

# REVIEWS

## Approaching the Life-giving Spirit: An Evangelical Perspective

“Life-giving Spirit: Probing the Center of Paul’s Pneumatology,” by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41.4 (December 1998): 573-589.

In a refreshing, honest, and thought-provoking presentation, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, addresses a largely ignored verse in the New Testament: 1 Corinthians 15:45. In his approach, he begins to probe the seminal importance of Paul’s economical description of Christ—the last Adam, the life-giving Spirit. Professor Gaffin forcefully addresses the hesitation within evangelical circles to engage Paul’s utterance by arguing that 1 Corinthians 15:45 is at the center of Paul’s pneumatology. He confronts the theological concerns that inform this hesitation by identifying the life-giving Spirit with the Holy Spirit, and then, for the most part, addresses these concerns simply and effectively. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, he attempts to broaden an appreciation for the significance of Paul’s statement by showing its implications for genuine spirituality in the life and living of the church. Some subtle weaknesses are present in his argumentation, but on balance, the strengths of his article outweigh these weaknesses.

Gaffin begins his examination of 1 Corinthians 15:45, “So also it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living soul’; the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit,” by asserting that the Epistles of Paul present a consistent theology.

In their fully occasional and contingent character Paul’s letters are fully coherent....They evince a unified, consistent body of teaching, a thought-out worldview and in that sense, especially given their relative size and quantity, a theology. (573-574)

With the Spirit occupying a central position in Paul’s theology,<sup>1</sup> Gaffin argues that a verse that links the incarnated, crucified, and resurrected Christ to the Spirit, who is uniquely identified as life-giving, deserves greater attention in the circles of evangelical theology.

The death and resurrection of Christ in their eschatological significance control Paul’s teaching on the work of the Spirit. The preceding comments provide a framework for focusing on the final clause of 1 Cor 15:45: “The last

Adam became life-giving Spirit.” I do so primarily for two reasons. (1) In all of Paul, as far as I can see, there is no assertion about the Spirit’s activity as pivotal, even momentous, as this. (2) On the other hand it does not appear to me to have received the attention it deserves, especially among interpreters with an evangelical commitment. (575)

Even though 1 Corinthians 15:45 is a relatively obscure verse, Gaffin recognizes its importance and elevates it to the center of Paul’s understanding of Christ. The obscurity of this verse in theological studies and discourse is clearly at odds with Paul’s understanding of the role of the Spirit in the ministry of the new covenant as presented in chapter three of 2 Corinthians. In contrast to the old covenant of letters, the new covenant is intrinsically related to the Spirit who gives life for the transformation of the believers into the image of Christ. With the Spirit of the living God as the element and content of Paul’s inscribing ministry (vv. 3, 6), his ministry reveals that the Spirit’s liberating and transforming work in verses 17 and 18 is the result of the operation of the divine life which is given in verse 6. The Christian life is not based on the law of letters, but rather on the law of the Spirit of life which frees us in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:2).<sup>2</sup> *Life*, *Spirit*, and *Christ* are central terms<sup>3</sup> in Paul’s theology. His theology reveals and demonstrates the dispensing of the divine life of the Triune God into the tripartite man, which has been effectuated by the major steps of Christ in incarnation, human living, death, resurrection, ascension, and in His current operation as the life-giving Spirit. In no other verse are these terms so intrinsically linked as in 1 Corinthians 15:45.

Given the centrality of the life-giving Spirit in Paul’s ministry, the relegation of this verse to obscure status is difficult to understand. Gaffin acknowledges this aversion, and he probes the theological concerns at the base of this aversion, just as he probes the center of Paul’s pneumatology. Gaffin points out that the principal concern is a reluctance to identify the life-giving Spirit with the Holy Spirit. The underlying base of this concern, however, goes much deeper because it seemingly places proponents of this identification at odds with orthodox understandings of both the Trinity and Christology, including Paul himself. Consequently, his utterance is often diluted, rationalized, or ignored. Gaffin, however, does not ignore this verse.

## Life-giving Spirit and Holy Spirit

In response to those who suggest that the life-giving Spirit

is not a reference to the Holy Spirit, Gaffin provides an argument that is simple, scripturally based, and remarkably free of theological dissimulation. He states, “A couple of interlocking, mutually reinforcing considerations show, decisively it seems to me, that ‘spirit’ in v. 45 refers to the person of the Holy Spirit” (577). He further states:

