

The Misstated Truth of the Believers' Judgment

A Life God Rewards: Why Everything You Do Today Matters Forever, by Bruce Wilkinson with David Kopp. Sisters: Multnomah Publishers, 2002.

At the beginning of *A Life God Rewards* (hereafter *Rewards*), Bruce Wilkinson proposes that the study he is about to offer is surprising, unsettling, astonishing, and possibly the most life-transforming the reader has ever undertaken. The goal of his teaching is to establish a direct, unbreakable link between the work that a believer does in this life and his joy and rewards in the coming life. *Rewards* comes to us as a set: the basic book cited above, a thirty-one-day *Devotional* and companion *Journal*, a *Bible Study*, a video series, and special editions for teens and children. This may be considered the third volume in a series. The first and most highly acclaimed entry, *The Prayer of Jabez*, teaches the believers to pray for God's blessing and greater influence, or "territory," in this world, and the second work, *Secrets of the Vine*, emphasizes the need for our territory to produce a great harvest of good works. For reviews of these two books, please see *Affirmation & Critique*, VII.1, April 2002, pp. 76-79. Now in *Rewards* Wilkinson seeks to show how the harvest we produce will directly impact our experience in eternity and how that truth can have dramatic effects on our life and work today.

Wilkinson examines the teachings of the New Testament concerning the reward offered to believers. To this end, he takes Luke 6:23 as his banner: "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven," concluding, "There is a direct connection between something you do for Him on earth and something 'great' He will do for you in heaven" (10). This "something" is related to the crucial but much overlooked teaching of the New Testament concerning the responsibility and accountability of the believers for their life and work in

this age, a specific judgment for the believers in the future, and a subsequent reward or discipline for the believers. In moving forward into this territory of scriptural teaching, Wilkinson is inspiring and bold, especially in consideration of the current popularly accepted version of the gospel in which a believing faith in Christ, as a "ticket to heaven," may be followed by an unproductive, apathetic, and indifferent life with no lasting consequences. We certainly affirm a renewed openness to the teaching of the Lord and the apostles concerning the truth of our accountability to Him. As we shall see, however, *Rewards* is seriously flawed in its accuracy related to this subject.

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Rewards and Crowns

We will represent that which may be commended of Wilkinson's work by two examples—his comprehension of the term *reward* in the New Testament and his understanding of the crowns given to the believers. There is abundant evidence in the New Testament that there is a reward for believers, which is distinguished from salvation by free grace. In the New Testament, the Greek word translated as *reward* is most often μισθός, which means "primarily wages, hire, and then, generally, reward" (Vine 976). *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines *reward*

as "something given or received in recompense for worthy behavior or in retribution for evil acts" (1546). Similarly, it defines *wage* as "payment for labor or services....A fitting return; a recompense" (2007). The most frequent corresponding verb in the New Testament is ἀποδίδωμι, which is translated as *repay* in Matthew 6:4, 6, 18, and 16:27. In this journal, we have dealt with these definitions in detail; please see *Affirmation & Critique*, IV.2, April 1999, pp. 53-55. In his own brief word study, Wilkinson concurs with these definitions. Concerning *misthos*, for example, he renders Luke 6:23 as, "Your *misthos* [wages] are great in heaven" (*Devotional* 25). He similarly cites verse 35 and Matthew 5:12, in which *misthos* is translated as *reward*, and 1 Timothy 5:18, Matthew 20:8, and James 5:4, in which it is translated as *wages*, a clear indication of its meaning with respect to

the labor of the faithful believers (*Bible Study* 26). Concerning *apodidomai*, he appropriately cites Luke 10:35, Luke 14:14, Matthew 6:4, and 16:27 for *repay*. He then concludes his word study with Hebrews 11:6, in which God's nature is shown to be that of "a rewarder [*misthos-apodidomai*]" (27).

Wilkinson also breaks with the vague, unscriptural view of the crowns offered to the believers, demonstrating from scriptural context that crowns are offered as rewards, not free gifts, and not to all believers unconditionally but only to those faithful ones who in their lifetime shepherd the flock of God (the crown of glory, 1 Pet. 5:1-4), endure trial and tribulation (the crown of life, James 1:12; Rev. 2:10), finish their course and long for the Lord's return (the crown of righteousness, 2 Tim. 4:6-8), bear fruit through the ministry (the crown of boasting, 1 Thes. 2:19), and are victorious in the Christian race (the incorruptible crown, 1 Cor. 9:25). Wilkinson concludes, "Let the prize of God's highest honor and praise shape your every choice today" (*Devotional* 72), and this, of course, is a worthy exhortation.

The Bema, the Great White Throne, and the Intervening Kingdom Age

Much of the surprise and astonishment that Wilkinson promises his readers comes in his discussion of the judgment seat of Christ. As mentioned in 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Romans 14:10, all believers will give an account to Christ the Judge at His judgment seat (Greek *bema*) concerning their life and work in this age. So crucial is this truth that Wilkinson devotes a whole week of his *Devotional* and an entire unit of his *Bible Study* to the subject of the bema. Using the aforementioned verses, with 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 as an accessory, he boldly recites, as if in a catechism:

What is it called? The Judgment Seat of Christ (*bema* in Greek). Who will appear? Everyone who believes in Jesus and has received His free gift of salvation. Who will be the judge? Jesus Christ. When will it occur? At Christ's coming....What will be judged? Our works for God. How? Our works will be tested by fire. (*Devotional* 54)

Wilkinson notes, "Followers of Jesus who do not live with the bema in mind have settled for a dangerous deception—that *there will be no time of accounting and reward*...for what they did on earth," and he adds, "By the way, can you think of a deception—apart from a deception about our salvation—that Satan would be more interested in spreading among the followers of Jesus?" (54-55).

We would affirm these observations heartily if it were not for the portions elided in the foregoing quotations. In his

catechism, he asks and responds, "Where [will the bema be]? In heaven....Why [will we be judged]? So that an eternal reward can be given—or lost—on the basis of the lasting value of our works" (54). And in the second quotation above, he speaks of a "time of accounting and reward in eternity" (54). It is to these phrases—in *heaven*, in *eternity*, and *eternal reward*—that we must object, and in them find error. Since much of the inaccuracy of Wilkinson's portrayal of the final judgments lies in his timeline, we need to consider the two seats of Christ's judgment mentioned in *Rewards*—the judgment seat of Christ and the judgment of the great white throne. Wilkinson never sees much need to compare, contrast, or fix them in time. He simply says, "When the apostle Paul wrote to churches, he referred to a judgment at the bema of Jesus. The apostle John wrote about a judgment at a great white throne" (46-47). The distinction, however, becomes important, because it forces us to consider an entire dispensation that God has wisely provided for the purpose of reward and discipline.

The most commonly understood judgment of God is that of the dead unbelievers at the great white throne. This judgment, spoken of in Revelation 20:11-15, will be at the resurrection of the unbelievers, the "resurrection of judgment" spoken of in John 5:28-29. An overview of Revelation 19 and 20 fixes the time of this judgment. In chapter nineteen, the Lord descends from heaven as the Word of God and defeats the Antichrist and his armies at Armageddon. This, of course, is His second coming. Then in 20:1-3 an angel binds Satan and casts him into the abyss where he is to be held for one thousand years. In verse 4 we see thrones, upon which sit those who victoriously kept the testimony of Jesus and the word of God even unto death; these live and reign with Christ for a thousand years. According to verse 5, "the rest of the dead" will not live again (resurrect) until after the thousand years are completed. In verses 7 through 10, the thousand years have now been completed, and Satan is released to lead a final act of rebellion, after which he is cast into the lake of fire. Then in verse 11—after the thousand years of the kingdom dispensation are completed—the unbelieving dead are resurrected to stand before the great white throne of God's final judgment of mankind. The foregoing exercise in eschatological chronology serves to identify an age, a dispensation—the millennium, the kingdom age of one thousand years—as intervening between the Lord's return and the judgment of the unbelievers for eternal perdition. This is important, because we can now fix the time of the judgment of the believers for reward or discipline.

The final, comprehensive judgment of the believers will be carried out at a specific time and place which the New Testament calls the judgment seat of Christ, or the judgment seat of God. The judgment at this judgment seat

will be before the millennium, immediately after Christ's coming back to the clouds in the air. Says W. E. Vine,

This judgment-seat is to be distinguished from...the post-millennial "Great White Throne," Rev. 20:11, at which only "the dead" will appear. The judgment-seat of Christ will be a tribunal held "in His Parousia," i.e., His presence with His saints after His return to receive them to Himself. (623)

Being a believer qualifies a person to appear at this pre-millennial judgment rather than the post-millennial judgment of the great white throne which will result only in the perdition of the unbelievers. At the judgment seat of Christ, the works of the believers will be tested by fire, and as a consequence, those whose lives are found to have been faithful and whose works are proven to be of "gold, silver, precious stones" (1 Cor. 3:12) will enter into the joy of the Lord in the millennial kingdom and there reign with Him for one thousand years. Those who do not pass the test at the bema will be excluded from the bright glory of the kingdom, requiring further time to be perfected before the beginning of the eternal age in the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth. By this we can see that a believer's reward, or loss, will be not in heaven but with respect to the heavenly realm of the kingdom reign on the earth, and not in eternity but in the kingdom age of one thousand years.

Wilkinson sketches out the main events of our life before and after the death of our body, calling this "the (real) timeline of your eternity" (*Rewards* 20): our physical life, our physical death, reaching our eternal destination, receiving a resurrected body, receiving our reward, and living forever with the consequences of our beliefs and actions while on the earth. This he calls "the biggest, truest view possible of your entire life" (15). However, he admits to leaving out certain details, such as the rapture and the kingdom. It is this omission, however, that warps his timeline and inaccurately locates rewards and losses in the eternal age rather than in the kingdom age as the Scriptures teach. The failure to distinguish this is a major, undermining flaw in *A Life God Rewards*.

Perpetuating the Myth of Eternity in Heaven

Perhaps the most devastating flaw of *Rewards* is

Wilkinson's error not only of the timing of rewards but of the locale. The traditional, superstitious belief in heaven as the eternal destination of the believers pervades *Rewards* from the first chapter to the last. Eternal rewards are equated with rewards in heaven, for Wilkinson knows of no other location to fix eternity. He says,

Jesus revealed that after death your soul is either with God in heaven or apart from God in hell (Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 5:8)...In all of His teaching, Jesus identified only two possible locations in the afterlife: heaven or hell (John 14:2; Matthew 23:33). (22)

Wilkinson's Scripture references are included in the preceding quotations so that we may visit them in brief (excepting the last one, in regard to Gehenna, which we need not pursue here).

