

## Theosis and the Virtues

“The Means and End in 2 Peter 1:3-11: The Theological and Moral Significance of *Theōsis*,” by Wyndy Corbin Reuschling. *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8.2 (2014): 275-286. Print.

Theology in the academy continues to suffer from an unhealthy division of labor. Specialists in biblical studies, historical theology, systematic theology, and Christian ethics are protective of their own turf and rarely overstep the boundaries between disciplines. Things have fortunately begun to change, and the *Journal of Theological Interpretation* is one of the many spaces where experimentation in cross-discipline research is being fruitfully encouraged.

This is perhaps most evident in the journal’s continued publication of articles exploring theosis in the New Testament that until recently was considered as the prime example of the early church’s unwarranted “Hellenization” of the simple morality of the New Testament. Already the journal has published articles on theosis in 2 Corinthians, Romans, and Colossians, and in the Fall 2014 issue, it published an additional two articles—one on Luke and one on 2 Peter 1:4 (reviewed here).<sup>1</sup>

Wyndy Corbin Reuschling’s article on 2 Peter 1:3-11 is additionally uncommon (though certainly not unique) in that she, unlike many others publishing on theosis and the New Testament, is neither a biblical scholar nor a scholar of early Christianity. She was trained in Christian social ethics at Drew University and presently teaches ethics and theology at Ashland Theological Seminary. Theosis research has exploded in the disciplines of historical, biblical, and systematic theology but has remained relatively uninfluential in the realm of Christian ethics, a deficiency that Reuschling hopes to remedy.

The crucial question, to her mind, is what the doctrine of theosis means for the Christian life. Scholars have argued persuasively that theosis is deeply woven into the fabric of the Christian tradition (both East and West), that it need not be excised, and that it ought to be restored to its rightful place at the center of Christian theology. Unfortunately, not much attention has been given to what difference theosis makes for the life of the believer. It remains largely an abstract teaching, another label for the conception of salvation that one already holds, or

something to look forward to in the age to come. In the end, Reuschling’s conclusions are not all that compelling, but at the very least, her article asks some helpful and much needed questions. Hopefully they will be heard and will prompt both theologians and Christian ethicists to think more deeply about the ways in which theosis pervades not only the whole of Christian theology but also the whole of Christian life and experience.

Reuschling’s article is divided into three sections. The first section lists what have become standard caveats to assuage the concerns of those who are still not sure whether theosis belongs within the boundaries of orthodox Christian teaching: (1) theosis must be understood within the context of the entire economy of salvation, pervading its every aspect rather than furnishing it with entirely new or different content; (2) theosis must be understood to be made possible by the incarnation of Christ; and (3) theosis must be understood to transform human nature, not to transcend it (i.e., the deified one does not cease to be human) (277-278). The second section turns to 2 Peter 1:3-11 and makes the crucial point that Scripture itself closely unites the classic theosis passage, 1:4, with a list of virtues (vv. 5-8), indicating that theosis is deeply tied to the Christian life in the here and now. The third section draws out several larger implications that this close connection has for the grander task of Christian ethical reflection.

As the title of the article suggests, Reuschling’s primary thesis is that we ought to understand theosis not only as the static “end” of the Christian life but also as its dynamic “means.” Theosis, then, is not simply something that the believers have to look forward to in the distant future; it is something that they ought to pursue in their endeavor to live the Christian life today.

Reuschling makes this point primarily by reading the classic New Testament theosis verse, 2 Peter 1:4, within its larger textual context (vv. 3-11), which, as she notes, includes a list of virtues (vv. 5-8). Clearly, then, there is a relationship between theosis and virtues. The crucial question concerns the nature of this relationship; that is, does theosis make the virtues possible, or do the virtues make theosis possible? Reuschling is not entirely consistent, but she seems to place the accent heavily on the latter: “We become these things [the things listed in 1:5-8] while we ‘make every effort’ to practice these virtues. And as we do so, we participate in God’s life and embody God’s own goodness” (284). The overwhelming impression one gets

---

from reading Reuschling's article is that, for her, practicing the virtues and participating in God's life are not two distinct things, but simply two ways of describing the same thing. What the believers are charged to do is to practice the virtues, and as they do, they can be said to "participate in God's life and embody God's own goodness."

This becomes readily apparent when Reuschling asks what it is that makes the practice of these virtues Christian: "What makes our list of virtues different, more 'Christian' in shape and content, than the stoic self-determination of Greek ethics?" (280). Her answer, in short, seems to be that Greek virtue ethics appeal to human reason and to an abstract notion of goodness as the grounds for practicing the virtues, whereas Christian virtue ethics appeal instead to the personal goodness of God's own nature. Thus, in striving to be good, the believers understand themselves not only to be striving toward the development of their intrinsic humanness but to be striving to be like God and to act like God. The attributes of God have been revealed in the Scriptures and in the life of Jesus, and thus, by practicing these virtues, the believer is made like God, that is, deified. Reuschling thus finds theosis attractive because it captures what it is that differentiates "Christian" virtue ethics from pagan virtue ethics—it appeals to the nature of God as manifested in the narrative of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the model of the ethical life that the believer and the believing community of the church ought to strive to embody and live out.

Reuschling means little more than this, and her sentiment is again confirmed by her understanding of what it is to participate in the divine nature. She understands this participation to be a "fellowship, partnership, and oneness in purpose" (279). For her the union of God and humanity is simply a moral union, not an ontological one. In Christ and in the Scriptures, the moral character of God has been revealed, and the theosis of the believer consists in "an active pursuit and engagement with God so that we understand God's moral priorities for the ways in which this informs and directs our own moral commitments and practices" (283).

This is, unfortunately, a very common understanding of theosis: by practicing the virtues embodied in Christ and revealed in God's Word, the believer becomes like God and lives a life that bears the character of God's own moral perfection. It is certainly the case that the deified believer will live a moral and ethical life, but the Christian life far transcends the category of the ethical. The New Testament undoubtedly contains ethical precepts, and one might extract from it a "New Testament ethic," but it is by no means a book of ethics. One could similarly derive an agricultural policy or a military strategy from the Old Testament, but no one would confuse it with a book of forestry or a manual of war. When the New Testament is

read as a book of ethics rather than as a book that contains some ethical statements, there is always a danger that the spiritual and transcendent nature of the divine revelation will be sacrificed.

There are several passages in the New Testament, for example, that indicate that the nature of the relationship between theosis and the virtues is precisely the opposite of what Reuschling suggests. The practice of the virtues does not enable us to partake of the divine nature; rather, our partaking of the divine nature enables us to live out the virtues. It is indeed striking that in an article on the virtues within the context of the Christian life, the Spirit is mentioned only once in the text (277) and in a single footnote (note 4), for the New Testament describes the virtues (including several in Peter's list) as "the fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22-26). It is the operation of the Spirit within the believers—not the efforts of their flesh to practice the virtues—that makes possible the living out of the virtues.

