

The Heaven of Human Imagination

Heaven, by Randy Alcorn. Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2004.

Drawing upon the Scriptures and the writings of C. S. Lewis, Randy Alcorn, a popular author of twenty books (including the Gold Medallion winner *Safely Home*) and the founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries, seeks to present in *Heaven* a biblical portrait of the believers' eternal destiny as a thrilling adventure that can transform lives of both believers and unbelievers. Despite the cry in the human heart to know the afterlife, in Alcorn's view, Christians have failed to explore and elucidate the Bible's teaching regarding the subject. Even among the books that focus on the believers' future in eternity, he finds that only a few offer any authentic scriptural insights. To remedy this perceived deficiency, Alcorn attempts to present a biblical view of heaven as the believers' eternal destiny by interpreting the texts of the Bible and then speculating with a "biblically inspired imagination" (17). Yet the book's portrayal of the Christians' afterlife is scarcely rooted in the divine revelation in the Scriptures; rather, it is sourced in fanciful imaginations tainted with traditional concepts of heaven and the cultural trends of the present age. As a result, *Heaven* presents the believers' final destination as a predominantly physical realm where they will enjoy an earthly yet sin-free existence, be reunited with their loved ones, realize their soulish aspirations, and gratify their physical senses. This inherently physical view of Christians' eternal existence ultimately stems from the book's inability to see beyond the physical aspect of the resurrection of Christ to the exclusion of its organic implications.

Heaven's Portrayal of Heaven as the Believers' Eternal Destiny

The book consists of three parts: (1) "A Theology of Heaven"; (2) "Questions and Answers about Heaven"; and (3) "Living in Light of Heaven." In Part 1, "A Theology of Heaven," Alcorn exhorts us to fuel our imagination with Scripture: to envision the eternal heaven, we simply need to "look around [us] and imagine what all this would be like without sin and death and suffering and corruption" (17). The book distinguishes the present, or intermediate, heaven from the future, or eternal, heaven. The former is

in the angelic realm (with physical properties), where Christians go when they die. The latter will be in the human realm, on the new earth, where the believers will dwell with God for eternity. In the intermediate heaven—"a bridge between life on the old Earth and the New Earth"—the believers, clothed with "intermediate bodies," remember life on earth, see what is taking place on earth, and pray for loved ones on earth (57). In the eternal heaven—Eden regained and magnified—resurrected mankind will live in harmony with animals, see God face to face, and rule the earth with Christ. The book states that "the heart and soul of Heaven" is being with God—that is, God dwelling among the believers (165). Alcorn then asserts that in heaven God will fulfill His plan to rule the universe through the believers as His image-bearers, children, and ambassadors. For eternity they will not only inherit the earth with Christ as His co-heirs, but also rule God's eternal kingdom on the new earth with Him as His co-kings.

Foundational to the book's notion of our eternal destiny is the physical resurrection of Christ. His resurrection is the forerunner of our resurrection, which in turn foreshadows that of the earth. Since Christ rose from the grave with the same body that was crucified, when we are resurrected, we too will retain our personal identity. This "principle of *redemptive continuity*" applies not only to the believers but also to the rest of God's creation, including animals, flowers, the heavens, and the earth (112). According to Alcorn, so far-reaching is resurrection that it extends to our service for Christ and to the works of our hands done to God's glory, that is, inanimate objects such as chairs, paintings, and books. Since on the new earth, the believers, their deeds for God, the works of their hands, and all the rest of the creation will be resurrected, the new earth will strike them as familiar. They will feel completely at home, enjoying the natural wonders and thriving human culture they once enjoyed on the old earth.

In Part 2, "Questions and Answers about Heaven," Alcorn addresses numerous topics regarding life on the new earth subsumed under five main questions: (1) what will the resurrected earth be like; (2) what will our lives be like; (3) what will our relationships be like; (4) what about animals; and (5) what will we do in heaven? In short, the book speculates that the center of the resurrected earth will be the New Jerusalem, a literal city, where all people will enjoy sunshine, rain, and snow, and have access to mountains, lakes, waterfalls, and trees as well as to parks, museums, restaurants, and concerts. Alcorn assures us that

in heaven the believers will retain their national identity, gender distinction, and personal traits; they will celebrate and delight in their differences, learning one another's languages and the resurrected cultures of ancient civilizations. With the resurrected mind, they will continue to learn biology, zoology, astronomy, mathematics, literature, and theology, enjoying intellectual discussions with Isaac Newton, Thomas Edison, J. R. R. Tolkien, John Milton, and Leo Tolstoy regarding their respective fields of expertise. They will use drama, poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and movies to praise and worship God. The believers will have their own homes and will work to God's glory, building a cabinet with Jesus, tending sheep with David, sewing with Dorcas, making clothes with Lydia, or designing a new tent with Paul. In heaven, the believers will be united with infants who have died and will regain missed opportunities they lost. For instance, if a father never lived to see his believing son play basketball, "he'll not only see him play on Earth but also play with him on the New Earth" (358). Furthermore, according to *Heaven*, animals will inhabit the new earth to express the attributes and communicate the beauty of their Maker. Alcorn speculates that both extinct animals and the believers' pets will be restored on the new earth. The eternal heaven is a place where the believers' unfulfilled dreams are realized, such as building boats, painting pictures, writing books, and participating in athletic competitions. In heaven we will see trade and commerce as well as technology and machinery; we will not only travel to outer space to find new beings on other planets but also travel in time to see the lives of our spiritual ancestors.

In Part 3, "Living in Light of Heaven," Alcorn considers how a biblical theology of heaven shapes and transforms people's lives. For example, meditating on heaven relieves their pain, for it reminds them that suffering and death are but a gateway to an eternal life of unending joy. Moreover, anticipating the eternal heaven motivates them to live a righteous life; for instance, it empowers them to stick with a difficult marriage or to stay with a demanding job. It will also lead them to purify themselves from sin and to live each day in profound gratitude to God.

Heaven's Exercise of Its Fanciful Imagination

Heaven is riddled with erroneous biblical interpretations. Rigorous critique of its inaccurate points honors the author's request in the preface that readers, like the Bereans of old, examine the Scriptures and test his book to see whether its contents measure up to the divine revelation. First, in envisioning the believers' eternal destiny, the book is full of fanciful imagination—stained with religious traditions and alien to the Scriptures. *Heaven* claims that the Scriptures provide us with a substantial amount of information concerning the afterlife—enough detail to help us envision it by the aid of our imagination. To corroborate

this claim, the book cites 1 Corinthians 2:9-10: "But as it is written, 'Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard and which have not come up in man's heart; things which God has prepared for those who love Him.' But to us God has revealed them through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God." *Heaven* interprets what God has prepared for His lovers as heaven and suggests that since He has revealed the things regarding heaven to the believers, they should use their imagination to envision the world to come as a physical realm. Yet the context and the content of these verses reveal just the contrary. First, the things God has prepared for His lovers in verse 9 refer to God's wisdom in a mystery in verse 7, which is revealed in chapter 1 as Christ imparted into the believers' tripartite being: righteousness in our spirit, the sanctification of our soul, and the redemption of our body (vv. 24, 30). What God has prepared and predestined for His lovers and revealed to them through the Spirit is not a material world as our eternal destination, as suggested by the book; rather, it is Christ as the wisdom and depths of God manifested to us for our present enjoyment—"Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