The last Adam did not simply become πνεῦμα but “life-giving” πνεῦμα (πνεῦμα ζωοποιοῦν). The “spirit” in view is not merely an existing entity but an acting subject. Paul’s use of this verb elsewhere proves decisive here, especially his sweeping assertion about the new covenant in 2 Cor 3:6: “The Spirit gives life.” In the contrasting parallelism that stamps this passage too, few if any will dispute that “the Spirit” (τὸ πνεῦμα) in v. 6 is “the Spirit of the living God” just mentioned in v. 3—in other words, the Holy Spirit. Again, Rom 8:11 attributes the “life-giving” activity of resurrection to the Spirit (cf. John 6:63). (577-578)

The simplicity of his argument should provoke serious consideration, even if the implications of this identification are troubling to some and cannot be immediately answered to the comfort of their theology. Gaffin provides a service to the truth by simply asking the question of whether or not the life-giving Spirit refers to the Holy Spirit and supports his answer by pointing the reader to relevant passages in Romans 8 and John 6. He also provides a telling comment on the state of the scholarship concerning this verse:

On the one hand, it seems fair to say, across a broad front a substantial majority of commentators and other interpreters who address the issue recognize a reference to the Holy Spirit in v. 45. That may be seen, for instance, in various articles in the recently published *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. At the same time, however, giving rise to a certain overall dissonance or at least ambiguity, virtually all the standard English translations, for whatever reasons, continue to render “spirit” in v. 45 with a small “s.” The most notable exceptions are the Living Bible (and now the New Living Translation) and Today’s English Version. They—correctly, I believe—capitalize “Spirit.” (579-580)

Rather than acknowledging<sup>4</sup> a reference to the Holy Spirit and exploring the implications of this aspect of the divine economy for Christian experience, many who profess to be teachers have hidden this truth from the Lord’s children. Complete exegetical clarity should never serve as a prerequisite for declaring the truth in the Bible. John declares that the Word became flesh, but he does not provide us with a physiological or even metaphysical explanation. The explanation is never as important as the event. For example, a complete understanding of the mystery of the Trinity has never deterred the church from proclaiming this truth.

Paul speaks of the economy of the mystery (Eph. 3:9), and

according to Scripture, the action of giving life is at the core of God’s economic interaction with redeemed humanity. The Spirit gives this life to the believers, and the life that is given is the divine life of the Triune God. First Corinthians 15:45 is at the center of Paul’s revelation of this mystery. As such, God’s intention to impart Himself as life into humanity should be central to an understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Christians are more than people who simply hold and profess a common set of beliefs; Christians are people who have received and are uniquely joined to the Triune God through the operation of the divine life. This life is sourced in the Father, made available through the death and resurrection of the incarnated Son, and given and applied by the Spirit.

**A**voiding Paul’s utterance in 1 Corinthians 15:45 may safeguard academic reputations, but it deprives the church of a fundamental truth that informs, activates, and energizes the new covenant. Embracing the economy of the mystery and exploring its implications, however, will open up many productive avenues for scholarship and experience. Gaffin provides one such example by linking the timing of the last Adam’s becoming the life-giving Spirit to the Lord’s resurrection. “‘The life-giving Spirit’ is not a timeless description of Christ. Rather, he ‘became’ such (ἐγένετο). There is little room for doubt about the time point of this becoming. It is his resurrection or—more broadly, together with the ascension—his exaltation” (578). With this understanding, for example, verses such as Romans 1:3-4 and 1 Peter 1:3 assume greater importance in unveiling the significance of Christ’s resurrection in producing the church as an organic expression of the Triune God. None of these avenues will be explored, however, if there is a general avoidance of verse 45.

### Son and Spirit

If Gaffin is correct in his assessment that a substantial majority of commentators and interpreters recognize a reference to the Holy Spirit in verse 45 but obscure this truth in translation, there must be a hidden source of concern within the theological community. He identifies this concern with the difficulty of reconciling Paul’s statement with orthodox views of the Trinity and Christology.

To find here a reference to the person of the Holy Spirit seems clearly to put Paul at odds, even in conflict, with later Church Trinitarian and Christological doctrine. It apparently makes him, as the historical-critical tradition has long and typically argued, an advocate of a so-called functional Christology that has no place for a personal distinction in deity between Christ and the Spirit. (580)

According to Gaffin, the long-standing, orthodox understanding of the church in regard to the Trinity upholds a personal distinction among the three of the Godhead—

Father, Son, and Spirit. Since 1 Corinthians 15:45 seemingly blurs or even eliminates the distinction between the Son, the last Adam, and the Spirit, the life-giving Spirit, Gaffin believes that many are unwilling to acknowledge a reference to the Holy Spirit in verse 45. Clearly, it is a theologically perilous and misdirected task to deny a personal distinction between Christ and the Spirit, which he associates with James D. G. Dunn's functional Christology.<sup>5</sup> Having raised the issue, Gaffin examines the verse not only within the context of chapter fifteen but also with a backdrop of Paul's clearly enunciated Trinitarian statements in the New Testament. It may seem rather simplistic, but Gaffin's assumption that Paul is not inconsistent in his theology, a theology which is inherently Trinitarian, provides a safety net for his subsequent examination of the economic dynamics that are being highlighted by Paul in verse 45.

