritual environment. God's eternal purpose can be accomplished only by God in Christ as the Spirit imparting Himself as life into man's tripartite vessel to make Himself one with man, thus making man the same as He is in life, nature, constitution, and expression, but not in the Godhead (John 3:6; 2 Pet. 1:4; Gal. 4:19; 1 John 3:2). When this process of deification is completed within man, he is more than simply restored to his pristine, sinless state; he is fundamentally altered in his constitution, because through the divine dispensing, God's own being has become the intrinsic constituent of his being. Paul, a chosen vessel appointed to know the will of God, testified in 2 Corinthians that amidst relentless suffering, he as a fragile, worthless, earthen vessel enjoyed the indwelling Christ as the powerful, excellent, heavenly treasure, while being progressively transformed into the same image of the Lord from glory to glory (Acts 9:15; 22:14; 2 Cor. 4:7; 3:18). Owing to its stress on an outward restoration, *Heaven's* view of the goal of God's plan falls woefully short of the biblical revelation of God's desire to deify humanity by the divine dispensing for His expression.

Because it fails to see God's intention to deify man's tripartite being, *Heaven* resorts to characterizing the three parts of man mainly by their suitability to inhabiting "Heaven." The book highlights the need to be spiritually reborn by the Spirit of God, citing John 3:6—"that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (99). Yet the book goes on to say, "Just as our earthly bodies are not suitable for the first heaven, so in parallel fashion they are not suitable for Heaven. That is why Jesus tells us we must be born again (born from above)" (59). The book implies that we need to be born again spiritually for the express purpose of being suitable to dwell in "Heaven," the spiritual dimension where God is. Thus, the book indicates that both the reason for rebirth and the role of the human spirit are to connect with the second heaven, an external spiritual sphere where God objectively dwells. In contrast, the Bible reveals that the human spirit is man's innermost part to which God in Christ as the Spirit intends to join Himself (1 Pet. 3:4; Heb. 4:12; Isa. 66:1-2; 1 Cor. 6:17); hence, the regenerated believers' spirit is a mingled spirit in which the divine Spirit is joined to the human spirit (Rom. 8:9, 16; 2 Tim. 4:22; John 3:6). The believers' mingled spirit is not only the place where God dwells (Eph. 2:22) but also the center from which the Triune God intends to spread Himself to the circumference of their tripartite being in order to deify them (1 Thes. 5:23). In this light, *Heaven* does a disservice to the reader by relegating the function of the human spirit primarily to contacting an external spiritual dimension. The book comes far short of the biblical view of the ultimate significance of the human spirit: the starting point of the process of deification, the source from which God imparts Himself into man's entire tripartite being (Rom. 8:10, 6, 11).

Heaven's view of the destiny of the believers' body also is profoundly distorted by the book's desire to reconcile the status of the believers' physical body with its speculative, spiritualized cosmology. It states, "Since our glorified bodies will be made of heavenly substance, we will no longer be vessels containing the Spirit. We, ourselves, will be distinct spirit-beings in whose company and in whose midst God will be ever present" (191-192). The book errs in claiming that upon receiving our new bodies in heaven, "we will no longer be vessels containing the Spirit." Although the book rightly indicates that the Holy Spirit began to dwell in us when we were reborn by the Spirit, it is wrong in its suggestion that the Spirit will be eventually withdrawn from our being when we receive our glorified bodies and become distinct spirit-beings apart from the Spirit. Such a claim effectively nullifies our regeneration—a process by which we received God in Christ as the life-giving Spirit into us (John 3:6; 1 Cor. 15:45)—making us no different from unbelievers, unregenerate human beings without God. Such an extraction of the indwelling Spirit, however, is impossible in the divine economy, for regeneration is an irreversible process whereby the divine Spirit is mingled with and forever joined to the human spirit, making God and man one entity: "He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17; Eph. 2:22). The book's alarming notion that in eternity our bodies will no longer be a temple of the Spirit also provides a stark contrast to the scriptural revelation of God's progressive work of deification that begins by regenerating man's spirit, continues by transforming his soul, and consummates by glorifying his body (John 3:6; Rom. 12:2; Rom. 8:23). Whereas *Heaven* asserts that we will have bodies made of heavenly substance but devoid of the Spirit, the New Testament reveals that God desires to spread Himself in Christ as the Spirit from within our spirit, through our entire soul, and ultimately into our mortal body (vv. 10, 6, 11) until the earthen vessel of our body becomes the body of glory as the Spirit of glory permeates the members of our body with Himself, making it a spiritual body (1 Pet. 4:14; Phil. 3:21; 1 Cor. 15:44). The book's blatant errors stem from its need to match the state of the human body to its speculative cosmological criteria.

The Consummation of God's Plan: Literal City versus Spiritual Sign

Since *Heaven* misses both the focus and goal of God's work, the book inexorably misinterprets the consummation of God's work, the New Jerusalem. Rejecting a symbolic interpretation of the New Jerusalem, the book explicates it as a literal city 6,000 miles in complete circumference with streets of purest and glorified gold, a diamond wall 200-250 feet tall, a tree of life whose leaves enrich the soil of the city, as well as "sky and soil and streets and banquet tables and crowns and music and light—all tangible and perceptible items" (189). *Heaven*

also identifies the New Jerusalem as “Heaven,” an actual, future place as a part of the new cosmos in which the heavenly and the earthly spheres will be reunited as they “existed as one in the beginning in Eden, when God walked with mankind” (190).