Paul in 1 Corinthians 2 goes on to declare that only the Spirit of God has known the things of God—the things which the soulish man cannot receive, but only the spiritual man can discern. Relying exclusively on the faculty of the human soul, however, *Heaven* exhorts us to employ reason to find the truth from the Bible and to use "our Scripture-enhanced imagination" to envision heaven (21). To buttress its exegetical method, the book cites the words of C. S. Lewis: "While reason is the natural organ of truth, imagination is the organ of meaning" (22). In contrast, Paul stresses that to know the things of God and the things of man, one must be a spiritual man—a man led, controlled, and governed by his human spirit mingled with the divine Spirit (vv. 11-16; 6:17; 15:45). Regardless of how "biblically inspired" his imagination may be (17), a soulish man can know neither the things of God, which are Christ as the wisdom and the depths of God, nor the things of man, which include our eternal destiny. Here Paul clearly shows that our spirit is indispensable for knowing the things of God and that the use of our soul independent of our spirit is futile—the things of God prepared for us have never arisen in man's heart but rather are revealed to us in our spirit by God's Spirit. Hence, to know the things of God revealed in the Scriptures, we should not follow *Heaven's* exhortation that we "fuel" our imagination with Scripture (16). Instead, we must heed Paul's charge that we fan into flame our God-given spirit of sobermindedness by setting our mind on the spirit—that is, bringing our mind under the rule of our spirit (2:16; 2 Tim. 1:6-7). Only then, by our spirit of wisdom and revelation, will we receive the revelation in the Scriptures; by our spirit-governed mind, we will understand the revelation received in our spirit (Eph. 1:17).

Heaven woefully underestimates the effect of the fall upon man's soul. Through the fall, man's soul was contaminated with the thoughts, desires, and intentions of Satan. In particular, according to Paul's Epistles, the fallen human mind is disapproved by God, darkened in its understanding, vain in its reasoning, alienated from God, and rebellious against God (Rom. 1:21, 28; Col. 1:21; 2 Cor. 10:4-5; Eph. 4:17-18). In the days of Noah, Jehovah saw that "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5), and even after the flood, Jehovah said in His heart, "The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (8:21). In his Epistle to the believers in Ephesus, Paul suggests the distinct possibility that a believer's mind may remain virtually indistinguishable from that of an unbeliever: "I say and testify in the Lord, that you no longer walk as the Gentiles also walk in the vanity of their mind, being darkened in their understanding" (4:17-18). Recognizing that their mind must be renewed through the spreading of the mingled spirit into it, Paul charges the Ephesians: "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind" (v. 23). *Heaven* seems to neglect both the depravity of the fallen human mind and our need for a renewed mind, a mind filled with the spirit and under the control of the spirit. Although *Heaven* admits that our imagination must start

and the spring of water of life in Revelation are strictly signs symbolizing Christ as the embodiment of the divine life to be our supply (1:1; John 1:4; 10:10; 14:6; 4:14; 7:39). It then executes a ludicrous logical leap by inferring from the above verses that on the new earth we will enjoy peanuts, chocolate, wine, and "countless other foods and drinks," much of which we have never tasted, for they existed only in Eden before the fall (298). The book veers away from biblical revelation both in its basic fact and intrinsic meaning, and arrives at a hedonistic paradise of fleshly indulgence familiar to Epicureans yet foreign to the Scriptures.

The book's fanciful imagination leads to questions that cater to the fleshly desires of man, rather than the economy of God: "will we all appear the same age?"; "will we eat meat?"; "will we have our own homes?"; "will we open our homes to guests?"; "will we be reunited with infants who have died?"; "will there be private ownership?"; "will animals, including our pets, live again?"; "will extinct animals live on the new earth?"; "might some animals talk?"; "will there be arts, entertainment, and sports?"; "can there be thrills without risk?"; "will our dreams be fulfilled and missed opportunities regained?"; "will there be trade and business?"; "will we design crafts, technology, and new

Because Heaven overlooks that our mind must be set on the spirit and governed by the spirit, its imagination flies away from the things of the spirit, beyond the biblical revelation, and toward the things of the flesh.

from the truth in the Bible and maintain some proximity to the truth, it nonetheless gives our imagination free rein, quoting the words of Francis Schaeffer: "The Christian is the really free man—he is free to have imagination. This too is our heritage. The Christian is one whose imagination should fly beyond the stars" (22).

Because *Heaven* overlooks that our mind, including our imagination, must be set on the spirit and governed by the spirit, its imagination inevitably flies away from the things of the spirit, beyond the purview of the biblical revelation, and toward the things of the flesh. Therefore, much of its content is the product of the vanity of the mind, not the spirit of the mind. For instance, the book says that according to Revelation 21:6 we will drink from the spring of the water of life, and that according to 22:2 we will eat from fruit trees. He contends that "there's every reason to believe we'll drink juice made from the twelve fruits from the tree of life" (297). He then asks, "Is there any reason to suppose we wouldn't drink coffee or tea? Can you imagine drinking coffee or tea with Jesus on the New Earth? If you can't, why not?" (297). Here the book first misquotes Revelation 22:2 by saying there will be fruit *trees*, whereas the text speaks only of a singular tree of life. It fails to point out that both the tree of life

modes of travel?" (288, 321, 323, 340, 356, 389, 410-411, 415, 428-429). Since the Scriptures are silent on most of these issues, the book is forced to answer them largely by distorting biblical texts out of their context and by exercising speculative imagination. Such a venture results in a profane and preposterous portrayal of the believers' eternal destiny.¹ In effect, it creates personal myths of heaven; that is, if one can imagine an affirmative answer to all these questions, is it implausible for someone to imagine negative answers to them, and then is there any basis for deciding which imaginary vision is more plausible? But the real question is why Christians allow themselves to be absorbed in these "myths and unending genealogies" which only give rise to questionings (1 Tim. 1:4). In depicting the believers' final destiny as a return to an Edenic paradise, the book, on numerous occasions, approvingly quotes the writings of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. These avowedly Christian authors believed in some inherent significance of mythology, claiming, "pagan fables of paradise were dim and distorted recollections of Eden" (237). Hence, their non-fiction is a blend of biblical precepts and pagan myths. On a momentous night in which Lewis was converted to Christianity primarily through Tolkien's discussion of the relationship between Christianity and paganism, Tolkien stated that

we have come from God,...and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God. Indeed, only by myth-making, only by becoming a 'sub-creator' and inventing stories, can Man aspire to the state of perfection that he knew before the Fall. (Carpenter 151)

Tolkien also posited,

Not merely the abstract thoughts of man *but also his imaginative inventions* must originate with God, and in consequence reflect something of eternal truth. In making a myth, in practising 'mythopoeia' and peopling the world with elves and dragons and goblins, a story-teller... is actually fulfilling God's purpose. (Pearce 130)

A month after his conversion, Lewis wrote that he saw the inherent value of pagan stories as "God expressing Himself through the minds of the poets, using such images as He found there" (Pearce 185). *Heaven* lauds Lewis's writings—in particular the Chronicles of Narnia series—as an unsurpassed work of biblical theology:

Lewis captured the biblical theology of the old and New Earth, and the continuity between them, better than any theologian I've read. Did you catch his message? Our world is a Shadowlands, a copy of something that once was, Eden, and yet will be, the New Earth. All of the old Earth that matters will be drawn into Heaven, to be part of the New Earth.

