

## Evangelical Universalism: An Unsupported Teaching

*The Evangelical Universalist*, by Gregory MacDonald.  
Second Edition. Cascade Books, 2012.

In *The Evangelical Universalist* (hereafter *Evangelical*), Gregory MacDonald sets forth in his title an expectation of addressing two of the serious challenges to the teaching of universal salvation for all humanity, including believers and unbelievers alike: If all will be saved in the end, why is there a need to preach the gospel, and if the gospel is preached, why would anyone feel a need to believe in Christ, since he will not be deprived of a salvation that is rooted solely in God's love no matter in what state of sin he remains? For believers, universal salvation obviates the scriptural charge to preach the gospel; for unbelievers, universal salvation warrants the continuance of a profligate living of eating, drinking, and being merry. *Evangelical*, however, fails to adequately support its premise—that one can be both evangelical and universalist. In a book of seven chapters with seven appendices, totaling two hundred forty-six pages, the subject of evangelical universalism is raised only in chapter 7. The other chapters are devoted to a defense of universalism itself. Furthermore, in chapter 7 the subject of evangelical universalism is addressed only in a four-page subsection entitled “Objection 2: Does Universalism Undermine Evangelism?” As an even further indication of the paucity of support for its premise, *Evangelical* actually contains only four sentences in this subsection that speak to “many other motivations to proclaim the gospel” (169), none of which are particularly compelling if one accepts the logic of not needing to believe in the gospel in order to eventually receive God's loving salvation.

MacDonald's tone is not dismissive toward those who believe in an eternal judgment based on God's righteous appraisal of one's standing before God, and he leaves open the possibility that he is wrong. In his first six chapters he focuses on the teaching of universalism itself, presenting what he believes to be a convincing case for a reappraisal of the orthodox tradition of the church that accepts the certainty of

a final and lasting judgment. He states, “I thought that the book may play a role in helping evangelical churches gradually come to understand universalism enough to accept it as a Christian position (even if not the *only* one or the *right* one)” (xvi). Many of MacDonald's arguments, however, are fraught with errors, especially when he posits errant interpretations of key points of the truth in the Scriptures and then relies on these interpretations as proof of the presence of universalist texts in the Bible. His interpretations of *all* and *many* in Romans 5:18-19, *the nations* in Revelation 21:24, *firstfruits to God and to the Lamb* in Revelation 14:4, and *Gehenna* and *outer darkness* in the Gospels are misguided and, thus, cannot be used to support the teaching of universalism. These interpretations are interspersed throughout the various chapters of *Evangelical*.

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### Summary of Introduction and Chapters 1 through 7

In his introduction MacDonald chronicles his move from a traditional acceptance of God's eternal judgment to his current universalist position. In large part, it is a journey rooted in emotion and in a preference for a God of infinite and forgiving love who should not be inconveniently bound to the application of His righteousness in dealing with sinful humanity.

Over a period of months I had become convinced that God *could* save everyone *if he wanted to*, and yet I also believed that the Bible taught that he would not. But, I reasoned, if he loved them, surely he would save them; and thus my doxological crisis grew. Perhaps the Calvinists were right—God could save everyone if he wanted to, but he does not want to. He loves the elect with saving love but not so the reprobate... Could I love a God who could rescue everyone but chose not to? (3)

MacDonald further states, “It is, or so I contend, well nigh impossible to understand why God would not save everybody. Reason seems to be in serious conflict with traditional theology; and this, I suggest, leads us to enquire whether we may actually have misunderstood the implications of biblical theology” (7). If there is any misunderstanding of biblical theology, it lies with the universalist position, because saying that God could save everyone if He wanted to, but that He chooses not to, misrepresents the

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binding nature of God's attributes, ignoring that He is not only a God of love but also a God of righteousness. In His interaction with humanity, God demonstrated His love toward humanity by sending His Son in the likeness of the flesh of sin to condemn the sin that separated God from fallen humanity (Rom. 8:3). But in the sending of His Son, God also upheld His righteousness by providing a sinless substitutionary sacrifice on behalf of sinful humanity so that redeemed humanity could be joined to the righteous Christ through faith.<sup>1</sup> In truth, God cannot save everyone merely because He wants to; His desire to save all men cannot be applied to a sinner without the satisfaction of His righteousness (1 Tim. 2:4; Rom. 3:25-26). With the satisfaction of His righteousness through a repentant sinner's faith, however, He is obligated to justify by His righteousness and eager to save by His love.

