

A Plea for Corporate Theosis

Ecclesiology and Theosis in the Gospel of John, by Andrew J. Byers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Print.

Evangelical endorsement of the doctrine of deification continues to gather pace, and the proposals are getting bolder by the year. Andrew J. Byers, Lecturer in New Testament and Free Church Tutor at Durham University, adds a substantial contribution in the published form of his Durham University dissertation, *Ecclesiology and Theosis in the Gospel of John* (hereafter, *Ecclesiology*). In it Byers makes two bold claims: that John is “one of the first theologians of deification” and that Johannine deification is unambiguously corporate (168).

Lamentably, both of these claims are largely absent from the modern academic reappropriation of the doctrine of deification. As *Ecclesiology* rightly observes, the vast majority of work being done on the doctrine of deification in Scripture has focused on Paul and on 2 Peter 1:4 (“partakers of the divine nature”). Attention to deification in Paul and Peter is, of course, entirely welcome, but failing to attend to the writings of John, Byers contends, is “canonically lopsided and historically inaccurate” (168).

Discussions of deification all too often are viewed as being fundamentally elitist and escapist, having little or no bearing on a typical believer’s individual Christian life or corporate church life. *Ecclesiology* claims that for the Gospel of John, at least, this simply is not the case. Deification in the Gospel of John is profoundly corporate. “Jesus’ prayer in John 17 ‘that they may be one’ is,” Byers insists, “a plea for corporate theosis” (169).

Johannine Deification

As *Ecclesiology* rightly points out, it is odd that the writings of John have not attracted more attention than they have among biblical scholars interested in the doctrine of deification (162). The classic patristic proof texts for deification are, after all, 2 Peter 1:4 and Psalm 82:6 (“I said, You are gods, / And all of you are sons of the Most High”). The latter is uttered in the New Testament only in the recorded words of the Johannine Jesus:

Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, “I said,

You are gods”? If He said they were gods, to whom the word of God came, and the Scripture cannot be broken, do you say of Him whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world, You are blaspheming, because I said, I am the Son of God? (10:34-36)

Several influential commentators on John have claimed that the inclusion of this quotation is yet another indication that John’s Gospel is a mixture of Jewish and pagan religions (195). It was readily assumed before the recent revival of deification studies that nothing could be more pagan and alien to the Bible than the thought of becoming divine. But as Byers rightly notes, the Jews of Jesus’ own time sought to become divine. Theosis, then, was not a pagan import of the early church—one that Jesus would not have understood. If the rabbis’ reports are correct, the Levites sang Psalm 82:6 in the temple on a regular basis (191). The thought of becoming divine was a part of Israel’s life, and if Jesus came to fulfill all the promises of the Old Testament, surely He came to fulfill this promise.

To make the point, *Ecclesiology* first employs scholarship that traces the interpretive history of Psalm 82 in an attempt to shed light on the Lord’s quotation of it in John 10 (in particular, why the Lord specifies the divine utterance as being spoken to those “to whom the word of God came”). Byers shows that Psalm 82 was understood rather early on as referencing Jehovah’s appearing to Israel at Mount Sinai (189). According to the Jewish interpretation of the psalm, divine revelation has a deifying effect—as evinced in the shining of the face of Moses after his time in the presence of the glory of Jehovah, which contextualizes the deification utterance: “He said they were gods, to whom the word of God came.” Regrettably, the children of Israel did not receive God’s revelation in the proper way and thus forfeited their opportunity for corporate deification: “Nevertheless you will die like men / And fall like one of the princes” (Psa. 82:7). It is possible that Jesus was drawing on this interpretive tradition when He responded to the Jews’ being stumbled by His identification with the Father in John 10:30: “I and the Father are one.” In Byers’s reading, Jesus’ response to their disbelief suggests that if the Jews truly believed that they themselves would be deified by receiving the word of God, how could they balk at His claim that as the incarnate Word of God, He was one with the Father? Since Jesus is the deifying Word Himself, He must Himself be the true God. As Byers states,

The Word of God—Jesus—has appeared in history as the ultimate disclosure of divine reality whose rejection leads to death, but whose acceptance leads to filiation and deification ('you are gods' and 'sons of the Most High'). (195)

As intriguing and plausible as this reading might be, *Ecclesiology's* case for Johannine deification does not stand or fall with the intricacies of reception history. Far from relying on a single quotation, Byers's primary claim is that deification is the best way to read the narrative shape of the Gospel of John as a whole. Deification is not just *in* the Gospel of John; the whole Gospel is a Gospel of deification. John 10 is again key for Byers, for the Lord's word that He and the Father are one stands halfway between two other *ones* in the Gospel of John. The Shema, cited in John 8:41—"We have one Father, God"—is enlarged to include Jesus in John 10:30: "I and the Father are one"; and it is enlarged further to include the believers in John 17:21: "That they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us." While the recent predominance of redaction criticism in academic biblical studies has resulted in these passages being considered in isolation from one another (106), Byers insists that

Since *every appearance of 'one' in this Gospel builds on its previous appearances and anticipates its forthcoming iterations*, the narrative ecclesiology of oneness calls for a reassessment of what may well be the Fourth Gospel's most eminent text on ecclesial identity: John 17. (129)

Jesus' claim to be "one" with the Father is not simply a claim to unity of purpose and mission with the Father but a claim to shared divinity, as the Jews fully perceived (139-140); so too, "*the prayer for believers to become one as Jesus is one with the Father is ultimately a call not so much to social harmony but...to corporate participation within the divine interrelation of Father and Son*" (106). *Ecclesiology* makes this latter point by drawing attention to a number of "connecting threads" that tie John 17 with John 10—11 (145-146). The Jews were bothered in John 10 by the Lord's claim that He and the Father are one, but had the Jews been present in John 17, according to Byers's reading, they would have been all the more enraged. The prayer for oneness in John 17 should be viewed not simply as a prayer for the emendation of ecclesial schism but as a prayer for corporate incorporation into the very oneness of the Triune God.

A third major way in which Byers argues that "patristic concepts of theosis can indeed serve as fruitful *articulations* and *clarifications* of biblical themes like union and participation" (159) is by appeal to a literary device he calls "inclusive parallelism"—in which "divine actions or

words of Jesus become mirrored in particular human characters or character groups" (200). Jesus repeatedly says "I am" in the Gospel of John and, in doing so, makes a clear claim to be Jehovah God. But Jesus is not the only One to say "I am" in the Gospel of John; the blind man, too, says "I am" (9:9). Jesus is regularly called the Lord in the Gospels (another important divine title), but He is not the only one called lord in the Gospel of John; Philip, too, is called lord, or sir (12:21). Jesus is in the bosom of the Father (1:18); John reclines on the bosom of Jesus (13:23). Jesus' death is foreshadowed on various occasions (12:33; 18:32), and so too is Peter's (21:19). These and other inclusive parallelisms, Byers proposes, "suggest some degree of participation in (and not merely imitation of) divine reality or activity" (200).

This expanding of the Father-Son communal sphere to include the disciples within their shared activity, work, and filial bond is participation, but also deification since, as repeatedly observed, their inclusion involves ontological reconfiguration. The evangelist familiarizes his readers with dyadic theology through the high frequency of Jesus' reciprocal status with God. Then he subtly and gradually begins applying the familiar language of this christological and theological dynamic to human believers. (204)

Even though theological debate continues over whether or not the Johannine Jesus is divine, Byers makes the bold claim that John also presents the believers who are joined to Him as divine through their incorporation into His divinity. This, Byers claims, is so clearly the Gospel's intention that John includes it in the prologue to the whole book: The Son becomes flesh (1:14), and the believers become children of God (v. 12). He became what we are, and we become what He is (61). Byers sees the entire Gospel of John as a gradual unfolding of the prologue's "narrative script" of incarnation and filiation, ultimately "fulfilled in Jesus' resurrection when Mary is instructed to 'go to *my brothers* and say to them, 'I am ascending to *my Father and your Father*, to my God and your God' (20:17; emphases added)" (86).

Byers is, of course, clear that there is a distinction in the way in which Jesus and the believers are God: "The *divine identity* shared between Jesus and God is exclusive; but the *divine interrelation* between Father and Son is communally open, creating the possibility of a divine society of human family members" (169). It is the Son's relationship in life to the Father, not Their Godhead, that is open to human incorporation. This "filiation" of the believers, their participation in the divine life, is present throughout the Gospel of John, and *Ecclesiology* insists that "'deification' is the ontological transformation that filiation entails or requires" (169).