Through The Chronicles of Narnia series, we and our children can learn to envision the promised Heaven on Earth in a biblical and compelling way. (239)

Given *Heaven's* unabashed endorsement of the writings of Lewis and Tolkien and its unqualified acceptance of their hermeneutic, one cannot help but wonder what role pagan myths played in shaping its own inquiries into, and explanation of, our eternal destination as a restored Eden.

In stark contrast, Paul condemns both pagan myths, which produce questionings, and unprofitable questions, which beget contentions. He tells Timothy to charge the believers in Ephesus "not to teach different things nor to give heed to myths...which produce questionings rather than God's economy, which is in faith" (1 Tim. 1:3-4). He enjoins his child in faith to refuse both "profane and old-womanish myths" and "foolish questionings and those arising from an untrained mind," for "they beget contentions" (4:7; 2 Tim. 2:23). According to Paul, if anyone teaches different things rather than the teaching which is according to godliness—God manifested in the flesh in the person of Christ and in the Body of Christ—he understands nothing, is deprived of the truth, and is "diseased

with questionings" (1 Tim. 6:3-5). *Heaven's* imaginative speculation creates a mythology of heaven that seems to be the fulfillment of Paul's prophecy in 2 Timothy 4:3-4: "A time will come when the believers, having itching ears, 'will turn away their ear from the truth and will be turned aside to myths.'" In light of Paul's admonitions to his faithful co-worker, much of the book's speculation amounts to profane myths and vain babblings which advance to more ungodliness (2:16); it is not the healthy teaching of God's economy which brings forth godliness—God in Christ manifested in the believers.

Heaven's Exaltation of Human Culture and Diverse Nationality

Heaven also erroneously exalts human culture. According to the book, God created man in His image and appointed him to rule the earth that he would manifest God's attributes and exercise dominion over the earth. This dominion would produce God-exalting societies in which human beings exercise their creativity, intellect, and skills to develop God-glorifying culture which "encompasses commerce, the arts, sciences, athletics—anything and everything that God-empowered, creative human minds can conceive and strong human bodies can implement" (219). Although this culture-enriching purpose of God was interrupted by the fall of man, Christ's redemptive work will ultimately restore and enhance God's original plan.

Whereas *Heaven* uplifts human culture as the means of accomplishing God's purpose, the Scriptures indict it as a satanic system replacing God and usurping man from His purpose. According to the book, the fact that God mentions in Genesis 4 the inventions of human culture and examples of technological progress "suggests that [He] approved of the use of creativity and skills to develop society" (234). In so doing, it fails to note that before Adam's fall, although he possessed extraordinary abilities, there is no record of God's mandate that the sinless man develop a human civilization. It was only after the fall that man began to produce culture, and this culture was without God. In the garden of Eden man enjoyed God as his protection, provision, and pleasure, but after he lost God, he was forced to invent a godless framework of civilization as a substitute for God for his defense, sustenance, and enjoyment (Gen. 4:16-24). Human culture is not the product of sinless men living in the presence of God but that of godless men constituted with sin. Therefore, the will of God is not, as the book claims, "the advance of the human mind" through the ages, evident in technological progress and refinement of the arts (219). In stark contrast, according to Paul, the will of God is to "rescue us out of the present evil age," the modern appearance of the satanic system that replaces God and usurps the place of God in man (Gal. 1:4).² Whereas the book claims that God calls us to "cultural reform and

development” to fulfill the culture-enriching purpose of God for mankind on earth (214), Romans reveals that God has called us not to be fashioned according to this age but to be conformed to the image of Christ, His firstborn Son, that we may live in and build up the Body of Christ for the accomplishment of His eternal will (8:28-30; 12:2-5).

The book also suggests that in eternity all the nations’ cultural, artistic, athletic, scientific, and intellectual achievements—such as “the music of Bach and Mozart, the painting of Rembrandt, the writing of Shakespeare, the discoveries of science”—will not be lost or destroyed (235, quoting Albert Walters); instead, they will be given to the believers, who will rule the earth as “the stewards, the managers of the world’s wealth and accomplishments” (223). Here the book ignores that any monument of human genius and any masterpiece of human creativity—even those with a Christian orientation—will all perish in the fire of the Lord’s judgment, unless these works correspond to the Father’s divine nature (gold), the Son’s redemption (silver), and the Spirit’s transforming work (precious stones), and unless they are initiated by God according to His will, are carried out by God according to His power, and result in God’s glory (Rev. 18; 1 Cor. 3:9-15; Rom. 11:36). Moreover, Paul in Philippians 3 tells us

transcends differences” (363). Such a contention, however, runs counter to the work of Christ in His crucifixion in the verses cited: He not only slew the enmity between the Jews and the Gentiles but also abolished in His flesh all cultural ordinances—all forms and ways of living that create enmity and division—to create the one new man. In verse 16, Paul tells us that we were reconciled to God through the cross, not as individuals, as nations, or as cultures, but in the one Body of Christ—that is, the one new man. Elsewhere Paul reveals with unequivocal language that our national character, cultural heritage, and social status have no value or place in the new man: “Where there *cannot be* Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all and in all” (Col. 3:11, emphasis added).

Heaven fails to recognize that all cultural and national distinctions among mankind are an issue of the fall and have been abolished on the cross and in the new man. It, thus, wrongly suggests that in the New Jerusalem we will delight in each other’s differences, celebrating our racial, ethnic, and national diversity; as a result, in eternity we will have disagreements arising from different opinions and perspectives, challenging one another’s ideas and presenting our disputes before Christ. In sharp contrast, Paul underscores

Heaven fails to recognize that cultural and national distinctions were abolished on the cross. It wrongly suggests that in the New Jerusalem we will delight in each other’s racial, ethnic, and national differences.

that he counted all things, including his outstanding achievements in Judaism, not only as loss but also as refuse that he might gain Christ (vv. 7-8). Will Paul in eternity be content to be a steward of the world’s wealth and cultural accomplishments, all of which he despised, when he was already given the stewardship of the grace of God to dispense the unsearchable riches of Christ as grace to the fellow believers (Eph. 3:2, 8)?

Moreover, *Heaven* errs in celebrating the diversity of the believers based upon their cultural and national distinctions. It contends that Christ came “not only to redeem mankind as individuals, but also as nations and cultures” (97). In actual fact, however, all of our cultural, national, ethnic, and racial distinctions are the product of the fall of man, which reached its nadir in the collective rebellion of the whole human race at Babel and caused God to judge rebellious mankind by confounding his language and scattering him (Gen. 11:1-9). Quoting Paul’s words in Ephesians 2:14-16, the book rightly states that Christ on the cross “put racism to death” (362). Yet, positing that we will preserve our ethnic and national identities for eternity, it contends that peace among the believers on the new earth “will be accomplished not by the abolition of our differences but by a unifying loyalty to the King, a loyalty that

the divine oneness of the believers that results from having the one Christ progressively imparted into their being to transform them into the same image (2 Cor. 3:18): they should have the same mind, be attuned in the same opinion, think the same thing, speak the same thing with the same spirit of faith, and walk by the same rule in the same spirit and in the same steps (Rom. 12:16; 15:5; 1 Cor. 1:10; 12:25; 2 Cor. 4:13; 12:18; 13:11; Phil. 2:2; 3:16).

