

A Cynical Reading of *the Body of Christ*

Christ's Body in Corinth: The Politics of a Metaphor, by Yung Suk Kim. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008. Print.

Major shifts in literary theory often send tremors through the academic discipline of biblical studies. Postcolonial literary criticism is no exception, and Yung Suk Kim happily locates himself and his recent dissertation, *Christ's Body in Corinth: The Politics of a Metaphor* (hereafter *Politics*), squarely within that camp (5). *Politics* is published as part of the series *Paul in Critical Contexts*, which offers “cutting-edge reexaminations of Paul through the lenses of power, gender, and ideology” (back cover). The book is riddled throughout with an overriding concern for the marginalized, the oppressed, and the brokenhearted. Kim is dissatisfied with the standard interpretation of Paul’s “Body of Christ” language as a “metaphor for an organic unity,” which he fears is the hiding place of a Greco-Roman “ideology of hierarchical unity” (1). In its place he proposes a reading more in line with his own “vision of a world full of diversity and solidarity” (101). In the end it is his own vision, rather than that of Scripture, that leads the way, and his reading replaces salvation with social justice, obscuring one of the most profound mysteries in the divine revelation.

Summary

In the introduction Kim identifies himself with a growing group of contextual interpreters of Scripture, a branch of post-liberal interpretation. Post-liberal biblical scholarship resists the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation associated with liberal Protestantism, a method that seeks to find the objective historical meaning “behind the text.” Contextual interpreters of Scripture seek instead to find the meaning “in front of the text” as it relates primarily to the text’s readership. Meaning is not to be discovered between the text and its historical context but is to be constructed between the text and the reader’s contemporary context and experience. Contextual interpreters often identify themselves as marginalized persons and pit their readings of Scripture against what they consider “hegemonic” readings, typically characterized as Eurocentric, white, male, etc. Kim readily identifies himself as a contextual reader of Scripture and, as such, seeks to “register [his] own voice expressing a marginal, deconstructive and reconstructive hermeneutic in an effort to recover a diversified global community that

has been fragmented” (5). Like many contextual readers, Kim takes the poststructuralist emphasis that there is no objective meaning in a text to imply that one might as well fully embrace one’s own location. Kim thus readily acknowledges that he is “reading ‘[himself]’ in the Bible” (5). In effect, Kim approaches Scripture in order to find potential resources for a particular political agenda that he has already determined to be paramount, based on his experience as a “marginalized” person.

Given his general orientation, Kim’s approach to the book of 1 Corinthians is easily and quickly discerned. *Politics* challenges what Kim suggests is the dominant interpretation of Paul’s “Body of Christ” language, in which “Paul is viewed as a socially conservative, elite, Roman Stoic rhetorician, seeking peace and unity at the expense of diversity or differences in the community” (111). Kim fears that an interpretation of the Body of Christ that emphasizes unity might simply be “an ideologically disguised political rhetoric of control” (3). His concern is that an emphasis on unity might be wrongly used to enforce homogeneity with the result that marginalized persons suffer at the hands of those with power in the community. Such misuse in the history of the Christian church, Kim suggests, “has caused great evil, such as the Crusades, the Holocaust, various wars, and the evils of racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism” (2).

Politics suggests that while it is generally assumed that Paul’s “Body of Christ” is a metaphor for organic unity that is borrowed from Stoic philosophy, Paul’s voice in 1 Corinthians actually aligns more closely with that of the contemporary rivals of “hegemonic” Stoic philosophy—the Cynics. The Cynics challenge the status quo and the powers that be, standing instead with the marginalized and weak, crying out for a world citizenry (50-51). *Politics* suggests that Paul’s concern was not a lack of homogeneity in Corinth but a lack of an adequate respect for diversity. In place of the standard “hegemonic” interpretation of Paul as a Stoic rhetorician, *Politics* presents to us a Paul who is “a strong advocate for egalitarianism” (18). While Kim does briefly reflect on the historical context of the book of 1 Corinthians, his gaze is set on our contemporary context and how this reimagining of Paul lends credence to his own political and social concerns:

In the context of a deepening fragmentation of the world today, we need to embrace a different conception of

community—a community of all in diversity and solidarity. I believe such a conception is available in Paul’s new imagination of the body of Christ as a collective participation in *Christ crucified*. (21)

Politics suggests that the image of Christ crucified deconstructs the conception of community based on powers of wealth, status, and identity and reconstructs “the community based on sacrificial love and solidarity with those who are *broken* in society” (21).

Perhaps the most helpful way to grasp what Kim means by “participation in *Christ crucified*” is his reflection on the meaning of the phrase *body of Christ* and of its close corollary, *in Christ*, both of which appear repeatedly in Paul’s Epistles. Kim proposes that the genitive construction, *body of Christ* in 12:27, employs an attributive, rather than possessive, genitive (67). This suggests that the phrase means not that the body belongs to Christ but that it is a Christ-like body (think of the phrase *spirit of meekness* in Galatians 6:1, which could also be translated “a meek spirit”). Kim proposes that the phrase *body of Christ* should be translated “*christic* body” (67). In contrast to the possessive genitive, which Kim thinks underwrites an authoritative view of the body of Christ, an attributive genitive suggests that the body of Christ is a Christ-like body, a social body that embodies the life and death of Jesus Christ. Similarly, the dative construction, *in Christ*, is taken to represent not a spatial, instrumental, or temporal relationship between the believer and Christ but a modal relationship (33, 37). In Kim’s view, to be “in Christ” is to live a life according to a particular mode, namely, the mode of Christ’s own life, whose suffering and death were acts of solidarity with the oppressed and brokenhearted in society. According to Kim, the phrase *in Christ* “can refer to a way of life manifested in and associated with Christ’s life and sacrifice” (36-37). Thus, Kim argues, Paul’s language of dying and living with Christ bespeaks not “mystical spirituality” (37) but an imitation of Christ’s life, which “deconstructs the ideologies of powers...and reconstructs the life of diversity” (38). For Kim, Paul’s “body of Christ” language speaks to the community, and his “in Christ” language speaks to the individual. Both call for a conception of community as “a creative, struggling space for justice” in imitation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (35).

When turning to the book of 1 Corinthians, *Politics* suggests that all the problems in the church in Corinth were

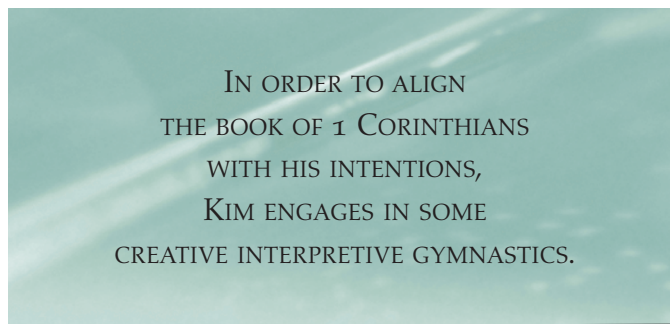
ideological problems of power in the community, repeatedly suggesting that “some members of the community do not live up to Christ’s life and death” (54). In particular, Kim places blame on the elite in the church who are guilty of the “disembodiment of Christ” and suggests that the entire book of 1 Corinthians is directed to them (55). In like manner, the Christian church has failed to “live up” to the ideal of Kim’s proposed reading of *the Body of Christ*, and he suggests that

today, God calls people to work for a livable, peaceful world full of diversity and differences. If we respond to such a call, it is to live as a ‘body’ so that we may share cross-cultural common denominators with each other. (102)

Kim contends that if the church would simply respond to Paul’s message of an egalitarian social vision, “the work of Christ’s death-like experience will be a basis for a just global community” (101).