Ecclesiology's claim that Johannine salvation is rightly

called “deification” has numerous layers. Byers nicely summarizes:

If believers are integrated into the divine interrelation of Father and Son, generated by God himself “from above”, and enabled to share in activities and authority readily classified as divine, then Johannine ecclesiology offers nothing short of “divinization.” (168)

By most accounts, the ecumenical movement has stalled, and Byers proposes that this is because the movement has focused on “doctrinal discourse and shared mission projects” when it should have taken “Johannine theosis...as a premise of ecclesial oneness and a goal of ecumenism” (243). Only by becoming God, *Ecclesiology* contends, can we be the one Body.

Critique

Ecclesiology is a landmark book in Johannine studies, and there is more in its pages that is worthy of further consideration. Still, despite its weightiness, it is hard not to wish Byers had distributed his attention differently. For one, the lengthy attention to the literary motif he calls “inclusive parallelism” is interesting and perhaps helps support the claim that deification is a licit description of Johannine salvation, but even if the literary motif is convincing, it is only convincing insofar as it compels us to believe that the believers *can* be deified. It does not tell us much about the Gospel of John’s understanding of *how* the believers are deified or what it *means* for them to be deified. Surely, we are not simply to start saying, “I am,” or asking people to call us “lord.”

To be fair, Byers’s emphasis on literary motif is driven by the current prominence of “characterization” in Johannine studies (200). Perhaps his point is that if we take the Gospel of John’s character development seriously, we would find that the Gospel uses its various characters as models of deification. Still, Byers himself recognizes that the literary motif can go only so far:

The full enactment of Johannine theosis for the wider ecclesial community lies primarily beyond the Gospel narrative...because believers cannot be divinized apart from the Spirit–Paraclete whose role in Johannine theosis primarily lies beyond the glorification of Jesus. (223)

Ecclesiology does include a brief chapter on the Spirit (ch. 11), but thirteen pages are simply not enough to establish the

deity of the Spirit and to elaborate on the Spirit’s post-resurrection work of deification in the church. In particular, *Ecclesiology* might have spent its time on the Lord’s charges in John’s Gospel that we eat Him (6:57), come to Him and drink (7:37), breathe Him in (20:22), abide in Him (15:4), etc., all of which are closely tied to the Spirit’s work in the writings of John. *Ecclesiology* mentions many of these passages, but more adequate attention to them would have made the book much more compelling.

In terms of discussing how the believers are deified, it would have been helpful if there had been a more sustained consideration of the relationship between the believers receiving the divine life, a matter that is central in John’s Gospel, and the result of this receiving—deification. As to what it means for the believer to be deified, *Ecclesiology* might have focused on the Lord’s promise that the works which He did, His disciples would do also (14:12). Perhaps the Lord is speaking of His miracles, but this seems unlikely, for the Lord promises that everyone who believes into Him will do them, and not all genuine believers do miracles. The verses immediately prior make the referent clear: “The words that I say to you I do not speak from Myself, but the Father who abides in Me does His works” (v. 10). The Gospel of John portrays the Lord as One who did not come to do His own will or His own works (5:30) and who did not speak His own

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words or seek His own glory (7:18). In all things, He took the Father as His unique source and did all things by the Spirit for the Father’s glory. The incarnate Son, in other words, lived a life in and with the Divine Trinity. It is precisely by entering into this kind of living and service that the believers enter into the experience of deification. By being incorporated into the Son, the believers, too, can live because of Christ (6:57) by the Spirit of reality (16:13) unto the glory of the Father (17:22). *Ecclesiology* touches some of these points briefly, but they play no central role in its account of Johannine salvation.

Finally, the title of the book promises an account of Johannine deification that is ecclesial in nature, but the promise seems unfulfilled. It is not entirely clear what *Ecclesiology* even understands corporate deification to entail. Does it simply mean that all believers are called to deification (rather than a mystic, monastic elite), or does it mean that deification makes us corporate in our being? If the latter, one might have hoped for a careful reflection on the Father’s house in John 14, or the Son’s vine in John 15, or the new child in John 16, thus giving a fuller account of what it means to be deified in, as, and

for the church. Any reader of this journal will, of course, know that a number of its authors have engaged in considerable reflection on corporate deification in the Gospel of John over the last two decades. In addition to the articles in this issue, the reader is encouraged to peruse other *Affirmation & Critique* articles written in this regard.¹

Byers has, of course, just begun his academic career, but he has given us much to think about in this rich and densely argued book, and he will undoubtedly have much more to offer in the years to come. Even if he only expands more fully on what he has begun in this book, he will have done the academy a considerable service.

by Mitchell Kennard

Note

¹See Kerry S. Robichaux's articles entitled "The Johannine Jesus as Bridge and Model for the Incorporation of the Believers into the Divine Trinity" in the April and October 2004 issues of *Affirmation & Critique* on "The Gospel of John." See also the series of articles by Ron Kangas on the Gospel of John, stretching from the October 1997 issue through the July 1999 issue, and his article "In My Father's House—the Unleavened Truth of John 14" in the April 2000 issue. The October 2008 issue is also devoted to a reassessment of John 14. These articles are available online at www.affcrit.com.

An Incomplete View of Paul's Gospel

The Gospel according to Paul: Embracing the Good News at the Heart of Paul's Teachings, by John MacArthur. Nashville: Nelson Books, 2017. Print.

Notwithstanding the introduction's protestations—"In this volume, my main purpose is not polemical" (xxvii)—John MacArthur's *The Gospel according to Paul: Embracing the Good News at the Heart of Paul's Teachings* (hereafter, *Gospel*) is a polemic defense of substitutionary atonement against "leading advocates of new-model doctrine," who "typically self-identify as evangelicals" (150). According to *Gospel*, "the label *evangelical* has historically been used to identify those who hold to both the formal and material principles of the Reformation," that is, *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide* (150). Such a defense is needed because "this generation of evangelicalism has lacked either the will or the conviction to regard open theists and liberal Emergents as wolves in sheep's clothing" (150).

Gospel's seven chapters are bounded by a seventeen-page introduction and a six-page epilogue entitled "Paul's Testimony." Over fifty additional pages of the book are devoted to four appendices. The first appendix "offers a more thorough discussion of penal substitution and some of the alternative theories of the atonement" (137). The second appendix is one of the author's sermons explaining "the biblical term *propitiation*" and is presented as "an example" of how he tries "to preach the gospel without backing away from hard truths or dumbing down the message" (xxviii). The third appendix juxtaposes "'purpose-driven' life and ministry" against "our one ultimate purpose," which is "to glorify God" (166), and concludes that "the glory of God is the singular goal...It is the reason for everything" (171). The final appendix, entitled "Paul's Glorious Gospel," is the author's combination, rearrangement, and adaptation of two sermons by C. H. Spurgeon, the first given in 1858, during the first decade of Spurgeon's ministry, and the second, in 1885—"in the last decade of his life and ministry" (173). The final section of *Gospel* is a glossary of theological terms. This glossary—which includes definitions of both theological terms and more familiar terms, such as *evangelical* and *grace*—is incomplete. For example, *Gospel* states that "the most thoroughly evil religious systems are those that literally aim at the deification of the individual" (25); however, the term *deification of the individual* is not in the glossary and is not further defined elsewhere. The reader may thus be influenced to believe that deification is an incontrovertibly satanic concept.¹

In an introductory section entitled "The Good Fight," *Gospel* outlines the author's personal history in dealing with various "assaults on the gospel" (xxv): "I have pointed out and opposed various attempts to modify the gospel, abbreviate it, tone it down, alter its focus, or even replace it with a completely different message" (xxii). These attacks on the gospel have included "a severely truncated" and "toned-down gospel" (xxiii), "pragmatism" and "the seeker-sensitive movement" (xxiv), and "the Emergent movement, a mostly liberal and highly post-modernized repudiation of virtually everything historically deemed distinctive to evangelical Christianity" (xxiv-xxv). Although "none of the old aberrations are completely gone," the author is encouraged by "a resurgence of Reformation values among conservative evangelical churches" (xxvi).