It is perhaps ironic that *Heaven*, predicated upon a spiritualized cosmology, utterly abandons its predicate in discussing the New Jerusalem as a physical city. One is left to wonder what role a deference to the teachings and traditions of men played in this part of the book’s discussion. In a portion of the divine revelation that is most conducive to a spiritual interpretation, being a sign, *Heaven* skirts around an examination of the New Jerusalem’s spiritual significance. The Bible indicates that the New Jerusalem is a spiritual sign of the ultimate consummation of the Triune God mingled with the tripartite men. The apostle John opens Revelation with a declaration that God made the entire book “known by signs” (1:1), indicating that the New Jerusalem should be considered as such. Twice in Revelation 21, John characterizes the New Jerusalem as the bride of Christ: “the holy city, New Jerusalem, . . . prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (v. 2); “one of the . . . angels . . . spoke with me, saying, . . . I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb . . . And he . . . showed me the holy city, Jerusalem” (vv. 9-10). In chapter nineteen, John associates the righteous saints with the wife of the Lamb who has made herself ready (vv. 7-8). In his own Gospel, John clearly identifies a group of believers as Christ’s corporate bride (3:29); in 2 Corinthians Paul betroths the Corinthian believers as a corporate pure virgin to Christ (11:2); and in Ephesians, he speaks of the church undergoing a gradual process of dispositional sanctification which will consummate in her presentation to Christ as His holy and glorious bride—the New Jerusalem, the holy city “having the glory of God” (5:23-32; Rev. 21:2, 9, 11). The Old Testament also abounds with references that reveal God’s yearning to marry His elect (Isa. 54:5-6; Jer. 3:1; Hosea 2:19). Especially in Song of Songs, Solomon (typifying Christ) describes his beloved Shulammitte (typifying a lover of Christ) as being “lovely as Jerusalem,” an allusion to the New Jerusalem as the counterpart of Christ (6:4).

These scriptural antecedents for God’s chosen elect as His spouse point to an aggregate sign, the New Jerusalem. The holy city as the wife of the Lamb signifies that the redeeming God will be fully dispensed into, wrought into, and manifested through His redeemed,

regenerated, transformed, and glorified elect in an eternal union. God’s good pleasure to be joined with His elect finds its consummate fulfillment in a universal couple—the Spirit and the bride, the processed Triune God incorporated with His deified tripartite elect (Rev. 22:17). Neglecting the antecedents for the New Jerusalem as the spouse of Christ, *Heaven* misconstrues the New Jerusalem as a physical city and consequently arouses the reader’s natural longings for things in the physical realm. It does not encourage the believers to prepare themselves to be the corporate bride of Christ by experiencing organic salvation, whereby they are cleansed by the washing of the water in the word and are thus beautified by the increase of the divine content in their inward parts.

Heaven’s earnest endeavor to present a biblical picture of heaven fails because its speculative cosmology shapes the crucial aspects of its theology (15). Focused on the concept of “Heaven” as the believers’ home in eternity, the book distracts them from their present enjoyment of abiding in Christ, who is the center of the divine plan. Enamored of a notion with a restoration to the garden of Eden, the book deprives the believers of the progressive experience of deification of their tripartite being, the goal of the divine plan. Adopting a physical interpretation of the New Jerusalem, the book defrauds the believers of the daily experience of Christ that will prepare them to become the bride of Christ—the New Jerusalem, the consummation of the divine plan.

by David Yoon

Heaven utterly abandons its spiritualized cosmology in discussing the New Jerusalem as a physical city. One is left to wonder what role a deference to the teachings and traditions of men played in this part of the book’s discussion.

Notes

¹In a footnote on 2 Corinthians 12:2, Witness Lee demonstrates a measure of caution in considering the three heavens:

The visible clouds *may* be considered the first heaven, and the sky, the second heaven. The third heaven must be the heaven above the heavens, the highest heaven (Deut. 10:14; Psa. 148:4), where the Lord Jesus and God are today (Eph. 4:10; Heb. 4:14; 1:3). (Recovery Version, note 4, emphasis added)

Works Cited

Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Recovery Version of the New Testament. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1991.

The Conflicted Theological Construct of Adoption

Adopted by God: From Wayward Sinners to Cherished Children, by Robert A. Peterson. Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2001.

Taking up J. I. Packer's challenge that more attention be given to the doctrine of adoption, Robert A. Peterson, professor of systematic theology at Covenant Theological Seminary, dedicates an entire book—*Adopted by God: From Wayward Sinners to Cherished Children* (hereafter, *Adopted*)—to its examination. Relying on Bryan Chapell's recommendation, the book promises that in so doing it will reveal “the love, assurance, and power in the Bible's teaching that God makes wayward sinners his own cherished children forever” (back cover), and “make us more aware of the privileges of being in the family of God” (2). *Adopted*, however, does not fulfill these promises.

Rather than presenting the divine revelation in the Scriptures concerning adoption, which, more fittingly, can be translated *sonship*, *Adopted* promotes a notion concerning the way in which God brings His chosen people into His family that is foreign to the Bible.¹ In fact, the primary thought that undergirds *Adopted*—the concept that God brings sinners into His family by means of a legal transaction parallel to the human practice of adoption—is not found in the Scriptures and is contrary to the Bible's revelation concerning our divine sonship. By imposing this erroneous theological construct upon the Scriptures, *Adopted* produces a sterile and contradictory theology that ignores the central function of the life of God in bringing us into the family of God and causing us to attain to the status of mature sons of God. Such a deficiency is critical, for apart from the divine life that we receive in regeneration and apart from the growth and maturation of this life within us, we can never truly know the tremendous power and ineffable privilege of being genuine children of God.