At the judgment seat of Christ, the works of the believers will be tested by fire, and those whose lives are found to have been faithful and whose works are proven to be of "gold, silver, precious stones" will enter into the joy of the Lord in the millennial kingdom and reign with Him for one thousand years.

The first of his citations is Luke 23:43, in which the Lord spoke to the thief on the cross, "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise." *Today* was the day of the Lord's crucifixion, yet nowhere does the New Testament hint that the Lord ascended to heaven on the day of His death, prior to His resurrection. Rather, on that day He *descended* into Hades (Acts 2:26-27, 31), which is called Sheol in the Old Testament, a place not above the earth but beneath it (Psa. 16:9-10; Num. 16:30; Deut. 32:22; 1 Sam. 2:6; Job 7:9; Amos 9:2). Thus, the Lord had prophesied that He would be in the "heart of the earth" three days and three nights (Matt. 12:40; cf. Eph. 4:9). It is there also that the thief went on that day.

Clearly, the heart of the earth is neither heaven nor hell, the "only two possible locations" allowed by Wilkinson.

Concerning Hades, Wilkinson elaborates on the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31, incorrectly equating "Abraham's bosom" with "eternal comfort in heaven" (*Devotional* 125). In his *Word Studies in the New Testament*, M. R. Vincent speaks more accurately concerning this passage, noting, "The rich man was in Hades (Luke xvi. 23), and *in torments*, but Lazarus was also in Hades, 'in Abraham's bosom'" (95). The Lord Jesus, the thief, and Lazarus went to Hades, yet the Lord told the thief, "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise." Paradise, therefore, where the thief joined the Lord on the day of His crucifixion and to where Lazarus was taken after his death, is the pleasant part of Hades, the temporary place

of comfort for the righteous after death. This too proves that the afterlife involves more than just heaven and hell. *Affirmation & Critique*, V.2, April 2000, particularly “The Believers’ Passage through Death,” pp. 101-114, deals with this truth in a much more thorough way, citing many Scriptures and authorities to prove that believers are not transferred to heaven at the time of their death.

Wilkinson’s second citation above is 2 Corinthians 5:8: “We are of good courage then and are well pleased rather to be abroad from the body and at home with the Lord.” That Wilkinson sees “heaven” in this verse once, if not twice, simply indicates that he shares with too many Christians the tainted *a priori* expectation of an eternal home in a luxurious city of physical mansions. In verse 1 of this passage, Paul speaks of his “earthly tabernacle dwelling,” referring to the dying, physical, natural body of the old creation. In contrast to this and in the same principle, the “building from God” which he subsequently mentions is the resurrected, transfigured body, the body mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15. Such a glorified body is both “in” the heavens, having a heavenly nature, in contrast to *earthly* (2 Cor. 5:1), and “out of” (ἐξ) heaven, having the heavenly realm as its source (v. 2). To be abroad from the body is to be released from the confining body in the material realm to be with the Lord in the spiritual realm. This is similar to Paul’s word in Philippians 1:23: “But I am constrained between the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for this is far better.” To be with Christ is a matter of degree, not of place. Paul desired to be with Christ in a higher degree, although he was always with Him constantly (v. 21). Through his physical death he would be with Christ to a fuller extent than he enjoyed in his earthly life, and in resurrection he would receive a glorious transfigured body. This is the basic understanding of 2 Corinthians 5:8. Thus, neither of the phrases *abroad from the body* or *at home with the Lord* carry with them the notion of heaven as an exalted realm of rich mansions. Such an interpretation is a relic of centuries-old leavened teachings, retrofitted to the pure Scriptures.

The third of Wilkinson’s “proof texts” for an eternity in heaven is John 14:2: “In My Father’s house are many abodes; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.” In *Rewards*, these “mansions,” as rendered in the King James Version, constitute an eternal “change of address” for the believers after their death (115). As we have stated many times in this journal, to interpret the “abodes” as physical villas in an empyrean yet material, urban heaven is to completely miss the revelation of the goal of God in the New Testament, and in the Gospel of John in particular. *My Father’s house* in verse 2 must be understood in the light of *My Father’s house* in 2:16. The Father’s house in John 2 is the temple as the sign of the Lord’s physical body

which would be crucified and raised in three days (vv. 19-22). Jesus, as the Word become flesh to be the tabernacle of God among man (1:14), was the temple of God in whom God the Father dwelt in His fullness (14:10; Col. 2:9). After leaving the disciples in crucifixion, He came back to them in resurrection and brought them to the Father and *into* the Father (John 14:20), making them “living stones,” “the temple of God,” and “the house of God, which is the church of the living God” (1 Pet. 2:5; 1 Cor. 3:16; 1 Tim. 3:15), causing the disciples themselves to be the very abodes of the Triune God (John 14:23). According to the entire New Testament, therefore, *My Father’s house* is not a place but a spiritual organism, a corporate person—Christ as the Head with all the believers as His many members—a mutual abode for the Triune God and the redeemed and regenerated believers in Christ. Therefore, neither *My Father’s house* nor *many abodes* refers in the least to heaven as a dwelling place.

That the reward of the faithful believers is “great in heaven” (Luke 6:23) indicates that it is of a heavenly source and nature, of the heavenly realm and sphere, and not of the earthly realm. Not surprisingly, though, Wilkinson’s heaven is troublingly material, an extension of all that is good and enjoyable about life on earth today. “Some of the descriptions of heaven in the New Testament,” he says, “are striking for their concreteness and familiarity,” like the surpassing beauty of C. S. Lewis’s new Narnia, of which the Unicorn exclaimed, “This is the land I have been looking for all my life” (*Devotional* 109-110, 121). Such concrete luxuries include “supremely beautiful” surroundings (*Bible Study* 16)—cities, houses, streets, gates, a river, trees, fruit, people, animals, relationships, and above all else treasures—physical, material, “real, valuable, and highly desired” treasures (51): “Jesus doesn’t want to take away our treasure; He wants to help us to keep it forever in heaven” (56). Having taught us in *The Prayer of Jabez* to pray for the health of our investment portfolios, Wilkinson now teaches that we can indeed take them with us to be enjoyed for eternity in heaven.

According to the revelation of the entire Bible, only a few points of which we have briefly expounded here, we cannot believe that rewards will be either assigned or enjoyed in the spiritual-yet-very-material heaven hoped for by many believers. A reward will be assigned to the overcoming believers and enjoyed by them following the judgment seat of Christ in the future (1 Tim. 6:19), at the Lord’s return (Matt. 16:27; Rev. 22:12), when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory (Matt. 19:28), at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:14), and when the overcomers enter into life (Mark 9:43) and enter into the kingdom (v. 47). None of these events or times necessitate, imply, or support the belief in the heaven imagined

by mystics, poets, investment managers, and misguided teachers through the ages. Apart from this notion of heaven, however, Christians today, cheated by the leavened tradition of “mansions in heaven,” simply have no other vocabulary to speak of the future, the next age, the kingdom, eternity, being “abroad from the body,” the Father’s house, Paradise, and the New Jerusalem. This is due to an inadequate revelation of God’s New Testament economy to build Himself into man and man into Him to produce the church in this age, which will consummate in the New Jerusalem as a universal, spiritual organism in the coming age and in eternity. We have already seen that due to an inadequate understanding of the nature and purpose of the kingdom age, *Rewards* misplaces the timing of the reward and discipline of the believers. Due to the lack of a revelation of the economy of God, it also miscomprehends the nature of the eternal habitation of God and man. These serious errors—in timing and in “locale”—undermine the purpose and teaching of the book.

Rewards and Loss of “Potential Rewards”

Finally, we must address a deficiency in Wilkinson’s treatment of the result contrary to rewards. “When we stand before the bema of Jesus,” he notes, “we may suffer loss” (*Rewards* 55). This loss, he says, is the loss of both “the potential reward we could have earned, and the opportunity to serve God more fully in eternity” (70). At the worst, these lost opportunities will be preceded by a regretful reflection of a wasted life, although this regret will be momentary: “Could anything be more painful than to feel shame and regret *at that moment?*” (*Devotional* 63, emphasis added). In general, he proposes, “The primary purpose of the bema is not loss, but gain” (*Rewards* 56), and on an even more optimistic tone he says, “Heaven never gets worse, only better” (99); it will be “wonderful for all (and even better for some)” (*Devotional* 116). According to Wilkinson, this, and not much more, is the extent of the believers’ loss at the judgment seat of Christ.

This language sounds very much like that of Rick Howard and Jamie Lash—whom Wilkinson quotes in two of his chapters (*Devotional* 58, 86)—as well as that of Mark Bailey and Erwin Lutzer. Howard says, for example, “The issue at the judgment of believers is not punishment. God will be looking for things to reward!” (10). All these authors seem to concur on this: The issue of our

rendering an account before the Lord and of being judged by Him at His bema is simply the difference between *good* and *better*, more rewards or fewer, an eternity of glory or an eternity of glory preceded by a moment of regret. Wilkinson concludes this as part of the “good news of accountability” (*Devotional* 73). However, the New Testament reveals that the judgment seat of Christ will issue in consequences more negative than merely loss of rewards, including wedding guests and unprofitable slaves being cast into outer darkness outside the bright glory in the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens (Matt. 22:13; 25:30), unfaithful and imprudent stewards being beaten with few or many lashes (Luke 12:47-48), and believers who do not endure persecution being hurt by the second death (for discipline, not perdition—Rev. 2:11). Wilkinson does not address these crucial issues.

(For more on this subject, please see *Affirmation & Critique*, V.1, January 2000, pp. 43-46.)

Apart from the notion of heaven, however, Christians today, cheated by the leavened tradition of “mansions in heaven,” simply have no other vocabulary to speak of the future, the next age, the kingdom, eternity, being “abroad from the body,” the Father’s house, Paradise, and the New Jerusalem.

Nourished with the Words of the Faith

The purpose of *A Life God Rewards* is twofold: It is to incite the believers to good works in the light of a coming judgment with long-term consequences, and it is also to encourage those who are already laboring in good works that their labor will not be in vain. To this latter end, Wilkinson recalls Malachi 3:14-18, in which God testifies that He will discern between one who serves Him and one who does not. “On a day in the future, He will open His book of remembrance,” and “not one act of service in His name will have gone unnoticed or unrewarded” (111). Wilkinson reports that his

good news of accountability has been preached in numerous conferences and seminars, often with the testimony of revival, renewal, and encouragement on the part of the audience. His report is credible, for indeed, the Lord’s promise of a day of reckoning for the believers is inciting, inspiring, and for the faithful, encouraging.