Persuasively Presenting Substitutionary Atonement, the Work of Christ, Regeneration, and the Indwelling Life-giving Spirit

There is much to affirm concerning *Gospel's* presentation. For example, *Gospel* persuasively presents the judicial aspect of God's salvation—this is especially true in its forceful and repeated defense of substitutionary atonement, a term it mentions over seventy times. With

respect to Christ's work, *Gospel* says that His incarnation is the "pivotal juncture in God's plan of redemption" (56). *Gospel* also affirms that the truth of Christ's crucifixion prompts "awe and adoration" (74):

I love what the crucifixion of Christ accomplished for sinners. But it is even more profound and thrilling to consider all that the cross accomplished from God's perspective—in its expression of His love, the demonstration of His righteousness, the magnification of His grace, the vindication of His justice, and the upholding of His law. (74)

Christ's resurrection is the "ultimate proof of the truth of the gospel" (18). *Gospel* describes how Christ's ascension is related to the believer's "conversion to Christ" (95) and, based on Ephesians 2:5-6, highlights the believer's experiential participation in the latter two steps: "The regeneration of a sinner is the result and a constant reminder of every believer's participation in Christ's resurrection and ascension to heaven" (102-103).

Gospel speaks clearly concerning regeneration, the indwelling of the Spirit, and our union and mutual abiding with Christ. Regeneration, a "miracle of spiritual resurrection," is "a miracle wrought by the Holy Spirit, whereby He gives life to a spiritually dead soul" (97-98). It is a "new birth." Based on John 3:3 and 8, *Gospel* states that "redeemed people—all true believers" are "those who have been 'born of the Spirit'" (98). The believers in Christ "'become the righteousness of God' [2 Cor. 5:21] by imputation, through their union with Christ" (90). In Christ, the believer is a new creation, an expression that "speaks of a spiritual union that occurs at salvation, when the Holy Spirit takes residence in the believer and thereby makes us spiritually one with Christ" (90). "It is the power of Christ, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, that enables us to renounce and resist sin" (125). Furthermore, it is "through the Spirit who indwells us" that "we have an unbreakable union with Christ" (171). *Gospel* goes on to state that "we abide in [Christ] and He in us...[1 John 4:13]" (171). Because "God's glory is perfectly revealed in Christ (John 1:14)," we have "unfettered access to the divine glory" (171).

Employing Biblically Accurate Terminology concerning the Church but Not Condemning Denominationalism

Gospel rightfully refers to the church as "the fellowship of true believers" (91). Paul "did not die discouraged,"

because he "knew the truth of the gospel would ultimately triumph. He understood that the gates of hell would never prevail against the church Christ was building" (xxi). *Gospel* refers to the church approximately ninety times, using scripturally based terms such as *the church in Thessalonica* (xviii), *the church at Corinth* (xv), *the Galatian churches* (xvi), and *the Corinthian assembly of believers* (10). *Gospel* also uses theologically expedient terms, such as *the early church* (xviii), and ambiguous terms, such as *the visible church* (2), terms that are neither defined contextually nor included in the glossary. *Gospel* gives tacit approval to the current state of the divisions brought about in the church through denominationalism, for, while avoiding the error of sectarianism in its text, *Gospel* is sprinkled with what could be termed "dust-jacket leaven"—promotional endorsements—from persons who self-identify with organizations, practices, doctrines, and ministries that denominate and differentiate themselves from the one ministry in the New Testament and the one Body, the universal church expressed as local churches (cf. Acts 1:17, 25; 2 Cor. 4:1; Eph. 4:4; Rev. 1:11)

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Toning Down, Truncating, and Missing the Heart of Paul's Gospel

Despite a valiant effort to expound and defend the gospel from assaults that would truncate and tone it down, *Gospel* itself suffers from being toned down concerning

the person of Christ and from being severely truncated concerning the church as the Body of Christ. As a result, it also misses the heart of Paul's gospel.

Considering the Depravity of Man More Relevant to the Gospel Than the Divine Trinity and the Person of Christ

Paul begins Romans by emphasizing the centrality of Christ, stating that the "gospel of God" is "concerning His Son, who came out of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was designated the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness out of the resurrection of the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1:1, 3-4). As far as these key verses on the gospel are concerned, *Gospel* references only verse 4, and then only in regard to His resurrection, neglecting His designation; it does not address verse 3 at all (21).

Gospel does eventually mention, in its final appendix, through the voice of Spurgeon, but without explicit scriptural references, the foundational importance of the person of Christ: "The Person of our Savior

is the foundation-stone of our hope. Upon His Person depends the usefulness of our gospel...I repeat: upon the Person of the Savior rests the whole of our salvation" (177). Spurgeon states unequivocally that our Savior, Jesus Christ, is both the Son of God and the Son of Man: "When we preach the Savior to you, we tell you that although Jesus Christ was the Son of man, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh,² yet He is eternally the Son of God, and He has in Himself all the attributes that constitute the perfect Godhead" (177). Hence, Christ is both man and God: "Since Christ Jesus the man was also Christ Jesus the God, we have the fullest confidence that we are offering you Someone who is worthy of all acceptance" (178). Consequently, as the "anointed Savior," He is both divine and human:

There is *the Person of Christ*, divine in Himself. And there is the *anointing from on high*, giving to Him the stamp of a commission received from Jehovah His Father...Yet we have not fully described the Person of the Redeemer until we have noted that He was human. (178)

Gospel's refocused version of Spurgeon's combined sermons opens not with a statement concerning the person of Christ but with this statement: "Paul's exposition of the gospel in Romans starts with that long, terrible exposé on human depravity" (174). This focus is different from the emphasis in Paul's presentation of the gospel. In the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, the "gospel of God" (1:1) begins with the person of Christ (vv. 3-4), not man's depravity (v. 18).

Similarly, Paul opens Ephesians with blessing, praise, and adoration to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (1:3-14), simultaneously incorporating the Father's selection and predestination (vv. 4-5), the Son's redemption (vv. 7-12), and the Spirit's sealing and pledging (vv. 13-14) with the gospel (v. 13). Man being dead in offenses and sins is not mentioned until chapter 2. Hence, in the gospel that Paul presents in Ephesians, the Divine Trinity and the person of Christ are preeminent.

Neglecting the Body of Christ

Gospel is sparse in mentioning the Body of Christ, referring to only three relevant verses. In the only paragraph in the entire book on this topic, *Gospel* asserts that 1 Corinthians 12:13 ("all baptized into one Body") is "true of every believer" and then proceeds to equate our being "in Christ" in 2 Corinthians 5:17 to what "Paul says in Ephesians 5:30, 'We are members of His body'" (90-91). *Gospel* then goes on to state that "the church—the fellowship of true believers—is metaphorically spoken of as 'His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all' (Eph. 1:23)" (91). *Gospel* appears to consider the church as the Body of Christ to be a mere metaphor and a relatively

unimportant topic in the context of Paul's gospel. This is a serious shortcoming.

Gospel's abbreviated and seemingly dismissive reference to the Body of Christ is in egregious contrast to the concept of Paul, who prominently relates the Body of Christ to the gospel. In Colossians Paul states appositionally that he was both a minister of the gospel and a minister of "His Body, which is the church" (1:23-25). Paul here is not referring to a metaphorical gospel, Body, or church. In Ephesians 4 Paul indicates that the Body of Christ is the goal of the gifts, the work, and the ministry. According to verses 11 and 12, the gifted members (including the gospel-preaching evangelists) are "for the perfecting of the saints unto the work of the ministry, unto the building up of the Body of Christ." In this passage none of the persons or their work—the gifted persons, the saints and their perfecting, the work of building up, the Head, and the Body—are metaphorical.

The Body of Christ Being a Central Theme and Essential Component of Paul's Gospel

Paul's gospel includes not only the judicial aspect of God's salvation—the redemption of depraved man by grace through faith to do good works unto the glory of God—but also the church as the Body of Christ. Again, both Ephesians and Romans are illustrative.