Critique

Assuming for a moment that there is nothing wrong with the basic presuppositions that *Politics* brings to the book of 1 Corinthians, the work is still subject to a number of problems when considered on its own terms. First, it is simply too short to accomplish what Kim hopes (a mere one hundred two pages of text, including a number of photographs whose relevance to the text is unclear). The first half of the book attempts to review the entire history of the interpretation of *the body of Christ* but does so with insufficient depth to be of benefit or even intelligible to anyone lacking a specialization in the field. The second half of the book attempts to elucidate Paul’s position by a review of its historical context and then comes to a consideration of the book of 1 Corinthians itself. Its attention to the text of 1 Corinthians as a whole is thus minimal, which is problematic, given that it proposes a complete rereading of the book. It rushes speedily through the entire book of 1 Corinthians—not once but twice—in the short span of twenty-six pages (71-96). Its treatment of the text in other places almost exclusively deals with passages that seem to contradict its general thesis. In order to align the book of 1 Corinthians with his intentions, Kim engages in some creative interpretive gymnastics, as in its interpretation of Paul’s seeming lack of expected outrage regarding the institution of slavery. Paul’s exhortation in 7:24 to the slave to “remain with God” in the midst of his or her environment is interpreted to mean that the slave should “stay with God’s initiative—God’s power that passes beyond



human ideology and power,” thus indicating that “Paul can be read as challenging social conservatism and nullifying human constructions of power” (58). In several cases where passages are not susceptible to Kim’s reinterpreted intentions, *Politics* simply assumes that the offending verses are not Paul’s voice at all but Paul’s quotation of his opponents, with whom he certainly cannot be imagined to agree (70, 91). Kim’s proposed reading lacks sufficient weight to be taken seriously, and, in the end, it does not fit the evidence.

This argumentative weakness stems perhaps from a deeper methodological weakness. It is readily apparent that Kim comes to the book of 1 Corinthians not *for* answers but *with* them. With his answers in hand, Kim searches the text for evidence. Where he does not find it, he creates it. Where he finds counter-evidence, he transforms it. Where he cannot transform it, he dismisses it. At several points along the way, *Politics* rejects any possible reading of the term *the body of Christ* if it does not conform to his own. For example, he expresses doubt that Paul would have agreed with Gerd Theissen’s reading of “love patriarchy” but provides no basis for his doubt other than that it does not conform to his own reading (16-17). This is not to suggest that Theissen is correct but to point out Kim’s basic approach. Dismissing an interpretation simply because it does not conform to one’s own seems to be both uncharitable and a dubious way to read Scripture. In fact, Kim applies the same standards to Paul himself. When addressing Paul’s dealing with the sinful brother in 1 Corinthians 5, Kim reminds us that “unity achieved through the expulsion of members is a forced unity, as practiced by the Roman world, and therefore *cannot* have been Paul’s meaning” (66). Kim’s basic methodological approach to Scripture thus serves to produce a self-fulfilling interpretation. He approaches Scripture to see if it contains resources to support his preconceived socio-political vision and then refuses to accept any interpretation of Paul that does not support such a vision.

While Kim affirms that he regards 1 Corinthians as Scripture (4), it is not entirely clear that his notion of Scripture is internally consistent.¹ His handling of 1 Corinthians, for example, is already somewhat suspect, but when he cannot find his socio-political vision at all in the book of Ephesians, he simply dismisses it as a proto-Catholic, Deutero-Pauline text (68-69). It is not exactly clear whether or not Kim holds Ephesians to be part of his Scripture, but if so, it would be interesting to see his justification, given his interpretive approach to Scripture. In Kim’s mind “the Deutero-Pauline letters espouse a universal deontological ethics according to which all people must follow the rules or an authority” (68), while the “real Paul” advocates an egalitarian society. For Kim, the “Deutero-Paul” is a proto-Catholic, whose emphasis on the headship of Christ is an ideological masking of a colonialist logic.

Politics is right to condemn the improper use of “body of Christ” language to underwrite a particular political agenda. But his own interpretation of what he regards as a metaphor is equally problematic. There is grave danger in attempting to situate Scripture within some other larger narrative, political or not, so that the grander themes of Scripture are replaced with more minor ones and then employing the perceived differences on these minor matters to position parts of Scripture against one another. What precisely does it mean to hold the text of the New Testament to be “Scripture” while constantly evaluating it by one’s own criteria? While Kim is right to challenge the application of Stoic logic to the term *body of Christ*, he simply replaces it with his application of the political agenda of the Cynics to the term. To suggest that this is the primary meaning of the book of 1 Corinthians and that this reading is wholly contrasted to that of the “Deutero-Pauline” Epistle of Ephesians obscures one of the greatest mysteries in the Word of God—the Body of Christ, which is Christ, and in whom all distinctions related to race, gender, and social status have been done away with through the terminating crucifixion of Christ, rather than through the control of hierarchical elites.

In the end Kim has reduced the message of the gospel to a mere call for social justice. The debate over whether or not Scripture speaks in political language is a long and arduous one, and its contemporary formulation is particularly prickly. This review cannot pretend to address it even in the barest of terms, except to suggest that there is a great difference between saying that the church has a social obligation and reducing the church to a social obligation and nothing more. Kim, it seems, is suggesting the latter: “Paul’s emphasis on the ‘free gospel’ of Christ... advocates for freedom of all people—especially for those excluded from the Roman system of patronage” (59). Kim resists any notion of the Body of Christ that limits salvation to the church, and his vision of a “holistic religious and interreligious, intercultural outlook” suggests that his reading implies a universalism that embraces all of humanity (8). *Politics* effectively reduces Paul to a naive utopian visionary who points to a historical Jesus created in Kim’s image. In doing so, *Politics* ignores the only means of accomplishing such a vision. Only when the believers recognize that they are one spirit with the Lord, only when they realize that the Jesus of history now lives again in their regenerated spirit, incorporating them into Christ, can they begin to learn how to live as indispensable members of Christ in the Body of Christ, expressing the distinctive operation of the one and same Spirit (1 Cor. 6:17; 12:4-7, 12-13).

Rather than discussing the kind of political vision embraced by Paul, the basic assumption that Paul is promoting any political agenda at all seems to be the more worthy target of our reflection. Paul’s reference “both to

Jews and to Greeks and to the church of God” seems to suggest that he considered “the church of God” to be distinct from any cultural entity on the earth (10:32). The church is not primarily Jews and Gentiles together but an entirely new entity on the earth. In Paul’s mind the Body of Christ is not primarily a place of diversity but the place where God in Christ is all and in all: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There cannot be Jew nor Greek, there cannot be slave nor free man, there cannot be male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27-28). *Politics*’ notion thus seems to be entirely opposite to that of Paul. For Kim, the Body of Christ is the place where there are both Jews and Greeks. For Paul it is precisely the other way around, and the only way for this to be a reality is found in the “Deutero-Paul”: Christ must become “all and in all” (Col. 3:11). The fundamental issue behind every problem in the church in Corinth was not the Corinthians’ lack of respect for diversity but their lack of the experience of Christ. Paul set forth the present Christ, not an egalitarian historical figure, as the solution to every problem in the church in Corinth. While this review cannot more fully explore the profound revelation of the Body of Christ as unveiled in the book of 1 Corinthians as an alternative to Kim’s reading and to that of his opponents, the various articles in this issue will certainly help to make up this deficiency.

IN THE END KIM HAS REDUCED THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL TO A MERE CALL FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE. THERE IS A GREAT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SAYING THAT THE CHURCH HAS A SOCIAL OBLIGATION AND REDUCING THE CHURCH TO A SOCIAL OBLIGATION AND NOTHING MORE.

by Mitchell Kennard

Notes

¹To be fair, Kim’s recent book *Biblical Interpretation: Theory, Process, and Criteria*, published by Pickwick Publications in 2013, may have a more nuanced account of his general approach to Scripture.

