

## Theological Darkness vs. the Light of Life

Recently, as I was studying and pondering an essay in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, I had a striking realization: The author of the essay was in darkness, and his writing was a work of darkness, where everything, perhaps in a fine and subtle way, was controlled and directed by the authority of darkness (Col. 1:13). The points were clear, the reasoning was sound, and there were numerous appeals to the Scriptures, yet all was in darkness, totally devoid of the light of life, and manifested a nature that can rightly be called *theological darkness*, darkness related to theological activity carried out apart from the divine light and the Spirit of life and thus in a deplorable condition of spiritual death. Hence, the title of this short “Reflections” piece is “Theological Darkness vs. the Light of Life.”

I realize that such a notion may strike readers as surprising, even shocking, since it is rare for students of theology to evaluate truth claims or dogmatic assertions according to light versus darkness when engaged in doctrinal discussion or various theological enterprises. Nevertheless, following the pattern of the polemical element in the writings of the apostle John, I have been learning to discern not only according to hermeneutical principles and intellectual analysis but, much more, according to life and death, light and darkness, and this is the principle that is the basis of these very brief reflections.

### The Tragedy of Believers Living in Darkness

Although genuine, regenerated Christians, having believed into the Son of God as light and having been born of God to become “sons of light” (John 12:36), are now “light in the Lord” (Eph. 5:8), they may not “walk as children of light” (v. 8) but instead may “walk in the darkness” (1 John 1:6), that is, live, think, speak, move, behave, and have their being in spiritual darkness. Concerning this most disheartening phenomenon, the New Testament is exceedingly clear. “He who says he is in the light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now” (2:9). Here *his brother* indicates that *he* is also a brother in Christ, one born of God to be a child of God having the life and nature of God. Such a reborn one may actually hate a fellow believer—his brother—and thus be “in the darkness until now.” This assertion is strengthened by verse 11: “But he who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness and

does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.” This clearly refers to a believer in Christ and reveals that, under certain conditions, such a believer may be in darkness and walk in darkness, not knowing where he is going. Furthermore, “the darkness has blinded his eyes,” causing the eyes of the heart (Eph. 1:18) to lose their normal function.

Two portions from Paul’s writings are pertinent here. In Romans 13:12 he exhorts his readers to “cast off the works of darkness” and “put on the weapons of light.” The implication here is that believers may still display the works of darkness and should cast them off and may not yet be clad with the weapons of light and need to put on these weapons. Paul does not say, “We cannot have the works of darkness”; rather, he says, “Cast off the works of darkness.” Neither does he declare, “We all have the weapons of light”; on the contrary, he admonishes us to put on the weapons of light. In actuality, as Paul’s word suggests, a believer may have the works of darkness and may not be clothed with the weapons of light.

In Ephesians 4 Paul addresses something much more subjective than works when he speaks about the mind: “This therefore 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” (vv. 17-18). If it were impossible for believers to walk in the vanity of the natural human mind and if it were impossible for children of God to be darkened in their understanding, there would have been no need of this exhortation. Realizing that believers may not have the experience of “no longer” walking as the Gentiles in their actual and practical daily living but may continue to live in the same way as unbelievers, Paul issues the charge, an apostolic command, to no longer walk in the vanity of the mind and to no longer be darkened in the understanding. Sadly, real children of God, true children of light, may not “walk as children of light” (5:8). Instead, in contradiction to their nature as children of God, they may walk in darkness, do the works of darkness, and be blinded by darkness.

Theologians, including those who are orthodox, evangelical, or fundamental, are not immune to thinking, speaking, writing, and living in this way, for whenever they fail to walk as children of light, they may produce

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works of theological darkness, misleading both themselves and unwary and undiscerning readers. Those who know the blessed Triune God in the way of life (John 17:3), who know the Word of God as spirit and life (6:63, 68), and who know the divine truth as the shining of the divine light (8:12, 32) know with much assurance that theologians, like all other believers, may live either in light or in darkness and that if their being is in darkness and they live in darkness, they will bring forth works that truly are examples of theological darkness.