It seems to me, however, that both Dunn and many who oppose his view share a mistaken assumption—namely, that to admit a reference to the Holy Spirit in v. 45 necessitates the functional Christology argued by him and others. The way out of this impasse is to recognize Paul's clearly Trinitarian understanding of God....Paul's Trinitarian conception of God is not at issue but is properly made a presupposition in the interpretation of 1 Cor 15:45. It is completely gratuitous, then, to find here a functional Christology that denies the personal difference between Christ and the Spirit and so would be irreconcilable with later Church formulation of Trinitarian doctrine. The scope of Paul's argument, in particular its limits and its salvation-historical focus, need to be kept in view. Essential-eternal, ontological-Trinitarian relationships are simply outside his purview here. As we have already noted, he is concerned not with who Christ is timelessly, eternally, in his preexistence, but with what he "became," with what has happened to him in history, specifically in his resurrection. (581)

Later in the article, he repeats this assertion more succinctly:

It bears emphasizing again that this oneness or unity, though certainly sweeping, is at the same time circumscribed in a specific respect. It concerns the conjoint activity of Christ and the Spirit in giving life, resurrection (=eschatological) life. In this sense, then, the equation in view may be dubbed "functional" or perhaps "eschatological" or, to use an older theological category, "economic" (rather than "ontological"), without in any way obliterating the distinction between the second and third persons of the triune God. (582)

Given his argument that 1 Corinthians 15:45 is consistent with Paul's Trinitarian theology, Gaffin creates a certain expectation for a consistent, yet simple explanation of how

this verse can fit into orthodox theology. The article attempts to address this self-imposed expectation, but it is here that it imperceptibly stumbles.

It is one thing to show that v. 45 is not a source of Trinitarian confusion but another to honor the terms in which Paul expresses himself here....Here moreover the focus, more pointedly than anywhere else in Paul, is the meaning of his resurrection (and ascension) for the relationship between Christ and the Spirit. In context two closely related aspects are in view: (1) Christ's own climatic transformation by the Spirit (he is the first to receive a "spiritual body"), and (2) along with that transformation his unique and unprecedented reception of the Spirit. The result is an intimacy, a bond between them that surpasses what previously existed. The result in fact is a new and permanent equation or oneness that is appropriately captured by saying that Christ has become the Spirit. (581-582)

The article's attempt to "honor" the distinction between the Son and the Spirit ultimately concludes on a weak note, a note that basically relegates Paul's utterance in verse 45 to the status of metaphor. In effect, the life-giving Spirit is only a state of heightened intimacy between Christ and the Spirit that is "appropriately captured by saying that Christ has become the Spirit." The article reduces this intimacy even further by suggesting that the economic utterance in verse 45 is but a unique restatement of evangelical theology's traditional understanding of the Spirit as the "vicar" of Christ (583). In many respects, the article ultimately succumbs to the same theological concerns that it attempts to alleviate. Gaffin's foray into Paul's pneumatological center, however, is so necessary, so honestly engaged, and so perilous, given the evangelical biases it confronts, that it is difficult to fault him for his deft retreat into safer waters.

When discussing boundaries of distinction and identity between the Son and Spirit, any probing must be conducted with a healthy respect for both the mysteries in God's economy and the economy of the mystery. Faith does not require explicit understanding, and Gaffin's overwrought effort to honor Paul's expression in this article, perhaps spurred on by a perceived need to reconcile verse 45 with the tenets of evangelical theology, only undermines his thoughtful probing. Avoiding such an attempt certainly would have left him open to accusations of scholarly dissimulation, but it would not have put him at odds with a spirit of faith that is willing to speak what it hears and believes (Rom. 10:17; 2 Cor. 4:13). Christians are not only people of life, but also of faith, and in this stage of our experience, we simply cannot know in full, even though we are known in full (1 Cor. 13:12). As stated earlier, explanations are never as important as events in the scriptural presentation of the economy of God. Alternatively expressed, *how* never takes precedence over *why*. Even if we

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could adequately explain how Christ became or now operates as the life-giving Spirit, we would not necessarily participate in this operation. If, on the other hand, we believe that the last Adam, Christ, has become the life-giving Spirit, we will exercise ourselves unto godliness by developing our intrinsic, organic relationship with the Lord to whom we are joined as one spirit (1 Cor. 6:17). Rather than merely appreciating the judicial aspects of our salvation, we will experience the organic aspects of our salvation.