Imitating God in Christ

Imitating God in Christ: Recapturing a Biblical Pattern, by Jason B. Hood. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2013. Print.

Imitating God in Christ: Recapturing a Biblical Pattern (hereafter *Imitating*) is a polemic challenge to contemporary Christianity (especially to its theological and pastoral

leaders) to give heed to imitation as an important biblical subject. According to *Imitating*, the “three aspects of imitation—the imitation of God, the imitation of his Son and the imitation of the saints—form the backbone of a biblical theology of imitation” (14). A reformed scholar quoted by *Imitating* says, “The topic of the imitation of Christ—the shaping of Christian character and conduct according to patterns observed in the life of Christ—has largely been neglected among Protestant and Reformed scholars” (15).

Imitating “attempts to answer the question, ‘What does the Bible say about imitation?’” (15), doing so progressively, beginning with the imitation of God as seen in Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament and proceeding to the imitation of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. *Imitating* traces this theme through the synoptic

Gospels and the Epistles of Paul and Peter, provides a brief review of imitation as seen in church history, and then concludes and applies the topic using numerous references from the writings of John. Refreshingly, *Imitating* springs from a fundamental hermeneutical premise:

This book about the Book employs a number of contested assumptions, including the assumption that the Bible is God’s Word, the Christian’s standard of belief and practice, and the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament is a crucial guide for contemporary interpretation. (15)

Imitating supports its thesis with over one thousand biblical references drawn from most of the Old Testament books and every book of the New Testament.

The Imitation of Jesus Producing Scars and Chains, Not Wristbands

According to *Imitating*, imitation is not “What would Jesus do?”

WWJD-oriented kitsch and an emphasis on practical application can eclipse redemption...In contrast, Paul’s description of his own Jesus imitation often sounds impractical. His imitation of Jesus produced scars (Gal 6:17) and chains, not wristbands. (185)

The introduction sets forth imitation as those “actions and mindsets that reflect the actions and mindsets of another” (12), and this cannot be separated from major New Testament themes because

imitation overlaps with (and is ultimately inseparable from) large theological categories of sanctification and discipleship, and incorporates example, pattern, paradigm (*typos*), partaking (2 Pet 3) and participation. It encompasses or encroaches on verbs like “putting on” or “clothing” (Rom 13:14). It relates to sharing (Rom 8:17), mirroring, reflecting, conforming and mortifying (KJV for “putting to death”). (12)

Concerning the imitation of God, *Imitating* says,

Even though some divine activities and attributes belong to God alone, imitation stands at the heart of human identity. God...gave us his image and spirit so that human character and work might reflect God’s character and work. (26)

Consequently, *Imitating* says,

We should imitate the character [God] displays as he works. Divine compassion, beauty, holiness and justice should be mirrored in the labors of God’s people...The preaching and teaching of God’s work should lead to the imitation of God’s faithfulness, forgiveness, generosity and righteousness. (40)

Imitating goes further to linking the imitation of God to His holiness and character: “Peter reprises God’s command to ‘be holy, for I am holy’ and ascribes this task to ‘obedient children’ of their ‘Father’ (1 Pet 1:14-17). They reflect the character of their Father as his images” (47).

With respect to the imitation of God in Christ, *Imitating* says that the Gospels present Jesus, the imprint of the Father, as the pattern to be imitated by the believers. The goal of this imitation is to be conformed to the image of the Son and to grow to the full stature of Christ. According to *Imitating*,

the imitation of a perfect God provides humans a goal for character, virtue, morality and behavior. The goal for our sanctification is to be godlike: godly, holy, glorified. The goal of imitation and discipleship is perfect humanity, disciples who look like Jesus (Gal 4:19)...Jesus perfectly fleshes out God’s goal for humanity. He hated what God hated, loved what God loved and loved as he was loved by his Father. Because Jesus is the exact human imprint of the Father (Col 1:15), his character becomes our goal.

Believers are predestined to be conformed to the image of the Son in order that he might be the firstborn within a large household full of siblings who think and act like him and like their Father (Rom 8:29)...Believers grow together up to “the full stature of Christ.” The goal of

imitation is to be mature, complete, blameless and perfect. (114)

Paul is also spoken of as a pattern of imitation because he

works and strains to the point of death, always targeting completion and maturity (Phil 3:10-15). He believes that God is at work in him (Phil 2:13) and that in the Messiah he has all the resources he needs to strive, to succeed, to sacrifice and to suffer (Phil 4:11-16)...

Paul joins the Gospels in seeing the imitation of Jesus’ sacrificial death as a template for the Christian life. His heavy emphasis on the Holy Spirit, resurrection and union with Christ also implicate imitation as a fundamental human task...

Paul rigorously applies both the benefits and the burden of the life and death of Jesus. That is another way of saying that Paul applies all the blessings of Jesus’ life and death, even those blessings that look something like death on a cross. (115-116)

Christians Christified: a Crucified and Resurrected People

Imitating states that Paul’s teachings provide an

important, oft-neglected framework for understanding imitation: union with Christ, resurrection, regeneration and Holy Spirit. These gospel elements become the engine for Christian sanctification—the process of looking more like the Father and the Son through the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer. (96-97)

In this context, *Imitating* introduces the term *Christification*, relating it to the crucifixion and resurrection as a mold:

Crucifixion and resurrection mold believers into the Messiah’s perfect pattern. We might call this process “Christification,” since believers are becoming new humans who are ‘created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness’ (Eph.4:24; compare 2 Cor. 3:18). (104)

According to *Imitating*, Christification is related to the goal and process of sanctification, and thereby shapes believers into the image of God, into a new creation. Thus, sanctification is associated with God’s original intention of having imitators of God:

The goal of sanctification is the renewal of the image of God: godlikeness refreshed and reloaded. In sanctification believers begin to become humanity 2.0, a Christified version of the original image-bearing, God-imitating

humans. Because believers have their identity tied up with the resurrected Messiah, that process of renewal begins now in behavior...

The glory of God is now being shown—dimly, sometimes almost imperceptibly, yet always definitively—in true humans as they are Christified. They imitate Jesus and are formed into his image, which is the image of God. (104-105)

The Holy Spirit Being the Engine of Transformation in the Believers to Shape the Christian Life

Imitating devotes an entire chapter to the Holy Spirit, emphasizing the life of Christ that the believers share with Him and received from Him when He breathed into the disciples after the resurrection. When introducing this chapter, *Imitating* says,

These new humans have a new engine and a new identity that changes everything. Like all the benefits of salvation, these benefits come from the life that believers share with their head, the Messiah (Eph 1:22-23)...The Spirit of God begins to shape these new creation people just as he shaped creation (Gen 1:2; Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17). (105)

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The author of *Imitating* uses his own experience to clarify that Christ being formed in the believers, not mere knowledge, is the main point in the New Testament: “I have often made knowledge about Christ my goal in discipleship. But Paul’s goal was Christ ‘formed in you’ (Gal 4:19). The goal of theology is not mere knowledge; the goal of theology is to shape the Christian life” (108). In a section entitled “Renewed by the Spirit,” *Imitating* describes how the disciples needed to receive the Spirit, which Jesus breathed into them after His glorification, so that they could participate in the resurrection life:

Before his death Jesus is clear that they do not yet have the engine of transformation that will help them proclaim Jesus, understand his teaching and obey his command to live Jesus-shaped lives and deaths. But when Jesus is glorified, he and the Father will send a helper (Jn 7:39; 15:26; 16:7).

When Jesus returns to his disciples after his resurrection, he launches them out into mission: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” But as he commissions them, he solves the problem of their pitiful state by breathing into them (Jn 20:21-22). John’s description reaches back to

the original creation account and Old Testament promises of new creation. The verb John uses for “breathing into” is used in Greek translations of Genesis 2:7 in the same form (*enephyssēsen*) to describe God’s act of breathing life and spirit into Adam...