Heaven’s Distracting of the Believers from Their Enjoyment of the Triune God

Because *Heaven* exercises speculative imagination and presents an elevated view of human culture, it portrays our eternal destination as a proliferation of human amusement. The book posits that theologians’ neglect of heaven over the centuries produced an “uninspired view of Heaven,” a ghostly place of boring, unearthly existence (10-11). In an attempt to disabuse the reader of this notion, the book presents heaven as a magnification of earthly pleasures, a panacea for the boredom of human life. In so doing, the book defrauds the believers of their experience of the Triune God. To its credit, *Heaven* argues that our primary joy in eternity will be knowing and seeing God; every other joy will derive from our relationship with God. The book’s

presentation of our enjoyment of God, however, is both shallow and erroneous. First, the book subscribes to a traditional notion that our eternal home is a cozy and intimate suite each of us owns privately in a spacious estate—namely, the Father’s house spoken of in John 14. Yet the context of the entire Gospel of John reveals that the Father’s house with its many abodes is not a physical place but a precious person—the Triune God in Christ as the Spirit dispensed into His believers to make them the Body of Christ, the church as the house of God (vv. 1-20, 23; 17:21; 2:16-22; 1 Tim. 3:15). The Father’s house is a mutual abode of the redeeming Triune God with His redeemed people, where in Christ they dwell in God and He dwells in them (John 15:1-7). (See “‘In My Father’s House’—the Unleavened Truth of John 14” in *Affirmation & Critique*, V.2, for a thorough treatment of this subject.) Since it misses out on this truth, *Heaven* presents our eternal home as a physical place on the new earth with natural wonders and flourishing human culture; thus, the book affirms, “This world is our home: we are made to live here” (85, quoting Paul Marshall). Therefore, the book distracts the believers from abiding in God who is their true dwelling place for now and eternity (Psa. 90:1; 1 John 2:28; 4:15-16; Rev. 21:22).

Perhaps the most absurd notion that *Heaven* advances is that the morning star the Lord promises to the overcomers in Revelation in 2:28 is “a celestial object—the planet Venus” (254). Based upon this verse, the book speculates that we may inhabit and govern resurrected planets such as “a new Saturn, new Jupiter, new Ganymede, new Pleiades, and a new Milky Way” (255). This interpretation flatly contradicts the Lord’s own declaration in Revelation: “I am...the bright morning star” (22:16). An interpretation of the morning star that is faithful to the Lord’s declaration in Revelation and the rest of the New Testament must consider 2 Peter 1:19: “We have the prophetic word made more firm, to which you do well to give heed as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” This verse indicates that before the day of the Lord’s second coming dawns—before Christ as the Sun of righteousness appears publicly to the world—He as the morning star will appear privately to His overcomers, those who are enlightened by the shining of the prophetic word and thereby earnestly seek the Lord and watch for His appearing (Mal. 4:2; 2 Tim. 4:8). Blind to the meaning of the morning star that is rooted in the Scriptures, *Heaven* can give us only a baseless expectation of inhabiting and governing renovated planets in the future, rather than a biblical exhortation that we give heed to the prophetic word to enjoy Christ as the bright morning star rising and shining in our hearts today.

Heaven’s Superficial View of the Resurrection of Christ

Perhaps the most foundational shortcoming of *Heaven* lies

in its shallow understanding of the resurrection of Christ. This understanding shapes its notion of the destiny of the believers and the earth: “Christ’s resurrection is the prototype for the resurrection of mankind and the earth” (117). Further, the book’s notion of resurrection revolves around “continuity—the *same* body that was destroyed is reconstructed into the new” (150). The book thus argues that both the empty tomb and the marks of His crucifixion in His resurrected body prove that “Christ’s resurrection body was the same body that died on the cross” (113). Likewise, we in resurrection will remain the same people with the same history, appearance, and interests—now furnished with new minds and incorruptible bodies and freed from sin and the curse. Overall, the book sees the resurrection of Christ primarily as a physical event in which He rose from the dead with an indestructible body while maintaining the personal identity He possessed prior to His death. This predominantly physical view of His resurrection leads to an application of the resurrection to the believers that is merely physical and objective, not spiritual and subjective.

Citing passages in 1 Corinthians 15, the book asserts that the apostle Paul considers the physical resurrection of Christ “absolutely essential to the Christian faith” (109). Yet *Heaven* fails to show that Paul in this chapter not only affirms that the veracity of the bodily resurrection of Christ is vital to the defense of the Christian faith; he also reveals that the intrinsic significance of His resurrection is crucial to our subjective experience of Christ: “The last Adam became a life-giving Spirit” (v. 45). Paul unveils that just as a grain of wheat is sown into the ground, dies, and is raised to become transfigured into another form, so also the last Adam, Christ in the flesh, died, resurrected, and thereby was transfigured to become the life-giving Spirit (vv. 35-45). The core significance of the resurrection from the perspective of the eternal economy of God is that Christ in the flesh, who had come in His incarnation that we may have life, has become, in His resurrection, the life-giving Spirit, the Spirit who gives life (John 10:10; 2 Cor. 3:6). If the central meaning of the resurrection of Christ was limited to rising with a new body that maintains its continuity with the old, as suggested by *Heaven*, His resurrection would be nothing more than an objective fact that bears no relevance to the believers’ subjective experience of the organic salvation of God. This is because the operation of the divine life of the Triune God within us hinges upon the work of the indwelling life-giving Spirit to progressively dispense God Himself as life into our tripartite vessel: regenerating our spirit by making it life, transforming our soul by filling it with life, and glorifying our body by giving life to our mortal body (Rom. 8:2, 10, 6, 11). Since *Heaven* misses the vital role of the life-giving Spirit in the believers’ experience of God’s organic salvation, it can only highlight the bodily resurrection of Christ at the expense of its intrinsic significance.

Heaven thus countenances, and perhaps nurtures, the believers' love for the world and the gratification of their physical senses while negating their enjoyment of the indwelling life-giving Spirit.

Far from mentioning the enjoyment of the life-giving Spirit, *Heaven* suggests that foretastes of heaven consist of our enjoyment of physical things in the old creation: watching a ball game, playing golf, riding bikes, working in the garden, watching the spaciousness of the night sky. To gain a foretaste of heaven, the book says, we should see God in His creation: in the food we eat, the air we breathe, the good books we read, and the pleasures of works and hobbies. But Paul reveals that the foretaste of our eternal satisfaction is the life-giving Spirit, the consummation of the processed Triune God. Even as we groan with all creation, longing for the redemption of our body, we have the Spirit as the firstfruits, the foretaste, of a coming harvest, that is, our full enjoyment of the Triune God in eternity (Rom. 8:23). God has given us the Spirit as the pledge (a sample and a foretaste) of our inheritance—the Triune God Himself as our eternal portion (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14). Rather than merely marveling at the old creation in its grand scale and intricate details, we, the new creation, should contact the Creator

physical aspects of our eternal existence belies the fact that the preponderance of the biblical revelation of our eternal destiny is on its spiritual qualities explicated through symbols. For instance, in keeping with John's declaration in the first verse of Revelation that it is a book of signs, the New Jerusalem must be understood strictly as a sign, a symbolic vision, of the consummation of God's eternal economy to impart Himself in Christ as the Spirit into His redeemed people to be their life, life supply, and everything. Yet the book insists that the New Jerusalem is a physical city with spiritual realities: It is both a figure of speech and a "literal geographical location" with natural wonders, spectacular sceneries, and thriving human culture (241). Predictably, however, *Heaven's* fixation on the physical nature of the believers' ultimate destination overwhelms its feeble attempt to explain the spiritual significance of the holy city, indicating that the former is incongruous with the latter. A pathetic case in point is the book's claim that on the new earth we will snorkel in huge lakes and drink life-giving water. The author explains away the statement in Revelation 21:2 that the sea is no more by arguing that the core meaning of the verse is that "there will be no more of the cold, treacherous waters that separate nations, destroy ships, and drown our loved ones. There will be...no more poisoned salt waters" (265).

