

REVIEWS

“Thinking Theologically”

The Mystery of God’s Will: What Does He Want for Me?
by Charles R. Swindoll. Nashville: Word Publishing,
1999.

The Mystery of God’s Will: What Does He Want for Me? (hereafter *Mystery*) has a dual focus: the mysterious nature of God’s will and the need of believers to recognize this mystery as they struggle to learn what God wants for them individually. The central thought of *Mystery*—that God’s ways are inscrutable and that obeying God is often difficult—is developed through the book’s twelve chapters in a two-part structure. Part one, “The Buffetings of God’s Will,” speaks of God’s sovereignty, of God’s decretive will and His permissive will, and of biblical principles related to knowing and doing God’s will. Part two, “The Blessings of God’s Will,” speaks of God’s mercy, immutability, and holiness, of the opening and closing of “doors” in our lives, and of the need to “think theologically” regarding God’s mysterious will. This part of *Mystery* also encourages us to realize that instead of trying to understand God’s will according to human logic, we should simply trust God, enjoying relief, relaxation, and freedom from stress for the rest of our lives. The twelve chapters (six in each part) are framed by the introduction, which sounds forth the theme of mystery, and by the conclusion, which proclaims that, from the human perspective, the will of God is a mystery and then encourages the reader to believe in this mystery and live according to it.

Mystery has a personal tone and intention. Regarding the personal tone, the dedication page speaks of “turbulent, soul-searching months” and of recent years “marked by times of uncertainty and mystery,” indicating that *Mystery* is the issue of genuine, even painful, experience. Regarding the personal intention, the author’s words on the back cover are worthy of attention:

I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who hasn’t struggled with the desire to know God’s will. The problem is, this struggle often involves a great deal of confusion and worry. That’s why this book has been so important to me personally. I wrote *The Mystery of God’s Will* in hopes of clarifying the confusion and putting people at ease.

Claiming to “have come to a new understanding of God’s will” (ix) and focusing on “the mysterious, vague, and disturbing side of obedience” (xi), the author tells us clearly

of his intention to write of “the mysterious ways of God’s will...It is these mysterious, surprising, and, yes, often distressing aspects of God’s will that I intend to address in the following pages” (x). “If nothing else,” the reader is informed, “I hope this book will give you permission to confess, ‘This is beyond my ability to understand. It’s a mystery’” (xi).

Mystery, therefore, is the central theme of *Mystery*; the secondary theme, as the full title reveals, is “what does He want for *me*” (emphasis added). This secondary theme is obviously centered on the needs of individual believers and on what God has planned for their lives. On the one hand, the book is devoted to the mystery of God’s will; on the other hand, it is dedicated to things involved with *me* and *my*, that is, to a study of God’s will that, contrary to the Bible, is personal and individual to the point of being individualistic. The strength of *Mystery* is related to its awareness of the element of mystery in God’s way of carrying out His will; the weakness is related to its preoccupation with *me* and *my* at the expense of the New Testament emphasis on the Body of Christ, the corporate expression of the Triune God.

The Mystery of His Will

The theme of mystery is articulated clearly and developed thoroughly from the first page to the last. In brief, the message of *Mystery* is that God’s will is mysterious and inscrutable, and we need to accept this fact and deal with it. This is what the author’s years of experience have led him to believe. “The longer I live,” we are told, “the more I believe that one of the most profound subjects in the Christian life is the will of God. The deeper we dig into it, the more we realize how little we know” (4). On the one hand, we are told that God created us to do His will and that He wants us to know and understand what His will is (103). On the other hand, we are directed to “this conclusion: Doing the will of God is rarely easy and uncomplicated. Instead, it is often difficult and convoluted. Or, back to my preferred term, it is *mysterious*” (57). “In fact, more often than not, *God’s will is downright humanly illogical*” (204). This message is strongly stated at the end of *Mystery*: “Having walked with Him now for over fifty years, I’ve finally worked up the courage to say it publicly, loud and clear: God’s will—from our finite, human standpoint—is a mystery. That’s right, M-Y-S-T-E-R-Y” (216).

In developing the idea of mystery and in undertaking what

is alleged to be “a serious study of the will of God” (4), the book makes particular use of the words *unfathomable* and *inscrutable*. God’s nature, God’s plan, and God’s ways are all unfathomable, and the way God works is inscrutable. “So much of the confusion we encounter in life goes back to our not understanding God and how He does His inscrutable work in our lives” (ix). According to this volume, God’s will is “called God’s inscrutable plan” (216). “*This subject is inscrutable*” (6). Sounding a tone of pastoral authority, *Mystery* says of God’s inscrutable plan, “I suggest it’s time we stopped trying to unscrew it. Face it. It’s beyond us. So? Deal with it. That’s my advice, plain and simple” (216).