Jesus breathes into the disciples so that they begin to participate in this new resurrection life (Jn 20:22). And because they now have the Holy Spirit, disciples are sent as Jesus was sent and are able to forgive or retain sins (Jn 20:21-23). Sending out disciples for these tasks without giving resurrection life and the Holy Spirit would be like requiring nuclear fission from a toddler. Disciples are not sinless, but they are remade and given a new ability to follow Jesus to the cross and resurrection...

He breathes his Spirit into them in order to send them as he was sent. They are empowered by the Holy Spirit, motivated by the love of Jesus and guided by the commands of God. They are the light of the world, evidence that the coming new creation is, in part, already here. Disciples connected to Jesus like branches to a vine have the Holy Spirit in them producing the living water that flows out to the world. (110-111)

Imitating Paul’s Ways in Christ—a Cross-shaped Life

Imitating’s use of the term *cross-shaped* is a key to understanding its definition of imitation. In the introduction *Imitating* comments on 1 Corinthians 4:16-17, saying,

Timothy is a flesh-and-blood model who knows and lives the ways of his spiritual father, Paul. He displays for the Corinthians what they should have been putting into practice: a sacrificial, cross-shaped life that reflects Paul’s “ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.” (10-11)

Paul’s teaching and his life were one, and the life Paul led was a cross-shaped life. It is Paul’s cross-shaped life that should be copied. *Imitating* explains that imitation in the Bible is rarely about precise copying:

When Paul speaks of imitation, he has in mind the duplication of a pattern, particularly a pattern that conforms to Jesus’ self-denial and cross-bearing. He teaches all of his churches to take his cross-shaped mindset and put it to work.

The present book follows Paul’s lead, using a flexible and

more expansive approach than the word *imitation* usually brings to mind. In this text imitation refers to actions and mindsets that reflect the actions and mindsets of another. (12)

Imitating returns to this theme, saying that “the Gospels emphasize the cross-shaped identity of Jesus and his disciples. But they also forecast the resurrection and the glorification of Jesus and all who follow him on the cross-shaped road (Mk 9:9; 10:30, 34)” (80). A chapter entitled “The Apostle of Imitation” restates the central role of the cross-shaped life, saying,

Paul’s way of life is so integral to his message that he responds not by mitigating his way of life, but by reminding the Corinthians of his cross-shaped spiritual résumé on multiple occasions (1 Cor 4:8-17; 2 Cor 1:8-10; 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:7-12:10, 14-15; 13:3-4) and sending Timothy as a faithful model to reboot the concept of a cross-shaped Christian. He repeatedly urges them to adopt the cross-shaped life he models. (124)

This is a further development of the author’s focus, where he has argued in other publications that cross-shaping, or cruciformity, is a key biblical item that is not being adequately considered by today’s Christianity. For example, the author concluded a prior article by saying, “Cruciformity is a crucial aspect of the NT’s message of the cross and must be recovered...The NT certainly presents its Messiah and his cross as appropriate objects of imitation” (“Cross” 294).

Imitating Missing the New Jerusalem as the Consummate Co-imitation of God in Christ

Imitating makes a cogent case that the imitation of God in Christ is not a mere sideline curiosity but a central theme in the Bible and therefore worthy of the believers’ serious and frequent study, consideration, and experience. *Imitating*’s scope of developing the topic of imitation, ambitiously encompassing Genesis to Revelation, is commendable, as is its taking the Word-of-God basis of its presentation. However, *Imitating*’s systematic, theological, and biblical presentation has one surprising omission, since it covers nearly the full span of the scriptural text—no explicit reference to the last two chapters of the Bible. Since Revelation 21 and 22 present the holy city, New Jerusalem, in the new heaven and new earth as the ultimate fulfillment of God’s purpose to have an eternal expression, in the highest sense of imitation, this is a serious omission.

Imitating refers to the New Jerusalem in three contexts but without explicit reference to Revelation 21 and 22. The first, in chapter 3, “Priests of God,” acknowledges that the New Jerusalem is the heavenly counterpart of

the garden of Eden, the tabernacle, and the temple (42). The second, in chapter 4, “Participating in the Work of God,” speaks of the New Jerusalem in the context of the kingdom age (52). The third, in a section entitled “The Scriptures Reveal God’s People in Relation with Him,” presents “New Jerusalem and new creation (a heavenly city and country)” as the destination pursued by both Old Testament and New Testament saints; their pursuit of this destination was by faith and faithfulness as a pattern to follow (167). It may be understood that *Imitating* is here referring to the eternal holy city as a destination or place but not as the explicit fulfillment of God’s ultimate expression.

If imitation is truly a central biblical pattern, as posited by *Imitating*, it is reasonable, if not imperative, that this truth be manifested in the concluding revelation of the Bible. The New Jerusalem is a sign of the consummate imitation of God constituted of God and man, Christ and the church, the Spirit and the bride. This city-bride has the glory and the appearance of God (Rev. 21:9-11), which glory is God expressed. The light of the city bears the appearance of jasper, the appearance of God (cf. 4:3). The glory of God as the light illumines this city through the Lamb as the lamp.

The city, consequently, becomes the diffuser through which it, in turn, becomes the light to the nations (21:23-24). The New Jerusalem as the city-bride is the tabernacle of God, the dwelling place of God (v. 3). Simultaneously, the Lord God and the Lamb are the temple (v. 22), the very city and dwelling place in which the redeemed saints live, thereby fulfilling the incorporation promised in John 14:20 and prayed for in 17:21-23. The New Jerusalem, composed of the redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified sons of God, is the bride, who speaks together with the Spirit as one (Rev. 21:7; 22:17). This is the ultimate “co-imitation.”

Imitating Failing to Mention “the Spirit...with Our Spirit,” the Mingled Spirit, as the Practical Way to Imitate God in Christ

Imitating acknowledges the limits of its scope, concluding that it is “a ‘what’ book, not a how-to book” and that “no one should mistake it for a full-scale theology of preaching, interpretation, sanctification or discipleship” (218). It thus challenges readers to further search out the implications of this topic. Notwithstanding the above caveat, *Imitating* unavoidably delves into the realm of practicality, application, and experience. It is in this context that *Imitating* fails to mention the truth and experience of the Spirit with our spirit as the means to practically imitate God in Christ (Rom. 8:16).

Imitating refers to 1 Corinthians 6:17, being one spirit

with the Lord (109), and appropriately emphasizes the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit (131); nevertheless, it seems to neglect the truth of the mingled spirit, the Divine Spirit mingled with the regenerated human spirit. The imitation of God in Christ becomes practical in our experience by the exercise of our spirit, which is one with the Lord. The apostles were patterns of those who served and walked in the mingled spirit, and they charged the believers to do the same (Rom. 1:9; 8:4; Gal. 5:16). Likewise, the experience and application of the cross (cruciformity) is possible because Christ's experience of the cross is an element in the Spirit that is applied by the Spirit in our spirit.

Imitating Being Ambiguous concerning the Human Virtues of the Natural Created Life and the Divine Attributes of the Uncreated Life of God

Imitating also does not clearly distinguish the natural created life, with its corresponding human virtues, from the uncreated life of God, with its divine attributes. As a man, Jesus had perfect and sinless human virtues, but He lived not by Himself or by His perfect human virtues; instead, He lived by the Father (John 6:57). He did not do His will but the will of the Father, He spoke not His own words but those of the Father, and He did not do His own works but the works of the Father (Matt. 26:42; John 4:24; 14:10). The pattern of His living was not simply that He did good and perfect things but that He denied the natural life and lived by another life, the life of the Father.