While snorkeling in freshwater, we will drink pure, refreshing, life-giving sweet water: This is a clear instance of Heaven twisting the Scriptures because of its obsession with the things of the old creation that will pass away.

who now lives in our spirit as the Spirit to taste and see that the Lord is good (2 Cor. 5:17; Psa. 34:8; 1 Pet. 2:3). Speculating that in eternity we may "play our favorite sports with some of our favorite sports heroes," *Heaven* asks, "How would you like to, in your resurrection body, play golf with Payne Stewart or play basketball with David Robinson?" (411). The believers who truly enjoy the Spirit as the foretaste of the Triune God as their eternal inheritance will reply that in eternity they will no longer yearn for such an idolatrous replacement of God; rather, they will forever only long for and be satisfied with, the all-inclusive Spirit as the river of God's pleasures, which will continuously supply and saturate their tripartite being (Rev. 22:1-2; Psa. 36:8-9; 42:1-2; 46:4).

Presenting its predominantly physical view of our eternal existence, *Heaven* attributes the Christians' tendency to disdain the physical world and to allegorize the Bible to the baneful influence of Platonic dualism, which posits the fundamental incompatibility between the spiritual and the physical, considering the former an ideal and the latter as a liability. The book contends with a Platonic disregard for the body by arguing that according to the Bible the physical realm is not an obstacle to, but "a central part" of, God's plan (465). Yet the book's preoccupation with the

Recounting his most exhilarating experience while snorkeling, the author, an avid snorkler, confesses, "I felt closer to God during that twenty minutes than at nearly any other time in my life" (267). He then states:³

I predict the New Earth will include large bodies of water where we'll dive, perhaps without tanks or masks... Imagine fresh water we can freely drink of, water in which we can open wide our eyes and play with God's creatures of the deep. (267)

Heaven goes on to tell us that while snorkeling in freshwater oceans, we will drink the "pure, refreshing, life-giving 'sweet' water" (267), a clear allusion to the crystal-bright river of water of life in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:1). This is a clear instance of the book's twisting the Scriptures because of its obsession with the things of the old creation that will pass away. Here the life-giving Spirit, the unique source of our eternal satisfaction, signified by the river of water of life, is demeaned as "life-giving" water that we will drink while playing with fish in an allegedly freshwater ocean (John 7:37-39; 1 Cor. 12:13). This illustrates that *Heaven's* inherently physical view of our final destiny vitiates the rich symbolic meaning of a crucial detail of the holy city.

According to the Scriptures, it seems that there will be a certain physical dimension to the believers' eternal destiny. *Heaven* rightly asserts that in eternity we will not be disembodied spirits, and our personal identity will not be effaced. The New Testament reveals that Christ did resurrect with a spiritual body, a body of flesh and bones, and the fullness of the Godhead now and forever dwells in His glorified body (Luke 24:39; Col. 2:9). Likewise, we the believers, who were created tripartite, will in eternity remain tripartite beings, possessing not only our regenerated spirit and transformed soul but also a glorified body, our body conformed to the body of His glory (Phil. 3:21). Yet the book fails to see that what raised Jesus from the dead is nothing less than the divine, indestructible, resurrection life in His spirit that was empowered and imparted into His crucified body (1 Pet. 3:18); similarly, what will glorify our body of humiliation to become the body of His glory is nothing less than the life of the Triune God that will eventually saturate our human body through the operation of the resurrected Christ as the indwelling life-giving Spirit (Rom. 8:11). Neglecting this pivotal role of the Spirit in the believers' eternal destiny, *Heaven* affirms that "Biblical hope, rooted in incarnation and resurrection, is creational, this-worldly, visible, physical, bodily hope" (147, quoting Herman Bavinck). But Paul's understanding of our hope is primarily spiritual and mystical, not physical and visible. When he speaks of one hope of our calling, he associates it with "one Body and one Spirit," that is, the one life-giving Spirit saturating our tripartite being through our drinking of the Spirit in order to make us the one mystical Body of Christ in reality (Eph. 4:4-6; 1 Cor. 12:12-13).

Alcorn tells us that as a novelist and Bible teacher, he first sees the revelation in the Scriptures by reasoning and then "add[s] to it the vital ingredient of imagination" (22). The vital ingredient of imagination which the book adds to the revelation in the Scriptures is but the old leaven of traditional teaching added to the fine flour of the divine revelation in the Bible. Further, *Heaven* states that we must start from the truth in the Bible and let our Scripture-enhanced imagination fly upon, not away from, the truth. Yet close inspection of the book under the lens of the divine revelation reveals that what the book allegedly discovers in the Scriptures is both shallow and erroneous, and the human imagination used to explicate the details of our ultimate destiny casts off the restraint of the heavenly vision of God's economy and flies far away from the truth. Overall, motivated more by human anxiety regarding earthly existence than by the biblical revelation of the eternal purpose of God, *Heaven* provides merely a physical view of the resurrection of Christ to the neglect of its organic significance, portrays a vision of our eternal destiny as the magnification of human amusement, and promotes human culture that replaces God, who is the unique fountain of our enjoyment. In so doing, it disgraces

the holy name and grand economy of God and distracts the believers from their participation in so great a salvation.

by David Yoon

Notes

¹A case in point is the book's belief that on the new earth we will see trade, business, and commerce. Ezekiel 28 reveals that the inventor of commerce is Satan, typified by the king of Tyre, whose iniquities were closely associated with his trading: "by the abundance of your trading they filled your midst with violence, and you sinned"; "by the multitude of your iniquities in the unrighteousness of your trading you have profaned your sanctuaries" (vv. 16, 18). Moreover, Revelation 18 unveils that in His second coming, the Lord will eventually judge material Babylon on the ground of her commerce, and that all the merchants of the earth will mourn her downfall (vv. 18-19). Why would He restore on the new earth that which He destroyed by the time of His second coming because of its satanic origin and nature?

²It is significant to note that according to the context of Galatians "the present evil age" does not refer to an immoral, carnal, or hedonistic aspect of the world; rather, it refers to the Jewish religion (6:14-15). This reveals that in the eyes of God, any religion or culture that distracts us from experiencing Christ revealed in us, living in us, and formed in us is inherently evil (1:15-16; 2:20; 4:19). If Judaism, a religion founded on the law of God, can become an evil tool to seduce the believers from God Himself, how much more may other secular forms of human culture pose peril to defraud them from their unique prize, the all-inclusive Christ?