The Legal Procedure of Adoption

The overriding thought of *Adopted* is that God brings sinners into the family of God at the time of their believing in Christ by means of a legal procedure. This thought permeates the book, and it is the foundation upon which the entire book is built. *Adopted* defines adoption in the following way: “Adoption is a legal action, taking place outside of us, whereby God the Father gives us a new status in his family” (109). Throughout the book, *Adopted* juxtaposes this legal action with the human practice of adoption. *Adopted* asserts that “physical adoption” is “a picture of spiritual sonship” (27) and, after telling the

story of a man who was adopted as a child by a millionaire, concludes that this man's story is “one of the best illustrations...of the biblical truth of adoption” (42). One of the many testimonies included in the book elaborates on the book's understanding of adoption:

Adoption is a legal procedure which secures a child's identity in a new family. The adoptive parents take the child into family court on a specific day, documents are signed, and from that point on the child belongs in the family....Studying adoption has helped me to see that when I accepted Christ as my Redeemer, I became a permanent member of his family. Nothing can undo the legal procedure that binds me to Christ. He died to redeem me. He signed the adoption papers, so to speak, with his blood. (77)

Adopted claims that its understanding of the doctrine of adoption is found in the writings of both Paul and John and argues that such a doctrine is an insightful prism with which to view God's salvation of man. These assertions are unfounded.

Adopted's Adoption versus Paul's Sonship

Adopted's understanding of adoption is founded primarily on its interpretation of the apostle Paul's teaching. This conviction is influenced in large part by the mere presence of the word *adoption* in various translations of the Bible (cf. Rom. 8:23; 9:4; Eph. 1:5, NIV). In referring to verses that employ this word, *Adopted* assumes that Paul's use of the term is the same as his, that is, that God brings sinners into His family at the time of their believing in Christ by means of a legal procedure parallel to that of human adoption. Based on this assumption, *Adopted* refers to Ephesians 1:5 over ten times to support its claim that God desires to bring us into His family through the legal act of adoption. This assumption, however, is unfortunate, for it recognizes neither the way in which Paul employs this expression throughout his writings nor Paul's profound understanding of our divine sonship.

The word *adoption* that appears in various translations of the Bible comes from the Greek word *huiiothesia*. The apostle Paul, who is the only New Testament writer to employ this word, uses it five times (Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5). *Huiiothesia* literally means “setting someone as a son” or “putting someone in the place of a son” (Good 39). It implies the receiving of the full rights, privileges, and position of an adult son. Translating *huiiothesia* as *adoption* can give one an incorrect impression that Paul utilizes *huiiothesia* to refer to a legal procedure that occurs at the time of our believing in Christ. This, however, is not Paul's meaning. In employing the word *huiiothesia*, Paul does not speak with regard

to the means by which we are brought into the family of God at the beginning of our Christian life but rather to the position and status that we arrive at as a result of growing and maturing in the divine life over the course of our Christian life. The way in which Paul uses this word in his overall presentation of the truth of sonship readily confirms this thought.

In Ephesians 1:5 Paul writes that God the Father predestinated us unto *huiothesia*. To be predestinated unto *huiothesia* in Ephesians 1:5 equals being predestinated to be conformed to the image of the Son of God in Romans 8:29. Clearly this does not refer to a legal procedure that takes place at the outset of our Christian life, for before we can be conformed to the image of the firstborn Son of God, we must be transformed into His image. This is a gradual process in which the divine life that we received in regeneration saturates our inner being and brings us from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18; cf. Rom. 8:30). In her book *God's Plan of Redemption* Mary E. McDonough points out that conformation depends upon transformation:

No human being can become conformed to God's mold until there is a change from within, *i.e.*, the *introduction of a new life* into the human personality. This new Life is for the purpose of permeating the entire personality, until transformation shall have resulted in complete conformation. (90, emphasis added)

Huiothesia in Ephesians 1:5 refers not to a legal procedure that takes place at the beginning of our Christian life but to our attaining to our status as mature sons of God at the consummation of our Christian life.

Romans 8 clearly reveals that Paul's understanding of sonship involves an organic process of growth and maturation. In verse 16 Paul refers to us as children—those who have received the Spirit of *huiothesia* into our spirit as an inner witness that we are genuine children of God (v. 15). As children of God, Paul charges us to enjoy the freedom of the law of the Spirit of life and to set our mind on the spirit (vv. 2, 6). As we learn to do these things, we eventually progress from being children to sons—those who have matured to the extent that they are led by the Spirit of God (v. 14). Eventually, through the leading of the Spirit, we progress to a further stage of the growth in life in which we become heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (v. 17). All creation eagerly awaits our revelation as mature sons and heirs (v. 19),

and we earnestly desire the final progression of our *huiothesia* (v. 23)—our conformation to the image of the firstborn Son of God and the redemption of our body (vv. 29, 23). Romans 8 clearly depicts a process that begins with our receiving the Spirit of *huiothesia* and consummates with our final *huiothesia*—the redemption of our body. Paul's use of this word and his understanding of our divine sonship is not limited to the forensic act of adoption as defined in *Adopted*. Rather, sonship is a process in which the divine life that we received in regeneration grows and matures in us, bringing us into the full status of sons with all its attendant rights and privileges.

