

Light in the Subjective Experience and Truth of God's Economy

"Light from Light': The Divine Light Reflected in and by the Son and the Holy Spirit," by Gerald O'Collins, SJ. In *Light from Light: Scientists and Theologians in Dialogue*, Ed. Gerald O'Collins, SJ, and Mary Ann Meyers. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. 103-121.

The clever juxtaposition of the Nicene maxim with the commonplace yet mysterious physical phenomenon of light can pique the interest of many to read *Light from Light: Scientists and Theologians in Dialogue* (hereafter *Dialogue*). Part One of *Dialogue* consists of six chapters that elucidate in relatively non-technical language the current experimental and theoretical understanding of physical light, along with the associated boundaries and paradoxes currently embodied in this knowledge. Since scientists use the term *light* for referring to all forms of electromagnetic radiation, not merely the portion of the spectrum that is physiologically visible to humans (19), the scientific topics discussed in Part One include relativity and its assumption about the maximum velocity of light, the wave and particle duality of light, quantum theory, quantum entanglement, cosmic background radiation, and the central role of light in the primordial and extant structure of the universe.

The chapters in Part Two of *Dialogue* speak to the use of light as an analogy for the Trinity, for creation, and for the presence of God in the Scriptures, in Christian mysticism, in Eastern and Western theology, and in art and literature. The scope of this review will be limited to Gerald O'Collins's "'Light from Light': The Divine Light Reflected in and by the Son and the Holy Spirit" (hereafter "Reflected"), the first chapter in the theological section.

"Reflected," a Circuitous but Lighted Path to the Nicene Creed and Beyond

As the introductory chapter to what the theologians have to say about light, "Reflected" faces the challenge of meeting multiple objectives. In the introduction the author says,

In this chapter I want to do four things: (1) recall some major themes about light from the Hebrew Bible; (2) sketch the New Testament recognition of Jesus as "the light of the world" (John 8:12); (3) retrieve some relevant

material from the Christian tradition about Christ and the Holy Spirit as light; and (4) signal some links between my presentation of the Holy Trinity as the ultimate mystery of light and some other chapters in this book. (104-105)

"Reflected" *Interconnecting Divine Light with Divine Glory, the Presence and Shining Forth of God*

"Reflected" illustrates "some of the rich ways in which the Hebrew Bible associates God with light and the divine gift of light to creatures" (107). "Reflected" points out that the Psalms say that God is clothed in glory and wrapped in light, that God's countenance is light, and that God shines forth out of Zion the perfection of beauty.

In biblical imagery "light" comes across as thoroughly interconnected with "glory," or the splendor/radiance of the divine presence. One can describe "glory (*kabod*) as the light streaming from God and thus as the glory that makes its home in the Temple (Ps. 26:8)...The "glory of the Lord" visibly manifests and expresses the divine presence, the overwhelming power and majesty... "Glory," for all intents and purposes, designates the divine reality. (105)

Referring to Isaiah 45:6-7, "Reflected" says,

By starting the work of creation with the creative command 'let there be light,' God shows — within the scheme of the Book of Genesis — that light is the most basic, general, and even perfect manifestation of the divine reality and operations. (106)

"Reflected" also refers to Psalm 36:9 and other Scriptures to affirm that the light of life is "the light which is life and the source of life" (107). Furthermore, "Reflected" affirms that the commandment (the word) of the Lord gives light (Psa. 19:8) and is light (119:105, 139), and that "light brings and even embodies order and salvation...(Ps. 27:1)" (107).

In the New Testament the Divine Light and the Divine Glory Being Revealed in Jesus Christ, Who Is "Light from Light"

In the section on the New Testament, "Reflected" says that Paul

draws on Genesis to express the way the divine light (or

its equivalent, the divine glory) has been revealed in Jesus Christ: “God who said, ‘out of darkness let *light* shine,’ has caused his *light* to shine in our hearts, to give the *light* of the knowledge of God’s *glory* in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). Two verses earlier Paul writes of seeing “the *light* of the Gospel of the *glory* of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4). We could well detect here a genitive of identity: “the light of the Gospel” that is “the glory of Christ.” (108)

From the synoptic Gospels, “Reflected” highlights that in the episode in which Jesus was transfigured on a high mountain, there is luminosity in the references to the face of Jesus (which “shone like the sun”) in the bright cloud, in the disciples’ seeing the glory of Christ, and with Moses and Elijah also appearing in glory with Him (109). According to “Reflected,” this is

a clear indication that the glory of the transfiguration should be understood as a preview of the glory to come with the crucifixion and resurrection (Luke 9:28-36). Luke thinks of glory as preeminently associated with the post-resurrection situation of Jesus: by rising from the dead, he enters into his glory (Luke 24:26). (109)

“Reflected” goes on to speak about the unique perspective of the Gospel of John, which emphasizes that Jesus is the light of the world, the One who makes the invisible God visible. He is the incarnate Son of God who manifested God’s glory. “Reflected” says,

The glory manifested right through the ministry of Jesus reaches its climax at his crucifixion and resurrection. What could seem the depth of deadly humiliation is in fact “the hour” or supreme manifestation of his glory (John 12:23; 13:31-32; 17:1). (110)

“Reflected” concludes the section on the New Testament with references to the vision of Christ in Revelation 1, the vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and 22, and the concluding word when “the glorious Jesus himself speaks: ‘I am the bright star of dawn’ (Rev. 22:16)” (111).

From its overview of the Scriptures “Reflected” concludes,

When we survey the sweep of biblical testimony to light, we face two startling developments. The first is the shift from Genesis to 1 John...“Let there be light” will move beyond providing an image for understanding God’s creative act to providing an image about God himself. In a metaphorical statement 1 John makes the simple identification: “God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). The least we can say is that for 1 John light is a most basic and perfect manifestation of the divine reality...[John] wishes to describe something of the nature of God.

