




LIFE AND FELLOWSHIP, DEATH AND DIVISION:

Partaking of the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in First Corinthians

by John Pester



It is difficult to read 1 Corinthians without becoming overly subjective about our individual standing before the Lord, especially when Paul's admonitions equally expose our weaknesses, shortcomings, and failures, revealing our kindred identification with the Corinthians, who similarly exhibited soulish and fleshly traits even though they were washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. To read 1 Corinthians subjectively and religiously is to enter into a realm of self-recrimination with no possibility for true growth in the divine life. Instead, there is only a flailing about for self-made correctives for the exposed problems. But even when we draw upon all our human wisdom, such efforts to cover our shame are ultimately fruitless; having begun in the flesh and relying on the flesh, there is no possibility for perfection in the Spirit. When we are finally forced to acknowledge our shortcomings in the flesh, our response often takes an ironic turn as we attempt to cover our failures, not with the grace that has been given to us in Christ, but with a reflexive self-denial of our problems, an assertive self-justification for our fallen behavior, and a puffed-up self-comparison to others whom we deem less spiritual than ourselves. In our religious efforts to overcome our personal shortcomings, division from both God and our fellow believers, rather than fellowship, becomes the norm, and as we live by human wisdom rather than the wisdom that is the issue of the fellowship of the divine life, great damage is inflicted on the Body of Christ, impeding the realization of the intrinsic goal of 1 Corinthians. In effect, when we read Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians as individual, fallen Corinthians, we remain like the Corinthians, who had access to the tree of life but lived only according to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Such a subjective reading of 1 Corinthians is fundamentally flawed because it fails to recognize and appropriate the power that comes from partaking of the crucified and resurrected Christ as the tree of life in the corporate fellowship of the divine life. The principal contrast that Paul presents in 1 Corinthians is not between spiritual deliverance and moral failure, not between good and evil, and not even between spiritual or fleshly and soulish matters. The contrast focuses on two organic expressions, which are the issue of partaking of the life and nature of two very different organic sources. It is a contrast between a corporate expression of the new man, who is sustained and nurtured by partaking of the organic realization of the tree of life, the crucified and resurrected Christ, and a divided expression of the corporate fallen man, who is sustained and nurtured by partaking of the organic development of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the wisdom of this age. The former expression, reflecting the wisdom of God, is an issue of divine fellowship and life; the latter expression, reflecting the wisdom of this age, is the issue of satanic division and death. In this Corinthian contrast, however, the wisdom of the world is but foolishness to God, because God in His wisdom has prepared something for us that could not even come up in our hearts but for His revelation, which is our calling to

be joined to God in the fellowship of His Son to become God in life, nature, and expression but not in the Godhead. This is so much higher than being like God according to one of His divine attributes, having just a knowledge of good and evil. In 1 Corinthians Paul presents the same choice to the believers that was first presented to Adam and Eve in the garden: to partake of the crucified and resurrected Christ as the tree of life rather than the wisdom of the age as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is a choice between the simplicity and purity toward Christ and the craftiness and deceit of the serpent (2 Cor. 11:3).

The Two Trees in the Divine Revelation

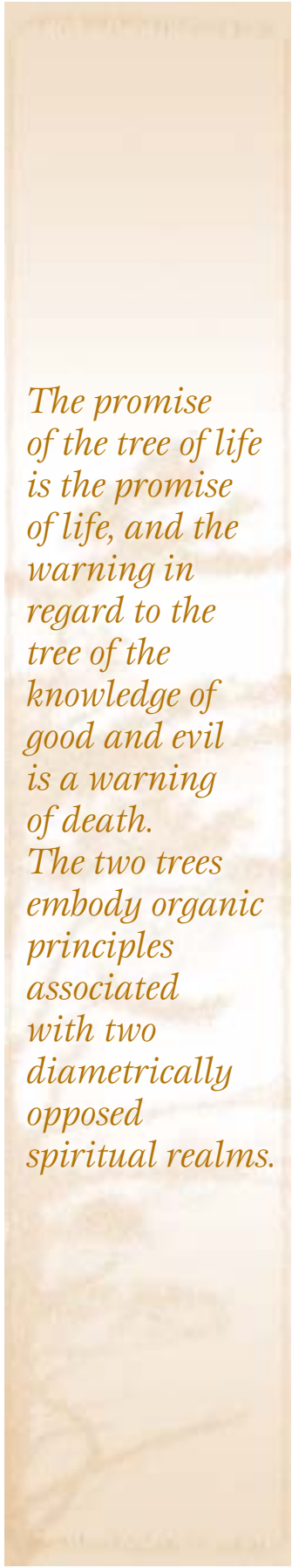
Rather than merely serving as an abbreviated account of creation, the opening chapters of Genesis unveil divine principles associated with the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose and satanic principles that are continuously being brought to bear in order to frustrate its fulfillment. The first chapters of Genesis are not words of science but simple words of promise and warning originating from God's heart of love. The reality of God's promise and warning are encapsulated in the explicit references to the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:9, 16; 3:1, 3, 6, 22, 24). Like seeds, the principles inherent in these two trees grow throughout the unfolding revelation of the Holy Scriptures and develop through their experiential application in the history of redeemed humanity, reaching full fruition in the unveiling of the consummation of the divine purpose and economy in the final chapters of the book of Revelation (22:2, 14, 19).¹ Between these two ends of the Holy Scriptures, implicit references to the essence of these two trees—life and death—abound.²

The essence of the tree of life is clearly presented as life itself, but there is an element of mystery concerning the nature and operation of this life, which is only progressively unveiled throughout the Scriptures as being the eternal, uncreated life of the Triune God (Col. 1:26). In contrast, even though the essence of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not explicitly revealed as death itself, there is little mystery as to the effect of its operation, which is to produce death. There is always an element of mystery with a promise, just as there is precision and clarity with a warning. The promise of the tree of life is the promise of life, and the warning in regard to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a warning of death (2 Tim. 1:1; Gen. 2:17). Both the promise and the warning point to organic realities, and in fact, the two trees crystallize and embody organic principles associated with two diametrically opposed spiritual realms. For each of these realms, there is an organic source that produces an organic fellowship, which is sustained through an organic partaking and results in an organic expression.

The Tree of Life in Genesis

There are only three direct references to the tree of life in Genesis, and its introduction is so innocuous that it does not seem to convey any special, intrinsic significance: "Out of the ground Jehovah God caused to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, as well as the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (2:9). The tree of life is pleasant to the sight and good for food, but so is every tree that has been planted in the garden. It appears to be only one of many nourishing sources of food, and there is no special charge from Jehovah to eat of this particular tree (v. 16). It is centrally located in the middle of the garden, but so is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It appears to be at the most at the same level of importance as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In fact, the only tree that is the focus of any extended treatment by Jehovah, prior to the fall of humanity, is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (v. 17). In its initial unveiling, the tree of life is very much a mystery.

It is only after the fall that the significance of the tree of life begins to be revealed through references to what was lost by not eating of it in contradistinction to what was



The promise of the tree of life is the promise of life, and the warning in regard to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a warning of death. The two trees embody organic principles associated with two diametrically opposed spiritual realms.

