

## Deification by Life

*Christosis: Engaging Paul's Soteriology with His Patristic Interpreters*, by Ben C. Blackwell. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016. Print.

At the very beginning of modern Protestant historical theology, Adolf von Harnack forwarded two influential theses. The first was that the early church got Jesus wrong. The history of dogma, then, is the history of what never should have been, and the task of the historian of dogma is to peel back the “husk” of Christian theology (including the Trinity and high Christology) to reveal the “kernel” of the true message of Jesus—the proclamation of the universal Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. The second thesis that Harnack forwarded was that all the accouterments of Christian theology could be traced back to one fateful mistake. The church’s insistence that Jesus was true human and its insistence that both the Son and the Holy Spirit are true God are both traceable, he suggests, to the conviction that the believers are “deified” through the incarnation of the Son and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Harnack insists that such a conviction is entirely foreign to the simple morality preached by Jesus and contends that it is, instead, an illicit import from Greek paganism.

Harnack’s theses proved influential. Until rather recently, scholars in academic circles have balked at the suggestion that biblical soteriology has anything to do with patristic deification. The two were thought to be fundamentally opposed to one another. The renaissance of deification research over the past several decades, however, has done much to remove the indifference toward the notion of deification, and a number of theologians have suggested that patristic deification has strong roots in the biblical material. Biblical scholars are beginning to challenge Harnack’s theses and to claim that patristic deification is not only consonant with biblical soteriology but a legitimate interpretation or development of it.

Some studies have sought to ground this claim by comparing particular passages in Christian Scripture to the pagan writings of their contemporaries, highlighting not only the similarities but also the differences between the two. Ben C. Blackwell, who earned his Ph.D. in New Testament and Historical Theology from Durham University and currently teaches at Houston Baptist University, suggests an alternative method for addressing

the question. In the published version of his dissertation, *Christosis: Engaging Paul's Soteriology with His Patristic Interpreters* (hereafter *Christosis*), Blackwell proposes that the church fathers themselves are the place to look if we are to ground the claim that deification is a biblical teaching.

Blackwell justifies his approach by appeal to the literary theory of Hans-Georg Gadamer and his followers, whose basic claim is that the potential meaning of texts unfolds gradually through the history of interpretation as the texts encounter new contexts (15-25). Future interpreters of texts do not always or merely impose foreign meanings on the text but also draw out the meaning that was already implicitly there. Thus, the history of interpretation should not be viewed with suspicion but as a potential source of genuine insight. Particularly in the case of great texts, the history of interpretation is vital. Great texts tend to acquire a rigid “horizon of expectation” based on a reading community that inculcates traditional ways of reading the text (18). Being told for decades what a text means makes it difficult to read the text with fresh eyes, and looking back to the history of interpretation—particularly to those who may have read the same text differently—challenges our particular horizon of expectation and provides an opportunity to read the text anew (20). That is precisely why Blackwell suggests we need to take seriously the way that the church fathers read the New Testament. When they read Paul, they saw deification even if many contemporary Christians do not. The fathers might have been wrong about that, of course, but maybe not. *Christosis* proposes that reading Paul in light of the fathers just might open up a new, legitimate, and maybe even better way of reading a text that many think they already know.

The first half of the book explores deification in two of the church fathers—Irenaeus of Lyons and Cyril of Alexandria. In both cases, Blackwell looks for the particular Pauline texts that each author appeals to when explaining what they mean by “deification.” *Christosis* then lays out a series of questions derived from this study of the church fathers and turns with them to consider two crucial texts in Paul—Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians 3—5:

- 1) What is the shape of Pauline soteriology? 2) When do these soteriological changes occur? 3) How do these soteriological changes of the human condition come about?

---

4) How does this transformation of the human condition relate to creation? (117).

If Paul's answers to these questions coincide sufficiently with the answers of Irenaeus and Cyril, Blackwell proposes that we can rightfully welcome patristic deification as a challenge to the dominant alternative understanding of New Testament salvation that characterizes much of contemporary Christianity. Blackwell concludes that they do, in fact, substantially agree: "Deification thus serves as the revelation from subsequent epochs that helps us to understand better the anthropological dimension of Paul's soteriology" (264).

### Deification by Life

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of the book is its focus on life in relation to deification. After presenting the soteriology of Irenaeus, Cyril, and Paul, *Christosis* concludes that "the centre of the anthropological dimension of soteriology within each of these three authors can be summed up with the term *life*" (255). The connection between life and deification should come as no surprise, despite the fact that it remains underdeveloped in contemporary deification research. The fundamental Old Testament proof text for deification, after all, makes the connection explicitly: "I said, You are gods, / And all of you are sons of the Most High" (Psa. 82:6). The very passage that patristic authors took to be the most explicit endorsement of deification in Christian Scripture indicates that what it means for the believers to be "gods" is fundamentally connected to what it means for them to be "sons of the Most High." Deification, then, is, for the patristic authors, closely related to the believers' sonship.

*Christosis*, thus, helpfully points out that whenever Irenaeus and Cyril seek to explain what it means for the believer to be deified, they almost always appeal to Pauline sonship:

While exegesis of Ps 82.6 served as the formal basis of this affirmation of believers as gods, the association between life and sonship was primarily supported using Pauline texts, especially, 1 Corinthians 15; Romans 8; Galatians 4; and 2 Corinthians 5. (253)

For Blackwell, then, what Irenaeus and Cyril mean by "deification" is what Paul means by "sonship." But this introduces a problem, since there is considerable dispute about what sonship entails. For many, Pauline sonship (or, as it is often called, adoption) is little more than a judicial procedure according to which the believer enters into a new objective relation to God without any actual inward change taking place. If this is what Paul means by sonship, then to identify patristic deification with it would be to reduce it to nothing at all. This is

where Blackwell's point about the potential usefulness of the early history of Pauline interpretation is helpful. A good deal of Christians today understand sonship to be little more than a change in a legal objective standing before God, but that is not the way the church fathers understood it. The patristic identification of deification with Pauline sonship, then, has the potential to challenge the contemporary "horizon of expectation" and enable many Christians to read Paul with fresh eyes. The identification of deification with sonship is meant not to reduce deification to what is already familiar to many Christians (a new legal standing) but to uplift their view from what they thought they already knew to something higher. Sonship is not a new legal objective standing but a deification of some kind.

### Life and Participation in the Spirit

How, then, does Blackwell understand life in relation to the deification of the believer? *Christosis* helpfully points out that there is another crucial Old Testament text that lies behind both Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians 3–5. In both of these passages, Paul draws on the prophecy concerning the new covenant in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36–37 (123). This new covenant is not simply another covenant; it is another kind of covenant. According to this covenant, not only is something demanded from us outwardly; something is supplied to us inwardly. God promises to supply a "new heart" and a "new spirit," but even more significantly, God says, "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes" (vv. 26–27). At the beginning of 2 Corinthians 3–5, Paul clearly adverts to these passages, speaking of the new covenant ministry as a writing of letters on hearts of flesh with the Spirit as the ink (3:2–6). In Romans 8 those who fulfill the righteous requirement of the law are those who are freed by the law of the Spirit of life and who walk according to the spirit (vv. 2, 4).

The life and sonship of which Paul speaks is thus rightly called by Irenaeus and Cyril a deification because life and sonship refer to an interior transformation wrought by a participation in the indwelling Spirit. While Paul himself does not often use language of participation, Blackwell argues that the church fathers rightly introduce the language of participation as an interpretation of Paul's ubiquitous "in Christ," "in the Spirit," and other such language:

Not only do each describe triune divine activity in the salvation of humanity, but importantly they each also describe this as a participatory relationship. The primary difference between Paul and our patristic writers, in this regard, is the nature of explicit language. Paul does use some explicit participation language (e.g., Phil 2.1; 3.10), but he primarily makes use of a variety of prepositional

---

phrases and oblique cases to describe the divine-human relationship. (258)

Blackwell argues further that patristic participation is not only a licit interpretation of Paul's language but a salutary clarification: "Both Irenaeus and Cyril move away from this use of prepositional phrases, presumably because of its ambiguity. In fact, they resolve the ambiguity in Paul's letters by using the terminology of union, communion, and participation regularly" (258).

Leaving aside the issue of whether or not Paul needs our clarification, it is certainly the case that many contemporary readers of Paul need clarification. A variety of creative readings of *in Christ* and other such phrases in Paul have sought to explain them away, but the prolific use of participation language by patristic authors indicates that the early church was much more willing to take Paul's language at face value. The church fathers did not think that Paul said that we are "in Christ" because we imitate His moral living; they thought Paul said we are "in Christ" because we actually are. That is to say, the early church did not think Paul's "mysticism" needed to be explained away by appeal to less embarrassing moral language; instead, they were more prone to interpret moral language in light of Paul's "mysticism." Our being "in Christ" is not explained by our living like Christ; our living like Christ is explained by our being "in Christ." *Christosis's* account of Pauline soteriology is thus governed by an insistence that a real participation—not only in the divine attributes but in the divine being itself—is granted to the believer in God's salvation by the indwelling of the Divine Trinity: "Believers do not merely share in divine attributes; rather, they share in God himself, particularly through the Spirit" (62). Further, *Christosis* repeatedly insists that this language is not reducible to our efforts at moral reform; rather, our participation in God *causes* the change in us:

The fruit of participation in Christ and the Spirit is that believers become like Christ, sharing in both his death and his resurrection...Thus, the experience of glory is not merely the experience of new life but a participation in divine life. (244)

### The Experience of Life

For Blackwell to have gone this far is a significant contribution to evangelical theology in and of itself. Pauline salvation is not simply a change in objective legal

standing; salvation reaches into the interior life of the believer. The Divine Trinity comes to dwell in the believers and to grant them a participation in His own divine being and divine attributes.

