

REVIEWS

Looking at the Fourth Gospel

I Am the Way: A Spiritual Journey through the Gospel of John, by Philip Wesley Comfort. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994.

Philip Wesley Comfort, an editor for Tyndale and visiting professor of New Testament at Wheaton College and North Park College, presents in *I Am the Way* an interesting, and perhaps significant, study of the Gospel of John. We recognize the importance of this volume and we intend, in the course of our research and writing, to examine it in detail, comparing it with other studies of John. We may also endeavor to review Comfort's other recent book, co-authored with Wendell C. Hawley—*Opening the Gospel of John*—and all future books. What we offer here is a preliminary review based upon a close reading of Comfort's text.

I Am the Way is lucid, well-written, and pleasant to read. The book is scholarly in substance, literary in character, and devotional in tone. Explaining why he has added to the vast material on John, Comfort says that "the Fourth Gospel has been my companion throughout my entire Christian journey" (10). He testifies that "this book has been too precious to me, too close to my life experience" and then reveals that "the Gospel of John has been my spiritual companion for nearly twenty-five years" (10-11). As he describes what he perceives to be "the spiritual journey in the Gospel of John," he includes himself in that journey and encourages the reader to do the same (10). Writing with clarity and warmth, Comfort discloses his intent: "I have done my best to make this work unique and to provide my readers with a new way of looking at the Fourth Gospel" (10).

This "new way" is focused on what Comfort calls "the journey motif" in the Gospel of John (12). "I am convinced," he remarks in the introduction, "that this book takes the reader on a designed journey led by Jesus himself and narrated by John" (11). In Comfort's reading, "John's Gospel depicts three journeys": the journey of the Son of God in becoming a man, in living among men, and in dying and rising to return to the Father; the journey of the disciples who followed Jesus in this journey; and "the journey of all the believers who follow Jesus and the apostles on a spiritual journey that leads to full enjoyment of God" (12). The purpose of such a spiritual journey is "for the disciples to know God the Father through the Son and Spirit," and its

ultimate goal is to bring the believers into a living relationship with the Triune God, and a loving relationship with each other, so that they together can be a corporate testimony to the world of God's grace and Christ's salvation. (12, 20-21)

After enunciating his theme, Comfort leads his reader on a journey through the Gospel of John in twenty-one stages: prologue, the first followers, revealing the new temple and kingdom, following the Savior of the world, hearing the Life-Giver and Judge, giving manna from heaven, journeying with the smitten rock and light of life, presenting the I AM, leading God's people from darkness to light, consecrating a new habitation for God, raising the dead, coming into His glory, serving the believers, preparing the way to the Father, planting a new vine, sending the Spirit of reality, praying for oneness, facing trial, dying on the cross, rising from the dead, and conclusion and epilogue. Comfort's volume concludes with "Postscript: Thoughts for Our Spiritual Journey," where the author muses on "a journey to full maturity," "a journey of suffering," and "a journey into glory" and expresses his longing for the day when we will see the Father's face and "he will wipe away all the tears from our eyes" (185).

Comfort recognizes some important truths which have been neglected or wrongly understood. For instance, he writes about the human spirit, an organ distinct from the soul in nature and in function: "Human beings possess a human spirit, the nature of which corresponds to God's nature, which is Spirit" (62). Holding to the reality of the new birth, Comfort points out that God has given "the divine, eternal life to each believer" in His begetting "many lovely and loving children" who now have "a life-relationship with the Father" (23). Furthermore, Comfort realizes that, according to "the heart's desire of God" to have "many sons...conformed to the prototype, Jesus," regeneration must be followed by transformation (178, 180). Using language reminiscent of others who have emphasized this neglected truth concerning the transformation of the soul, Comfort says, "Transformation involves an inward, metabolic-like renewal of our mind through which our inner man is changed into the likeness of Christ" (179). He continues by saying that "transformation involves an inward, life-imparted change in our essential constitution" (180). In his commentary on John 4, Comfort claims that there is "a profound, even mystical connection between drinking of the Spirit

and worshipping God in the Spirit” (59). In his chapter “Giving Manna from Heaven,” Comfort speaks of eating Jesus as the bread of life:

Jesus was the real bread of God, who came to be the ever-present manna, the ever-present life-giving supply.... Jesus’ death—the shedding of blood—enables people to have eternal life. To eat his flesh and drink his blood is to appropriate, by faith, the meaning of Jesus’ death.... Throughout the discourse Jesus kept urging his listeners to feed on his flesh and drink his blood in order to have eternal life, to dwell in God and be indwelt by him, to live by Jesus, and to live forever. (72-73)

It is particularly significant that Comfort speaks of the Spirit as “the Spirit of the glorified Jesus.” (Chapter five of Andrew Murray’s classic *The Spirit of Christ* bears this title.) In so doing, Comfort calls attention to a crucial clause in John 7:39—“the Spirit was not yet”:

Of course, the Spirit existed; but the Spirit about to be made available through the glorification of Jesus was not yet. In short, the Spirit of the glorified Jesus was not yet available for the believers to partake of....The availability of the Spirit is linked with the glorification of Jesus, for it was after Jesus’ glorification via death and resurrection that the Spirit became available to the believers (see 20:22)....He had to become Spirit so that he could be appropriated (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12). Glorification would be the means through which Jesus would be “pneumafied.”... The revelation of the Lord becoming Spirit through the glorification of resurrection is progressively presented in John’s Gospel. (78-79)

The serious student of the Gospel of John should be grateful to Comfort for bringing this progressive presentation to light.

In *I Am the Way* nothing is more striking than Comfort’s discussion of the Father’s house in John 14:2. Departing from the traditional view that the Father’s house refers to God’s house in heaven, Comfort argues that “the notion of a heavenly mansion seems foreign to the context of John” (123). He continues by saying that Jesus’ going to prepare a place for the disciples in the Father’s house indicates that He Himself is that house, for the Father dwells in Him and He in the Father. A person—the Father—not a place—a heavenly mansion—is the destination:

Then, the way for the disciples to dwell in the Father would be for them to come and abide in the Son. In other words, by coming into the One who was indwelt by the Father, the believers would come simultaneously into the Indweller, the Father....He, as the temple, as the Father’s house, would be the means through which the believers could come to dwell in the Father and the Father in

them....According to John 14:23 each believer becomes an abode of the Father and the Son, and since there are many believers, these must be the many abodes in the Father’s house. (123-125)

This interpretation of the Father’s house and the many abodes surely is correct; it exactly fits both the content and the context of the Gospel of John and is in keeping with the central revelation of the Scriptures concerning God’s purpose and economy. Comfort, however, is not the first to propose such a view, and his analysis, although welcome, is not original. What Comfort calls “the interpretation I have proposed” and “my interpretation” (125) has long been in circulation, albeit in a limited way, and some students of Johannine theology, including this reviewer, have been conversant with it for many years. Therefore, although I accept the interpretation Comfort advances, I feel obliged to point out that it has been advanced by other serious students of the Word.

I Am the Way is helpful in encouraging Christian believers in their pursuit of Christ and in pointing out vital truths in John’s Gospel, and thus it merits careful study. Readers of Comfort’s volume may be interested in two rich and profound studies of the Gospel of John, both written by Witness Lee and published by Living Stream Ministry: *Life-study of John* (1975, 612 pages) and *The Fulfillment of the Tabernacle and the Offerings in the Writings of John* (1991, 590 pages).

Reviewed by Ron Kangas

The “Specter” of Gnosticism

“Trichotomy—A Beachhead for Gnostic Influences,” by Kim Riddlebarger. *Modern Reformation*. July/August 1995, pp. 22-26.