MacDonald's journey toward universalism, a belief that "God will rescue all people" (4), began with an inaccurate understanding of the balance between God's attribute of love and His attribute of righteousness and of the preservation of this balance in the person of the incarnated Christ and the subsequent death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Universalists largely regard these attributes as being mutually exclusive or hierarchical in nature and, thus, abandon an acknowledgment of His righteousness in their elevation of His love. They, like MacDonald, ascribe a heartless motive to God's righteous judgments, but more importantly, they fail to see the marvelous mystery of the gospel as revealed in the person of Christ (6:19). Universalists want a God who expresses love first and foremost rather than a God who expresses both love and righteousness in balance. Speaking only of a loving God is an easier universal gospel, but it is not the evangelistic gospel contained in the New Testament.

In his movement toward this easier gospel, MacDonald, thankfully, is not insistent that an adherence to a universalist position is an item of the faith: "I need to make clear that when I speak of my view as a qualified dogmatic universalism I am not using dogma in the strong sense of a teaching central to the faith that all Christians ought to believe. I would never dare be so presumptuous" (4). Neither universalism nor eternal judgment is an item of the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Genuine Christians can adhere to either view based on conscience and still be genuine believers. The choice is ultimately rooted in one's view of God.<sup>2</sup> However, an acceptance of the teaching of universalism, even if it is not presented as an item of the faith for which we need to contend, nevertheless, will have a deleterious effect on the preaching of the gospel and nullify an incentive to live a sanctified Christian life, placing believers in a position of discipline in this age and the next and placing unbelievers in a position of judgment in the coming age.

In chapter 1, "A Hell of a Problem," *Evangelical* states the

need to develop a universalist theology that can be said to be true to the Scriptures, beyond what many would say is merely a personal philosophical preference. The pursuit of such a theology is the focus of the remaining chapters of *Evangelical*, because MacDonald rightly acknowledges that Christian theology must be guided first and foremost by the Scriptures and only subsequently by "tradition, reason, and experience" (9). Thus, he endeavors to construct "a theology that has some serious claims to being true to Scripture as a whole" (7). While *Evangelical* accepts the primacy of the Scriptures, it focuses, in its effort to construct a universalist theology, on positing alternative interpretations of scriptural texts: "Even a commitment to an inspired Bible is not a commitment to inerrant *interpretations*. Reason can play a role in exposing misinterpretations of the Bible" (9). The principal theological tradition that *Evangelical* attempts to counter relates to the eventuality of an eternal judgment: "All who fail to accept the gospel of Jesus Christ, so the tradition goes, will be condemned to eternal, conscious torment in hell. The moment of death is the moment after which there are no more chances to receive God's mercy" (10). As he begins to present his case, MacDonald says, "Protestants do not, in theory, recognize tradition, nor interpretations of the Bible, as infallible; so we must be open to the *possibility* that we have made a mistake here" (10). *Evangelical* speaks of the *possibility* of a mistake having been made, but it actually assumes a mistake has been made, and then it provides novel interpretations that extend beyond the thematic context of the verses. These novel interpretations are then counted as proof of a universalist teaching in the texts. In the following section some of these novel interpretations will be examined.

In chapter 2, "Universalism and Biblical Theology," *Evangelical* begins to build its case for a universalist theology, saying, "The Bible is the single story of God's creating and then redeeming his world, and any claim that universalism (or traditionalism) is biblical must show how it fits in with the broader picture of Scripture and makes sense of the broader themes" (36).<sup>3</sup> In this regard, MacDonald says, "There are several texts that *seem* to do this [support a universalist theme] (e.g., Rom 5:18; 1 Cor 15:22; Col 1:20; Phil 2:11)" (36). In this chapter, however, he focuses primarily on Colossians 1:16-22, which says,

Because in Him all things were created, in the heavens and on the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or lordships or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and unto Him. And He is before all things, and all things cohere in Him; and He is the Head of the Body, the church; He is the beginning, the Firstborn from the dead, that He Himself might have the first place in all things; for in Him all the fullness was pleased to dwell and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross—through Him, whether the things on the earth or the things in the heavens.

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And you, though once alienated and enemies in your mind because of your evil works, He now has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and without blemish and without reproach before Him. (*Recovery Version*)

*E*vang<sup>l</sup>ical essentially argues that the reconciliation of all things is indicative of a universal salvation. Paul’s discussion of reconciliation in these verses, however, is more nuanced, covering both the things in the old creation, which cohere in Christ by virtue of His creation (vv. 16-17), and the church in the new creation (v. 18; cf. 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). The reconciliation of both the old creation and the new creation was accomplished by the blood of His cross (Col. 1:20), but the salvific impact of these distinct reconciliations is limited to the new creation, the church. The old creation will be freed from the slavery of corruption (Rom. 8:21), but it will not receive the divine life as have all the genuine believers in the new creation. Despite this distinction, *Evang<sup>l</sup>ical* asserts that “the word [*reconciliation*] and the context [Colossians 1:21-22] make it abundantly clear that Paul speaks of salvation when he speaks of reconciliation and that, as long as a being remains hostile to God, it cannot be said to have been reconciled to him” (46).<sup>4</sup> Witness Lee speaks of reconciliation in relation to all created things as being separate from that of all believers:

