

Selective Light from the East

God's Shining Forth: A Trinitarian Theology of Divine Light, by Andrew R. Hay. Pickwick Publications, 2017.

In his revised doctoral thesis, *God's Shining Forth: A Trinitarian Theology of Divine Light* (hereafter, *Shining*), Andrew R. Hay offers extended reflection on two basic proposals: “*God is light in himself; and from himself God shines forth his light*” (xviii). The work draws heavily from all corners of the Christian tradition, but none so heavily as from the pro-Nicene fathers and the great lights of the Reformed tradition (xviii). The two combine about as well as oil and water. While the initial emulsion seems promising, the two ultimately separate. This is not the first time such projects have proved to be less fruitful than might have been hoped. There is a fundamental incompatibility between the patristic fathers and much of the Reformed tradition, and many of the scholars attempting to blend them together have ultimately been unwilling to modify the latter in any significant way. Instead of enriching the Reformed tradition, such attempts have resulted in the church fathers being cheapened.

God Is Light in Himself

As the title suggests, the primary focus of the book is the second proposal, but before considering God’s shining forth, the opening chapter and a half reflect on the first proposal for the very good reason that “a trinitarian account of God’s *light in himself* includes a particular way of thinking of God’s *shining forth his light* upon human creatures” (xix). That is to say, we cannot understand God’s shining forth until we understand what it means for God to be light in Himself. The first chapter thus surveys the theme of light in both the Old and New Testaments, arguing primarily that there is a fundamental difference between the light created by God (Gen. 1:3) and the light that God Himself is (1 John 1:5). Here, *Shining* rightly criticizes recent readings of Scripture, which have sought to merge created and uncreated light in a way that would make God much more neo-Platonic than the biblical texts warrant (23).

Light is not simply a function of God’s external operations. God Himself is light in His own Trinitarian life, and Hay rightly points out that the image of light is so crucial

to the pro-Nicene defense of the full deity of the Son that it is forever enshrined in the Nicene Creed’s affirmation that Jesus Christ is “Light of Light, true God of true God” (12). Even if God had never created light, He would still eternally be light because of the intrinsic splendor of His own being: “Just as light and radiance are one and undivided, so the Father and the Son are one and undivided, that is, the Father and the Son are *homoousion*” (11). As Ivor Davidson helpfully summarizes in the foreword, “God’s light is his triune glory in himself, in the plenitude of the relations in which his perfect life eternally subsists” (x).

From Himself God Shines Forth His Light

In the middle of chapter 2 *Shining* turns from its first proposal to its second proposal: “The internal works of God are shined forth externally in the temporal missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit into the creaturely realm” (50). Just as in the first part of the book Hay gives a Trinitarian account of the God who is light, so, in the second, he gives a Trinitarian account of God’s shining forth. In sum,

God the Father is the one who elects from all eternity the gathering of human creatures as “children of light” (Eph 5:8); God the Son is the one who accomplishes this reconciliation of human creatures by being the “great light,” the *sponsor* rescuing human creatures from “dwelling in darkness” and the “region of the shadow of death” (Matt 4:16); God the Holy Spirit is the one who is the terminus of that “calling out of darkness” by illuminating human creatures, and calling them “into the marvelous light” of communion with God. (53)

The Father saves us from the darkness of sin and death by shining Himself forth, choosing us—by no merit of our own—to be children of light:

The work of election is a work of God’s light because it is work that “has delivered us,” namely, a work in which human creature has been “qualified” and “transferred” from residing in the “domain of darkness” to have “redemption, the forgiveness of sins,” and inclusion in the kingdom of his beloved Son.” (56)

The Son accomplishes the Father’s choosing by shining Himself forth to enter into and defeat the darkness of sin and death through His death on the cross:

God's wrath had to be revealed against the darkness and sin of human creatures, against the power of darkness and the power of Satan. But only God could bear his own wrath upon this darkness; only the light *of* and *for* the world could scatter this power. (69)

Finally, the Spirit completes the Father's choosing and the Son's reconciling by shining Himself forth to "illuminate" the chosen and reconciled ones:

The Spirit completes the plan of reconciliation (cf. Rom 8:16), whose resolve is that there should be a creaturely existence of "walking in the light, as he himself is in the light," that is, a covenant relationship between himself and human creatures whom he has elected, reconciled, and illuminated by drawing them into a covenantal relation with himself. (98)

Chosen by the Father, reconciled by the Son, and illuminated by the Holy Spirit, the church is led to walk in God's light and to be the light of the world. It does this primarily by its work of proclamation. "The church's being the 'light of the world,'" Hay tells us, "is at its heart a proclamation" (103). The concluding part of the penultimate chapter briefly presents the primary facets of the church's life of proclamation and ends with the importance of praise:

DEIFICATION IS NOT AN OCCASIONAL THEME IN THE FATHERS. IT ABOUNDS IN THE CAPPADOCIANS, NOR IS IT UNIQUE TO THEM IN THE EARLY CHURCH.

Preceding all these acts of outshining—namely, obedient listening to the summons of the gospel, bearing witness to the light of God, and praying that God's light is the true light *of* and *for* the world—will once again be the church's outshining of praise. (118-119)

Selective Retrieval

Hay tells us in the introduction that

the coming chapters are deeply marked by the "pro-Nicene trinitarian theology" of the fourth-century church; that is, the dogmatic terminology developed in the debates surrounding Trinity and Christology by Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil is vital to our reflections offered here. (xviii)

Hay's attempt to retrieve a fourth-century account of God's Trinitarian being and of the shining forth of the divine light is certainly appreciated, but his account of the latter is clearly at odds with that of the pro-Nicene fathers upon whom he ostensibly draws. For the fathers, the shining forth of the divine light does not merely

rescue us from sin and death, nor does it simply bring us into "covenantal relation" with God (98). It certainly entails both of these, but it also entails something much more profound. For the fathers (and even more so for their Eastern Orthodox inheritors), the divine light penetrates our humanity and uplifts it by bestowing on it a deifying participation in God. For example, Basil of Caesarea, speaking of the saving work of the Holy Spirit, says,