Adopted's Adoption versus John's Regeneration

Adopted also claims that its understanding of adoption is found in the writings of the apostle John. The book bases this assertion upon its interpretation of two verses—John 1:12 and 1 John 3:1. After quoting John 1:12, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (NIV), *Adopted* writes, "To grant the right to become children of God is equivalent to adoption" (85). Implicit in this argument is that the right that God gives is a legal right. Such an assertion completely disregards the context of John's statement. According to the language of the verse and the following verse, John clearly states that we become children of God by means of a divine begetting that takes place when we receive the divine life. John says that

those who receive the right to become children of God are those who believe into Christ and that to believe into Christ is to receive Him. Thus, our authority to become children comes from receiving Christ—the One who is God (v. 1) and in whom is the life of God (v. 4)—into us. Henry Alford links our receiving of the right to be children of God with our receiving of the Spirit to be born of God (3:3-7). He concludes that to say, "As many as received Him, to them He gave the authority" is "equivalent to saying, 'As many as received Him, to them gave He His Holy Spirit'" (459). Thus, our authority to be children of God comes not from a legal pronouncement but from the life of God that we received by being born of the Spirit through regeneration. John emphatically reinforces this point in 1:13, saying, "Who were begotten not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Clearly John's thought is that we become children of God by receiving the divine life of God to be begotten of God.

Huiothesia does not refer to the means by which we are brought into the family of God at the beginning of our Christian life but rather to our position and status as a result of growing and maturing in the divine life over the course of our Christian life.

Adopted also argues that 1 John 3:1 speaks of the legal procedure of adoption, saying, “To ‘be called children of God’ by God the Father is to be adopted by him” (53). In the word *called*, *Adopted* sees a judicial pronouncement, which causes us to become children of God. Again, in making such a claim, *Adopted* ignores the context of John’s statement. Immediately prior to declaring that we are called children of God by God, he says that we have been begotten of God (2:29). Moreover, in 3:9-10, he explicitly states that we are made children of God by receiving the seed of God to be begotten by Him. In this entire section of the Word, John does not say anything, even by way of remote allusion, in regard to a legal procedure. Rather, he unequivocally declares that we can be called children of God because we have received the seed of God and have been begotten of God.

Regeneration and Adoption— Injecting Confusion into the Harmony of the Scripture

In anticipation of those who would argue that John teaches regeneration rather than adoption, *Adopted* states,

Some argue that in the New Testament only Paul teaches adoption. However, I agree with John Murray and Sinclair Ferguson that although John speaks more about regeneration, he also speaks about adoption in these two texts. (174)

The notion that John, as well as the New Testament, teaches both regeneration and adoption is a great contradiction introduced by this book. In a chapter titled “Adopted and Born Again?” *Adopted* states,

Adoption and regeneration are two ways of describing how we enter the family of God. Both ideas conceive of God as Father and of believers as his children. In regeneration, he begets his children, giving new life to those who were spiritually dead. In adoption, the Father places adult sons and daughters, former children of the devil, in his family. (109)

Coming to the Scripture fully enamored with its doctrine of adoption, *Adopted* is unwilling to relinquish this notion when faced with the truth of regeneration and, thus, looks for a way to accommodate the two. The result of this accommodation is a conflicted theological system in which God brings His chosen people into His family as adults through adoption and, at the same time, as children through divine birth. This injects confusion into the revelation of the Scriptures. The Scriptures do not teach that sinners enter into the family of God both as children and as adults, both through divine birth and through adoption. The writings of Paul and of John do not contain such a contradiction. God’s unique way to bring redeemed sinners into His family is through divine birth. Moreover,

after genuinely begetting children, God continually imparts His divine life into them. This ultimately results in the believers’ attainment of sonship—the full right, as mature sons of God, to inherit all that God is and has.

With profound harmony the Bible unveils this divine fact. As the One who has life in Himself (John 5:26), God imparts His life and nature into His elect (3:16; 1 John 5:12-13; cf. John 10:10; 2 Pet. 1:4), causing them to be regenerated (1 Pet. 1:3, 23; Titus 3:5), born anew (John 3:3), and begotten of God by divine birth (1:13; 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). This entrance into the family of God through divine birth coincides perfectly with Paul’s thought concerning the organic process of sonship and provides the foundation for it. This organic process begins with divine regeneration. Believers progress from being infants (1 Cor. 3:1; Heb. 5:13) and children (Rom. 8:16-17) to being sons (v. 14; Gal. 3:26; 4:6-7; Heb. 12:7) and heirs of God (Rom. 8:17; Gal. 4:7). This progression results from the growth of God as life (Col. 2:19; cf. 1 Pet. 2:2; Eph. 4:15-16) unto full growth (Col. 1:28; Heb. 5:14; 1 Cor. 14:20) and maturity (Col. 4:12).²

Salvation as Adoption— Negating Our Need for the Divine Life

When God’s sons corporately attain to such a level of maturity, God’s desire will be fulfilled (Eph. 1:5; Rom. 8:29). However, our attainment to this maturity absolutely depends upon our receiving and growing in the divine life, the life of God. *Adopted*’s doctrine of adoption, however, altogether negates the central role of the divine life in our becoming sons and removes any need for us to seek to grow in this life. *Adopted* exacerbates the harmful consequence of this negation when it imposes its doctrine of adoption upon God’s salvation.