Elsewhere in the New Testament we see that reconciliation involves God’s chosen people, but here we see the reconciliation of all things to God. All things were created in Christ, through Christ, and unto Christ. But through man’s fall, all these things were lost. Therefore, there is the need for all things to be reconciled to God in Christ. Through Christ’s redemption, the reconciliation of all things has taken place.

Notice that [Colossians 1:20] does not say “all people,” but says “all things,” referring to all things which, according to verses 16 and 17, were created in Christ and now subsist in Him. Through Christ’s redemption, all these things were reconciled to God. These things include not only human beings but also all the creatures. (*Life-study* 387-388)

Paul reinforces this distinction with the words *and you* in verse 21. If there were no distinction between the reconciliation of all things in the old creation and that of the believers who constitute the church as the new creation, there would be no need to use these words or to speak of the believers being particularly reconciled to one another

and to God in the body of His flesh (v. 22) in addition to being generally reconciled through the blood of His cross (v. 20). *Evang<sup>l</sup>ical* fails to see this distinction, arguing that the text is

quite unambiguous about the extent of the reconciliation Christ has effected through his cross. The “all things” that are reconciled in v. 20 are, without any doubt, the same “all things” that are created in v. 16. In other words, every single created thing. It is not “all without distinction” (i.e., some of every kind of thing) but “all without exception” (i.e., every single thing in creation). (45)

*A*ll things in verse 16 refers to all things in the old creation, verses 17 and 18 speak of the scope of the old creation, and verse 18 shows that “Christ is the first in resurrection as the Head of the Body. As such, He has the first place in the church, God’s new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15)” (Lee, *Recovery Version*, Col. 1:18, note 1). *Reconcile*, mentioned for the first time in verse 20, refers to a reconciliation accomplished in Christ’s status as the Firstborn from the dead, and it is a reconciliation that is limited to the church as the Body of the Head. *All things* in verse 20 refers “not only to human beings but also to all creatures, which were created in Christ and now subsist, cohere, in Him (vv. 16-17) and are reconciled to God through Him” (v. 20, note 2).

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In chapter 3, “Israel and the Nations in the Old Testament,” and chapter 4, “Christ, Israel, and the Nations in the New Testament,” *Evang<sup>l</sup>ical* seeks to present a “fairly detailed biblical metanarrative that fits very nicely with the teachings of Christian universalism” (7). To do this, *Evang<sup>l</sup>ical* examines the promises of God to Abraham, which also include a promise of the nations being blessed through the extension of God’s saving promise to the nations.

In chapter 5, “A Universalist Interpretation of the Book of Revelation,” *Evang<sup>l</sup>ical* focuses on Revelation because it is “the home of the two most horrific hell passages in the entire Bible, and thus it presents a serious challenge to universalism” (7). To meet this challenge, *Evang<sup>l</sup>ical* argues that “it is legitimate to understand the biblical teaching about hell<sup>5</sup> as compatible with an awful *but temporary* fate from which all can, and ultimately will, be saved” (7). *Evang<sup>l</sup>ical*’s support for such a temporary fate hinges on the phrase *forever and ever* in Revelation 20:10, which *Evang<sup>l</sup>ical* says “literally means ‘unto the ages of ages’...and, strictly speaking, is compatible with a limited, though *very*

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long, duration” (128). This is weak support for a claim that divine judgment ultimately is temporary in its application; nevertheless, *Evangelical* is forced to rely upon it in its effort to find an alternative universalist interpretation of the hell texts. Even though MacDonald challenges the usual understanding of *forever* in his effort to provide an alternative reading of the hell texts in Revelation, he hedges his interpretation of *forever* when it comes to the devil:

One could maintain that the devil will be punished forever, but that Lucifer will ultimately be saved. Paul is able to speak of how God saves humans through the putting to death of “the flesh” or the “old person.” The human in rebellion against God is “killed” so that there is new creation (2 Cor 5:17). According to the tradition, the devil is a fallen angel. The devil, like the “flesh,” must be destroyed forever, because creation has no place for him. But he dies, and Lucifer is reborn as a redeemed angel. It would still be possible to speak of the devil being tormented forever and ever to symbolize this defeat even though no actual being is still in the lake of fire. (131)