Still, there is a significant theme in Pauline soteriology that is missing from *Christosis*, and its inclusion would have made the book a much more compelling piece of scholarship, particularly since the book is entitled *Christosis*. Without much elaboration, Blackwell suggests in the closing pages of the book that "while deification, or theosis, can generally serve as a helpful description of Paul's soteriology, perhaps *christosis* (or *christopoiesis*) is a better term to describe Paul's specific soteriological emphasis" (264). Blackwell thinks this for two reasons: first, to highlight the "christo-form nature" of Christian deification, and, second, to avoid the potential misunderstandings of the term *deification* (265). Setting aside the second issue, Blackwell's account of the Christiformity of Pauline soteriology, while welcome, could have been pressed further than it is. In particular, *Christosis* could have benefited significantly by reflection on a number of key passages in Paul which indicates that his understanding of the profundity of our union with Christ far exceeds the categories that Blackwell employs to identify the effects of our participation in Christ.

*The new covenant is another kind of covenant. According to this covenant, not only is something demanded from us outwardly; something is supplied to us inwardly.*

In presenting the believer's experience of life, *Christosis* identifies three distinct effects: "noetic enlightenment, moral enablement, and somatic resurrection" (254). Blackwell has sufficient biblical warrant in doing so. The promise of the new covenant speaks of all *knowing* God and of God causing us to *walk* in His ordinances (Jer. 31:34; Ezek. 36:27). Paul, too, speaks of being "transformed by the renewing of the mind" and of fulfilling the righteous requirement of the law by walking according to the spirit (Rom. 12:2; 8:4). Still, to speak of sonship in terms of "noetic enlightenment" and "moral enablement" alone—while accurate as far as it goes—fails to capture the full sense of Paul's understanding of our deifying participation in Christ. Blackwell's book is long, but it would have been greatly enhanced by reflection on certain key passages in Paul where he speaks not simply of being transformed into moral Christ-likeness but of living and working together with Christ.

In Philippians Paul tells us that he counted all things loss so that he might know "the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (3:10). *Christosis* characterizes the believer's participation in Christ's resurrection in

---

terms of “mental and emotional support...in the midst of distress and, at times, deliverance...from the events causing the distress so that believers do not experience its culmination with bodily death” (202), but this falls far short of the full reality for which Paul longed. At the opening of the Epistle, Paul expresses confidence in the petition of the saints and the bountiful supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ (1:19). Paul’s confidence was not in his being released from prison but in his not being put to shame and in Christ being “magnified in [his] body” (v. 20). “For,” he continues, “to me, to live is Christ” (v. 21).

We might have trouble understanding what this means, but the Philippians probably did not. Paul, after all, had been in prison before, in the very city of Philippi. Paul certainly experienced moral and emotional support, but surely something much more profound transpired in that prison. What is most striking about the story in Acts 16 is not the unfastening of the bonds and the opening of the prison doors; rather, it is that, when the doors swung open, Paul and Silas did not leave (vv. 26-28). God did not simply render moral and emotional support to Paul. Long before the earthquake struck, Paul and Silas “sang hymns of praise to God” (v. 25). The quality of their life and living was so extraordinary that those imprisoned with them not only listened to their singing but remained with them in the prison when the opportunity for escape presented itself. When the prison guard entered and was about to take his own life, Paul assured him that they were all still there, and the guard responded not by marveling at Paul’s morality but by falling down before Paul and Silas and asking, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (v. 30).

Paul refers to such experiences in his second Epistle to the Corinthians. There he speaks of himself and of the new covenant ministers as a “fragrance of Christ” (2:13-16) and as those in whose hearts God has shined in order to “illuminate the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” to the unbelievers around them (4:6). The quality of Paul’s life, living, and ministry far exceeds the category of mere human morality. When people encountered Paul, they saw the glory of the face of Christ; when they encountered him, they smelled the aroma of Christ. Paul puts this most succinctly in Galatians 2:20: “I am crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” While it is certainly possible to reduce this language to something more familiar, perhaps by suggesting that Paul means the old Paul is gone, and a new Paul, who has become morally like Christ, was living. But the “old” Paul is precisely the “moral” Paul, the Paul who was blameless with regard to the “righteousness which is in the law” (Phil 3:6-7). Surely, then, a “new” Paul—the Paul in resurrection—was radically different from being merely more moral. In his union with Christ, Paul did not simply receive moral

enablement; he was brought to the point where Christ lived in him and he lived Christ (Gal. 2:20; Phil 1:21). Paul spoke in Christ, and Christ spoke in Paul (2 Cor. 2:17; 13:3). Paul labored in Christ, and Christ operated in Paul (Rom. 16:9; Gal. 2:8). Paul did not simply become *like* Christ; Paul *became* Christ in his union with Him. Only in this light does it make sense to speak of deification and what could be called, instead, “humanization.” We can draw moral support and enablement from all manner of sources, but the deifying perfection that makes us sons like our Father can come only from the deifying life of Christ (Matt. 5:48). Thus, while our deifying participation in Christ certainly supplies moral enablement, it also brings us into all the reality of God that is in Jesus, including His incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection (Eph. 4:21).

*Christosis’s* emphasis that Pauline sonship is deification by participation in the indwelling Triune God is to be commended without reservation. Its presentation of the experience of life, while accurate as far as it goes, could have been bolstered by tending to other important Pauline themes. Blackwell is not done with Paul and promises a forthcoming book exploring Pauline justification as a participation in the righteousness of God (xxviii). He has already made a significant and welcome contribution to Pauline scholarship and will hopefully continue to do so.

by Mitchell Kennard

## Natural Concepts of Heaven

*The Heaven Promise*, by Scot McKnight, New York: Waterbrook Press, 2015. Print.

Heaven, as perceived to be the eternal destination of believers, is perhaps one of the most discussed topics among Christians, and the amount of literature that fuels that discussion only surges each year. The greater part of such literature seems to approach the discussion in one of three ways: testimonies of near-death or out-of-body experiences, definitions or descriptions of heaven, and questions and answers concerning heaven. In *The Heaven Promise* (hereafter *Heaven*), Scot McKnight combines the latter two approaches in an attempt to refocus the believers’ thinking concerning heaven on the Bible. Regrettably, its efforts only introduce additional natural concepts concerning heaven.

*Heaven* anchors its chief claim that heaven is a promise made by God on twenty-seven verses in the New Testament—Luke 12:32; John 11:25; 14:1-3; Luke 23:43; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 6:14; 15:54; 2 Corinthians 4:14; 5:1, 8; Ephesians 1:18; 1 Timothy 4:8; Hebrews 12:28; 1 Peter 1:3-4; Revelation 22:3-4; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1; Hebrews 11:13-16; Isaiah 65:17, 22—and advances its thesis in four sections (19, 21, 23). In the first section, “The Heaven Question,” *Heaven* notes that many categories of people—children, atheists, and others—have their own considerations concerning heaven (5) and that it is often when these considerations clash that many are forced to reconsider what they believe. It states that the “history of how the church has thought about heaven” can be captured in two lines of thought: a theocentric, God-centered heaven and a kingdom-centric, world-transformed-centered heaven (11). It suggests that the proper view of heaven is a “balance between the God-centered heaven and kingdom-centered heaven,” a heaven in which love for God and love for others is perfectly lived out, and claims that such a balanced view is supplied only by the Bible (13).

The second section, “The Heaven Promise,” presents its considerations on the basis for heaven as the final destination of the believers after death. It states emphatically that heaven is God’s promise to the believers (17), a promise based on the New Testament verses listed prior. It also asserts, based on Genesis 17 and Hebrews 11:13-16, that “Heaven is the promise made to Abraham in its eternal form,” and the fact that God entered into a covenant with Abraham related to His promise indicates to *Heaven* that “God has entered into a covenant with us to make the Heaven Promise good, a binding covenant on which God stakes His life and integrity” (19, 24-25). *Heaven* buttresses its argument by stating that the heart of God’s promise is the resurrection of Christ because everything related to heaven depends on whether or not Christ rose from the dead (30). Then it affirms that Christ’s resurrection is certain because the tomb was empty, some claimed that they encountered Jesus after His death, there is no evidence that the post-resurrection witnesses had any opportunity to fabricate a false testimony, and the first persons to witness the empty tomb were women (30-32). Regrettably, all of McKnight’s proofs of the resurrection are only empirically based, neglecting the reality of the internal witnessing of the regenerating and indwelling Spirit.

*Heaven* suggests that when we take the resurrection of Christ seriously, we can begin to consider what heaven is

like. It argues, “Jesus’s resurrection body shows us what our bodies will be like, and therefore what heaven will be like” (37). Moreover, it claims that “when we join the apostles to proclaim that Jesus was raised from the dead..., we are announcing that Jesus took on flesh and blood in a new body that was made for the future kingdom of God” (37). Thus, that body becomes the believer’s hope (39, 41).