The theme of mystery is closely related to the exhortation to train ourselves to “think theologically” (17). When we think theologically, “our focus turns away from ourselves, removing us from a self-centered realm of existence and opening the door of our minds to a God-centered frame of reference, where all things begin and end with Him” (17). The reader is then urged to think theologically about the decreed will of God—God’s sovereign, determined, immutable will—and the permissive will of God—what God allows but does not decree. *Mystery* goes on to argue that to think theologically (which is the same as thinking biblically) requires one to confess that God’s mysterious plan defies human logic and to cease all efforts of trying to make it humanly logical. To think theologically is to train our mind to apply Romans 8:28 to our human situation: “If you’re going through a trial, go through it theologically. Train your mind to acknowledge God’s hand in *whatever* it is you’re living with” (212). The result of doing this, we are informed, is a peaceful life free of stress: “Do you realize what a peaceful life you can live if you decide to live like this? Do you realize how relaxed you can be, how free of stress?” (206). *Mystery* proceeds to advise us theologically and to counsel us theologically by suggesting that we learn to say “okay” to riddle, mystery, and enigma: “See, it’s the ‘okay’ part that requires thinking theologically. It’s also where the peace comes from, because we can relax as we leave it with God” (208).

Mystery, a book on the “‘archaeological study’ of the will of God” (5, whatever that means) concludes with consoling words concerning the result of thinking theologically and of reminding ourselves “two or three times a day” that God’s will is mysterious: “Before you know it, you’ll really start to believe it and live it. When that happens, you cannot image how relaxed and relieved you’ll be, filled with anticipation and adventure...for the rest of your life” (217). In a nutshell the message of *Mystery* is that we should learn to think theologically and confess

that God’s will is mysterious so that we can be relaxed and relieved for the rest of our lives.

In the judgment of this reviewer, the strength of *Mystery* is conveyed by its primary title—*The Mystery of God’s Will*—and its weakness is epitomized by its secondary title—*What Does He Want for Me?* The former is focused on God; the latter is centered on the self, on the individual believer. *Mystery* renders a service by speaking honestly and truthfully about the element of mystery in following the Lord and of the struggle involved with knowing and doing the will of God. The forthrightness of this message is comforting. However, *Mystery* also renders a disservice by its emphasis on *me* and by neglecting crucial matters in the Word of God pertaining to the will of God. This is disconcerting and requires extensive comment.

His Will for Me

The most serious defect of *Mystery* is that the focus of the book actually is not on God and on God’s will for Himself and on how God’s will is related to His eternal purpose and heart’s desire; on the contrary, the focus of *Mystery* is on the individual believer and on God’s will for and related to the individual. *What Does He Want for Me?*: this is what will probably be of interest to most readers. A comment on the back flap makes clear what the real message of the book is: “Overflowing with Swindoll’s practical insights, humor, and unforgettable stories, *The Mystery of God’s Will* inspires you to discover what God’s will is for your life.” The emphasis is obvious: *your life*, not the eternal purpose of God; *your life*, not the heart’s desire of God; *your life*, not the economy of God; *your life*, not the goal of God in creating the universe and in bringing the believers into the process of His complete salvation; *your life* and the things that concern you (Phil. 2:21), not the deep things of God concerning Christ.

This theme is articulated repeatedly throughout the book. Consider the following: “God’s will for us in this life” (ix); “God’s will for one of His chosen vessels” (x); “God’s will for my life” (5); “What I hope we will do is learn how to turn to God and rely on Him to work out His will in our lives” (12); “How in the world do I find the will of God for my life?” (39); “God’s best for our lives” (39); “God’s plan and process for their lives” (59); “The will of God in our lives” (60); “God has a plan for us, mysterious though it may be, and we want to be in the center of it” (71); “His plan for our lives” (113); “The will of God for us” (163); “I am in the nucleus of God’s plan for my life” (201).