He shines upon those who are cleansed from every spot, and makes [them] spiritual men through fellowship with Himself. When a sunbeam falls on a transparent substance, the substance itself becomes brilliant, and radiates light from itself. So too Spirit-bearing souls, illumined by Him, finally become spiritual themselves, and their grace is sent forth to others. From this comes knowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of hidden things, distribution of wonderful gifts, heavenly citizenship, a place in the choir of angels, endless joy in the presence of God, becoming like God, and, the highest of all desires, becoming God.¹

Deification is not an occasional theme in the fathers. It abounds in the Cappadocians, nor is it unique to them in the early church. Here Basil is attempting to persuade his fellow Christian readers of the full deity of the

Holy Spirit. He does so by employing the classic Cappadocian argument that only God can deify. If the Holy Spirit deifies us, so the argument goes, He must be the true God, together with the Father and the Son. Such an argument, with respect to both the Son and the Spirit, indicates that the early church was more convinced that we are being deified than it was concerning the full deity of the Holy Spirit. For Basil, deification does not need to be argued; rather, deification functions as the premise of his argument, not the conclusion. His assumption is that his reader agrees with him that the Holy Spirit deifies us, and he urges his reader to recognize that the Holy Spirit must, therefore, be the true God.

As is the case with the biblical themes of eating, drinking, and breathing (John 6:57; 7:37-39; 20:22), the fathers were clear that the theme of light entails a divine dispensing, an impartation of the divine life, which is the source of light (1:4). Light not only enables us to see; light is essentially related to life. The fathers saw that the divine light makes us God because the divine light is the light of the divine life (8:12; 1:4).

While Hay rightly notes the close biblical connection between light and life, he develops this connection primarily in the context of his reflection on his first proposal regarding the inner Trinitarian life of God (32-35). The connection between light and life is left largely undeveloped in his account of God's shining forth, and where the connection is developed, it is applied primarily to Christ's resurrection (70-76).

Hay's general and repeated characterization of God's shining forth in terms of "election, reconciliation, and illumination" (xviii) is unmistakably Reformed and deeply at odds with the patristic wells from which he wishes to draw. While *Shining* retrieves the pro-Nicene defense of the inner Trinitarian nature of divine light, it neglects entirely the deifying shining forth of that light, one of the primary arguments that the pro-Nicene fathers deployed in that very defense.

It might be argued that these unmistakably Reformed themes and the patristic themes of participation and deification are by no means mutually exclusive even if fundamentally different in content and emphasis, but Hay is not simply indifferent to these patristic themes; indeed, he is openly hostile to them. While Hay never directly attacks the fathers, at several points in the book he explicitly contrasts his proposal to that of a number of contemporary Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant theologians who have tried, with considerably better success, to offer a much richer account of Christian salvation:

Talk of "election," "reconciliation," and "illumination," is calculated: it is not a discourse on mere "imaging," "extension," or "participation." For instance, "abide in him and he in us" (1 John 3:24) does not mean ontological union between God and the church, à la Moltmann, Volf, and LaCugna. The mention of "in God, and God in him" is not ontological communion, but the saving divine agency that recreates a relationship between God and his human creatures, anticipated in the church which is a covenantal "people that have such...one dwelling in the midst of them." (98-99)

The proposals to which he refers speak of the church as an imaging of the Trinity, as an extension of the incarnation, or as participating in God, language with which Hay is clearly uncomfortable. Hay seems to think that such language is problematic because it undergirds too lofty an ecclesiology; Hay repeatedly insists that the church is *in* the light but is not *itself* the light: "In short, again: the church is *in* the light and not *the* light" (109). He seems to understand the two as mutually exclusive—that *being* the light of the world somehow entails that the church has its own light apart from God: "Such an ecclesiology places undue weight upon the church as

agent, and, likewise, reduces the passivity or receptivity that is at the center of the church as a *creature* of divine light" (93).

But *Shining* has clearly presented us with a false dichotomy. To say that the church so participates in God that it becomes the light of the world is not the same as saying that the church has this light apart from its walking in God's light. In good Reformed fashion, it seems that Hay is so concerned about maintaining the glory of God that he has wrested any glory whatsoever from the church, even the glory that God is pleased to bestow upon it (John 17:22). The church's glory is not simply its proclamation of the glory of God. Paul contrasts the glory on the face of Moses with the ever-increasing glory of the new covenant ministers, a glory that shines in their heart and transforms them into the "same image," shining through them to "illuminate the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 3:7, 18; 4:6). Walking in the light is not simply walking in and witnessing to God's covenants. Walking in the light causes the believers and the church to shine with the glory of God.

Shining ends with a chapter on the nature of theology, but it might have been a much stronger book had it closed with the New Jerusalem, the city of light (Rev. 21:11). Early in the book of Revelation, the One sitting on the throne is described as "like a jasper stone...in appearance" (4:3). By the end of the book, the New Jerusalem is described as "having the glory of God," with "her light" being "like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, as clear as crystal" (21:11). The apostle John goes on to specify that "the building work of its wall was jasper" (v. 18). The One on the throne is clearly God; the identity of the wall is not quite so evident, but because the city is the bride of the Lamb (v. 2), it seems safe to assume that the wall represents God's glorified elect. By the end of the Bible, the church has been built up in God's salvation to the extent that she glows with the glory of God (Eph. 5:27).²

by Mitchell Kennard

Notes

¹Basil. *On the Holy Spirit*. Translated by David Anderson, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980.

²While this is not the place for a full exploration of the theme of light and the New Jerusalem, much help can be obtained from Ron Kangas's "God's Economy in Light," *Affirmation & Critique*, vol. 3, no. 1, Jan. 1998, pp. 38-48 and Ed Marks's "Experiencing God as Light," *Affirmation & Critique*, vol. 8, no. 2, Oct. 2003, pp. 41-45.

A Religion of the Mind

Christianity Considered: A Guide for Skeptics and Seekers, by John M. Frame. Lexham Press, 2018.

John M. Frame's *Christianity Considered: A Guide for Skeptics and Seekers* (hereafter, *Christianity*) is an apologetic written to stir up a genuine consideration of Christianity within inquiring readers—whether skeptical or seeking—and to present an understanding of the Christian faith to believers (1-4). In its unique way *Christianity* is able to identify the items of the Christian faith; however, its presentation of what Christianity is and how to enter into its provisions differs from the biblical thought. Moreover, its excessive focus on an intellectual apprehension of Christianity and its claims misleads the reader into a consideration of Christianity as an undertaking that is primarily soulish in nature.