The second striking development in the biblical story of revelation comes with Jesus himself being identified in John’s Gospel as “the light of the world.” This provides a starting point for the eventual emergence of the creedal confession of him as “Light from Light.” (111-112)

The Spirit of Life, the Spirit of Truth, and the Spirit of Glory

Having surveyed the biblical references to God and Christ as light, “Reflected” then moves on to describe what the New Testament says concerning the Holy Spirit:

The New Testament repeatedly links the Holy Spirit with *life* (e.g., Rom. 8:1-17) and with *truth*: “the Spirit of truth” will guide Christ’s followers “into all truth” (John 16:13). Further, all the manifestations of the Spirit, according to Paul, reach their climax with *love* (1 Cor. 12:31—13:13); through the Holy Spirit, God’s love “floods the hearts” of believers (Rom. 5:5).

Direct links of the Holy Spirit with “glory” and “light” are less apparent. While often linking “glory” to the Father and the Son, the New Testament does so only once in the case of the Spirit: “the Spirit of glory” rests upon believers (1 Pet. 4:14)...Thus the New Testament provided some platform, albeit a limited one, from which to link the Holy Spirit with “glory” and “light.” (113-114)

The Nicene Creed Attesting concerning the Son in Some Detail but Making Only a Cryptic Reference to the Holy Spirit

After establishing the scriptural basis of Christ as the light, “Reflected” begins to trace the development of theological thought that led to the Nicene Creed’s declaration of Christ as “Light from Light.” Hebrews 1:3, with its interpretation by such witnesses as Justin, Tertullian, Origen, and Athanasius, was a key basis for the effort to aver the consubstantiability and eternal coexistence of the Father and the Son, while maintaining their distinction without separation, particularly in the face of heresies to the contrary. These historical interpretations often appealed to various light analogies. For example, “Reflected” tells how Origen related 1:3 to the question of the eternal existence of the Son, which along with other comments, introduced “Light from Light” and other phrases that were later incorporated into the Nicene Creed (116):

There is only one principle of divine Light, with the Father as the eternal, unbegotten Light, and the Son as the eternal, begotten, or generated Splendor of that Light. In this fragment Origen prepared the terminology to be used at the First Council of Nicaea about the Son: not only “Light from Light” but also “there never was

when he was not” and his being *homoousios* with the Father or sharing his essential reality (*ousia*). (116)

Concerning the Holy Spirit, “Reflected” points out that the Nicene Creed “simply confessed, ‘we believe in the Holy Spirit,’ and left it at that,” corresponding to the fact that Arius had little to say about the Holy Spirit (118). “Reflected” gives the historical context as to why the First Council of Constantinople was compelled some decades later to develop further the third article of the Nicene Creed concerning the Holy Spirit:

Prior to the fourth century such Christian thinkers as Tertullian and Origen had initiated theological reflection on the Spirit. But from around 360 CE, various groups (often lumped together under the name of “Pneumatomachians”) began challenging the truly divine status of the Holy Spirit. These challenges prompted St. Basil of Caesarea (d. 379), St. Gregory of Nyssa (d. around 395), and others to reflect seriously and at length on the Spirit as sharing the divine substance/essence (being “consubstantial”) with the Father and the Son. The First Council of Constantinople (381) developed at length the third article of the Nicene Creed in expressing the divinity of the Spirit, the “Lord” and “Life-giver” who is worshiped and glorified together with the Father and the Son.

Those who championed the Holy Spirit followed Tertullian...in applying the language of light. Basil declared that the Holy Spirit shines on believers and illuminates them like the sun (*On the Holy Spirit*, 26.61). Gregory of Nazianzus called the Spirit “Life and Life-giver, Light and Light-giver” (*Oration on Pentecost* 9)... But, in the event, the Council of Constantinople inserted in the Nicene Creed a recognition of the Holy Spirit as “Life-giver” but not as “Light-giver.” (118)

“Reflected” Successfully Defending the Creedal Confession, “Light from Light”

The biblical survey in “Reflected” seems quite thorough and at least by reason of mention covers most but not all the relevant topics of light as seen in the Scriptures. “Reflected” insightfully connects light as the nature and essence of God’s expression with the divine glory, the divine reality, and the divine presence. This concept corresponds to a twentieth-century witness who in the note on the word *light* in 1 John 1:5 in the Recovery Version of the Bible speaks of light as “the nature of God’s expression” (note 3 on 1 John 1:5). “Reflected” is also faithful to the Scriptures in alluding to the connection of light to life, and in cataloguing that the word of God is light, that Paul addressed his Epistle to the children of the light, that the kingdom of God is a realm of light, and that the New Jerusalem is the city of light.

While not stated explicitly as an objective, the outline of “Reflected” leads the reader through an understanding of the declaration concerning Christ as “Light from Light,” and perhaps serves as an apologetic defense for this phrase’s inclusion in the Nicene Creed. In so doing, “Reflected” does not back away from exploring the Trinitarian controversies that propelled the authoring of the creeds in the first place. “Reflected” promotes the witnesses that affirm the consubstantiality and coessentiality of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. “Reflected” repeatedly mentions the struggle of the orthodox to aver the Trinitarian distinction, without separation, of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, a truth that should be guarded. Furthermore, “Reflected” seems to agree with those witnesses that confessed the eternal coexistence and the essential (not merely participative) divinity of the Son with the Father. In a backhanded way, “Reflected” also acknowledges that the 325 A.D. version of the Nicene Creed was incomplete with respect to the Holy Spirit. “Reflected” seems to favor the subsequent additions made to that section of the Creed in later councils, and appears to promote that the Spirit should further be confessed as “Light-giver.”