Furthermore, even reversing the order of priority between theosis and the virtues does not adequately capture the relationship between them, for theosis does not simply enable us to become "the humans God created and called us to be" (277). Theosis does not merely make believers better human beings (though it certainly should); it also makes them much more than they could possibly be. It does not simply restore the human virtues damaged through the fall; it uplifts them, enabling believers to live a life that is beyond their own human capacities. We see this particularly in the last two items in Peter's list—"brotherly love" and "love"—for the latter is the unconditional love that belongs properly to God alone. Indeed, love is the very nature of God's essence (1 John 4:8, 16). Loving one's own is possible, but human love is incapable of extending to one's enemies. Yet, the believer is charged to have such love (Matt. 5:43-48), and in 2 Peter love is identified as the pinnacle in the development of the believer's spiritual life. What is it, then, that enables believers to do what the Gentiles cannot do? Is it simply that we know (unlike an unbeliever) that God loves His enemies and that we, who are made in His image, should act like He acts? Is it simply because the incarnate Lord manifested such a love on the cross and inspires us to do likewise? Is it simply because He and His apostles charge us to do so in the New Testament?

Such views are entirely insufficient. Paul tells us that he desired to "be found in Him, not having [his] own righteousness which is out of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is out of God and based on faith" (Phil. 3:9). Paul speaks in the present, indicating that he sees as a real possibility that a believer (even he himself) might be found in their "own righteousness" as distinct from that which is "out of God," having God as its source. Paul similarly warns the

---

Galatians that, “having begun by the Spirit,” they were now trying to be “perfected by the flesh,” having neglected God as the one who “bountifully supplies...the Spirit” (Gal. 3:3-5). He contrasts the operation of the Spirit not with the negative “works of the flesh” as he does in Galatians 5 but with “being perfected by the flesh” (3:3)—indicating that the ethical improvement of the believer might have a source other than the Spirit, in which case it is merely human improvement and not a partaking of the divine nature.

It seems that there is a very real possibility that the ethical development of the believer can be intrinsically indistinguishable from that of an unbeliever and of little value in the eyes of God. Paul’s aspiration was not to be a better person but to be “found in Christ,” with Christ living in him (2:20). He sought to live and to walk by the Spirit (5:25) and to thereby fulfill “the righteous requirement of the law” (Rom. 8:4). Paul’s aspiration was not the improvement of his own ethical behavior but to live in and with the Triune God. The fact that such a living scores favorably according to the standards of any ethical system by which it might be measured was of little concern to Paul (1 Cor. 4:3).

Of course, it might be argued that Peter had an entirely different ethics than did Paul. While Paul encouraged a kind of mystical Christian living, Peter was more concerned with the practical, ethical formation of Christian believers and communities. One certainly senses the difference between Peter and Paul, but the treasure within these earthen vessels is surely the same, and to focus on the earthly vessels does them a great disservice (2 Cor. 4:7). Without addressing the whole of the Petrine Epistles, even close attention to the passage that Reuschling purports to exegete shows that Peter’s “ethic” is not so much unlike that of Paul. The focus of the passage is not the ethical improvement of the believer. It primarily highlights the work of God within the believer: “His divine power has granted to us all things which relate to life and godliness”; He has “called us by His own glory and virtue”; “He has granted to us precious and exceedingly great promises”; and then through such work—not through our efforts—we “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:3-4). Based upon all that God has done and that we have received, we are to render our cooperation in developing the divine attributes that have been imparted into us through our regeneration in the divine life (1 Pet. 1:3, 23). Even at the close of the passage, “entrance into the eternal kingdom” is not something that we attain through our own efforts but something that “will be richly and bountifully supplied to [us]” (2 Pet. 1:11).

The crucial difference that theosis makes for the practice of the virtues is not that it rearticulates their narrative context, telos, or significance. If the believer is called to become God and not merely to become good, the crucial question that must be asked is how we are to distinguish between the development of our own virtue and the development of that virtue imparted into us by means of the divine life and nature. As Paul clearly understood, both are distinct possibilities, and it is in understanding this difference that the potential of theosis for shedding light on “Christian ethics” lies.

Reuschling should be thanked for raising some very important questions and prompting us to think about the difference that theosis should make in the life of the believer. Regrettably, one will need to look elsewhere for clearer answers to these questions.

by Mitchell Kennard

Theosis does not simply restore the human virtues damaged through the fall; it uplifts them, enabling believers to live a life that is beyond their own human capacities.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See “Affirming Theosis in Romans,” *Affirmation & Critique* 16.2 (2011): 99-103; “Deified into the Same Image,” *Affirmation & Critique* 13.2 (2008): 85-88; and “Ontological Transformation apart from Divinity,”

*Affirmation & Critique* 19.2 (2014): 132-136.

### A Gap between the Origin and Goal of the Christian Life

*Resurrection: The Origin and Goal of the Christian Life*, by Frank J. Matera. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015. Print.

*Resurrection: The Origin and Goal of the Christian Life* (hereafter *Resurrection*) aims to inspire contemporary believers concerning the bodily resurrection from the dead of Jesus and of His believers. Relying on the New Testament record, *Resurrection* elucidates Christ’s bodily resurrection from the dead as the center, source, and origin of the life of a Christian. The resurrection of Jesus Christ, a fundamental item of the New Testament faith, is presented in the context of a continuum that concludes with the believer’s bodily resurrection on the “last day” as the stated goal of the Christian life. However, *Resurrection* makes no mention of the dispensing of the

---

resurrection life of the Triune God into the inward parts of the tripartite man, the organic process through which the Christian arrives at this goal. *Resurrection* makes clear its main purpose:

The resurrection is the central teaching of Christianity—that without which there is no Christianity. It is my hope that this volume will help those who believe to enter more fully into this mystery and invite those who do not believe, or who have fallen away, to consider the central claim of the New Testament: *God raised Jesus from the dead.* (17)

*Resurrection* presents its topic within the structure and framework of the canonical order of the New Testament. It is written with the a priori assumption that the New Testament's claim "that God raised Jesus from the dead and that the risen one appeared to others who proclaimed what happened to them" (15) is reliable. Occasionally, hints of *Resurrection's* Roman Catholic catechetical perspective come through related to doctrine—"this new birth took place at their baptism" (122) and a subtle quip that Luke's record gives a "nod to Paul's teachings on justification by faith" (77)—and related to ritual—"the Spirit, like water, was poured upon believers" (98), and reference to the "eucharistic celebration" (56). Nevertheless, the overall tone and flavor are fundamental and biblical.

### Intimations, Stories, Defense, and Predictions of the Resurrection in the Gospels

*Resurrection* begins with the Gospels, which, prior to recounting the resurrection itself by way of stories of the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Lord, speak of the resurrection in four ways. First, there are intimations of resurrection in certain incidents and in statements made by Jesus that remained a puzzle to His hearers, until they were later understood or remembered by His disciples after He was raised from the dead. One illustrative example of this category is Luke's statement, "And after three days, they found Him in the temple" (2:46), in reference to the parents of Jesus searching for the twelve-year-old Jesus, which *Resurrection* interprets as being anticipatory to "a far more important event: the third day when the distraught disciples will find Jesus risen from the dead" (20). *Resurrection* provides other examples, including John 2:19-22 and 7:34-35. The point is that "although there is no mention of the resurrection of the dead in these texts, the resurrection is the key to understanding what Jesus means" (21).