An Intellectual Preoccupation

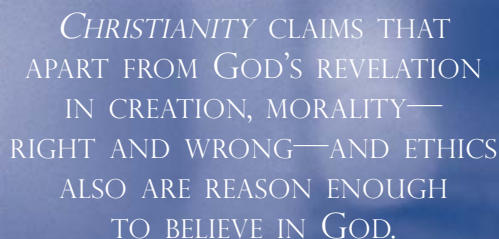
Christianity's brief apologetic is divided into twenty-nine chapters that cover roughly nine topics: the need to be educated concerning Christianity; how believing works; God, right, and wrong; the word of God; Jesus, the divine-human Judge, with His death and resurrection; the Holy Spirit and God's salvation; the practices of the believers; their attitude toward this world; and the return of Christ.

In chapters 1 through 3 *Christianity* presents the case that everyone should “consider the claims of Christianity” (5). It argues that since Christianity has been so influential in the development of Western civilization, no one's education is really complete without a measure of learning regarding it (5). Moreover, in that learning, it is important for the learner “to determine whether, or to what extent, Christianity is true” (6). It suggests that any proper evaluation of Christianity must deal with its truth claims, noting that a characteristic of Christianity's claim of truth is that it is rooted in history (7-8).

According to *Christianity*, the main frustrations to believing in Christianity are autonomous reason, characteristic of the Enlightenment, which supposes that Christians have insufficient evidence and argument for their faith (11-13), and post-modern skepticism, which questions whether Christians have the “right to claim that they know any truth at all” (13). *Christianity* argues that scientific reason places an obligation

to “believe what our culture presents as the modern view” (12) and that post-modern skepticism is self-contradictory (13).

In chapters 4 through 6 *Christianity* argues that an intellectual autonomy in which we ourselves are the final criterion of truth, in which we decide what we think is true, is opposed to divine authority, an understanding that God is the final criterion of truth (17). It claims that ultimately no one is intellectually autonomous, since we all make decisions based on data beyond ourselves to form opinions about the world (18). In other words, we come to a certain way of thinking because we have a complicated system of trust that underlies all our beliefs, and this system has been built up through our experiences since birth (22). *Christianity* argues that integrating new beliefs is a matter of adjusting, either significantly or slightly, this system of trust and defines believing in God as “a way of thinking that suddenly looks and feels right” (23, 29).



CHRISTIANITY CLAIMS THAT
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In chapters 7 through 11 *Christianity* presents God in the Bible as being unique from all other conceptions of god and supreme beings. It also discusses why we should believe in God. It argues that with the “biblical God” there is a “creator-creature distinction,” and that although God is supreme and absolute, He is also personal (32). It states

that “in many philosophies and religions, the more absolute a being is, the more abstract and impersonal he (it) is. But in the Bible God's absoluteness and personal-ity reinforce one another” (32). Thus, God is able to have a relationship with man. *Christianity* explains that this ability to have a relationship with man is rooted in God's “tri-personal” nature; that is, “God is himself a society, before he even creates any other personal beings” (33).

Thus, His social nature is independent of other partners. *Christianity* proposes that since God is sociable and has made Himself known through creation, “unbelief is not ignorance, but rebellion” (35). It claims that apart from God's revelation in creation, morality—right and wrong—and ethics also are reason enough to believe in God. It argues that each person's sense of moral obligation and belief originates from or is shaped by those in his “web of trust” (22); however, the fact that the people in the web of trust may themselves change, perhaps from being kind to being cruel, without changing the beliefs that were formulated through their previous influence, indicates that there must be an

objective source of morality—God (42-43). *Christianity* concludes that since God “is the source of right and wrong, we ought first of all to believe in God” (46).

In chapters 12 through 14 *Christianity* identifies the Bible as God’s spoken and written word and addresses the difference between God’s revelation of Himself in creation and His further revelation through the Bible. It argues, based on Romans 1:20-32, Luke 13:1-5, and Acts 17:29-31, that God’s message through creation is that He is “our creator, who cares about right and wrong. He calls us to repent of sin and become his friends” (57). This puts us in a situation with no way out because of the burden of our sins (57-58). *Christianity* explains that the New Testament message is that God has renewed a call to repent; if we do not repent, judgment by a “human-divine judge” (57) would follow. However, through this judge God “acted in history to forgive our sins and make us his friends” (59). *Christianity* concludes that the Bible is God’s speaking about this “mysterious judge” referred to in Acts 17 (60).

In chapters 15 through 17 *Christianity* introduces Jesus as the preoccupation of the Scriptures, a man whose actions were beyond goodness, who had a “special relationship with God,” and whose disciples eventually considered Him to be God (66-68). It argues that Jesus, the Son of God became a man to “die in our place, to die the death we should have died because we had sinned against God” (69). *Christianity* states that this death issues in a salvation, which we may obtain by faith, and that faith is simple trust, an expectation of God to keep His promise (70). *Christianity* avows that “salvation comes from trusting what God says about Jesus” (72). It explains that this Jesus, who died in our place, was raised from the dead; otherwise, there would be no reason to expect eternal life from Him (75). Then, quoting various scriptural references as evidence of resurrection, *Christianity* concludes that “the argument for the resurrection of Jesus is essentially an appeal to the new mind, not the old. It calls us to hear God’s word and believe it” (78).

In chapter 18 *Christianity* presents the Holy Spirit as “the Author of the new mind,” the One who “creates us anew” and causes us to be “‘born again’ (John 3:1-15), a renovation that affects everything we are: choices, feelings, and mind” (80). It points out the different events in this process of renovation, saying,

The Bible describes different events in this process of renovation. There is the new birth itself, which theologians call “regeneration.” The Spirit also gives faith and repentance, which theologians combine under the label “conversion.” There is “justification,” which means that God, the supreme judge, regards us as righteous, for the

sake of Christ’s righteousness (Rom 3:21-26). “Adoption” means that we become part of God’s family (Rom 8:14-16). “Sanctification” means that the Spirit makes us holy (1 Cor 1:2, Eph 5:26, 1 Thess 4:3-4). “Glorification” is the consummation of sanctification (2 Cor 4:17), our sharing in the presence of God. (80)

In chapters 19 through 21 *Christianity* covers three Christian practices—reading the Bible, praying, and going to church (81). It explains that these activities are ways not of earning salvation but of renewing our relationship with God (81). It also suggests that Christians practice reading the Bible because it is God’s speaking to them concerning not only what He has done for them—salvation—but also concerning what He wants them to do for Him—the kingdom of God as “God’s historical project of defeating his enemies and bringing all to a conscious acknowledgment of his rule,...the establishment of worship upon the earth” (83).