Gospel's "Simple Rehearsal of Gospel Principles" in Ephesians Omitting the Body of Christ and the One New Man as the Masterpiece of God

According to *Gospel*, "Ephesians is a simple rehearsal of gospel principles, with an emphasis on the essential truth that lies at the heart of the message: salvation is entirely God's work" (xvii-xviii). *Gospel* focuses exclusively on 2:1-10, where

Paul goes back to the familiar starting point of his gospel presentation—the bad news of humanity's sin problem...Here, in order to stress how utterly hopeless the human situation really is he likens unbelievers to dead people. (96)

Note that, whereas *Gospel* states earlier that the Body of Christ in 1:23 is a metaphor (90), here it argues inconsistently that unbelievers being dead "is not a flippant metaphor. It's not really a metaphor at all" (96). *Gospel* proceeds through these ten verses to describe, how as redeemed people, we have been resurrected from the dead through regeneration, which is "a miracle wrought by the Holy Spirit, whereby He gives life to a spiritually dead soul" (98). This resurrection is by grace (103), through faith (106), and with a purpose—God's glory (109-110). *Gospel* repeatedly mentions that glory is the

purpose of the gospel and devotes an entire appendix to emphasizing that God's glory is the reason for everything. Surprisingly, however, *Gospel* nowhere references Ephesians 3:21—"to Him be the glory in the church"—further exposing its blind spot concerning the corporate emphasis of Paul's gospel.

Gospel seems to chide those who would stop the gospel message at Ephesians 2:9:

Too many people quote Ephesians 2:8-9 and put all the emphasis on full pardon and free forgiveness we receive when we are justified—as if that were the end, rather than the beginning, of the many blessings we lay hold of by faith. (110)

Gospel then says,

In the first nine verses of Ephesians [2], Paul repeatedly makes it clear that good works are not meritorious, nor are they a prerequisite for faith. Then in verse 10 he makes it equally clear that good works are nevertheless the expected fruit of regeneration. (111)

Based on verse 10, *Gospel* concludes that the "simple rehearsal" of the gospel presented in Ephesians ends with "the Christian's own good works, foreordained...by God" as "faith's inevitable fruit" (112). It is inexplicable that *Gospel* stops at this verse, as if this were the final word of Paul's gospel in Ephesians. Yet even in expounding this verse, *Gospel* misses something crucial: in the first part of this verse Paul speaks of God's "masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus." It is this masterpiece, this workmanship,³ that is "for good works." Regretfully, *Gospel* does not make this connection, despite Paul's presentation in which the remaining verses are also part of the gospel.

In these subsequent verses Paul goes on to describe this masterpiece and how it was created. The Gentiles were apart and far off from Christ, from the commonwealth of Israel, and from the covenants of the promise (vv. 11-12). *The Gentiles* refers to a corporate people, and *the commonwealth of Israel* also denotes a corporate people. It is "in Christ Jesus" that the Gentiles "have become near in the blood of Christ" (v. 13). As our peace, "He Himself" has made these two peoples one by creating "the two in Himself into one new man, so making peace, and might reconcile both in one Body to God through the cross" (vv. 14-16). According to verse 17, this peace is the gospel. Hence, the producing of the one Body (the same

Body, the church, referenced a few verses earlier in 1:22-23) is the gospel. However, *Gospel* has omitted this central aspect of Paul's gospel.

Gospel's "Very Heart of Gospel Truth" in Romans Omitting the Body of Christ

In its introductory survey of Paul's Epistles, *Gospel* recaps Romans as follows:

The book of Romans is a carefully ordered discussion of the doctrines that constitute the very heart of gospel truth. It is laid out in a careful, logical, ordered outline. Starting with the doctrine of universal sin and human depravity, Paul moves systematically through the whole catalogue of gospel truth, dealing with justification, sanctification, eternal security, election, reprobation, the grafting of Gentiles into the people of God, and the ultimate restoration of Israel. (xvii)

Regretfully, *Gospel* seems to consider that Romans, the "most ordered and comprehensive exposition of gospel doctrines" (xvii), ends its gospel with the ultimate restoration of Israel in chapter 11. However, Romans 12 through 16 should not be arbitrarily excluded from Paul's gospel, especially given Paul's continued and repeated reference to the gospel in later sections (cf. 15:16, 19-20; 16:25).

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has omitted this central aspect
of Paul's gospel.*

Furthermore, *Gospel* misses the connection between chapter 8 and chapter 12—a connection noted by various expositors of Romans. For example, in a chapter entitled "Christianity Is Christ," Donald Grey Barnhouse begins to comment on 12:1 by referring to the *therefores* in Romans, based on which he connects 12:1 ("I exhort you therefore") with chapter 8:

The eighth chapter of Romans, considered by many to be the greatest chapter in the Bible, begins by saying that there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. What a mercy this is!...

These, then, are the mercies of God by which God appeals to us to live as those who are alive from the dead. On the ground of His mercies, He implores us to present ourselves to Him. (6-7)

Witness Lee likewise connects chapters 8 and 12, emphasizing the connection of chapter 8 to the one Body in Christ with its many members in 12:4-5. In outlining Romans, he states that

chapter twelve is the direct continuation of chapter eight, with chapters nine through eleven as a parenthetical insertion regarding the selection of grace. Chapter 8 reveals that we are being conformed to the image of the Son of God (v. 29). This conformation qualifies us for the practice of the Body life. (*Life-study* 617)

Elsewhere he points out that “the many brothers in chapter eight become the members of the Body in chapter twelve” (379).

G*ospel* references 12:5 to support its statement that “true believers are united with Christ” through faith and are thus “in Christ” (58), but *Gospel* fails to contextualize the verse and thus fails to note that the emphasis of this verse is the Body: “We who are many are one Body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” In Romans 12 the sacrificial presenting of the believer’s physical body (a “reasonable service”), having a renewed and transformed mind (vv. 1-2), and being “burning in spirit, serving the Lord” (v. 11) are for practicing the Body life (cf. vv. 4-8, 10, 13, 16). Chapters 14 and 15 should also be considered as indirect references to the practical Body life in that they describe the practical receiving of the saints and the practical communication between the Gentile saints and the Jewish saints. In chapter 16 Paul introduces the terms *church* and *churches* (vv. 1, 4-5, 16, 23). Hence, a complete presentation of the gospel according to Paul should include the Body of Christ, the church, and the local churches. In omitting the aspect of the Body, *Gospel* truncates Paul’s gospel.

Paul Beginning to See the Person of Christ and the Body of Christ at the Time of His Conversion

Paul is unique among the New Testament writers to refer to Christ as the Head and to the church as the Body of Christ, which he does repeatedly.⁴ As previously noted, the Body of Christ is inextricably woven into the content and aim of Paul’s gospel. The source of this unique emphasis can be traced to the three questions that were asked during his conversion experience (cf. Acts 22:2-10).

Gospel helpfully opens and concludes with references to Paul’s conversion. In chapter 1 *Gospel* says, “In Philipians 3, Paul himself describes how his conversion radically reshaped his whole worldview and religion” (5). *Gospel* returns to this theme in its epilogue:

For all his life as a Pharisee, Paul had believed eternal life would be won through ritual, race, rank, religion, and right living...But when he met Christ, Paul saw that both his ancestry and his accomplishments were permanently and irreparably flawed. It was nothing but one large mass of liabilities. Therefore, he trashed it all in order to gain Christ (Phil. 3:8). (132-133)

Consequently, Paul “put all his faith solely in Christ” (133). *Gospel* then queries, “What motive could possibly take a devoted, overzealous Pharisee like Saul of Tarsus and persuade him gladly to abandon his lifelong efforts and convictions, labeling them all ‘dung?’” (134). *Gospel* concludes that “having seen the radiance of Christ’s glory in the bright light of gospel truth, nothing else would ever again take first place in his heart” (134).

This “bright light of gospel truth” should include the person of Christ and His Body. On the way to persecute those of the Way in Damascus, Paul heard a voice that asked, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 22:7). In response to this question, he answered with his own question, “Who are You, Lord?” and received the Lord’s response: “I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you persecute” (v. 8). Paul then asked a second question, “What shall I do, Lord?” (v. 10). Witness Lee explains how this enabled him to see the Body of Christ:

How did Saul learn at his conversion that the church is the Body of Christ?...The Lord’s words, “Why are you persecuting Me?” caused him to realize that the believers were one with Christ. Saul may have thought, “I have not been persecuting anyone in the heavens,” but the Lord was indicating to him that those whom he had been persecuting were members of His Body. Because they were one with Him, for Saul to touch them was to touch the Head. Suppose I beat someone on the arm. He will protest, “Why are you beating me?” If I reply, “I am not beating you. I am beating your arm,” he will no doubt say, “Look, if you beat my arm, you are beating me,” because the arm is a member of his body. Similarly, from the Lord’s words Saul could infer that all the believers were the members of Christ.