After attaching the believer’s hope for heaven to the resurrection of Jesus, *Heaven* addresses the issue of the location of heaven. It suggests that according to the Bible, “heaven occupies two locations. One is the undisclosed reality of God’s presence...The other location is the future new Heavens and new earth” (45). Designating the first heaven with a lower case *h* and the other with a capital *H*, it claims, based on Revelation 21:1-2, that “the first heaven, where we go when we die, is not our eternal location. What is eternal is the new Heavens and new earth that will be located on (our new) earth, centered around the new Jerusalem” (48). It explains that at some point those in the temporary heaven will be transferred to the final “earthly, physical, and embodied” Heaven and supposes that this final Heaven is what the Lord described as the many abodes in the Father’s house in John 14:2 (47-48). Regarding the “new Heavens and new earth,” *Heaven* says, “The book of Revelation tells us heaven and earth join one another to form the new Heavens and the new earth. This is described as the new Jerusalem,” and “The new Heavens and the new earth will be a city” (49-50). It concludes the section by noting that the resurrection of Christ as the heart of the “Heaven Promise” (50) empowers the believers to stand boldly in the face of death.

In the third section, “God’s Six Promises about Heaven,” *Heaven* puts forth its understanding of the general principles concerning what Heaven will be like and how it will operate. The first promise—that “God will be God”—advances the thought that “Heaven is designed for and only comfortable for God-lovers” because it will be a place where God can fully be God to all persons and things (60). McKnight maintains that in Heaven, the believers will spend much time in fellowship with and worship to God and will be able to understand the meaning of their lives and human experiences.

The second promise—that “Jesus will be Jesus”—emphasizes the centrality of Jesus as the Lamb who is also the Lion on the throne: “Heaven is designed for people who

McKnight’s proofs of the resurrection are only empirically based, neglecting the reality of the internal witnessing of the regenerating and indwelling Spirit.

---

love Jesus and long to be with him for ever and ever,” and that the narrative in the book of Revelation, which ultimately reveals that God’s team wins, shows the victorious Lamb as central to everything in heaven (68, 71, 75).

The third promise—that Heaven will be a utopia of pleasures—stresses the point that it will be a place of deep joy, happiness, and pleasures, all of which will lead to God, because the believers’ joys and pleasures will be attuned to God’s (78-79).

The fourth promise involves eternal life. *Heaven* explains that the narrative of the Bible concerning heaven goes beyond the notion of a personal salvation in which one simply dies and goes to heaven to be with God. It makes the observation that whereas a personal salvation is important, Genesis 3 indicates that God’s salvation is a “salvation from” and a “salvation for” (83). In particular, it notes that “Genesis 3 tells us that we *failed in our image-bearing role of governing for God*” and that “we are saved from our sin...so we can accomplish *our calling as image bearers*” (83). *Heaven* states that we will “*live out that divine summons to be image bearers*” (83) in the “final heaven.” It explains that whereas man’s fall caused many negative things to come into the world, heaven is where all the negative things, including death, will be undone, since God’s people will no longer be in rebellion.

The fifth promise—that of an “eternal global fellowship” (91)—and the sixth promise—that of an “eternal beloved community” (103)—go together. *Heaven* emphasizes that the final heaven is societal in nature, asserting that “Heaven is designed by God for those who want relationships with others in family and community” (92). It claims that both the historical view that the church has had of heaven as a kingdom, a city, and a garden and the Lord’s words regarding preparing rooms in John 14 indicate these characteristics. In its consideration, heaven will be characterized by fellowship and filled with loving relationships with people. *Heaven* develops its consideration of heaven as a society or community by emphasizing that all social injustices will be done away with in the final heaven.

As a conclusion to the first three sections, *Heaven* includes two additional chapters. The first is on what it terms “the first hour in heaven” (114). In this chapter *Heaven* explains that since the final heaven is a place where justice is present, there must be a provision for all who will inhabit heaven, a provision that deals with their grievances with others. Without any biblical support, *Heaven* proposes that the first hour in heaven will be a time of seeking forgiveness and of forgiving. The second additional chapter focuses on how “Heaven people” (122) should live today, itemizing some principles based on its explanation of the general ideas of heaven. Such principles include “Heaven people” trusting the

heaven-promising God in their daily lives, their imagining heaven and implementing it gradually on earth today, their carrying out God’s calling for them on earth, their making things right with others today, entering into fellowship with others, forgiving those who have wronged them, and standing against any injustices in their own lives.

In the final section, entitled “Ten Questions about Heaven,” *Heaven* addresses some of the most commonly asked questions about heaven. Regarding the question of near-death experiences, it suggests that such experiences often do not concur with the general principles of heaven in the Bible, and that Christians should believe in the final heaven, not because others have been there and back but because it is God’s promise (144). On the question of rewards, *Heaven* argues, again without biblical support, that rewards are at best incentives, because in the final heaven all are equal. As to the question of who will be in heaven, *Heaven* responds, “Jesus and those who are in Him” (157). Concerning the question of God’s fairness, *Heaven* suggests that if we hold to the ideas that God is good and that He is love, we will realize that God grants to each person a fair opportunity to respond to His love (160). As to the question of families in heaven, *Heaven* boils the question down to the issue of marriage and argues that the Lord’s response to the Sadducees regarding the resurrection was only that there will be no new marriages; it suggests that if such is the case, there are marriages and families in heaven (170). Regarding children who die, *Heaven* says that “because God is loving, good, and just, God will send those who die in infancy or prior to their maturity into what is most right for such persons” (175). *Heaven* also addresses the question, “What about creation?” Since we are made from dust and return to dust, it claims that the process of returning to dust is of no issue and that what matters is Christ’s resurrection (178). It concludes that there is no biblical basis for purgatory, and that purgatory contradicts what God does for us and to us by His grace (182). Related to whether or not pets will be in heaven, *Heaven* says that animals and plant life will probably be in heaven (185). *Heaven* responds to the final question, related to why we should be in heaven, by stating that we should believe because Jesus and the apostles did, because Jesus was raised from the dead, because the Bible does, because the church always has, and because most people do (188-190, 192). It also cites factors such as desire, justice, and the fact that science does not provide all the answers (193-195).

### Life and Building—God’s Purpose in Salvation

*Heaven*’s understanding that God’s purpose in creating man is for man to be image bearers in heaven is superficial and primarily objective. The thought in the Bible concerning bearing God’s image is intrinsically related to

God's life on the one hand and the producing of the church as Christ's counterpart on the other hand. According to the type in Genesis 2, after creating man, God focused on man's eating (vv. 16-17). In particular, Genesis 2 shows that man needed to eat of the tree of life and to receive the life of God so that he could become a genuine God-man who bore God's image in life and expressed God's nature. The genuine bearing of God's image and exercise of God's dominion are the issue of life and its operation (Col. 3:3-4, 10; Eph. 4:18-24).

And just as it was not good for Adam, a man, to be alone, so also it is not good for God in Jesus Christ as a man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). For the producing of Adam's counterpart, a rib was taken out of his side and built into a woman (vv. 21-22). Similarly, in order to produce a counterpart for Christ, the indestructible, resurrection life of Christ, typified by the rib taken out of Adam, must be imparted into redeemed humanity to produce the church as an enlarged corporate counterpart for Christ, having the same life as Christ and resulting in the same expression as Christ. Thus, the church is the counterpart of Christ because she is the same as Christ in life, nature, image, expression, and function. Such a church in consummation is the New Jerusalem, a bride adorned for her husband, having the glory of God (Rev. 21:2, 11)

### Misapplying the Truth concerning Eternal Life the Kingdom, and the New Jerusalem

In its core argument that heaven is a promise made by God, *Heaven* defines "the final Heaven" as several items, including eternal life, the kingdom, the New Jerusalem, the new heavens and new earth, etc. (47-48, 57). This amalgam of designations demonstrates a measure of confusion and dilutes and misconstrues these realities. In other words, the heaven envisioned as God's promise is, in reality, only a product of man's natural concepts. God does promise and give eternal life, but this giving of eternal life is not related to the "promise" of heaven. The same is true regarding the kingdom and the New Jerusalem. These three realities—eternal life, the kingdom, and the New Jerusalem—are related, but they refer to distinct realities in Scripture, not to varying aspects of what is yearnfully presented as heaven.

In the New Testament, eternal life refers mainly to the life in the Son of God—the uncreated, indestructible life of God to be received by man so that he may match God in life, nature, and expression (John 11:25; 1 John

5:11-12; 1 Tim. 1:16). Moreover, the modifier *eternal* in the phrase *eternal life* refers more to the nature and quality of that life than to its relationship with time. In contrast to the Bible's revelation, *Heaven's* definition of eternal life is mainly that it is a place where there are no more negative things and where we live forever. The kingdom of God, another central theme in the Bible, is Jesus Christ the Savior sown into and increasing in His believers to become God's ruling realm (Luke 17:21). Note 2 by Witness Lee on Luke 4:43 in the Recovery Version of the Bible defines the kingdom as follows:

The kingdom of God is the Savior...as the seed of life sown into His believers, God's chosen people (Mark 4:3, 26), and developing into a realm over which God can rule as His kingdom in His divine life. The entrance into the kingdom is regeneration (John 3:5), and the development of the kingdom is the believers' growth in the divine life (2 Pet. 1:3-11). The kingdom is the church life today, in which the faithful believers live (Rom. 14:17), and it will develop into the coming kingdom as a reward to be inher-

ited (Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5) by the overcoming saints in the millennium (Rev. 20:4, 6). Eventually, it will consummate in the New Jerusalem as the eternal kingdom of God, an eternal realm of the eternal blessing of God's eternal life, which all God's redeemed will enjoy in the new heaven and new earth for eternity—Rev. 21:1-4; 22:1-5, 14.

*Heaven's understanding that God's purpose in creating man is for man to be image bearers in heaven is superficial and primarily objective.*

To consider the kingdom merely as a coming heaven that begins when we die dismisses the living of the kingdom reality today, a living that qualifies the believers to inherit the manifestation of the kingdom as their reward.