### Causes of Theological Darkness

The primary source of darkness in the lives of believers is spiritual death. The Scriptures reveal that there is an intrinsic relationship between life and light, especially the life of God and the light of God. On the one hand, light is the source of life; on the other hand, life is the source of light (John 1:4). When one believes into the Son of God and thereby receives eternal life, that one spontaneously becomes a child of light. From that point on, in Christian experience, life and light will always go together. By contrast, death and darkness are essentially related, and a believer who abides in death (in the words of John) also walks in darkness (1 John 3:14; 2:11). Sadly, many students of the Bible, failing to realize that the Lord's words are spirit and life (John 6:63), touch the Word of God only in letter, and again and again, the letter kills, and they lapse into a condition of spiritual death. As the result of decades of study, observation, and experience, I have learned that not only common believers but also (even especially) theologians may, in actuality, live and move in the realm of spiritual death, and the result inevitably is darkness.

Other causes of theological darkness include being veiled by natural or religious concepts, not being open to the Lord and to the light in the Word, trusting in the natural mind, being separated from the unique fellowship of the organic Body of Christ, and remaining under the authority of darkness. According to Paul's word in 2 Corinthians 3, as we read the Scriptures, a veil may be upon our hearts, as it was with the Jewish religionists, covering us, darkening us, blinding us. This was Luther's experience before the veil was lifted from his darkened heart, and he was enlightened to see that the righteous one lives by faith (Rom. 1:17). A believer who is veiled cannot be truly open to the Lord Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18) and to the light shining in the Word of God. Rather, perhaps unconsciously, such a believer comes to the Bible and

engages in theological activity closed in mind, in heart, and in spirit. Furthermore, such a person may trust in the unaided human mind, rely on natural intelligence, and have the confidence that any reader of the Bible, including unbelievers, can understand the Scriptures simply by employing sound hermeneutical principles. For them, no spiritual enlightenment is necessary. Those who are in such a deplorable spiritual condition also function individually and live apart from the fellowship, the continuous flow of the divine life, of the Body of Christ. The tragic result is that, in a practical and experiential way, they remain under the authority of darkness (Col. 1:13) and are controlled by this darkness even when engaged in activities that are theological in nature.

### Experiencing and Enjoying the Light of Life

To state the obvious, theological darkness is versus the light of life. Christ is the light of the world, and those who follow Him will not walk in darkness but have the light of life (John 8:12). Where is the Lord that we may follow Him? As the Gospel of John and the Epistles of Paul make crystal clear, Christ as the life-giving Spirit dwells in the believers' regenerated human spirit (John 14:20; 15:4-5; 1 Cor. 15:45; 6:17; 2 Tim. 4:22). When we turn to the mingled spirit—the human spirit mingled with the divine Spirit—exercise the spirit, and walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:25) and according to the spirit (Rom. 8:4), we follow the Lord and thereby have the light of life. Such an experience is balanced, of course, by contacting the Lord through the Word, which reveals Him and testifies concerning Him.

Through the Spirit of life and the word of life, we experience eternal life, and this life becomes the light (God Himself, 1 John 1:5) in which we walk. The more we love the light, come to the light, open to the light, turn our heart to the Lord, and live in the oneness and fellowship of the Body of Christ, the more we will receive, experience, and enjoy the light of life. The shining of this light is truth (John 8:12, 32)—the only reliable basis for sound theological study and writing. Regarding every aspect of the theological enterprise, may the Son of God, who is the embodiment of God as life and light, turn His regenerated believers from darkness to light so that they may walk in the light of the Lord (Isa. 2:5) and release words that are filled with and convey life, light, truth, and reality to all those who seek God with a pure heart (Matt. 5:8), love His truth, and hunger for His living word.

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