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gained by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: “Jehovah God said, Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever” (3:22). By eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, humanity became like God in one of His attributes—knowing good and evil—but humanity could no longer freely partake of the source from which God’s divine attributes sprang forth—His eternal life. Through this choice, access to the eternal life of the Triune God and incorporation into the fellowship of this eternal life was exchanged for a mere knowledge of the difference between good and evil. The knowledge that humanity gained, however, was not realized in the form of objective enlightenment; rather, it was actualized through a subjective union with the sinful life and nature of the serpent. Adam and Eve became aware of good and evil because their very being was now a constitution of sin (Rom. 5:19). But Jehovah, who seemingly acted with no special regard for the tree of life prior to the fall, now acted decisively in relation to it: “He drove the man out, and at the east of the garden of Eden He placed the cherubim and a flaming sword which turned in every direction to guard the way to the tree of life” (v. 24). The banishment of Adam and Eve from the garden can be viewed as a punishment for disobedience, but it was more of an act on the part of God to separate the tree of life from defilement, the holy from the profane (Lev. 15:31; 22:2; cf. 1 Cor. 5:13). According to the Genesis account, Jehovah guarded the tree by means of the cherubim and a flaming sword.

God closed the way to the tree of life by means of three items: the cherubim, the flame, and the sword. Cherubim signify God’s glory (cf. Ezek. 9:3; 10:4; Heb. 9:5), the flame signifies God’s holiness (Deut. 4:24; 9:3; Heb. 12:29), and the sword for killing indicates God’s righteousness (cf. Lam. 3:42-43; Rom. 2:5). These attributes of God placed requirements on sinful man. Since sinful man was unable to meet these requirements (Rom. 3:10-18, 23), he was not permitted to contact God as the tree of life, until Christ fulfilled the requirements of God’s glory, holiness, and righteousness by His all-inclusive death on the cross to open a new and living way for us to enter the Holy of Holies and partake of the tree of life. (Recovery Version, Gen. 3:24, note 1)

God’s righteousness, holiness, and glory come out of the eternal life and nature of God. By not partaking of the tree of life and instead partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the eternal life of God was no longer freely available to humanity because the very attributes of God, which issue from His eternal life—righteousness, holiness, and glory—were offended by corruption and death, arousing His wrath and calling forth the need for reconciliation, which could be appeased only by an atoning sacrifice.

The Significance of the Tree of Life

It is only in the revelation of what was lost that the intrinsic significance of the tree of life begins to be progressively unveiled throughout the rest of the Holy Scriptures. In this unveiling, the tree of life symbolizes an organic reality—the incarnated Christ as the embodiment of the Triune God. Bonhoeffer succinctly states that the tree of life is “the life-giving Lord himself” (57).³ The edible fruit of the tree of life also points to the promise of partaking of the eternal life of the Triune God (2 Pet. 1:4), indicating that God does not, as the serpent suggested, wish to withhold anything from humanity, not even His very Being. Instead, the tree of life is a life-giving tree that is able to constitute those who partake of the root of its fatness with the divine, eternal life (Rom. 11:17). This partaking, this fellowship, is possible because redeemed humanity has been incorporated into the divinized humanity of the crucified and resurrected Christ through the life-imparting of the life-giving Spirit. Practically, this partaking involves the believers’ union with and pursuit of Christ as the wisdom of God, which manifests itself in the dispensing of the processed Christ as righteousness with respect to our human spirit, as sanctification with respect to our soul, and as redemption with respect to our physical body (1 Cor. 1:30). This is the hope of our calling, the consummation of partaking of the tree

of life. The eyes of fallen humanity were opened to see the difference between good and evil, but like their access to the tree of life, their eyes were closed from seeing the true hope of God's calling. The tree of life, however, is still a life-giving tree because it is a processed tree, a tree that was sent forth by God into His creation at the fullness of the time (Gal. 4:4), a tree that grew up like a root out of dry ground in His human living before God (Isa. 53:2), a tree that was delivered up to be cut down through God's determined counsel and foreknowledge (Acts 2:23), and a tree that was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father that we might walk in newness of life and bear fruit to God (Rom. 6:4; 7:4). Only the eyes of the heart of redeemed humanity can be opened to see this hope (Eph. 1:18), a hope that is much higher than merely knowing good and evil.

Christ, as the embodiment of the living God (Col. 1:19, 2:9), is organic; He is life (John 14:6), in Him was life (1:4), and He has come to give life (10:10).⁴ The life which He is and which He gives is Himself as the eternal, uncreated life of God (1 John 5:20). All that God is and has is embodied in Him as an incarnated tree. By virtue of His incarnation, he began to grow in His humanity with His divinity (Luke 1:80), living according to the life of the Father (John 6:57), and denying even His sinless, God-created humanity (14:10), so that the divine life could be released and made available to fallen humanity through His atoning death (12:24). In His human living the impulse of the divine life within Him was pressed (Luke 12:50), and in the cutting of His death, His baptism, access to His cultivated, atoning life was made available to those, who by their fallen and sinful nature, were wild and uncultivated (Rom. 11:24). This living tree, Christ, is holy, and its branches, the believers, are also holy because the tree not only bears the branches; it is the branches (v. 18; 1 Cor. 12:12). In the grafting spoken of in Romans 11, there is incorporation, a mutual abiding of Christ in the believers and the believers in Christ (John 15:4). And just as Christ is in the Father and the Father is in Him, the believers have been incorporated into the fellowship of the incorporated Triune God (14:20; 17:21). The tree of life is still growing with the growth of God (Col. 2:19); it is branching and spreading as Christ makes His home in our hearts (Eph. 3:17); and it is branching and spreading as the work of ministry results in the building up of the Body of Christ (4:12), which is also the dwelling place of God and humanity because the tree of life ultimately produces a mutual dwelling of the processed Triune God and redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified humanity. The tree of life produces deified humanity that is expressed corporately as a mutual dwelling of God in man and man in God in the person and fellowship of the Son. In contrast, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil produces only self-deceived humanity that is expressed corporately through death and division.

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in Genesis

In contrast to the brief treatment of the tree of life, there is a more extended treatment of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis. It is the subject of conversation between God and humanity and also between the serpent and humanity. The conversation between God and humanity concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is simple, direct, and focused on the central truth of His divine economy: "Jehovah God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden you may eat freely, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, of it you shall not eat; for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17). For God the two trees are a matter of divine life or satanic death, and each of these lives is received by eating, not by conduct or teaching. God's commandment in the garden is simply to eat, and He does not prohibit the man from eating of any tree, saying that he can eat freely "of every tree of the garden." While He allows the man to freely choose the source of his sustenance, God also delivers a warning in love to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This warning reflects God's eternal desire for humanity to partake of His life, even though the serpent later twists this warning by interpreting it as a selfish prohibition on the part of God (2 Cor. 11:3; cf. 2 Pet. 3:16).

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God's first commandment to man concerned man's eating, not man's conduct. Eating is critical to man, a matter of life or death. Man's outcome and destiny before God depends altogether on what he eats. If man eats the tree of life, he will receive God as life and fulfill God's purpose; if he eats the tree of knowledge, he will receive Satan as death and be usurped by him for his purpose.