The sign of the New Jerusalem denotes a corporate person constituted with God's redeemed, regenerated, transformed, conformed, and glorified elect to be the bride and counterpart of Christ (Rev. 21:2; Eph. 5:25-27). In all three cases *Heaven* misinterprets and misuses these realities, furthering the traditional notion of heaven as the eternal destination for the believers.

### Mishandling Scripture

*Heaven* claims that its intention is to engage the Bible's truth concerning life to come. However, its handling of Scripture suggests otherwise. In at least two instances it attempts to shape the biblical revelation to fit its desired view. In one case related to whether or not there are families in heaven, *Heaven* analyzes the questioning of the Lord by the Sadducees concerning the resurrection

---

(166-168). On the one hand, *Heaven* argues that the intent of the Pharisees in this passage (Mark 12:18-27; Matt. 22:23-33; Luke 20:27-40) is to “prove that either there is no resurrection, or that God condones either polygamy...or divorce in the resurrection life” (168). Not being content with the Lord’s answer, *Heaven* concludes that “what Jesus said is *not* that there won’t be marital life in Heaven...It says only that there *will be no new marriages*” (168); thus, “we are then to presume that in Heaven our families and marriages will be intact” (170). *Heaven*’s conclusion regarding the passage is both alarming and without biblical support. *Heaven* is so fixed on pushing its view of marriage existing in some form in a final heaven that it does not recognize that it has fallen into the trap the Pharisees attempted to set for the Lord, for if the original earthly marriages of the seven men to the one woman were valid in the resurrection, it would mean that God condones either polygamy or divorce. This is a gross misrepresentation of Scripture. In the second instance *Heaven* acknowledges that the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven (Rev. 21:1-2). Rather than allowing this truth to shape its understanding of God’s salvation, however, it attempts to force a new perspective of heaven on Scripture by defining the “final heaven” as the New Jerusalem and then equating it to the new heavens and new earth that is located on yet another new earth (48, 50, 153). This mishandling of Scripture only perpetuates misunderstanding.

### Errantly Teaching That the New Jerusalem Is a Physical City

When it attempts to address the question of who will be in the final heaven, *Heaven* interprets the New Jerusalem as a physical city (154). As indicated earlier, since Christ the redeeming God is a genuine man, the God-man, He must have a counterpart, because “it is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Moreover, that counterpart cannot be a different “kind” than He is, as illustrated in Genesis 2:19 and 20. Since Revelation 21:9 and 10 state that the New Jerusalem is the bride, the wife of the Lamb as His counterpart (see also v. 2), she cannot be a physical city, for she must be of the same kind as her Husband. Hence, just as the Lamb is a figure, a sign of Christ, so also the New Jerusalem is a figure, a sign, of the church as the bride of Christ in consummation. To interpret the New Jerusalem otherwise is to deprive Christ the Lamb of His counterpart and to rob the believers of their most delightful destiny—to be the counterpart of Christ.

### Conclusion

*Heaven* is able to identify a few areas where the traditional discussion concerning heaven runs against Scripture, yet when it attempts to elaborate on these issues, it is unable to bring its readers into the thought of the Bible

concerning each matter. Instead, it offers other equally speculative assessments, never genuinely breaking from the mold of natural concepts related to the truth of Scripture. Thus, it succeeds only in duplicating the impact of most other books concerning heaven—misleading the believers and distracting them from God’s intention in His salvation of man.

by Joel Oladele

### Works Cited

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

## A Different Gospel Centered on the Power of the Self

*The Power of I AM—Two Words That Will Change Your Life Today*, by Joel Osteen. New York: FaithWords, 2015. Print.

*The Power of I AM—Two Words That Will Change Your Life Today* (hereafter *Power*) exemplifies the teachings of the prosperity gospel of wealth and health popularized by charismatic pastors and faith healers pervading Christian television and megachurches. Some of the largest congregations in America espouse the teaching that God desires to bless His children with abundant wealth, good health, fulfilled dreams, and happy lives. The message of a blessed life is consistent throughout *Power*, with the stipulation that the believer invokes it through positive declarations beginning with “I am...” *Power* claims that “what follows those two simple words will determine what kind of life you live” (1). If the description is negative, then the corresponding negative experience will become true. If what is claimed is positive, then, *Power* avers, God’s blessings will follow accordingly. To express this succinctly, *Power* maintains that what Christians believe and express of themselves becomes their reality. *Power* alleges, as the underlying principle throughout the book, that “whatever follows the ‘I am’ will eventually find you” (2). After this principle is established in the first three chapters, the sixteen chapters that follow essentially reiterate and reapply this overarching principle by elaborating on particular blessings Christians can summon through self-declaration: “I am blessed” (ch. 4), “I am free” (ch. 5), “I am valuable” (ch. 6), “I am a masterpiece” (ch. 7), “I am content” (ch. 8), “I am secure” (ch. 9), “I am victorious” (ch. 10), “I am

---

prosperous” (ch. 11), “I am focused” (ch. 12), “I am determined” (ch. 13), “I am strong” (ch. 14), “I am anointed” (ch. 15), “I am patient” (ch. 16), “I am forgiven” (ch. 17), “I am protected” (ch. 18), and “I am generous” (ch. 19).

**D**espite its intention to encourage, motivate, and inspire Christians, *Power* fundamentally misrepresents the biblical message by diverting virtually all emphasis to individual well-being rather than presenting Christ as the central revelation in the Scriptures. This produces a deeply myopic view of the Christian life and purpose, displacing the biblical vision of the all-sufficient and all-inclusive Christ, who is not only the reality of all positive things to every believer but also the preeminent One in God’s eternal economy (Col. 2:17; 1:9—3:11). Moreover, *Power*’s focus on individual Christian welfare completely obscures God’s corporate purpose and goal in His economy. In *Power* the Christian living and goal are usurped by the self, a product of the fallen old creation, to serve its own intents and purposes, which undoubtedly will be individualistic and self-seeking. This is evident in *Power*’s numerous anecdotes that prize physical blessings and promote individual attainment. The resultant message is a different gospel from that of the faith once for all delivered to the saints and therefore must be rejected as such (2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:16; Jude 3).

### Self-declarations Supplanting God’s Word

*Power*’s main premise, established in the first three chapters but echoed throughout the book, is that what we as Christians speak of ourselves will eventually become true. It claims that by our own speech, we “invite” into our life the very blessings we declare (2). *Power* asserts that even if what a believer declares of himself or herself is not true presently, it will become a reality as he or she continues to proclaim it (13). Our declarations, *Power* claims, are the planting of seeds. In order to reap success, victory, and abundance, one must sow with positivity:

You’re going to reap fruit from the exact seeds that you’ve been sowing. In other words, you can’t talk negative and expect to live a positive life. You can’t talk defeat and expect to have victory. You can’t talk lack, not enough, can’t afford it, never get ahead and expect to have abundance. If you have a poor mouth, you’re going to have a poor life. (16)

*Power* explains that the principle of the entire book is that “nothing happens until you speak” (35). Claiming that “the Scripture talks about how with our tongue we

can bless our life or we can curse our life,” *Power* maintains that a believer’s health, wealth, and prosperity are either fulfilled or forfeited by his or her declaration (16): “The ‘I am’s coming out of your mouth will bring either success or failure” (1). Although *Power* briefly indicates that “you are who God says you are,” it neither elaborates nor expounds what God actually says in His word concerning believers (9). Seemingly less interested in what God speaks of His people, *Power* places greater emphasis on what believers proclaim of themselves, as if to imply that their aspirations have been divinely ordained.

In effect, the book firmly promotes the correlation of positivity in speech with individual success and prosperity while ignoring the scope of the divine revelation concerning believers. In modern psychology, positive speaking may be at best a form of improving self-esteem and at worse, mere wishful thinking. However, raised to the level of teaching by *Power* through dubious scriptural basis, positive self-declarations with the expectation that

God will comply accordingly are presumptuous, self-serving, anti-biblical, religious superstitions. What God says will come to pass regardless of what we speak, and what God has not ordained or allowed will not become reality no matter how fervently we invoke it by self-effort or wishful thinking. Reality is not the product of our own posi-

tive declarations or self-determinations but of the Triune God’s ordination, plan, intention, and operation.

**D**ebunking *Power*’s main premise does not require one to venture beyond the texts that the book presents as the scriptural basis for its claims, for these biblical texts convey the opposite when properly interpreted within their context. One example that *Power* cites is the difference among the twelve who were sent to spy out the good land of Canaan. *Power* argues that the ten spies who gave a negative report succumbed to “fear, intimidation, and inferiority” because they allowed the wrong “I am” to take root (12). *Power* explains that Joshua and Caleb’s “I am”’s unleashed the “seeds of greatness inside them” and that the wrong “I am”’s of the other ten spies deprived them of their opportunity to be “history makers” (13). *Power* goes on to caution,

Don’t let that be your destiny. You may be facing some major obstacles. My challenge is for you to be a Joshua. Be a Caleb. “I am strong. I am confident. I am equipped. I am more than a conqueror. I am well able.” Make sure you have the right “I am”’s coming out of your mouth. (13)

*Power places  
great emphasis on what  
believers proclaim of themselves,  
as if to imply that their aspirations  
have been divinely ordained.*

---

Upon closer inspection of the text, a Bible reader who is faithful to cut straight the word of the truth will observe that the ten spies did more than express and promote negativity. Rather, their unbelief and subsequent negative assessment constituted rebellion against the word of Jehovah, who had promised the good land to Israel (Exo. 23:20-33; Deut. 8:7-10). Whether or not Israel would acquire the promised land was not contingent upon a positive attitude. In Numbers 14:8-9 Caleb pleaded with the children of Israel:

If Jehovah is pleased with us, He will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against Jehovah, nor should you fear the people of the land, for they are our bread. Their protection has been removed from them, and Jehovah is with us; do not fear them.