If there is another source of the article's imperceptible retreat in its attempt to honor the terms in verse 45, I suspect it is a view of the Trinity that is based solely on distinction rather than on distinction but not separation. When distinction is emphasized to the point of separation among the persons of the Trinity, a subtle and unspoken form of tritheism can result. Orthodox theology does not allow for separation even though it stresses distinction. In addition to eternally coexisting as Father, Son, and Spirit, the three of the Trinity also eternally coinhere. The mutual perichoresis among the three of the Trinity is evident even in the distinct actions of the three of the Trinity.<sup>6</sup> It is wrong to view the distinct actions of the persons of the Trinity as purely separate actions. If this view is implicitly operative, as I believe it is in much of the muted, evangelical aversion to verse 45, the consternation caused by this seeming confusing is more than understandable, for how can the distinct and separate second of the Trinity become the distinct and separate third of the Trinity without violating an "orthodox" understanding of the Trinity that is based solely on distinction. If, on the other hand, our view of the Triune God, both essentially and economically, is informed by a view of an eternally coexisting and coinhering Triune God, it is easier to recognize the misdirected nature of this consternation and focus instead on the positive implications of verse 45 on the life and experience of the church.

### Life-giving Spirit and Experience

To his credit, Gaffin relates the life-giving Spirit to spiritual experience that is uniquely the product of our being joined to the Lord and of our participation in the eternal life of God by our initial and continual receiving of the Spirit (Gal. 3:2, 5). Thus, he demonstrates that more is at stake than the clarification of a doctrinal conundrum. Indeed, it is our experience of the economy of God, which is intrinsically related to our experience of the life-giving Spirit that is at stake.

The resurrection life of the believer in union with Christ is not only future but present (e.g., Rom 6:2-6; Gal 2:20; Eph 2:5-6; Col 3:1-4). Christ, as resurrected and ascended, is already active in the Church in the life-giving, resurrection power of the Spirit. And that activity is

rooted in whom he has become and now is: "the life-giving Spirit." (579)

Without such a view, it is easy to deviate and fixate on other "manifestations" of the Spirit—signs and wonders, prosperity, ethics, self-improvement, etc.—and miss the vital component of Christian experience—the operation of the divine, resurrection life within the believers. This operation begins with the regeneration of the human spirit with the divine life, continues with the transformation of the soul through the increase of the divine life, and culminates with the redemption of the body through the saturation of the divine life at the coming of the Lord. Gaffin acknowledges that much of evangelical piety is missing this vital component.

If we move on now to relate the preceding reflections on Paul's theology to the life of the Church today, this state of affairs confronts us: The Holy Spirit and eschatology, simply inseparable for Paul and at the very heart of his gospel, remain virtually unrelated in traditional Christian doctrine and evangelical piety...How many Christians grasp that in union with Christ, the life-giving Spirit, the Christian life in its entirety is essentially and necessarily resurrection life? How many comprehend that in terms of Paul's fundamental anthropological distinction between "the inner" and "outer man" (2 Cor 4:16), between "heart" and "body," believers at the core of their being will never be any more resurrected than they already are? (585)

Ultimately, the Triune God reveals Himself for our experience rather than just our evaluation, and the Bible honors this intention, this heart's desire, by revealing the Triune God more in the way of economy than in the way of systematic theology. First Corinthians 15:45 displays this tendency, and Gaffin appropriately identifies it as the cornerstone of Paul's "entire teaching on the Holy Spirit and the Christian life" (584). This is refreshing and ultimately elevates this article out of the realm of the often convoluted wranglings of theologians that only give rise to doubtful disputations. Even with the caveats mentioned above, there is much in Gaffin's article that deserves thoughtful consideration and further study.

*by John Pester*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>There are numerous verses that undergird this point. Two passages are helpful in this context. Second Corinthians 5:16, which says, "So then we, from now on, know no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him so no longer," indicates that even though our focus must remain on Christ, our knowing of Christ must progress beyond the outward and objective experiences of the disciples in the days of His flesh to an inward and subjective knowledge that has been made possible because of

His post-resurrection status as the life-giving Spirit. Galatians 3:1-2 indicates that while Paul portrayed the crucified Christ to the Galatians, they received the Spirit out of the hearing of faith. Witness Lee succinctly comments on this verse:

When the believers believe into Christ, they receive the Spirit. It is a serious misunderstanding to consider Christ as separate from the Spirit. At the time of regeneration we believed into Christ, and we also received the Spirit and were sealed with the Spirit (Eph. 1:13). At that very moment an organic union took place—we were grafted into the Triune God (Rom. 11:17), and the Spirit as the pledge (Eph. 1:14) became the ultimate blessing of the gospel to us (v. 14). After this, receiving the Spirit is a lifelong, continuous matter. God is supplying the Spirit to us continuously (v. 5). (Recovery Version, Gal. 3:2, note 1)

While Christ is the content of our experience, our experience of Christ is possible only because of the availability and application of the Spirit.