Second, the Gospels recount stories of Jesus raising the dead, such as His raising of Jairus's twelve-year-old daughter (Mark 5:21-43), the widow's son (Luke 7:11-17), and Lazarus (John 11). That the dead are raised is one of the items Jesus lists in response to John the Baptist's question, "Are You the Coming One, or should we expect another?"

(Matt. 11:3-5; Luke 7:19-22). Raising the dead is also part of what the disciples are to do in their spreading of the gospel of the kingdom (Matt. 10:8).

Third, the Synoptic Gospels present Jesus' defense of the resurrection of the dead when challenged by the Sadducees concerning the doctrine of resurrection (Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-38). Jesus affirmed, by quoting from Exodus, that "Scripture itself presupposes the resurrection of the dead" (29); hence, the Sadducees were wrong in that they do not understand the Scriptures. The Sadducees were also wrong concerning the power of God: "by denying the resurrection of the dead, they imply that the power of death is greater than the power of God" (29). In this context *Resurrection* draws a distinction between resuscitation, a return to a former life, and resurrection, a transformation as an "entrance into a new kind of life" (29).

Fourth, in Jesus' explicit predictions of His death and resurrection, He anticipated God's vindication. *Resurrection* draws particular attention to Jesus' statements in Mark 8:31, 9:31, and 10:33-34. It notes that in these verses Jesus referred to Himself as the "Son of Man," echoing Daniel 7:13 and thus the vision in verses 14 and 27: "Just as the saints of the Most High received an everlasting kingdom after a period of persecution and suffering, so Jesus will be vindicated after his passion and death" (31).

*Resurrection* concludes its opening section by noting the relationship between the central proclamation of Jesus' message in His ministry, which was the kingdom of God, and the central message of the church, which focuses on "his saving death and life-giving resurrection" (33). *Resurrection's* argument that both the kingdom and the resurrection are the same message is accurate: "Those who are raised from the dead have entered into the fullness of the kingdom, and those who have entered into the fullness of the kingdom have been raised from the dead" (35).

### The Resurrection Narratives in the Gospels

*Resurrection* then proceeds to discuss the resurrection narratives in each of the four Gospels, within the confines of some clearly stated assumptions that the author helpfully explains as follows:

*I will not reconstruct how the resurrection narratives came about... Rather, I begin with the gospel narratives as we have them in order to explain what they proclaim about the resurrection...*

*My interpretation of the resurrection narratives is an exercise in biblical theology rather than historical reconstruction.*

...I begin with the following faith premises: (1) God



raised Jesus from the dead, (2) the tomb was empty, (3) and the risen Lord appeared to chosen witnesses...

*I will not harmonize the resurrection narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John...*

*I approach the resurrection of Jesus as an event rooted in history but transcending history...* The resurrection does not mean that Jesus was restored to his former way of life... To confess that God raised Jesus from the dead is to confess that God raised him into the sphere of his own life, a life we cannot comprehend until we have experienced it. (36-38)

**R**esurrection begins this section by discussing the various extant endings of Mark (e.g., with and without 16:9-20). *Resurrection* points out that, notwithstanding these textual complications, even the open-ended conclusion of verses 1 through 8, which do not record any appearances of the risen Lord, challenge the reader to confront the fact of the empty tomb and of the message of the young man that Jesus the Nazarene has been raised. "It is left to readers to accept or reject the message of the young man. Those who accept the message understand that the empty tomb is God's response to the death of his Son" (44). Verses 9 through 20 recount "a number of appearances of the risen Lord" and the failure of the disciples to initially believe the message concerning the Lord's resurrection (45). After the Lord appeared to them directly, He, on one hand, reproached them for their unbelief but, on the other hand, charged them to proclaim the gospel. According to *Resurrection*, this section makes two theological points: first, the resurrection of Jesus "does not do away with the need of faith; it requires faith," and second, "the risen Lord will not allow his disciples' lack of faith to frustrate God's plan of salvation" (45).

Based on an analysis of Matthew's more extensive narrative, *Resurrection* derives four additional theological insights. First, the transcendent power of God that was at work in raising Jesus from the dead marks the beginning of a new age, the age of the resurrection from the dead (50). Second,

the refusal of the soldiers and religious leaders to believe in the resurrection of Jesus in the face of this apocalyptic event underlines the hardness of the human heart that can resist the most powerful evidence... Not even the resurrection can change the hearts of those who refuse to be changed. (50)

Third, "the resurrection, which is the climax and ending of the story of Jesus' ministry, is the starting point and beginning of his disciples' ministry in every generation until he comes again" (50). *Resurrection* strikes an affirmative chord in its fourth insight: "The resurrection is not a substitute for faith but the origin and basis of faith... Those who have not seen the risen Christ are not at a disadvantage since even those who have seen the Lord must believe in the resurrection" (50).

*Resurrection* states that Luke's resurrection narrative introduces some additional themes that highlight the bodily dimension of Jesus' resurrection (i.e., His inviting the disciples to touch His hands and feet and His eating in their midst) and that His resurrection was not a mere resuscitation from the dead (55). For example, He walked with two disciples but was not initially recognized (Luke 24:16); when their eyes were opened to recognize Him after breaking the bread, He disappeared (v. 31); and when He appeared to the eleven, they thought He was a ghost, yet He had flesh and bones (v. 37-39). According to *Resurrection*, the most important contribution that Luke makes concerning the understanding of resurrection is the relationship between faith, the Scriptures, and the breaking of bread (56).

### The Witness of Resurrection in John's Gospel and First Epistle

*Resurrection* points out that the significance of the Johannine resurrection narrative is its correlation with the "overall theology of Jesus' mission" (60). In the way the Father sent Jesus into the world to reveal what He has seen and heard of the Father, so Jesus sends His disciples into the world to report what they have seen and heard in His presence about the Father; thereby underscoring that resurrection is the origin of the church's mission to proclaim the gospel (60).

In identifying the church's mission as simply the proclamation of the gospel, *Resurrection* does not give sufficient weight to the context of John 20:20-31. The Lord's sending in verse 21 is conjoined with His breathing Himself as the Spirit into the disciples to be in them as their life (vv. 22, 31). The mission should not be separated from the life needed to carry out the work. In his footnote on verse 21 Witness Lee makes this point:

The Lord sent His disciples with Himself as life and everything to them... This is why, immediately after He

*Resurrection*  
makes no mention of the  
dispensing of the resurrection  
life of the Triune God into the  
inward parts of the tripartite man.