In his contribution to *Modern Reformation*’s issue on Gnosticism, Kim Riddlebarger wishes to unmask Gnosticism as the real danger inherent in a trichotomist view of the human being. The piece is well-written though not well-argued. Mr. Riddlebarger’s thesis is quickly apprehended: The trichotomist view of the human being, held by many modern believers, was also held by the ancient Gnostics; therefore, trichotomy provides a way in for Gnostic influences in the church. In essence he is saying: Gnostics were trichotomists; many modern believers are trichotomists; hence, many modern believers are Gnostics (or, to be fair, suffering from “the Gnostic impulse”(22)). It is somewhat surprising that Mr. Riddlebarger misses the fallacy in this thesis, but we all have had occasion to miss the obvious. What is more surprising is that Mr. Riddlebarger has drawn evidence for his thesis from the wrong sources, as we shall see. What is most disturbing is that this thesis deceives the Christian reader and incites fear without anything resembling ample reason. In

all honesty, I feel that Mr. Riddlebarger just has not given careful enough thought to what amounts to a cleverly devised thesis.

Mr. Riddlebarger defines “the Gnostic impulse” as

a quest for secret knowledge (*gnosis*), and a disparaging of matter, including an aversion to things physical and intellectual, coupled to the notion that religion is essentially a quest for a vaguely defined spirituality attained via a mystical ascent into the heavenlies to encounter God apart from means and a mediator. (22)

Mr. Riddlebarger’s “Gnostic impulse” is not exactly Gnosticism, which among its varied forms holds other principles as central. Thus, from the outset we are being warned about an abstract construct, not a genuine cultural phenomenon. Particularly, in his article Mr. Riddlebarger focuses on the last two of his three identifiers: the aversion to physical and intellectual things, and a spirituality attained through a mystical ascent to God apart from means and mediator. In case we are not sufficiently frightened by the threat of “the Gnostic impulse,” Mr. Riddlebarger finds another association that should make us think twice: “If we adopt the trichotomist understanding of human nature, we inevitably set up the same dualistic conception of reality in which the Gnostic impulse thrives, and which we immediately recognize in the New Age movement” (22).

After making his warnings, Mr. Riddlebarger presents his biblical evidence for dichotomy. First, he correctly shows that according to the Scriptures the material aspect of the human being is not inherently evil, as Gnostics of old held. He also admirably affirms that the human bodies of both Christ and His believers will exist forever in glory and will not, contrary to what some Christians may think, be abolished. Then he proceeds to the immaterial aspect of the human being. He presents quotations from our Lord and excerpts from elsewhere in the New Testament where “soul certainly appears to be synonymous with spirit” (23). His presentation would convince only the convinced, since others have read the same passages more finely and come to the conclusion that in them the Lord and His disciples are making distinctions between soul and spirit. Mr. Riddlebarger’s assertions hardly settle the issue.

Mr. Riddlebarger tells us that “a doctrine is not necessarily false simply because it has a dubious pedigree, but it is important to remember that a doctrine’s pedigree is often times a very good clue as to its source and its ultimate consequences” (23). The pedigree of trichotomy is dubious for Mr. Riddlebarger because it reflects the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle. This evokes the indictment: “The trichotomist notion of human nature [i.e., the human being]

as tri-partite is unmistakably Greek and pagan, rather than Hebrew and biblical” (23). A great deal is assumed here, and a sea of errors, so to speak. Simply because something in Christian truth has analogs in Plato and Aristotle does not necessarily make it pagan and non-biblical. Harnack can find Platonism throughout the New Testament and in the subsequent early history of the church. The Greek models of thought as a way to somehow get a handle on the divine revelation are well-documented by scholarship and well-defended by the early apologists, by the early champions of the Christian truth, and by many modern scholars, like Prestige (*God in Patristic Thought*). As human beings, we will always use human modes of thought to express our understanding of the transcendent mysteries of faith. Mr. Riddlebarger seems to believe that the Hebrew mode of thought is superior for expressing Christian truth, which ironically has been revealed to us in Greek. Has he forgotten that not only was the New Testament written in Greek and thus subject to Greek categories but also that two of the major doctrines of Christian faith, that of the Trinity and that of Christology, were worked out under and by the instrumentality of thoroughly Greek modes of thought? A Triune God described as one *ousia* in three *hypostaseis* and a Christ defined as a hypostatic union of two natures, of one *hypostasis* in two *phuseis*, are about as Greek in conception—and about as orthodox in acceptability—as one can ever find. I am certain that Mr. Riddlebarger would never suggest that we abandon the formulations of Nicaea-Constantinople and of Chalcedon because they are “unmistakably Greek and pagan.”