In the early pages of *Mystery*, we are instructed regarding the

The most serious defect of the book is its focus on the individual believer and on God’s will related to the individual, not on God and on God’s will for Himself and on how God’s will is related to His eternal purpose and heart’s desire.

need to make a switch from thinking horizontally (humanly) to thinking vertically (theologically). If we make this switch, “our focus turns away from ourselves,” and we move from “a self-centered realm of existence” to “a God-centered frame of reference, where all things begin and end with Him” (17). This is excellent advice; however, it is somewhat contradicted by *Mystery* itself, with its emphasis on *what He wants for me*. If we have truly made this switch from a self-centered point of view to a God-centered perspective, surely our primary question will not be, “What do You have for me?” Or, “What is Your will for me?” Or, “What is Your plan for me and my life?” Instead, we will begin to ask questions of another sort: “Lord, I read in Revelation 4:11 that all things were created because of Your will. What is Your will, the will for which all things were created?” “What is the good pleasure of Your will that Paul talks about in Ephesians 1:5?” “What is Your good pleasure, and how does this relate to Your will?” “What is the mystery of Your will, which You made known through the apostles?” “What is the counsel of Your will, and how does this relate to Your purpose and intention as revealed in Ephesians?” “What is Your perfect will in Romans 12, and how is Your will related to the Body of Christ?” Then we may go on to pray, perhaps with desperation, “Lord, cause me to understand what Your will is.” “Lord, for the sake of Your good pleasure, fill me with the full knowledge of Your will.” “Lord, I pray that I will stand fully matured in all of Your will.”

Mystery does not prompt us to ask such questions, questions that are centered on God and on His purpose and operation in the universe. Neither does this book incite us to pray such prayers, prayers that take as their center the desire and goal of God. Much to the contrary, *Mystery*, despite its charge to think theologically and to have a God-centered frame of reference, actually directs us to ourselves, to our lives, to our things, to matters related to *me*. Of course, in our pursuit of the Lord, there are times to seek His personal leading and guidance, but not at the expense of seeking first the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33), which surely requires that we seek God for God and His interests, and not with disregard for the fact that we are members of the Body of Christ and that the Head’s direction to the whole Body implies His direction to every member of the Body. If we care for God’s will for God Himself, He will cause the desire of His heart to be fulfilled in our lives, but He will do this in His way, though it may be inscrutable, and in His time, though it may be surprising or even disappointing. Today’s believers, I would suggest, need the boldness to pray, “Lord, whether I know Your plan for my life means little. My desire is that Your plan be carried out, that Your will be done on earth, and that the desire of Your heart be satisfied.”

Seeking His Will

Earnest, seeking Christians may be helped by the central message of *Mystery* and thereby receive “permission to confess, ‘This is beyond my ability to understand. It’s a mystery’” (xi). There can be relief in obeying without understanding and in trusting without analyzing. Nevertheless, although we may not understand God’s will and way with us individually, the Bible indicates that we should not be ignorant of God’s will concerning Himself and His purpose. “Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (Eph. 5:17). This should incite us to seek the Lord through His Word, asking questions and offering prayers that express our longing to know the Lord and to understand what is on His heart. What, we should ask, is the will of the Lord according to the book of Ephesians? How is *will* in 5:17 related to *will* in 1:5 (“the good pleasure of His will”), in 1:9 (“the mystery of His will”), and in 1:11 (“the counsel of His will”)?

Since we are told that the mystery of God’s will has been made known, what is this mystery, and what has been made known? Ephesians speaks much regarding the church as the Body of Christ. What does the will of God mentioned in Ephesians have to do with the church? Does this not indicate that the will of God is more of a Body matter than of an individual matter?

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We should press on in our study to know the will of God as it is revealed elsewhere in the New Testament,

for instance in Romans 12. In this chapter the will of God is mentioned in relation to the Body, of which all believers in Christ are members. What is the connection between the perfect will of God and the Body? Following this, we may turn to Colossians, which reveals the all-inclusiveness of Christ and speaks of the centrality and universality of Christ in God’s economy. How are the knowledge of God’s will and standing mature and fully assured in God’s will related to the revelation of Christ in this book (1:9; 4:12)? Is the will of God in Colossians a Body matter, or is it merely or mainly a matter of “God’s plan for my life”? We should also study the will of God in the book of Revelation. Revelation 4:11 says that all things were created for God’s will, and the last two chapters unveil the New Jerusalem. What is the connection between the will of God in chapter four and the New Jerusalem in chapters twenty-one and twenty-two? This kind of pursuit requires a serious and sustained study of the Word and a deep resolve to “think theologically” about how God’s will is related to God and to His eternal purpose. To raise the kind of questions mentioned above is to seek God and to study the Word in order to understand God’s will for God first, not first for ourselves and for our lives.