Concerning prayer, *Christianity* explains that it is the believers’ speaking to God by praising Him, asking Him to forgive their sins, thanking Him, and supplicating, asking Him “for everything we need” (86). Regarding “going to church” (89), *Christianity* argues that the church is not a place where people meet but “people,... the body of Christ” (92). It explains that the church meetings are a time when believers “take responsibility for one another” and where there is the reading of the Bible, the application of its teachings, the partaking of the sacraments as a dramatization of the gospel and a seal of its blessings, and prophesying, a speaking forth the word of God (90-91).

In chapters 22 through 27 *Christianity* addresses the commission of the church and what its attitude should be toward religion, philosophy, morality, politics, and science. It asserts that since the commission of the church is evangelism, embodied in the Lord’s word in Matthew 28:18-20, Christians cannot accept any attempts to stifle evangelism, and by extension, the stifling of the “expression of Christian values in the academy, the marketplace, politics, or general culture” (94). It points out that in contrast to true religion, religions of fate, religions of self-realization, and religions of law are void of grace and redemption, and are condemned by God as idol worship (95-96). It claims that philosophies, which also are in competition with Christianity, are limited in so far as they declare autonomy from God (97-98). However, they can be helpful as a tool to describe and communicate the Christian thought and worldview (98).

Regarding morality, it states, “Christianity is not primarily an ethic, but its main message is about man’s ethical rebellion and God’s work to put it right. So it has much to say about right and wrong” (99). *Christianity* acknowledges

that the influence of the Bible on the morality of Western civilization has waned. Nonetheless, it argues that although the trend has been that of a departure from the Scriptures, civil laws should agree with moral principles and that, “just as Christians derive their morality from Scripture,...they should test their political opinions by Scripture as well” (103). Finally, *Christianity* explains that science is much like religion in that scientists look at the world in terms of their past experiences and presuppositions and “create communities of people with a common goal” (107). Thus, science stands on equal footing with religion and has no superior position to rebut Christianity (107).

In chapter 28 *Christianity* presents the return of Christ as the hope of the church that governs the believers’ living. In the final chapter, an epilogue, *Christianity* states that it has “argued that it is possible to think very differently from the way people are commonly taught to think.” This different way of thinking is “thinking with a ‘new mind,’...the way God intended us to think, the way of thinking mankind rejected in the fall” (113).

A New Mind or a New Person

Christianity’s apologetic essentially presents Christianity as just a different way of thinking with a new outlook—a new mind (1, 53, 113). Although it asserts that this new mind is the mind of Christ authored by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those who reject autonomy and choose divine authority (23, 50, 73, 80, 95, 17, 58-59), *Christianity* nevertheless emphasizes that this new mind is a new web of beliefs, choices, and feelings (80). It characterizes Christianity as the receiving of a new mind (113), stating that this mind sees right as right and wrong as wrong (45).

This thought is superficial at best, erroneous in actuality. Genuine Christianity in its most basic and fundamental sense is not about obtaining access to a new way of thinking or even the mind of Christ as a thing in itself; it is uniquely about receiving a person—God in Christ as the Spirit (John 1:12-13; Rom. 1:1, 3; Acts 8:35). This person is life to us through our experience of being regenerated in our spirit by the divine Spirit because of righteousness, through allowing Christ to make His home in our hearts so that He may saturate our inward parts with Himself, and through our magnifying Him in our body (John 3:6; Rom. 8:10; Eph. 3:16-17; Phil. 1:20). This is both God’s wisdom and His complete sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30; 1 Thes. 5:23).

Although all believers should realize that in the course of God’s salvation we receive the mind of Christ, the focus is not on what belongs to Christ but on Christ Himself, the person; anything other than Christ, positive or negative, can become a distraction from Him. The unique One whom we must see and obtain is Christ; actually, Christ alone is what God gives us. In this sense, genuine Christianity is not concerned with grace, redemption, or even salvation but with Christ, the person, as grace, redemption, and salvation (Gal. 2:20; 1 Cor. 15:10; 1:30; Luke 2:27-30).

A second significant problem with presenting Christianity as the obtaining of a new way of thinking is that it becomes a soulish endeavor. The thought in 2 Corinthians 2:6-16 concerning the mind of Christ is to present a contrast between a soulish person and a spiritual believer, explaining that only spiritual believers, those who have their regenerated human spirit as the strongest part of their being, can discern, apprehend, experience, and enjoy Christ as wisdom and as the deep things of God conveyed by the Spirit of God (1:30). Hence, Paul’s thought is that Christians should be spiritual persons, those who, by virtue of a spiritual life union with Christ in their regenerated spirit, possess His mind, one of His divinely uplifted faculties. Paul’s thought is that a proper Christian is one who is governed by his regenerated spirit;

Christianity’s presentation, however, appears to move in an opposite direction, with its emphasis on the faculties of the soul, particularly the mind (27, 45, 80). This misdirection is reinforced by the fact that *Christianity* neglects the human spirit, not mentioning it even once throughout the entire work, apart from one verse quotation.

Believing and Faith versus “Simple Trust”

As mentioned earlier, when addressing faith as the way to receive God’s salvation, *Christianity* defines faith as “simple trust,” as “expecting God to keep his promise” (70). *Christianity* suggests that this faith comes from a new mind (73). It also uses *trust* as a synonym for *believing*, stating that “salvation comes from trusting what God says about Jesus” (72), that “God is waiting for all those he has chosen to repent of sin and to trust in Christ” (111), and that trusting Jesus as Savior brings forgiveness of sins (114). This understanding of faith is superficial, lacking the subjective sense. Such an understanding of believing misses the mark of the scriptural revelation concerning our participation in God’s salvation and economy.