God's forbidding commandment given as a warning to man indicates (1) God's greatness in creating man with a free will that man may choose God willingly and not under coercion; (2) God's love for man; and (3) God's desire that man would eat the tree of life to receive God into him as life. (Recovery Version, Gen. 2:17, note 1)

In a state of innocence humanity is oblivious to the utter incompatibility of life with death, as demonstrated by the separation imposed by God in driving fallen humanity from the garden "lest he put forth his hand and take also from the tree of life" (3:22). God, however, is not unaware. God knows that even though the man has the freedom to choose, he does not have the power to casually dismiss the consequences of his choice. In the divine economy there is always a reaping of what is sown (Gal. 6:7-8; cf. 1 Cor. 15:42-44), and God knows that each choice will result in a radically different and mutually incompatible direction of human development—one within the divine economy and the other within the satanic economy. Consequently, He speaks His warning in love. Bonhoeffer notes,

No word in the passage indicates the possibility of understanding the prohibition differently, perhaps as temptation. The prohibition of paradise is *grace* of the Creator towards the creature. God tempts no man. Up to this point only the Creator knows what the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is, Adam does not know it yet. Living in the unity of obedience, he cannot understand that which is twofold...Adam knows neither what is good nor what is evil; in the most particular sense he lives beyond good and evil. (58)

The consequence of eating the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, according to God, is death because "the tree of knowledge is the tree of death" (59). E. O. James similarly notes that "the potency of the Tree of Knowledge was such that to partake of its fruit had fatal consequences, death being the result of eating thereof. Therefore, it was virtually a tree of death" (221). God is not concerned with whether or not humanity will be like Him; if He were, He would not have placed humanity in front of the tree of life. His only concern at this point is whether humanity will choose the wrong tree and be constituted with the element of death and be separated from the divine fellowship. The form of death that is of principal concern to God is spiritual death because God is Spirit and those who worship and contact Him must worship and contact Him in spirit and truthfulness (John 4:24). In the context of the divine economy, *death* in Genesis 2:17 does not refer to "the death of man's body but to the deadening of man's spirit (Eph. 2:1), which leads ultimately to the death of man's entire being—spirit, soul, and body (Heb. 9:27; Rev. 20:14)" (Recovery Version, note 2). As a consequence of eating from the tree of death, man's human spirit was deadened, and humanity was alienated from the life of God (Eph. 4:18). All human beings, after the fall, are living in death, and it is still reserved for men to die once (Heb. 9:27; 1 Cor. 15:22). Physical death is the unavoidable consequence of spiritual death. Unregenerated humans are physically alive, but at the same time, they are spiritually dead and physically dying in their offenses and sins. Regenerated believers are still physically dying, but at the same time, they are spiritually alive together with Christ in their regenerated human spirit (Eph. 2:5-6). If we understand God's warning concerning the imminent prospect of death as referring merely to physical death, we will grossly oversimplify the consequences of the failure to heed God's warning in the garden.

In the conversation between the serpent and humanity concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the subtle words of the serpent represent a direct attack

on the divine economy. In his persuasive words, he deliberately misquotes the word of God, deceitfully mischaracterizes the focus of God's word, and deceptively undermines the purpose of God's speaking. In considering this conversation, it is important to realize that all of the serpent's words are lies because the serpent is the father of lies (John 8:44).⁵ Every word that he utters is corrupt and contains the element of death, which has the organic capacity to spread like gangrene (Matt. 7:18; 2 Tim. 2:17).

The assault on the divine economy begins with a question: "Did God really say, You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?" (Gen. 3:1). Both the force of the question and the content of the question immediately confuse and contaminate the innocent woman. The force of the question plants within her mind the thought and burden of the need for independent judgment, which finds its expression in an independent, religious judgment about God Himself. Bonhoeffer notes,

The serpent's question was a thoroughly religious one. But with the first religious question in the world evil has come upon the scene. Where evil appears in its godlessness it is powerlessness, it is a bogey, we do not need to fear it. In this form it does not concentrate its power but diverts us from the other place where it really desires to break through. And here it is wrapped in the garment of religiousness... "Did God say?", that plainly is the godless question. (73)

Earlier in a discussion about the serpent's question, Bonhoeffer establishes the religious orientation of the question by showing how it forces the woman to question God, even in the midst of her defense of God. In order to determine what God has or has not really said, the woman must find a validation of God's word, apart from His spoken word. The suggestion that it is possible, necessary, and even commendable for humanity to validate its knowledge of God is the beginning of humanity's independence and separation from God. The pursuit of such knowledge is justified in the mind of the woman, not because it is a pursuit of evil, but rather a pursuit of good. Thus, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has already been planted as a seed and taken root in her being.

The serpent asks, "Did God say, You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" The serpent does not dispute this word but it enables man to catch sight of a hitherto unknown profundity in which he would be in the position to establish or dispute whether a word is the Word of God or not... The decisive point is that this question suggests to man that he should go behind the Word of God and establish what it is by himself, out of his understanding of the being of God... Surely it can only serve God's cause if such false words of God, such misunderstood commands are swept aside before it is too late. The misleading thing about this question is therefore that it obviously wants to be thought to come from God. For the sake of the true God it seems to want to sweep aside the given Word of God. (72)

According to Bonhoeffer, the force of the serpent's question sweeps aside the given Word of God, which is true, and replaces it with a religious investigation into the nature of the "true God," as determined by the independent judgment of the woman. God, however, does not need our validation; He is, and we need to simply let God be true (Rom. 3:4).⁶ By accepting the thought of independently validating the person and purpose of God, however, the purity of the woman is corrupted, and by responding to the deliberately misquoted content of the serpent's question, her simplicity is equally corrupted. God spoke of eating of "every tree," but the serpent asks whether God spoke of not eating of "any tree." The woman's response, in which she adds, "nor shall you touch" (Gen 3:3), indicates the onset of corruption through the addition of independent knowledge that is contrary to what is truly according to God, even while it poses as being about and for God.

Following his corrupting question, the serpent deceitfully mischaracterizes the focus of God's word and deceptively undermines the purpose of God as represented by the tree of life. "Inasmuch as Eve has involved herself in this conversation the serpent can now

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risk the real attack. It speaks about God, and indeed with an attitude of deep knowledge of the secrets of God, i.e. it speaks religiously. But this religiousness is now unmasked in open attack” (76): “The serpent said to the woman, You shall not surely die! For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will become like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:4-5). The serpent’s words mischaracterize God’s warning in love as being related to physical death, which he then deceptively undermines by introducing the thought that God is selfish rather than loving toward humanity. In effect, he suggests and the woman accepts the notion that the warning of imminent physical death is not to be feared because it is part of a selfish ruse to keep humanity from attaining equality with God.⁷

When the woman received the serpent’s words, every part of her tripartite being was affected by the organic corruption that was now a part of her very constitution: “When the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make oneself wise, she took of its fruit and ate” (Gen. 3:6). Her mind came to an independent judgment about the fruit, her emotions were influenced by its beauty and its potential to make one wise, and her will was exercised to take it. In her organic response the human body was contaminated and the human spirit was deadened. Of the three parts of the soul—mind, emotion, and will—the part most profoundly affected was the mind, which recognized the beauty of the fruit and initiated the taking of the fruit. The temptation to know good and evil was quickly conflated within her contaminated mind into the desire to “make oneself wise.”⁸ This is the beginning of humanity’s seeking for wisdom, which is a fleshly wisdom that cannot stand against the wisdom of God and which will be set aside at the revelation of Christ as God’s wisdom (2 Cor. 1:12; 1 Cor. 1:19, 30), but which, having been organically imparted, is, nevertheless growing, developing, and spreading the death element inherent in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And as this death element spreads, it is manifested in division, first from God, who asks, “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:9), and then from one another, when the husband justifies his sin, saying, “The woman...she gave” (v. 12).