After Saul realized who was speaking to him, he raised a second question: “What shall I do, Lord?” (Acts 22:10). The Lord said unto him, “Rise up and enter into the city, and it will be told to you what you must do” (9:6). The Lord by this word was indicating that Saul could no longer be individualistic. He was to go into Damascus, where his next step would be shown him by an otherwise unknown believer named Ananias. Now that Saul had been brought into the Body, if he wanted to know the Lord’s will, he must go through a member of the Body rather than be told directly by the Head. (*Completing* 12-13)

In hearing this voice from the heavens, Paul began to see the person of Christ and His incarnation, human living, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. This was perhaps the seed that would upon Paul’s further reflection become the introduction to the “gospel of God” in Romans 1:3-4. Furthermore, when Paul asked, “Who are You, Lord?”—a query concerning the person of Christ—

the Lord indicated in His answer that He is a “corporate Me,” that is, both the Head and the Body. When Paul asked concerning the work that he should do, he was directed to a small member of the Body, who told him what he should and would do. Paul thus began to see that even in his work, he must be in measure as a member (cf. Eph. 4:16). In His direct preaching to Paul, the Lord included His person and His Body as the crucial content of the gospel. Hence, beginning with Paul’s conversion, the Body became a great revelation and central aspect of Paul’s gospel.

In conclusion, *Gospel* provides a forceful defense of *sola fide* and the judicial aspect of God’s full salvation, especially substitutionary atonement, but falls short of its own stated standards by abbreviating Paul’s gospel and changing the emphasis of his gospel. *Gospel* is incomplete, abbreviated, and has altered the focus of the gospel in at least two fundamental areas. First, *Gospel* has relegated the person of Christ to an appendix instead of identifying this truth as the central theme and starting point of Paul’s gospel. Second, *Gospel* is nearly silent concerning the church as the Body of Christ, at best considering this term a mere metaphor. Admittedly, both of these subjects are “hard truths,” but, in *Gospel*’s own words, we should present the gospel without “backing away” from these or “dumbing down the message” (xxviii). Regrettably, *Gospel* has presented a truncated gospel that ignores the corporate aspect and goal of Paul’s gospel, which is the church as the Body of Christ. Consequently, it has presented an incomplete gospel that leaves out a most crucial item of “the good news at the heart of Paul’s teachings.”

Gospel presents a truncated gospel that ignores the corporate aspect and goal of Paul’s gospel, which is the church as the Body of Christ.

by James Fite

Notes

¹For a balanced understanding of the term *deification* both in a positive sense as bounded by a proper scriptural understanding and in a negative sense as used spuriously, philosophically, and heretically, see *Affirmation & Critique* 7.2 (2002). Jules Gross’s *The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers* provides a historical context for this concept in the early church as well.

²Note Spurgeon’s implicit application of Genesis 2:23 to Christ. Paul reinterprets and applies this portion of Scripture (“no one ever hated his own flesh...”) to the way that Christ cares for the church, the Body of Christ (cf. Eph. 5:29-30); *Gospel*, however, does not make this connection.

³Ephesians 2:10 is repeatedly quoted and referenced throughout *Gospel*. However, *Gospel* gives no commentary or attention to the term *masterpiece*, despite the rich significance of the Greek word *poiema* (translated “masterpiece” in ISV), particularly in the context of this verse (see, for example, Witness Lee’s footnote on this word in the Recovery Version of the Bible).

⁴Paul refers to the Body and its members in four of his Epistles—Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 10:17; 12:12-14, 18-20, 27; Ephesians 1:23; 2:16; 4:4, 12, 16, 25; 5:30; and Colossians 1:18, 24; 2:19.

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Undermining the Significance of the Lord’s Words in John 14

“The Father’s Home, and the Way There,” by Augustus Nicodemus Lopes. *Coming Home: Essays on the New Heaven and New Earth*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2017: 63-77. Print.

In “The Father’s Home, and the Way There” (hereafter, “Home”), Augustus Nicodemus Lopes presents a five-part exposition of John 14:1-14, given as an address during the 2015 national conference of the Gospel Coalition. The brief article examines this portion of the Scriptures in order to apply the Lord’s words of comfort to the disciples in His day as words of comfort and hope to present-day believers who are under persecution. It also seeks to highlight the implications of this passage as it relates to the

gifts of the Spirit, the unique way of salvation, eschatology, and evidence of the believers having a place in the Father's house. "Home" is able to access some points of truth in John 1:1-14, but it is ultimately bound by traditional, unscriptural concepts of the Father's house. Moreover, it neglects other portions of John 14 that are critical to understanding the Lord's words in the first fourteen verses and also makes misguided assumptions even when it has sufficient insight and information to present the truth. Consequently, it inevitably comes to wrong conclusions in its exposition and undermines the significance of the Lord's words in this passage.

A Five-part Analysis

"Home" divides its analysis of John 1:1-14 into five sections:

First, Jesus tells his disciples to not be troubled (14:1). Second, he gives them three reasons for not being troubled...Third, he teaches them the way to the Father's house (14:4-6). Fourth, he tells them they can enjoy the Father, here and now, before going to the Father's house, by faith in him, Jesus (14:7-11). And, finally,...they will be able to continue Jesus's ministry by faith in him (14:12-14). (64)

In the first section it is suggested that the Lord's speaking in John 14:1-14 was to comfort His disciples who were troubled by two items—the fact that the Lord would be leaving them soon and the revelation that Peter would deny the Lord. "Home" maintains that the meaning of the Lord's word in John 14:1, "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe into God, believe also into Me," is that the disciples' belief in the Lord and in God would free them from their unrest when they were considering these concerns (65). "Home" states that "as God, Jesus would never leave them alone, nor would he abandon Peter after his fall" (65).

In the second section "Home" claims that the Lord provided three reasons for the disciples to not be troubled. First, there are many rooms in His Father's house (v. 2); second, the Lord was going there to prepare a place for them (vv. 2-3); and third, He would come back and get them to be with Him forever (v. 3). "Home" explains that the Lord's mention of many rooms indicates that there is enough room for all the believers (66), that His preparing a place refers to His death and resurrection (66), and that His returning to receive the believers refers to His second coming (67). It also states that even though the text of John 14:1-3 emphasizes being with a person more than being in a place, the Father's house nevertheless refers first to heaven as the place of God's dwelling, a temporary location where the believers will dwell, and then to heaven as the new heaven and new earth (68).

In the third section "Home" asserts that Jesus is the unique way to the Father and to His house because of His redemptive work; thus, He is the truth, the "perfect revelation" of God, and the life, the source of eternal life (69). In the fourth section "Home" argues that "if the disciples believe Jesus is in God and God is in him, based on the works they have observed in Jesus for three years, they will see God here and now, even before going to the Father's house" (71-72). In the fifth section "Home" attempts to explain the significance of the disciples' doing works that are greater than the Lord's works, as presented in verses 12 through 14. It states that the works mentioned in these verses include not only the signs in John's Gospel but also what Jesus did in "preaching, teaching, ministering to the poor, and...doing miracles" (73). Then it argues that the disciples can do works that are greater because of their placement in the redemptive-historical sequence" and because these works will be carried out "over a longer span of time" (73-74).

"Home" applies its exposition of John 14:1-14 to believers today in four ways. First, it says that this passage should reassure the believers that "the hope of the Christian is the blessed hope of the new heaven and the new earth" (75). This is scripturally inaccurate. Second, it suggests that the way the believers impact the world is by doing His works—acts of love and preaching the gospel—today. This is scripturally shortsighted. Third, it asserts that "there is no salvation outside of faith in Jesus Christ" (76). This is scripturally accurate. Fourth, it claims that the believers have the assurance that there is room for them in the Father's house only if they do the works of Jesus (77). This is scripturally inaccurate.

Going, Preparing, and Coming

When addressing the meaning of the Lord's going to prepare a place and coming to receive the believers, "Home" suggests that "Jesus's death and resurrection are themselves the preparation" (66) and that His coming refers to His second coming (67). This conclusion, however, cannot be substantiated by the text of John 14. Strictly speaking, the Lord Jesus gave enough explanation within John 14 to understand much of what He meant when He spoke the words in verses 1 through 3. A closer look at the entire text of John 14 reveals the meaning of the Lord's words regarding His going and coming.