“Reflected” Meandering in Its Theme by Ignoring the Central Lane of God’s Economy in the Scriptures

“Reflected” is not light reading. While presuming to have limited and narrowed its scope to the question: “To what extent is the ultimate mystery of God, the Holy Trinity, to be understood as a or rather *the* mystery of light?” (113), “Reflected” pursues many seemingly side points. Because of the breadth of the topics covered by “Reflected,” it is difficult to point to a succinct statement of its central thesis. I believe this difficulty results from the deficiency in “Reflected” to connect its multiple themes to “God’s economy [*oikonomia*], which is in faith” (1 Tim. 1:4).

“God’s economy rests upon the simple premise that God operates in time upon His elect to make them the same as He is in life, nature, and expression” (Robichaux 37). In the context of evaluating “Reflected,” I would extend this definition to also say that God’s economy involves the dispensing of the Triune God in the communicable aspects of His nature (including love, life, and light) into His chosen people for His consummate expression. While “Reflected” touches on some of these themes, it is deficient in the following four areas.

Not Connecting the Trinity and God’s Being Light to the Christian Experience

The main fault of “Reflected” is its failure to include the “experimental” data, that is, the mystical and experiential aspect that gives life and heartbeat to what is otherwise a

mere theoretical framework of doctrinal academic study. A balanced discussion of the Divine Trinity should include not only the objective and doctrinal side but also the subjective and experiential side of the truth, lest we misaim from the line and goal of God's economy.

The Bible reveals not only the objective God but also *the subjective God*—the true and living Triune God who is real to us in our spiritual experience, that is, the Divine Trinity who, as the indwelling One, is life and everything to us in our experience and enjoyment of Him. (Kangas, "Subjective" 29)

Echoing concepts described by the author of "Reflected" in the introduction of *Dialogue*, theologians should perhaps take a cue from the scientists and avoid discrepancies between what is "derived from theory" and what is "deduced from observational data" (cf. 8).

The truth of the essential Trinity (including the coexistence, consubstantiality, and distinction without separation of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the Godhead) is motivated by the economical desire of God for man to partake of His divine nature of love, life, and light. "Reflected" does not clearly articulate that the revelation of the truth of the Divine Trinity, as embodied in the Nicene Creed's declaration "Light from Light," has as its aim that man become a partaker of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4).

Likewise, in the spiritual and theological realm, the scriptural truths in 1 John 1:5 and Hebrews 1:3 cannot be separated from Christian experience. This inseparability is analogous to findings posited by quantum mechanics in the physical realm, namely that the observer cannot be detached from what is being observed (*Dialogue* 65, 206). For example, in the context of 1 John 1:5, God being light involves the believers walking in the light (versus walking in the darkness—there is no intermediate state) and altogether affects the believers' fellowship with God and with other believers (vv. 6-7).

To walk in the light is to continually experience God as light by living, moving, and having our entire being in the light...In the physical world, one cannot live without light. In the spiritual world, one cannot live without being in the presence of God, the divine light. (Marks 41)

Thus, walking in the light is altogether a matter of personal and experiential experience of God by His children.

Speaking of the Truth of "the Spirit" without Acknowledging the Truth of "Our Spirit"

"Reflected" misses references to relevant key Scriptures concerning light and the human spirit, for example, "The

spirit of man is the lamp of Jehovah / Searching all the innermost parts of the inner being." (Prov. 20:27) in the Old Testament and "be burning [fervent, aglow, boiling] in spirit" (Rom. 12:11) in the New Testament. We should consider these verses in the light of Romans 8:16, "The Spirit Himself witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God," and 1 Corinthians 6:17, "He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit." These Scriptures indicate that the human spirit is the specific connection point between God and man. The God-created man needs to be reborn of the Spirit (John 3:3, 5) and in spirit worship Him who is Spirit (4:24). The failure to see a connection between the human spirit and the divine Spirit of light reduces the ability to apply the work of God as light to the experience of the believers.

Missing the Seven Spirits of God as a Key to the Spirit Being the Light-giver

While "Reflected" refers to Christ as light in Revelation, saying, "The Book of Revelation opens with a vision of the exalted Christ among seven lampstands of gold, his eyes flaming like fire and his face shining 'like the sun at full strength' (Rev. 1:13-16)" (111), it fails to connect this vision to the seven Spirits of God, who are also unveiled in Revelation. Revelation 1:14 says that "His eyes were like a flame of fire" (see also 2:18 and 19:12), but 5:6 indicates that the eyes of the Lamb (who is Christ, the Son of God, in chapters 1 and 2) are actually the seven Spirits of God, and that these seven Spirits of God are the seven lamps of fire (4:5). These references to the seven Spirits of God, which are not included in "Reflected," provide some of the strongest scriptural bases for saying that the Spirit is also the light and the Light-giver. We can extend this even further to suggest that the seven Spirits of God as the seven lamps join through regeneration the spirit of man as the lamp of Jehovah to make these regenerated persons the children of God, the light of the world, and consummately a city situated upon a mountain (cf. Phil. 2:15; Matt. 5:14).

Not Connecting the New Jerusalem, the City of Light, to the Goal of God's Eternal Purpose

In God's economy the experience of the Divine Trinity as light issues in the city of light as the ultimate expression of the Triune God in glory. "Reflected" makes a passing reference without elaboration to the final vision in Revelation, saying, "The book finishes with a vision of the New Jerusalem, a city that did not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, 'for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb' (Rev. 21:23; see 22:5)" (111). But "Reflected" does not show that this city is a sign of the ultimate and consummate fulfillment of God's purpose and desire, which is to have a glorious expression of Himself for eternity.