³This prediction of *Heaven*, springing from its world-loving heart, brings to mind Jehovah's indignation against the false prophets, those who "prophesy out of their heart," "follow their own spirit," have seen and spoken vanity, lead His people astray, and "expect that He will fulfill their word" (Ezek. 13:1-10).

Works Cited

- Carpenter, Humphrey. *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.
- Pearce, Joseph, ed. *Tolkien: A Celebration: Collected Writings on a Literary Legacy*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001.

As It Was in the Beginning?

Visible Church—Visible Unity: Ecumenical Ecclesiology and "The Great Tradition of the Church," by Ola Tjørhom. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004.

In *Visible Church—Visible Unity* (hereafter *Unity*) Norwegian theologian and Lutheran ecumenist Ola Tjørhom argues for an ecumenical ecclesiology that is

based upon the church's "Great Tradition" and that occasions visible unity within the church. Dr. Tjørhom, professor at the Norwegian School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger, is no stranger in ecumenical circles. He participated in the process that led to the landmark Anglican-Lutheran *Porvoo Common Statement* in 1992, was research professor at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, and served as a Lutheran member of the Anglican-Lutheran International Working Group. Neither is Tjørhom foreign to controversy. In 2003 he followed through with his ecclesial convictions and became a member of the Roman Catholic Church. *Unity* thus provides a glimpse into the thoughts of one who is committed to following his ecumenical vision through to what he sees is its most logical conclusion. Unfortunately, however, his conclusion lacks an emphasis on the kernel of the divine life, which alone can sustain the visible oneness that can convict the world.

Bridging the Gap

Unity lays out a strong case for visible unity. In order for the world to believe, *Unity* stresses that the church must possess not only the inherent oneness of the Triune God, but also a visible communion that exhibits a common

Luther's ecumenical goals of renewal have been achieved—some during the Reformation itself, some as recently as the Second Vatican Council. The success that signaled the fulfillment of the original Lutheran charter should have led to the Reformation movement's reintegration of itself into the church's fellowship thus preserving its visible unity. Simply by coming back to its own roots, *Unity* suggests, Protestantism, or at least Lutheranism, will be able to tap back into the core of ancient Christian tradition from which it originally sprang and thereby share the rediscovered ecumenical and ecclesiological mission with its estranged mother, the Roman Catholic Church. According to *Unity*, hopeful signs of this very thing are becoming more apparent by the day: not only does the so-called Great Tradition play a fundamental role within the Roman Church, but it is also held in honor by self-identified "traditional Christians" who embody vast segments of Protestant confessions. With this evidence in hand, *Unity* makes the case that the Great Tradition's "old way forward" is today's most viable path to achieving the ecumenical goal—full, and visible, unity.

The Great Tradition: An Old Way Forward

The Great Tradition that *Unity* describes is "great" in the

Unity stresses that the church must possess not only the inherent oneness of the Triune God, but also a visible communion that exhibits a common spirituality and exists undividedly within concrete ecclesial structures.

spirituality and exists undividedly within concrete ecclesial structures. *Unity* also insists that the basis of the church's visible unity must be the one true faith as declared in the Bible and interpreted by the church in accordance with the apostolic witness. Quoting René Beupère, *Unity* acknowledges that if believers, confessions, and denominations strive for such a traditionally based ecumenical ecclesiology, the church will lie "beyond all existing ecclesial realities" (80) and in so doing will destabilize parochial institutions as we know them (89-90). For *Unity*, however, this is a small price to pay, since this route will potentially bring about the emergence of Christian unity and consequently the fulfillment of God's purpose for the church and the seeing and believing of the world (John 17:21).

Implicit in *Unity* is an effort to bridge the gap between Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism. It attempts this, in part, by critically examining the present state of Lutheran ecclesiology and ecumenism. *Unity* contends that Martin Luther's intention, far from starting another church, was to affect constructive change within what he perceived to be the one apostolic, catholic church and to encourage its return to the teaching of the historic church in the few areas where it had departed. The Reformation project seems to have been a success in that most of

sense that it includes the key elements of "classic Christianity." From a theological perspective (1) the Great Tradition is "grounded in the apostolic witness to Christ as ultimately revealed in Holy Scripture and living on in the Church's *anamnesis* [recollection]"; (2) it is "defined and shaped by the ecumenical creeds of the ancient and undivided church"; (3) it is "fundamentally catholic in the sense that it aims at incorporating the faith of the church in all its richness across time as well as space"; (4) it is "sacramentally, ecclesiological, and liturgically based"; (5) it "realizes that the people of God are a structured people in the sense that pastoral leaders and shepherds as well as laity are included"; (6) it is "based on the firm conviction that the Church...is one, and it acknowledges a fundamental ecumenical obligation"; (7) it "holds God's will to be binding and obligatory for human life in its totality"; (8) it "places significant weight on the Church's sending, mission, and service in the world"; (9) it "realizes that the dialectic between creation and redemption provides the framework of the Church's mission"; and (10) it is not "a purely nostalgic project" (27-29). Structurally speaking, the Great Tradition is "committed to the goal of visible unity," is mindful of "the office of the bishop as a key bond of unity and continuity in the Church's life," is "open to the possibility

that visible community on the universal level requires some kind of unity with the Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter,” and takes us “significantly beyond traditional church borders” (30-31). On a practical level, the chief ecumenical asset of the Great Tradition is that it establishes a visible church unity among believers across time and in all places and demonstrates that visible church unity is “a unity that is founded on the empirically recognizable means of grace [i.e., the sacraments] and is directed toward the world in order that it may see and believe” (35).

That the World May Believe

Unity's underlying contention is that the unity of the church must be not merely spiritual, much less diplomatic, but physical and visible—in other words, *real*. *Unity's* view of church unity thus stands in opposition to contemporary Protestantism's “insistence that the Church should be understood largely as an invisible and therefore abstract entity” (14), an insistence that *Unity* ascribes to “a general ecclesiological deficit” on Protestantism's part (77). According to *Unity*, the visible oneness of the church is obligatory. It is not a trifling point of doctrine that is to be theologized away or ignored; rather, “unity belongs inseparably and necessarily to the church's nature” (xvi). Accordingly, “Visible unity is crucial to the Church's witness so that people will be able to see and believe” (93).¹ What is at stake is nothing less than the richness of the fellowship between the church's members and the effective witness of the church to the unbelieving world (71). Given the church's nature and its grave responsibility toward the unbelieving and divided world, it comes as no surprise that Tjørhom in a recent article characterized unnecessary schism as an outright sin (*Pro Ecclesia* 261-262).

Unity's ability to see that the church should be moving in the direction of oneness is refreshing. According to *Unity*, practical oneness is a stumbling block to many believers because genuine commitment to church unity will lead to the end of existing denominational structures by throwing open every committed confession's ecclesial structure to radical reorganization, if not dissolution (22, 90-93). In the end, *Unity* suggests that the only way to overcome dissension within the church today is for believers to devote themselves to the unity of the Body of Christ, come what may, and ensure that the various institutions that currently bisect it “are explicitly intended to contribute to the greater unity that corresponds to the Church's nature” (92).