In verses 2 and 3 the Lord said, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I am coming again." The phrase *if I go...I am coming* indicates that the Lord considered His going and coming as being coterminous developments in the divine economy; that is, His going was inseparable from His coming. Peter refers to the inseparability of the Lord's experience of death and resurrection, declaring that while He was being put

to death in the flesh, He was being made alive in the Spirit (1 Pet. 3:18). The Lord repeats His pairing of His going and coming in John 14:18, which says, “I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you,” and in verse 28, which says, “I am going away and I am coming to you.” The preparation of many abodes in the Father’s house in verse 2, which is linked to His going and coming in verse 3, must refer to the Lord’s going to the cross to shed His blood for the redemption of our sins and for the release of His divine life through death (19:34) and refer to His coming in resurrection to impart His divine life into redeemed humanity to make the mutual indwelling of God and humanity possible by dealing with all the problems that separated God and fallen humanity (cf. 1:29; 3:14-15).

Although “Home” acknowledges that the Lord’s preparation involves His death and resurrection, it fails to see the Lord’s allusion to His going as being His death and to His coming as being His resurrection (66); instead, it argues that His coming refers to His second coming (67). The Lord’s plain words later in John 14, however, refute this interpretation. In verses 18 and 19, the Lord said, “I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you. Yet a little while and the world beholds Me no longer, but you behold Me.” If the Lord’s coming to receive the believers referred to His second coming, the believers would be orphans until He returns, because He stated that it is through His coming that they are no longer orphans. Moreover, the phrase *yet a little while* modifies not only the world’s beholding of Him (because His death deprived the world of His physical presence) but also the disciples’ beholding of Him in His resurrection form three days after His death. Finally, if the Lord’s coming refers to His second coming, His word that the world would no longer behold Him is false, because at His second coming the world will behold Him.

The Many Rooms—the Believers in Christ

“Home” suggests that the many rooms, or abodes, in the Father’s house indicate that there is sufficient room for all the believers; this assessment is superficial. Considering John 14:2 in light of verse 23 suggests a much greater significance to the abodes in the Father’s house. Verse 2 says, “In My Father’s house are many abodes,” and verse 23 says, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make an abode with him.” These verses show clearly that the many abodes in the Father’s house

signify the many Jesus-loving believers with and within whom the Father and Son dwell (v. 20). In His reference to many abodes in verse 2, the Lord was preemptively assuring the disciples that they could not be separated from Him either by His death or by any subsequent failures—such as Peter’s—because their belief in Him, which was spoken of in the verse immediately preceding, would inseparably join them to the Father in Him (cf. Eph. 2:18).

The Father’s House—a Corporate Person

The part of “Home” that most exposes its advancement of interpretations that are unsupported by the Scriptures is its discussion of the Father’s house in John 14:2. Although “Home” draws a connection between the Father’s house in 14:2 and the temple in Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God mentioned in 2:16 and also indicates that the emphasis in 14:2 and 3 is Jesus’ person, not a place (66-68), it discards its own observations and instead claims with no scriptural support that “the Father’s house is heaven” (68). The scriptural revelation of the Father’s house in John 14 is altogether different from what is presented in “Home.” John 14:2 and 3 say, “In My Father’s house are many abodes...If I go and prepare a place for you, I am coming again and will receive you to Myself, so that where I am you also may be.” These verses show that

The part of “Home” that most exposes its advancement of interpretations that are unsupported by the Scriptures is its discussion of the Father’s house in John 14:2.

the purpose of the Lord’s preparing a place is for the believers to be where He is and that when the Lord Jesus returns, He will receive the believers to Himself, not to some physical structure.

John 14 is not silent as to where the Lord Jesus is; rather, it repeatedly asserts that the Lord Jesus is in the Father (vv. 10-11, 20). Thus, to be where the Lord is, is to be in the Father, a person. This thought is reinforced by the fact that the Lord said that He would receive the believers to Himself, a person, not to a physical structure or location. These verses together reveal the truth in John 14: the Lord Jesus would go into death, return in resurrection, and receive the believers into Himself as the Spirit of reality so that the believers would be in Him and in the Father. This is the basis for the Lord’s words in verse 20: “In that day [the day of His resurrection] you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.” The mutual indwelling of the Son in the Father, the Son in the believers, and the believers in the Son is the fulfillment of “where I am you also may be” (v. 3).

The mutual indwelling of the Lord, the believers, and the

Father in verse 20 as the issue of the Lord's going, coming, and receiving of the believers into Himself is the preparation of the mutual abode in verses 2 and 23 as the issue of the mutual love between the believers, the Lord, and the Father. From this perspective, the Father's house with its many abodes is a corporate composition of the mutual indwelling of God and redeemed humanity as the many abodes. Moreover, the way into such a mutual indwelling is through Jesus Christ who opened the way through His death and resurrection.

This corporate composition is called the Father's house because it is the fulfillment of the rebuilding of the temple of Jesus' body, which replaced the physical temple in Jerusalem as the Father's house (2:16, 19, 21). John 2:19 through 21 indicate that when the Lord's physical body, as the tabernacle and temple of God (1:14), was "destroyed" on the cross, He "raised it up" in three days, "in that day" (14:20), as His mystical Body in resurrection to be the enlarged temple of God, the Father's house and God's dwelling place. Moreover, the fact that this temple refers to the corporate Christ in resurrection implies that the Father's house is a corporate person with the resurrected Christ as the Head and with the regenerated believers indwelt by God as the Body (1 Cor. 12:12).

To claim that the Father's house in John 14 is heaven as a physical, temporary, or even permanent location where the believers will dwell in the future is to completely discard the revelation contained in the Lord's plain words and to be veiled by traditional and unscriptural claims about heaven being God's intended destination for the believers. The Lord Jesus was not focused on the believers going to some location in the future but on their entering into a living of mutual abiding in Him and in the Father through the Spirit of reality in resurrection (vv. 15-20). Such a living is initiated by His going through death to eliminate the problem of sin, sins, and Satan and by His coming in resurrection to receive the believers into Himself as the way into the Father.

The Revelation in John 14—the Genuine Comfort

Based on its interpretation of the Father's house, "Home" suggests that the Lord's word of comfort to the believers is their being *with* Him at some location in the future. The Lord's word in John 14, however, shows that His comfort to us, the believers, will come from His being in us and our being in Him following His resurrection from the dead (vv. 18, 20). While the disciples lost the Lord's limited outward presence for a little while because of His going into death, they would enjoy His unlimited inward presence after a little while because of His coming in resurrection as another Comforter, the Spirit of reality (vv.16-18). This comfort was far greater than what the

disciples experienced when the Lord was dwelling with them outwardly, and the comfort that we the believers need today comes not from a promise of a mansion in heaven but from Christ being in us and our being in Christ no matter what our outward circumstances may be. In its examination of John 14:1-14 "Home" leads the believers to a place other than the Father's house and presents them with a comfort that is no better than what the anxious disciples had prior to Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

by Joel Oladele

Missing the Consummate Revelation in Revelation 21 and 22

"A New Heaven and a New Earth," by Philip Graham Ryken in *Coming Home: Essays on the New Heaven and New Earth*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2017: 119-138. Print.

In an article entitled "A New Heaven and a New Earth" (hereafter, "New Heaven") Philip Graham Ryken expounds Revelation 21 and 22. In "New Heaven" the aim of the exposition of these chapters is to encourage a desire for the eternal home that we "glimpse in times of joy and long for in times of pain and suffering" (121). Despite correctly highlighting major themes that encapsulate Revelation 21 and 22, "New Heaven" misses the focal point of God's goal—the New Jerusalem—as the consummate revelation in the book of Revelation, because its eschatology conflates and confuses the new heaven and the new earth and the New Jerusalem with the popular but erroneous notion of heaven. "New Heaven" obscures the consummation of God's eternal plan—the New Jerusalem, which is rich in biblical and spiritual significance—with a longing and hope for an everlasting heavenly home that is devoid of suffering and pain but filled with joy and the splendor of God's glory.

Longing for a Home in the New Heaven and the New Earth

"New Heaven" confesses that its

purpose in expounding the last two chapters of the Bible is to awaken greater homesickness, as well as renewed hope, so that everyone who reads these words may go out into the world like the apostles, the abolitionists, and all

the other great men and women of God who had such a vision of glory that they were able to do the suffering work of the church in the world until Jesus comes again. (121)

To accomplish this goal, “New Heaven” expounds Revelation 21 and 22 along four major themes: the recapitulation of creation, the reversal of the curse, the consummation of salvation, and the enthronement of Christ.