---

said, “I also send you,” He breathed the Holy Spirit into them. By His breathing into them He entered as the Spirit into the disciples to abide in them forever (14:16-17). Hence, wherever His disciples were sent, He was always with them. He was one with them. (Recovery Version, note 2)

Lee’s footnote on 20:31 goes on to highlight the intrinsic connection between the life and the mission:

*The Christ* is the title of the Lord according to His office, His mission. *The Son of God* is His title according to His person. His person is a matter of God’s life, and His mission is a matter of God’s work. He is the Son of God to be the Christ of God. He works for God by the life of God that man, by believing in Him, may have God’s life to become God’s many sons and work by God’s life to build the corporate Christ (1 Cor. 12:12), thus fulfilling God’s purpose concerning His eternal building. (Recovery Version, note 1)

Notwithstanding the shortcoming noted above, *Resurrection* rightfully notes the centrality of the theology of resurrection in its review of 1 John, an Epistle that does not explicitly reference the resurrection of Jesus or of the believers. However, “without the resurrection there would be no talk of eternal life; there would be no confession that Jesus is the Christ; there would be no anointing of the Spirit; there would be no union with Christ” (123). From John’s perspective, although resurrection is chronologically after incarnation, the incarnation can be understood only through the lens, or in light of, the resurrection. What John says about Jesus being the Christ and about the believers being God’s children “presupposes a prior understanding of resurrection” (126).

### The Witness of Resurrection in the Acts of the Apostles

In discussing the book of Acts, *Resurrection* chooses to focus on the recorded sermons and speeches of Peter and Paul, who are representative of the two categories of those chosen to be witnesses of Christ’s resurrection. Peter is a representative of those who were with Jesus from the beginning of His earthly ministry to death, resurrection, appearances for forty days, and ascension. This first group became the witnesses of what they had seen and heard (4:20). For example, in the consideration of who was to replace Judas as the twelfth apostle, a most important factor concerned his being “a witness of His resurrection with us” (1:22).

Paul is a representative of those who became witnesses of the resurrection of Christ after His exaltation and enthronement. *Resurrection* states, “Whereas the apostles see the risen Christ in a bodily form that highlights the continuity between the earthly Jesus and the risen Christ, Paul encounters the ascended and enthroned Lord in a

glorious light that blinds him” (67). Both of these witnesses can testify based on their personal experiences: “The apostle[s] and Paul can preach with boldness that Jesus is the Messiah because they know from personal experience that Jesus is risen and alive” (68).

*Resurrection* discusses Peter’s speeches at Pentecost, in the temple after the healing of the paralytic, before the religious authorities, and finally his message to the Gentiles at the house of Cornelius (69-75). Seven main points are made in these speeches. First, the resurrection is God’s vindication of Jesus of Nazareth. Second, the resurrection is confirmed by the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets. Third, the risen Lord appeared over an extended period of time in a bodily form to show to His chosen witnesses that He was indeed alive and risen. Fourth, the crucified Jesus has been glorified and exalted by God to be the Lord and the Messiah. Fifth, as the enthroned Messiah, Christ is waiting to return on the day of universal resurrection. Sixth, Jesus was raised by God to bring both the Jews and the Gentiles to repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Seventh, the apostles are the God-chosen witnesses to proclaim that the crucified Jesus has been raised from the dead (75).

To illustrate Paul’s witness to the resurrection, *Resurrection* first focuses on his sermons given in Antioch of Pisidia and in Athens and, second, on his defense speeches in Jerusalem and Caesarea (75-81). *Resurrection* points out that Luke, as the author of Acts, gives a more detailed record of the contents of only two of Paul’s gospel sermons—one to Jews and God-fearers in a synagogue setting and the other to Gentiles who were unfamiliar with the Jewish Scriptures (78). The rest of Luke’s accounts of Paul’s messages give only a brief summary of the topic. *Resurrection* thereby concludes that these two detailed sermons are characteristic samples of how Paul spoke to audiences in these two categories.

To a Jewish audience Paul reviewed the history of Israel and led his hearers to the conclusion that Jesus as the descendant of David is the culmination of that history. Paul then used scriptural proofs to show that the resurrection of Jesus as the Messiah is the culmination of the promises made to their ancestors.

In Athens Paul spoke at the request of some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who wanted to know about his “new teaching about Jesus and the resurrection” (78). According to *Resurrection*, Paul connected with his audience by referring to their altar dedicated to an unknown God, by praising their piety, and by pointing out that the One they unknowingly worshipped was actually the true God—the Creator of heaven, earth, and all that dwells therein—and that they were His offspring. Paul then warned them to repent from their idolatry because there is a day of judgment coming. The righteous judgment, connected with the

---

resurrection, will come from a man, whom God has appointed; “of this he has given assurance to all *by raising him from the dead*” (79, quoting Acts 17:31).

The latter part of Acts contains accounts of the defense speeches Paul gave to various audiences, including to a Jewish crowd, to the Sanhedrin, before the Roman governor Felix, and before the Jewish king Agrippa. *Resurrection* insightfully makes the case that Paul reframed his defense to address the true cause of his imprisonment—his teaching concerning the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees were still waiting for the resurrection of the dead, but Paul proclaimed that the resurrection of the dead has already started with the resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah (80).

**B**oth Peter and Paul proclaimed a common message: Jesus has been resurrected to be Lord and Christ. To the Jews and the God-fearing people the resurrection of the Messiah is the fulfillment of God’s promises—the climax of promise and hope. To the Gentiles the resurrection of the Lord of all is a warning of the coming judgment so that they will repent and receive the forgiveness of sins. From this witness in Acts, *Resurrection* derives the implication for those who believe in the risen Lord: their sins are forgiven, they receive the gift of the Spirit, and they will be raised with Him (82).

### The Witness of Resurrection in the Pauline Epistles

*Resurrection* acknowledges the daunting challenge of attempting to synthesize the witness of resurrection found in the Pauline Epistles: “The reality of the resurrection so suffuses these letters that there is hardly a chapter that does not, in some way, witness to the resurrection...In a word, the resurrection is that without which there would be no Pauline theology” (84-85). *Resurrection* categorizes its reflections into seven topics (85-110), considering them to be merely a “starting point” (85). The first topical category is Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ. The gospel Paul preached, especially the witness of His resurrection, derived from the foundational experience of his call, in which God’s Son was revealed to Paul (cf. Gal. 1:15-16).

Second, the Pauline writings contain the creedal statements, summaries of the faith, and hymns that embody the church’s and Paul’s understanding of the resurrection. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 Paul hands down what he had received: Christ died, the proof of which is that He was buried, and Christ was raised, the proof of which is that He was seen by Cephas and other reliable witnesses.

Another such statement in Romans 8:34 “reveals the full scope of God’s redemptive work in Christ: death, resurrection, exaltation, and intercession” (91).

Third, *Resurrection* is polemic concerning the importance of the resurrection of the body: “The resurrection is not just a metaphor for eternal life. Nor does it merely refer to a spiritual rising to new life in Christ...The body of Christ has been raised and the bodies of those who believe in him will be raised” (93). In supporting this assertion, *Resurrection* draws particularly from 1 Corinthians 15, a chapter written to answer two questions: “Will there be a bodily resurrection? If so, what is the resurrection body like?” (94). Commenting on verse 45, *Resurrection* says,

The first Adam, the man of sin, was a “living being” because he was animated by the natural life principle called the soul. The second Adam, the New Man, the eschatological man, was a “life-giving spirit” because he is animated by God’s own Spirit...Both have bodies. But whereas the body of the first was made alive by the ordinary life principle, the body of the second is animated by God’s own Spirit. (95)

Both Peter and Paul proclaimed a common message: Jesus has been resurrected to be Lord and Christ. The resurrection is the fulfillment of God’s promises.