GENUINE CHRISTIANITY
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Faith as the substantiation of things hoped for, the conviction, evidence, or proof, of unseen things, originates not from us but from God (Heb. 11:1; 2 Cor. 5:7). Thus, it is referred to as “the faith of Jesus Christ” and “the faith of the Son of God” (Rom. 3:22; Gal. 2:20). In this sense, it is God Himself worked into us to become our believing ability; this is illustrated by Abraham’s experience of the God of glory appearing to him repeatedly and thus enabling him to respond to God’s call (Acts 7:2-4; Gen. 11:31—12:1; Heb. 11:8-9). Such faith involves an exercise of our spirit, not merely our mind or will (2 Cor. 4:13). In its essence, faith is not merely to expect in our mind that God can or will do something; it is to believe and receive God in our spirit—He is the I Am, the self-existing and ever-existing One (Heb. 11:6; Exo. 3:14). Everything that God is, has, has done, and is doing is in the realm of faith (1 Tim. 1:4).

Moreover, *believe* in the New Testament is used not only in the sense of trusting, affirming, or agreeing with something. According to John 1:12, to believe is to receive. Hence, when we believe into the Lord Jesus, as described in John 3:16, we receive Him into our spirit and are brought into an organic union with Him. In this union we are joined to Him as one, possess Him as our life, and all that He is becomes available to us (1 John 5:12). This indicates that our entrance into the Christian life is our receiving this wonderful person as eternal life.

“Right, Wrong, and God”

A significant portion of *Christianity’s* argument regarding believing in God hinges on the notion that “God is the source of right and wrong” (46). *Christianity* makes this argument in order to show that ethics and reason are impossible without God; however, the principle behind this thought is precisely what the record in Genesis 2 and 3 cautions against.

In that record two trees, signifying two sources, two principles of living, which lead to two destinations, are presented (2:9). The first is the tree of life, which signifies God embodied in Christ as the source of life to man so that he may live a life of dependence on God and become one with God (John 14:6; 15:1, 5). The second is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as the embodiment of Satan, which leads man into sin and death by causing him to live a life of independence apart from God (Gen. 2:17; Eph. 2:1-2; 4:17-19; Matt. 25:41).

Several points in the picture in Genesis 2 and 3 are noteworthy: First, the contrast between the simplicity of life and the complication of knowledge, good, and evil illustrates the deceptive nature of the tree of death. Second, God’s charge to man concerning his eating suggests that God’s concern was not what man thought but what

he contacted and received into his vessel—God as life or Satan as death (2:17; 3:11). Third, the fact that good and evil are grouped together on the tree of knowledge, which leads to death, indicates that the knowledge of both evil and good are used by Satan to distract man from God as life and to lead him into death. This is a strong word of caution, implying that an argument based on the knowledge of right and wrong is more likely to lead one astray than to believe in God.

Conclusion

Ultimately, *Christianity’s* apologetic seems to be more concerned with how to gain a new way of thinking about Christianity than with what genuine Christianity is. *Christianity* does address the items of the Christian faith—the word of God, the Triune God, Christ’s person and work, the salvation of the believers, the church as the Body of Christ, and the Lord’s return. However, most of the items, when they are developed, revolve mainly around the construct of a new mind in contrast with the old mind. This preoccupation with a new way of thinking leaves a reader with the thought that a new mind is what matters and that Christianity, as presented in this apologetic, is important only because it is the way to obtain and maintain this way of thinking (113). Thus, it can be said that *Christianity* effectively replaces a believer’s relationship with God in Christ according to His desire with an intellectual makeover.

by Joel Oladele

Misinterpreting the Father’s House as Heaven

A Place Called Heaven: Ten Surprising Truths about Your Eternal Home, by Robert Jeffress. Baker Books, 2017.

In *A Place Called Heaven: Ten Surprising Truths about Your Eternal Home* (hereafter, *Place*), Robert Jeffress asks and answers ten common questions about heaven, with the intention of presenting truths about the so-called eternal destination and home of Christians. Through personal and illustrative anecdotes and a review of relevant verses, *Place* seeks not only to convince its readers that heaven is a real, physical place but also to warn unbelievers of the reality of hell. Nevertheless, its main emphasis is to help believers to prepare for a life in heaven. Unlike

many other books on the subject, *Place* attempts to draw attention to the relation between a Christian's present living and his future reward. Ultimately, however, *Place's* treatment of its central subject is fundamentally flawed for presupposing that in John 14:2-3 the place the Lord is preparing refers to heaven and that it even is a place. *Place* never questions the feasibility or absurdity of this assumption.

Although *Place* does not present the more fantastical notions of heaven prevalent in some Christian teachings, the book is nevertheless unable, due to its faulty understanding of John 14, to probe deeper into the significance of the "dwelling places," or "abodes," that Jesus spoke of in that chapter and their intrinsic connection to the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and 22. The tragic result is yet another book about heaven that intends to comfort believers who suffer in their present life by focusing all their hopes on a physical paradise in the future. As such, *Place* is a defective guide for believers, whose present Christian experience and life on earth would be greatly enriched if they were instead presented with the truth that God's goal is a person rather than a place.

Heaven in *Place's* Eschatology

Place asserts that heaven is real, in contrast to being a state of mind, and that it is "a physical place for us to live in for eternity," "a place so fabulous that it defies imagination" (40). The primary basis for *Place's* concept of heaven is Christ's revelation of the Father's house in John 14:2-3, which says,

In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. (39)

Specifically, *Place* highlights two words in these verses that supposedly, with knowledge of the original Greek, bolster this interpretation:

"Place" (*topos*) is used three times in John 14:2-3. This Greek word serves as the root for our word *topography*—the act of detailing the actual, physical features of land on a map. When used in the New Testament, *topos* almost always indicates a locatable and inhabited space...The Greek word for "dwelling" is *mone* and can also be translated as "habitat," "lodging," or "domicile." Each of these words describes something that is real and physical. (39)

Place further states that Jesus' "act of going and preparing speaks to something tangible, not intangible" (40). *Place* correctly interprets that Jesus' going refers to His death, resurrection, and ascension. *Place* then says that because Jesus "traveled from one geographical location (the Mount of Olives) to another geographical location (heaven)" in His ascension, He must be preparing a physical place, heaven, and will, at the proper time, come to receive us so that we may be where He is (40-41).