This well sounding call is presented with the best of intentions, but it misses the mark. The growing oneness of the Body of Christ is not predicated upon visible institutions, even ones whose intentions are directed

toward contributing to greater unity. Neither does the oneness of the church, visible or invisible, rest upon institutional adherence to an “agenda” of “visible oneness.” Rather, it depends upon the one life of the one Triune God, which has been dispensed into every genuine believer in Christ. Only when believers are connected with the reality of the divine life that is within them will the oneness that Tjørhom desires be produced.

Universal and Local

Unity's reliance upon the Great Tradition, as a credible basis for practical ecumenical ecclesiology, forces it to adopt a profoundly erroneous position concerning the nature of the church, based on its mistaken understanding of the scriptural role of a bishop in a genuine local church. Ultimately this view destroys some of the most fundamental distinctions within the church and in so doing, turns the true oneness of the church into a product that is nothing more than a consolidated, traditionally correct, church episcopate. *Unity's* view is organizational and hierarchical, reflective of the structure and teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

While the priestly office serves the local church and the bishop provides a link between the local and the universal levels, there is much reason to believe that we also need some kind of universal ministry in order to express and guard the Church's essential universality. This has traditionally been the task of the Bishop of Rome...

[One] difficult issue in regard to the papal office is perhaps the matter of “universal jurisdiction.” On the one hand, *the universality of the church requires some kind of universal authority*. On the other hand, the subtle balance between unity and diversity suggests that *such jurisdiction always must be exercised within a collegial and communal framework in which the whole college of bishops plays a crucial role*. In practical terms, collegiality can be realized both through synods and through the principle of subsidiarity, which means that decisions in most cases should be taken at the lowest possible level in the Church's life. (58-59, emphasis added)

Unity erroneously supposes that a “universal jurisdiction” is presided over by human agency within the church. *Unity* argues that an episcopal ministry that exercises authority not only over local congregations but also to a limited extent over the universal church will help achieve the goal of visible unity (55). The episcopal office, we read in *Unity*, developed in response to the post-apostolic church's rapid growth and subsequent need for “new forms of leadership” (55). The eventual result of this hierarchical evolution was the so-called threefold ministry, which consists of bishops, priests, and deacons. In this ministry, which is common to all episcopally organized

churches, priests and deacons fulfill local obligations, and bishops—successors to the apostles and “vital signs of unity and continuity in the Church” (57)—play both local and universal roles. Because disunity rather than unity is the rule among present-day episcopacies (Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and so on) *Unity* advocates a “unified episcopate” (58) in which bishops of all confessions recognize one another and together exercise apostolic authority over the united church (58). Then, in part, as a result of a visible, unified ministerial structure, the world will be able to “see and believe,” and the church’s purpose will be fulfilled.

Unity is correct to recognize the need for visible oneness within the church. However, the means we employ to attain such oneness must never be at odds with biblical revelation. *Unity*’s decision to make the Great Tradition its chief guide to ecclesiology has led it into a view of oneness that the Scriptures contradict. The New Testament tells us that the church has two distinct aspects: universal and local. The universal church is composed of all who believe into Christ as the Son of God and are thereby forgiven of their sins and regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Hence, the universal church has no boundary but the faith. If a man is of the orthodox faith of Christ, he is

church, it fails to grasp the separation that exists between them in terms of administration and oversight. Corresponding to the two aspects of the church are three church offices. The first office, that of an apostle, involves work that extends beyond the boundary of a local church. Conspicuous in its absence from apostolic authority is local, administrative oversight of any kind. The second and third offices, those of elders and deacons, involve work that is confined within the boundary of a local church. The New Testament records no instance of an elder having any official authority outside of his own locality.

It is worth noting that brethren (whether apostles, elders, or ordinary believers) from one local church are in no wise forbidden from fellowshiping with and otherwise making suggestions to another local church; however, they have no right to impose their will upon it. Likewise, although the elders in a local church, if spiritual, will actively seek out fellowship from believers—apostles for example—who are outside their locality, they are not obliged to do so, much less are they required to submit to any non-local demands save those from the Lord Himself.

First, by misunderstanding the local and universal aspects of the church as well as the God-ordained offices of the

Unity is correct to recognize the need for visible oneness within the church. Its decision, however, to make the Great Tradition its chief guide to ecclesiology has led it into a view of oneness that the Scriptures contradict.

within the universal church regardless of his situation in time, space, class, or creed. While the universal church includes all believers, the church in its local aspect has definite boundaries and does not include all believers. According to the New Testament, the boundary of a local church is the boundary of the city in which it exists, and a genuine local church consists of all the believers who are within this boundary. Each local church, then, is distinguished from all other local churches by virtue of its unique geographical location alone. It is for this reason that the apostles called each local church by the city in which it existed and referred to all of the members of the universal church who were in a given city as the church in that city. For example, the New Testament speaks of “the church which was in Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1) and indicates that it consisted of “all” who were in that city (see also 13:1; Rom. 16:1; 1 Thes. 1:1; Rev. 1:11; 2—3).² Only when believers are one with one another in the context of local churches will the oneness of the universal Body of Christ be visibly realized.

Apostles and Elders

Though *Unity* correctly notes (albeit in a limited fashion) that there is a distinction between the universal and local

church, *Unity* compromises both the universal church’s universal character and the local church’s local character. The Word of God speaks only of the universal and local aspects of the church; it contemplates no third aspect in which the church either is narrower than the universal church or wider than the local church. By stating that “the universality of the church requires some kind of universal authority” (58) and suggesting that this authority be born by human agency, whether a bishop or a college of bishops, *Unity* tramples underfoot the New Testament’s clear presentation of the church’s aspects and corresponding offices. *Unity*’s position, regardless of the nobility of its purpose, is biblically indefensible.

Second, contrary to *Unity*’s position, the New Testament does not condone the office of bishop, especially where *bishop* is understood to refer to one who “represent[s] the local churches universally and the universal Church locally, thus providing an effective bond of unity” (57).³ The New Testament describes no single office that approximates that of the tradition-bound “bishop.” In the degraded practice of traditional Christianity, the office and function of bishop replace those of the elders, obviate those of the apostles, and usurp those of the Head. If that were not enough, in its pursuit of visible unity, *Unity* goes

on to call for a single bishop—that of Rome—to carry out “a special universal service to or ministry of unity” (31). This position demonstrates the utter obliviousness that *Unity* has concerning the destruction that the anti-biblical office of bishop inflicts upon the church and her visible unity.

Unity's reliance on the Great Tradition as a panacea for ecumenical ecclesiology will not result in a divinely sourced unity. The oneness that is seen in the New Testament is not one wrought by a traditionally ordered episcopal structure, but worked out in the fellowship of the divine life of the Triune God which has been dispensed into all the believers.

Life, the Spirit, and Oneness

The divine life is God Himself, for only God is divine and only God is life (John 1:1, 4, 14; 14:6). Moreover, Romans 8:2 tells us that the divine life is of the Spirit, the life-giving Spirit, who is the third of the Trinity and the consummation of the processed Triune God (1 Cor. 15:45). Consequently, those who receive the Spirit are recipients of the eternal life of God and as such are the sons of God (John 3:6, 8; 1:12-13; 1 John 3:1). Christ begins His prayer for the believers' oneness by speaking directly concerning the fundamental role of the eternal life: “Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son that the Son may glorify You; even as You have given Him authority over all flesh to give eternal life to all whom You have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Him whom You have sent, Jesus Christ” (John 17:1-3). Thus, the divine life is the unique factor of the believers' oneness and the church's visible unity.