Creation Recapitulated

In developing the first major theme, “New Heaven” says that in Revelation 21 and 22 there is a reappearance of “every major theme from Scripture”: “What is so amazing about Revelation 21 and 22 is the way that seemingly every strand of Scripture is drawn together and brought to its perfect conclusion” (121). “New Heaven” explains that all the strands of the great tapestry of God’s work throughout history—such as the temple, the covenant, atonement, and the kingdom—are brought to “a satisfying conclusion” at the end of the Bible (122): “The Bible is the great tapestry of God’s work in history, and all of its threads are bound together at the end of Revelation” (122). “New Heaven” speaks of heaven as being primarily a recapitulation of God’s creation. To underscore its thesis of the new heaven and the new earth being the believers’ eternal home, “New Heaven” asserts that “the grand story of God’s redemption begins and ends with a creation of heaven and earth” (122).

“New Heaven” goes on to address the parallels between creation and Revelation 21 and 22, showing that they form the “bookends” of the Bible (122). “New Heaven” accurately points to the matching elements between the beginning and the concluding chapters of the Bible. These elements contain rich significance in the divine revelation. The aptly named Genesis contains all the major themes of the Scriptures in seed form, which are developed, expanded, and brought to their ultimate consummation at the end of Revelation. In particular, the crucial themes of God and man, the tree of life and river of life, the bride and groom, heaven and earth, light, and expression are reflected in these bookends. The article effectively demonstrates that Adam and Eve reflect the bride and Groom in Revelation 21, that the great lights created at the beginning of the Bible are referenced in this chapter, and that the river and the tree of life in Genesis 2 directly connect to the river of the water of life and the tree of life in Revelation 22. God,

in keeping with His character as the Alpha and Omega, has brought the Bible to a “fitting conclusion” and will bring “the plan of salvation to such a magnificent culmination” by recapitulating in the new heaven and the new earth what He established in the beginning in creation (124).

The Reversal of the Curse

According to “New Heaven,” through the recapitulation of creation, the curse that was brought in by sin will be effectively reversed. The article says that when the curse is reversed, “the dreadful consequences of sin in a fallen world will be overcome” (125). There will then be the restoration of the marriage between God and His people; the wiping away of tears, signifying the eradication of grief, regret, frustration, sorrow, and anger; the destruction of death as the last enemy; the removal of psychological and physical pain; and the deliverance from sin (126-130). Furthermore, God’s people will quench their thirst of discontentment by drinking of the spring of the water of life as their spiritual contentment.

“New Heaven” conflates and confuses the new heaven and the new earth and the New Jerusalem with the popular but erroneous notion of heaven.

This “grand story of God’s redemption” (122) that “New Heaven” views as the biblical message began from the curse that was put upon fallen, sinful men. In addition to being banished from the garden of Eden, “our great sin has brought endless woe on

the human race: guilt, alienation, slavery, warfare, abuse” (125). While in exile, Adam’s race suffers daily from the “dreadful consequences of sin in a fallen world” (125). “New Heaven” points toward a hope of restoration in the final pages of the Bible, pages that are “full of images from Scripture of things that have been damaged and all but destroyed by sin, but one day will be restored” (125).

Included in the reversal of the curse at the end of the Scriptures are the wiping away of tears, the demise of death, the end of pain, and the eradication of sin. “New Heaven” bases this interpretation on Revelation 21:4, which says, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death will be no more, nor will there be sorrow or crying or pain anymore; for the former things have passed away.” “New Heaven” expounds God’s promise of wiping away tears as the passing away of sorrow, loss, regret, anger, mourning, and crying. Moreover, death, the last enemy, with its accompanying pains, frustrations, and the finality it brings to human life, will ultimately be destroyed. “New Heaven” asserts that when the curse is reversed, death will see its death and be no more (128).

At the same time, pain, which can be worse than death in its impact on human sufferings, will be taken away. Furthermore, sin will no longer exist, and all unrepentant sinners will not have a place in “God’s everlasting home” in the new heaven and the new earth (129). Christians will then be free of the sin that so easily entangles them and “reach a state of sinless perfection” (130).

“New Heaven” states that we will be entirely sanctified and satisfied in the new heaven and the new earth. It claims that the most difficult anguish resulting from the curse in the fallen world is the “underlying discontent” (130). Life, even during the best of times, is marred with disappointments, and one never attains “total happiness” (130). Paradoxically, even people living in the most affluent nations, such as America, are only marginally satisfied despite being more prosperous and having a higher standard of living. The article points to the fundamental problem that nothing in the fallen world can satisfy us and that our thirst is finally quenched in the “story of our salvation” at the end of Revelation (131). Therein we find the “spiritual contentment that only the living God can provide” (132).

Perhaps the most refreshing observation that “New Heaven” makes under the theme of the reversal of the curse is that of the restoration of the marital relationship between God and His people, which culminates in His people becoming “a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2). “New Heaven” briefly traces the “litany of marital failure” that God has with His people in the Bible, beginning with Israel’s chronic “spiritual infidelity” in the Old Testament (126). “New Heaven” exults over the fact that, due to the Groom’s “dowry,” paid with His own blood, His people, the church, become a bride who has been “made spotless and clean and perfect” for her wedding (127).

Salvation Consummated

“New Heaven” describes God’s plan of salvation as being not merely to take us back to an earlier condition but to “carry things forward to absolute perfection” (132). In this perfect conclusion of Scripture “there will be a new heaven—a new wilderness tabernacle of sorts, a new kind of temple—with the coming of the New Jerusalem” (133). “New Heaven” points out that the “whole blessed metropolis,” the New Jerusalem, “is a dwelling place for God” and that the entire city will be the temple of God, because “the whole beautiful place will be filled with the glorious splendor of the radiant majesty of God,” thereby being the ultimate fulfillment of Moses’ tabernacle and Solomon’s temple (133). This will be the “consummation of the salvation promise of the presence of God” (133).

Christ Enthroned

According to “New Heaven,” the last major theme seen in Revelation 21 and 22 is the glory of God Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. “New Heaven” notes that “Jesus is everywhere in these two chapters as his presence pervades the city of the New Jerusalem and his glory suffuses the atmosphere of the new heaven and the new earth” (134):

In Revelation 21:2 Jesus is the husband waiting eagerly to see the beauty of his bride. In verse 3 he is the voice speaking from the throne and pronouncing the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise to be with his people and be their God. In verse 4 he is with the Spirit as the Comforter who wipes away our tears. In verse 5 he is with the Father as the re-creator, making all things new. In verse 6 he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the eternal, everlasting, and almighty God. He is the root and the shoot of David (22:16). He is the free and living water (21:6) who satisfies our thirsty souls. He is the Lamb (22:1), the light (22:5), the lamp (21:23)—indeed, the very life of the city. (134)

“New Heaven” indicates that Christ will be the focus of our worship in the new heaven and the new earth and that we will dwell in His radiant glory and eternal splendor. Finally, “New Heaven” encourages believers with the hope that their temporary sufferings are incomparable to the eternal blessings of God, which will never wane, be interrupted, nor end in any way but rather will be infinitely greater and better forever.

The New Jerusalem—the Consummation of God’s Eternal Purpose, Plan, and Salvation

Each theme “New Heaven” expounds misses the ultimate revelation that is clearly unveiled in and that permeates the two concluding chapters of the Bible—the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2, 9-27; 22:1-5). While it strikes the thematic “strands” that are developed throughout the Bible, “New Heaven” fails to connect these themes to the actual consummation of God’s eternal purpose, plan, and salvation and therefore misses God’s ultimate and concluding revelation in the Scriptures.

The failure in “New Heaven” to clearly recognize the rich significance of the New Jerusalem may stem from its lack of understanding the delineation and difference between the new heaven and the new earth and the New Jerusalem. “New Heaven” conflates the two, using the terms interchangeably throughout the article and thereby implying that they are one and the same. When the popular but erroneous notion of heaven as the believers’ destiny is added to this mix, the resulting confusion further obscures the centrality of the New

Jerusalem in God's revelation. The following statement exemplifies this mixture: "The *new* heaven and the *new* earth will be the *last* heaven and the *last* earth...This is why they are described in terms of gold and jewels—precious things from earth that point to the permanence of heaven" (137). From this, readers may be led to infer that heaven is the destination, the home that believers should long and hope for. What the divine revelation shows, however, is that the new heaven and the new earth are in fact the old heaven and the old earth that have passed through the burning of God's judging fire and are renewed (2 Pet. 3:10-13). Furthermore, the gold and jewels refer to the materials used for the building of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:18-21).