A thoughtful reader will notice a flaw in *Place's* conception of heaven. If indeed Jesus is preparing heaven for believers, where then did He ascend to and, for that matter, where are the dead believers presently? *Place* solves these conundrums by distinguishing between "the present heaven where God resides and the future heaven Jesus is constructing for us" (43). *Place* states that, as an "intermediate state," the present heaven, deemed by theologians as the third heaven, "represents the presence of God" and is "where all Christians immediately go when they die" (43-44). *Place* goes on to say that the future heaven, currently "under construction," is "the place where all believers—Old Testament saints, New Testament saints, and all Christians from the time of Jesus's death and resurrection to date—will live for eternity" (44).

Citing Revelation 21:2, in which John describes the New Jerusalem as "coming down out of heaven from God," *Place* indicates that the "future heaven," an amalgamation of the new heaven and new earth and the New Jerusalem, will descend from the present heaven (44). *Place* goes on to state, "At some future point the present heaven—where God, the angels, and all believers who have died are—will be combined with the future heaven—the new heaven, new earth, and New Jerusalem" (45). The new earth, according to *Place*, will be a vast improvement over the present earth and will be the physical setting for the new heaven (48). *Place* maintains that, being resurrected with new bodies, believers will require an "earthy, physical dimension" as their home—they will not live eternally as ethereal beings in a spiritual realm (48).

Place indicates that the city of New Jerusalem will be the capital and focal point of the new earth; thus, it is an "actual, physical city being built by Jesus in the present third heaven: the abode of God" (51):

It's being built in one location but will be transported to another location. After the re-creation of the new

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heavens and new earth, the New Jerusalem will descend out of the third heaven and rest upon the re-created earth. (51)

Place even ventures to provide a description of the New Jerusalem: as a real city, the New Jerusalem is “complete with buildings, streets, and residences occupied by people who are involved in bustling activities, cultural events, and worship—it will be unlike any city we’ve ever seen” (51). *Place* gives the width, height, and length of the New Jerusalem as fifteen hundred miles each, resulting in a total surface area of two million square miles (51). According to one calculation that *Place* quotes, the city could accommodate twenty billion residents if each person occupied seventy-five acres, with room for “parks and streets and other features that you’d likely see in any major city” (53).

Based on its definition of heaven and eschatological perspective, *Place* answers common inquiries about the nature of the future heaven. In the chapter entitled “Do Christians Immediately Go to Heaven When They Die?” *Place* indicates that, upon death, “the spirit of every believer is immediately ushered into the presence of God—the third heaven” (85). Based on 2 Corinthians 5:6-8 and 12:2, *Place* attempts to show that through death a believer is transported spiritually to the heavenly home, where Christ is, to await the day of rapture, the day when he will be resurrected with “a new incorruptible and imperishable body that is designed for eternity” (88).

According to *Place*, the destination of the Old Testament saints after death is also the present heaven. This runs counter to Luke 16:19-26, where we see two sections of Hades—the pleasant side, also known as Paradise, for those who are accounted righteous, and the side of torment for the unrighteous. *Place* argues that since the Lord, on the cross, promised the thief that he would be with Him in Paradise, the thief must be in heaven, where the resurrected and ascended Lord is today (92). *Place* states that Hades, a place of “unbearable pain and agony,” is the temporary location for all unrighteous ones in the Old Testament as well as for all unbelievers who died or will die after Christ’s crucifixion and who are awaiting judgment at the great white throne, and that, according to Revelation 20:11-15, the ultimate destination of unbelievers is the lake of fire (92-94).

To the question of what believers will do in heaven, *Place* begins by explaining that our two primary responsibilities are to worship and to work. In heaven we will, according to *Place*, experience the most exhilarating worship, adding our voices to the heavenly chorus of angels who ceaselessly praise God (104). However, *Place* points out that our worship will not be limited to

a formal praising of God, praying, and preaching; rather, we will be worshipping God in a wide array of activities, because, as *Place* defines it, worship is “a continual awareness of, gratitude toward, and submission to God in everything we do” (105). In short, we will worship God in everyday activities.

Moreover, *Place* remarks that in heaven we will enjoy invigorating work (105). *Place* views life in the new heaven and new earth to be an extension of our life on earth today and says that we will continue our cultivating and creative work in heaven. Since there will be no trace of sin and its curse, work will not be burdensome or tiring but a joyful and exhilarating vocation. *Place* states, “We shouldn’t be surprised that we will continue our creative work in the new heaven and new earth,” and even conjectures, “Why wouldn’t we bake cherry pies, eat salsa, write books, make movies, produce songs, teach classes, or do a thousand other things we do on earth?” (108).

Furthermore, in heaven believers have one specific job description—to rule and reign with Christ (109-111). In the thousand-year reign that Christ establishes after His return, He will appoint faithful followers to rule with Him in His new kingdom and in the eternal new heaven and new earth after the millennium (110). Ruling and reigning entail two responsibilities—judging angels and governing over the new creation, including other Christians working in God’s kingdom. *Place* also claims that those who will reign with Him should not only be deemed faithful but also have the desire and leadership skills to rule (111).

Misinterpreting the Father’s House and Paradise as Heaven

Place’s conception of heaven is an egregious misinterpretation of *My Father’s house* and *dwelling places* in John 14:2-3. *Place* wrests *dwelling places* and *My Father’s house* from the context of the Gospel of John in general and chapter 14 in particular, proposing that Christ is constructing a physical dwelling place. Juxtaposing John 14:2-3 with Acts 1:9-11, *Place* then claims that the third heaven is the eternal dwelling place for believers; this is far removed from the divine thought concerning God’s eternal goal and destiny for believers. Although the Bible does speak of heaven as God’s dwelling place and the site of His universal administration, His throne (1 Kings 8:30; Rev. 4:2; Heb. 8:1; 9:24), there is no statement in the Scriptures that conveys the thought of the heaven to which Christ ascended becoming our eternal destination.

The divine revelation is marvelously more profound. It is proper to accord the same understanding of “My

Father's house" in John 14:2 with that in 2:16, the context of which indicates that the Lord Jesus was speaking of the temple but which John then interprets as His body (vv. 19, 21), setting the principle in the book of John that the Father's house does not signify a place but a person.