Trichotomy, according to Mr. Riddlebarger, “has served gnostically inclined Evangelicals quite well by appearing to cover several Biblical bases” (23). First, it allows for the doctrine of the depravity of man. Second, it permits a doctrine of free will. And third, it provides theological justification for Pentacostalism. Knowing the theological persuasions of him and his companions who write *Modern Reformation*, we can expect that only the first of these three biblical bases has any validity in Mr. Riddlebarger’s mind. But if the depravity of man is not necessarily a beachhead for “the Gnostic impulse,” why should we believe, as he implies, that the doctrine of a free will and the Pentacostal phenomenon are?

Mr. Riddlebarger then sets out the arguments advanced by the defenders of trichotomy. To the argument that since God is triune and since human beings are made in the image of God, human beings are also tripartite, having spirit, soul, and body, he answers that the analogy comes not by way of biblical data but by way of crude inference. He forgets, or does not know, that Augustine illustrated the relations of the three in the Trinity based upon the notion that there are analogies between the Triune God and the threefold aspects of His creature (*De Trinitate*, Book XV).

Augustine did not use the analogies to defend trichotomy, to be sure; but an appeal to the analogy between the Triune God and the chief creature that He called into being is not as crude as one may think.

The two main scriptural passages showing trichotomy, 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12, are next reviewed. As with his presentation of the interchangeability of *soul* and *spirit* in the Scriptures, the arguments against taking the plain meaning of these verses are preached to the dichotomist choir. Another choir would justifiably appreciate a preacher with the opposite message. I should call into question, however, the appeal made to the meaning of the Greek word *merismos*, translated “dividing” in Hebrews 4:12. We are told that

the verb [actually *merismos* is a noun] used here...is never used elsewhere in Scripture in the sense of distinguishing between two different things, but is always used when distributing and dividing up various aspects of the same thing (see Heb 2:4; Lk 11:17-18; Mt 27:35; Jn 19:24). (24)

But actually, *merismos* occurs elsewhere only in Hebrews 2:4, where as a plural form it would naturally refer to things in distribution: “distributions of the Holy Spirit.” The other verses cited employ *diamerizo*, which gains its definite notion of “distributing and dividing up various aspects of the same thing” from the compounding of the prefix *dia-* with the verb root *merizo*. Unfortunately, an appeal to the one other New Testament occurrence of *merismos* is hardly support for the disputed meaning, especially when the other occurrence is not grammatically in kind. In the larger context of Greek literature as a whole, *merismos* certainly has the meaning that the trichotomists see in it (see Liddell and Scott). An appeal to the linguistics of Hebrews 4:12, it seems, hurts rather than helps Mr. Riddlebarger’s cause.