The New Jerusalem has God's glory (21:11), indicating that this city expresses God. Verse 23 speaks of the glory of God giving light to, or illumining, the city, and says that its lamp is the Lamb. Verse 24 continues by saying that "the nations will walk by its light." According to 22:3-5, the slaves of God and of the Lamb, who will serve Him as priests and will reign forever, "will see His face," and "the Lord God will shine upon them." Based on these verses we can state that in the New Jerusalem there are the light, the lamp, and "the diffuser." (In the physical realm a diffuser causes a single light source to spread out, scatter, and reach a broader target.) These verses show that the light is God the Father, that the lamp is God the Son (the Lamb), and that the diffuser is the Body of Christ, the New Jerusalem, to shine the divine light over the nations, the people who live around the New Jerusalem. Thus, God as the divine light shines within and through the redeeming Christ, and this shining enlightens the city so that the entire city becomes a light-bearer and expresses the God of light. The entire New Jerusalem is a diffuser of the divine light, diffusing the divine light over the nations outside the city. The New Jerusalem has God's glory as the uncreated light and the Lamb as the lamp to shine forth the divine brightness through the entire city. Thus, the sons of God (21:7) will express Christ as the lamp, the light-bearer, in the New Jerusalem, with the glory of God as the light within Him, by which the nations will walk.

Experientially speaking, this means that the sons of God, the sons of the light, become the enlarged expression of Christ, who has God in Him as the light, and this light, which is God Himself shining in Christ throughout the New Jerusalem, saturates them. The sons of God will be immersed in God Himself as the light, and will be the expression of Christ with God as the light (cf. 1 John 1:5; Eph. 5:8). This shows that God's purpose is altogether a matter of sons of God, who are born with the life of God (John 1:12-13), becoming a corporate entity, the holy city. In this city God as light shines from within the Lamb as the lamp through the city as the diffuser of the divine light to express Himself as glory. This expression is God's goal.

Since God is dispensing Himself as life with His nature into us, the more we receive His dispensing, the more we have of His light and the more we become what He is as light. In this way God makes us the same as He is: He makes us light, the nature of His expression. (Kangas, "Light" 39)

Conclusion

"Reflected" serves as a helpful commentary for biblical and theological students seeking to understand how one crucial maxim, "Light from Light," came to be a part of the Nicene Creed. Such a reader will also come away with a more mentally enlightened understanding of the

scriptural and historical meaning and significance of this phrase. At the same time, the reader may be left with a longing similar to that which is implied at the end of "Reflected" for something more personal, and thus be impelled toward a deeper seeking that supersedes a merely academic "impersonal analogy" (121).

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Traditional Answers to Speculative Questions

The Heaven Answer Book, by Billy Graham. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012.

Thomas Nelson, long-time publisher of Billy Graham's works, has gathered material from his previous writings on the topic of heaven and compiled them in a little volume entitled *The Heaven Answer Book* (hereafter *Heaven*). Along with a short introduction and conclusion by Graham himself, the work comprises over 100 two-to-three-page answers to common questions about the eternal destiny of the believers. The publisher has arranged these short questions and responses into six categories: 1. Does Heaven Really Exist? 2. What Is Heaven Like? 3. What Happens When We Die? 4. What Will We Do in Heaven? 5. Can We Be Sure We Will Go to Heaven? 6. What Difference Does Heaven Make?

Heaven strives to avoid human speculation and to respond in a way true to the divine revelation. At the same time, it endeavors to do more than merely reply to human curiosity; it serves as a gospel to the unbelievers, as a call to revival for the backslidden, and as a charge to serve God in the preaching of the gospel for those who

have already committed their lives to Christ. Still, while *Heaven* thankfully rejects much of the fantastical and speculative views of contemporary heaven popularizers, it still holds to the traditional teaching that heaven is the ultimate goal and destiny of the believers. This basic presupposition obscures several key passages in the New Testament and continues to veil the believers from their true responsibility and privilege in their life and service to the Lord in this age.

Summary

Heaven begins by stating, “We know there is life after death because God promised it, our souls bear witness to it, and most of all, Jesus Christ confirmed it by His life, death, and resurrection” (13). God promises life after death in the Word of God. Our souls bear witness to life after death, because we were created in the image of God and because “God has put within each of us an inner sense that life on earth is not all there is” (11). Finally, the resurrection of Christ not only proves that “He was the Son of God and that there is life after death, but it assures us that death—our final enemy—has been defeated” (16-17).

Heaven is free from the corruption of sin, filled with the glory of God, and perfect in every way (29-37). Not only is heaven itself perfect, but the believers as its inhabitants will be perfect as well.

When we are cloaked in Christ’s perfection, there will be no more sin, no more physical pain, no more mental anguish, no more loneliness, no more daily stress, no more abuse, no more weariness or lack of strength, no more aging process, no more death. (39)

Furthermore, heaven will be full of joyful worship to God and to the Lamb (61). It will be a marvelous reunion with the Lord, with the family of God, and with those family members of ours who believed into Christ during their life on earth (43-45). Fear, suffering, and darkness will be no more, and the believers will serve God and reign with Christ forever (55-60, 49).

Heaven assures its readers that death is nothing to be feared for a believer. “Death marks the beginning of a new and wonderful life in Heaven with Christ that will last forever” (72). “The body will be buried in the earth awaiting the final resurrection, but the soul will be in God’s care” (74). Based on the story of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16, *Heaven* indicates that, upon death, angels will accompany a dying believer to heaven (77). Those who are still alive at the second coming of Christ will be raptured to “join with believers from throughout the ages in the final resurrection” (88). There in heaven the believers will not be angels; instead, they will inherit

resurrected bodies, which “are physical bodies reunited with the spirit (soul)—but without any imperfection or weakness” (89). “We will be free from all the pains and sorrows and evils of this life, and we will be safely in God’s presence forever” (82).