The Significance of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil symbolizes an organic, spiritual reality, which is personified in Satan as the embodiment of sin (1 John 3:8; Rom. 8:3), whose life and sinful nature constitute and animate the life of those who, by organic identification, are fellow partakers of sin (7:17, 20, 23). Through this living and growing tree of death, the many have been constituted sinners and by nature are children of wrath and sons of disobedience (5:19; Eph. 2:2-3; 5:6; Col. 3:6). The tree of the knowledge of good and evil has incorporated all humanity into the satanic life and nature (1 John 5:19), producing an unholy fellowship among all who take fellow delight in sin (1 Cor. 10:20; Rom. 1:32), who seek their own glory (John 7:18), and whose high thoughts rise up against the knowledge of God (2 Cor. 10:5). This exaltation of high thoughts primarily manifests itself in the pursuit of all forms of human wisdom, but particularly religious wisdom, since humanity has usurped the place of God by creating gods of their own making (Rom. 1:22-23, 25).

The issue of the pursuit of the wisdom of the age, especially in its religious forms, is a continuing operation of death and the manifestation of division, including separation from God, separation from fellow members of the race of God (Acts 17:29; Gen. 11:1-4), and even separation from fellow members of the household of God (1 Cor. 1:11; 12:25; Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19). The operation and spread of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the resulting manifestation of division, is not confined to just the realm of the fallen creation, it can also impact the realm of the new creation, the church, as demonstrated by the situation in the church in Corinth. Happily, however, the new creation is the domain of the tree of life, and Paul unveils Christ as this living tree in order to bring the believers in Corinth out of the realm of death and division and into the realm of the divine life and fellowship.

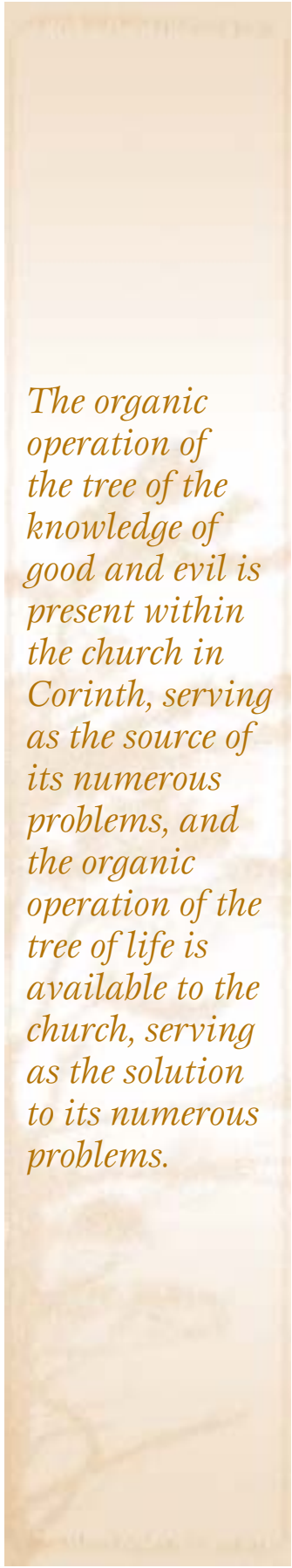
The Two Trees in First Corinthians

The intrinsic significance of the two trees in Genesis frames the content of Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians. The line of life and fellowship and the line of death and division, which begin in the first book of the Old Testament and end in the last book of the New Testament, pass through and inform the problems that Paul confronts and the solutions that he presents to the church in Corinth. The organic operation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is present within the church in Corinth, serving as the source of its numerous problems, and the organic operation of the tree of life is available to the church in Corinth, serving as the solution to its numerous problems. From beginning to end, the presence of both trees implicitly overshadows the entire Epistle. The line of life and fellowship begins in the first chapter with the saints' being called into the divine fellowship (v. 9), and the line of death and division begins in the very next verse. With the swallowing up of death in victory in chapter 15, only the line of life extends to the end of 1 Corinthians. This mirrors the termination of death in chapter 20 of Revelation with only the tree of life extending into the final two chapters of the divine revelation. Given the presence of both trees, the focus of the Epistle centers on the believers' partaking of and their resulting incorporation into a fellowship of death or a fellowship of life. In the fellowship of death, the believers are like God, knowing good and evil, but they use their knowledge to damage and delay the purpose of God. In the fellowship of life, the believers become God in life and nature, expressing all God's divine attributes in their human virtues, to fulfill the divine purpose.⁹

The Presence of the Two Trees in First Corinthians

Although Paul begins and ends his Epistle with reference to the tree of life, which is realized in the fellowship of the Son and consummated in the ultimate victory of the resurrection life over death, there is little doubt that the operation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is present in the church. This is evident in Paul's general discussion of division in verses 10 through 17 of chapter 1, and especially evident as Paul deals with specific problems in chapters 5 through 15. All the problems related to the evil brother (ch. 5), to lawsuits among the believers (6:1-11), to the abuse of freedom (vv. 12-20), to marriage life (ch. 7), to the eating of things sacrificed to idols (8:1—11:1), to head covering (vv. 2-16), to the Lord's supper (vv. 17-34), to the gifts (chs. 12—14), and to resurrection (ch. 15) are the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.¹⁰ In the intervening verses between 1:19 and 4:21, however, Paul speaks of the intrinsic, organic operation of both trees within the believers. Specifically, he discusses the Corinthians' longing for the wisdom of this world in contrast to the wisdom of God, which has been made available through the cross of Christ and which is realized in the organic growth of Christ as righteousness in our spirit, as sanctification in our soul, and as redemption in our body (1:17, 30). He also talks about the organic operation of both trees within those who account it sufficient to be a guide in Christ and those who account themselves as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God (4:15, 1).

The wisdom of the world,¹¹ which motivates every action of the deceived Corinthians, is the consummation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And the pursuit of this wisdom, particularly in its religious guise, has enthralled them. It is manifested in their speech (1:17; 2:4), their understanding (1:19), and their seeking (v. 22). All their wisdom, however, is but the wisdom of men, completely separate from the power of God (2:5). The wisdom of this age is limited to the rulers of this age, who will be brought to nought, indicating that wisdom is comprised of perishing elements (v. 6). It fails to grasp the deep significance of the things that God has truly prepared for those who love Him (vv. 9-10). Professing to be wise, the Corinthians have become truly foolish, knowing nothing of the things of God or man because, being soulish and infants, they cannot receive, much less discern, the things of the Spirit of God (vv. 11-14; 3:1).



The organic operation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is present within the church in Corinth, serving as the source of its numerous problems, and the organic operation of the tree of life is available to the church, serving as the solution to its numerous problems.

Participation in the things that God has prepared requires more than just a knowledge of good and evil. Ethical teachings, even spiritually-based teachings, are powerless to resolve problems of a Corinthian nature, because these problems are rooted in the life and nature of death itself.

Like the man and the woman in the garden, the Corinthians are truly like God in their knowledge of good and evil, having been enriched in all utterance and knowledge and not lacking in any gift (1:5, 7), but like the first couple, they lived in the realm of independent judgment related to themselves, their fellow believers, and the apostle, who, as God's representative, is also accused of selfish motivations in his ministry (4:3-6; 9:3). The wisdom of the world is desired by the Corinthians, and it is taken by the Corinthians, but in their taking there is only death and division—divisions resulting from different teachings, preferences for different teachers, adherence to different practices, and even perceived differences in levels of spiritual maturity (1:10, 13). But in all their grasping for that which will make them wise, they remain fleshly and untransformed, having little or no experience of the golden nature of the Father, the silver redemption of the Son, or the precious transformation of the Spirit. For this there is the need of another tree, the tree of life, which is sourced in the cross of Christ and experienced in the dispensing of the divine life through the life-giving Spirit.