The believers' imitation of this pattern, true cruciformity, is to not live by our human life but to live out the resurrected life that we received at regeneration. The result of living out this pattern is the expression of the divine attributes in the human virtues. The recurring experience of this imitation is growth and transformation—Christification. This growth is not the mere restoration of the natural human virtues back to their pre-fall state; it is the increase of God Himself in making man His genuine expression.

by James Fite

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A Limited View of the Economy of God

The Triune God in Christian Thought and Experience, by James A. Fowler. Fallbrook: C.I.Y. Publishing, 2013. Print.

The Triune God in Christian Thought and Experience (hereafter *Triune*) is a series of talks given and turned into written form by James A. Fowler. The study aims to demonstrate that the proper understanding of the Triune God as He exists in Himself is derived not from academic speculation concerning God but from God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, as recorded in the Bible. It also seeks to show that the purpose of God's revelation in Christ and the Holy Spirit is to bring those who receive Him into an intimate, experiential relationship of fellowship with Him. *Triune* also calls for "a renewed discussion and rethinking of the distinctively Christian God" (3), arguing that an

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understanding of the Triune God focused on His relational being and its implications, insofar as He desires to bring the believers into an experiential relationship with Him, will revitalize the Christian community. Although *Triune's* desire to return to a biblical revelation of God is encouraging, and its arguments for an emphasis on the desire of God to bring the believers in Christ into intimate fellowship with Him are compelling, it bases many of its arguments on a limited view of the economy of God and subsequently makes too great a distinction between God's economy and the experiential fellowship that the believers economically experience with and in God.

Theologia, Oikonomia, and Koinonia according to *Triune*

Triune presents its thesis in four main sections: the first, titled "*Theologia*," assesses the historical and contemporary understanding of the Triune God as He exists in Himself; the second, "*Oikonomia*," evaluates the Triune God in His historical self-revelation in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit as recorded in the Bible; the third, "*Koinonia*," examines the relationship between the believing tripartite man and the relational Triune God; and the fourth, "Correlation of Categories," discusses the relationship among the foregoing sections.

In the first chapter, titled "*Theologia*," after a Greek word that *Triune* defines as "human considerations and understanding of God" (4), *Triune* traces the conception of God in the West from the time of Plato to the present. It argues that contemporary Christian thinkers have placed God in a box (14), because much of their understanding of God is derived from Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical methods. It asserts that "Plato's idea of 'The One,'...his philosophical concept of a mono-ideal Form, was easily accommodated to their particular monotheistic explanations of God by later Jewish and Christian thinkers" (11-12). According to *Triune*, Plato employed a deductive reasoning process in his contemplation concerning "The One" such that an observer "projected hypothetical concepts of the absolute Ideal prior to any subjective observation of evidence" (14). It states that whereas Aristotle, Plato's most famous student, held to the same ideal form, he applied an opposite method of reasoning, in which an observer progressed backward "to the possible origins of what he was observing or experiencing" (14-15). Thus, even though the two philosophers used opposing methods, they held to the same ideal form, and when such an ideal was adapted into Christian concept, the result was that "the ultimate, supreme Being was conceptualized in a big mental box of idealized superlatives" (14).

Based on that background, *Triune* suggests that the two Christian thinkers whose "theological premises have predominated and influenced Christian thinking to this very day" are Augustine and Thomas Aquinas (21). It correlates Augustinian theology with Platonic thought and Aquinas's theology with Aristotelian thinking. *Triune* argues that in order for Christians to have an adequate awareness of the Triune God, they must move toward a perspective based on His revelation of Himself "as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, relationally interacting in LOVE" (32), an understanding of God in which we recognize that the Triune God is "dynamically constituted and energized by the eternal loving relationships of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (33).

Triune reasons that an understanding of the Triune God based on His revelation in Jesus Christ, as recorded in portions of Scripture including John 10:30; 11:25; 14:6, 9-10; and 15:1 and 5, would turn the believers away from having an inaccessible God who has no real connection with mankind (33-34). It also argues that such an understanding would steer the believers away from the errors of a primarily "numerical Trinity" (32), a monadic monotheism and tritheism, and guide them into an understanding of God in which "the relationality of the divine Persons is the supreme ontological premise" (35), and the divine persons exist and move around in the same place and function as one (39).

In the second chapter, titled "*Oikonomia*," *Triune* parses

the Greek word *oikonomia* and proposes that it pertains to what God does "in His Self-revelation of Himself within the action of the Son and the Spirit in human history" (42). It argues that the "relational Triune God" functions with triadic action throughout His economy to accomplish "His eternal administrative purpose and plan for humanity" (43) and then steps through each event of the "historic life and work of Jesus" (50), including creation, the incarnation of the Son, His baptism, human life, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, showing that in each event "the three Persons of the Trinity were functioning simultaneously and interrelationally" (62). *Triune* concludes the chapter with a long discourse on "what occurred at Pentecost in the outpouring of the Spirit of Christ, allowing the living Lord Jesus to live within His disciples by the Spirit" (54).

In the third chapter, titled "*Koinonia*," *Triune* explains that the Greek word *koinonia*, derived from another Greek word meaning "common," "pertains to the common union that Christians have with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and with one another in the Christian community" (65). It asserts, based on 1 Corinthians 6:17, that by receiving the Lord Jesus, a believer has the Triune God dwelling in his or her spirit and is joined in a spiritual union with the Triune God (75). *Triune* explains further that the implications of the Triune God dwelling in the believers are that "we are identified with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and are invited and encouraged to participate in His divine Being and interactions" (74-75), and it states that

what we call the "Christian life" is being alive in and with the Triune God to the extent that God and the individual human are interwoven spiritually in a "one spirit" union (cf. 1 Cor. 6:17); God and man interpenetrate one another; and we are meant to function perichoretically, i.e. in such a way that we move in the same space so seamlessly that it is not possible to tell whether it is He or me in action. (75)

Supposing that the believers' participation in the Triune God becomes the basis for all proper relationships among human beings, including marriage life, family life, friendships, and churches, *Triune* explores how a fresh understanding of the Triune God as a relational Being affects prayer in the experience of a believer based on Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-19 (81-83). *Triune* concludes that the purpose of God's creation of human beings is fulfilled as the "Triune God dwells in and functions through Christian individuals and the Church" in such a way that God can manifest His glory in Christian individuals and in the Body of Christ (84).

In the fourth chapter, "Correlation of Categories," *Triune*

attempts to draw a relationship between the categories it examined in its earlier chapters: *theologia*, *oikonomia*, and *koinonia*. It explains that *theologia* considers the essence of who God is in Himself; *oikonomia*, God at work in human history; and *koinonia*, God at work in the believers (87). *Triune* claims that this third category, *koinonia*, has been neglected in much of Christian thinking and discusses the need to consider the perichoretic Trinity with an emphasis on the believers' spiritual union with Him (89), in other words, to consider "the relational Self-communication of the Triune God *ad diversum*, i.e. toward and involving others" (89). It maintains that both *theologia* and *koinonia* are connected by *oikonomia*—God in Himself (*theologia*) as well as His activity "in the objective and historic life and work of Jesus Christ (*oikonomia*)" are outside of us, objective, but *oikonomia* "culminates in the resurrection, ascension, and Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit of Christ whereby the person and work of the living Lord Jesus can be appropriated within receptive individuals" (92). This produces the connection that issues in *koinonia*, the relationship that the believers have with the indwelling presence of the Triune God (93). Thus,

theologia must be informed by, developed on the basis of, and derived from the Christological and soteriological narrative of *oikonomia*...