A particularly serious verse that speaks of the will of God is Matthew 7:21: “Not every one who says to Me, Lord, Lord, will enter into the kingdom of the heavens, but he who does the will of My Father who is in the heavens.” As the following verses make clear, believers in Christ may do many things in the Lord’s name without doing the will of the Father. This may indicate that the sphere of God’s permissive will may be much larger than we suppose, including all kinds of religious works that are done in the name of the Lord but are not carried out according to the perfect or purposeful or decretive will of God. Many things done in the Lord’s name may turn out to be acts allowed by God’s permissive will, not deeds ordained by God’s decretive will. In order to enter into the kingdom of the heavens, we must do the will of our Father who is in the heavens. Those who reign with Christ during the millennial kingdom will be those who knew and did the Father’s perfect will; they are not “workers of lawlessness” (v. 23) doing what they will in the Lord’s name but according to God’s permissive will. Religious works done according to God’s permission rather than His direction will not be rewarded by the Lord Jesus at His judgment seat. This should cause God’s people, especially the leaders among them, to wake up and get serious with God concerning His will as it is revealed in the New Testament. To know and do the will of God for God demands that we deny ourselves and set ourselves aside and study the Word of God from God’s point of view and for the fulfillment of God’s eternal plan.

Plan is an important word in *Mystery*. We are told, “He’s [God] shaping us into His [Christ’s] image. That’s His predetermined plan. And He’s committed to it. Nothing we can do will dissuade Him from that plan” (22). The book goes on to speak of God’s “sovereign plan to shape individuals into the image of Christ” (22). “The will of God is primarily and ultimately concerned about our becoming like Christ” (207). These remarks are helpful; however, they fall short of the central thought of the divine revelation concerning both the purpose and the process of our being conformed to the image of the firstborn Son of God (Rom. 8:29). In essence, the central thought is this: God’s goal is to produce and build up a corporate expression of Christ, initially as the Body of Christ and ultimately as the New Jerusalem. This corporate expression—the Body of Christ consummating in the New Jerusalem—is a composition of Christ as the firstborn Son of God and the believers in Christ as the many sons of God who have been conformed to the image of God’s firstborn Son. To be sure, all the believers in Christ will eventually be conformed to the image of Christ as

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God’s firstborn Son, but for what purpose? The purpose, as revealed in the Word of God, is the eternal, consummate corporate expression of Christ, the New Jerusalem. God’s plan, therefore, is not merely to have individuals who are “like Christ.” (This emphasis on individuals is not in keeping with Paul’s teaching concerning the Body of Christ.) God’s plan is to have a corporate organic entity composed of millions of glorified sons of God who have been conformed to the image of His firstborn Son and who have been built up together in the Triune God as His corporate expression. This is God’s plan. If we see this, we will also see that the will of God is to make the believers in Christ the reproduction of Christ for the corporate expression of Christ.

Another defect in *Mystery*, an especially serious one, is that this book contains and conveys “the leaven of heaven,” the erroneous teaching that our ultimate destination as Christians is eternity in heaven. *Mystery* speaks about our getting to heaven: “Not until we get to heaven,” where “we will know as we are known” (7). Then with approval the book quotes Jay Kesler: “The first sound we will hear from every throat when we get to heaven is, ‘Ahhhh...Now I see it!’” (7). This indicates that, according to *Mystery*, the perplexing, inscrutable, unfathomable mystery will be resolved when we all “get to heaven.” Elsewhere the book claims that God will send His Son and take us “home to be with Him” (34). We are also told of

inheriting “all the rewards of heaven” (89), where it will be “a different story” (186). *Mystery* even links God’s plan to heaven: “It’s Your plan that’s important, Lord, not my desire. I didn’t bring myself into this world, and I can’t take myself into heaven” (211). Of course, it is God’s plan and not our desire that is important. However, God’s plan is not to take us into heaven; God’s plan is to make us, His chosen, redeemed, and regenerated people, parts of His eternal corporate expression, the New Jerusalem.

The secondary title of *Mystery* asks, *What Does He Want for Me?* If we learn from the Scriptures what God wants for Himself, we will know what He wants for us, His children. According to the full revelation in the Bible, God intends to make us the components of the New Jerusalem, His glorious expression. God’s will is the New Jerusalem, and God’s plan is that we become the New Jerusalem for His good pleasure. This is the mystery of God’s will, and this is what God wants for Himself and for us.

by Ron Kangas

A Scriptural but Shortsighted View of Christ, the Building Stone

“Christ, the Building Stone, in Peter’s Theology,” by Frederic R. Howe. *Bibliotheca Sacra*. 157 (January-March 2000): 35-43.