Commenting on Philippians 3:21, *Resurrection* says, “The bodies of those who believe in Christ will be conformed to the body of the risen Christ, a body Paul describes as glorious because it has been transformed by God’s Spirit and so reflects God’s glory” (95-96).

Fourth, the Spirit of God plays a crucial role in the resurrection of Christ and of His believers. This is seen especially in Romans 8. The justified no longer belong to the realm of the flesh, because the Spirit of God dwells in them (v. 9). It is God the Father who raises the dead by the power of the Spirit (v. 11). The justified are God’s children, His “adopted sons and daughters,” who are led by God’s Spirit, call God “Abba! Father!” become joint heirs with Christ, and, if they suffer with Him, become glorified with Him, that is, are “raised from the dead” (97). The Spirit’s presence is the assurance and “the first taste of the resurrection life that those who believe in Christ already experience” (97).

Fifth, the church is a sanctified assembly called into being by God’s redemptive work in Christ. *Resurrection* emphasizes that “the death and resurrection of Christ form a single redemptive act” (99). The church is also the temple of God and the Body of Christ. *Resurrection* posits that the Pauline references relating the community of believers to the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:27; Rom. 12:4-5;

---

Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15-16) refer not to the body of the earthly Jesus but to “the resurrection body of the crucified and risen Christ” (101). The church as the Body of Christ came into being at the death and resurrection of Christ. Each member “by virtue of being baptized into the crucified and risen body of Christ has become one Spirit with Christ (1 Cor 6:17)” (101). The crucified and risen Lord is the Head of the Body, and it is into this Head of the Body that the church must grow (cf. Col. 1:18).

Sixth, even today the justified are “already experiencing the newness of life that comes from the power of the Spirit released by Christ’s resurrection” (103). In this context *Resurrection* argues that baptism is “more than a ritual bath” but “a moment of profound faith in the crucified and risen Christ when [the justified] sacramentally participated in the event that is the object of their faith: Christ’s death and resurrection” (103). This baptismal union with Christ leads to a newness of life. If they hope in the future resurrection, the justified must also share in the Lord’s suffering and death. This resurrection is experienced as a foretaste “in an anticipatory way through their life in the Spirit” (104). This life in the Spirit empowers and enables the justified “to live a morally good life that accords with the new creation that has come about through Christ’s resurrection” (107).

Seventh, the resurrection of Christ is the beginning of the resurrection of the dead and culminates in the general resurrection; hence, it is through this resurrection that God’s whole creation is renewed. The believers will be changed and transformed and so will the creation in which they live. In Romans 8:29-30 “the apostle points to the resurrection as the goal of the Christian life: the purpose of God’s plan for humanity is to conform humanity to the image of the risen Christ, who is the image of God because he reflects God’s own glory (2 Cor. 3:18)” (110).

Concerning the Pauline letters, *Resurrection* concludes that “the resurrection is not just a doctrine among doctrines; it is the lynchpin for understanding” them (110). In Paul’s Epistles God is the One who raises the dead, Christ is the one whom God raised, and the Spirit is the foretaste and guarantee of this resurrection. Paul further testifies that the church came into existence by the Lord’s resurrection, the moral life of the believer is empowered by the Spirit received at the resurrection, and the resurrection is the final hope of the Christian (110-111). “Apart from the resurrection there is no Christian life; in the resurrection is the fullness of life” (111).

### The Witness of Resurrection in Hebrews, 1 Peter, and Revelation

Of the remaining New Testament writing, *Resurrection* derives some additional insights from Hebrews, 1 Peter,

and Revelation, stating that “these writings point to the resurrection as the goal of the Christian life” (112). *Resurrection* says that a superficial reading of Hebrews suggests a focus on Christ’s death, with only passing reference to the resurrection (13:20); however, more in-depth readings of “this sublime text [reveals] that the resurrection of Christ supports the entire argument of this treatise” (113). Christ’s entrance into and enthronement in the heavenly sanctuary is predicated upon His death as the once-for-all sacrificial offering and His resurrection as the High Priest who presents the offering. The writer of Hebrews uses Psalms 2 and 110, which prophesy concerning the resurrection of Christ, to establish that He is now the permanent High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, who lives always to intercede. *Resurrection* thereby concludes that “the sacrifice that he brought into heaven was the sacrifice of his life, and his entrance into the heavenly sanctuary was his resurrection” (116).

*Resurrection* also correlates Hebrews’ allusions to the entrance of God’s people into the Sabbath rest to the entrance of the believers in Christ into the heavenly city via resurrection. Building on the examples of faith in chapter 11, which contains allusions to resurrection (cf. vv. 10, 16, 19, 35), Hebrews 12 speaks of the city of the living God and the church of the firstborn (vv. 22-23). “Those who enter into God’s Sabbath rest have been raised from the dead because they belong to the city of God, the assembly of the firstborn” (118). Christ’s entering into the heavenly sanctuary and the believers’ entering into God’s Sabbath rest are, on one hand, the result of the resurrection of the dead and, on the other hand, “a way of speaking about the resurrection of the dead” (119). In this context, *Resurrection* makes a weak attempt to attribute a deeper meaning to the superficial way in which believers speak of heaven: “When contemporary believers talk about their salvation in terms of ‘heaven,’ they are implicitly speaking of resurrection from the dead in view of the fact that entrance into heaven is the result of being raised from the dead” (119). *Resurrection* seems here to equate the resurrection of the dead with “going to heaven.”

*Resurrection* utilizes 1 Peter’s implied theological structure—the past suffering and present glory of Christ, compared to the present suffering and future glory of the Christian—to correlate Christ’s resurrection from the dead to the believers’ hope and assurance of resurrection, if they follow the example of Christ: “The pattern of Christ’s life is the pattern of the believer’s life” (121). The believers have been born anew, are growing into salvation, are living stones built into a spiritual house, and thereby are God’s people. *Resurrection* here avers that, as prefigured in the story of Noah, this new birth took place at baptism, in which the believers have a good conscience before God “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ’ (3:21)” (122).



The book of Revelation portrays Christ in two descriptions. First, He is one like a Son of Man, reminiscent of the glorious figure in Daniel, assuring the churches that as the risen Lord, He is in their midst speaking the word of God and present in their tribulation. Second, He is portrayed in the figure of an animal standing at the throne in the heavens. In one aspect He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, “a powerful messianic figure of David’s line.” In another aspect He is the Lamb, “a sacrificial victim, the Lamb of God..., who conquers through death rather than through power and might” (128-129).