Likewise, the intimate relationality of experiential Christian *koinonia* with the Triune God and others must also be informed by, and derived from the historic Christological and soteriological narrative of *oikonomia*. (108-109)

Triune also notes that the two becomings of Christ can be observed in the transition from *theologia* to *oikonomia* and from *oikonomia* to *koinonia*; that is, the Word becoming flesh in John 1:14 corresponds to the transition from *theologia* to *oikonomia*, and the last Adam becoming a life-giving Spirit in 1 Corinthians 15:45 corresponds to the transition from *oikonomia* to *koinonia*. After presenting the relationship between the three categories, *Triune* discusses "why there has been such an aversion in the history of the Church to accepting, teaching and proclaiming the glorious reality of the *koinonia* participation of Christians with the Triune God" (96). It points out that whereas "there are some voices crying in the wilderness,...the institutional Church, as a whole, is not interested," because "they have a bias against such subjective concerns" (107). *Triune* concludes that

the whole of the gospel, the whole of the Christian faith, the whole of salvation, the whole of the Church of Jesus Christ is predicated on our awareness of and participation in the inseparable personal relationality of the Triune God. (122)

Two Aspects of the Spirit

In its examination of *oikonomia*, *Triune* repeatedly declares that Christ as the Spirit came to dwell in the believers at the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit. It states in one place that "the living Lord Jesus Christ returns to His disciples in Spirit-form on Pentecost" (50). When considering the Lord's promise in John 14:16-17, it suggests that "Jesus was promising that He would come to aid and assist His disciples in the form of the Spirit, and this was historically enacted at Pentecost" (53). Again, *Triune*

points out that "the importance of what occurred at Pentecost in the outpouring of the Spirit of Christ" was that it allowed "the living Lord Jesus to live within His disciples by the Spirit" (54). *Triune's* notion, expressed in the statements above, not only misses the distinction between the biblical revela-

tion concerning the Spirit's indwelling the believers for life and clothing them with power for work but also obscures the believers' experience of these two aspects of the Spirit.

According to the record in John 20, on the evening of the Lord's resurrection, fifty days prior to Pentecost, the Lord Jesus came and stood in the midst of His disciples, showed them His hands and His side, and said to them, "Peace be to you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you" (vv. 19-21). When He had said this, "He breathed into them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit" (v. 22). The Lord's breathing of the Spirit into the believers on the evening of His resurrection, not the outpouring in Acts 2 as *Triune* supposes, was the fulfillment of His promise in John 14:16-17. The outpouring of the Spirit recorded in Acts 2 fulfills the promise in Luke 24:49, which says, "I send forth the promise of My Father upon you; but as for you, stay in the city until you put on power from on high." Witness Lee's presentation concerning this distinction is insightful; he explains that the Spirit received by the disciples in John 20:22 was

the Spirit expected in 7:39 and promised in 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; and 16:7-8, 13. Hence, the Lord's breathing of the Holy Spirit into the disciples was the fulfillment of His promise of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter. This fulfillment

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differs from the one in Acts 2:1-4, which was the fulfillment of the Father's promise in Luke 24:49...In Acts 2 the Spirit as a rushing, violent wind came as power upon the disciples for their work (Acts 1:8). Here the Spirit as breath was breathed as life into the disciples for their life. By breathing the Spirit into the disciples, the Lord imparted Himself into them as life and everything. Thus, all that He had spoken in chs. 14—16 could be fulfilled. (Recovery Version, John 20:22, note 1)

Obscuring the distinction of the infilling of the Spirit as life for the believers' existence in John 20:22 and the outpouring of the Spirit as power for the believers' work in Acts 2:4 can mislead the believers in their experience of the Triune God.

Oikonomia and *Koinonia* as Revealed in the Bible

In its presentation of *oikonomia* and *koinonia* as categories, even though *Triune* is able to adequately define these terms according to their Greek meaning, it is limited in its understanding of their use in the Bible. *Triune* not only supposes *oikonomia* to have a terminal point at the outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2 but also limits *oikonomia* to the objective, outward sphere of Christ's and the Spirit's work on earth. Furthermore, it considers that *oikonomia* and *koinonia*, while related, are separate categories. However, a brief survey of the use of *oikonomia* in the New Testament will show that *Triune's* understanding of these terms does not match that the New Testament revelation.

The Greek word *oikonomia* is rendered "economy" in Ephesians 1:10; 3:9; and 1 Timothy 1:4, and it is rendered "stewardship" in 1 Corinthians 9:17, Ephesians 3:2, Colossians 1:25, and Luke 16:4. Ephesians 1:9-10 says that the mystery of God's will is "unto the economy of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ." Here, the fact that the economy is of the fullness of the times, or the ages, indicates that this economy spans all ages and continues until the fullness of the ages, when the new heavens and new earth appear in eternity (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1; Isa. 65:17). Also, the function of this economy is "to head up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens and the things on the earth, in Him" (Eph. 1:10), indicating that at the fullness of the ages all things will be headed up in Christ. According to verse 22 of the same chapter, such a heading up is to the church, which implies an economical dispensing of the Triune God and a transmission of Christ to the church.

In Ephesians 3:9 the apostle Paul states that one aspect of his stewardship was "to enlighten all that they may see what the economy of the mystery is." Here, the economy is of the mystery concerning God, Christ, and the church

(Col. 2:2; Eph. 3:4-6; 5:32), indicating that this economy pertains to and consists of Gentiles becoming fellow heirs and fellow members of the Body of Christ by being placed in Christ and by partaking of His riches (3:6, 8). Hence, God's economy is by no means merely objective, for it concerns the believers' partaking of, receiving into themselves, the riches of Christ.

First Timothy 1:3-4 says, "Charge certain ones not to teach different things...which produce questionings rather than God's economy, which is in faith." For God's economy to be in faith means that the entirety of God's economy is initiated by and carried out in the sphere and element of faith, which is altogether subjective. Moreover, Paul's charge to Timothy in these verses coupled with Acts 2:42, which says that the believers in Jerusalem "continued steadfastly in the teaching and the fellowship of the apostles" reveals the relationship between the teaching of the apostles, the fellowship of the apostles, which is also the fellowship of the Triune God, and God's economy (1 John 1:3; 1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 13:14).

Paul's charge in 1 Timothy 1:3-4 implies that the unique teaching allowed among the believers is the teaching that produces God's economy, and Acts 2:42 reveals this teaching to be the teaching of the apostles. In addition, the fact that teaching and fellowship are grouped together in Acts 2:42 indicates that the unique teaching of the apostles with its fellowship, the fellowship of the Triune God, is what produces God's economy in faith. In other words, God's economy in faith consists of the teaching and fellowship of the apostles. In this sense, all the aforementioned verses show that God's economy is not terminal, merely objective, or separate from fellowship; rather, it is a matter that spans from eternity to eternity, is altogether subjective, is full of the teaching of the apostles, and is full of the fellowship of the Triune God with the believers for ministering God in Christ as the Spirit into His chosen people to be the Body of Christ, which will consummate the New Jerusalem to usher in the new heavens and new earth, at which time all things will be headed up in Christ.

From God's perspective what He is doing in Christ as the Spirit through the believers to dispense Himself into them for the producing of the Body of Christ is His economy; from the believers' perspective God's economy is a stewardship characterized by their enjoying and dispensing, that is, imparting, the grace of God, the mysteries of God, the unsearchable riches of Christ, and all that they have seen and heard concerning the Word of life to propagate the teaching of the apostles and to enlarge the fellowship of the Triune God for the accomplishment of His economy (1 Pet. 4:10; Col. 1:25; 1 Cor. 4:1; Eph. 3:2; 1 John 1:1, 3-4).

Conclusion

Triune's study presents an understanding of the Triune God as a relational Being and emphasizes the believers' experiential relationship with Him in order to turn around "the sad state of affairs in the Trinitarian awareness of the modern Church" (3). In its attempt to show a relationship between the Triune God and the believers in Christ, however, it advances a definition of God's economy that separates the believers' experience of God, a reality that involves the believers' economical participation in the Triune God, from the economy that made and continues to make this participation possible.

by Joel Oladele

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Wild Stories of Heavenly Excursions

Heaven Is Beyond Your Wildest Expectations: Ten True Stories of Experiencing Heaven, by Sid Roth and Lonnie Lane. Shippensburg: Destiny Image Publishers, 2012. Print.