In “Christ, the Building Stone, in Peter’s Theology” (hereafter “Building Stone”), Frederic R. Howe, Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology, Dallas Theological Seminary, seeks to identify the sources of emphases in Peter’s Epistles and to give definition to Christ as a building stone in Peter’s theology. Honoring the primacy of the Word of God and preeminence of Christ, the article presents a scripturally based interpretation of 1 Peter 2:4-8. Despite its fidelity to the Scriptures, “Building Stone” treats the passage primarily as an elementary gospel message and falls short of penetrating its intrinsic significance. This shortfall springs from the article’s judicial framework for interpreting Peter’s Epistles and its failure to take into account both the immediate and broad context of 1 Peter 2:4-8, which abounds with organic references to God’s full salvation and to the corporate dimension of the believers’ life. In so doing, the article fails to highlight the means by which believers become living stones—feeding on the milk of the word—and the goal for which they are transformed to be living stones—the building up of a spiritual house for God’s corporate expression.

“Building Stone” consists of two sections: “Sources of Petrine Emphases” and “Peter’s Christology: Christ as a Building Stone.” In the first section Howe identifies three major sources of Peter’s writings: remembrance, reflection, and revelation. Given Peter’s close association and sustained contact with Jesus Christ, the article contends that memory serves a major role in Peter’s spoken and written ministry. As a “witness of the sufferings of Christ” (1 Pet. 5:1) and of His “majesty” (2 Pet. 1:16), Peter recalled words spoken by the Lord (Acts 11:16) and crucial incidents of Christ’s life. There can be little doubt that these were indeed formative factors in his writings. Howe posits that Peter “doubtlessly not only remembered key events from Christ’s life, but also reflected on them, meditated on them, allowing them to shape his thinking and his reactions to life” (36). For instance, as Peter no doubt pondered Jesus’ personal directive to shepherd His sheep (John 21:15-17), he later exhorted the elders to “shepherd the flock of God” (1 Pet. 5:2). According to the article, the “most important source for Peter’s writings is the revelation of truth from God Himself,” which “blends perfectly with the other two sources” (37-38). Not only did Jesus

proclaim to Peter that his great confession in Matthew 16:16 was ultimately sourced in the revelation from the Father, He also promised His disciples that after His resurrection, the Spirit of reality would come and guide them into all the reality (John 16:13).

Howe expounds 1 Peter 2:4-8 by presenting Christ as a building stone in four aspects: the living stone—“communication of life”; the precious cornerstone—“connection in life”; the rejected stone—“confrontation in unbelief”; the stone of stumbling—“crystallization of rejection.” The article states that Christ, as a “living Stone,” is God’s incarnate Son to whom “the living God imparted life-giving truth” and that “Christ, the living Stone, communicates or imparts spiritual life to those who come to Him in faith” (39). Quoting Alan M. Stibbs, Howe comments, “By reason of their relation to Him,” those who believe in Him then become “lively” stones (39). Christ, as the cornerstone, signifies “the interconnectedness of the building stones to each other, and their vital relationship to the Cornerstone” (40). As a rejected stone, Christ was despised and crucified by Jewish religionists during His earthly sojourn, even though in His resurrection and ascension “He was vindicated in triumph, and...made

the chief Cornerstone” (41). Finally, as a stone of stumbling, Christ will be “a source or even cause for stumbling” to those who reject Him by their disobedience to the gospel (42). Therefore, Howe concludes with “the vivid contrast of belief and unbelief...seen in 1 Peter 2:4-8”

(43). Whereas believers, by faith, come to Christ, the living stone, contact Him as the chief cornerstone, and are then built up to function as a holy priesthood, unbelievers, in their unbelief, reject the living stone and stumble at the cornerstone, thereby “failing to make vital contact with” Christ, the living stone, and confronting Him as a rock of offense (43).

Two points in “Building Stone” merit affirmation. First, the article scrupulously adheres to the Scriptures as the sole source of divine revelation. From the outset, cognizant of the recent debate about Peter’s authorship of 1 and 2 Peter, Howe upholds the Petrine authorship of 1 and 2 Peter, demonstrating how Peter’s encounter with Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, shaped the content of his Epistles. Unlike many modern biblical scholars who rely on extracannonic sources, Howe primarily uses numerous Old and New Testament passages to corroborate his claims. Second, Howe’s faithfulness to the Scriptures leads to a Christ-centered interpretation of 1 Peter 2:4-8: the destiny of both believers and unbelievers alike hinges on how they deal with Christ, who is a living stone and the chief cornerstone to believers and a rejected stone and a stone of

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stumbling to unbelievers. The article rightly contends that “in depicting Christ as a building Stone, Peter drew on several Old Testament passages to establish the fact of the centrality of Christ” (43). An approach that focuses on Christ as the interpretive key is commendable, for He is the unique content, subject, and center of all Scriptures (John 5:39; Luke 24:27, 44).