<sup>2</sup>For a fuller examination of the law of the Spirit of life, see “The Working of the Law of the Spirit of Life to Dispense the Life of the Triune God into the Tripartite Man” by Ed Marks in *Affirmation & Critique*, IV.2 (April 1999): 14-24.

<sup>3</sup>See Romans 8:2, 9-11; John 6:63; 7:38-39; 14:17-19; Revelation 2:7.

<sup>4</sup>While it is difficult to readily acknowledge that the life-giving Spirit refers to the Holy Spirit, theologians would do well to consider the consequences of avoiding or, more perniciously, denying this identification. If the life-giving Spirit is not a reference to the Holy Spirit, then there are two Spirits in the divine economy who can give life, the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45) and the Spirit who gives life (John 6:63; Rom. 8:2). While the former consideration may seem troubling, the latter consequence is heretical.

<sup>5</sup>Although Gaffin fails to mention it, those who accept, rather than explain away, Paul’s words in 15:45 and in 2 Corinthians 3:17, “The Lord is the Spirit,” also face the possibility of being labeled modalists. Modalism, an ancient heresy, asserts that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not eternally coexisting and coinhering, but rather three successive manifestations of God, that is, three successive modes of one God. First Corinthians 15:45 can contribute to such a view only if one perceives it to be a description of the Triune God in His essential being rather than in His economic activity. As Gaffin correctly points out, however, 1 Corinthians is neither “a timeless description of Christ” (578), nor are “essential-eternal, ontological-Trinitarian relationships” within the purview of Paul’s utterance (581).

<sup>6</sup>For a fuller examination of the distinct but not separate operation of the Divine Trinity in the divine economy, see “The Divine Trinity in the Divine Economy” by Kerry S. Robichaux in *Affirmation & Critique*, IV.2 (April 1999): 37-44. The article develops the premise that “the three operate inseparably to manifest any one of the three distinctly, and in every action of one the three are understood to be operating simultaneously” (40).

## “Holy Pride” and Human Potential

*Turning Hurts into Halos and Scars into Stars*, by Robert H. Schuller. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999.

Written by the self-proclaimed “father of possibility thinking” (30), *Turning Hurts into Halos and Scars into Stars* (hereafter, *Hurts*) is a religious self-help, self-improvement, and self-cultivation book. Unashamedly teaching and advocating “holy pride” (153) and devoted to the “development of human potential” (223), *Hurts* is intended “for every living human being” (xii) and is designed to promote “possibility thinking” (16), a method of thinking that is supposed to enable the reader to “become a goal-setting, goal-managed, and dream-driven person” (96). The thesis of this “feel good” tome is simple: “All hurts can be turned into halos” (xii). “Each and every hurt can become a halo...There is a halo in every hurt, and I intend to help you find yours” (18). “God is able to turn any hurt—even those caused by our own selfishness and sin—into a halo!” (16).

Since this is a self-help book, the reader is reminded, “Only you can change yourself” (18). Those who change themselves, we are informed, are in “the process of evolving into humble humans” (56), even though they are also “heroes” and “beautiful people” (30, 2). Those who would undergo this evolution are advised to follow a number of cute aphorisms: “You’ll be spared from becoming a complainer and become an explainer” (xiii); “Your cross will turn into your crown” (67); “Be slow to take the blame, but be quick to take aim” (89); “Your hurt can change you from a zero to a hero” (103); “Say ‘hello’ to a halo” (141); “Your good luck was really your good Lord” (172).

As indicated by the blurbs on the back cover, *Hurts* is highly praised by public figures such as the agnostic Larry King (see pp. 216-221), who says, “Robert Schuller’s newest book, *Turning Hurts into Halos and Scars into Stars*, is his best ever. He brilliantly shows how you can turn minuses into pluses—and it works.” If King’s comments are any indication, *Hurts* will be well-received by the world (1 John 4:5). However, *Hurts* should not be taken seriously by seeking Christians who want to be saturated with the divine truth in the Word of God and to live a life that magnifies Christ for the building up of the Body of Christ.

*Hurts* springs from a particular experience of the author, and it vividly recounts many experiences of anguish and profound loss. It is not the object of this critical review to comment on the personal experiences related in the book or to discuss anyone’s life or ministry. Only the Lord is qualified to assess the ultimate significance of any life or any instance of hurt or suffering. My only concern is to

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examine the theology woven into a fabric of *Hurts*, a theology that in many respects is deformed, humanistic, self-centered, superficial, deficient, and erroneous.