This muddling together of the new heaven, the new earth, and the New Jerusalem may be the result of not adhering to the hermeneutic principle established at the beginning of Revelation: "The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to Him to show to His slaves the things that must quickly take place; and He made it known by signs, sending it by His angel to His slave John" (1:1). Witness Lee explains,

The revelation of this book is composed mainly of signs, i.e., symbols with spiritual significance, such as the seven lampstands, signifying the churches; the seven stars, signifying the messengers of the churches (v. 20), etc. Even the New Jerusalem is a sign, signifying the ultimate consummation of God's economy (chs. 21—22). This book, then, is a book of signs through which the revelation is made known to us. (Recovery Version, 1:1, note 2)

Any student of Revelation must sort through the many items that are found throughout the book, not only to understand and appreciate the spiritual significance of those that are signs but also to discern which items are not signs. Based on this understanding, the new heaven and the new earth is not a sign. The new heaven and the new earth will be a physical reality as the setting for God and His people as well as for the nations (21:24-26). The New Jerusalem, however, is a sign—the richest, deepest, and highest of all biblical signs.

It is apparent that the home "New Heaven" exhorts us to long for is the heavenly part of the new heaven and the new earth. More than once, the article deems the eternal destination and abode of the believers to be "heaven," which, when read in context, ostensibly refers to the new heaven: "The promise is not just being taken away from earth to heaven; it's a new earth as well as a

new heaven" (133), and "When we get to heaven, the blessings of God will be ours forever and ever, uninterrupted for all eternity" (136). In part, the problem may lie with the concept in "New Heaven" of the recapitulation of creation being the restoration of a utopia in heaven. "Revelation 21 and 22," "New Heaven" posits, "are filled with echoes from Eden," suggesting that Christians will return to an Eden-like existence in the new heaven and the new earth (122). "New Heaven" points out that the Bible, like great literature, concludes by binding the various threads found therein and tying up the loose ends to bring in a "sense of harmony and completion" (122), which is embedded in the idea of returning home, the place where we have always belonged.

Because "New Heaven" is a short article lacking greater specificity, it is difficult to ascertain to what degree it considers our ultimate home to resemble the garden in Genesis. Still, the notion put forth by "New Heaven" of returning to "our ancestral home," "a return to the place where we began" (124), demonstrates a significant lack of understanding of the relationship between the old creation in Genesis 1 and 2 and the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and 22, which is the consummation of the new creation and the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose. To be sure, the types of the tree of life, the river, the gold and precious stones, and man and his wife are "echoed" in Revelation 21 and 22. However, this is done not in a way of restoration but in the reality of their ultimate fulfillment.

God's ultimate intention is not to bring His people back home to a heavenly garden of Eden; instead, it is to harvest the seeds that He sowed in Genesis 1 and 2, seeds related to His eternal purpose. The main narrative of the Bible is much more than a "grand story of God's redemption" as "New Heaven" asserts. God's heart's desire will not be satisfied with returning a redeemed creation to a renewed heaven and earth. Contrary to what "New Heaven" posits, the Bible does not imply that God's goal is to bring us to heaven as "a domicile with a sense of *déjà vu*" (123). God's eternal purpose is to gain His dwelling place by being thoroughly joined to and mingled with man for His corporate expression. Although the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose was delayed by sin and death, which required the death and resurrection of Christ to reverse the curse and redeem God's elect, God is unabated in His eternal goal to gain the New Jerusalem as an enlarged organic expression of Himself with His life and nature.

The new heaven and the new earth is not a sign. The New Jerusalem, however, is a sign—the richest, deepest, and highest of all biblical signs.

When we study the marvelous sign of the New Jerusalem, the descriptions do not concur with any notion of an eternal paradisiacal destination in heaven. As a matter of fact, in Revelation 21:2 John says, “I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.” According to this verse, the holy city comes out of heaven and down to the new earth, indicating that the New Jerusalem cannot be heaven nor even be in heaven. Christians will not return to the utopian paradise that was Eden but will become the dwelling place that God intended since eternity past, that He is working to build in the course of time through various ages, or dispensations, and that will consummate in the New Jerusalem for eternity.

Although a thorough presentation of the New Jerusalem is beyond the scope of this review,¹ we need to realize that the holy city, New Jerusalem, is not a literal city but is instead the ultimate sign in the Bible and is full of rich spiritual significances. Revelation 21:2 says that the holy city will come down out of heaven from God “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” Here the bride, who is identified as the holy city, is the “wife of the Lamb” in verse 9 and corresponds to the one who speaks in oneness with the Spirit in 22:17. Since the New Jerusalem is a bride, it must be a person. Indeed, she is the consummation of the church, composed of those who have believed into Christ, who have been regenerated with His life, and who have been adorned through sanctification, renewing, transformation, conformation, and glorification in order to be prepared as His counterpart (John 3:5-6, 29; Eph. 5:25-27, 31-32; Rev. 19:7). This implies that the New Jerusalem is a corporate person composed of the many God-men who are the mass reproduction of Christ as the first God-man (John 1:12-13; Heb. 2:10; Rom. 1:4; 8:29; 1 Pet. 2:21; John 12:24). As sons of God and the brothers of Christ, who is the firstborn Son of God, we possess the divine life and nature. Hence, we are the same as Christ in His life and nature and are thus His corporate duplication: He is divine and human, and we are human and divine (1 John 3:1; 5:1). Christ and His bride can therefore be counterparts because they both have divinity and humanity.

By having the same life and nature as Christ, we also are the Body of Christ and the one new man, the corporate God-man (Rom. 12:4-5; Eph. 2:15; Col. 3:10-11). Christ, the firstborn Son, is the Head of the corporate God-man, and the believers, the many sons, are the Body of this corporate God-man. Together, He and we are the one new man in the universe. This universal entity consummates as the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and 22 as God’s universal corporate expression for eternity.

The New Jerusalem is also the consummation of the Father’s house in John 14:2. Revelation 21:22 says, “I saw

no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” The Father’s house is symbolized by the tabernacle and then the temple, which initially refers to Jesus’ physical body (John 1:14; 2:16, 19). Through Christ’s resurrection the physical body of Jesus as the temple was enlarged to be the mystical Body of Christ, which is the church as God’s dwelling place on earth (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 1:22-23; 2:21-22). Since the church is comprised of the believers, the “many abodes” in the Father’s house must refer to the believers, who are the many members of the Body of Christ (John 14:2; Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12, 27). The church as the Body of Christ consummates in the New Jerusalem as the mutual dwelling place of God and man, where we dwell in God as the temple and He dwells in us as the tabernacle (Rev. 21:3, 22). The Body of Christ is being built up today (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 4:16). This implies that the New Jerusalem is not merely a matter of hope for the future; it should also be a present reality and experience in our Christian life. We are not going to the New Jerusalem; since it is a corporate person, we are becoming the New Jerusalem through our growth and transformation in life (1 Cor. 3:6-7; Eph. 4:15; Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18).

There is no reference in Revelation 21 and 22 that the new heaven and the new earth is the home that the believers in Christ are returning to or should long for. Rather, these chapters clearly show that it is God who has been longing for His home, which is the mutual abode of God and man, a dwelling place constituted of believers joined to God. He will ultimately gain the New Jerusalem as His home. The new heaven and the new earth will be the physical setting for the New Jerusalem, which is the mutual abode of the Triune God with the redeemed, regenerated, sanctified, renewed, transformed, and glorified tripartite man, who will be His home as His eternal corporate expression for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose.

by Kin-Leong Seong

Notes

¹For more thorough presentations see “‘I Saw the Holy City, New Jerusalem’—the Vision of the New Jerusalem as a Corporate God-man” by Ron Kangas in *Affirmation & Critique* 17.2 (2012): 3-12; “The New Jerusalem—a Corporate Person” by Ed Marks in *Affirmation & Critique* 5.2 (2000): 45-65; and “Aspects of the New Jerusalem as the City of the Living God” by Witness Lee in *Affirmation & Critique* 17.2 (2012): 13-19.

Works Cited

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