Although “Building Stone” has these strengths, it fails to probe the core truths in 1 Peter 2:4-8 because of three deficiencies. First, the article’s framework of interpreting 1 Peter 2:4-8 is principally judicial, viewing the passage mainly as a basic gospel message. As a case in point, the article is neatly summed up in a “double effect” of Christ as the building stone: “By means of God’s concealed revelation in him, with its justification of the sinner, the summons goes out which leads either to salvation in faith or to perdition in unbelief” (42). Further, when speaking of revelation as a source of Peter’s writings, the article relies on William Hendriksen, who equates “all the truth” into which the Spirit of truth guides the believers with the whole body of “redemptive revelation” (38). According to Hendriksen’s article, from which the quote is drawn, the “redemptive revelation” is mainly characterized as the “doctrine with respect to the cross” (328), the Lord’s teaching “based upon the facts of redemption” (329); hence, it relies upon a view of God’s salvation that focuses on redemption principally from the standpoint of the satisfaction of God’s righteousness.

In contrast, the immediate context of 1 Peter 2 and the tenor of 1 Peter 1 show that the scope of salvation for the believers extends far beyond a mere judicial pronouncement that saves them from eternal perdition. The second verse of the Epistle makes it clear that the recipients are not unbelievers in need of the basic gospel but believers who have been “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father in the sanctification of the Spirit unto the obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” After referring to Christ’s redeeming blood that ushered the sprinkled believers into the enjoyment of the Triune God, Peter goes on to speak of the regenerated believers being guarded “unto a salvation ready to be revealed at the last time” (vv. 3-5). Since, according to the immediate context, “the last time” clearly refers to “the revelation of Jesus Christ” (v. 7), the second advent of Christ, which has yet to take place, the salvation mentioned here cannot refer merely to the redemption and regeneration which the believers have already experienced. This salvation refers to God’s full salvation that dispenses the Triune God as life into the believers’ entire tripartite being in three stages: the initial stage in which the

believers have been regenerated in their spirit (John 3:3-6), the progressing stage in which the believers are being transformed in their soul throughout the entire course of their Christian life (2 Cor. 3:18), and the completing stage in which the believers will be glorified in their body at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:7; Phil. 3:20-21).

Peter also indicates that at the Lord’s coming, the believers, whose faith has been tested and proved by the fire of sufferings, will receive the “salvation of [their] souls” (1 Pet. 1:9). Hence, God’s full salvation is the salvation of the believers’ souls, not from eternal perdition but from the dispensational punishment of God’s governmental dealing (v. 17; 4:17; Heb. 12:5-11). As the disciple who prompted the Lord’s speaking regarding the saving of man’s soul-life (Matt. 16:22-27), Peter is implying that to receive such a salvation, the believers must deny their soul, their soulish life, with all its enjoyment in the present age so that they may gain it by entering into the Lord’s joy in the coming age (10:37-39; Luke 17:33; Matt. 25:21). Perhaps most significantly, two verses prior to speaking of Christ as a living stone, Peter writes that believers as newborn babes should “grow unto salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2). The

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phrase, “grow unto salvation,” bespeaks the organic and progressive character of this salvation, indicating that salvation here is not our initial justification as a consequence of our obedience to the redemptive truth, but God’s complete salvation as the result of the believers’ growth in the divine

life. First Peter 2:4-8 must be interpreted in the light of such an expansive view of God’s full salvation presented in the first two chapters of the Epistle. Yet the article’s short-sighted view of salvation confines its exposition of 1 Peter 2:4-8 to a rudimentary gospel message written for the sake of the believers’ initial salvation rather than a revelation of God’s full salvation that results in the believers’ growth in life and the building up of God’s house.

Because of its narrow understanding of God’s full salvation, “Building Stone” fails to fully point out a crucial matter in 1 Peter 2:4-8—the metabolic process by which the believers, created of clay (Rom. 9:21), become transformed into living stones. The article attempts to address the organic implication of Christ being a living stone and the believers being living stones by saying, “Christ, the living Stone, communicates or imparts spiritual life to those who come to Him in faith” (39). “Building Stone” asserts that the way to receive “spiritual life” is “faith (belief in Christ)—that is, according to Stibbs, to “acknowledge Christ as the exalted stone,” for Peter wrote of those who are coming to Him and of the one who believes in Him (1 Pet. 2:4, 6) (39). The article thus seems

to define “coming to” Christ as an objective belief in and mental acknowledgment of Christ, considering it as a once-for-all event.