The focus of Joshua and Caleb was not on themselves but on Jehovah, the true I AM. In verse 11 God issued His own rebuke: “How long will this people despise Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?” Christians should not assume to be true what God has not said nor rebel against what God has said by their unbelief. As a reaction to their rebellion against His word, God proclaimed the following judgment:

Surely as I live, and as all the earth will be filled with the glory of Jehovah, none of those men who have seen My glory and My signs, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have tried Me these ten times and *have not listened to My voice*, shall see the land which I swore to give to their fathers, nor shall any of those who despised Me see it. Only My servant Caleb, because he had *a different spirit and has fully followed Me*, will I bring into the land which he entered; and his descendants shall take possession of it. (vv. 21-24, emphasis added)

Due to their unbelief, Jehovah denied entry into the promised land to the first generation of Israelites, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb (Deut. 1:32; Heb. 3:17-19). The stubbornness of Israel led them further into rebellion. Numbers 14:39-42 says,

When Moses spoke these words to all the children of Israel, the people mourned greatly. And they rose up early in the morning to go up to the top of the mountain, saying, Here we are; now we will go up to the place which Jehovah has spoken of, for we have sinned. But Moses said, *Why do you again transgress the commandment of Jehovah?* This will not succeed. Do not go up—for Jehovah is not among you—so that you are not struck down before your enemies. For the Amalekites and the Canaanites are there before you, and you shall fall by the sword. Because you have turned back from following

Jehovah, therefore Jehovah will not be with you. But they presumed to go up to the top of the mountain, even though neither the Ark of the Covenant of Jehovah nor Moses had departed out of the midst of the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who dwelt in that hill country came down and struck them and beat them back as far as Hormah. (emphasis added)

Israel twice disobeyed God by their words and actions. First, because they feared the giants, they refused to enter and take the promised land in spite of the direct assurances from God that He would fight for them as He did in Egypt (cf. Deut. 1:29-32). Seeing that they had failed Jehovah the first time, they rebelled against God’s word a second time when they attempted to enter Canaan despite His clear forbidding. If *Power* is to be believed, Israel should have succeeded on the second attempt, given that they changed their “I am” to the positive. However, from God’s perspective, their positive “I am” contradicted His word of judgment. What the children of Israel could do and be pivoted not on their selfish intentions but on God’s word, because they were a people redeemed for His purpose to bring Christ to the earth. In the Gospels the Lord Jesus lived a human life that exemplified His dependence on God’s word. In Matthew 4:4 He said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out through the mouth of God.’” Jesus’ living is a testament to the revelation that God’s word is preeminent over human necessities, to say nothing of man’s individual ambitions and desires. *Power’s* proposition throughout the book that self-declarations invoke positive changes disregards the place reserved for God’s speaking and bears a great resemblance to the countless self-help guides filled with advice based on contemporary psychology.

### Physical Blessings Replacing the All-inclusive Christ

*Power’s* specious interpretation of the Scriptures continues in its faulty concept of blessings. *Power* largely misconstrues blessings in the Scriptures as being physical rather than spiritual. The book alleges that when a Christian gives God the highest priority, He will command blessings upon him, turning him into a “magnet” for the “goodness of God” (50). *Power* then illustrates what it considers to be commanded blessings:

When you keep God in first place...God will send blessings that chase you down, favor that overtakes you. Out of nowhere, a good break comes. Suddenly your health improves. Out of the blue, you’re able to pay your house off. Unexpectedly, a dream comes to pass. That’s not a lucky break. That’s not a coincidence. That’s the commanded blessing on your life. Like a magnet, you’re attracting the goodness of God. (49-50)

---

One case of misleading interpretation is the explanation of myriads of quail seen in Numbers 11:4-35 in the chapter entitled “I Am Prosperous: Have An Abundant Mentality.” *Power* claims that the millions of quail exemplify the blessings from God who meets His people’s needs in abundance (151-152). Moses would beg to differ because the quails were a curse to the children of Israel who lusted after meat. Numbers 11:33-34 says,

While the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the anger of Jehovah was kindled against the people, and Jehovah struck the people with a very severe plague. And the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah because there they buried the people who lusted.

Furthermore, the pursuit of mere physical blessings replaces the believers’ experience and enjoyment of Christ as their spiritual blessing. Due to *Power*’s myopic emphasis on external blessings, many scriptural passages are misconstrued or distorted to serve that belief. For example, the fatted calf in Luke 15 is viewed as an endowment of wealth (148-150) rather than a type of the all-inclusive Christ as the believers’ spiritual life supply:

Don’t go around thinking that you’ll never get ahead. You’ll never live in a nice place. You’ll never have enough to accomplish your dreams. Get rid of that skinny-goat mentality and start having a fatted-calf mentality. God wants you to overflow with His goodness. He has ways to increase you that you’ve never dreamed. (149)

There is no debate that God sovereignly provides for and indeed blesses His people in manifold ways, but His provisions to meet our human needs pale in comparison to the spiritual blessings that He bequeathed to us. Sadly, the allure of physical abundance promised by such mishandling of biblical texts obscures the divine revelation and deprives believers of any genuine experience and enjoyment of Christ. In the chapter entitled “I Am Free: Your Seventh Year,” *Power* reduces a rich vein of Old Testament type to signify freedom from physical limitations:

The seventh year is a year of release from sickness, disease, and chronic pain. Release from depression, worry, and anxiety. Release from bad habits, from addictions. It’s not only a release from limitations; it’s a release into increase. God is about to release you into new opportunities, good breaks, and new levels. He is going to release ideas, creativity, sales, contracts, and business. The seventh year is

when you get released into overflow, into more than enough. It’s when dreams come to pass. (66-67)

In a later portion *Power* relates the seventh year to the year of jubilee by referring to Isaiah 61:1-2 (74). Those verses say,

The Spirit of the Lord Jehovah is upon Me, / Because Jehovah has anointed Me / To bring good news to the afflicted; / He has sent Me to bind up the wounds of the brokenhearted, / To proclaim liberty to the captives, / And the opening of the eyes to those who are bound; / To proclaim the acceptable year of Jehovah.

The year of jubilee, the fiftieth year, is particularly rich in significance. Witness Lee explains,

The year of jubilee is the acceptable year of the Lord prophesied in Isaiah 61:1-2 and fulfilled by the Lord’s coming in Luke 4:16-22. In the Old Testament type the jubilee lasted for one year, but in the fulfillment it refers to the entire New Testament age, the age of grace, as the time when God accepts the returned captives of sin (Isa. 49:8; Luke 15:17-24; 2 Cor. 6:2) and when those oppressed under the bondage of sin enjoy the release of God’s salvation (Rom. 7:14—8:2). The believers’ enjoyment of the jubilee in the age of grace, i.e., their enjoyment of Christ as God’s grace to them, will issue in the full enjoyment of the jubilee in the millennium and in the fullest enjoyment in the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth. (Recovery Version, Lev. 25:10, note 1)

*As does the supplanting of God’s word by self-declarations, repeated emphases on physical blessing and abundance pervade the entire book.*

As does the supplanting of God’s word by self-declarations, repeated emphases on physical blessing and abundance pervade the entire book, drawing the believers’ focus away from the enjoyment and experience of the all-inclusive Christ.

### **The Prominence of the Self Resulting in a Different Gospel**

*Power*’s disproportionate emphasis on physical blessings and on a self-proclaimed entitlement to them dishonors God, disregards His word, and exposes the deeper and subtle problem of the self. In Matthew 16 the Lord Jesus unveiled His crucifixion and subsequent resurrection, but Peter rebuked Him, failing to realize the need for Christ to pass through death and to enter into resurrection for the accomplishment of redemption and the building up of the church. Verses 23 through 25 say,

---

He turned and said to Peter, Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of men. Then Jesus said to His disciples, If anyone wants to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his soul-life shall lose it; but whoever loses his soul-life for My sake shall find it.

Witness Lee explains,

Three terms in vv. 23-25 are related to one another: *mind*, *himself*, and *soul-life*. Our mind is the expression of our self, and our self is the embodiment of our soul-life. Our soul-life is embodied in and lived out by our self, and our self is expressed through our mind, our thought, our concept, our opinion. When we set our mind not on the things of God but on the things of men, our mind grasps the opportunity to act and express itself. (Recovery Version, v. 24, note 2)

*Power* may be summarized as a gospel, a good news, for the self. Instead of describing the rich position and inheritance that we have as God's people in Christ, *Power* goads believers into indulging in selfish pursuits of self-improvement, physical blessings, and personal success. The overall message in *Power* presents a different gospel in contrast to the biblical revelation, which centers on Christ not only as Lord and Savior but also as the rich reality of every positive thing for the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose (Col. 2:17). Paul reproved the Corinthians in his second Epistle to them, saying, "If indeed he who comes preaches another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit, which you have not received, or a different gospel, which you have not accepted, you bear well with him" (11:4). Since the believers in Corinthians could bear so well with the Judaizers, who were false apostles, Paul expressed with irony that they should bear more with him (cf. v. 1). In verses 2 and 3 he opened his heart toward them, saying,

I am jealous over you with a jealousy of God; for I betrothed you to one husband to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I fear lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your thoughts would be corrupted from the simplicity and the purity toward Christ.