A central tenet of *Adopted*’s message is that its understanding of the doctrine of adoption is a useful framework in which to view God’s salvation of man. After including the testimony of a man who had been adopted as a child, *Adopted* asserts, “We understand salvation better when he presents his physical adoption as a picture of spiritual sonship” and claims that “adoption is another way of talking about salvation” (27, 29). Salvation, according to *Adopted*, can be viewed as having four aspects—God the Father’s planning salvation, God the Son’s accomplishing salvation, God the Spirit’s applying salvation, and the entire Trinity’s consummating salvation. In explaining the Father’s purpose in planning salvation, *Adopted* states that based upon His great love for us, the Father chose and predestinated us that one day we would enter into His family through adoption. In examining God the Son’s work to accomplish salvation, *Adopted* explains, “The saving work of the unique Son of

God, expressed in terms of adoption, is a redemption” (70). Based upon Galatians 4:4-5, *Adopted* argues that because we were “enmeshed in evil and could not free ourselves” (71), Christ shed His blood on the cross to set us free and in so doing adopted us as sons of God. In expositing God the Spirit’s role in the application of salvation, *Adopted* asserts, “Adoption is another way of speaking of the application of salvation” (9). The Spirit’s role in applying adoption to us is twofold—the Spirit opens our hearts, giving us the gift of faith and enabling us to address God as Father; and the Spirit comes into our hearts to confirm that we have been adopted by God. In explicating the Trinity’s intention to consummate salvation, *Adopted* states that one day God will give us our future adoption (159), which will include an eternal inheritance (160), the redemption of the cosmos (163), the adoption of our bodies (164), and our conformity to the Son (169).

By limiting God the Father’s plan-ning of salvation to a legal act that occurs at the initiation of our union with Christ, *Adopted* negates God’s desire to produce the Body of Christ composed of full-grown sons who would fully express Him for eternity (Eph. 1:5, 12, 22-23; Rom. 8:29-30; Rev. 21:7). This in turn limits Christ’s salvific work to its judicial component and fails to recognize that in His death Christ also released the divine life within Him to germinate the new creation (John 12:24; Eph. 2:15). Furthermore, *Adopted*’s depiction ignores the fact that in His resurrection Christ regenerated His chosen people (1 Pet. 1:3) and became the life-giving Spirit to impart the divine life into us. *Adopted*’s portrayal of the Spirit’s application also greatly minimizes the central role of the Spirit in the accomplishment of God’s organic salvation, for the Spirit not only “sweeps” in our hearts prior to salvation (cf. Luke 15:8) and confirms that we have been made children of God but also sanctifies us (Rom. 15:16; 6:19, 22), renews us (Titus 3:5; Eph. 4:23), transforms us (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18), conforms us (Rom. 8:29), and will glorify us (v. 30). Although *Adopted*’s judicial portrayal of our salvation negates the indispensable necessity for us to receive the divine life and experience the full salvation in the life of Christ, the book still encourages its readers to look forward to the day when they will be conformed to the image of the firstborn Son of God and receive the redemption, glorification, of their body. Sadly, such a teaching instills false hope in its readers. If we do not grow in the divine life today, it is a delusion to think that we will suddenly be conformed

and glorified at the Lord’s return. Witness Lee warns against this stupefying notion:

We should not expect to be glorified without firstly growing in life and being conformed to the image of God’s Son. If we expect to be glorified without being conformed, we will be disappointed. The glorification to come depends on our conformation to the image of the Son of God. Thus, glorification depends upon our growth in life.

...I use the illustration of a carnation seed. The seed is sown into the ground and sprouts: this is regeneration. Then the carnation grows: this is the growth in life, the stage of transformation. Eventually the carnation plant grows to the point of blossoming: this is transfiguration and glorification. The stage of the blossoming of the carnation plant is the stage of its glorification. If while the carnation plant is in the sprout stage it expects without growing to blossom and to be glorified, the time of blossoming will never come. If you do not grow in life, yet await the time of blossoming, the time of glorification, you are a dreamer. Nevertheless, this is exactly the situation among many Christians today. (235-236)

Unfortunately, *Adopted*’s portrayal of God’s salvation negates the necessity for growing in the divine life and exacerbates the poor condition of many Christians.

In dedicating an entire book to the doctrine of adoption, *Adopted* sets out to illuminate “the love, assurance, and power in the Bible’s teaching that God makes wayward sinners his own cherished children forever” (back cover). Instead, the book’s conflicted theological construct casts a shadow over these truths. Taking the notion that God brings redeemed sinners into His family by means of a legal transaction parallel to the human practice of adoption as its foundation, *Adopted* seeks to unearth this notion from the writings of Paul and John. But it comes up empty. Faced with the potent revelation that God begets genuine children through regeneration, *Adopted* strives to formulate a system of thought that allows for its understanding of both regeneration and adoption. But it produces sterile and contradictory results. Eager to apply its doctrine of adoption to the totality of the Christian experience, *Adopted* takes adoption as the paradigm with which to understand God’s salvation. But it negates the indispensable necessity for the divine life.

The exalted revelation of the holy Scriptures is that the

Eager to apply its doctrine of adoption to the totality of the Christian experience, *Adopted* takes adoption as the paradigm with which to understand God’s salvation. But it negates the indispensable necessity for the divine life.