However, there are several serious flaws in Wilkinson’s presentation, including his lack of understanding concerning the nature and purpose of the kingdom age and his acceptance and perpetuation of traditional, leavened, and fantasy-filled notions of heaven. Because of this, his good news may indeed be inspirational, but it lacks the full effectiveness of the ministry of God’s Word and even propagates outright error. Concerning the teaching of the apostles, 1 Timothy 4:6 says, “If you lay these things

before the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, being nourished with the words of the faith and of the good teaching which you have closely followed.” The words of the faith are the words of the full gospel concerning God’s New Testament economy, and the words of the good teaching are the words that contain and convey the riches of Christ to nourish, edify, and strengthen the believers. The believers may be served momentarily by being inspired, but they are best served by being nourished with the riches of Christ in the accurately expounded words of God’s New Testament economy.

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Orthodoxy and Unity Reconsidered

The Rebirth of Orthodoxy, by Thomas C. Oden. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003.

Thomas C. Oden, Henry Anson Buttz Professor of Theology and Ethics at Drew University, chairman of The Institute on Religion and Democracy, and general editor of The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series, pens in *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy* (hereafter *Rebirth*) a work that demands serious consideration and reflection. After wandering about for a number of years in the areas of hard-left theology and Christian-oriented liberal activism, Oden was challenged by Will Herberg, his “irascible, endearing Jewish mentor” (87) to study classic Christianity particularly as enunciated by the Fathers of the church, if for no other reason than to live up to his job description as a theologian. This fatherly exhortation prompted a radical reorientation in Oden’s pursuit as a theologian and a Christian, to the extent that he has become one of the harshest critics of modernistic Christianity and one of the leading proponents of both small o orthodoxy and an ecumenism that is committed unapologetically to ancient classic Christian teaching.

In the first part of his book, Oden explains the phenomenon of orthodoxy. Here the reader is introduced to the key points of modern secularism and its eventual demise before our eyes. The primary cause of its fall, Oden observes, was its rejection of the wisdom of the past and its knee-jerk acceptance of anything new. Dispossessed of roots yet seeking a deep connection to time-honored truths, many believers have together created a ground swell of interest in ancient consensual Christian teaching, or orthodoxy. Oden continues this section by defining and explaining orthodoxy, remarking upon parallel orthodox tendencies among some Jewish circles, uncovering the keys to orthodoxy’s persistence, and outlining a new ecumenism founded upon classical orthodoxy. The second part of the book details the signs of this rebirth, which include personal transformation in the lives of those it has touched (including Oden’s own), the growth of faithful scriptural interpretation in the light of ancient Christian texts, the strengthening of the multicultural aspect of orthodoxy, the growing boldness among believers to mark the boundaries of Christian doctrine, the reclamation of ecumenical roots, and the revival of classic consensual ecumenical method as first set down by Vincent of Lérins in the fifth century. In his “Concluding Imperatives” (187). Oden expresses his hope not just that the readers would be convinced that orthodoxy is undergoing rebirth, but that orthodoxy would be reborn in them in an experiential and life altering way.

While *Rebirth* exhibits a seeking spirit, fights for the orthodox faith, encourages Christian unity, and petitions its readers to study the Word and its greatest expounders, it lamentably overlooks and unknowingly contributes to the very problems that have kept the church from entering into the full knowledge of the truth and laying hold of true oneness.

Oral Tradition versus the Divine Revelation

Although the title speaks of the rebirth of orthodoxy, the book gives considerable attention to a description of and defense of orthodoxy as Oden understands it. *Rebirth*’s treatment of orthodoxy is compelling, not only because it is lucid but also because it is impassioned. Oden himself underwent a conversion of sorts from being a movement theologian to being a “Freudian-Marxist-existentialist-demythologizing” (87) theologian to being a God-loving, Bible-believing, tradition-honoring believer (a process he describes in detail in chapter six). Perhaps because of his own experience, he first explains the rebirth of orthodoxy as a phenomenon emerging out of and rising up against the desolate legacy of modern secularism. Modernity “has attempted a preemptive strike on all premodern wisdoms” (8), he writes. Rob humanity of received wisdom and multi-generational memory, however, and what is left is a sense of historical and spiritual rootlessness that

demands relief. Thus, it is no surprise that the abandonment of the certainty and solidity of faith and connectedness with the past has prompted a reaction among believers. Bearing within themselves the sense of rootlessness and a longing for historical depth, many believers, like Oden himself, in their search for roots are seeking an “accurate and plausible recollection of historical wisdom” with its depth, prudence, and tradition (10). This dawning seeking and its accompanying “profound rediscovery of the texts, methods, and pastoral wisdom of the long-neglected...patristic traditions—that is, the traditions of...the early fathers of the church of the first millennium” (11), is the rebirth of orthodoxy. It is these texts and the truths they convey, *Rebirth* asserts, that form the basis of orthodoxy.

Having introduced us to the orthodox movement, Oden identifies orthodoxy as “ancient consensual scriptural teaching” (29), which he identifies as “the doctrine taught during the period of ancient ecumenical Christianity—doctrine that is commonly called *classic* Christian teaching” (29). According to *Rebirth*, this teaching was set forth in the New Testament, defined in the conciliar process, and most concisely expressed in the classic creeds (principally the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed) and their subsequent confessions. Orthodoxy has, generally speaking, been received by all believers at all times in all places, and it is that for which countless faithful ones have suffered and died. *Rebirth* posits that this teaching “is nothing more or less than the ancient consensual tradition of Spirit-guided discernment of scripture” (31). The book firmly attests to the fact that the recollection process of the people of God was guarded by the Holy Spirit Himself and did not—indeed, could not—go astray (32). Hence, we read, the oral tradition of consensual teaching, especially that which is recorded by the fathers of the church and is read by us today, complements instead of adds to or detracts from, the written tradition contained in the canon (32).

Chapter four presents Oden’s view on how orthodoxy persists and is faithfully transmitted. At the heart of such persistence are the transcending nature of God’s will and the keeping power of the Holy Spirit. In this chapter, we read that

God promises to preserve his people from fundamental

error in the long course of history...God did not create the community of faith at such great cost only to let it fall finally into irremediable error. This [the doctrine of faithful preservation]...is a doctrine grounded in the utter reliability of the divine will to accomplish God’s purpose. (45)

Rebirth rightly states that the Holy Spirit is by no means inactive in the life of the church: “The Holy Spirit has a perfect memory of the truth, even when we remember imperfectly” (45). Indeed, “the Holy Spirit promises to uphold faith from an irrecoverable fall into apostasy” (46). Not only does the Spirit preserve the faith, *Rebirth* offers, but He also maintains the general consent of the people of God from one generation to the next: “The Spirit works relentlessly...to offer noncoercive resistance to false teachings, striving for unity of the faithful and valid transmission of the apostolic tradition” (48).

Bearing within themselves the sense of rootlessness and a longing for historical depth, many believers, in their search for roots are seeking an “accurate and plausible recollection of historical wisdom” with its depth, prudence, and tradition.”

In the final chapter, “Rediscovering the Classic Ecumenical Method,” *Rebirth* presents the “crowning act” of orthodoxy’s rebirth: the rediscovery and practice of “think[ing] ecumenically in classic terms” (156). This chapter centers around Vincent of Lérins’s method of consensual recollection and its application in our own times. Vincent was a fifth century Christian who sought to understand and preserve for succeeding generations the means for recollecting rightly what believers at that time already knew and had received from their spiritual forebears. He recorded his findings, which he premised on the promise of the Holy Spirit to assist the memory of believers, in his classic work,

Commonitorium (known by many today simply as *Commonitory*). The central rule by which Vincent would determine what things were orthodox (that is, what things were a right remembering of the faith as handed down from the apostles) has come to be known as the Vincentian rule. Oden expresses this rule as follows: “In the worldwide community of believers every care should be taken to hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all” (162). In Vincent’s tradition, *Rebirth* maintains that by using the three criteria of universality (“everywhere”), apostolic antiquity (“always”), and conciliar consent (“by all”), believers today are able to define accurately every key point of orthodoxy. If a teaching is not shared by the entire community of believers, not grounded in the teaching of the first-century apostles, and not confirmed by ecumenical councils or

the consensus of the church fathers, there is a possibility that it may not be orthodox. Indeed, if any teaching is contrary to any one of these criteria, it may well fall into the category of heterodoxy. Oden furthermore summarizes Vincent's four levels of tests by which to authenticate "truth-claims" (171):

1. The universal prevails over the particular (the whole is preferred to the part).
2. The older apostolic witness prevails over the new alleged general consent.
3. Conciliar actions and decisions prevail over faith-claims as yet untested by conciliar acts.
4. Where no conciliar rule avails, the most reliable consensual ancient authorities prevail over those less consensual over the generations. (171-172)

Rebirth makes much of Vincent of Lérins's "proximity" to the early apostolic era—"only ten generations away from the originating event" (185)—and cites this as grounds for believing his understanding of the means of authenticating ancient Christian wisdom. Oden reasons,

We can trust his distillation of that procedure, because he lived only ten generations from the first generation of apostles (if we assume a quarter-century as the span of a generation).

Consider this succession of witnesses: Paul knew Polycarp, who knew Irenaeus, who knew Callistus..., who knew Dionysius of Alexandria..., who knew Anthony of the Desert..., who knew Athanasius..., who knew Damasus..., who knew John Cassian..., who knew Honorat, who was the abbot of Lérins, who knew Vincent. In these ten generations separating Paul and Vincent, the guardianship of the apostolic witness was taken with absolute seriousness and defended to the death. Only ten generations. (185)

In Oden's view, the primary opponent of orthodoxy in this day and age is modern secularism. This thought constantly casts doubt upon the ability of the Christian community to preserve undistorted the teaching taught during the apostolic era. As mentioned earlier, Oden's response to this charge is that through the preserving power of the Holy Spirit, such teaching has been accurately conveyed from one generation to the next with no adulteration that is not eventually caught and remedied. This answer seeks to counter liberalism's claims of interpretational deviation due to human error throughout the passage of time and attempts to explain the pure transmission of both the Scriptures and the basic items of the faith from ancient times to the present. However, in

seeking to vindicate an accurate transmission of the faith, *Rebirth* overlooks an equally true, albeit tragic, aspect of church history: namely, the degradation of the church and with it, the loss of significant elements of New Testament teaching.