According to *Heaven*, “we will meet the saints of old. There we will walk the streets of gold and be reunited with those we love. When we enter Heaven, we will have crossed the finish line to meet the One who will reveal stories yet untold” (123). We will sing with the angels and Jesus, and we might even “ride on chariots of clouds or walk on the wings of the wind like the Lord” (107, 109). Much more than this, “we will be in His presence forever,” and “we will receive a glorious inheritance—the inheritance of eternal life in all its fullness” (109, 117).

Heaven comforts its readers by assuring them that no amount of human goodness can qualify one for a place in heaven. Instead, the death and resurrection of Christ, which terminated sin and defeated death, are the sole qualifications for a believer to dwell with God in eternity (127-128). Even the most heinous sin will be forgiven by God (143-144), and based on the Lord’s word to the thief on the cross, *Heaven* affirms that even a genuine deathbed confession is adequate to secure a place for the believer in heaven (138-139).

Heaven argues that our life on earth is not merely a waiting room for heaven. Instead, the believers have been given “an earthly mission with a heavenly goal” (159). “As long as we are on this earth, God’s purpose is for us to bring honor and glory to Him by the way we live and work, so that we can win souls for His kingdom” (161). “We should be busy at work in the name of the Lord, so many others will join us on that heavenly journey home” (162). In fact, Jesus has not yet returned because “God wants to give everyone an opportunity to know Christ through repentance and faith in Him” (163). “We are all called to be witnesses for Christ, bringing His love and transforming power to a broken and confused world” (162).

Rejecting Imaginative Speculation

Heaven thankfully rejects several of the prominent errors propounded by many contemporary heaven popularizers, errors that contaminate the pure revelation of the Word of God with the fantasies, hopes, and speculations of human concepts. It affirms that our only source in understanding the destiny of the believers is the Word of God (3). It acknowledges that “it is part of our human nature to want to satisfy our imaginations about Heaven” (32), yet it contends that “Heaven will not reflect our earthly desires; instead we will reflect Heaven’s King, our Lord Jesus Christ” (104).

In addition, *Heaven* expresses little sympathy for the plethora of eyewitness accounts of heaven that have flooded the market of Christian publications. Graham warns that these claims “often say little about Jesus Christ—and this should make us treat them with great caution. Our hope must be built on Christ alone and on the promises God has given us in His Word” (19-20).

Finally, *Heaven* rejects expectations concerning heaven that are based solely on human longing without reference to and sometimes in contradiction with the divine revelation. As an illustration, many writers have succumbed to the urge to override the divine revelation with the understandable human longing to be reunited in marriage with their departed fellow heir of the grace of life. Graham, whose own wife passed away in 2006, faithfully contends, based on the Lord’s word in Mark 12:25, that “marriage as we know it in its human form will not be practiced in Heaven because it will be perfected in the Lord Jesus Christ” (114). “Marriage in Heaven will be on a much higher plane because the church will be united with Christ” (113).

While many heaven writers have painted a primarily anthropocentric picture of the world to come in which we will fulfill all the human dreams and desires that we did not experience in this age, *Heaven* stands firm in its attempt to reject human speculation, limiting itself to what the Word has revealed, and it remains content with the prospect that we will spend eternity in fellowship with God.

Perpetuating Traditional Concepts

Heaven’s attempt to reject the errors of contemporary heaven popularizers is noble and welcomed. Yet, on the whole, it still perpetuates traditional concepts concerning heaven, which continue to leaven the pure truth of the divine revelation concerning the deep and profound destiny of the believers, a destiny that begins in our life on the earth in this age for the fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose. In the remainder of this review we will consider several misinterpretations of various biblical passages, which are perpetuated in *Heaven*, concerning heaven as the eternal destiny of the believers.

A Misinterpretation of Abraham’s Bosom and the Father’s House

Heaven uses two passages in particular in its account of the life to come: Abraham’s bosom in Luke 16 and the Father’s house in John 14. Also, following a traditional understanding of these passages, the book assumes that these two places speak of heaven as the final resting place of the believers. Abraham’s bosom, however, refers to the pleasant part of Hades, which is under the earth, and the

Father’s house refers to the church as the house of God, which, though heavenly in nature, is present on the earth today.

Luke 16:22 indicates that Lazarus was able to see the rich man in his suffering in Hades; Luke 23:43 tells us that, in His crucifixion, the Lord promised the criminal at His side that he would be with Him that day in Paradise, and Matthew 12:40 speaks of the Lord’s descent into the heart of the earth. Based upon these verses and others, it becomes clear that Paradise is the pleasant part of Hades in the heart of the earth and that it, and not heaven, is the holding place of the believers in Christ who are finished with their life on this earth. This does not imply that the believers will be apart from Christ, just that they will not be in heaven. Paul tells us in Philippians 1:23 that he desired to depart and be with Christ. Because Paul was already with the Lord, we must understand this to be a matter of degree. If Paul were to depart, he would have been with the Lord to a greater degree than he was already.

More serious is the book’s extensive use of John 14 with the unwarranted assumption that the Father’s house refers to the believers’ future life in heaven. *Heaven*, thankfully, rejects the concept that the believers will dwell in literal mansions, yet it still holds to the concept that John 14 speaks of a future and primarily material inheritance (51-52). In John 14 the Lord tells the disciples that He was going away and that He would prepare a place for them (vv. 1-6). According to the book, “that place is Heaven and Christ our Savior is there now, preparing for our arrival” (21). This interpretation ignores the fact that John 14 does not once mention heaven. Instead, the Father Himself is the “place” to which the Lord is going, the place where the Lord is, and the place in which the believers will be (vv. 6, 10-12). Since the New Testament affirms that the believers are now in the Son and that He is now in us, “that day” in John 14:20 does not refer to the day we enter heavenly bliss but to the blessed reality of our life today (Col. 1:27-28).