At the moment at which every believer repents and acknowledges the Lord Jesus as their Redeemer, they receive Him as life (1 John 5:12). Given the opportunity, this life, just like any other, will grow, flourish, and bear fruit after its own kind (cf. Gen. 1:11-12, 21, 24-25). The fruit of the divine life is, among other things, oneness on account of the fact that the divine life is the one God Himself in Christ as the Spirit. Since all the believers have been begotten of the very life of our one God, the threshold for oneness has already been met. This is why Paul charges the believers to *keep* the oneness of the Spirit; for the oneness of the Spirit had come to the believers at the time of their birth of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3; John 3:6). Essential oneness notwithstanding, the church in the physical realm is far from harmonious. Indeed, it is the disconnection between the oneness the church possesses and the division it exhibits that *Unity* attempts to rectify. The key in solving the riddle of oneness lies in knowing the source of division and how to counteract it.

The problem of division enters when believers begin to pay attention to matters that do not encourage the growth of the divine life within them. Such things can be as obvious as heresy or idolatry. But by far the matters most destructive to the manifest oneness of the Body of Christ are innocuous, even sound doctrines, accurate teachings, and authentic spirituality. Such matters, as vital as they are, when allowed to take precedence over and even replace the growth of Christ Himself as the seed of the divine life within the believers, actually become seeds of discord that result in the strife and division that fracture Christ's Body (Gal. 6:7). And while such things can never negate the oneness of the divine life that is shared among all genuine believers, they can, if allowed to grow, diminish the actual experience of the divine life in the believers, and thus mar the oneness of the Body to the extent that the world cannot see and believe.

If we are to stand against the division of the church, we must experience and enjoy the life of the Triune God. This life, which was dispensed into us at our regeneration can—indeed, must—continue to be imparted into our tripartite being day by day until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thes. 5:23). The way that God has provided for His believers to continually receive the divine life is by partaking of the Spirit. Practically, because the divine life is of the Spirit, the way to receive the divine life is to receive the Holy Spirit. To this end, the Lord charges us with special urgency to implore Him for the Spirit: “If you then being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father who is from heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” (Luke 11:13). In these days of division, the cry in the Lord's heart for oneness must be matched by the cry in our heart for the Spirit. Only then will the divine life grow within us and the fruit of oneness appear within the church.

The oneness of the church, as a matter of the divine life, has important ramifications for any ecclesiology, particularly one which has a goal of visibly expressing the oneness of Christ's corporate Body. Any view of the oneness of the church, much less any practice of such oneness, that does not take the divine life as its center and impulse has no real connection with the oneness of the Spirit which the Triune God has given to the church and in which the church is to continue. Indeed, it is entirely possible to achieve a semblance of oneness through mutually recognized leadership, shared purposes, concelebrated sacraments, and even a common spirituality. Yet this type of “unity,” regardless of how visible, is unrelated to the oneness that comes out of the divine life and the Spirit. At the most, it is only an artificial, temporary, and all-too-human cohesion that is at best based upon the faculties of the fallen human soul and at worst on the senses of the flesh of sin. *Things* are not the basis of the visible oneness for which Christ prayed in John 17. Visible unity is

wrought by the life of Christ being dispensed into and growing within the members of His Body.

Conclusion

Despite its laudable goal, *Unity* is an example of what goes wrong when one goes about filling in “gaps” in the Bible. *Unity* is convinced that the Scriptures play “a decisive authoritative role, but clearly not in the sense that all answers are given once and for all in the Bible” (42). Consequently, it feels quite confident basing its ecumenical ecclesiology upon “an interaction between the Word of God and its ‘effects’ throughout the history of the Church” (42). Although a closer inspection reveals that the post-apostolic institutions that *Unity* values so highly exhibit a profound inferiority to the truth as found in the Scriptures, it is upon these very “effects” that *Unity* builds its ecclesiology. It is regrettable that *Unity* fails to realize that in many places where the Bible is apparently silent, it is actually speaking gently and quietly—a mode of communication favored by God (1 Kings 19:12). Had *Unity* recognized this, it would have perhaps checked itself in its rush to plaster over an ecclesiological gap that is not there. Although *Unity* asks many of the right questions, it provides unsatisfactory answers.

The post-apostolic institutions that Unity values so highly exhibit a profound inferiority to the truth as found in the Scriptures. Unfortunately, it is upon these very institutions that Unity builds its ecclesiology.

At times, *Unity* seems content to return to the original Lutheran vision of ecumenical renewal under the aegis of the historic (Roman Catholic) Church—something along the lines of what is described in the Augsburg Confession (22-23). Underlying this, there also seems to be a longing to return to something much firmer, much closer to the unity enjoyed by the church in the early centuries of her existence—hence the subtitle to the book: *Ecumenical Ecclesiology and “The Great Tradition of the Church.”* Yet deeper still, one gets the impression that Tjørhom senses a need for something more than merely what the Great Tradition has to offer. It is a sign of hope that Tjørhom candidly writes,

I consider the concept of the Great Tradition to be an excellent theological and ecumenical platform and the most suitable response to the current crisis of the Reformation movement. Yet I must admit to being less and less convinced that it can finally provide a workable ecclesial alternative to, or a feasible “surrogate” for, a full church life. We may eventually be forced to look elsewhere. (34)

By God’s mercy, the “elsewhere” to which the Lord’s children must look is that which has been so from the

beginning (Matt. 19:8). To this end, may our hearts be tuned to the Spirit’s speaking in the midst of the church’s degradation, and may we heed the Lord’s loving reproof to His overcoming believers (Rev. 3:1-6, 14-22). The Word is in our hands. The life-giving Spirit is in our spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Tim. 4:22). Equipped thus, we can be the church in whom the Son’s prayer is finally answered:

That they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that You have sent Me. And the glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, even as We are one; I in them, and You in Me, that they may be perfected into one, that the world may know that You have sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me. (John 17:21-23)

by Nathan Betz

Notes

¹Here it is worthwhile quoting Geoffrey Wainwright, who in the foreword to *Unity* aptly describes the stark alternative to

visible unity: “Spiritual unity and visible unity are not truly alternatives: the alternative to visible unity is visible *dis*unity, and that is a witness against the gospel” (x, quoting Wainwright, p. 4).

²So closely were the local church and its members identified with their city that the apostles understood the word *city* to have a special ecclesial denotation. Hence, the apostles could and did use the word *city* interchangeably with the word *church* (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Rev. 1:11).

³To avoid confusion, it must be noted that the function of oversight, which corresponds to the word *bishop*, comes out of one’s maturity in the divine life, which corresponds to the word *elder*. Hence, according to the scriptural revelation, a bishop is an elder. This is in contrast to the Great Tradition, in which a bishop is higher, or at least somewhat other, than an elder.

Works Cited

- Tjørhom, Ola. “Catholic Faith Outside the Catholic Church.” *Pro Ecclesia*. XIII.3 (Summer 2004): 261-274.
- Wainwright, Geoffrey. *The Ecumenical Moment: Crisis and Opportunity for the Church*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1983.