Degradation of the church refers to the departure of the church from the breadth of the essential New Testament teaching and from the proper practice of that teaching as described in the New Testament. It is a fact of history that, even while Paul, Peter, and John were alive and ministering, churches were falling away from the apostles, believers were becoming shipwrecked concerning the faith, and some of the central matters of the Christian faith were being misrepresented, twisted, and simply forgotten. Readers of the New Testament stand in need of appreciating freshly that nearly all of the letters in the New Testament were written to address deep and distressing problems, which, if left untreated, would spoil local assemblies and infect larger areas of Christ's Body. This body of Scripture, then, presents verse after chapter after epistle of evidence of the church's decline and with it, a fading adherence to divine truth. Within the first few verses of 1 Timothy, Paul reminds Timothy of his instruction to stay in Ephesus, where he was to "charge certain ones not to teach different things nor to give heed to myths and unending genealogies, which produce questionings rather than God's economy, which is in faith" (1:3-4). That Paul would charge the young Timothy regarding different teachings that were being propounded in Ephesus indicates a level of degradation from the pure faith, which, if left unchecked, would undermine the central teaching of the New Testament—the economy of God. Indeed, Paul goes on to repeat the Spirit's warning that "in later times [the times in which Timothy and Paul were living] some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and teachings of demons by means of the hypocrisy of men who speak lies" (4:1-2). It appears that such deviation or at least falling away from the healthy teaching was occurring not just in Ephesus; Paul remarked in his letter to the Philippians that among all his co-workers and among all the churches that he had planted, only Timothy was "like-souled" with him (2:20). By the time he wrote his second Epistle to Timothy, all the churches in Asia had forsaken Paul, indicating that they had abandoned not only him, but more importantly, his teaching, which was nothing less than the completion of the word of God (1:15; Col. 1:25). The condition of the churches in Asia at the time that John wrote to them was woeful to the extreme. The litany of grievances that the Lord had against the majority of the Asian churches indicates that degradation had become so rampant, and those faithful to Him so rare, that the Lord issued to them stern rebukes and solemn warnings, going so far as to threaten the removal of the lampstand of His testimony out from Ephesus, a church whose situation seemed moderate

compared to that of some of the others (Rev. 2:5).

Although God revealed all elements of the Christian faith to the apostles, the full content of that faith was not necessarily received through oral tradition by the generations following the apostles, even the one immediately succeeding the apostolic age.¹ In a fact that may be hard for us to accept, Paul's teaching was hard to understand even by Peter's standard (2 Pet. 3:15-16). It should then be no surprise that others of a lesser stature than Peter would encounter difficulty understanding the revelation that was given through Paul and the other apostles.

At this point it is important to distinguish between two kinds of contributors to the decline of the church—maliciously false teachers and well-intentioned, but inadequate teachers. The former twist the healthy teaching into heresies and false teachings, while the latter simply do not understand them and thus could hardly relay them accurately to succeeding generations of Christians (v. 16; Acts 18:24-26). While willfully destructive teachers present extreme difficulty to the church, innocuous and innocent yet ignorant and incomplete teaching has as insidious an effect on the church and the truth. This kind of teaching is what predominated from the middle of the first century onward. The fact that the generation immediately following Paul (to say nothing of his own generation) seems not to have had much of a grasp of his enunciation of the divine revelation does not speak well for *Rebirth's* (or *Lerins's*) contention that the divine revelation was indeed transmitted perfectly through extra-canonical tradition.

Paul, the great expositor of the Old Testament, was the vessel chosen by God (Acts 9:15), a minister according to the stewardship of God divinely appointed to complete the word of God (Col. 1:25). The content of the divine revelation given to him for all believers was nothing less than “the mystery which has been hidden from the ages and from the generations but now has been manifested to His saints” and “the economy of the mystery...which throughout the ages has been hidden in God” (v. 26; Eph. 3:9). God's purpose, concisely expressed, is God's intention to express Himself through humanity. His economy is the way in which He accomplishes His purpose—dispensing Himself in His divine trinity into His chosen and redeemed elect until they

become like Him in life and in nature but not in the Godhead and are built up together into the Body of Christ, which consummates in the New Jerusalem, the full and perfect expression of God through man. Although this truth is the frame in which all of Paul's teaching and indeed that of John, Peter, and the balance of the New Testament apostles should be understood, it finds utterance only in the pages of the New Testament and did not enjoy transmission to even the generation of believers who were educated at the apostles' feet. Compare Paul's writings to those of Clement, whom Eusebius affirms knew Paul, or the writings of John to those of his pupil, Polycarp, or the *Didache* to the New Testament in general. What is immediately observed is a precipitous drop in content, in depth, and in the understanding of the divine revelation. The hidden mystery that forms the centerpiece of the New Testament revelation (and indeed the Old Testament revelation) finds utterance in Paul and the apostles as it found in no one else, even a generation after them.

The fact that the generation immediately following Paul seems not to have had much of a grasp of his enunciation of the divine revelation does not speak well for the contention that the divine revelation was indeed transmitted perfectly through extra-canonical tradition.

This observation in no way casts doubt on the inerrancy of the New Testament, nor does it call into question the foundational points of the Christian faith, which, through the faithfulness of God and the preserving work of the Holy Spirit, have escaped substantive degradation throughout the passage of time. The doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and the redemption and resurrection of Christ are ably and accurately expressed in the Scriptures and in Christian tradition, namely through the mouthpiece of the councils. The general problem with orthodoxy as framed by Oden centers not

so much on the issue of accuracy but on that of completeness. While the faith that has been passed down and recorded through the generations is accurate, so far its foundational matters are concerned, it is far from a complete representation of apostolic teaching as presented in the New Testament.

It is for this reason that the oral tradition should not be construed to be as decisive an adjudicator of Christian truth as Vincent and Oden contend. Although the writings of the doctors of the church are instructive and fruitful for our study today, if we use them as the primary source by which to interpret Scripture and determine orthodoxy, a practice that *Rebirth* was largely written to teach and encourage, we will be robbed of the comprehensive and resplendent revelation of God's eternal

purpose as expressed in canonical utterance. What then is the place of traditional consensual teaching, and how does historical Christianity as expressed by the fathers, fine-tuned in the councils, and represented in the creeds figure in a believer's search for doctrinal veracity? It should be judged based upon the criterion upon which we judge any other extra-canonical source: does it explicate the Word of God both accurately and fully? To the extent that the ancient tradition does, we should accept it; to the extent that it does not, we should look to those sources that do.

Reform versus Recovery

According to *Rebirth*, the signs of the rebirth of orthodoxy are several, including the re-orientation of the lives of many toward orthodox truths, the rediscovery of the earliest biblical interpreters, the strengthening of the multicultural nature of orthodoxy, the increased willingness among confessing believers to engage in biblically-informed doctrinal boundary-setting, the rejuvenation of many mainline Protestant organizations, and the rediscovery of the classic ecumenical method as described by Vincent of Lérins. In the foregoing paragraphs, I have made remarks about *Rebirth's* view of orthodoxy and the Vincentian method. From this point onward, I turn my attention to *Rebirth's* treatment of the growth of orthodox teaching within the mainline denominations and, in particular, to its discussion of the role such religious institutions play in a return to God's revealed intention.

Rebirth maintains that one of the most visible evidences of the rebirth of orthodoxy is found in the liberal Protestant mainline churches. Indeed, although many of the clergy in these denominations, and many of their in-house publications, have made a lurch leftward in both their theology and politics, the astute observer will perceive that the laity remains largely orthodox. Hence, while the top half, so to speak, of these institutions continues to careen deeper into secularism, the bottom half has seeded a number of grass-roots movements and Scripture-centered accountability movements that are aimed at the renewal of classic Christian teaching from within (140). These groups and interests are frequently called the *confessing movements*. Similar, but distinct from the confessing movements are the *renewing movements*, which are focused on reclaiming fallen religious institutions. "The expectation is increasing," states Oden, that these movements "will *reform* the decaying mainline" (140). Oden then spends several pages seeking to corroborate this statement by providing his readership with a "remarkable roster" (145) of various confessing movements that exist within most, if not all, mainline denominations throughout the United States and Canada.

Anticipating a level of doubt in his readers as to whether or not such a reform from within is advisable, much less possible, Oden addresses a very serious question: "Why remain faithful to an apostatizing church?" (149). In other words, "Why don't orthodox believers just walk away from a church long locked in secularizing ideologies?" (149). Responds Oden, "The renewing and confessing movements are growing firmer in their answer: The mainline is a sleeping giant still capable of recovering its earlier history of evangelical witness and leadership. Its institutions are worth recovering and cannot easily be replicated. Much will be lost by their almost total collapse" (150).

Although *Rebirth* offers pragmatic reasons for believers to "remain within their conflicted communions to renew and reground them," such as the one given above, *Rebirth* cites another, more specific reason: "We are sternly warned by scripture against schism. We dare not further divide the church, which has suffered enough already under the divisiveness of false teachers and ideological advocates." (150). Oden reminds us that none of us heard the gospel apart from the faith community that transmitted it to us. In his eyes, "to leave our communion tempts us toward a despairing act of voluntary abandonment of communities and institutions to which our forefathers and foremothers gave blood, sweat, prayers, and tears, and through which the apostolic teaching has been transmitted" (150-151). Oden also asserts that "to leave one structure is to embrace another" (151)—a structure which may have similar or worse problems than the one we just left.

That point aside, to leave our religious structures is furthermore to abandon all hope of renewal. States Oden,

To quit is to leave behind mounting problems that will *never* be solved unless the faithful are willing to roll up their sleeves and help. The churches need loyal and steady critics more than purists or loners or deserters....

The Holy Spirit is working to renew the church, and we are invited to participate in the renewal. To abdicate our own historical mainline communion now would be wasteful and negligent. It would be like leaving a family in distress just at a time when a fresh start is possible....

The longer we wait to clean house, the harder the recovery of classic Christianity will be. (151)

Oden concludes his argument for pursuing renewal within the context of the denominations in the following manner:

Although it is sometimes argued that the mainline churches have so fundamentally deteriorated that they

are intractable and practically unreformable, the confessing movements disagree, arguing that the Holy Spirit has not given up on our local churches with their families, their roots, their histories, and their promise. Proponents of church reform believe that the Holy Spirit has called us to pray for the various communions that brought us to faith and to remain as agents of witness and reconciliation within them. (151)

In short, Oden calls upon orthodox believers to use the various forms of capital within these “lapsed institutions” (139)—primarily their people, history, and structures—as the means to restore them to orthodoxy (155).