*Evangelical*'s attempt to hold the devil eternally accountable while maintaining the teaching of universal salvation is strained at best and disingenuous at worst. If universalism is true, and all those in heaven, on earth, and under the earth will in fact be saved, there is no need to make a distinction between the devil and Lucifer, since all, including the devil, will eventually be saved. The positing of this distinction serves only the purpose of making the extreme implications of universalism more palatable to Christians. But, however unpalatable, the devil needs to be included in a universal salvation in order to maintain the consistency of the universalist teaching. Yet an honest argument for his inclusion in a universal salvation, given his history of unremitting rebellion against God and widespread destruction of humanity made in God's image, is a serious affront and stumbling block to the Christian conscience. A dedicated universalist cannot have it both ways.

In chapter 6, “To Hell and Back,” *Evangelical* continues to focus on the possibility of a temporary fate, saying, “A universalist could argue that the hell texts do not actually affirm *everlasting* damnation but warn of a terrible but *temporary* fate. This is the classical Christian universalist position found in Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and many subsequent universalists” (135). The chapter also addresses Christ's use of the terms *Gehenna* and *outer darkness* and Paul's view of hell.

In chapter 7, “Advantages of Christian Universalism and Replies to Remaining Objections,” *Evangelical* “sets out some of the theological benefits of Christian universalism and responds to some remaining objections” (7). In this chapter *Evangelical* attempts, albeit briefly, to make a case for a universalism that can still support evangelistic missiology.

### *Evangelical's Misinterpretations*

Throughout chapters 1 through 7, *Evangelical* attempts to provide a basis for a universalist theology based on the broader themes of the Scriptures, but in this effort, it introduces novel interpretations of key texts that are not in conformity with these broad scriptural themes. *Evangelical*'s interpretation of *all* and *many* in Romans 5:18-19, *the nations* in Revelation 21:24, *firstfruits to God and to the Lamb* in Revelation 14:4, and *Gehenna* and *outer darkness* in the Gospels are outside the common understanding and applications of these texts; MacDonald's novel interpretations simply do not support the teaching of universalism. These interpretations are interspersed throughout the various chapters of *Evangelical*.

#### *All and Many in Romans 5:18-19*

In chapter 4, MacDonald examines Romans 5:18-19, which says,

Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. (78-79)

According to MacDonald, “Paul is at pains to make clear that the ‘all people’ [in Romans 5:18-19] who were ‘made sinners’ and ‘condemned’ are the *very same* ‘all people’ who will be ‘made righteous’ and who, in Christ, are justified and have life” (80). To bolster his defense for this assertion, MacDonald addresses a counterargument from non-universalists who say that the all who are justified and the many who will be made righteous are, in fact, a believing subset of the all who are condemned and who are constituted sinners:

It is commonplace to find scholars suggesting that “all” can sometimes mean “all without distinction” rather than “all without exception,” and thus “all people” can mean “all *types* of people” (i.e., Jew and Gentile) and does not necessarily mean “all individual people.” However, the distinction between two uses of the word “all” is simply bogus. The word “all” only has one meaning in Greek, as in English, and that is “all without exception.” (82)

While *all* may mean “all without exception,” the usage of this term is not confined to its use as an exclusive reference to all humanity only. *All* surely can refer to all humanity without exception, but in the context of a subgroup of humanity, it can refer also to all in that particular subgroup without exception. *All* can be understood and applied both broadly and narrowly without violating its meaning, and Paul applies both a broad and narrow



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consideration of *all* in verses 18 and 19. Broadly, all humanity was condemned and made sinful because of the trespass and disobedience of one man, but narrowly, the all who are made righteous is limited to the all who are justified through faith in Christ. Even MacDonald alludes to a narrow application, saying, “It is true that Paul taught that justification and life come only to believers and also that he taught that not all are believers” (80), but then he says that

this should not be thought to undermine the universalism in vv. 18-19. Paul needs only to believe that one day all will believe (and I shall argue later that he did), and his statements are easily fitted together. This enables him to maintain that salvation is only for believers, that not all are currently believers, *and also* that “the many will be made righteous.” (80)

MacDonald’s later argument in response to the judgment texts of Paul involves dealing with the hell texts discussed in chapter 6. He says, “If we are able to deal sensibly with the hell texts, then there remain no objections to taking Romans 5:18-19 at face value as teaching universalism” (84). His treatment of these texts, however, is less than convincing, hinging, as it does, primarily on a mere connotational variant of the word *forever*.