### An Unbalanced View of God

*Hurts* presents an unbalanced, incomplete, and superficial view of God. In *Hurts* God is “the greatest idea ever to enter the human consciousness” (67). In *Hurts* God is “some superior spiritual intelligence that is good and beautiful” (221). In *Hurts* God is “the Creative Genius behind this universe,” the One who sends “His signs and signals” of “redemptive ideas, constructive dreams, and creative concepts into human minds” (79). In *Hurts* God is the “Eternal Super Spirit” who is inside everyone, believer and unbeliever alike (93). In *Hurts* a natural sense of aliveness can be the very presence of God within us, and whatever stimulates this sense of aliveness could be a message from God. Therefore, we are told that we should “listen to the positive ideas, moods, emotions, impulses, memories, and mental assumptions that are constantly entering” our consciousness (94). In *Hurts* “God is alive. Alert. Energetic. Aggressive. God is on the go!...He is sending His spiritual signals into your consciousness. This is God you are experiencing” (132-133). In *Hurts* we read of “that Eternal Creative Holy Spirit we call God” (141). In *Hurts* God is the One who believes in us, even if we are atheists; thus, we are the object of God’s faith, those in whom He believes (172). In *Hurts* one’s “good luck” is really one’s “good Lord” (172); hence, luck and God are equated.

Is the God of *Hurts* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? No! Is the God of *Hurts* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? No! Is the God of *Hurts* the eternal, co-existing, coinhering Father, Son, and Spirit? No! Is the God of *Hurts* the God of righteousness, holiness, and glory, the sovereign Lord of all? No! Is the God of *Hurts* the processed and consummated Triune God revealed in the New Testament? No! In actuality, the God of *Hurts*, who supposedly lives in everyone, is a spirit who is blending into the natural human personality (133) and is therefore indistinguishable from the natural human soul with its ideas, moods, and impulses. Moreover, the God of *Hurts* is the God we can visualize, the God we can see in our mind and in our imagination (179). The God of *Hurts* is not God as He is in Himself or as He has revealed Himself in the Bible as the written Word and in Christ as the living Word. The God of *Hurts* is not the God of the Bible but a God imagined by the creative mind of the natural man.

### The Jesus of *Hurts*

I am saddened by the portrait of Jesus in *Hurts* and can bear only to make a brief comment. Who is the Jesus of *Hurts*? Yes, He is the One who died for our sins and rose again, but this is not the emphasis. In *Hurts* the emphasis

is on Jesus as the leader of a religious movement (35), as the author’s Best Friend (53), as “the most beautiful Person of all time” (54), as “my holy hero” (57), as “the greatest religious thinker and leader of all time” (140). Paul could speak of Jesus Christ as the embodiment of the fullness of the Godhead (Col. 2:9) and he preached the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel (Eph. 3:8). John could speak of Jesus as the One whose face shone as the sun shines in its power and as the One before whose feet he fell as dead (Rev. 1:16-17). But in *Hurts* we have Jesus as our Friend and hero and as the most beautiful Person. In *Hurts* the human self is given much more attention than the wonderful Christ, the Lord of all.

### A Mistaken View of the Cross

Early in *Hurts* we are told, “This book is about the Cross” (12). The reader should not suppose, however, that the cross described in *Hurts* is the cross revealed in the New Testament. In sharp contrast to the Word of God, *Hurts* equates the cross with any form of human pain, misery, adversity, suffering, and tragedy. We are assured that God “has given all hurting human beings the freedom to choose to turn their crosses into crowns, their hurts into halos” (15). Hence, a cross is a hurt, and to hurt is to experience the cross. Since everyone on earth is hurting, it follows, according to the theology in *Hurts*, that everyone is bearing the cross. In the view espoused in *Hurts*, any hurting person, even an atheist, is bearing the cross.

Such a view of the cross is natural, religious, and contrary to the truth in the Scriptures. According to the divine revelation in the Word of God, the cross is not merely a matter of suffering—the cross is mainly a matter of termination, of death to the self. To experience the cross is to die. Knowing this from experience, Paul could say, “I am crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live” (Gal. 2:20). The “I” does not simply suffer; the “I” dies. The “I” is crucified, terminated. To suffer a hurt without being put to death by the cross may be an experience of misery, but it surely is not an experience of the cross. “If we take up the cross, will we but suffer pain? / Nay, if we bear the cross, be sure that we will die! / The meaning of the cross is that we may be slain; / The cross experienced the self will crucify” (*Hymns* 568).

On the cross the Lord Jesus died, and when the cross is applied to us, we die. The self may “hurt,” but that hurt has nothing to do with the cross unless the self is slain, crucified, put to death. Furthermore, the Lord Jesus has told us clearly that bearing the cross is related to denying the self. “If anyone wants to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me” (Matt. 16:24). To bear the cross is not simply to suffer; to bear the cross is to remain under the killing of the death of Christ for the terminating of the self. In *Hurts* what is called the cross is related

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to the developing of the self and to the realizing of human potential. In the Bible the cross is related to denying the self and to doing the will of God for the glory of God.