The life-giving Spirit, compounded with the reality of the crucified and resurrected Christ, is the blossoming of the tree of life.¹² Paul determined not to know anything other than Jesus Christ, and this One crucified, because the power of God is made available through the cross for the purpose of the continuing salvation of those who are being saved (2:2; 1:17-18). Participation in the things that God has prepared requires more than just a knowledge of good and evil. Ethical teachings, even spiritually-based teachings, are powerless to resolve problems of a Corinthian nature, because these problems are rooted in the life and nature of death itself. To combat death, the divine life and the power contained within the divine life are needed. The same power that operated in Christ in raising Him from the dead is needed in order for believers to overcome the elements of death that are contained in the wisdom of the world. And the same life that infused, permeated, and saturated the humanity of Christ at the moment of His resurrection is now available to the believers through Christ as the life-giving Spirit.¹³ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., points out the significance of the life-giving Spirit, not only for the future resurrection of our body, but also for our current experience:

Certainly in the immediate context this life-giving contemplates Christ's future action when he will resurrect the mortal bodies of believers (cf. 1 Cor. 15:22). It seems difficult to deny, however, that his present activity is implicitly in view as well. That the resurrected Christ, as life-giver, currently exists in a suspended state of inactivity would be a strange notion indeed to attribute to Paul. And in fact, as he explicitly teaches elsewhere, believers have already been raised with Christ. The resurrection life of the believer in union with Christ is not only future but present (e.g. Rom. 6:2-6; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 2:5-6; Col. 3:1-4). Christ, as resurrected and ascended, is already active in the Church in the life-giving, resurrection power of the Spirit. And that activity is rooted in whom he has become and now is: "the life-giving Spirit." (578-579)

While the need for the tree of life, which is received through the dispensing of the divine life, can be seen in the shortages present among the believers in Corinth, the presence of the tree of life can be seen in the life supply afforded to them in the ministry of the apostle. As a person who knows only the crucified Christ, Paul characterizes himself as a begetting father, and he characterizes those who rely upon teachings and knowledge as mere guides.

First Corinthians 4:15 says, "For though you have ten thousand guides in Christ, yet not many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel." Guides, teachers, or instructors are good, but these guides are related to the tree of knowledge. The guides are a matter of knowledge, but the father is a matter of life. Fathers impart life to their children whom they beget, and the apostle was such a father who imparted the divine life into the Corinthians so that they became children of God and members of Christ. (*Crucial* 70)

The impartation of the divine life is related to God's first command to eat. While God desired that humanity would partake of the tree of life, they instead partook of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The matter of partaking and eating, given the existence of the two trees, is a central point in Genesis, and given the presence of these two trees in 1 Corinthians, it is also prominently featured in Paul's response to the Corinthian situation.

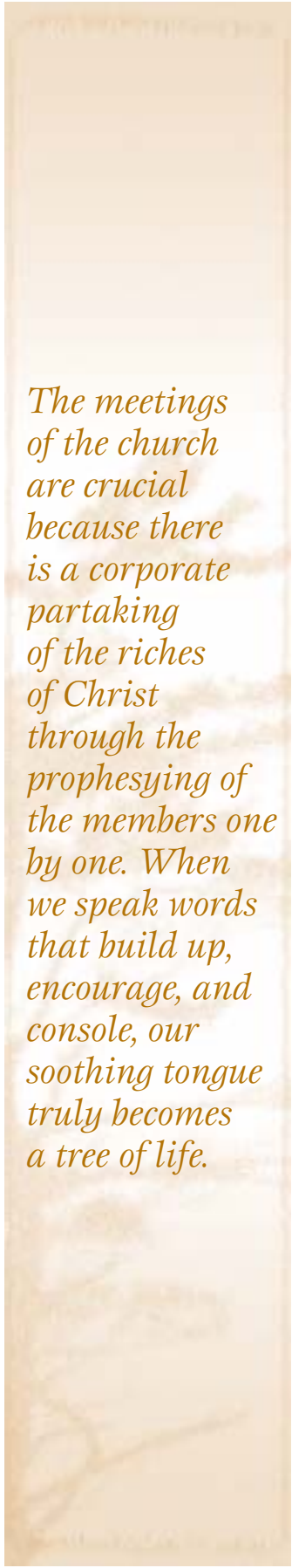
Partaking of the Two Trees in First Corinthians

In 1 Corinthians, the partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil occurs primarily through the believers' individualistic pursuit of human wisdom, masked within a seemingly commendable pursuit of spiritual knowledge and gifts. The Corinthians, while being enriched in many spiritual aspects, were absolutely divided from one another and puffed up on behalf of one, against the other (4:6). With their knowledge they were destroying their brothers, wounding and stumbling those for whom Christ died (8:11-13). In contrast, Paul, who had true knowledge that an idol is nothing in the world, was unwilling to let this knowledge govern him; instead, he denied what he knew and what was his right in order to not stumble his brothers or hinder the gospel (vv. 4, 13; 9:12). The Corinthians, while displaying a multiplicity of gifts, lack the greater gifts that build up the church and the excellent way of love that sustains the mutuality of those who are individually members one of another (12:31). Rather, than being blended to the point that the member most lacking is the member afforded the most abundant honor (v. 24), the Corinthians' religious privileging of one gift over another, based on their judgment of what is good, forces the apostle to ask the rhetorical questions: "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all have works of power? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret tongues?" (vv. 29-30). By partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the "germ of death" (Keil and Delitzsch 107) that penetrated the human nature at the point of the fall is fully operative within the church in Corinth, which should be a living, organic expression of Christ as His Body, but which is, instead, a cold, heartless gathering of the dead.

The gathering of the church is central to the believers' partaking of the tree of life because the tree of life is a corporate tree. We have been grafted into it, and we are branches in the vine. In this context, Paul cedes no ground to a purely individualistic pursuit and partaking of Christ. It is for this reason that he emphasizes a corporate pursuit for the building up of the Body of Christ through eating and enjoying Christ by meeting and speaking in mutuality and by displaying Christ as God's wisdom in simplicity and even foolishness. In our meetings we should have no motive other than the building up of the Body of Christ, and we should trustfully allow God to reveal if we are in anything otherwise minded (Phil. 3:15).

The meetings of the church are crucial in 1 Corinthians because there is a corporate partaking of the riches of Christ through the prophesying of the members one by one (14:1-3, 31). In the meetings each member has the organic capacity to offer something for the nourishment of the other members, whether it is a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation (v. 26). Prophesying in chapter 14 simply means the telling forth of the riches of our experience and enjoyment of Christ in understandable utterances. Just as the divine life, which animates the gospel, is imparted through the foolishness of preaching, the divine life, which builds up the church, is imparted through the foolishness of prophesying. When we speak words that build up, encourage, and console, our soothing tongue truly becomes a tree of life (Prov. 15:4).

By our partaking of the tree of life, Christ is eaten and organically assimilated into us. This reality characterizes the presentation of Christ throughout 1 Corinthians. In this Epistle the believers grow, not by learning and teaching, but by eating, whether the eating involves milk or solid food (3:2). The food that we should eat is Christ as our feast (5:7-8). He is our spiritual food and spiritual drink (10:3-4), and He is the reality of



The meetings of the church are crucial because there is a corporate partaking of the riches of Christ through the prophesying of the members one by one. When we speak words that build up, encourage, and console, our soothing tongue truly becomes a tree of life.