*Resurrection’s* self-imposed constraints to exclude historicity and avoid harmonizing become a liability in the treatment of Revelation. *Resurrection* apparently did not find anything new in the book of Revelation, instead concluding that this book “does not so much provide us with new teaching on resurrection as it witnesses to the reality of the resurrection through its portrayals of Christ and those who have remained faithful to him” (131). *Resurrection* points out that in Revelation 5 the Lamb, the risen Christ, “is worthy of the same worship given to God” (129), but regrettably fails to mention the seven Spirits of God, an important key for interpreting Revelation. In Revelation the Spirit of God is presented as the seven Spirits of God, ranked among the Triune God (1:4-5) and mentioned second, before Jesus Christ (a different order than in the Gospels—cf. Matt. 28:19). Furthermore, the seven Spirits of God are the eyes of the resurrected Lamb-lion Christ (Rev. 5:6). It is as such a Spirit, the seven Spirits, that Jesus Christ, the Firstborn of the dead, carries out His present, priestly ministry to care for the lampstands, the local churches, in their various circumstances and stages of readiness for His return (2:25; 3:3, 11) and unseals the mystery of God’s economy and executes it. If for no other reason than its canonical place as the conclusion of the entire Scriptures and (upon Revelation’s stated authorship) also the conclusion of the Johannine writings, understanding and theologically interpreting Revelation require a reader to leave *Resurrection’s* interpretive paradigm, since historicity is indeed embedded in its structure. Commenting on 1:9, Watchman Nee says, “This verse lays the sections of this book clearly before us: (1) ‘the things which you have seen’ (past), (2) ‘the things which are’ (present), and (3) ‘the things which are about to take place after these things’ (future)” (10). If we exclude historicity, some very important truths will be overlooked, as *Resurrection* has done.

*Resurrection* provides several examples of how the risen

saints are portrayed in Revelation 6, 7, 14, and 20. *Resurrection* seems to assume that these cases precede the general resurrection of the dead, but such an assumption leaves the reader of *Resurrection* with some unresolved eschatological conundrums. For example, what is the difference between the three reapings described in chapter 14 (i.e., firstfruits, harvest, and grapes)? *Resurrection* identifies the interpretive problem related to the millennium and suggests that there would have to be “some sort of distinction between the resurrection life that believers already enjoy with the Lamb in heaven and a resurrection of the dead at the end when all will be judged” (130-131). The reluctance to address these historical issues essentially leaves open questions such as: What exactly does *Resurrection* mean by “general resurrection of the dead” (12)? Who participates in this resurrection? and How, when, and where will they do so?

In *Resurrection*  
there is a lack of discussion  
on what should happen between  
Christ’s past resurrection  
and our future resurrection.

Furthermore, *Resurrection* makes no reference to Revelation 21 and 22, thus neglecting the true goal and destination of the Christian life—the New Jerusalem, the ultimate and consummate vision and conclusion of the Bible. In the context of the mystery and truth of resurrection, the New Jerusalem

should be interpreted as the “resurrection city”—composed of the resurrected, enthroned, redeeming Lamb-God flowing as the resurrection-life Spirit, incorporated with the redeemed, transformed, built-up, and resurrected sons of God—a city of life. Notwithstanding these critiques, *Resurrection* brings out its main point concerning Revelation: “the eternal life that Christ has attained, believers will attain” (131).

#### A Gap concerning the Organic Process of Resurrection in the Present

A reader of *Resurrection* should come away with a strengthened faith in Christ’s resurrection and in the future hope of the bodily resurrection of the dead. Such a fundamental faith is energizing and motivating, “the substantiation of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). However, in *Resurrection* there is a lack of discussion on what should happen between these two points—Christ’s past resurrection and our future resurrection. In its polemic defense of the resurrection of the body, *Resurrection* does not speak of the dispensing of the resurrection life of the Triune God into the tripartite man. In fact, despite its more than four hundred scriptural references from twenty-one of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, *Resurrection* does not discuss 1 Thessalonians 5:23, a verse that reveals clearly that man is a

---

tripartite being composed of spirit, soul, and body and that speaks of the preservation of these parts until the coming of the resurrected Christ. The New Testament associates the three parts of man (spirit, soul, and body) with three categories of life—the divine life (*zoe*), the human life (*psuche*), and the physical life (*bios*) (Rom. 8:6; Matt. 16:25-26; Luke 8:14). The new birth of a Christian is an almost instantaneous receiving of the divine life into a specific part, the human spirit, through his repentance, faith, and baptism (John 3:6; Mark 1:15; John 1:12-13; Acts 2:38). Likewise, the transfiguration of the body is in “the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:52). The experience of each Christian is that the resurrection life enters into his regenerated spirit, and eventually, this resurrection life will operate to the extent of raising up his dead body (Rom. 8:10-11). But how does the resurrection life get from the spirit to the body? Where does the soul fit in all of this? This crucial process involves the transformation of the inward parts of man, of which the mind is the leading part (Rom. 12:2; Heb. 8:10; cf. Jer. 31:33). Disappointingly, *Resurrection* fails to mention this lifelong and present-day process, through which the resurrection life can gradually fill every function of the soul to metamorphosize the thoughts, intentions, and emotions of the justified believers, thereby conforming them not only to Christ’s outward likeness in the body but also to Christ’s inward image in the soul. Today the gospel needs to be preached and surely the Christian should be expressing a proper humanity, a “moral life” (111), but the most crucial action is the needed saturation of the soul by God’s resurrection life to make the soul “resurrectionally.”

To be transformed is to have the pneumatic Christ, Christ in resurrection as the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17), dispensed and wrought into our soul to replace what we are in the natural life so that our living by Christ may increase and our living by our natural life may decrease. In transformation the Christ who is in our spirit, the organ for contacting, receiving, and containing God, becomes the Christ in our soul, the organ for expressing God (Eph. 3:17). The function of the soul to express God is related to the image of Christ, according to which we were created (Gen. 1:26; Col. 1:15) and into which we are being transformed (2 Cor. 3:18). In transformation the element of the divine life in Christ (1 John 5:11-12) is dispensed into our soul so that we may have the outward expression of the image of Christ as the firstborn Son of God in resurrection. As the process of transformation takes place within us, the old element of our natural being is expelled and carried away, and the resurrected Christ as the life-giving Spirit is added into us to replace the natural element. This process is altogether organic, that is, a matter in the divine life with its nature and spontaneous function. (Kangas 3-4)

Transformation is an active process today. It is the dispensing of the Triune God as resurrection from a believer’s

regenerated human spirit, to his soul, and ultimately to his body. The bodily resurrection should not be understood as a mere future expectation or miraculous surprise. The coming bodily resurrection of the believers will be the organic result of the divine dispensing of the Triune God into and through their tripartite being. This understanding is consistent with Paul’s presentation of the bodily resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, in which he likens resurrection to the development of a seed (cf. vv. 37, 42-44). In the physical analogy, the flowering of a seed is not “in the twinkling of an eye.” A seed must first undergo a transformation into roots, stems, branches, and leaves. The flower is the final product that issues from the organic, metabolic, and transformative process. The “glorious” flower ultimately identifies the nature of the seed through its expression. The point is that the operation of Christ’s death and resurrection in the present applies not just to the physical bodily shell but, more importantly, to the inward parts of man, particularly the mind, emotion, and will. In this sense *Resurrection* fails to bridge the gap between Christ’s resurrection as the origin of the Christian life and the future bodily resurrection of the believers as the destiny of the Christian life.

by James Fite

### Works Cited

- Kangas, Ron. “Transformed by the Renewing of the Mind.” *Affirmation & Critique* 6.2 (2001): 3-19. Print
- Lee, Witness. Footnotes and Outlines. Recovery Version of the Bible. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2003. Print.
- Nee, Watchman. *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*. Vol. 16. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1992. Print.