In advocating that believers stay within the “captive institutions” (155), however hopeless they may seem, *Rebirth* displays an ardent spirit of sympathy and hope. Notwithstanding, such advocacy also betrays a very deep misunderstanding of the church. Indeed, in this brief section, *Rebirth* unwittingly exposes a systemic problem that infects nearly the sum of Protestant and evangelical ecclesiology. Concerning the truth of the church *Rebirth* has misaimed.

In order to best understand the nature of *Rebirth's* error, we must have a proper view concerning the church. According to the pure revelation of the holy Scriptures, every redeemed and regenerated believer in Christ is a member of the universal church. The only qualification for his or her entrance into the church is faith in the crucified and resurrected Christ for the remission of sins which initiates the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Regeneration by the Spirit marks the introduction of a believer not only into the universal church but also into the practicality of a church life in whatever city he happens to be. This is displayed in Acts, where the existence of believers in a locale marked the beginning of the church in that place. For example, Acts 2 speaks of the salvation of three thousand in Jerusalem, and chapter four speaks of the salvation of an additional five thousand in that city. As Watchman Nee observes in *The Normal Christian Church Life*,

Without a single word of explanation they are referred to in the following chapter as the church—“And great fear came upon the whole church” (5:11). Here the Scriptures call the children of God “the church,” without even mentioning how the church came into being. In Acts 8:1, immediately after the death of Stephen, the word is

again used, and the connection in this case is clearer than before. “There occurred in that day a great persecution against the church which was in Jerusalem.” (73)

The passage that Nee cites makes it obvious that the believers in Jerusalem were the church in Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem thus consisted of all the saved ones in that city. The church, as delimited in the Bible, thus consists of all the saved ones in a given locality (73). On such a basis, we may conclude with Nee that “it is this inherent unity [of the Spirit] that accounts for the impossibility of division between believers, except for geographical reasons” (76).

In addition to possessing the benefit of being supremely reasonable and commonsensical, as the truth is wont, this understanding of church unity, both on the universal and local planes, is entirely supported by the witness of Scripture. However, while it is generally accepted for the church universal, a general intransigence is encountered in most Protestant circles in regard to this truth when it is applied to the local church. Nevertheless, it remains true that even a cursory search of the New Testament turns up a deafening silence concerning denominationalism or the existence of more than one “church” in any given city. In other words, one could say that the New Testament does not acquiesce to the confused condition of the church two thousand years after its establishment. Strictly speaking, the canon does not even contemplate the existence of such a situation: neither the Acts of the Apostles nor the Epistles speak of the type of divisions and

Even a cursory search of the New Testament turns up a deafening silence concerning denominationalism. The canon does not even contemplate the existence of such a situation: neither Acts nor the Epistles speak of the type of divisions and sects that dominate the post-apostolic landscape.

sects that dominate the post-apostolic landscape. Instead, they present a very clear and consistent principle of the unique oneness of all believers and thus the unique oneness of the church of God both in its universal and local aspects. The Spirit states unequivocally that there is “one Body,” which is “the church” (Eph. 4:4; 1:22-23). This point is not debatable. Equally indisputable is the Spirit’s record concerning the local expressions of the universal church. According to the divine utterance in Acts 13:1, these local expressions are, unsurprisingly, local churches. So, we have references to “the church which was in Jerusalem” (8:1), the “church” in Antioch (13:1), “the church of God which is in Corinth” (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1), “the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thes. 1:1; 2 Thes. 1:1), “the church in Ephesus” (Rev. 2:1), “the church in Smyrna” (v. 8), “the church in Pergamos”

(v. 12), “the church in Thyatira” (v. 18), “the church in Sardis” (3:1), “the church in Philadelphia” (v. 7), and “the church in Laodicea” (v. 14). As the definite article associated with each church in the foregoing verses indicates, each of these churches was unique in its city. Indeed, there are no scriptural sources that suggest that there was ever more than one church per city during apostolic times.² The pure revelation of the holy Scriptures concerning the principle of “one city, one church” thus unveils God’s concept for the church both in its universal and local existence and practice.

Bearing in mind this limited survey of New Testament ecclesiological thought, it would be fair to say that the ecclesiology we see in *Rebirth*—similar in its assumptions to that of nearly all Protestant organs—bears little similarity to the biblical revelation of the church. *Rebirth* proffers a seemingly persuasive argument against a denomination’s theological or moral weakness being a good reason to leave it. But by the same token, neither is a denomination’s deficient doctrinal health, or even robust health, a justification to stay. By injecting a hope of reform into the issue of denominationalism, the picture that is otherwise clear in the holy Scriptures is obscured. When it comes to the question of whether we should leave a denominational institution, the New Testament provides its readers with stunningly clear answers. The issue of whether or not a denomination or other religious institution holds to correct theology, is weak in the faith, or displays hope for eventual renewal is beside the point. Whether or not one should remain in a denomination or any other group depends solely upon whether that group is rightly related to both the one universal church and its local expression. Indeed, it is from a proper relationship with the church that one can take action vis-à-vis the church that matches the revelation in the Scriptures.

As we have seen, the true oneness of the Body is the oneness of the Spirit, which we share through regeneration; the only separation that is allowed between believers is that which geography demands. This means that whether a denomination is orthodox or not, whether it shows signs of becoming more orthodox or not, or even whether it simply suits one’s fancy or not is not grounds for remaining in it or abandoning it. Denominations are divisions, which the Bible condemns in no uncertain terms. They must be abandoned, and the various divisive grounds on which they were founded must be forsaken. Rather than seeking a rebirth of orthodoxy within intrinsically divisive segments of the church, the genuine seekers of God will seek a recovery of the practice of the genuine local church within their city and outside of every faction.³

In the Old Testament, Israel, the chosen race, was led by God out of Egypt into the promised land of Canaan. After conquering the inhabitants of their God-given land, the

Israelites built a temple in Jerusalem, the unique place of God’s choosing. The temple in Jerusalem preserved the unity of God’s people, who, although they were intrinsically one—all coming from Israel (Jacob) their father—had to maintain their practical and visible unity for the sake of God’s testimony. Remarks Witness Lee, “Without such a center, after the children of Israel had entered the good land, they would have been divided. Foreseeing this problem, God repeated the commandment again and again concerning the place of His choosing” (2451). We see this repeated commandment in Deuteronomy 12:

But to the place which Jehovah your God will choose out of all your tribes to put His name, to His habitation, shall you seek, and there shall you go....Then to the place where Jehovah your God will choose to cause His name to dwell, there you shall bring all that I am commanding you, your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the heave offering of your hand and all your choice vows which you vow to Jehovah....Be careful that you do not offer up your burnt offerings in every place that you see; but in the place which Jehovah will choose in one of your tribes, there you shall offer up your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I am commanding you. (vv. 5, 11, 13-14)

Nevertheless, following the building of the temple, Israel fell into decline, was divided, and was eventually overrun by the Babylonians, who destroyed the temple and took the Hebrews to Babylon, where they remained as captives for seventy years. Whereas Jerusalem was the ground of oneness, Babylon, whose name means *confusion*, was a place of division, scattering, and captivity. Lee continues,

The people of Israel had no right to choose their own place to worship. That right was in God’s hands; He alone could make that choice, and the people were to take His choice, the divine choice. God’s choice became the center of the gathering of His people, and this is the unique ground of unity. For this reason, it was necessary for God’s people in the Old Testament to be brought back to Jerusalem, the unique ground ordained by God. (2451)

Hence, after seventy years and as the result of the faithful intercession of the aging Daniel (Dan. 6:10; 9:2-3), a return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple and the city were undertaken by a small remnant of God’s people under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra 1:3 records part of Cyrus’s proclamation allowing the Jews to return to their land: “Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him; and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and let him build the house of Jehovah the God of Israel—He is God—who is in Jerusalem.” The remnant who hearkened to this proclamation realized that if they were to remain in

the confused situation of Babylon and not go up to Jerusalem, God would neither have a proper testimony nor receive proper worship. The majority of God's people, however, did not have ears to hear the divine injunction in Deuteronomy and stubbornly remained in Babylon.

As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:6, Israel's history is an example to us. Being their direct spiritual descendants, we should take heed to the events that befell our Old Testament fathers and through which they passed. Based upon this principle, Lee states that "the return of the children of Israel from their captivity typifies the recovery of the church" (2448). The injunction of the New Testament is that the church, both in its universal reality and local expression would be indivisible. Nevertheless, the church has fallen into a captivity of Babylonian proportions. In this bondage the unique place of God's worship has been lost, for the most part forgotten, and in too many instances ignored and even devalued. The ensuing situation is a Babylonian confusion among Christians. Rather than taking the unity of the Spirit and the simple ground of locality as the factors for preserving unity, confessing believers today have created a situation in which practical unity is little more than a dream while division remains a guiding principle of Christian activity.

What is God's attitude regarding the current captivity of the church? The apostle John gives voice to the Spirit when he hearkened back to Israel's captivity of old and wrote concerning a new Babylonian captivity under which the church would suffer. This imperative, strikingly similar to Cyrus's proclamation to the Jews to leave Babylon and return to Jerusalem, is "Come out of her, My people" (Rev. 18:4). To come out of Babylon is to come out of the confusing and divided captivity which the church of God has suffered for centuries (v. 2).

Uncertain signals result in uncertain battles. And it is precisely such an uncertain blast of the trump that *Rebirth* sounds with regard to reclaiming the church. *Rebirth's* call to arms centers around a plea to stay within the system of division that has torn asunder the Body of Christ. To follow that signal is to promote and aid the survival of a system which is contrary to Scripture and is diametrically opposed to the genuine unity of the church. God's command to His people is not "Remain!" as *Rebirth* would have us understand; it is "Come out!" God's answer to the

church's division, denomination, and degradation is not reform but exodus and recovery. Regarding recovery, as opposed to reform, Witness Lee states the following:

"Recovery" means the restoration or return to a normal condition after a damage or a loss has been incurred. When we speak of the recovery of the church, we mean that something was there originally, that it became lost or damaged, and that now there is the need to bring that thing back to its original state. Because the church has become degraded through the many centuries of its history, it needs to be restored according to God's original intention. Concerning the church, our vision should be governed not by the present situation nor by traditional practice but by God's original intention and standard as revealed in the Scriptures. (2447)

Rather than taking the unity of the Spirit and the ground of locality as the factors for preserving unity, confessing believers have created a situation in which practical unity is little more than a dream while division remains a guiding principle of Christian activity.