Triune God has the ability to impart His divine, eternal life into redeemed sinners to regenerate them to be genuinely born again and that God is able to organically transform these children from infants into full-grown sons who fully match Him and express Him in every way (1 John 3:1-2). Only in receiving and entering into the experience of such a revelation can we ever begin to comprehend what manner of love the Father has given to us in making us His children.

by Nathan Vigil

Notes

¹Properly understood, the translation of the Greek word *húiothesía* as *adoption* is not without merit in the Greek language. The term *adoption*, however, has lost much of its finely nuanced meaning in its modern employment. This entire book is a testament showing just how much has been lost. The translation of *húiothesía* as *sonship* provides more opportunity to capture the nuances of its original usage and meaning.

²This paragraph is based upon a similar section in the article "Sonship or Adoption as Sons?" by Roger Good in the October 2000 issue of *Affirmation & Critique*, pp. 39-40.

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Heaven: An Identity Crisis

Heaven: My Father's House, by Anne Graham Lotz.
Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2001.

In the wake of any tragedy there is an understandable need in man for hope and the comfort that hope affords. In the weeks and months following the terrorist strikes on September 11, 2001, many in this country have sought solace and comfort to a degree not seen in several decades. In answer to this cry, numerous television programs, articles, and books have been offered to a grieving

public. One book that appeared within weeks of the tragedy is *Heaven: My Father's House* (hereafter *House*) by evangelist, author, and founder of AnGeL Ministries, Anne Graham Lotz. This book, dedicated to "the dying and...all who are facing the future with a troubled heart," seeks to comfort the nation and give its inhabitants an enduring hope. Taking the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as a point of departure, *House* broadens its scope to include nearly every form of human suffering and seeks to instill the reader with the hope of "Heaven, My Father's House." This theme is echoed in the foreword, written by Lotz's father, evangelist Billy Graham: "This little book written by my daughter Anne sets forth the tremendous hope of God's promise that we may spend eternity with Him...[W]e can look forward with confidence to an eternal home in Heaven" (viii-ix). In short, *House* offers heaven and our future existence in it as the salve to soothe an unnerved nation and the comfort to calm the most shaken of souls.

House is written in an easy and conversational, if not sentimental, style, and it opens with a chapter called "Looking Forward to Heaven." In this chapter the book's theme is established by identifying our future in heaven as our hope for both today and tomorrow (5, 7). No matter who we are or in what condition we find ourselves, "it is vitally important for you to be prepared for that moment in time when you step into eternity!" (9). "You and I can look forward WITH HOPE!" the first chapter concludes, "because we have the blessed assurance of Heaven, My Father's House!" (10).

In the course of the ensuing seven chapters, *House* elaborates on the hope that is signified in John's "tantalizing glimpse into Heaven" (referring to the revelation of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21, which is quoted in its entirety on pp. xi-xiv) (6). It does this primarily by enlarging upon the various qualities that our heavenly home possesses. In these chapters *House* seeks to address various human needs and desires and describe how they will be met when we eventually get to heaven. At the same time, *House* seeks to assuage our fears by contrasting the many sufferings and shortcomings common to our earthly existence with the coming joys and delights of heaven. According to these chapters, the Father's house is a home in heaven, a home of our dreams, a home that is safe, a home we can never lose, a home of lasting value, a home that's paid for, and a home filled with family (see Contents, v-vi).

Having thus described heaven as our hope and the comfort that it renders us, *House* informs us that "It's [Our] Choice to Go to Heaven" (105). In this chapter, "A Home You Are Invited to Claim as Your Own," Lotz invites unbelieving readers to receive the hope of heaven by placing their faith in Jesus Christ. This invitation is

followed with a prayer that unsaved readers can pray to place their faith in Christ and accept God's invitation to heaven (115-116). In the final chapter *House* borrows a well-known jingle from a popular motel advertisement and assures the readers who have accepted God's invitation that "God the Father has left the light on in Heaven to welcome you...home!" (119).

Lotz's motive in writing the book is noble and even laudable. In a world that is frequently racked with war, pain, and uncertainty, there is a real need in every person for hope and comfort. The success of her intent (i.e., whether comfort is actually rendered to the believer), however, depends upon whether the book accurately identifies and portrays the believer's hope as found in the Bible. If the hope that is presented is consonant with the Scriptures, then true comfort can be rendered. If, on the other hand, the heavenly hope is less than biblical, any comfort rendered to the reader is falsely premised and thus has only momentary sufficiency.

House's style and tone are pastoral, not polemical; it does not attempt to offer theological argument backed by carefully chosen and explicated passages of Scripture. There is no ground to find fault with this approach; there is a long history of pastoral narrative that some would say stretches back to Paul himself. Despite its decidedly non-doctrinal style, however, *House* repeats some basic assumptions and assertions that flow out of ingrained misunderstandings of biblical truths. Common though they may be, these assumptions are cause for concern in a reader who is striving for a proper understanding of the Scriptures with a view to entering into a daily experience of Christ. Our understanding of the divine truth as revealed in the Scriptures is the window through which we view our life and the map according to which we direct it. It so heavily shapes our worldview and influences our daily living that if it is errant, so too will be our ambitions, goals, and daily living. Although Lotz's motivation in writing this book is sincere, some of the assumptions and assertions repeated in the book—two in particular—are so fundamentally unscriptural that they warrant energetic criticism.