Applying this principle to John 14 requires that we interpret *dwelling places* not as the many residences of the believers in a heavenly paradise but as the many believers comprising the Father's dwelling place. This understanding of *dwelling places*, or *abodes*, in verse 2 is substantiated by the use of the same Greek word in verse 23: "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make an abode with him." Christ with the Father desires to make the many believers His dwelling place, not to build residences in heaven for them. As in the case in John 2, the Father's house in John 14 also is a person. Specifically, it is the church, composed of all the believers as members of the Body of Christ.

Although *Place* correctly indicates that Christ's going refers to His passing through death, resurrection, and ascension, it has no base to claim that Jesus' preparation involves His personal oversight of a vast construction project of a physical, eternal paradise in the heavens. The idea is inherently ludicrous and devoid of any biblical standing. The preparation needed was actually His accomplishment of redemption to create a place in God for His many believers to be members of His Body. Witness Lee explains,

The Lord's intention in [John 14] was to bring man into God for the building of His dwelling place. But between man and God there were many obstacles, such as sin, sins, death, the world, the flesh, the self, the old man, and Satan. For the Lord to bring man into God, He had to solve all these problems. Therefore, He had to go to the cross to accomplish redemption that He might open the way and make a standing for man, that man might enter into God. This standing in God, being enlarged, becomes the standing in the Body of Christ. Anyone who does not have a standing, a place, in God does not have a place in the Body of Christ, which is God's dwelling place. Hence, the Lord's going in order to accomplish redemption was to prepare a place in His Body for the disciples. (Lee, Recovery Version, John 14:3, note 2)

This understanding of Christ's preparation is in harmony with the profound revelation in verse 3: "If I go

and prepare a place for you, I am coming again and will receive you to Myself, so that where I am you also may be." Having accomplished redemption to prepare a place in His Body for the believers, He came again to receive them to Himself, that is, into Himself, in the Body of Christ. His coming to them was fulfilled on the day of resurrection, when He returned to His disciples and breathed Himself as the Holy Spirit into them (20:19-22), thereby never leaving them again (14:17-18). This Spirit is the transfigured form of the Christ who has passed through death and resurrection. Witness Lee says,

This was the Spirit expected in 7:39 and promised in 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; and 16:7-8, 13. Hence, the Lord's breathing of the Holy Spirit into the disciples was the fulfillment of His promise of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter. (Recovery Version, 20:22, note 1)

By becoming the Spirit, Christ can dwell in His believers, and by His accomplishing redemption, they have a place in Him. Moreover, the Lord Jesus is in the Father, and the believers are also in the Father by virtue of being in the Lord (14:4, 10). This is the living of coinherence of Christ and the Father with the believers that is revealed in 14:20—"In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you." Therefore, any hope of a heavenly paradise cannot be compared to living and dwelling in the heavenly Father and in the Body of Christ.¹

Place invokes the Lord's promise to the thief on the cross—"Truly I say to you, Today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43)—to bolster the argument that believers are transported to the third heaven upon death, for since the Lord ascended to heaven, the thief must have accompanied Him there. What *Place* fails to note is that the Lord ascended to heaven on the day of His resurrection, not on the day of His death. The "today" spoken of by the Lord to the thief on the cross was the day that He descended into the lower parts of the earth. *Place's* teaching also errs by ignoring the breadth of the revelation concerning Hades, which is equivalent to Sheol in the Old Testament (Num. 16:30, 33; Job 7:9; Deut. 32:22; Matt. 11:23; Luke 16:22-23).

In Psalm 16:10 David says, "You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, / Nor let Your Holy One see the pit." Based on this, *Place* argues that David must have been brought to heaven and not abandoned to Sheol. However, on Pentecost Peter quoted this psalm but applied it to

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Christ: “You will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor will You permit Your Holy One to see corruption” (Acts 2:27). This verse indicates not only that Sheol and Hades denote the same thing but also that Hades is the temporary holding place of the spirits and souls of the dead, for David, like the Lord Jesus, descended into Hades, will not be abandoned there, and will eventually be resurrected. For the Lord Jesus, the resurrection came on the third day, as He repeatedly prophesied (Matt. 12:40; 16:21; 17:23). It is He and only He who has been raised and who has ascended to the Father in heaven (John 20:17; Acts 1:9-11).

Acts 2:34 clearly says, “David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at My right hand.’” Bringing the foregoing verses to bear upon Luke 16, we can see that Hades is composed of two sections—a pleasant section and a section of torment and anguish, as evidenced by the distinct experiences in each and the chasm that separates them (vv. 22-26). To be sure, Lazarus is in the section of comfort, with Abraham, whereas the rich man is in the section of torment and anguish (vv. 23-24). Contrary to *Place*’s assertion that Paradise, or Abraham’s bosom, is “far away” in the third heaven (92), the parable shows that those in one section can converse with those in the other. This proves that they are two distinct sections of one place, despite there being a great and unbridgeable chasm. Thus, we may conclude that the Lord Jesus fulfilled His promise to the believing thief that he would join Him in Paradise on the day of their crucifixion, for upon death they both descended into the pleasant section of Hades.²

Misinterpreting the Kingdom Reward and the New Jerusalem

In presenting a response to the question “Will heaven be the same for everyone?” *Place* touches on a matter that few of the many Christians who hold the hope of going to heaven would agree with, namely that believers will receive or forfeit their kingdom reward according to their living and faithfulness as a Christian. A good number of Christians believe that they will be judged only by whether or not they have accepted the salvation that Christ accomplished by His death on the cross for the forgiveness of their sins; they are unwilling to entertain the notion that their living after becoming a Christian will also be subject to evaluation when they stand before the judgment seat of Christ. *Place* is correct to claim that if the Lord were to reward all Christians equally, “regardless of our behavior on earth, He would be an unjust Judge” (183).

While *Place* assures us that our debt of sin has been fully paid by Christ and that there is no longer condemnation

for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1), it also argues that “justification does not exempt us from God’s evaluation of our lives after we are forgiven for our sins” (173). *Place* indicates that this evaluation of our Christian living will take place after the rapture of the church and will determine our experience in heaven. Putting the subject of heaven aside, the principle that all believers are subject to judgment for reward or punishment, while never losing their eternal salvation, is scriptural (Matt. 5:20; 7:21; 25:1-30).