### Error concerning God's Purpose in Creating Humanity

*Hurts* has some strange notions about God's purpose in creating humanity. "Humans were designed by God to be His angels on planet earth" (16). The emphasis in *Hurts*, however, is not on being angels but on becoming wonderful, positive-thinking persons. "It's His strategy," the book claims regarding God, "to shape us into maximum personhood by molding us into positive-thinking individuals" (55). If we become such individuals, *Hurts* asserts, God has achieved His goal. "God has succeeded! He has achieved His glorious goal—to make you into a true person, a trusting human, a powerful spiritual being" (67). God's purpose is thus "to evolve this animal called man into a fully developed creature called a spiritual human being" (222). From this we see that the purpose of the God of *Hurts*—the ultimate Possibility Thinker—is to populate the earth with a multitude of possibility thinkers who can pursue their own dreams, fulfill their own goals, unleash the power of their own potential, and evolve into fully developed creatures. "Now," the reader is advised, "you will get a new dream. You'll become a goal-setting, goal-managed, and dream-driven person!" (96).

This may be God's purpose according to *Hurts*, but it is not God's purpose according to God. Romans 8:28-29 indicates that God's purpose is to have many sons conformed to the image of the firstborn Son of God. These many sons are the many members of the Body of Christ (12:4-5), which will consummate in the New Jerusalem, the ultimate, consummate, and eternal corporate expression of God in Christ. We were created for this (Gen. 1:26), we were saved for this (2 Tim. 1:9), and now we are being transformed for this (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). God's purpose is not that natural human beings evolve into fully developed creatures. God's purpose is to have many redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified sons who, possessing the life and nature of God through regeneration, are His corporate expression for eternity. God's focus is therefore not on the human self with its dreams and goals; God's focus is on the outworking of His economy to fulfill the desire of His heart to have a corporate expression of Himself in Christ.

### "Holy Pride"

*Hurts* advocates the development of what it calls "holy pride," openly encouraging its readers to become persons of whom "God is proud" (144, 153, 155, 157). "God's pride is showing" (156) whenever one wears his or her "halo," the product of one's self-transformation into a beautiful person with a spiritual aura. "The spiritual aura

that you sense surrounding some special soul marks the presence of a heavenly Father who is proud of how one of His children is turning a hurt into a halo and a scar into a star" (153).

In *Hurts* pride is not only holy—it is healthy. "Healthy pride lets your faith give birth to strong self-respect" (176). "Dynamic faith will make you proud of who you are" (177). Exhibiting this "healthy pride," the writer of *Hurts* declares, "I'm proud of who I am." "I'm proud of my church" (emphasis added). "I'm proud of my work" (176-177).

According to *Hurts*, since pride can be "holy" and "healthy," pride is not always a sin. "Don't buy into the concept so many religions teach—that pride is always a sin. That's wrong" (176). The reader might protest, saying, "But Proverbs 16:18 says, 'Pride goes before destruction.'" Claiming insight into what "the Bible intends to teach," *Hurts* has a ready reply: "A better translation would be, *Egotism* always precedes the fall" (177). By replacing the biblical word *pride* with *egotism*, *Hurts* gives room to its notion of holy and healthy pride.

This is contrary to the pure and clear words of Scripture. "When pride comes, then comes dishonor" (Prov. 11:2). "A man's pride will bring him low" (29:23). "The haughtiness of the ordinary man will be humbled, / And the loftiness of the men of distinction will be abased; / But Jehovah alone will be exalted in that day" (Isa. 2:17). "Jehovah of hosts has purposed it, / To defile the pride of all beauty" (23:9). "But Jehovah will abase his pride" (25:11). "He is able to abase those who walk in pride" (Dan. 4:37). "Not a new convert, lest being blinded with pride he fall into the judgment suffered by the devil" (1 Tim. 3:6). "He is blinded with pride, understanding nothing" (6:4). "Every one who is proud in heart is an abomination to Jehovah" (Prov. 16:5). "Jehovah of hosts will have a day / Over everything proud and lofty" (Isa. 2:12). "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 5:5). The concepts of holy pride and healthy pride are alien to the Bible, and we embrace them at great risk to our relationship with the Lord and to our spiritual life. In the light of the Word, the notions of holy pride and healthy pride, strongly promoted in *Hurts*, must be condemned, rejected, and repudiated.