In contrast, a close inspection of the verses immediately prior to 1 Peter 2:4-8 shows that “coming to Him” (v. 4) is actually the subjective enjoyment of Christ—feeding on and tasting Him as “the guileless milk of the word” continually for the believers’ growth in life (vv. 2-3). Having been regenerated “through the living and abiding word of God” (1:23), the believers as newborn babes must daily feed on the milk of the word in order to grow unto salvation. By being regenerated and transformed through the word of God, the believers who were worthless pieces of clay (Gen. 2:7) become precious, living stones (1 Cor. 3:12), the mass reproduction of Christ—the prototypical living stone (1 Pet. 2:21). As one of the disciples who heard the Lord’s discourse in John 6, Peter knew the believers’ need to eat the Lord by receiving His words as spirit and life: “He who eats Me, he also shall live because of Me....It is the Spirit who give life; the flesh profits nothing; the words which I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (vv. 57, 63). Paul echoes this in his charge to the Ephesian believers: “Receive...the sword of the Spirit, which Spirit is the word of God, by means of all prayer and petition, praying at every time in spirit” (6:17-18). Hence, by exercising their spirit to come to and receive the word of God, the embodiment of the Spirit of life, the believers become nourished with the spiritual milk to grow in life and become living stones for God’s building. The spiritual nourishment in the word constitutes the believers with Christ as their life and life supply for their daily salvation; the living and operative word of God also divides the believers’ soul from their spirit (Heb. 4:12), enabling them to deny their soul for the salvation of their soul. This article, unfortunately, neither highlights the believers’ need for a progressive experience of God’s organic salvation nor provides a practical way to experience this salvation.

Third, the article pays minimal attention to the goal of Christ being a building stone and the issue of the believers’ transformation as revealed in 1 Peter 2:4-8—the building up of a spiritual house for God’s divine building. Paying only cursory attention to this critical truth, the entire article revolves around the believers’ individual relationship with Christ. When discussing Christ as a living stone, the article underscores the vital relationship between Christ and individual believers (39). Yet the pivotal significance of Christ as a living stone is that Christ as a living stone reproduces Himself in His believers as many living stones to build them up as a spiritual house, “the church of the

living God” (1 Tim. 3:15). The article claims that the prominent point of Christ as a cornerstone is the individual believers’ “dependence on Christ” (40). Yet when referring to Christ as a cornerstone, Ephesians 2:21-22 reveals that His function is to join the believers one to another for the building of God’s house. Christ is the cornerstone in whom “all the building,” including both the Jewish and Gentile believers, is “fitted together” and is “growing into a holy temple in the Lord” for the building up of a “dwelling place of God in spirit.” Further, 1 Peter 2:9 contains several collective nouns referring to believers corporately: a “chosen race” denoting their corporate lineage and descent from God; a “royal priesthood,” their corporate service to God; a “holy nation,” their being a corporate community for God; a “people acquired for a possession,” their corporate preciousness to God. The same verse also reveals that the believers who are built up with one another “tell out the virtues” of the Triune God for His corporate expression. Inasmuch as Peter’s Epistles were fundamentally influenced by the revelation embodied in his declaration that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Peter’s writings were just as profoundly shaped by the Lord’s reply to his confession, which expressed His unfailing intention to build the church upon Himself as the foundation with His believers as many stones: “I also say to you that you are Peter [which translated means *a stone*], and upon this rock [referring to Himself and the revelation concerning Himself] I will build My church” (Matt. 16:18). With such a vision, Peter wrote his first Epistle, unveiling that the desire of God’s heart and the goal of the believers’ salvation is not only to redeem, regenerate, and transform God’s chosen people but ultimately to build them up into a corporate spiritual house for His eternal expression, rest, and satisfaction (1:2-3, 18; 2:2-9; 4:17). Even if the believers, following the article’s suggestion, cultivate a highly private and “vital contact” with Christ (43), individual believers will not fulfill God’s desire for His habitation, for they, at best will be precious stones that are scattered about but not fitted together and built up to form a house fit for His dwelling.