Referring to Ephesians 2:8-10, *Place* points out that Paul distinguishes between the works before salvation and the works after salvation: “While our works are worthless in securing us a *place* in heaven, they are integral in determining our *experience* in heaven” (174). Then *Place* uses 1 Corinthians 3:10-13 to show that all believers must build their life on the “durable materials” of gold (“a life dedicated to glorifying God”), silver (a life of “introducing others to the Savior”), and precious stones (a life of “demonstrating a love for God and others”), for each man’s work will be proved by fire (178-179). If we are proved worthy and our works are durable, we will receive possibly five different crowns of various significance—the imperishable crown (1 Cor. 9:25), the crown of exultation (1 Thes. 2:19-20), the crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:8), the crown of life (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10), and the crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:4) (184-185).

Place interprets these crowns as representing “tangible and eternal benefits given to those who have been rewarded by Christ at His judgment seat,” which benefits include special privileges, special positions, and special praise (186-187). Such a notion—that the reward given to Christians who lived in faithful obedience and service is not only tangible but also differential throughout eternity—deviates from the divine revelation regarding the kingdom of the heavens and the kingdom reward of the overcomers. Although *Place* indicates that there are degrees of reward, it mistakenly assumes that these are degrees of difference that are applied eternally, failing to see that the reward or loss of reward applies to a believer’s participation in the millennial kingdom, not to his eternal participation in the blessings of the New Jerusalem as the consummate expression of the Triune God and redeemed and glorified humanity.

There will not be believers walking on streets of gold, wearing varying numbers of crowns, and enjoying special privileges that others will not enjoy. Rather, following the millennium, during which the believers are rewarded or punished, all the believers will be the New Jerusalem, and all will equally enjoy and express the Triune God, with whom they will be one organic entity for eternity.

God has an eternal goal to be corporately expressed through His redeemed, regenerated, sanctified, transformed, conformed, and glorified people, who are the church, the Body of Christ, and the bride of Christ. The church was produced through Christ's death and resurrection, but soon after the church came into being, degradation began to set in (Acts 5:1-11). This degradation did not cease but worsened throughout church history by divisions and deviations from the apostles' teaching, which is the New Testament ministry. Due to this, there is a call for every believer to overcome the degradation of the church so that God may gain the reality of His intention with a few on behalf of all. The faithful ones among Christians who heed the call are the overcomers (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 20-21).

The overcomers are not just faithful in service and saved in life but also have arrived at maturity in life so that they even reign in life (Matt. 25:1-30; Eph. 4:13; Rom. 5:17). They live the life of the kingdom in the church and participate in the building up of the church with gold, silver, and precious stones, which "signify the various experiences of Christ in the virtues and attributes of the Triune God" (Lee, Recovery Version, 1 Cor. 3:12, note 2). The overcomers are also the man-child, the stronger part of the woman, and will be caught up to the throne and thereby escape the great tribulation (Rev. 12:5). Among their many rewards, the overcomers will reign with Christ in the millennial kingdom (20:4, 6), enjoy the salvation of their soul (1 Pet. 1:9; Matt. 25:21, 23; Luke 9:24), participate in the wedding feast in the kingdom of the heavens (Matt. 22:2; 8:11; 25:10; Rev. 19:9), and become the New Jerusalem in the millennium (3:12).

Place's interpretation of the New Jerusalem is also unacceptable. The New Jerusalem is not a physical city but the ultimate sign in a book of signs, as established by John in Revelation 1:1. *Place* endeavors to refute the teaching that the immense dimensions and rich features of the New Jerusalem are symbolic, arguing that John "went out of his way to say that these dimensions were given in 'human measurements'" (52), ignoring the fact that all numbers in the Scriptures have spiritual significance. *Place's* description of the New Jerusalem as a physical city is itself unsustainable. The first complication to this line of literal interpretation would be John's introduction of the holy city: "I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). The bride refers to the wife of the Lamb, which, in the context of

the New Testament, undoubtedly signifies Christ as our Redeemer (v. 9; 5:6; John 1:29; 1 Pet. 1:19). If *Place's* explanation is believed, Christ will marry a physical city, an assuredly ridiculous concept. It must be that the New Jerusalem, like the Father's house in John 14, the church, and the Body of Christ, is a person:

The New Jerusalem is a bride, indicating that she is not a material city but a corporate person. To Christ she is a bride for His satisfaction; to God she is a tabernacle in which He can rest and through which He can express Himself. (Lee, Recovery Version, Rev. 21:2, note 3)

Without first seeing that the New Jerusalem is a sign, we will be unable to comprehend its rich significance. It is not surprising that the author, after quoting 22:2 concerning the tree of life yielding fruit, confesses, "I don't pretend to understand what all of this means" (55).

Conclusion

Although *Place* does bring out the truth that the believers will be judged and rewarded according to their faithfulness on earth, there is little else of value in this book that presupposes heaven as the eternal destination of Christians. Its unwillingness to question the glaringly absurd teaching that Christ is engaged in a universal construction project, which it

deems to be a physical New Jerusalem in a new heaven and new earth, prevents the book from probing the profundity of the divine revelation of the Father's house in John 14 and the New Jerusalem as God's ultimate dwelling place in Revelation 21 and 22.

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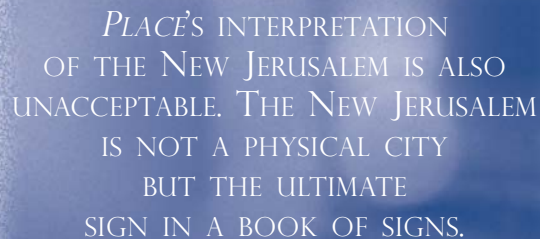
Notes

¹For a more thorough discussion of the Father's house, see Ron Kangas's "In My Father's House: The Unleavened Truth of John 14," *Affirmation & Critique*, vol. 5, no. 2, April 2000, pp. 22-36.

²For a more thorough presentation of Hades, see John Campbell's "The Believers' Passage through Death," *Affirmation & Critique*, vol. 5, no. 2, April 2000, pp. 101-114.

Work Cited

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