Heaven Is Beyond Your Wildest Expectations: Ten True Stories of Experiencing Heaven (hereafter *Heaven*) contains interviews with ten individuals that are presented as narrative testimonies of visits to heaven either in person or through a dream or vision. The credibility of these excursions to the "heavenly realm" is premised upon seemingly miraculous circumstances. The book boldly asserts that "these stories give [us] an opportunity to see into the heavenly realm perhaps even beyond what [Jesus'] disciples understood about Heaven at that time" (17). Upon closer inspection, however, *Heaven's* stories would fail to convince any seeking believer whose faith is grounded upon the infallible Word of God. In its effort to provide a sense of hope and encouragement in the midst of earthly sufferings, *Heaven* presents an eternal paradise rife with inconsistencies and contradictions that mar the hope it wishes to engender. Ultimately, it turns believers away from the reality of the present experiences of Christ, who is our true hope of glory (Col. 1:27).

Of the ten stories, half recount a transcendental experience in a life-threatening situation. One narrator is

purported to have been lifted out in the midst of a "fatal" automobile accident, which "took his life, sending him to Heaven to the feet of Jesus" (38). This visit to heaven supposedly occurred in the twenty minutes that he was brain-dead without oxygen (36). The concluding story is perhaps the most miraculous of all. Having been declared dead for ten hours due to a head-first fall from a second-story balcony, the narrator was apparently extracted from his physical body, suffering no pain, and transferred into "the spirit body," in which he arrived in heaven (168). Though he walked in a spiritual body, he nevertheless describes heaven as a "place" that has "a vast valley," "trees," and "flowers," thereby upholding its physical quality (173). Bolstered by these miracles, the book claims to unveil a "wonderful picture" of the believers' "glorious and eternal future," which will bring them "a supernatural peace" that will "overpower the cares of this life" (14).

It is beyond the scope of this review to comment on the so-called miracles as they are portrayed. What is pertinent, however, is that *Heaven's* extra-biblical characterizations of a glorious realm cast a shadow of doubt on the credibility of the narrators' heavenly visits. The descriptions of a heavenly realm not only audaciously defy the biblical record but also, in many instances, infringe upon simple logic. In its effort to encourage believers in their present sufferings and to assure them of liberation in an eternal paradise beyond physical death, *Heaven's* fantastical utopia promise of mere peace, joy, and comfort presents a low view of our heavenly hope, and it also misdirects believers away from the reality in Christ available to them today.

Most readers, upon casual perusal of the testimonies, can easily detect many instances of strained reasoning and wild interpretations of scant verses that refer to an eternal paradise. *Heaven* contains extra-scriptural and, in more than a few cases, anti-scriptural descriptions of heaven. There is also descriptions of Jesus and statements of His commission that either go beyond or fall short of the Scriptures. As a result, *Heaven* ultimately does a disservice to the believers in its presentation of a false hope of the future, which simultaneously deprives them of the real experiences of Christ in their spiritual walk today.

Extra-scriptural Depictions of Heaven

Heaven claims that the many life-changing visits to a heavenly paradise are "supported with Scripture" (58), yet the vast majority of the narratives contain few verses to substantiate the details of their assertions. Instead, the narratives tend to evoke a place of glory, light, and beauty that is loosely based on verses but without deeper understanding of their significance or conscientious thought to context. In *Heaven's* introduction we are told that stories of these visits will "explode" our ideas about heaven "into fireworks of brilliance and glory in the truth presented in

them” (17). *Heaven* presumes that the notions of heaven contained in the individual stories are supported by Scripture. In reading *Heaven*, however, even the uninitiated can detect the glaring inconsistencies between various individual descriptions of heaven, to say nothing of discrepancies related to the Word. If these individuals have truly spent time in heaven, how can there be contradictory facts in their accounts? These differences call into question not only the validity of these self-proclaimed visits to heaven but also of *Heaven*’s attempt to legitimize them with the Bible. It is not too much to surmise that these inconsistencies stem from a need for these narrators to compensate for the lack of scriptural detail related to a material heavenly realm.

Additionally, and sadly, the shortage of particulars in the scriptural record has emboldened some of these self-declared witnesses of heaven to fashion a physical realm that contradicts God’s Word. In so doing, they have crafted an ethereal paradise in their individual image. Much of the credibility of the stories is tarnished by bizarre depictions of heavenly life that overlap only vaguely in their descriptions. For example, the throne of God, the feature most commonly commented on, is invariably presented as glorious, bright, and wonderful beyond human imagination. However, there are details of various heavenly trips that create doubts in the mind of an unbiased reader as to whether they are even talking about the same thing, including the depictions of Jesus in heaven. Of the ten, at least five individuals describe a direct vision of and even an encounter with Christ.

One narrative presents the following account: “He was about six foot two inches tall. You don’t lose your ethnic or racial origin in Heaven, so He looked Jewish, with an olive complexion. His hair was like some rabbi’s—with curls along the sides of His face” (28). Another account says, “Standing beside me was a fantastically beautiful human figure—it was Jesus. He was slightly taller than I, about six foot” (175). If this account is to be believed, then this “Jesus” should not have possessed an attracting form, majesty, or beautiful appearance (Isa. 53:2). *Heaven* is so assured of its premise that it does not balk at such discrepancies but rather finds room for varying presentations of a heavenly paradise and of meetings with Jesus.

Moreover, there are portions in every story that overstep the bounds of the biblical record. For example, one narrator says, “As I traveled along the street, I found myself in a setting that closely resembled a little Spanish town” (69). Others also portray settings that mirror earthly scenes. At times, *Heaven*’s depictions extend to the ridiculous, such as, “I walked over and picked up the whole bucket and threw the contents at the walls. Suddenly the flowers appeared everywhere and the room was permeated with the sweetest floral aroma I’ve ever smelled”

(30). Another says, “I saw musical notes floating through the air and then go into a person who would burst into song, singing in the spirit” (32). While such fantastical accounts may cheer those in dire need of some existential relief from the unbearable pains in life, a willingness to degrade the Word of God in this regard will doubtlessly disappoint truth-seeking believers, if it does not first insult their intelligence.

There are numerous instances of portions in *Heaven* that contradict Scripture. For example, concerning the description of one sign in Revelation—the street in the New Jerusalem—one account states, “The street that led directly down the middle of the city was perfectly straight with intersecting streets at absolutely perfect right and left angles” (68). Another narrator presents it this way: “Then the Lord took me outside to the town. The town was lined with golden roads” (100). Revelation 21:21, however, speaks of “the street of the city.” The singular form of *street* is confirmed in 22:1, which says, “He showed me a river of water of life, bright as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb in the middle of its street.” Revelation is a book of signs, that is, of symbols with spiritual significances. The one street of gold signifies that walking according to the divine nature is the unique way for God’s people to walk.

John 14:2 has been traditionally used, and *Heaven* is not an exception, as scriptural evidence for a heavenly abode: “In My Father’s house are many abodes; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.” In *Heaven* one individual states that although the Lord Jesus was not “talking about a house or a mansion...[there is] a much greater place in Heaven just for us...Jesus has a place in Heaven just for you” (56-57). A thorough study of this verse in the context of the Gospel of John indicates that the Father’s house is not a piece of heavenly real estate that believers will inhabit forever. John 14:23 presents a crucial revelation: “Jesus answered and said to him, If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make an *abode* with him” (emphasis added). Thus, we see that the many abodes in the Father’s house are personal; that is, they involve persons, who are the believers, rather than a place—physical or otherwise. The Triune God makes His abode in and with the believers, living in and with the believers as His dwelling place. This revelation is confirmed in verse 17, which says, “Even the Spirit of reality, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him; but you know Him, because *He abides with you and shall be in you*” (emphasis added). Hence, within the context of John 14 we can see that the proper interpretation of the Father’s house is that it is not a place but persons.