In the final analysis, *Rebirth's* ecclesiology, shared by essentially all of Protestantism, is so much fodder for the New Testament canon. What is needed in the church today is not a renewal of failed institutions. The desperate need of the church today is an exodus out of the denominated and divided church and a recovery to the church's original, unique, and normal condition. Only when believers exit the Babylonian ground of captivity and come back to the ground of oneness will the problem of division, the existence of which is accepted and assisted by today's Christianity and finds complicity in *Rebirth*, begin to be addressed and any genuine "rebirth" commence. Anything short of such a recovery falls short of the command of God in the Scriptures and contradicts the word of the indwelling

Spirit within the believers.⁴

Conclusion

Orthodoxy and unity are basic aspects of the Christian experience. Throughout the history of the church, they also have proven to be the most problematic. While Oden lays open his feelings and sets forth his findings in a spirit of truth-seeking, he regrettably falls short with regard to these critical two points. First, although he notes the general success of the church fathers in keeping the elements of the faith free of appreciable alteration, he fails to see their incompleteness in both understanding and consequently uttering biblical truths. By esteeming the fathers as the most accurate interpreters of the Word, Oden relies upon an inadequate

yardstick for the truth. In more or less restricting Christian hermeneutics to what the first millennium of believers saw and understood, he limits the believers' ability to pursue a fuller understanding of the depths of the Word of God. Although certainly unconsciously, he also underestimates the revelatory activity of the Holy Spirit. Oden extols the preserving power of the Holy Spirit in keeping orthodoxy truly orthodox. However, the Spirit who preserves is also the Spirit who illumines. It is regrettable that Oden does not stress a return to a living interaction with the illuminating Spirit in prayerfully considering the Scriptures in addition to returning to the early teachings of the church.

Second, although Oden repeats the divine injunction against schism, he advocates reform from within a fundamentally discordant situation, acquiescing to the current condition of Christian disunity. Within every believer there is a divine aversion to division. This comes not only from the clear letter of the Bible but also from the indwelling Spirit within every believer. The Spirit is one, and so is the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:4); division in the church is contrary to the very nature of every regenerated believer. Nevertheless, the situation in which Christians live and move today is one of deeply ingrained division that ignores and even defies the Spirit's impulse toward oneness. Oden seems to be aware at some level of this inward impulse because of his repeated warnings against schism. He, unfortunately, misinterprets this spiritual aversion to division as a call to reform rather than to condemn the de facto human divisions in existence. It is difficult to accept the simple realization that if division should not be tolerated in the Body of Christ, then the human institutions that perpetuate division should not be tolerated as well, no matter how ancient and "orthodox" they may appear to be. May we all be strengthened to arrive at the oneness of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God.

by Nathan Betz

Notes

¹This does not mean, of course, that any of the divine revelation was lost. The entire divine revelation, and with it the entire content of the faith, has been fully and exhaustively recorded in the New Testament. This fact, in and of itself, is enough to sustain Oden's argument concerning the preserving power of the Holy Spirit without the need for reference to creeds, councils, or the Vincentian rule.

²First Corinthians 16:1 and Galatians 1:2 both contain the phrase *the churches of Galatia*. It must be noted, however, that Galatia was not a city but rather a province of the ancient Roman Empire. Hence, *churches* here refers to the churches in the cities of Galatia collectively.

Nor does Paul's word on division in 1 Corinthians allude to the existence of separate denominational congregations in Corinth. That Epistle, despite recording an instance of gross division, does not in any way indicate that the believers in Corinth were meeting separately. If they were, imagine the confusion on the part of the separate congregations upon the arrival of an Epistle of Paul addressed simply to "the church of God which is in Corinth" (1:2). Furthermore, Paul indicates that the entire church came together (14:23). Even in the throes of their schismatic crisis, the believers in Corinth maintained the unity of the local church and did not establish separate congregations!

³This discussion takes for granted that the believers in question are pure with regard to the basic items of the faith (e.g., the Bible, the Triune God, the person and work of Christ, etc.). Should so-called believers be aberrant in the faith, they cannot be received into the practical church life. This principle applies generally to those who neglect to hear the church (Matt. 18:15-17), those who cause divisions (Rom. 16:17), those who are exceedingly evil in that they insult God's divinity or damage humanity (1 Cor. 5:13), those who are sectarian (Titus 3:10, Gk.), and those who go beyond the teaching of Christ (2 John 9-10, 7). All believers who do not fall into these several categories must be received absolutely and without preference into a local church.

⁴Some may charge that leaving the denominations and the denominational system is schismatic, or, in Oden's words, "to leave one structure is to embrace another" (151). Leaving the denominations and the denominating principle to come back to God's explicitly expressed New Testament will of one church in each city is no more divisive than was the ancient Israelites' leaving their families and loved ones in Babylon to return to Jerusalem, God's unique place of worship. Extreme, unpopular, or difficult it may be; schismatic it most certainly is not. The burden of defense falls on those who would remain in division rather than on those who would leave it.

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An Incomplete Revelation of Experiencing the Trinity

Experiencing the Trinity, by Darrell W. Johnson.
Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2002.

Darrell W. Johnson, Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, seeks to underscore in *Experiencing the Trinity*

(hereafter *Experiencing*) the doctrine of the Trinity as the heart of Christian faith and experience. In the main, the book posits that the doctrine of the Trinity must be relevant to our experience of Him in our everyday life. *Experiencing* premises its thesis on an assumption that the doctrine of the Trinity was borne out of the early apostles' living encounter with the resurrected Christ, not their philosophical speculation. Based on this premise, Johnson portrays the Trinity as a community of love and invites the believers to participate in the inner life of the Trinity. Although the book presents orthodox biblical doctrines of the Trinity and underlines the need for our experience of Him, the doctrine and experience of the Trinity endorsed by the book come short of the biblical revelation of the Triune God in His life-union with redeemed humanity. This shortcoming is sourced in its lack of revelation concerning the primary means of our experience of the Triune God—the life-giving Spirit in our human spirit—and in its negation of the issue of our experience of the Triune God—the deification of man through the mingling of the divine and human natures.¹ Because of these deficiencies, *Experiencing* misses the ultimate goal of our experience of the Triune God—the mutual indwelling of the Triune God with tripartite redeemed humanity for His corporate expression, the Body of Christ.

Experiencing's View of the Trinity in Our Experience

In the first chapter, "The Simple Jesus," Johnson argues that since the doctrine of the Trinity did not emerge out of "an ivory tower think-tank" but out of "the life and mission of ordinary Christian congregations" (18), a proper understanding of the Trinity should impact our everyday Christian lives. According to the book, although the word *Trinity* does not appear in Scripture, the Bible abounds with traces, or "tracks" (21), of the threefoldness of God's nature. The book examines these tracks of threefoldness throughout the record of God's self-revelation—the Old and New Testaments. Johnson starts with Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." In this verse the Hebrew word for *God* is *Elohim*, a plural noun, but the verb that describes His action is singular, thus suggesting plurality in the one God. More striking are plural personal pronouns referring to God in Genesis 1:26, where God says, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." "A multiplicity, a plurality within the unity of

God's being" (25) is also affirmed by God's commandment that priests bless the children of Israel with a threefold benediction in Numbers 6:24-26 as well as the angelic hosts' singing to God with the threefold refrain, "Holy, holy, holy" in Isaiah 6:3. The New Testament is even more replete with the tracks of the threefoldness of the one God. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit were all involved in the conception of Jesus (Luke 1:35), in His baptism (Matt. 3:16-17), and in His earthly ministry (John 1:33; 5:19, 17:12). When the Spirit came upon the disciples of Jesus, the traces of the Trinity appeared "with greater regularity and sharpness" (27). Grounded in this threefoldness of God are our Christian identity (1 Pet. 1:2), our Christian salvation (Titus 3:4-6), our Christian understanding of the body (1 Cor. 6:13-20), our Christian service (12:4-6), our access to God (Eph. 2:18), the church's unity and vitality (4:4-6), and our Christian experience (3:14-16).

Although the book presents orthodox biblical doctrines of the Trinity and underlines the need for our experience of Him, the doctrine and experience of the Trinity endorsed by the book come short of the biblical revelation of the Triune God in His life-union with redeemed humanity.

In chapter two, "The Three-foldness of God," *Experiencing* asserts that to preserve the mystery of the Trinity, we must hold on to three basic truths revealed in the Scripture: God is one, He eternally subsists in three distinct persons, and the three persons are equally God. Heresies, such as modalism, subordinationism, and tritheism, result from affirming two of the truths while ignoring or denying the third. The "incommunicable" reality unique to each person of the one God is shown in the way the persons are related to one another (48): God the Father is begotten of none and proceeds from none, God the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and God the Spirit eternally proceeds

from the Father and the Son. This means that in His being "God is an intimate relationship, a fellowship, a community of love" (51). According to *Experiencing*, knowing the Trinity as a fellowship of love has "three everyday consequences" (52). First, since we are created in the image of God to reflect the relational essence of God, we should strive to have righteous relationships with others in our personal, church, business, and political lives. Second, we should exhibit balance in enjoying the full benefits of God's mighty acts: the Father as God for us, the Son as God with us, and the Spirit as God in us. Third, baptized in the trinitarian name, we should know the fullness in the Triune God by being immersed in the love and life of God the Father, in the grace and truth of God the Son, and in the power and purity of God the Spirit.

In chapter three, “Co-Lovers,” *Experiencing* asserts that the living God is neither a solitary nor an isolated God; from eternity the living God has lived in and as a relationship and has existed in and as a community of love. This infinitely content trinitarian God—the Father as Lover, the Son as Beloved, and the Spirit as Love itself—creates us, redeems us, and adopts us into His family to be co-lovers with Him in three ways. First, we are co-lovers with God to worship God, loving each person of the Trinity with the love of the other persons of the Trinity. Second, we are co-lovers with God of one another in the Christian community, loving the fellow disciples of Christ by joining the Trinity who loves them. Third, we are co-lovers with God of the world to love the unbelievers by sharing the gospel with them.

In chapter four, “Within the Circle of the ‘Us,’” *Experiencing* suggests seven characteristics that express the essential dynamics of the inner life of the Trinity in which the believers should participate: intimacy, happiness, servanthood, purity, power, creativity, and peace. In chapter five, “Experiencing the Trinity,” the book expounds Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21, where “Paul prays...that we *experience* the Trinity” (91). In brief, the book contends that this prayer reveals our experience of the fullness of life in and with the Triune God: the Father strengthening us with power “through His Spirit in the inner person” (91) to have Christ take up permanent residence in our hearts that we may apprehend the dimensions of His love until we are filled up to the brim with the Triune God.