Our organic incorporation into both the life and nature of Satan through the fall is a reality, just as our organic incorporation into the life and nature of the Triune God through our redemption and regeneration is a reality. The realm of each incorporation is a fellowship.

the bread that we eat and the wine that we drink at His table (vv. 16-17, 21). In our partaking of Christ, He is manifested and displayed for all to see (14:24-25); our eating of Christ produces an expression of Christ. While speaking and eating in the corporate meetings of the church can seem like a foolish exercise, we should understand that the wisdom of God is foolishness to man and simply eat. Our partaking of the two trees produces two radically different fellowships, one that involves the believers' incorporation into the fellowship of the Son and the other that involves the believers' continuing incorporation into the fellowship of demons.

The Fellowship of the Two Trees in First Corinthians

Little needs to be said on this point because this reality will be either rejected by the religious mind or received in spirit: Our organic incorporation into both the life and nature of Satan through the fall is a reality, just as our organic incorporation into the life and nature of the Triune God through our redemption and regeneration is a reality. The realm of each incorporation is a fellowship; one is the fellowship of demons and the other is the fellowship of the Son, which is also the fellowship of the Body of Christ (10:20, 16). For all of the high and elevated pursuits of religious wisdom by the Corinthians, they were really just mired in a fellowship of death. Similarly, those who are not joined by faith to Christ are in a fellowship of death, whether they live predominantly on the good or the evil side of the tree of knowledge. Those who have been called into the fellowship of the Son, however, have an opportunity to turn from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and daily partake of the tree of life, which is the life-giving Spirit in our spirit, particularly by calling on the name of the One who has called us (1:2, 9). Indeed, "No one can say, Jesus is Lord! except in the Holy Spirit" (12:3). This simplicity toward Christ keeps us in the fellowship of the tree of life.¹⁴

The fellowship of the tree of life fulfills the purpose of God by producing the fellowship of the Son and the fellowship of the Body of Christ, which makes redeemed humanity God in life and nature but not in the Godhead. Scott Brodeur in *The Holy Spirit's Agency in the Resurrection of the Dead* summarizes this point nicely:

God creates, redeems and saves the world out of love, sharing his divine nature with us so that we may become what he is. In Christ Jesus, the Father brings his wondrous work to completion through the agency of the Holy Spirit. God remains God and creation remains creation, yet something of God enters into the identity of man and something of man enters into the identity of God. In Christ, humanity is fully integrated into the Trinity; in the Spirit, divinity is fully integrated into the spiritual bodies of human beings. Yet divinization is not pantheism, since both Creator and creation keep their unique identities in spite of the marvelous exchange which has taken place. (270)

The possibility for humanity to be incorporated into the Triune God through our participation in the fellowship of the Son exposes the grossest part of the serpent's lie in the garden. When he said, "God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will become like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5), he was lying by omission, because being like God involves more than just knowing the difference between good and evil. Keil and Delitzsch note,

The knowledge of good and evil, which man obtains by going into evil, is as far removed from the true likeness of God, which he would have attained by avoiding it, as the imaginary liberty of a sinner, which leads into bondage to sin and ends in death, is from the true liberty of a life of fellowship with God. (95)

Becoming God in life and nature but not in the Godhead is much higher than just being like God in one of His attributes. God in His wisdom prepared humanity as a vessel to contain His life and nature, and He prepared Himself to be received by humanity by

passing through a process of incarnation, human living, death, resurrection to be consummated as the life-giving Spirit, in order that God and man and man and God would be mutually joined to one another in a divine fellowship of the divine life. As a result of this economy, redeemed humanity has become God in life, nature, and expression, but not in the Godhead. This is much higher than just being like God according to one of His attributes by knowing the difference between good and evil. Redeemed and regenerated humanity now, once again, has an opportunity to partake of the tree of life. May we all exercise our right to the tree of life for the sake of the building up of the church as the Body of Christ, living in life and fellowship rather than in death and division. **AFC**

Notes

¹The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not present in chapters 21 and 22 of Revelation because, as Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 15:54, “Death has been swallowed up unto victory.” This victory is the victory inherent in the operation of the resurrection life of Christ.

²The lines of life and death run throughout the Bible. In the *Life-study of Genesis* Witness Lee devotes two messages to detail the line of life and the line of knowledge throughout the Scriptures (see Messages 15 and 16). The line of life is increasingly personified in Christ, who is realized in the mingling of the divine Spirit with our human spirit, and the line of death is increasingly personified in Satan, who is realized in the constitution of sin in our fallen bodies. The choice between these two lines is likewise presented throughout the Bible and is summed up in the charge of Moses in Deuteronomy 30:19: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today: I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life that you and your seed may live.” The natural operation of the tree of life in the New Testament becomes “the law of the Spirit of life...in Christ Jesus” and the natural operation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil becomes “the law of sin and of death” (Rom. 8:2). Likewise, the choice of Adam continues to be our choice—whether to set our mind on the spirit, which is life, or to set our mind on the flesh, which is death (v. 6).

³In his reflections on the Genesis account in *Creation and Fall*, this is one of Bonhoeffer’s few observations concerning the tree of life, but it is significant in its association of Christ with this tree. Bonhoeffer devotes most of his discussion to humanity’s interaction with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In many respects, his focus on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil reflects the priority given to it in Genesis, a priority that is needed in order to inform fallen humanity, the readers of this account, of the devastating reality of sin and death in their living as a consequence of partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and of not partaking of the tree of life. The tree of life can be appreciated and received only in light of humanity’s experiential knowledge of the tree of death (59), as Bonhoeffer later describes it.

⁴By its very existence within God’s creation before the fall, the tree of life points to a need for incarnation for the sake of humanity’s union, mingling, and incorporation with the Triune God, rather than just for the sake of redemption. Through incarnation God was qualified and able to come into humanity. The remarkable passage in Philippians 2:6-10, concerning the condescension of Christ in emptying Himself and coming in the likeness of man, does not specifically deal with redemption even though it speaks of the death of the cross. The passage speaks rather of Christ passing through a process of incarnation, death, and resurrection in order to secure a place for divinized humanity within the glory of the Godhead. Without Christ passing through this process, God would forever be separated from humanity, and humanity would be unable to participate in the fellowship of the Son. In the *Life-study of Romans* Witness Lee notes,

From the time God created us in His image and according to His likeness, we were ready to receive Him into us as life. We had a spirit to receive Him and a soul to express Him. Although we were ready, God was not yet ready. He was not yet qualified to come into man. In order to become qualified for this, He had to put on humanity; that is, He had to be incarnated. In Old Testament times, God could come upon the prophets, but He could not come into them...After His resurrection, He could be in them, and they could be in Him (John 14:20)...

Redeemed and regenerated humanity, once again, has an opportunity to partake of the tree of life, becoming God in life, nature, and expression, but not in the Godhead. This is much higher than just being like God according to one of His attributes.

The concept of a heartless and selfish God, which comes out of humanity's independent, darkened, and limited judgment of God, permeates the wisdom of our age, even the theological wisdom of our age.