In a footnote on verse 3 in the Recovery Version, Witness Lee writes concerning the Greek word for *simplicity*, which can also be translated "singleness." He connects the denotations of the two words, saying,

Referring to the believers' single-hearted loyalty, single-minded faithfulness, toward Christ. In the garden of Eden,

Eve, the wife of Adam, was deceived by the serpent, Satan, through his questioning and undermining of God's word, and was thus carried away to the tree of knowledge and distracted from the simplicity of eating the tree of life (Gen. 3:1-6). Here the church in Corinth, the pure virgin betrothed to Christ, was being deceived by the Judaizers, the ministers of Satan (2 Cor. 11:15), who were undermining God's word by preaching another Jesus, a different spirit, and a different gospel (v. 4). Because of this undermining preaching, the apostle was fearful that the Corinthians would be distracted by the teachings of the Judaizers and would be separated from the genuine appreciation, love, and enjoyment of the precious person of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself as their life and their everything. The above-mentioned three things preached by the Judaizers, who intermingled with the believers, were of Satan. (Note 2)

**E**ven in *Power's* best use and understanding of Scripture—in the chapter entitled "I Am Forgiven: God Loves Imperfect People"—the focus nevertheless is not on the forgiving Savior but on a forgiven sinner. Once the all-inclusive Christ in His centrality and significance is marginalized in service to the self, all that the Bible reveals of the person of Christ as well as His desires, intents, and goal will simultaneously be disregarded.

### Conclusion

The only difference between *Power* and secular self-help books, the equivalent of the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel, is that *Power* is gilded with, though not substantiated by, the Word of God. *Power's* expositions of the few biblical portions that it presents are darkened misinterpretations, even self-interpretations, and demonstrate a disregard for scriptural contexts. However, the deeper and more troubling notion undergirding *Power's* erroneous main thought is the sense of entitlement to physical blessings that uncovers the hidden lusts of the self at its center. Apart from the token mentionings of honoring God, the main message of *Power* is virtually bereft of God and His thoughts, desires, intents, purpose, and goal. Contrary to what the book purports, what will change the Christian's life every day is to depend absolutely on and live by the words of the unique One who is I AM (Exo. 3:14; John 8:58).

by Kin Leong Seong

### Works Cited

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

---

## A Christ-centered Revelation

*Christ-centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Revelation*, by Daniel L. Akin. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2016. Print.

Daniel L. Akin's *Christ-centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Revelation* (hereafter *Exalting*) is part of a biblical commentary series that "seeks to display exegetical accuracy," aims to assist busy pastors in their preparation of "biblically faithful and gospel-saturated sermons," hopes to serve readers with "helpful illustrations and theologically driven applications," and seeks "to exalt Jesus from every book of the Bible" (xiii-xiv). Dr. Akins is one of three series editors.

Each of *Exalting's* thirty-two chapters contains a main idea and a topical outline of Revelation in chapter-verse sequence. These outline points are used as headings for the subsequent commentary. This logical arrangement facilitates searches in the commentary for a particular section or set of verses in Revelation. Furthermore, a Scripture Index enables one to easily find the page and context of the numerous biblical references used throughout *Exalting*. Each chapter of *Exalting* concludes with a "Reflect and Discuss" section containing prompts and questions seeking to reinforce the major themes, encourage and focus small-group discussion, and challenge readers to personally apply the content to their Christian walk, personal life, "good works," and "the life of the local church" (78). *Exalting* contains some helpful charts and tables that highlight, compare and contrast, or otherwise organize selected themes, textual correlations, and timelines. For example, one such chart compares the contents of the epistles to the seven churches (30-31), and, in another example, a highlighted box provides a topical excursus on the Nicolaitans (35-36).

### **Exalting Being Commendably Fundamental in the Major Items of the Christian Faith**

Concerning the authority of the Bible and its applicability, *Exalting* says, "The Bible is God breathed, authoritative, inerrant, sufficient, understandable, necessary, and timeless" (xiii). Furthermore, "because it is God's Word, it is true and trustworthy, inerrant and infallible...His Word is authoritative and sure" (57). It should be interpreted and preached in light of its messianic focus: "Luke 24:25-27, 44-47 and John 5:39, 46 inform both

our hermeneutics and our homiletics" (xiv). Concerning the Trinity, *Exalting* says,

The Bible makes clear in Revelation 21—22 that we shall see God in all of His fullness. In other words, we will see that there is only one God, yet this one God exists as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (see Matt 5:8; 1 John 3:2). (343)

Concerning the Father, *Exalting* says, "All members of the Godhead are avenues, conduits, for the flow of grace and peace in our direction. John begins with the fountainhead, God the Father" (8). Concerning Jesus, *Exalting* says, "Who God is, Jesus is, because Jesus is God" (91). Christ is both the eternal God—having full deity and eternity—and a genuine and complete man: "Colossae was infected with a Christological heresy. It appears to have denied the full deity and eternity of the Son on one hand and questioned the genuineness of His complete humanity on the other" (102). Concerning Christ's work, *Exalting* says, "The Son was born, lived, died, rose, and was caught up to heaven in ascension and exaltation" (213).

*Exalting identifies the seven Spirits in Sardis with the life-giving Spirit: "Through His life-giving Spirit He has the power to breathe new life...into this church."*

### **Acknowledging the Seven Spirits as the Holy Spirit**

In its commentary on Revelation 1:4-6a—a section entitled "Welcome the Greeting from the Triune God"—*Exalting* says that "there is debate over exactly who the seven spirits are," and concludes, "I believe...the reference is to the Holy Spirit" (9). *Exalting* supports this conclusion by noting that when *the seven spirits* is used in Revelation 5:6, "His divine omnipresence is in view" and by insisting that "the phrase should be understood in light of Isaiah 11:2 and Zechariah 4:1-6, 10, where similar phrases speak more clearly to the Spirit of God" (9). Based on Revelation 3:1, *Exalting* further identifies the seven Spirits with the life-giving Spirit: "The Savior has the Spirit but Sardis does not. The Savior has life but Sardis is dead...Through His life-giving Spirit He has the power to breathe new life, resurrection life, into this church" (81).

In reference to Revelation 14:13, *Exalting* says, "This is the only time the Holy Spirit is quoted in the whole Revelation except in 22:17" (246). This statement appears to contradict an earlier statement that each of the seven epistles to one of the seven churches opens with the Lord Jesus speaking, yet at the end "He looks for those who have ears to hear what the Spirit says (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22)" (26). *Exalting* states that the phrase *what the Spirit says* should be interpreted in a Trinitarian context as

the word of the Son of God applied by the Spirit of God: “Anyone [that’s you and me!] who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says [the word from God the Son applied by the Spirit of God] to the churches” (99). *Exalting* later acknowledges that “the victorious warrior Lamb...the Lord Jesus Christ” has “seven eyes” and that these are “the seven spirits of God,” explaining that “there is only one Holy Spirit of God, but the number seven again speaks of the perfection, completeness, and fullness of the Spirit” (126). *Exalting* also indicates that “the Holy Spirit of God” who is “in front of God’s throne” is the “Spirit who proceeds from the very throne of God” and is the indwelling God: “The God who lives in us (1 Cor 6:19) is the God who is before the throne! The One who is in heaven is the One who also is in us!” (9).

### The Focus of Revelation Being on the Son, Jesus

*Exalting* also comments on the placement of the Son in the order of the greeting in Revelation 1:4-6: “Though it is unusual, John places the Son last in this greeting from the Trinity for emphasis. Indeed he will say more about the Son here than he does the Father and the Holy Spirit put together because the focus of Revelation is on Him!” (10). Affirming *Exalting*’s basic premise is appropriate: “From 1:1 to 22:21 the Apocalypse is from Jesus and about Jesus. As He is the focus of the Bible, so He is the focus of this book” (4). Witness Lee similarly says, “The whole Bible reveals Christ. As the conclusion, completion, and consummation of the Bible, the book of Revelation especially is ‘the revelation of Jesus Christ’ (1:1)” (*Life-study of Revelation* 8).

### Considerations of the Church in Revelation

*Exalting* refers to both local churches and the universal church: “This book and these letters (2:1—3:22) are for various local churches and the church universal throughout the church’s history” (8). *Exalting* equates the church with the saved Body of Christ—“the church, the body of Christ, that Jesus saved her to be” (83). *Exalting* also equates the church to the bride: “With the arrival of the reign of God comes also the long-awaited day of the marriage of the Lamb, the Lord Jesus, and His bride, the church” (286). Concerning the seven churches addressed in Revelation, *Exalting* says,

These were actual historical churches in Asia. The number seven also stands for completeness. It would also indicate their representative nature of the various types of churches that exist throughout the history of the church. (21)

With respect to the local church, *Exalting* neglects to address Revelation’s implied reference to the practical ground of the oneness of the church.<sup>1</sup> In the formula of Revelation 1:11, John heard a voice charging him to

write what he saw in a scroll and send it to the seven churches; instead of naming churches, the voice listed seven cities. Hence, verse 11 equates the seven churches with seven cities. As seen in the way each church is subsequently addressed in chapters 2 and 3, the church is simply *in, of, or at* that city. Perhaps to Christians today this simple designation of the local church appears quaint for its lack of further modifiers such as ordinals (eastern, western, northern, southern), geopolitical identities (American, African, Spanish, Chinese, Korean), seniority (first, second), practices and administrative structures (Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian), unique doctrines (Seventh-day Adventist), or influential persons (Lutheran, Calvinist, Wesleyan). The additions of these sectarian modifiers directly contradict the Lord’s commendation of Philadelphia: “You...have not denied My name” (3:8). *Exalting*’s silence concerning the proper ground of the church suggests either an implicit acceptance of the status quo of today’s divided Christianity or an unstated assumption that this is a minor or unimportant issue in the context of Revelation.