### Telling an Incomplete Story

*The Whole Story of the Bible in 16 Verses*, by Chris Bruno. Wheaton: Crossway, 2015. Print.

In an attempt to trace the main story in the Bible from Genesis through Revelation and the development of its central themes, *The Whole Story of the Bible in 16 Verses* (hereafter *Whole*) represents a noble effort to unveil an essential, but secondary, theme—God’s redemption of man from sin and death. However, *Whole* falls far short of presenting the overarching story of the Bible, which God’s Word reveals is His eternal economy and purpose to make man His eternal dwelling place and expression. *Whole* illustrates its endeavor to delineate the Bible’s main theme as using “sixteen important trees,” which are verses that

---

serve as “guideposts” on the tour of the “whole forest” (11-12). However, *Whole*’s best efforts tell an incomplete story due to its glaring neglect of a particularly rich source of truth in the New Testament—the Epistles—where all lines of the biblical story thematically intersect.

### Sixteen Trees that Serve as Guideposts for the Forest

“Creation [Gen. 1:31]” (17): *Whole* begins tracing the biblical storyline from its source by confidently affirming that God is the “Author of the Bible and the hero of every story found in it” (17). To draw light upon the divine authorship, *Whole* turns to God’s work of creation as set forth in Genesis 1:31: “God saw everything that He had made, and indeed, it was very good.” The creation record, *Whole* infers, points to the chief aspect of God—His sovereign authority. Furthermore, God’s pronouncement of creation to be “very good” evinces His ultimate authority and sovereign power over creation.

“Human Beings [Gen. 1:27-28]” (23): *Whole* shows that God did not want to rule over His creation alone. Instead, Adam and Eve, as the “pinnacle of creation,” were delegated a specific role to serve as God’s “image bearers, or representatives” (24). *Whole* bases its interpretation on Genesis 1:27-28, which says,

God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.

*Whole* explains that *image* refers to God’s “characteristics and the relational tendencies that we share with God” (24). Being God’s image bearers and representatives enables man, referring to both the male and the female of the created race, to fulfill God’s commission to them—a loving stewardship over His creation, the expansion of the dominion in which He dwells with His people, and the proclamation of His glory and blessing in that expanded realm.

“The Fall [Gen. 3:6-7]” (29): *Whole* depicts the fall as a violation of the “covenant relationship” that God had with man (30). God stipulated that man could eat of every tree, with the exception of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve disobeyed, being abetted by the serpent’s deceit and lulled by their delight of the fruit; this disobedience constituted a “treason” (32) that brought in the consequences of sin and death. Sin resulted

initially in Adam and Eve’s spiritual death, the loss of “intimacy with their God and Creator,” but also eventual death of their physical bodies (33).

“Redemption Promised [Gen. 3:15]” (35): *Whole* asserts that Jehovah’s pronouncement of the hope of redemption simultaneously foretold a pattern of conflict throughout the ages between the serpent and his seed and the woman and her seed: “I will put enmity / Between you and the woman / And between your seed and her seed; / He will bruise you on the head, / But you will bruise him on the heel” (Gen. 3:15). According to God’s prophecy, *Whole* submits that Adam and Eve’s descendants diverged into two continuous pathways. One line, exemplified by Cain, departed from “God’s original design and command to represent him as his image bearers in creation,” whereas the other line “represented God in a fallen world as they waited for him to fulfill the promise of Genesis 3:15,” which is the defeat of the serpent (38).

“Abraham [Gen. 12:2-3]” (41): As a further development in His redemptive plan, God made a twofold promise to Abraham—that he would be “a great nation and a great blessing” (42). To produce a nation

from the nomadic Abraham and barren Sarah, God promised Abraham an “heir of [His] covenant promises” (44), who would crush the serpent’s head (Heb. 2:14); God also promised to give Abraham land to be inherited by his descendants, the children of Israel. Finally, God promised that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham. These promises were further confirmed when God obligated Himself to the fulfillment of a covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:18).

“Judah the King [Gen. 49:10]” (49): Based on Genesis 49:10, *Whole* points out that a descendant of Judah would be a “royal seed” (53). This royal seed would not only bless the nations but also expand “God’s kingdom presence in this world” (52). *Whole* affirms that God will fulfill the covenant to bruise the head of the serpent through the seed of the woman, the seed of Abraham, and the royal seed of Judah and bring His covenant blessings to the world.

“The Passover Lamb [Exo. 12:23]” (55): The next guidepost in *Whole*’s storyline is Exodus 12:23, which refers to the Passover lamb and indicates that “God *redeemed* his people...by means of a *substitute*” (59). *Whole* contends that the first Passover established the pattern of redemption that would later emerge in the Mosaic law, which expects the promised seed to be the sacrifice to fulfill the covenant.

*Whole*’s best efforts tell an incomplete story due to its glaring neglect of the Epistles in the New Testament, where all lines of the biblical story thematically intersect.

---

“King David [2 Sam. 7:12-13]” (63): *Whole* then presents 2 Samuel 7:12-13 as a prophecy related to the building of God’s house, which is “a royal dynasty that would last forever” (66). David wanted to build a house of cedar wood, but God desired a place where His presence would dwell with His people for eternity. One from the kingly line of David would bring the presence of God, the promised blessing of Abraham, to all the nations.

“The Suffering Servant [Isa. 53:6]” (55): Since the law and the sacrificial offerings could not provide a long-term solution for sin, Isaiah 53:6 prophesied of a “definitive solution” in the person of a “suffering servant” who would become the substitutionary sacrifice for God’s people (73). This Servant who suffered as our Substitute is the promised seed of the woman who took “the covenant penalty on himself and remove[d] sin once and for all” (76). By bearing the sin of man, He would bring peace and healing (76).

“Resurrection Promised [Ezek. 37:3-5]” (79): The sacrifice of the suffering Servant defeated sin, but death remained a “great enemy” (76). *Whole* demonstrates that Ezekiel 37:3-5 shows how God would finally “overcome death” (81). God caused His breath, which is His Spirit, to enter into the bones, and they became alive. God’s breath of life removed the power of death that held His people captive. Death’s defeat ushered in God’s Spirit to freely reign and to give life, first to the suffering Servant and then to all who receive the forgiveness of sin.