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Virtually neglecting the organic and corporate aspects of the believers’ salvation revealed in 1 Peter, the article ends with a conventional note: “Peter’s beautiful description of Christ as the building Stone elicits from believers heartfelt gratitude and the determination to honor Him with increasing devotion” (43). Yet Peter’s presentation of Christ as the building stone should beget in the believers an aspiration to feed on the word of God for their growth and transformation in life and to be built up with one another for the building up of the church

as God's spiritual house. Although, in general, "Building Stone" is founded upon the Scriptures, it only touches upon the shell of 1 Peter 2:4-8 and fails to unveil its kernel, for it takes into consideration neither the immediate context of 1 Peter 2:4-8 nor the broader context of 1 Peter. Although it aims to show the centrality of Christ as a building stone, the article comes short of revealing His centrality and universality in and for God's building; it neglects God's deep longing to duplicate Christ, as the living stone, in the members of His Body to produce many living stones for the building up of the church as the house of God, which is the corporate, increased, and enlarged Body of Christ (John 2:18-22; 3:29-30). A final caveat to this critique, however, should be noted: This article is the first of a four-part series entitled "Theological Themes in 1 and 2 Peter." It is our sincere hope and perhaps the author's intent to address these shortcomings in the subsequent articles.¹

by David Yoon

Notes

¹At the time of the printing of the present issue of *Affirmation & Critique*, two of Howe's three subsequent articles have been published. Unfortunately, a review of these articles reveals that the shortcomings in the first article have not been adequately addressed. The second article characterizes the believers' identification or union with Christ as being primarily judicial and objective. And in the course of expounding 2 Peter 1:4, a key verse that supports an organic understanding of Petrine themes, the third article avoids much of the believers' subjective interaction with Christ, again leaving it principally in the objective realm.

When commenting on the believers being "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4), Howe's third article, "The Christian Life in Peter's Theology," contends that "Peter was not implying anything even remotely associated with the idea of the deification of humanity" (308), equating deification with *apotheosis*. The article defines *apotheosis* as "a latent gnostic idea" in which "man's actual being is supposedly absorbed into the deity" (308). This is an incorrect understanding of *apotheosis*. The article's resulting critique of deification, by extension, is flawed. *Apotheosis* is commonly associated with the classical Greco-Roman cultural practice of merely declaring a person, typically an emperor, to be divine. No inherent notion of partaking or even nature is implied by this concept.

Furthermore, in the ancient pagan religions men became gods by mere declaration. The process was called *apotheosis* in Greek and *consecratio* in Latin, and generally occurred after the death of the emperor. Yet no one believed that the deified ruler had changed in any way except in how he was regarded. Formerly, he was respected as an emperor; now he was worshipped as a god; but essentially he was still a man. There was no

change in life and nature. It was much the same as the inauguration of a modern president: Formerly he is without the office and is not accorded the dignity and respect of the office, but in a moment, at his inauguration, he is declared president. The man himself does not change at all, but his status is uplifted, and by this he gains the respect of the citizenry. This...contrasts with what the Bible says about God's redeemed, regenerated, and transformed people, who not only gain the status of being the sons of God but, more importantly, experience a change in their life and nature that gives an essential reality to their being the sons of God. (Robichaux 23)

The article also seems to be plagued by fears that any acknowledgment of a subjective aspect to partaking of the divine nature will create an impression that gnosticism is being espoused. A clearer understanding of the biblical revelation related to partaking of the divine nature, however, could have eased the fear of such an association. Gnostics hold that the human body is inherently evil and the human soul is defective. Believing deification to be a Gnostic construct, the article contends that deification "ultimately results in obliterating the finitude of humankind" (308). This Gnostic perspective, however, is antithetical to the biblical view. The Scriptures do not present a view of deification that results in the annihilation of humanity. On the day of resurrection, Christ in His humanity was begotten as the Son of God (Rom. 1:3-4; Acts 13:33). Christ rose from the dead as the Son of Man with a resurrected body of flesh and bones (Matt. 17:9; Luke 24:36-43); Christ ascended as the Son of Man (John 6:62); Christ sits at the right hand of God as the Son of Man (Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69; Acts 7:55-56); Christ will come back in glory as the Son of Man (Matt. 16:27-28; 25:31); and Christ will sit on the throne of His glory to reign in the millennium and for eternity as the Son of Man (19:28; Rev. 22:1; Luke 1:31-33). Like Christ's, the humanity of the believers will not be eradicated, but rather sanctified, transformed, and uplifted into the divine sonship.

According to the biblical revelation, man becomes God in life and nature, but never in the Godhead nor as an object of worship. Man can become God only in His communicable aspects such as life (John 3:6), nature (2 Pet. 1:4), and expression (1 John 3:2). The believers will never become God in His incommunicable aspects. Deification, properly understood, is not something to avoid, but rather something to diligently examine in the Scriptures, and 2 Peter 1:4 should be our starting point, not our stopping point.

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