In contrast to a great many books that trivialize the Trinity as an ancillary point of Christian theology, *Experiencing* correctly locates the doctrine of the Trinity as the center of the Christian faith. The book rightly holds that the doctrine of the Trinity was formulated not “to resolve the mystery of God’s self-revelation, but rather to *preserve that mystery*” (40). Further, while corroborating the doctrine of the Trinity by marshalling proof texts of the Trinity throughout the Scripture, Johnson evinces a clear understanding of the trinitarian heresies, such as modalism, subordinationism, and tritheism. Most significantly, *Experiencing* admirably maintains that the doctrine of the Trinity should impact the daily Christian life of ordinary believers, rather than produce futile philosophical speculation accessible only to astute scholars.

The Scriptural Secret of Experiencing the Triune God—the Life-giving Spirit in the Human Spirit

Despite the book’s consistent emphasis on our experience of the Trinity, it comes short of disclosing the secret to our experience of the Triune God as revealed in the Scripture: the Triune God as the life-giving Spirit in our

human spirit. Admittedly, the book occasionally discusses the role of the Spirit: the Spirit is “God *in us*” (53); “[the] Spirit gives us entry into the inter-Trinitarian delight” (65). Yet the book completely misses the crucial New Testament revelation that although the Triune God in His eternal self-existence remains immutable as Father, Son, and Spirit, He has undergone in Christ a series of temporal processes for the accomplishment of His economy to dispense Himself as life into humanity. The New Testament unveils that in incarnation the Triune God as the eternal Word became flesh—God “was manifested in the flesh” (John 1:14; 1 Tim. 3:16); in resurrection, Christ as the last Adam became the life-giving Spirit, “the Spirit who gives life” (1 Cor. 15:45; John 6:63; 2 Cor. 3:6). The Triune God in Christ passed through the process of incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection to be completed, or consummated, as the all-inclusive life-giving Spirit. Hence, the Spirit of God who had only divinity was processed through Christ’s death and resurrection to be consummated as the Spirit of Jesus Christ, into whom all the experiences of the Triune God in Christ as the man Jesus were compounded so that He might become our bountiful supply (Phil. 1:19). The God whom we worship, serve, and experience today is the Triune God processed in Christ and consummated as the life-giving Spirit. Because the book fails to see this New Testament revelation of God, the Triune God in the book is almost no different in experience from His portrayal in the Old Testament. This serious oversight hinders the reader from knowing the subjective Triune God revealed in the New Testament and from enjoying the bountiful supply contained in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Neglecting the revelation of the Triune God in His New Testament economy, *Experiencing* relies too strongly on the formula that “the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father; the Son is not the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Son; and the Spirit is not the Father, the Father is not the Spirit” (45), which respects the distinction of the three of the Trinity. The apostle Paul, however, also clearly identifies the resurrected Christ as the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45). In Romans 8:9 he speaks of “the Spirit of Christ” because the Spirit is inseparable from Christ, bearing and communicating Christ with His person and process to the believers. In Galatians 4:6 Paul also speaks of “the Spirit of His Son” because the Spirit is the reality and realization of Christ, the Son of God, who is in turn the embodiment and expression of the Father (John 14:10; 1 John 5:6). In 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 Paul maintains the distinction between the Son and the Spirit yet underscores the identity of the Son as the Spirit: Paul not only speaks of “the Spirit of the Lord” (distinction) but also avers that “the Lord is the Spirit,” “the Lord Spirit” (identity). The book fails to unveil that in the economy of God, the Father is expressed as

the Son, who is realized as the Spirit by the believers (Isa. 9:6; John 14:10; 16:13-15). Instead, *Experiencing* unwittingly veils the reader from experiencing the Triune God in Christ as the Spirit imparting Himself as life into his being.

The book also misses the crucial function of the human spirit² to receive, contact, and experience the Triune God. In so doing, *Experiencing* confuses the spirit with the heart and even elevates the significance of the latter at the expense of the former. The book speaks of “the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts” (74). But the apostle John clearly reveals that regeneration is accomplished by the divine Spirit dispensing the divine life into the human spirit: “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). Romans 8 indicates that through regeneration the Spirit of life, the life-giving Spirit, is imparted into our spirit to make it life (vv. 2, 10). Paul characterizes a regenerated believer who is joined to the Lord Spirit in his human spirit as being one spirit: “He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit” (1 Cor. 6:17). Our regenerated spirit is now a mingled spirit. Although through the fall Satan penetrated and permeated our heart, making it incurably wicked (Jer. 17:9), God has sovereignly preserved the human spirit from Satan’s infiltration because it is the contact point of man’s experience of the Triune God (Job 1:12; 10:12; 1 John 5:18). Since the Triune God is now the Spirit, God’s interaction with man begins with and hinges upon his spirit (Rom. 8:16). Only the human spirit can interact with the divine Spirit (John 4:23): Only spirit can worship Spirit (v. 24), only spirit can know Spirit (1 Cor. 2:9-12), and only spirit can serve Spirit (Rom. 1:9; Phil. 3:3). Unfortunately, *Experiencing* neglects the indispensability of the human spirit in the believers’ experience of the Triune God.

In its exegesis of Ephesians 3:14-21, the book says, “In one sense, ‘heart’ is equivalent to ‘inner person’...If ‘inner person’ is the center, ‘heart’ is the control center of the center” (95). In contrast, however, the Bible reveals that the inner man and heart are two distinct parts of man and that the inner man is the control center of the heart, not vice versa. For instance, the apostle Peter speaks of “the hidden man of the heart in the incorruptible adornment of a meek and quiet spirit” (1 Pet. 3:4). This verse not only distinguishes the hidden man from the heart but

also equates the hidden man of the heart with a meek and quiet spirit, indicating that our spirit is the inner man hidden within our heart. The mingled spirit—the human spirit of a regenerated believer joined to the consummated Spirit of the processed Triune God—is the inner man of a believer. In fact, the inner man is Christ Himself as the Spirit residing in our spirit to be our new person (Gal. 2:20). The mingled spirit as the inner man is the center from which Christ reigns and permeates the parts of our heart: our conscience, mind, emotion, and will (Heb. 10:22; Matt. 9:4; John 16:22; Acts 11:23; Eph. 3:16-17). *Experiencing* ardently contends that Christ should make His home in the believers’ hearts by taking up permanent residence in them as “the Master of the house” (96). Yet it fails to point its readers to their regenerated spirit, which is the source for all spiritual growth.

The book also misses the crucial function of the human spirit to receive, contact, and experience the Triune God. In so doing, it confuses the spirit with the heart and even elevates the significance of the latter at the expense of the former.

The Scriptural Issue of Experiencing the Triune God—the Deification of Redeemed Humanity

Another serious shortcoming of the book is its denial of the deification of redeemed humanity. *Experiencing* extols Thomas Torrance’s utterance: “God draws near to us in such a way as to draw us near to himself within the circle of his knowing of himself” (60). The book expounds this sentence as meaning that through the Son’s redemptive death on the cross and through “the re-generating work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts,” the believers “are adopted by the Father into the Trinitarian Family” to “become real sons and daughters in relationship with the only begotten Son” (74). Yet this understanding of the book falls short of unveiling the fundamental message of Scripture:

God drew near to us by becoming man to accomplish His redemption and draws us near to Himself by making us God in life and nature but not in the Godhead; that is, in Christ God partook of blood and flesh, the human nature, that we might partake of His holiness, the divine nature (Heb. 2:14; 12:10; 2 Pet. 1:4).

Experiencing presents what it regards as a mind-boggling wonder: The believers are “legally adopted, with the same rights and privileges of the *only-begotten Son*” (emphasis added) (67). Calling Jesus his “elder brother” (67), Johnson maintains that to participate in the inner life of the Trinity is to “enter into the Only Begotten’s relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit” (74). To elucidate why the second of the Trinity is the only begotten Son of God, the book cites C. S. Lewis:

To beget is to become the father of; to create is to make. And the difference is this. When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A human begets human babies, a beaver begets little beavers...But when you make, you make something of a different kind from yourself. A bird makes a nest, a beaver builds a dam....What God creates is not God; just as what humans create is not human. What God begets is God; just as what humans beget is human. (49)

The book then exclaims, "That is why 'the one begotten Son of God' is God!" (49). If indeed the believers have the same rights and privileges of the only begotten Son and enter into His relationship with the Father, as the book claims, the believers are not merely creatures or legally adopted children of God—like the Son of God; they too must be begotten of God, must belong to the species of God, and must be God in life and nature but not in the Godhead. This view that the believers are deified children of God accords with the Son's own words in the Gospel of John regarding the believers' regeneration: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (3:6). Since the immediate context of the verse discusses Nicodemus's human birth, the former means that what is begotten of a human is human. Since in the same Gospel John states that "God is Spirit" (4:24), the latter means that what is begotten of God is God. The apostle John affirms that through regeneration the believers, who were merely creatures, became children of God not only legally but, much more, organically by being begotten of God, whose seed now abides in them. In this sense they are the same as God, their Father, in life and nature but not in the Godhead (1:12-13; 1 John 3:9; 5:1).

The book's reluctance to ascribe to the children of God the only begotten Son's privilege of being begotten by God may be attributed to its inability to see the distinction between the only begotten Son and the firstborn Son. The Bible unveils that Christ as the only begotten Son refers only to His divinity and to His eternal status in the Godhead—the second of the Divine Trinity, who is eternally begotten by God the Father with the Spirit. As such, although He is the embodiment of the divine life, He can never have brothers (John 1:4, 14, 18; 3:16). Christ as the firstborn Son, however, refers to both His divinity and humanity, that is, to His divinized humanity—His humanity, which He assumed in incarnation, being begotten of God the Father in resurrection and thus designated the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness (Acts 13:33; Rom. 1:4). As the firstborn Son, Christ is the dispenser of the divine life and thus has many brothers destined to be conformed to His image (John 20:17; Rom. 8:29). Strictly speaking, therefore, it is inaccurate for *Experiencing* to claim that we "become real sons and daughters in relationship with

the only begotten Son" and that we "enter into the Only Begotten's relationship with the Father" (74). We can never become the sons of God in the way that the only begotten Son is, for His eternal and unique relationship with the Father is the "incommunicable property" of the second of the Trinity, as the book affirms (49). Rather, we become sons of God as brothers of the firstborn Son in union with Him, for just as He possesses humanity and divinity, so do we.