In the last two-fifths of his article, Mr. Riddlebarger presents some consequences of trichotomy as exemplified in the teachings of Chuck Smith and Charles Ryrie. He takes issue with the carnal Christian teaching, saying that it “has led to a foothold for the Gnostic impulse” (24). Both Smith and Ryrie teach, based on 1 Corinthians 2:14—3:1, that some persons are soulish, some are spiritual, and some are fleshy. Mr. Riddlebarger identifies the Scofield Reference Bible as the source of this “Gnostic impulse” and shows the parallel between a note on 1 Corinthians 2:14 in the former and a passage from Plotinus. The comparison might be convincing if Plotinus were a Gnostic writer; unfortunately, however, he is not. Plotinus, who lived in the third century, was one of the finer representatives of Neoplatonism, and his ideas were well-respected by some of the great teachers of the fourth century. It is well-known, for example, that Augustine applied notions from Plotinus in his own

theology. Mr. Riddlebarger may complain that this is a small oversight, that whether this is Neoplatonism or Gnosticism, it still is unmistakably Greek and therefore pagan, rather than Hebrew and biblical. Perhaps so, but how effective would his article be if he had to title it as it really should be titled: “Trichotomy—A Beachhead for Greek Influences”? Many of the scholarly community would roll their eyes in mild irritation, and many Christians even mildly educated in the history of doctrine would wonder why such effort is being expended on the obvious. Mr. Riddlebarger, in quoting Plotinus, has not only failed to establish the foothold of the Gnostic impulse in the carnal Christian teaching but has also unwittingly demonstrated that the notion of classes of soulish, spiritual, and fleshy persons, clearly enunciated by the apostle Paul, was not a particularly Gnostic concept. This should not surprise us, for as a syncretistic system Gnosticism borrowed much from other domains of thought. Indeed, good scholars have argued that Gnosticism borrowed from Christianity. Mr. Riddlebarger’s thesis that Gnosticism is making inroads through the carnal Christian teaching is simply unfounded, and the point that he is actually laboring at (whether he knows it or not), that trichotomy and the carnal Christian teaching have analogs in Greek thought, lacks the sensation and degree of alarm that his thesis at first instills.

For obvious reasons, Mr. Riddlebarger does not attempt to refute Paul’s descriptions of “the spiritual man” and “fleshy” men. It is difficult to get around Paul’s equating fleshy men with “infants in Christ.” Because of this, I am ever aware of how much I need to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). As he presents things in his article, I wonder if Mr. Riddlebarger believes that we should grow in Christ, that we should make some progress. Can it be that he feels that being objectively justified before God is the full compass of Christian experience in this age? This somewhat annuls the exhortations of the apostles not to be fleshy and to grow in grace.

Mr. Riddlebarger’s article offers us little insight. He has made a daring claim without providing credible evidence for it. In essence, he has only shouted, “Don’t be trichotomist; Gnostics are trichotomist!” We may be alarmed at the charge, until we pause a moment and notice that the charge is seriously flawed. As he leads us to the chase, we further notice that the old “fox” is not Gnostic at all but at worst simply Greek and not Hebrew, that there was no need for alarm at all. He has led us after that same tired old rabbit that Christian scholars have been chasing for 1700 years and that has done us less harm than irritation. We’ve been falsely roused.

Reviewed by Kerry S. Robichaux

Experiencing God the Old Testament Way

Experiencing God, by Henry Blackaby and Claude King.
Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994.

I wish to acknowledge at the outset that in this review *Experiencing God* will be assessed in light of its applicability to the experience of the Triune God which is according to God's economy revealed in the New Testament. In this book Henry Blackaby presents an impressive catalogue of experiences of God, both his own and those of others of whom he has firsthand knowledge. He has had an unusual ministry in the sense that he has carried it out in an uncommon way—by prayer, by the Lord's leading, and by fulfilling "assignments" given to him by God. This is the impression he gives, and I see no reason not to believe that it is so. His helper, Claude King, has been a writer of Sunday School literature for the Southern Baptist Church and presently is a writer for "The Office of Prayer and Spiritual Awakening" of that same denomination. He puts Henry Blackaby's principles and experience into an acceptable style with a vocabulary directed toward the common believer. He is obviously a convert of Henry Blackaby and gives his own testimony in the preface.