“New Creation [Isa. 65:17]” (87): *Whole* indicates that Isaiah 65:17 reveals a glimpse of the new heaven and new earth, where “God’s people will finally experience and enjoy the covenant blessing, dwelling with God forever, to its fullest” (89).

“Fulfillment! [Mark 1:14-15]” (95): To *Whole*, Mark 1:14-15 is a proclamation of the gospel as the fulfillment of the covenant promises anticipated throughout the Old Testament. Jesus’ proclamation was threefold: First, it was the fulfillment of all that God promised. Second, it was the unveiling of the Messiah, the very King who would establish God’s rule and reign. Third, it was a call for man to repent from sin and believe in God’s word announced as the gospel.

“The Cross [John 19:30]” (101): According to *Whole*, John 19:30 is the “culmination” of the “redemptive plan” (101). Jesus, the Messiah, represented His people as their “final substitute” (102). On the cross God’s anointed One, who was the seed of the woman, of Abraham, and of David as well as the designated suffering Servant, gave His life and declared the accomplishment of redemption once and for all: “It is finished!” His sacrificial death paid the price for sin, defeated the serpent, and destroyed the power of death.

“Resurrection [Rom. 1:3-4]” (107): Jesus’ death and resurrection inaugurated the gradual fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises, including the defeat of sin and of death, the crushing of the serpent, and the breathing of new life and the pouring out of His Spirit into the believers. To *Whole*, Romans 1:3-4 validates and fulfills the prophecy of breathing life into the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 (107-108). Moreover, these verses connect the resurrected Jesus with the “royal Son of David” and heir of God’s promises given to His forefather (108).

“Justification [Rom. 3:21-26]” (115): According to *Whole* Romans 3:21 through 26 shows that we are justified, that is, deemed righteousness before God, by His grace (117). Our justification is based on the redemptive work of the Messiah, Jesus, whose shed blood appeased “God’s righteous wrath” (118).

“Glory [Rev. 21:1-4]” (121): The unfolding of the “amazing plan of redemption” bring the believers to the original goal of their existence—“living with God forever in the world he created for his glory” (119-120) and “under the perfect rule of Jesus” (122). The biblical story ends in the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth. In this holy city God’s people will “live in and enjoy the life-giving presence of God” for eternity (125).

### **The Biblical Theology of God’s Eternal Economy in the Apostles’ Teaching**

Considering *Whole*’s claim of tracing the storyline of the Bible, one is left to wonder at the dearth of verses from an especially rich segment of the Scriptures—the Epistles, which constitute the majority of the New Testament. Any book purporting to depict the overarching story of the Scriptures (the “whole forest,” to use its own metaphor) but disregards the apostles’ teaching, especially that of Paul, will inevitably fail to tell the complete biblical story, because it was Paul’s distinct commission to complete the word of God (Col. 1:25). All lines of divine truth intersect in the Epistles; hence, the revelation therein must be considered as a primary source of any biblical theology. The Epistles’ emphasis on God’s eternal economy as the overarching story in the Scriptures relegates the “amazing plan of redemption” (119) to its proper position as a necessary subplot.

The apostle Paul was charged with a particular mission: “I became a minister according to the stewardship of God...to complete the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from the ages and from the generations but now has been manifested to His saints” (Col. 1:25-26). The appositional use of *word of God* with *mystery* evinces an aspect in the divine Word that had been kept secret from eternity until its revelation through Paul’s writings (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:3-5, 9). The mystery in the



word of God is of two aspects—Christ as the mystery of God (Col. 2:2) and the church as the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:4)—and culminates in the great mystery of Christ and the church (5:32). Paul’s unveiling of this mystery is the completion of the word of God as the divine revelation (Lee, Recovery Version, Col. 1:26, note 1).

The mystery that has been hidden from the ages is God’s eternal economy. In Ephesians 3:8-9 Paul says, “To me, less than the least of all saints, was this grace given to announce to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel and to enlighten all that they may see what *the economy of the mystery* is, which throughout the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things” (emphasis added). *Economy*, a transliteration of the Greek word *oikonomia*, means “a household law, or household administration, for the distribution of food and resources to its respective members. Paul applies *economy* in the household of God to the dispensing of the unsearchable riches of Christ as life and everything to those who have received salvation through grace.

In Ephesians 1 we see that the divine economy issued from the depths of God’s being. Verses 9 and 10 say, “Making known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Himself, unto the economy of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens and the things on the earth, in Him.” Paul unveils that the mystery of God’s economy is related to God’s will, good pleasure, and purpose. God has a will, a definite intention, which satisfies the good pleasure of His heart. Based on this heart’s desire and good pleasure, God had a plan (cf. 3:9-11). God’s economy is His plan to dispense Himself as life, as life supply, and as everything into the His chosen people to produce the church as the Body with Christ as the Head.

God’s eternal economy is the unique biblical theology because it is God’s way of accomplishing His eternal purpose and plan, as consistently unveiled from Genesis through Revelation. God’s economy, based on His eternal purpose, precedes man’s creation and fall. Ephesians 1:4-5 says, “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blemish before Him in love, predestinating us unto sonship through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.” The good pleasure of His will, according to verses 9 and 10, is what He purposed in Himself. Moreover, God’s economy has not yet been fully carried out even after man’s redemption. Verse 10 indicates that God’s good pleasure is His

purpose unto the economy of the fullness of the times, which is the appearance of the new heaven and new earth. God’s plan extends from eternity past to eternity future, a scope greater than that of man’s fall and subsequent redemption. Therefore, the arc of the Bible’s story cannot be God’s redemptive plan but must be God’s eternal intention to dispense Himself into man so that fallen man can not only receive the forgiveness of sins but be regenerated with the divine life to be produced as the Body of Christ.

*Whole* correctly points out that God’s plan is to make man His “image bearers, or representatives” (24), yet it does not specify the means by which God intends to carry this out. This is a clear shortcoming in *Whole*’s perspective when summarizing the story of the Bible. *Whole* suggests that three actual trees can be used as a synopsis of the Bible: sin and death became man’s curse by his eating the

fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; Jesus paid the price for sin by dying on the “tree of Calvary”; and God’s people will live and enjoy His presence by eating the tree of life in Revelation (125). Curiously, *Whole* does not speak of the tree of life being present in the beginning of the Bible. Genesis 2:9 says, “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” (emphasis added). Based on God’s intention in man’s creation, this verse shows that God wants man to eat of the tree of life, which “signifies the Triune God embodied in Christ as life to man in the form of food” (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 9, note 2). Therefore, God’s economy to dispense Himself into man was already present before man’s fall and is consistently operative throughout the Bible.

According to *Whole*, the storyline of the Bible is God’s redemption of man to bring him back from the fall to God’s presence and to God’s commission to spread God’s glorious presence to the whole earth. However, *Whole*’s version of the biblical story demonstrates the lack of depth and scope that its perspective affords when the Epistles, especially those of Paul, are not taken into account.

by Kin Leong Seong

#### Works Cited

Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Recovery Version of the Bible. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2003. Print.

God’s economy to dispense Himself into man was already present before man’s fall and is consistently operative throughout the Bible.