In order to be qualified to enter into us, Christ had to pass through incarnation, human living, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Furthermore, as the Spirit, He had to descend upon us. Then the only thing remaining is for us to call upon Him in faith. When we say, "O Lord Jesus, I believe in You," His qualified life enters into our prepared life, and the two lives are joined. In this way our life is grafted into His. (669-671)

⁵There can be no true understanding of the significance and consequences of the serpent's words unless they are viewed from this divine perspective: Satan, as the father of lies, does not lie just occasionally; his every utterance is a lie. It is ironic, therefore, that his lies in Genesis 3 often are accepted as if they were true. For example, James Barr, who sees little if any of God's economy, especially as it pertains to the need for the deadened human spirit to be enlivened with the divine life, accepts and even advances the serpent's lie regarding the issue of death in *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality*. In his mind and in his argument there is the same satanic doubt that infected the woman in the garden. He writes,

The centrality of death is emphasized from the beginning. God said to the man, before the woman came on the scene, "You must not eat of the fruit of this tree; for on the day that you eat of it you will certainly die" (NEB). Later the snake says to Eve: "You will certainly not die. For God knows that when you eat of the fruit your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." They ate of the fruit; their eyes were opened, they found that they knew good and evil; and they did not die. The serpent was the one who was right in such matters. They did not die. (8)

⁶Bonhoeffer provides insight into the subtlety of the serpent's question, especially in the role that the pursuit of religious knowledge plays in the corruption of humanity:

What is the real evil in this question? It is not that it is asked at all. It is that the false answer is contained within it, that within it is attacked the basic attitude of the creature towards the Creator. Man is expected to be judge of God's word instead of simply hearing and doing it. This is accomplished as follows. On the basis of an idea, a principle, some previously gained knowledge about God, man is now to judge God's concrete Word. When man proceeds against the concrete Word of God, he is in the right from the first, he becomes God's master, he has left the path of obedience, he has withdrawn from God's addressing him. In other words, in this question the possibility is played off against the reality and the possibility undermines the reality...Only because the question is asked in a way that Adam can understand it as a new possibility of "being for God" can it lead him to "being against God." The possibility of our *own* "will to be for God," discovered by ourselves, is the real evil in the serpent's question. (74)

⁷The concept of a heartless and selfish God, which comes out of humanity's independent, darkened, and limited judgment of God, permeates the wisdom of our age, even the theological wisdom of our age, as demonstrated by James Barr in his continuing confusion, which conforms fully with the corrupted perspective of the serpent:

For the God who places upon humanity the one condition, that they should not eat from a particular tree, is a God who is not insisting upon any very central ethical principle. Eating that fruit is not in the same category of offences as murder, which was Cain's offence, or filling the earth with violence, which was that of the generation before the Flood. Why was it wrong to eat that fruit? In fact, we are left to surmise, because God wants to keep to himself the knowledge of good and evil; he does not want anyone else to have it, and still more does he want to keep to himself the reality of eternal life. The sheer irrationality of the command, not to eat of the tree, and of the threat to deprive of life if it was eaten, has had a great effect on the history of understanding: for it has been read as if to mean that the slightest deviation from the slightest divine command, however devoid of perceptible ethical basis that command might be, was and must be a totally catastrophic sin which would estrange from God not only the immediate offender but also all future descendants and indeed all future humanity. None of this, however, is involved in the actual story. It is God who is placed in a rather ambiguous light. He has made an ethically arbitrary prohibition, and backed it up with a threat to kill which, in the event, he does nothing to carry out. (11-12)

Barr accepts and repeats the serpent's lies, agreeing that God is selfish in wanting to "keep to himself the knowledge of good and evil." However, he goes further by suggesting that God wants to "keep to himself the reality of eternal life," blindly forgetting that God placed man in front of the tree of life and commanded him to eat. Barr is so steeped in the organic operation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that he sees Genesis only as an account concerned with the ethics of God rather than the life of God. He also regards God's admonitions concerning eating, which reveal the wisdom of God, as not being "very central." For Barr, it seems foolish to privilege the matter of eating over matters of ethical consequence, such as murder and violence. Finally, in his independent, religious judgment, it is God who is the ambiguous actor in the drama in the garden, not only because of His ethical pettiness but also because of His apparent powerlessness in carrying out His pronouncement of death.

⁸In our satanified and corrupted world, nothing is more highly prized and valued than wisdom and knowledge. The world is defined by what we regard as knowledge, and the pursuit of knowledge, the desire for wisdom, is the determinative essence of what we regard as human progress. Our wisdom defines our understanding of what is human; as such, even our wisdom, the wisdom of the age, rises up against the knowledge of God (2 Cor. 10:5). We exalt and value wisdom, even though it will quickly pass away at the unveiling of the foolishness of God (1 Cor. 1:24-25). A misaimed valuation of human, even ethical wisdom is at the core of Barr's exegesis of Genesis. His longing for a "wise" God and for an "enlightened" humanity, both coming from Barr's own image of himself, sadly comes through in the following passage:

The person who comes out of this story with a slightly shaky moral record is, of course, God. Why does he want to keep eternal life for himself and not let them share it? Even more seriously, why does he not want them to have knowledge of good and evil? What is wrong with this knowledge, that they should not possess it? And if we look at the traditional interpretation again for a moment: if Adam and Eve were, before their disobedience, completely free from death, why then under these circumstances were they to live eternally without any knowledge of good and evil, to be a sort of perfect human toy, living in a paradise where no moral sense was ever required or to be required? (14)

⁹It is difficult, given the expansive nature of the topic at hand—a comparison of the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and a subsequent application to the first Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians—to adequately address all the many points that Paul addresses. The following sections are intended to primarily serve as an overview of the operation of the two trees in the church in Corinth. I also have a concern that any attempt to present an extensive and detailed argument could easily veer into an over reliance upon persuasive words alone, and this I wish to avoid. Hopefully, these words will contain enough of the element of the Spirit to point to our need to approach and receive the contents of this Epistle in the way of life. In this regard, pray-reading some of the crucial verses addressed in this article would yield fruitful benefits.

¹⁰These outline divisions are contained in the Recovery Version of the Bible and were written by Witness Lee.

¹¹The wisdom of the world by definition is wise. Wisdom as wisdom is its own validation. This makes it hard to denounce it with the same certainty as Paul. To proclaim that the wisdom of the age is not really wisdom seems foolish because it requires that we essentially deny who we are, not just what we think, because we have constructed ourselves and our world out of the materials of our mind, our thoughts and reasonings, our determinations of what has meaning and what does not. The cross of Christ and the foolishness of preaching are not very palatable to minds saturated with the wisdom of the world, and many efforts are made to rescue a role for our wisdom in our lives. Such an attempt can be seen in Paul W. Gooch's *Partial Knowledge*, which tries to make a fine distinction that ultimately merely differentiates between good and bad applications of our worldly wisdom:

What is wrong with wisdom in its worldly guise lies in self-deception, inflated conceit, bragging—morally and epistemologically undesirable conditions or activities...Having affirmed that Paul's critique of wisdom is not a critique of reason per se, we are now in a position to conclude that his first-prong attack is against the misuse of reason resulting in self-deception and boasting. Whether Paul's text can allow reason a legitimate role to play in our knowledge of God must be considered in the next section, but for now we

*To proclaim
that the wisdom
of the age
is not really
wisdom seems
foolish because
it requires that
we essentially
deny who we
are, not just
what we think,
because we have
constructed our-
selves and our
world out of
the materials
of our mind,
our thoughts
and reasonings.*

“Paul’s Trinitarian conception of God is not at issue...in the interpretation of 1 Cor. 15:45... Essential-eternal, ontological-Trinitarian relationships are simply outside his purview here. He is concerned with what [Christ] “became” ...in his resurrection.”

may content ourselves with the observation that Paul’s condemnation of worldly wisdom does not directly attack philosophy. (40-41)

¹²According to James, the tree of life is identified with the cross of Christ in Christian imagery and eschatology, especially in its relation to the death and resurrection of Christ (243).