### *The Nations and Gates in Revelation 21:24-25*

When *Evangelical* discusses the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:24-25, which says, “The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut (indeed, there will be no night there)” (114-115), it claims support for a universal salvation based on the gates of the New Jerusalem being open to those who are outside in the lake of fire. This interpretation, however, ignores the nations who are also outside of the city, not in a place of torment, but on the restored new earth. MacDonald incorrectly says,

In John’s visionary geography there are only two places one can be located—within the city enclosed in its walls of salvation (Isa 60:18) or outside the city in the lake of fire. The gates of this New Jerusalem are never closed. Given that those in the city would have no reason to leave it to enter the lake of fire, why are the doors always open?...The open doors are not just a symbol of security but primarily a symbol of the God who excludes no one from his presence forever. (115)

This interpretation is based on an incorrect understanding of the role of the nations in the millennial kingdom and of the “geography” of the new heaven and new earth. The lake of fire certainly is outside the city as a place for “the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (Rev. 22:15) (118), but the city is situated in the new earth, which also serves as the place for the “sheep” of the nations to live. These sheep will walk by the light of the city, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it (21:24-27). Those in the lake of fire will remain in the lake of fire. In a footnote on Revelation 21:24, Witness Lee presents a clear explanation of the place where the nations and the kings of the earth who can enter through the gates of the city would be; that is, be in the presence of God, who is joined to His redeemed and regenerated elect:

At the end of this age a great part of the inhabitants of the earth will be killed as a result of the sixth and seventh

trumpets. The rest will be judged by Christ at the throne of His glory when He comes back to earth. The condemned ones, the “goats,” will be cursed and will perish in the lake of fire, while the justified ones, the “sheep,” will be blessed and will inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world (Matt. 25:31-46).

Unlike the New Testament believers, the “sheep” will not be saved and regenerated; they will only be restored to the original state of man as he was created by God. They will be the nations as citizens of the millennial kingdom, in which the overcoming believers will be the kings ([Rev.] 20:4, 6) and the saved remnant of Israel will be the priests (Zech. 8:20-23). After the millennial kingdom, a part of these nations, deceived by the devil, will rebel against the Lord and will be consumed by fire from heaven ([Rev.] 20:7-9). The rest will be transferred to the new earth to be the nations, which will live around the New Jerusalem and walk by its light. They will be the peoples mentioned in vv. 3 and 4. They, as created but unregenerated men, will be maintained to live forever in their created state through the healing of the leaves of the tree of life (22:2). Even for them there will be no more death (v. 4). Under the shining of the New Jerusalem with the divine glory, neither will they be in darkness. (*Recovery Version*, note 1)

The nations and kings of the earth are not in the lake of fire, and they can enter into the city through its open gates, but those in the lake of fire cannot. In addition to the New Jerusalem and the lake of fire, there is a third place, the new earth, which is the dwelling place for the inhabitants of the

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new earth. *Evangelical's* assertion that open gates support the teaching of universalism—that “the damned of 14:9-11 and 20:10-15 will be redeemed at some point and enter the New Jerusalem” (120)—simply cannot be sustained by the actual scriptural text.

### *The Firstfruits and the Harvest in Revelation 14:4*

When *Evangelical* discusses Revelation 14:4, which speaks of those who were purchased from among men as firstfruits to God and to the Lamb, a reference to the hundred and forty-four thousand standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion and having His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads (v. 1), it claims support for a universalist teaching based on its interpretation that the harvest that follows the reaping of the firstfruits, the church, is a harvest of the nations. *Evangelical* says,

The first-fruits was the first sheaf of the harvest, which was offered to God and which functioned as a guarantee that the rest of the harvest was on the way. Paul speaks of Christ's resurrection as the first-fruits (1 Cor 15:20), but here the church *itself* is offered as a first-fruits. This is best interpreted to imply that the nations are the rest of the harvest, which will be harvested at the right time. The church is a guarantee that they will come in. (118)

This interpretation violates the principle of similarity when comparing aspects of a type. It is incongruous for a harvest to be of a different life and nature than the firstfruits to which it is related. When a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it produces many grains of wheat (John 12:24). It does not produce tares (Matt. 13:25-30). The firstfruits represent ripened overcomers in the church, and the harvest represents the majority of unripened believers, who are in need of greater sanctification due to their neglect of God's so great a salvation (Heb. 2:3). The Spirit persistently calls the saints in the churches to overcome (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). Some will respond to this call and overcome; others will not. Those who do are represented by the hundred and forty-four thousand firstfruits standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion; those who do not are represented by the harvest. In a footnote on 14:4, Witness Lee clearly identifies the firstfruits and the harvest as two categories of Christians—the early overcomers and the majority of believers—not the firstfruits as Christians and the harvest as the nations.