Stated simply, this book is about carrying out the work of God. It is about doing things with God and for God. It is about receiving "assignments" from God and carrying out "assignments" for God. In a sense, *Experiencing God* is Henry Blackaby's testimony. He says in the introduction, "I will share with you the biblical principles by which God has been guiding my life and ministry" (3). He boldly quotes John 7:17: "If anyone wills to do His will, he will know concerning the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself" and presents this as the "fair criteria for [judging] this book as well" (3).

There are some very salutary and positive points contained in *Experiencing God*. Who, for instance, could fail to be impressed with Blackaby's testimony of an association of Southern Baptist Churches in Vancouver, B.C., under his leadership, with only 2,000 members who became burdened to reach over 20,000,000 people at the World's Fair in that city in 1986? With a usual operating budget of \$9,000 and \$202,000 needed to carry out the project, "dependent on prayer and God's provision," they received from Canada, the United States, and other parts of the world \$264,000 the year of the fair. People from all over the world came to assist them, and during the course of the fair they "saw almost 20,000 people come to know and trust Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord" (26-27). Blackaby says, "Only God could have done that," and it is hard not to agree with him.

However, for a book which purports to lead people to "experience God," this volume has some serious, even fatal, shortages. These shortages can be classified under

three categories of what I will call "crises of contextual awareness," a phrase that denotes serious deficiencies regarding the awareness of the spiritual reality revealed in the New Testament.

The First Crisis: Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Experience

Experiencing God is not based on the New Testament revelation. Most of the principles are drawn from the Old Testament, and the key role models are Old Testament characters. (I was anticipating reading *Experiencing God* because the title attracted me. Especially the word *experiencing* aroused my interest, but the imagery on the jacket did not.) The jacket portrays Moses, apparently from a distance, looking at the burning bush, an inappropriate symbol to convey the inward and intrinsic experience of the Triune God revealed in the New Testament. Actually, the jacket exactly represents the essence of the book, which is to experience God in an extrinsic and outward way, with Moses and other Old Testament characters as the dominant role models (32-39).

With *Experiencing God* there is, as I have pointed out, a crisis of contextual awareness. Many Christians are in a crisis of contextual awareness, and instead of lessening this crisis, Blackaby's book deepens it by focusing their attention on the outward acts of God. As Christians they should be in the New Testament revelation, but their way of speaking and writing exposes the fact that they are actually conducting their lives according to Old Testament principles. They really do not know where they are. This is the case with the author of *Experiencing God*. From the message on the jacket to the experiences narrated in the book, the context is outward and extrinsic and therefore Old Testament in nature. It may be asked, "What's wrong with such experiences? After all, the saints in the Old Testament had many experiences of God." This is true, but they were not and could not be the intrinsic experiences unveiled in the New Testament. After the incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the outward, extrinsic, Old Testament way to experience God was changed to the inward, intrinsic, New Testament way to experience the Triune God.

The Second Crisis: No Knowledge or Practice of the Human Spirit

In order to have the New Testament experience of the Triune God, we need to know the human spirit, use the human spirit, and exercise the human spirit. It is difficult to imagine that anyone could write a book on experiencing God without mentioning the human spirit even once, but this is precisely what Henry Blackaby has done. John's Gospel tells us that a regenerated believer is born of the Spirit in his human spirit (3:6). The writings of Paul are

replete with references to the human spirit. He served God in his human spirit (Rom. 1:9); he stressed that Christ, the Spirit, and grace are with the believers' regenerated human spirit (2 Tim. 4:22; Rom. 8:10, 16; Gal. 6:18); and he prayed that the saints might have "a spirit of wisdom and revelation" (Eph. 1:17). This spirit is surely the human spirit regenerated and indwelt by the Spirit of God. With such a spirit we can know God and His economy. When Paul went to Troas for the gospel of Christ and a door for such work was opened to him by the Lord, he testified, "I had no rest in my spirit" (2 Cor. 2:12-13). This indicates that Paul did not carry out his work by outward indicators. Rather, he was a person who lived, walked, and worked in his spirit. Paul further told us that we should pray in our spirit (Eph. 6:18), that the Lord is with our spirit (2 Tim. 4:22), and that we need to exercise our spirit (1 Tim. 4:7). Paul used such terms as *my spirit* (Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 2:13), *our spirit* (Rom. 8:16), *the spirit of man* (1 Cor. 2:11), *his spirit* (5:5), and *your spirit* (1 Thes. 5:23).