Overlooking the distinction between the two aspects of Christ's sonship, *Experiencing* seems obliged to insist that since Christ is the *only* begotten Son, He alone is begotten by God the Father and thus is God, while the believers are not (49). According to the biblical revelation, however, Christ is the only begotten Son *within the Trinity*. He alone is begotten of the Father and He alone expresses the Father, but He is not the only son God intends to beget. In fact, the very existence of a begotten Son in the Trinity should point us to God's intention and ability to beget many sons of God in humanity by dispensing Himself as life into them. Just as in the Godhead the Father gives life to the Son "to also have life in Himself" for His individual expression (John 5:26), in His economy the Father in Christ as the Spirit desires to give His divine life to human beings to beget them as His many sons for His enlarged expression (Heb. 2:10-12). *Experiencing* rejects the deification of man through regeneration in an attempt to protect the incommunicable property of the second of the Trinity. Yet this attempt to preserve the uniqueness of the Godhead amounts to an implicit, though unintentional, insult to the Triune God in His economy, for it denies both the desire and power of the omnipotent God who has a good pleasure to beget many sons and to bring them into glory (Eph. 1:4-6).

The book's most explicit negation of the believers' deification is found in its exposition of Ephesians 3:19:

It is important to say at this point that "being filled up to all the fullness of God" does not make us God. Godly, yes, but not God. Filling a glass with water does not make the glass water. Filling a balloon with helium does not make the balloon helium. Filling a human being with God does not make a human being God. The filling makes a human being human—finally all we were created to be: creatures pulsating with the Presence of the Creator. (102)

Experiencing's denial of our deification is predicated upon the strength of the analogy between a glass being filled with water (or a balloon being filled with helium) and our being filled with the Triune God. While this analogy³ is useful to describe God's intention to fill humanity with Himself, it proves inadequate to illustrate

the degree of oneness God desires to have with humanity: an intimate mingling of the divine nature and the human nature for the mutual indwelling of God and man. Glass and water (or balloon and helium) share no fundamental compatibility in their natures that allows them to be mingled with each other, whereas there is a compatibility between God and man. Humanity was created in the image and likeness of God, that is, according to God's kind (Gen. 1:26). Paul thus proclaims to the Athenians that the human race is "the race of God" (Acts 17:29). The Triune God also breathed His breath of life to form the human spirit as an organ to contact and contain God (Gen. 2:7; Zech. 12:1). Based upon the affinity of nature between the Spirit of God and the human spirit, the Triune God can be mingled with humanity (1 Cor. 6:17; John 3:6; Rom. 8:16). It is through such a mingling of the divine Spirit and the human spirit that redeemed humanity becomes God in life and nature but not in the Godhead (2 Pet. 1:4).

Further, based upon the mingling of the divine Spirit and the human spirit, the Triune God and regenerated humanity can coinhere, or mutually indwell, one another. Neglecting God's central intention to coinhere with redeemed humanity, the book only acknowledges that "*perichoresis* (mutual indwelling)" is one of terms that take us deeper into the mystery of God's trinitarian being (90). *Experiencing* comes short of explicating or exploring the significance of the term, though it admits the need for such a term: "The more mysterious the emerging landscape, the further they must reach for appropriate language to describe it" (90). Regrettably, the book mentions the term *mutual indwelling* only once, that is, in relation to God's trinitarian being. It fails to reveal the Triune God's desire to mutually indwell redeemed human beings to deify them. According to the biblical revelation, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit eternally coinhere, as evidenced by the Son's words: "I am in the Father and the Father is in Me" (John 14:10). The Triune God's intention to coinhere with humanity is revealed in the Lord's charge to the disciples in John 15:4: "Abide in Me and I in you." To fulfill this intention, the Lord Jesus in John 14 prophesies to His disciples that when He as the Spirit of reality comes to them in resurrection and forever abides within them, they will know experientially that He is in the Father, they in Him, and He in them (v. 20). The apostle John thus declares that it is by the Spirit that we abide in God

and He in us (1 John 3:24). In 1 Corinthians 12:13 the apostle Paul testifies to this reality: the believers were baptized in one Spirit and were given to drink the one Spirit into their being. Ultimately, the Lord's words in Revelation 3 indicate that the overcomers will be the believers who abide in the Triune God as the temple and are even built into the temple as pillars; they are deified believers, having the name of their God written on them because they have become what God is in life, nature, and expression, but not in the Godhead (v. 12; 21:22). In other words, by living in and with the Triune God, the believers are progressively deified until they bear His name, a testimony that they have become God (22:4).

Experiencing seems to overlook the greatest proof of the deification of man—the incarnated and resurrected Christ. Prior to incarnation, the infinite God and finite humanity were two separate entities with an impassable chasm between them. Yet the incarnation of Christ forever removed the gulf between the immortal God in heaven inhabiting eternity and mortal humanity on earth confined in time (Isa. 57:15; 66:1). The Triune God was mingled with a tripartite man to become a God-man when the Holy Spirit entered the womb of Mary to produce "the holy thing"—a child begotten of the Holy Spirit and born of a human virgin to be divine and human (Matt. 1:18-20; Luke 1:35). Christ was simultaneously the Son of God and the Son of Man, the complete God and a perfect man (v. 35; 6:5). Christ, in whom the divine and human natures are mingled, is typified by the meal offering composed of "fine flour, unleavened cakes mingled with oil" (Lev. 2:4). Here the fine flour signifies the humanity of Christ, for a grain of wheat in John 12:24 symbolizes Christ in His humanity, while oil signifies the divinity of Christ, for oil in Isaiah 61:1 symbolizes the Spirit of the Lord Jehovah. Had Christ been only human but not fully divine, His death on the cross would have served as a ransom for only one human being but would have lacked the universal and eternal efficacy necessary to apply to all human beings. But, thankfully, Christ was not only a perfect man with genuine human blood but also the complete God whose deity gives eternal value to His redemption. Since Christ died as a God-man, shedding even God's own blood, the blood of Jesus His Son (Acts 20:28; 1 John 1:7), He could obtain an eternal redemption available to all humankind through all time (Heb. 9:12). In addition to His redemptive death, this

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first God-man—the only begotten Son of God become the Son of Man—fell into the ground and died as a single grain of wheat; in resurrection He became the firstborn Son of God, bringing forth many grains of wheat, many sons of God—many God-men (John 12:24; Rom. 1:3-4; 8:29). Since Christ, the prototypical grain of wheat, was God yet man, His brothers, His mass-reproduction, must also be men yet God. *Experiencing's* negation of deification diminishes the intrinsic significance of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, a seminal step in God's economy to mingle Himself with redeemed humanity for its deification.

The Scriptural Goal of Experiencing the Triune God—the Body of Christ

Finally, *Experiencing* neglects the corporate dimension of the believers' experience of the Triune God, which results in the building up of the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:4-6). This neglect is evident in the book's interpretation of a phrase in Ephesians 3:17: "rooted and grounded." Here *Experiencing* says, "In his enthusiasm Paul has mixed metaphors. 'Rooted' is an agricultural metaphor. 'Grounded' is an architectural metaphor" (97). Far from mixing metaphors in his enthusiasm, Paul combined the agricultural and architectural metaphors sequentially to reveal that the life of God dispensed into us is for the building up of the Body of Christ. Elsewhere Paul twice joins these metaphors in the same sequence: "Having been rooted and being built up in Him" (Col. 2:7); "You are God's cultivated land, God's building" (1 Cor. 3:9). As God's cultivated land, we have Christ as the divine life planted in us and should be rooted to grow this divine life (v. 6; Col. 3:4; 2:19). As God's building, we have Christ wrought into us as the building materials (gold, silver, and precious stones) and should be grounded for the building up of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 3:10-17). Paul thus indicates that our experience of the Triune God as life growing within us results in the building up of the Body of Christ (Eph. 2:20-21; 4:12-13, 15-16).

Experiencing admirably underlines Ephesians 3:14-21 as a passage that presents our experience of the Trinity, not a "coherent theory of the Trinity" (91). Yet in interpreting the passage, the book fails to disclose that such experience is not for individual spirituality but for the corporate expression of the Triune God, the church as the Body of Christ. The inner man into whom the Father strengthens us through His Spirit is the person of Christ, who is now the corporate Christ. We are rooted for our growth and grounded for our building so that we may grow up into Christ for the growth of the Body unto the building up of itself (4:15-16). To apprehend the breadth, length, height, and depth—the universal dimensions of the immeasurable Christ—we need all the saints, all the members of the Body of Christ. Ultimately, we will be

filled unto all the fullness of God, which is the Body of Christ, the fullness of the One who fills all in all (1:22-23). The apostle's doxology ascribes to God glory in the church because God is glorified not merely in an individual believer but in the universal church for His full manifestation (3:21). Regretfully, the book neglects the corporate context of Paul's prayer and misses the goal of our experience of the Triune God—the glorious church as the built-up Body of Christ.

Experiencing concludes by offering an objective and shallow reason for our existence: to become "creatures pulsating with the Presence of the Creator" (102). The divine revelation in the Scriptures, however, presents a deeper purpose to our existence: to become bona fide sons of God who are begotten of God with His life, mingled with God in His nature, and coinhering with God in His person. Our experience of the Triune God is molded by our understanding of Him in His process, intention, and goal. In this light, the book's admirable emphasis on the relevance of the Triune God to our daily experience is undermined by its omission of the means by which we experience Him—the Triune God processed in Christ, consummated as the life-giving Spirit, and indwelling our spirit. *Experiencing's* fixation with the preservation of the eternal uniqueness of the only begotten Son negates the Triune God's intention in His economy to deify the believers by begetting them as His genuine sons and to mature them in the divine life for the building up of the Body of Christ, His corporate expression. *Experiencing's* discussion of our need to experience the Trinity is vitiated by its neglect of the means, issue, and goal of our experience of the Triune God in His economy.

by David Yoon

Notes

¹Here *mingling of the divine and human natures* means to unite or combine the divine nature and human nature into a single entity without confusion or loss of their characteristics.

²On the whole, *Experiencing* shows a lack of clarity regarding the tripartite nature of man. The Bible consistently presents the tripartite view of man: Man is composed of spirit—his inmost organ to contact God who is Spirit, soul—his inward being to contact the psychological world, and body—his outer frame to contact the physical world (Gen. 2:7; Job 7:11; Isa. 26:9; Luke 1:46-47; 1 Thes. 5:23; Heb. 4:12).

³Just as *Experiencing* acknowledges that there is no adequate analogy from nature that illustrates the mystery of Trinity (44), all analogues in the physical realm fall short of fully explicating the mystery of God's economical interaction with humanity.