These early overcomers will be the first-ripe ones in God's field. Hence, they will be reaped before the harvest as firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. The harvest will be reaped later, in vv. 14-16. This means that the overcomers will be raptured to the heavens before the harvest, just as the firstfruits of the good land were reaped and brought into the temple of God before the harvest (Lev. 23:10-11; Exo. 23:19). The events recorded in [Rev. 14:6-13], all of which

will take place during the great tribulation (Matt. 24:21), indicate clearly and prove strongly that the first overcomers, the firstfruits in [Rev. 14:1-5], will be raptured before the great tribulation, and that the harvest in vv. 14-16, composed of the majority of the believers, will be raptured at the end of the great tribulation. (*Recovery Version*, note 2)

According to MacDonald, *firstfruits* in Revelation 14:4 indicates that the “multi-national community of the church is a foretaste and guarantee of the full pilgrimage of the nations, which is yet to come” (97). This full pilgrimage of the nations evidently will be the eventual universal salvation of the nations. Based on this misidentification of the harvest as the nations, MacDonald then claims that “the sharp distinction between the church and the nations maintained throughout Revelation collapses under the weight of God's wide mercy” (97). Instead of this sharp distinction collapsing, it is MacDonald's reinterpretation that collapses.

### *Gehenna and Outer Darkness in the Gospels*

In chapter 6, “To Hell and Back,” MacDonald devotes a section to the question “Did Jesus Actually Speak of Hell?” and traces the origin of the name Gehenna, used by Jesus, to “the associations that the valley of Hinnom (*gehinnom*), south of Jerusalem, had with unrighteousness, burning, and slaughter” (142). In His references to Gehenna, Jesus transfers the features of an existing place to a place with eternal significance. MacDonald acknowledges that

Jesus often warned his audience about the coming judgment in very striking terms. He spoke of fire (Matt 5:22; 18:8, 9, 45, 47), of “eternal fire” (Matt 18:45, 47; 25:41), an unquenched fire that would not go out (Mark 9:48) accompanied by worms that will not die (Mark 9:48). Jesus refers to the place where the fire burns as Gehenna (Matt 23:33). It is a place of judgment (Matt 12:41-42), condemnation (Matt 23:33), “eternal punishment” (Matt 25:46), and divine wrath (Matt 3:7, 12; Luke 3:7, 17). (142)

MacDonald does not seek to directly explain away Jesus' emphasis on eternal judgment, even acknowledging that Jesus “only once mitigated his claims about hell so as to suggest that it was a temporary fate (Mark 9:47-49)” (140). Mark 9:47-49 says, “If your eye stumbles you, cast it out; it is better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into Gehenna, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. For everyone shall be salted with fire” (*Recovery Version*). In these verses, contrary to MacDonald's assertion, it is hard to find a direct reference to a temporary fate. The fire of Gehenna in verse 47, given its association with the phrase *the kingdom of God*, is a “refining fire (Mal. 3:2), the purifying, purging fire, as in 1 Cor. 3:13, 15 (cf. Isa. 33:14), which, as a dispensational punishment in the kingdom age, will purge the believers who commit sin and are unrepentant in this age”

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(Lee, *Recovery Version*, Mark 9:49, note 2). The fire spoken of in these verses pertains to believers in need of purification in this age and in the next age, not to unbelievers in need of universal salvation in order to escape the fire of Gehenna.

Despite Jesus' clear statements concerning Gehenna, MacDonald endeavors to lessen the impact of His teachings on the reality and eventuality of Gehenna, suggesting that the Gehenna language is metaphorical in nature. He does this by incorrectly equating Gehenna with outer darkness.

Sometimes Jesus spoke in the imagery of expulsion to "outer darkness," where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 24:51). The diversity of the images that, if taken strictly literally, would be somewhat contradictory (flames and outer darkness) alerts us to the metaphorical nature of the language employed here. (142)

In the Gospel of Matthew, the Lord directly speaks of outer darkness three times, and each time the term is used in reference to believers who are variously described as sons of the kingdom (8:12), servants (22:13), and slaves (25:30). Outer darkness is not a place for the unbelieving and unrepentant; it is a place of dispensational discipline for "defeated" Christians during the millennial kingdom.