The Lord left the disciples through His death and resurrection and entered with His humanity into the Father (cf. John 14:2). While many understand the Lord’s coming referred to in this chapter to be His appearing in glory with His kingdom at His second advent, the Lord promised the believers that in His going He would not leave them as orphans—thus, His “coming” in this passage refers not to His second advent but to His coming as the Spirit of reality in His resurrection as another Comforter (vv. 16-18). The Father’s house is not another name for heaven but one of the many aspects of the church as the corporate expression of God on the earth (1 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 2:19; Heb. 10:21; 1 Pet. 2:5). The many abodes in the Father’s house are not many dwelling places for the

believers but the many believers themselves as the dwelling place of God the Father. The Son is not busy building many abodes for the believers in heaven; the Son is building Himself into many believers through His constant visitation with the Father for the Father's dwelling and expression on the earth today (John 14:23; Eph. 3:14-17).

A Misrepresentation of the Judgment Seat of Christ

Heaven recognizes that the believers will appear before the judgment seat of Christ but contends that this throne will only be for reward and not for punishment. The believers' rewards differ according to their labor in the Lord, yet no one will receive discipline (120). It attempts to ground this teaching in the Bible's use of the metaphor of a race. In a race the winner receives a prize, but the others do not receive punishment. This interpretation ignores other passages in the New Testament that need to be adequately addressed.

For one of its proofs, *Heaven* says,

Physical death will come to believers in Jesus Christ (except those living at the time of the rapture), but believers are assured that there will be no second death for those who have been redeemed. 'He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death' (Revelation 2:11). (57)

This interpretation ignores the fact that this verse is a promise to the overcomers within the church, not to all believers. The fact that the overcomers are not hurt by the second death indicates that the defeated believers will be to some degree.

This thought is strengthened when we turn to 1 Corinthians 3:14-15: "If anyone's work which he has built upon the foundation remains, he will receive a reward; if anyone's work is consumed, he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." *Heaven* quotes this passage to affirm that the believers will receive a reward according to their labor but neglects to comment on the fact that some believers will be saved through fire. The fire of God's judgment will touch both the person and the work of every believer, and this judgment will be a test to the life and service of the believers to see of what sort they are.

This truth is not intended to instill fear in the believers but to encourage them to be faithful to their portion and their ministry in the church for the building up of the Body of Christ in this age (Eph. 4:16). Ultimately, all the believers in Christ will be fully matured to be the New Jerusalem in eternity, but only those who build the church with gold, silver, and precious stones today gain

the privilege of fulfilling God's eternal purpose in this age and participating with Christ in His reigning over the whole earth in the next.

A Misunderstanding of the New Jerusalem

One of the fundamental problems with the assumption that heaven is the eternal destiny of the believers is that the conclusion of the Bible is not focused on the heavens but on the new earth with the New Jerusalem. *Heaven* attempts to resolve this problem by claiming that "the Bible tells us that God will bring Heaven to earth where He will live among His people at the end of this present age" (25). This ignores the fact that for the New Jerusalem to come down "out of heaven" indicates that the two should not be conflated together (Rev. 21:2). We are not told that heaven will come down but that the holy city will come down out of heaven. Heaven and the New Jerusalem are not merged together as one.

The divine revelation makes it clear that heaven is neither the place to which the dead in Christ go nor the place in which we are to spend eternity. Instead, and much more profoundly, we will spend eternity as we should in our life on this earth, abiding in the Triune God with the Triune God abiding in us. The Lord prayed for this on the eve of His crucifixion, He accomplished it through His death and resurrection, He charges us to live in this reality in our life and service in this age, and He will perfect it in the New Jerusalem as the eternal destiny of the believers in Christ (John 17:21-23; 14:19-20; 15:4; Rev. 21:3, 22).

Conclusion

The apostle Paul himself struggled with the question of whether he should depart and be with the Lord or remain on the earth (Phil. 1:23-24). While death would have afforded him comfort and closer union with Christ, he desired instead to continue his suffering in his ministry on the earth, not merely to win more souls for heaven but for the progress and joy of the Philippian believers and most assuredly all the churches under his care, even those who had not seen his face in the flesh (vv. 24-25; Col. 1:28—2:1; 4:12; Gal. 4:19). While Paul was certainly burdened for the furtherance, the advancement, and the defense and confirmation of the gospel, the goal of his gospel and his primary and central work were to minister Christ into the believers for their growth in the divine life unto the building up of the church as the Body of Christ (Phil. 1:5, 12, 7; Eph. 3:7-11; 4:11-16).

Insofar as Paul is a model to all the believers in Christ, our primary aim in our life and service should not be to prepare for heaven or even to just gain more heaven-bound souls. In addition to the preaching of the gospel, our primary purpose should be the purpose of the apostle

Paul, which is the purpose of God Himself, that we might grow in life, build up the church, live in the Body, and struggle for the believers under our care through our prayer and our shepherding (2 Tim. 3:10; 1:9).

by Mitchell Kennard

A Balanced Refutation

Deification and the Rule of Faith: The Communication of the Gospel in Hellenistic Culture, by Daniel E. Wilson. Bloomington: CrossBooks, 2010.