### Self-development versus Transformation

*Hurts* is about self-improvement; it is a book designed "to help you become a better person" (25). According to *Hurts* God's grace is "His strategy to shape us into maximum personhood by molding us into positive-thinking individuals," into those who "become a bigger, better, and more spiritually mature person" (55). In the words of *Hurts* we are "on the path to becoming healthy and



helpful, religious and scientific creatures” (56). The book instructs us to ask of God, “*How* will You help me to become a better person through my pain?” (61). The goal of *Hurts* is to teach us “to live an emotionally healthy and happy life” (108) and thereby have stars instead of scars in our crown (120). Better persons, maximum personhood, positive-thinking individuals—this is the goal of the self-development strategies outlined in *Hurts*.

What does all this have to do with God’s eternal purpose as revealed in the Scriptures? Nothing. Self-development is incompatible with God’s full salvation revealed in the Bible. It is not God’s desire that we evolve into “better persons” but that in the divine life and nature we grow into matured sons. The Father’s intention is to lead many sons into glory for the fulfillment of His good pleasure to have a corporate expression of Himself in Christ (Heb. 2:10; Eph. 1:5). Sonship involves regeneration, transformation, conformation, and glorification, all of which are aspects of the organic aspect of God’s complete salvation. Instead of helping us to make ourselves into better persons, God is leading us through transformation and conformation into glorification. Instead of the self-development and self-cultivation proclaimed in *Hurts*, the believers in Christ need the transformation of the soul through the renewing of the mind (Rom. 12:2), a transformation into the image of the firstborn Son of God from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18).

**T**he program of self-development taught in *Hurts* is contrary to God’s economy and is both a counterfeit and a replacement of God’s goal in His salvation in life (Rom. 5:10). The Word of God teaches self-denial through the cross and transformation through the Spirit, but *Hurts* teaches self-development through self-effort. One can take the way of self-improvement taught by *Hurts* or the way of transformation taught by God, but one cannot take both ways, for they are mutually exclusive. Any genuine believer in Christ who practices the procedure of becoming a “better person” outlined in *Hurts* will only delay the process of transformation in the divine life.

### Faith and the Development of Human Potential

In *Hurts* faith is related not primarily to God but to the development of human potential. The book assures us, “Believe that, with all your positive-thinking faith, you’ll be able to handle the worst!” (95). “Faith helps you mature and motivates you to think for yourself” (173). For this purpose, we are told, “You need to choose a faith that makes you proud of who you are” (176). “Being a believer...brings with it unlimited positive possibilities” and enables us to “tap into the hidden powers that total commitment releases” (217). If we have this kind of possibility-thinking faith, we will be “shaped into a person

with a mental attitude that’s open to countless creative options!” (217).

*Hurts* goes on to define faith in terms of achieving human potential: “Faith is the fulfillment of spiritual facilities designed and engineered to evolve this animal called man into a fully developed creature called a spiritual human being” (221-222). “Faith is the basic engineering principle in the ultimate creative development of human personality” (222). “Without the empowerment of this faith engineering principle, our human imaginations may never envision their awesome potential” (223). “Life without the faith principle limits the development of human potential” (223). *Hurts* then proceeds to misuse and misapply John 10:10, mishandling a verse which speaks of the life which is Christ Himself (11:25; 14:6; 1 John 5:11-12) and then using this verse to promote the unlimited development of the natural human life and the cultivation of the self. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that when *Hurts* quotes Psalm 23, it does so in a self-centered way, emphasizing not the person and work of the Lord as the Shepherd but *I, Me, and My* (232-233). In contrast to the Bible, where faith is related to God and to God’s economy (Mark 11:22; 1 Tim. 1:4), faith in *Hurts* is related to the self, to holy and healthy pride, and to human potential. In effect, the gospel preached in *Hurts* is, “Be all that you can be through possibility thinking.”

At this juncture we can articulate the central message of *Hurts*—the evolution of the self and the unhindered development of human potential. The goal of *Hurts*, with all its halos instead of hurts and stars instead of scars, is not the will of God or the purpose of God or the economy of God or even the person of God. The goal of *Hurts* is the ultimate and consummate development of the self, whereas the goal of God in His economy is the fulfillment of His heart’s desire concerning His beloved Son.

The message of *Hurts*, a book centered on the self and its development, may be summarized this way: “I’m proud of who I am” (176). The message of the Bible, a book centered on God and His economy, may be summarized this way: “This is My Son, the Beloved, in whom I have found My delight” (Matt. 3:17). Instead of being proud of who we are, we should be one with the Father in finding our delight in His beloved Son. We are here not for the self and its potential; we are here for God and His economy. The choice before us is clear—the development of the self for the glory of the self or the fulfillment of God’s economy for the glory of God. May the self be denied and may God be glorified in Christ Jesus, our Lord!

*by Ron Kangas*

### Works Cited

*Hymns*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1988.