To be cast into the outer darkness is not to perish; it is to be dealt with dispensationally, to be disqualified from participating in the enjoyment of the kingdom during the millennium, for not having lived by Christ an overcoming life. In the millennium the overcoming believers will be with Christ in the bright glory of the kingdom (Col. 3:4), whereas the defeated believers will suffer discipline in outer darkness. (Lee, *Recovery Version*, Matt. 22:13, note 2)

Since being "cast out into the outer darkness in the coming kingdom age differs from being cast into the lake of fire after the millennium and for eternity (Rev. 20:15)" (Lee, *Recovery Version*, Matt. 8:12, note 2), MacDonald's assertion that the diversity of the images used to describe Gehenna (fire and outer darkness) enables the metaphorization of Gehenna, thereby weakening the teaching of Jesus concerning Gehenna, is not justified. At the end of his discussion on Gehenna, MacDonald acknowledges yet tries to get around the fact that Jesus never explicitly taught universal salvation: "We should not suppose that, because Jesus did not explicitly teach universal salvation or explicitly repudiate

the idea that many people would never experience salvation, universalism is an un-Christian idea incompatible with Jesus' ministry" (149). Since he cannot point to an explicit reference to universal salvation in the teachings of Jesus, MacDonald is left with a weak declaration that Jesus also did not explicitly repudiate a teaching of universal salvation. In the flurry of our metaphorical imagination, however, and in our penchant to pursue different teachings (1 Tim. 1:3), it is possible to present many teachings that are not explicitly disqualified from consideration as being in line with the faith simply because they are not explicitly repudiated (consider all the heretical challenges dealt with by the early church). The argument that Jesus did not directly repudiate the teaching of universal salvation is a weak endorsement for universal salvation.

### Evangelistic Universalism

Evangelistic universalism, even more, is a weak endorsement for the preaching of the gospel, because it effectively obviates the need for any form of evangelism if everyone will eventually be saved irrespective of hearing or not hearing the gospel. In the Foreword, Oliver D. Crisp sets forth a high expectation that a strong case for evangelistic universalism will be presented in the ensuing pages of the book, saying, "When it was published, few had dared to say in print that one could be an evangelical *and* a universalist" (xi). To just say that one can be an evangelical universalist, however, is not enough; there must be some development of this assertion, and regrettably, there is no serious effort to do so on the part of MacDonald. As mentioned previously, there are only three sentences in a four-page subsection of chapter 7 that actually speak of motivations for a continued pursuit of Christian mission and evangelism. Before presenting these motivations, MacDonald says, "There can be no doubt that the main argument against the *evangelical* universalism I have defended thus far is the presence of many texts about final judgment and hell found across the New Testament" (133, emphasis added). Up to the point of this statement, however, MacDonald has not defended *evangelical* universalism at all, only universalism. His short defense of an evangelical universalism begins late in the book, on page 169, and is limited to the following:

The New Testament provides many other motivations to proclaim the gospel [other than just preaching the gospel to spare some from eternal damnation]. We believe that people are only saved through faith in the gospel, and how can they believe if they are not told?—that's one very Pauline

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reason to proclaim it (Rom 10:13-15). Christ commands it—that’s a Matthean reason (Matt 28:18-20). It also serves the glorious purpose of summing up all things in Christ—a very Pauline (or deutero-Pauline) motive (Eph 1:10).

Each of these motivations provides no compelling reason for a universalist to be evangelistically oriented. Even if an unbeliever can be saved only through faith in the gospel, why is there a need to preach this saving faith if all will be saved eventually, even those who reject the saving faith that is preached? A believer should proclaim the word in season and out of season (2 Tim. 4:2), but is there really a need to place oneself under this requirement? And what incentive does an unbeliever have to respond to the gospel when it is possible to continue in a profligate living and still be saved from judgment? Indeed, many who hear the word of the gospel consciously reject it because they do not want to abandon their sinful lifestyle. This tendency to reject the gospel would only increase if an evangelical universalist actually preached a gospel of universalism.

Furthermore, that Christ commands believers to preach the gospel is a weak incentive for preaching the gospel. The Lord’s command to preach the gospel is a command that is targeted toward believers, not unbelievers, but believers routinely ignore the Lord’s commands. Who has not refused to forgive an offense (Mark 11:25; Luke 17:4)? Who has not given into the weaknesses of the flesh (Mark 14:38)? Who has not borne false witness (Luke 18:20)? The list of our willful failures in response to the Lord’s commands is lengthy. But if there are no consequences for such willful denials, what is the harm of neglecting a command to preach the gospel? And even if there may be some discipline, it will only be temporary because universalism applies also to believers.