The apostle John also emphasized the human spirit. He said four times that when he received the revelation which closes the entire divine economy, he received it in his spirit (Rev. 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). In Revelation John stressed not only the divine Spirit as the sevenfold intensified Spirit for God's intensified move but also our human spirit as the organ for us to cooperate with God and respond to His move. Whereas in their understanding of the Bible many Christians confuse the terms *spirit*, *soul*, *heart*, and *mind*, God does not use these words in a careless and meaningless way. That the human spirit is not the same as the soul or the heart is clear from Hebrews 4:12, where the spirit is divided from the soul, and both are distinguished from the heart.

Blackaby's exhortation to his readers to "watch for times today to worship God" clearly implies an attitude of waiting on the Lord for His outward activities (8). Unfortunately, he never reminds his readers of the Lord's word in John 4:24: "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in [the regenerated human] spirit." Jesus told the woman at the well that "the true worshippers will worship the Father in [their] spirit" (v. 23). How can one be a "true worshipper" if he does not know and exercise his regenerated spirit? How can one help others to have the New Testament experience of the Triune God if he does not encourage them to live and walk in their regenerated spirit? The New Testament clearly indicates that the key to experiencing the Triune God is the regenerated human spirit, yet Henry Blackaby neglects this.

The Third Crisis: No Awareness of the Organic Nature of the Christian Life and the Church Life

The third crisis of contextual awareness in *Experiencing*

God is the lack of awareness concerning the organic nature of both the Christian life and the church life. Two crucial concepts in the New Testament are the believers' organic growth in the divine life and the organic building up of the Body of Christ through the divine life. Both ideas are revealed in 1 Corinthians 3. Planting, watering, and growing are mentioned in verse 6: Paul planted, Apollos watered, and God caused the growth. God agrees with and blesses such an organic work. An organic work is altogether different from the outward work that Blackaby consistently speaks of.

Paul's work in Corinth was organic. His speech and proclamation were not in persuasive or enticing words of human wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:4). Life is in the Spirit, and the Spirit is the reality of life. Instead of giving mere knowledge to the Corinthians, Paul exercised his spirit, and when his spirit was released, the divine Spirit was demonstrated. In this way he sowed the life-seed into the Corinthians, planting something of Christ as life into their spirit. Then Apollos came to water what Paul had planted. It is significant that Paul called the church in Corinth "God's cultivated land" (3:9). If the authors of *Experiencing God* really want their readers to become "church planters," they should take the lead to demonstrate, as Paul did, that what builds up the Body of Christ is the ministry of life. Instead of trying to organize "churches," we need to cooperate with God to plant and water so that He, agreeing with our organic ministry, will grant the growth in life. According to the New Testament, the genuine experience of the Triune God always involves an experience of the life of God. The normal Christian life and the proper church life are organic; that is, they both depend on the daily experience of the life of God. The New Testament emphasizes this, but, sadly, *Experiencing God* ignores it.

It is indeed regrettable that *Experiencing God*, a book which purports to help Christians advance in the experience of God, actually distracts them from the Triune God by focusing their attention on outward, Old Testament manifestations and hinders them from knowing, experiencing, and enjoying the Triune God according to His New Testament revelation. Those who wish to remain Old Testament Christians may benefit from *Experiencing God*, but those who earnestly desire to be New Testament Christians in their experience of the Triune God need to be enlightened to see "the economy of the mystery," the divine economy, "which in other generations [the generations of the Old Testament] was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in spirit" (Eph. 3:9, 5).

Reviewed by Gene Ford