¹³Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., devotes considerable space in “Life-Giving Spirit”: Probing the Center of Paul’s Pneumatology” to addressing the identity of the Spirit in verse 15:45, considering both grammatical structure and similar scriptural references. Considering the grammatical structure of the context of verse 45, he states,

A couple of interlocking, mutually reinforcing considerations show, decisively it seems to me, that “spirit” in v. 45 refers to the person of the Holy Spirit. (1) Πνεῦμα in v. 45 and πνευματικόν, twice in v. 44 and once in v. 46, are linked semantically. As cognate noun and adjective they qualify and explain each other (as do the noun ψυχήν and the adjective ψυχικόν on the other side of the contrast). Further, in vv. 44 and 46 the adjectives πνευματικόν and ψυχικόν are paired antithetically. That contrast occurs in only one other place in Paul (or, for that matter, the NT): in 2:14-15. There, as most interpreters recognize, the activity of the Holy Spirit is plainly in view: his sovereign exclusive work in mediating God’s revealed wisdom. On the one side of the antithesis, in 2:15, “the spiritual person” (ὁ πνευματικός) is the believer (cf. vv. 4-5) specifically as enlightened and transformed by the Spirit...As the adjective πνευματικόν in vv. 44 and 46 plainly refers to the activity of the Holy Spirit, so its correlative noun πνεῦμα in v. 45 refers to the person of the Holy Spirit. (577)

Considering scriptural expressions similar in content to verse 45, he states,

This conclusion is reinforced by the participial modifier Paul uses. The last Adam did not simply become πνεῦμα but “life-giving” (πνεῦμα ζωοποιοῦν). The “spirit” in view is not merely an existing entity but an acting subject. Paul’s use of this verb elsewhere proves decisive here, especially his sweeping assertion about the new covenant in 2 Cor. 3:6: “The Spirit gives life.” In the contrasting parallelism that stamps this passage too, few if any will dispute that “the Spirit” (τὸ πνεῦμα) in v. 6 is “the Spirit of the living God” just mentioned in v. 3—in other words, the Holy Spirit. Again Rom. 8:11 attributes the “life-giving” activity of resurrection to the Spirit (cf. John 6:63). For these reasons, πνεῦμα in 1 Cor. 15:45 is definite and refers to the person of the Holy Spirit. (577-578)

Gaffin predicates his entire article on the centrality of Paul’s unveiling of Christ as the last Adam, the life-giving Spirit, stating, “In all of Paul, as far as I can see, there is no assertion about the Spirit’s activity as pivotal, even momentous, as this” (575). He also provides an important discussion as to why 1 Corinthians 15:45 has not “received the attention it deserves, especially among interpreters with an evangelical commitment” (575). In this regard he accurately points out the source of the theological reticence to address or even consider the economical implications of the last Adam becoming the life-giving Spirit:

From the viewpoint of contemporary evangelical and historic Christian orthodoxy, the apparent objection to this translation and the supporting exegetical sketch given above is as obvious as it is serious. To find here a reference to the person of the Holy Spirit seems clearly to put Paul at odds, even in conflict, with later Church Trinitarian and Christological doctrine...Paul’s Trinitarian conception of God is not at issue but is properly made a presupposition in the interpretation of 1 Cor. 15:45...Essential-eternal, ontological-Trinitarian relationships are simply outside his purview here. As we have already noted, he is concerned not with who Christ is timelessly, eternally, in his preexistence, but with what he “became,” with what has happened to him in history, specifically in his resurrection. (580-581)

It is one thing to show that v. 45 is not a source of Trinitarian confusion but another to honor the terms in which Paul expresses himself here. In view is the momentous, epochal significance of the resurrection/exaltation for Christ personally. Paul means to affirm what has not always been adequately recognized in the Church’s Christology. In his resurrection something really happened to Jesus. By that experience he was and remains a changed man in the truest and deepest—in fact, eschatological—sense. As Paul puts it elsewhere, by the declarative energy of the Holy Spirit in his resurrection God’s

Son became what he was not before: “the Son of God with power” (Rom. 1:4). Relatively speaking, according to 2 Cor. 13:4, while Christ was crucified in (a state of) “weakness” he now “lives by God’s power.” He is now, by virtue of the resurrection and ascension, what he did not previously possess: a glorified humanity. (581-582)

Gaffin realizes and rightly observes that 1 Corinthians 15:45 is not a declaration concerning, much less a denial of, the eternal coexistence and coinherence of the persons of the Divine Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is an important starting point for any meaningful consideration of verse 45 because it takes the discussion out of the realm of being “in conflict, with later Church Trinitarian and Christological doctrine.” The reference point for verse 45 properly begins and ends with the operation of the Divine Trinity in His economy to make His life and nature available to the redeemed to glorify their humanity just as the humanity of Christ was glorified through the operation of the Spirit who gives life. The operation of the economy of God in the believers’ experience is dependent upon the life-giving Spirit, and this is the reason that this verse is so “pivotal” and “momentous.”

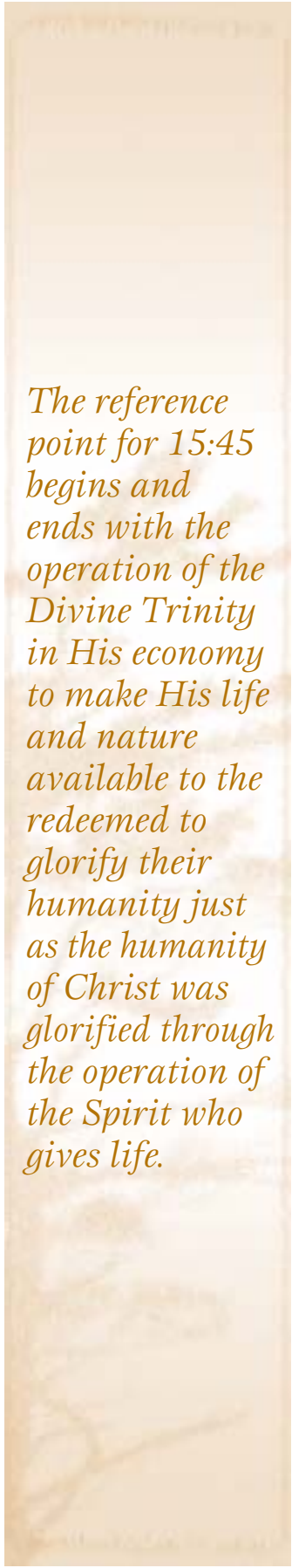
¹⁴Simplicity is often equated with foolishness. What is simple seems foolish, and what is simple often is difficult to receive because, well, it is foolish. Such is the cross of Christ, which is at the center of our initiation into God’s economy, and such is our continuing experience of God’s economy. The following foolish word was spoken by Witness Lee in 1979 concerning how to receive and enjoy the contents of the Epistle to the Colossians. It was also recently sent out by e-mail via Living Stream Ministry’s daily electronic ministry program, eManna:

Pray-read Colossians for thirty days. Pray until all the aspects of Christ revealed in this book saturate your being. We do not need regulations or teachings—we need to be infused and saturated with Christ as the all-inclusive One. If Christ is infused into you, you will drop everything that is not Christ, and you will be constituted with Christ in your very being. Religion gives people doctrines and teaches them how to behave. The book of Colossians, on the contrary, speaks of the all-inclusive Christ. This Christ is already in us, but we need to see Him, know Him, be filled with Him, be saturated with Him, and become absolutely one with Him. (*Life-study of Colossians* 76-77)

I appreciate this simple word, but I was also encouraged by some of the simple responses that we received to this e-mail. One stated, “Praise God that we receive these wonderful messages. This particular one is so full of life. So rich in truth. Without Jesus, Jesus, and more Jesus, we are left with our own devices. Anything apart from Christ equals death! Praise His name!”

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