That God’s dwelling place as well as the believers’ destiny

is not a physical heaven is proved by another verse that *Heaven* quotes and misapplies, Isaiah 66:1. This verse begins, “Thus says Jehovah, / Heaven is My throne, / And the earth the footstool for My feet.” Of this portion, one account in *Heaven* says,

Before the Throne there was an immeasurable number of heavenly creatures giving God praise. He was in the midst of the Throne and connected to the Throne. Where He was, the Throne was there...The Throne was bright and looked like a cloud. (52)

Heaven’s focus on the word *heaven* outwardly objectifies both heaven and the throne of God in verse 1, and it ignores the emphasis in verse 2 on God’s intention to dwell with and in His redeemed and regenerated people. The remainder of verse 1 and the second half of verse 2 say, “Where then is the house that you will build for Me, / And where is the place of My rest?.../ But to this kind of man will I look, to him who is poor / And of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.” The promise of a palatial mansion in the heavens pales in comparison to the truth that God desires to abide in His people as His dwelling place and desires that they would abide in Him as their dwelling place to be the universal mutual abode of God and man for eternity. Witness Lee explains,

The dwelling place God desires to have is a group of people into whom He can enter. God intends to have a dwelling place in the universe that is the mingling of God and man, in which God is built into man and man is built into God, so that God and man, man and God, can be a mutual abode to each other (John 14:2, 20, 23; 15:4; 1 John 4:13). In the New Testament this dwelling place, this house, is the church, which is God’s habitation in the believers’ spirit...The ultimate manifestation of this universal building, this universal house, is the New Jerusalem. In this city God is in man, taking man as His dwelling place, and man is in God, taking God as his habitation (Rev. 21:3, 22). (Recovery Version, Isa. 66:1, note 1)

Rather than making His home in heaven, the Lord in His transforming work as the Spirit is making His dwelling place in the believers’ hearts (Eph. 3:17). His believers are the members of the Body of Christ and abodes in the Father’s house. The Father’s house, the Body of Christ, the bride of Christ, and the New Jerusalem reveal aspects of God’s dwelling with and in His people.

Superficial Commissions from Christ

Half of the narrators’ accounts of visits to heaven speak of a personal meeting with Jesus. Given the private nature of these encounters, the testimonies differ in specifics; nonetheless, each claims that Christ commissioned them with a message for His people on earth. For the most part, these commissions reiterate basic features of the gospel, that is, redemption through the blood of Jesus afforded to believers when they repent, turn back to God, and believe in Jesus Christ. Many are also charged with proclaiming His anticipated second coming, at which time He will bring them to their eternal home. Consider the following examples:

Even though you have been disobedient and haven’t done what I have told you to do, I still love you, and I desire for you to tell My people the glorious things that My Father has made for them...Tell My people I am coming soon. And I love them. (142)

I’m coming back for My people...They’re asleep. They’re at ease. I’m coming as a thief in the night. I’m sending you back to

herald My return. I am coming back for people who make themselves ready, for those who lay aside every sin and get their eyes totally upon Me. I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. (145-146)

I have worked to make salvation available to all...I fellowshiped with the first created man in these gardens—until sin became a reality. Into outer darkness My Father cast the evil one and all those who followed him. They were cast far away from this perfect abode that I have prepared for My bride of faithful believers. The days of creation are numbered...Soon, I will take the heavenly armies that you have witnessed, along with these elders who are here, and go get My people. It will be the happiest time of all eternity. (146)

These meetings with Jesus in heaven allude to the believers’ initial salvation, along with a flawed notion of a heavenly destiny. This suggests that once a sinner repents and accepts Christ, all that is left to do is to enjoy God’s love, stay away from sin, and wait to be extricated from earthly travails and brought to a heavenly paradise either through physical death or at Christ’s second coming. Such teaching demotes the believers’ experience after salvation to a futuristic version of eternal bliss. In such a view, heaven becomes the automatic consequence of salvation. *Heaven* states, “If you do not know Him before

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you die, Heaven will not be your home" (186). Indeed, our salvation is eternally secure based on Christ's redemptive work and our believing into Him. And surely He will return for His bride, composed of His faithful ones who have matured, to rapture her to the heavens for His marriage feast. However, the readiness of the bride does not reflect redemption and forgiveness, because these are not items that those aspiring to be the bride can carry out. Rather, having been redeemed and forgiven through the work of Christ, these ones can make themselves ready only by growing in life unto spiritual maturity (Rev. 19:7-9). This maturation process occurs in the believers' daily walk with Christ in the spirit.

One of the few points of truth that can be gleaned from *Heaven*, though insufficient to recommend it, is its allusion to man's tripartite being. *Heaven* acknowledges that "man consists of three parts—spirit, soul, and body" (186). More importantly, it accurately points out that the spirit "is our contact with God who is a Spirit," that "our soul is our mind and emotions," and that "our body is our 'earth suit'" (186). *Heaven*, however, relegates the human spirit to a faculty that merely substantiates the supernatural, thereby drastically limiting the scope and function of the human spirit in Christian living and experience.

This shortsightedness with regard to the believers' human spirit, which has been regenerated, indwelt, and even mingled with the Spirit to become one spirit (1 Cor. 6:17), exposes one of the crucial shortages in *Heaven's* understanding of the believers' life in Christ on the earth. The New Testament, in particular, emphasizes the believers' enjoyment and experience of Christ, who is the Spirit in their spirit, in their daily living.

Heaven disregards, or rather is ignorant of, the process through which the believers mature. Christ's intention is not limited to rescuing His people from their sufferings into a kingdom of bliss; instead, He is producing a bride through the believers' experience and enjoyment of His resurrection life, especially in the midst of ongoing trials and tribulations. Romans 8:18 confirms this, saying, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the coming glory to be revealed upon us."

The notion that the coming of Christ is merely to extricate the believers from their earthly sorrows and to fulfill their hope of a material paradise exposes the self. *Heaven's* stories are superficial and individualistic. The utopian hope that it presents undervalues and undermines the believers' present, daily experience of Christ, since all hope is placed in a physical place rather than in the person of Christ. Christ as the Spirit today is the limitless supply for His people's needs under every circumstance for their growth in life.

Heaven's ultimate disservice lies in its diversion of a believer's focus away from Christ Himself as the real hope of glory. Colossians 1:27 says, "To whom God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." Today Christ is in His believers as their life and as their person. At His return He will be glorified in them, and they will be glorified in Him.

Christ, who dwells in our spirit to be our life and person, is our hope of glory. When He comes, we will be glorified in Him. This indicates that the indwelling Christ will saturate our entire being that our physical body may be transfigured and conformed to the body of His glory. (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 27, note 3).

Paul's revelation of Christ as the riches of the glory of this mystery and the hope of glory far surpasses any physical grandeur purported to exist in heaven. Furthermore, the work of the indwelling Christ in His believers is infinitely beyond what human imagination can conjure (1 Cor. 2:9). Nevertheless, these riches have been revealed to us through the Spirit for our enjoyment and experience (v. 10). What Christ is accomplishing and the way in which He is carrying it out in this present age are beyond the wildest expectations of believers who have hope only of a material heaven.

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Works Cited

Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Recovery Version of the Bible. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2003. Print.

The New Jerusalem as Bride and Tabernacle

The New Jerusalem will come down as the bride for Christ. This indicates that the New Jerusalem is not a material city; she is a corporate person, the bride. This city will also be the tabernacle of God for His dwelling with man (v. 3). To Christ, this new city will be the bride for His satisfaction; to God, it will be the tabernacle in which He will dwell and through which He will express Himself.

From *Life-study of Revelation* by Witness Lee, p. 677