In the late nineteenth century, Adolf Harnack famously asserted that the gospel proclaimed by Jesus had not come down through the ages as it had been delivered to the disciples; rather, it had evolved from its original purity into a system of provable dogmas through a process of Hellenization. The fathers of the early church, Harnack insisted, adopted Greek and Roman philosophical ideas in their communication of the gospel and thereby syncretized the teachings of Jesus with the pagan thought predominant in the Roman Empire. For Harnack, the doctrine of deification exemplified this syncretization. The early church fathers and pagan philosophers employed common terms in their teaching of the divinization of man, and for Harnack, the similarity evidenced a fusion of Hellenistic and Christian conceptions that constituted a corruption of the gospel. After Harnack, the doctrine of deification was traditionally met with scorn from Western theologians, who discounted any notion of divinization as Hellenistic and pagan. But Harnack's thesis, once commonly revered, has been met with doubt by modern historical theologians who have closely studied the writings of the patristic era and have come to acknowledge deification as a soundly Christian doctrine. A recent addition to this group of scholars is Daniel E. Wilson, a graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. His doctoral dissertation, *Deification and the Rule of Faith: The Communication of the Gospel in Hellenistic Culture* (hereafter, *Deification*), published as a monograph, mounts a formidable challenge to Harnack.

Among the church fathers who advanced the doctrine of deification and, according to Harnack, contributed to the Hellenization of the gospel were Irenaeus and Athanasius. *Deification* chooses these two teachers as test cases to work out its proposition, contra Harnack, that the teaching of deification in the early church did not

change over time but is consistent with Scripture and the rule of faith.

This dissertation seeks to display that Irenaeus' and Athanasius' respective descriptions of deification reflect the rule of faith. Both Irenaeus' and Athanasius' respective descriptions of deification are also consistent with their interpretation of scripture in overall scope as reflected in their description of the divine *oikonomia*, and their respective descriptions are specifically related to Pauline and Johannine concepts. Further, this dissertation seeks to reveal that the reason both Irenaeus and Athanasius display similar descriptions of deification and follow fundamentally the same rule of faith is because they both follow a scriptural description of deification, and they adhere to the same tradition of scripture as correctly interpreted within the context of the Church. (xxvii-xxviii)

Deification states that Irenaeus and Athanasius are ideal candidates for examination because they were separated by time, having lived approximately one hundred fifty years apart, by geography, having taught on different continents, and by polemical objectives, having contended with different opponents, namely, the Gnostics and the Arians. If the gospel was changed, a deviation surely would have been evident in the teachings of these early church fathers. But, *Deification* asserts, "Irenaeus' and Athanasius' respective descriptions of deification as they relate to the gospel are extremely similar in fundamental content though they differ on minor issues of presentation" (xxvi). *Deification* ably makes its case and, in so doing, effectively cuts Harnack's thesis at its roots.

Deification, a book of five chapters, consists of three major parts. The first part (chs. 1–3) examines Irenaeus's and Athanasius's respective descriptions of deification within the context of the divine *oikonomia*. The book places particular emphasis on each teacher's understanding of the incarnation as the restoration of the *oikonomia* and each one's description of deification in relation to the Divine Trinity. Part 2 (ch. 4) contrasts the Greek philosophical understanding of deification with that of Irenaeus and Athanasius. Part 3 (ch. 5) examines the two descriptions of deification in relation to the unchanging gospel and demonstrates their consistency with Johannine and Pauline descriptions of deification.

A Balanced Refutation of Harnack

At the conclusion of its refutation of Harnack, *Deification* submits that "reasonable doubt" has been cast on the German theologian's argument that "the presence of deification within the works of the Church Fathers represents the gospel's syncretization with Hellenistic philosophy" (207). But *Deification* does more than cast "reasonable doubt" on Harnack's propositions; it adds

significant weight to the mounting scholarship that should already be sufficient to convince fair-minded readers that the fear of Hellenism is merely spectral.

Deification helpfully recognizes that Irenaeus's and Athanasius's "respective descriptions of deification are consistent with Hellenistic philosophy on a peripheral level (i.e. terminology)" but that the two church fathers "radically differ with the fundamental principles of the Greek and Roman philosophers" (119). The description of how Irenaeus and Athanasius differ from the pagan philosophers is particularly well articulated:

The predominant message of deification for the Hellenistic philosophers is that one can find happiness in union with God through the mind and away from the body. However, both Irenaeus and Athanasius assert that one receives deification through faith in the Incarnate Christ who through the Spirit deifies the whole person, body and soul, and ends in the resurrection. Both the medium and end result differs [sic] between the Hellenistic description of deification and that of both Irenaeus and Athanasius. (xiii)

Deification explores "the medium and end result" of Irenaeus's and Athanasius's respective descriptions of divinization with rich insights into the striking parallels between them and their manifest independence from pagan notions of the doctrine.

The Incarnation

For Irenaeus and Athanasius, the key to deification as the goal of salvation is the incarnation as the crux of the divine *oikonomia*, "the central concept of a unified and structured plan from creation to the resurrection that portrays all of salvation history" (2). The incarnation of the Word is paramount for Irenaeus and Athanasius because it is through the incarnation that God joins Himself to humanity and, thus, redeems and ultimately deifies it. But in order to accomplish the goal of the divine *oikonomia*, Christ, the Word of God, had to be both fully human and fully divine, embodying in Himself the very humanity that He would deify by His divinity. The incarnation was the main source of contention between Irenaeus and Athanasius and their opponents, the Gnostics and Arians, respectively, whose teaching either denied that Christ came in the flesh (the Gnostics), thus stripping Him of His humanity, or insisted that He was a creature and therefore not fully God (the Arians), thus denying His full divinity. Over against these contrary voices, Irenaeus and Athanasius emphasize the necessity of properly conceiving of the incarnation as "the pinnacle of salvation history" (43):

Both Irenaeus and Athanasius focus their Christology on

the fact that God became flesh for the purpose of humanity's deification. The Incarnation came to re-create the image and likeness within humanity, to pay the sin debt that humanity had incurred, and to join God with humanity. All of these functions require Christ to be fully God, as only the Creator could re-create, pay humanity's sin debt, and take the step to join with humanity. All these functions require Christ to be fully human, which allows God to identify completely with humanity as its perfect substitute for the specific purpose of deifying it. (73)

Deification is specifically concerned with demonstrating that the teaching of these two representative church fathers is in fact consistent in its major themes and situated firmly in the divine *oikonomia* revealed in Scripture. The demonstration is well supported, thus leaving Harnack's claim that the gospel became syncretized with Greek and Roman philosophical elements seriously strained.