### Concerning the Eschatological Significance of the Seven Churches

*Exalting* acknowledges that the seven churches in Revelation were “seven *historical churches* located in Asia Minor...at the end of the first century AD” (29) and that “each of their messages has a word of wisdom and application for all churches throughout history until Jesus comes again” (29). However, *Exalting* unambiguously states that “these seven churches do not represent seven ages or dispensations of the church (usually seen as the church in the West)” (29). This opinion derives from *Exalting*’s declared eschatological assumptions that for the most part exclude historicism. *Exalting* identifies four interpretive methods that could be employed for Revelation: preterism (the book addresses events in the first century), idealism (timeless truths but not historical events), historicism (chronicle of Western church history), and futurism (future events at the end of history and the eternal state) (18). *Exalting* claims to take not a classic dispensationalist approach but “a modified futurist approach,” in which, in the words of Grant Osborne, “the preterist, idealist, and futurist methods” are allowed “to interact in such a way” to maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses (18). *Exalting* acknowledges falling “in line with New Testament scholars like Greg Beale, D. A. Carson, Robert Mounce, and Grant Osborne” (18). *Exalting*’s extensive reliance on Mounce’s *The Book of Revelation* (quoted favorably over ninety times) affirms a nondispensationalist, evangelical frame of reference. Nevertheless, *Exalting* claims to hold “a sane and tame premillennialism” (19) and is “sympathetic” to a pretribulation rapture (96); at the same time, it counsels “hermeneutical restraint” and a “tempered and reasoned

perspective,” arguing that the alternative view, a post-tribulational perspective, is “not without merit” (96-97).

As a derivative of these assumptions, *Exalting’s* timeline is that “the Rapture of the church takes place before the opening of the seal judgments in chapter 6” and that chapters 6 through 19 comprise “SEVEN YEARS OF TRIBULATION / Daniel’s 70th Week,” the “Battle of Armageddon,” and the “2nd Coming of Christ” (142). *Exalting’s* unstated implication is that close to two thousand years have elapsed since the Lamb took the scroll in Revelation 5, and He has yet to open its seals.<sup>2</sup> *Exalting’s* appeal for taking a “hermeneutical approach” that is “both balanced and wise” is commendable; however, the need to “avoid wild speculation” (19) is not a sound basis for singlehandedly dismissing historicism. Admittedly, the mere recounting of history is a risky enterprise, and attempts to forecast the future are even more fraught. Notwithstanding these interpretive caveats, the church must recognize and accept her responsibility to cooperate with the divine history that is being carried out in human history. For example, Jesus prophesied, “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole inhabited earth for a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14). This verse suggests that “the end” is not simply a preordained future point at a predetermined time but the outcome and timing of a process that depends on the church’s faithful endeavor and cooperative move to gain such a testimony in the context of the present world situation. In the same Gospel the resurrected Jesus commanded His disciples, “Go therefore and disciple all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you all the days until the consummation of the age” (28:19-20). According to the historical record, this commission has been progressing for the past nineteenth centuries—since John’s writing of Revelation—and has done so primarily, but not exclusively, in the context of the chronicle of Western church history.

### Emphasizing Only the Judicial Aspect of Christ’s Redemption

*Exalting* repeatedly refers to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the need to communicate and proclaim it to others. *Exalting* abounds with references to redemption, the Redeemer, and the redeemed: “God’s mission [is] one of making worshipers of Christ from every tribe and tongue worked out through this redemptive drama in Scripture”

(xiii). Prayer, which accompanies the preaching, “moves God to save souls and bring them into His kingdom” (176). As a result, the Spirit “convicts us of sin and changes our heart in regeneration (Titus 3:5)” (114-115). The blessing in Revelation 21:8 “is for the overcomers who trust in Christ. The warning is for sinners who are headed to the lake of fire without Christ” (331).

Given its evangelical perspective, *Exalting* surprisingly uses the term *born again* only once and then only in the context of hypothetical “theological exams” given by the church in Ephesus to identify “those who call themselves apostles and are not” (34). *Exalting* refers to the giving of eternal life: “Because He is Himself eternal life, He can give eternal life to others” (331), but for *Exalting* this may carry a sense only of living forever in the future and not of the eternal life that is in God Himself. Commenting on Sardis, *Exalting* says, “Our God is in the resurrection business. He is continually active in bringing dead sinners to life (Eph 2:1-7), and He is active in breathing life back into dead churches” (83). However, instead of describing this life experience by using subjective and organic terms (such as, *begotten of God*, John 1:13; *born of the Spirit*, 3:5), *Exalting* uses objective and judicial language: “God’s adopted children” (331) and “Adopted heirs of a perfect heavenly Father” (332).

*With respect to the local church, Exalting neglects to address Revelation’s implied reference to the practical ground of the oneness of the church.*

Concerning transformation and glorification, *Exalting* states that in heaven “we will be fully complete, mature, perfect, and whole” (345) and “will have a transformed, glorified body in heaven that is incorruptible, glorious, powerful, and spiritual (1 Cor 15:42-44)! In fact, it will be a body like the body of the resurrected and glorified Jesus (Phil. 3:20-21; 1 John 3:2-3)” (346). *Exalting* offers a practical way to be transformed: “Let the Word of God live in your daily life. Let Scripture guide you and shape you. Let it do its powerful work as it, by the Spirit, transforms you into the image of the Lord Jesus” (350). The Word and the Spirit are also factors in the preparation of the bride: “Through sanctification by the Word and Spirit, she has made herself ready” (286).

*Exalting* refers to growth mainly in terms of good works for Jesus in this age (70) or growth in knowledge that will continue and is thus a reason we will not be bored in heaven (345). A discussion prompt says, “Consider the suggestions in this chapter for how the bride of Christ readies herself for marriage. In which of these aspects do you see the most victory in your life? In which aspects do you see the most need for growth?” (290). The bride

---

is prepared by remaining faithful, enduring hardship, trusting God and obeying God to take the gospel to all tribes, languages, peoples, and nations (287).

*Exalting* does not refer to the need for the Lord's regenerated children to grow with the growth of God for the building up of the Body and to arrive at a full-grown corporate man (cf. Col. 2:19; Eph. 4:12-16). Furthermore, *Exalting* fails to identify the believers' need to be sanctified and enlivened in their entire tripartite being through a subjective process in which the eternal life of the Triune God is experienced in this age, prior to the future bodily resurrection and rapture (cf. 1 Thes. 5:23; Rom. 8:10, 6, 11). Likewise, the Spirit and the bride's call in Revelation 22:17 should not be considered as merely a one-time "invitation to all persons of the world to come and be saved" (354). The drinking should also be an ongoing and continuous drinking.

### **Not Distinguishing the Eternal Gospel from the Gospel of the Kingdom**

Commenting on Revelation 14:6, *Exalting* says, "The 'eternal' gospel is the same gospel proclaimed throughout all of history. It is the good news of forgiveness and eternal life made possible through the death of Jesus Christ for sinners" (242). Utilizing somewhat circular reasoning, *Exalting* supports this statement with references from a variety of descriptors of the gospel in the Gospels, Acts, and the Epistles (e.g., of the kingdom, of Jesus Christ, of God, of grace, of peace, etc.), concluding that

the gospel is truly great and multifaceted! Jesus promised that this gospel would be preached throughout the whole world before the end (Matt 24:14). The preaching of this angel will in some sense assure that this promise is indeed fulfilled. (242)

**H**owever, both the difference in the announcer (an angel, not a man) and the contents of the eternal gospel should give us pause when considering such a conclusion. Watchman Nee states unambiguously,

This "eternal gospel" is different from the gospel of grace. The eternal gospel, according to the text which follows, teaches people to worship only the Creator. It does not preach God's redemption; it preaches only God's creation. It does not cause men to worship the Lamb, but to worship God. It does not preach God's grace, but God's judgment. It does not cause men to thank and praise God, but to give glory to God. (16: 128)

Witness Lee arrives at a similar conclusion:

The eternal gospel, which will be preached during the time of the great tribulation (Matt. 24:21), differs from

the gospel of grace (Acts 20:24) preached in the church age. The basic contents of the gospel of grace are repentance unto God and faith in the Lord Jesus (Acts 20:21) that men may be forgiven of their sins and be born again as the children of God (Luke 24:47; John 1:12), whereas the basic content of the eternal gospel is that men should fear God and worship God that they may not be deceived and follow Antichrist but may be brought back to the genuine worship of God, who made heaven and earth (v. 7). Only man is privileged to preach the gospel of grace on the earth today (Acts 10:3-6). But the eternal gospel will be preached by the angel in the air at the close of this age. (Recovery Version, Rev. 14:6, note 1)

*Exalting's* suggestion that the angel's preaching of the eternal gospel is possibly a fulfillment of the Lord's commission entrusted to His New Testament believers (cf. Matt. 28:19) is a serious abrogation of the church's vital responsibility to faithfully cooperate with the Lord in the present age.

### **Assumptions concerning Heaven and the New Jerusalem**

*Exalting* seems to equate heaven, the kingdom of God, eternal life, and the New Jerusalem. "The millennium is the beginning of God's restorative work 'on the way' to the new heaven, new earth, and new Jerusalem" (308). "Heaven is...the unique dwelling place of God, where good angels and saints will live forever and ever. That heaven has not yet been created" (327).<sup>3</sup> "The new Jerusalem is both a *place* and a *people*" (98). It is "heaven's capital" (336). "Only one is the sovereign Lord who holds the key to the entrance into heaven and eternal life" (92).