"My Father's House" Is Not Heaven

House's fundamental flaw lies in its erroneous identification of the Father's house and the New Jerusalem as heaven. This interpretation is altogether alien to the Scriptures and contrary to the truth in God's Word. The

first occurrence of this error in *House* is related to the belief that the Father's house spoken of in John 14:2 is heaven. *House* also assumes that the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 is synonymous with heaven. *House* nowhere explains why we should regard the Father's house as heaven; it embraces the notion without any discernable reservation. Chapter two, entitled "A Home in Heaven," is introduced with an explanatory blurb, stating that "My Father's House is a home prepared especially for you" (11). Immediately thereafter, John 14:3 is printed on a page of its own. In this context we read that "the Bible teaches us that God is preparing a heavenly home" for us, and that we can "look forward with hope as we glimpse Heaven, My Father's House, which is being prepared as an eternal home for God's people" (16). Once His preparations are completed, "My Father's House will be ready as a heavenly home for His loved ones" (23). "[W]hen I walk into My Father's House," Lotz writes, "I am expected and welcome, because He has prepared it for me!" (25). Again, she writes, "My Father's House is a home in Heaven" (103).

John 14:2-3 says,

In My Father's house are many abodes; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I am coming again and will receive you to Myself, so that where I am you also may be.

If heaven is not the proper identification of what Jesus calls "My Father's house," then what is? To

answer this question, we must consider the only other occurrence of the expression, which is found a few chapters earlier in the same book. There, the Lord Jesus says to those who were selling doves in the temple, "Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise" (2:16). Before Christ's incarnation, the Father's house was the temple in Jerusalem. However, the Lord used this temple to signify His body when He said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (v. 19). He made it clear that He was speaking not of the temple made of stone but of the "temple of His body" (v. 21). These verses strongly indicate that at the time of Christ's earthly ministry, the Father's house, which was signified by the temple in Jerusalem, was in reality Christ Himself. The Father's house is not a place but a person, for we read elsewhere in John's Gospel that God dwelt within Christ (14:10). Paul confirms this fact in Colossians 2:9, where he writes, "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." Hence, when the

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Lord spoke of the raising up of the temple after three days, He was referring not to the physical temple in Jerusalem; He was speaking of raising up His body in resurrection. In resurrection, Christ produced His mystical, corporate Body, the church—the “Body of Christ.” Just as Christ’s body in incarnation was the Father’s house, and therefore the real temple of God, His mystical Body in resurrection is the temple of God, the Father’s house, which includes Christ with all His members (1 Cor. 12:27). Paul demonstrates that Christ’s mystical Body is the Father’s house, that is, the house of God, with three simple phrases: “the church, which is His Body” (Eph. 1:22-23), “the house of God, which is the church of the living God” (1 Tim. 3:15), and “you [the believers] are the temple of God” (1 Cor. 3:16). When the Lord Jesus discoursed with His disciples concerning the Father’s house, He was not referring to a heavenly villa that He, a Jewish carpenter, was going to erect in some distant corner of the universe over the course of the next twenty or more centuries. The Father’s house, according to the divine revelation, is His mystical Body, the church—in which God and man indwell one another mutually—which will consummate as the New Jerusalem.

“The New Jerusalem” Is Not Heaven

House also takes at face value the erroneous yet popular notion that the New Jerusalem, particularly as revealed in Revelation 21, is heaven. The foreword tells us that “this book is developed from the...Biblical description of Heaven” (xi), immediately after which the description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 is quoted in its entirety. The author develops her thoughts on this would-be proof text at the very outset of the book:

Exiled to the island of Patmos in the midst of the Aegean Sea, the apostle John knew he would be facing death in the not-too-distant future. This was the very moment in time when God chose to give John a vision of the glory of Jesus Christ! This vision included a tantalizing glimpse into Heaven, where one day God Himself will live forever with His people. This glorious vision has been recorded in the final book of the Bible, Revelation, because John was commanded to write down what he saw. The vision was to be not only for his own personal comfort and encouragement but for all people down through the centuries who, when facing daily challenges, extraordinary circumstances, or even when plunging to certain death, could do so with courage and *with hope*. (6-7)

Elsewhere *House* quotes Revelation 21:2, where John describes the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. From this verse, we are to understand that “God is preparing His heavenly home” for us (18). Again, in the

chapter entitled “A Home of Lasting Value,” we read in reference to the New Jerusalem that when we get to heaven, we will walk on the golden “streets of our heavenly home” (74). *House* consistently equates the New Jerusalem with heaven and uses the terms interchangeably.

While the Bible tells us that the New Jerusalem is heavenly in nature (Heb. 12:22; 11:16; Gal. 4:26), not once does it equate the New Jerusalem with heaven. The apostle John saw the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Rev. 21:2). In the same vision, John heard an angel tell him, “Come here; I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (v. 9). Immediately thereafter, the angel carried John away in spirit onto a great and high mountain and showed him “the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (v. 10). The wife of Christ is the church (Eph. 5:32). It is not logical to assert that the “New Jerusalem...prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” in Revelation 21:2 is somehow different from the New Jerusalem in verse 10, which is “the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (v. 9). If the church is the wife of Christ, and the wife of Christ is the New Jerusalem, then the New Jerusalem must be the church in its consummate and mature form (as indicated by the phrases *adorned for her husband* in verse 2 and *has made herself ready* in 19:7). The Bible identifies the New Jerusalem clearly. The New Jerusalem is not heaven. Heaven is a location; the New Jerusalem is a corporate person—the matured church, the wife of Christ, who is fully one with the Triune God.