The Divine Trinity

Deification also demonstrates from the writings of Irenaeus and Athanasius that both teachers stressed the coinherent activity of the Divine Trinity in the process of deifying man. While "Athanasius presents a terminologically advanced description of the Trinity as compared to that of Irenaeus" (75), both teachers' descriptions of the operation of the Divine Trinity in the process of deification are "parallel in theological content on a foundational level" (75). Athanasius "places more emphasis than Irenaeus on describing the Trinity's ontology or the inner relationships of his being as consistent with the requirements for the divine *oikonomia*" (85), but both stress that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are "three distinct members who share in the divine essence as one God" (108) and who operate inseparably within the divine *oikonomia* to carry out the deification of humanity.

Athanasius follows Irenaeus' pattern of thought in describing the specific roles for each member of the Trinity as it functions within the divine *oikonomia* to bring about humanity's deification. The Trinity carries out specific functions, but each member of the Trinity has a specific role in that function, reflecting the distinctions among the three in regards to the divine will. No member of the Trinity performs a function without the other two, and each Trinitarian action occurs in the consistent sequence of from the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit, which reflects God's immutability and the coherence of the entire *oikonomia*. (92)

Irenaeus's and Athanasius's descriptions of deification focus on the incarnation as the hinge upon which the divine *oikonomia* turns, but their descriptions are also

thoroughly Trinitarian. Whereas the Greek and Roman philosophers emphasized that “one may attain to the divine through a virtuous lifestyle and contemplation” (211), deification for Irenaeus and Athanasius “is a divine act that involves all three members of the Trinity, as humanity is connected to the Son through the Spirit and to the Father through the Son” (210). The consistency between Irenaeus and Athanasius on this point again suggests an error in Harnack’s thesis that the gospel was subject to the imposition of pagan notions and, therefore, deviated from its original content and intention.

The Unchanging Gospel

Harnack’s thesis depends on the assertion that change was effected upon the gospel by its alleged syncretization with pagan philosophy, but the evidence drawn from the writings of Irenaeus and Athanasius establishes that the teaching in the early church, as represented by the teaching of these two fathers, was consistent with Johannine and Pauline ideas of deification and the rule of faith as the standard of orthodoxy. For both teachers it is Christ and His incarnation as the catalyst for deification within the divine *oikonomia* that functions as the factor to unify Scripture, the rule of faith, and, therefore, the unchanging gospel.

Though a century and a half separate Irenaeus and Athanasius, they adhere to the same description of the Incarnation. Christ has to be fully God and fully human to perform humanity’s deification, and the Incarnation is the glue that unifies the rule of faith, tradition, and ultimately the scriptures. (164)

Christ, the center of the rule [of faith] is the key to scripture, which makes known the Father through the Son and by the Holy Spirit speaking through the prophets. (175)

Both Irenaeus and Athanasius claim that they teach an unchanging gospel as represented by Christianity’s central message, the rule of faith. Further, both Irenaeus’ and Athanasius’ respective descriptions of deification resemble their respective descriptions of the rule in structure and content, signifying that their descriptions of the gospel and their descriptions of humanity’s deification are actually one in [sic] the same. (205-206)

The consistency in the teaching of Irenaeus and Athanasius provides striking testimony to a gospel that did not evolve over time but remained well within accepted orthodoxy in the early church. Further, their consistent treatment of deification and of the incarnation as the initiation of it, within the context of the divine *oikonomia* and according to the Scriptures and the rule of faith, affirms that the divinization of the believers is indeed a Christian doctrine.

Conclusion

Deification ably challenges Harnack, and its voice is a welcome addition to modern scholarship on the subject of divinization in the patristic era and of the later charge of Hellenism. Regrettably, the charge of Hellenism has marginalized and obscured a significant item of the faith—deification as the goal of the divine *oikonomia*, which, ironically, is equal to the goal of the gospel. With such scholarship as contained in *Deification*, the church can begin to reclaim this truth in our confession of the faith and in our experience of the faith.

In 2002 A & C Press published an English translation of Jules Gross’s seminal work *The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers*. In their introduction to that volume, Kerry S. Robichaux and Paul A. Onica expressed the hope that “the bugaboo of hellenization can finally be dispelled from the notion of deification as held by the Christian church” through the presentation of Gross’s work to a wider audience (xi). The consistency between Irenaeus’s and Athanasius’s teachings of deification from a distance of one hundred fifty years is sufficient to deflate Harnack’s thesis, but Gross’s work demonstrates that deification was taught with consistency over a much broader span of time and by many more teachers in the early church. Robichaux and Onica comment,

We may simply say here that the pagan concept was, like so many religious notions of the ancient world, eclectic and far from well-defined. It bore one quality in this work and another, sometimes even opposite, quality in that work, and thus took on a highly mythical and superstitious character that little deserved universal acceptance even among the pagans. On the other hand, Gross’s presentation of “Christian divinization,” if we may so term it, shows a striking degree of agreement among the various models, so much so that we constantly feel as if we are reading about one unified thought on the matter, held universally by a number of writers across a period of some 500 years. (ix)

The fight is still on, but the work of Gross and others has valiantly led the charge and effected significant advancement toward the goal. If *Deification* finds an audience, its acceptance may signal the church’s further openness to cut loose the anchor of long-unquestioned assumptions and embark on a renewed understanding of the “things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

by Tony Espinosa

Works Cited

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