*Exalting* describes the New Jerusalem as "a perfect city, a temple, and a garden" (335) and applies symbolic significance to these descriptions. For example, the fact that the city "is laid out like a cube" (Rev. 21:15-17) "recalls and reflects the most holy place, or holy of holies (1 Kgs 6:10; 2 Chr 3:8-9). This is 'the place of divine presence... where God has taken up residence with his people'" (338).

### **Rewards to Believers and Punishment to Unbelievers**

At the judgment seat of Christ, the believers will receive "rewards or loss of rewards, but not loss of salvation, which is secure" (320). Commenting on the phrase *that no one take your crown* (Rev. 3:11), *Exalting* says,

Loss of salvation is nowhere in view, for that could never be taken. But Satan or evil men could rob them of future reward if they get their eyes off Jesus or if they yield to temptation to deny His name or disobey His word." (97)

It is the “true followers of Christ” who “will remain faithful and receive from the Lord the reward of eternal life” (55). Quoting G. K. Beale, *Exalting* says that a new name (2:17) is part of this reward:

In the ancient world and the Old Testament...to be given a new name was an indication of a new status...Therefore, believers’ reception of this name represents their final reward of consummate identification and unity with the intimate, end-time presence and power of Christ in his kingdom and under his sovereign authority. (65)

At the great white throne (20:11-15) “the spiritually dead..., those who died apart from Christ,” will be judged based on their “rejection of Christ and thus one’s own righteousness” (320). *Exalting* says that “everyone will be ‘thrown into the lake of fire’ (20:15; 21:8), but there will be varying degrees of punishment and suffering” (321).

### Assumptions concerning the Inhabitants of the Millennial Kingdom

In the context of Revelation 20:4-6, *Exalting* identifies several passages that relate to the reigning saints (Matt. 19:28; 1 Cor. 6:3; Rev. 2:26; 5:10). *Exalting* suggests that the Lamb-followers in 5:10 “could refer to glorified saints ruling over natural-born persons in the millennium” (309). A second group, in 20:4, are “tribulation saints” who “remained faithful and true to the Lamb”; they are resurrected and also “reign with Christ as coheirs for a thousand years” (310). According to *Exalting*,

at the beginning of the millennium, two types of persons are on the earth: believers with glorified bodies and believers with nonglorified bodies who survived the tribulation. Nonglorified believers can and will have children. These persons, like all persons, will have the opportunity to say yes or no to Jesus. (311)

*Exalting* states that among these persons, many will say no in their heart (311) and will become those who rebel and follow Satan when he is released at the end of the millennium. There is, however, simply no scriptural basis for *Exalting* to attribute glorified bodies to some believers and non-glorified bodies to other believers.

### Concerning Angels in Revelation

*Exalting* assumes that every use of *angel* or *angels* (ἄγγελος) in Revelation refers to an angelic being: “Angel

(Gk *angelos*) means ‘messenger.’ Angels are mentioned 67 times in Revelation, which accounts for one quarter of the references to them in the Bible...Through these beings the Lord made His message known” (6). There are, however, some cases in Revelation where the textual context argues for an expanded understanding. The first is the seven stars in chapters 1 through 3, which stars refer to human messengers. The second is where ἄγγελος should be understood as referring to Christ—Revelation 8:3 being a particular case in point.

Commenting on the seven stars in Revelation 1:20, *Exalting* says that they are “His servants who are protected” because they are in Christ’s right hand (24). “They most likely are angels who have a specific relationship to the church (see 1 Cor 11:10), though many believe they represent the pastor of each church” (24). Throughout its commentary on Revelation 2 and 3 *Exalting* refers to these messengers with a variety of terms—the *angel*, the *divine messenger*, *angelic watcher*, *heavenly watcher*, *angelic representatives*, and the *protector of the church*. For example, commenting on 3:1, *Exalting* says that “the seven stars are angels, the ‘angelic representatives who report to Jesus’” (81). To *Exalting*, these are not human messengers.

Watchman Nee makes the counterpoint case for why they are human messengers:

*Exalting fails to identify the believers’ need to be sanctified and enlivened in their entire tripartite being prior to the future bodily resurrection and rapture.*

According to the Bible, there are two kinds of messengers: the angels in heaven (Matt. 22:30) and human messengers (Hag. 1:13). The messengers here [Rev. 1:20] definitely do not refer to the messengers of heaven because: (1) the messengers of heaven, though they serve the church, cannot bear the responsibility of the church; (2) the messengers of heaven are spiritual, and therefore, they cannot receive a physical letter; (3) since this book is revealed to John by the Lord through His angel, it cannot be that the angel writes letters through John to other angels; and (4) the Lord asks the messenger of the church in Smyrna to be faithful unto death (Rev. 2:10). If this is an angel, how could he fulfill what is described here? (16: 11)

Witness Lee identifies four instances in Revelation where *another Angel* should refer to Christ. In a footnote on Revelation 7:2, he says:

This Angel, as well as the One in 8:3, 10:1, and 18:1, is Christ. In the Old Testament, Christ was called “the Angel of Jehovah”; that Angel was God Himself (Gen. 22:11-12; Exo. 3:2-6; Judg. 6:11-24; Zech. 1:11-12; 2:8-11; 3:1-7). Here

---

in the New Testament He is again referred to as an Angel (a messenger). (Recovery Version, note 1)

*Exalting*, commenting on Revelation 10:1, says, “The description of the angel recalls the vision of the exalted Christ [in] 1:12-16. However, this is not Christ but His heavenly representative” (190). Yet a few sentences later, commenting on the fact that this angel is “surrounded [ESV, ‘wrapped’] by a cloud,” *Exalting* states that this “recalls the coming of the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13-14” (191).

**I**t is particularly problematic to consider the angel in Revelation 8:3-5 as anyone other than Christ. Here the Angel is at the golden incense altar before the throne of God. On the one hand, the Angel adds incense to the prayers of the saints to make them acceptable to God; on the other hand, the Angel as the Executor of God’s judgment casts fire to the earth, as the answer to the prayers. *Exalting* refers to this One as the “angel priest” (172). In its commentary on Revelation 1:13, *Exalting* acknowledges that “in His clothing He [Jesus] is our *priest*” (23), but it fails to draw a connection to the Jesus in 8:3-5.

In conclusion, it is refreshing to find a biblical commentary, especially on Revelation, that takes Christ as the primary focus. *Exalting* is successful in identifying the numerous references to Christ in this book but is less so in its experiential application. Nonetheless, the preaching of this multifaceted Christ can convince unbelievers to believe and receive Him, and the more this Christ is unveiled in His many aspects, the more believers will be drawn to seek Him, love Him, and worship Him. This sincere worship should not be merely outward and objective but subjective and experiential in spirit (John 4:23-24). Furthermore, the exalting of such a Christ will attract His faithful and loving seekers to ask: “Where today is the church, the Body, His bride, to match this exalted Christ?”

by James Fite

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Watchman Nee discusses the boundary of the local assembly, stating,

In the Bible God has ordained that the smallest unit of the church on the earth is the local assembly. The highest institution is also the local assembly. The local church is the ultimate and minimal organization. Every local church is a miniature to express the universal church. Nothing is bigger than the local church, and nothing is smaller than the local church. (22: 113)

Witness Lee also spoke repeatedly and extensively concerning this matter. The following, spoken in 1957, is representative of the argument that there should be only one church in a locality, and that the locality correlates to a city:

In the early days, regardless of the locality, there was only one church. In Jerusalem there was one church (Acts 8:1), in Antioch there was one church (13:1), and in Corinth there was one church (1 Cor. 1:2). In every place there was only one church (Rev. 1:11). Even in places such as Jerusalem and Corinth, where the cities were large and the believers many (Acts 21:17-21; 18:8-10), the church was still one. In addition, since the number of believers was large in Jerusalem, they met in many houses (2:46), but they were still one church; they were not divided into many churches. This is because in one locality there can be only one church, just as there can be only one church in the universe. Since the church in the universe is not divided, the church in each locality should not be divided. Therefore, in one locality there should be only one church and there should be only one fellowship of the church and one ground of the church.

Every saved person with proper reasoning would acknowledge that since all believers are members of the church, there should be only one ground, there should be only one fellowship, and there should be only one church. This is the proper way. But what is the situation today? Incredibly, in one locality there are so many churches! There are so many grounds! There are so many fellowships! This situation is not only one of separation, of division, but also of confusion. This is exceedingly wrong. Every saved person must condemn such a mistake! He must hate this division and oppose this confusion! We must all desire the oneness of the church. God’s desire is for the church to be in oneness, and we must also desire that the church be in oneness. (*Testimony* 139-140)

<sup>2</sup>*Exalting* considers the “little opened scroll” in Revelation 10:2 to be “a different book from the sealed book in chapter 5” (191).

<sup>3</sup>According to *Exalting*, “believers who die do immediately go to be with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8), but that is an intermediate place of blessing, not our final heavenly home” (327); “the Bible teaches that we go immediately into the presence of God into an intermediate state, sometimes called ‘paradise’ in the Bible. Therefore, we are with God though we are not in our final resting place” (343).

## Works Cited

- Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Recovery Version of the Bible. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2003. Print.
- . *Life-study of Revelation*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1984. Print.
- . *The Testimony and the Ground of the Church*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2004. Print.
- Nee, Watchman. *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*. 62 vols. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1992-1994. Print.