The Mutual Abode of God and Man

House’s greatest failure, however, is that in misidentifying the Father’s house and the New Jerusalem and consequently misunderstanding the true nature of these realities, it entirely overlooks God’s eternal purpose, which is for God to dwell in man and man to dwell in God both in this age and for eternity. When the Lord Jesus spoke concerning the Father’s house to His disciples in John 14, He opened up a window into the desire of God’s heart. God’s desire, simply put, is that He would dwell in man and that man would dwell in Him, and that together they would have one living. The Lord revealed this mutual indwelling of God and man, which is the real basis of our hope and comfort, explicitly in verses 16 through 20:

And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Comforter, that He may be with you forever, even the Spirit of reality, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him; but you know Him, because He abides with you and *shall be in you*. I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you. Yet a little

while and the world beholds Me no longer, but you behold Me; because I live, you also shall live. In that day you will know that *I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you* (emphasis added).

The phrase *in that day* refers to the day of resurrection, the day on which Christ breathed Himself into the disciples as the Spirit (20:22). True to His word, Christ did not leave His disciples as lonely orphans to simply wait for their Lord's return at the end of the church age. Before His death and resurrection, He had dwelt merely *with* the disciples; on the day of His resurrection, however, His word in 14:17 was fulfilled, and He came to abide *in* them as the Spirit of reality. Based upon this fact, each believer is an abode, a dwelling place, of God. This is precisely what Christ was speaking of in verse 23: "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make an abode with him." This understanding is in perfect harmony with the Scriptures. In Ephesians 3:17 Paul speaks of Christ making His home in our hearts through faith, and in 2 Corinthians 13:5 he tells the believers, "Jesus Christ is in you." When we gain an understanding according to verse 2 that every believer is an "abode" of God, we realize that when the Lord spoke of the many abodes in the Father's house, He was speaking not of mansions in heaven but of the believers in the Father's house, that is, the members of the Body of Christ.

On the day of resurrection, not only did the disciples know that Christ, the embodied God, had come to dwell in them as the Spirit; they also knew that Christ was in the Father and that they, the disciples, were in Christ. By virtue of Christ being in the Father, we are in the Father as well. Thus, on the one hand, we are abodes in whom God in Christ as the Spirit dwells; on the other hand, God is our abode, and we abide in Him. In John 14:3 the Lord Jesus says, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I am coming again and will receive you to Myself, so that where I am you also may be." He then continues, "And where I am going you know the way" (v. 4). The destination that the Lord signifies by the phrases *where I am you also may be* and *where I am going* is the Father Himself, not heaven, although this may not be immediately apparent—witness Thomas's puzzlement in verse 5: "Lord, we do not know where You are going." The Lord, however, made clear His meaning, first in verse 6, where He told the disciples that "no one comes to the Father except through Me," and then in verse 12, where He declared in no uncertain terms, "I am going to the Father." Yet Christ was not going by Himself to the Father. According to the above verses, He wanted His believers to be in the Father as well. Through Christ's death and resurrection, the believers were brought into God the Father. This is confirmed in Paul's letters to the church in Thessalonica, the

church that he describes as being "in God the Father" (1 Thes. 1:1; 2 Thes. 1:1).

Hence, John 14:2, 17-20, and 23, viewed together, describe clearly and concisely the mutual abode of God and man in which God dwells in man and man dwells in God. This mutual abode is the Body of Christ, the Father's house. In this mutual abode the believers, who are the many abodes indwelt by God, dwell in God, who is their abode. It is this mutual abode in which we are commanded to live today (15:4), and it is this mutual abode that will have its consummation and ultimate manifestation as the New Jerusalem, where God dwells in man as His tabernacle and man dwells in God as man's temple (Rev. 21:3, 22).

Conclusion

On its promise to give hope and provide comfort to those who are suffering on this earth, *House* does not—and, indeed, cannot—deliver. *House's* entire message of hope is premised upon the thought that both the Father's house and the New Jerusalem are heaven. The Bible emphatically reveals that both the Father's house and the New Jerusalem are aspects not of heaven but of the mutual abode of God and man, the church. Since our destiny is to be part of such a mutual abode, and since this mutual abode has been on this earth since the day of Christ's resurrection, any hope we have that we are "going to heaven" is misplaced. *House*, insofar as it presents heaven as the object of our hope, presents a false hope, and therefore a false comfort, and the true hope and comfort that could be offered to suffering believers through teachings that encourage the experiences of Christ that are now available to believers, who are indwelt by their heavenly Father, are not offered.

In his discourse on the believers' hope of the resurrection, Paul states that "if it is only that we have hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most miserable" (1 Cor. 15:19). We believers, however, need not be miserable because of misplaced hope. Rather than looking forward to the day that we live in a "home in heaven"—a day that will never come—we can live a daily life in God the Father and daily enjoy Him as He lives in us, the members of the Body of Christ. Furthermore, as the members of His church, we can enjoy participating in Christ's sanctifying work to become the bride of Christ and the wife of the Lamb, the New Jerusalem (Eph. 5:26-27; Rev. 21:2). Believers in Christ should not waste time with the hope of "going to the Father's house"; rather, they should develop an intimate relationship with the Christ within them, who is their hope of glory (Col. 1:27).

by Nathan Betz