Though preaching the gospel also serves the glorious purpose of summing up all things in Christ, the eventual summing up of all things will not be hindered by not preaching the gospel. There may be some delay to this summing up, but does this really matter? After all, all is well that ends well, and if there is anything to the promise inherent in the teaching of universalism, it is an ending that ends well. MacDonald consequently and honestly speaks of the potential for an incompatibility between Christian mission and evangelism, saying, “The theme of Christian mission and evangelism is central to the New Testament. If Christian universalism undermines it, then that is a clear indicator that it is incompatible with a biblical theology” (169). Universalism may not doctrinally undermine evangelism, but it certainly has a detrimental impact on the practice of preaching the gospel and thus, at a minimum, is experientially incompatible with biblical theology. Such a teaching has great potential for stumbling the little ones who believe into the Lord (Matt. 18:6). In light of the possibility of a “millstone” being hung around our neck because of our stumbling others through the promulgation of the teaching of universalism,

it is best to consider the ramifications of the neglect of the gospel that will only increase when universalism is taught. Even *Evangelical* states, “If universalism is false and we teach it, the costs are infinite; for we will fail to proclaim the gospel to those who need it, and the number of the saved will be diminished” (171). *Evangelical* does not deny the possibility of such a diminishment, saying, “I have not studied the matter, but I would not be surprised if historically the rise in universalism did lead to an erosion of mission. This, I suggest, is because the *kinds* of universalism that have arisen within some liberal Christian churches have not been the kind of evangelical universalism that I have been developing” (171). MacDonald’s evangelical universalism will never gain ascendancy, because it does nothing to blunt the extreme position of universal salvation, an eternal salvation for all, no matter how it is modified for greater acceptance. If all will be saved, all will be saved. If universal salvation is not universal, should universalism even be taught?

by John Pester

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In God’s redemption love and righteousness complement each other. Love is the impetus behind Christ’s redeeming sacrifice, but righteousness is the surety of this redemption. If love were the only basis for redemption, God could withdraw His love at any time, imperiling the certainty of one’s salvation. Indeed, many Christians, when they sense God’s displeasure with their conduct, have questions about the security of their salvation. God’s righteousness, however, provides this security. God’s justification is based on God’s righteousness (Rom. 5:18), and He cannot withdraw His redemption out of a sense of displeasure without violating His own righteousness. This is the insight that calmed Luther’s troubled heart and sparked the Reformation: God must righteously forgive and justify those who receive Christ through faith.

<sup>2</sup>Without being a God of universal salvation, God is less than God to MacDonald: “I have been supposing that God loves everyone and wants to show mercy to all. Indeed, I have hinted that I believe that if God did not love and try to save everyone, he would be less than perfect” (21).

<sup>3</sup>It is ironic that *Evangelical* gives primacy to the Scriptures, saying that “Scripture must retain its place as the primary locus of authority in any hermeneutical spiral of understanding,” but then modifies this claim, saying, “If such a review of the Bible does not plausibly yield to a universalist interpretation, then we need to return to philosophy and try to see how we can make sense of the everlasting damnation of the lost” (41). If the Scriptures do not plausibly yield a universalist interpretation, what would justify looking to philosophy to continue to argue against the teachings embodied in the Scriptures other than an unwillingness to accept that which may not be fully explainable to one’s intellectual satisfaction?

<sup>4</sup>In Romans 5:10, which says, “If we, being enemies, were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more we will



be saved in His life, having been reconciled,” Paul, in fact, argues just this point, namely, that a being who is hostile toward God cannot be said to have been experientially reconciled to God. Witness Lee writes,

Propitiation and forgiveness of sins are adequate for a sinner but not for an enemy. An enemy needs reconciliation, which includes propitiation and forgiveness but goes further, even to resolving the conflict between two parties. Our being reconciled to God is based on Christ’s redemption and was accomplished through God’s justification (3:24; 2 Cor. 5:18-19). Reconciliation is the result of being justified out of faith. (*Recovery Version*, Rom. 5:10, note 1)

<sup>5</sup>For the sake of discussion, I utilize the term *hell* as it is referenced in *Evangelical*, but this term is not used in the New Testament. Rather, what is commonly considered as the referent of *hell* is spoken of in Revelation 19:20; 20:10, 14, and 15 as “the lake of fire.” Given that John speaks of Revelation being a book of signs (1:1), it would not be out of place to regard the lake of fire also as a sign. If it is so regarded, then the principal aspect of this sign surely is fire. The first reference in the Bible to fire occurs in Genesis 3:24, where God used a flaming sword to maintain a separation between sinful humanity and Himself, represented by the tree of life. The torment of hell, which is largely regarded as physical in nature, may, in fact, be the anguish of a complete, existential separation from God, a separation that is justified and understandable because of the presence of unrepentant sin. “What fellowship does light have with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14).

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## A Liturgical and Sacramental Application of Salvation

*Deification through the Cross: An Eastern Christian Theology of Salvation*, by Khaled Anatolios. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2020.

Khaled Anatolios, John A. O’Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, proffers *Deification*

*through the Cross: An Eastern Christian Theology of Salvation* (hereafter *Deification*) as an antidote to what he calls a “distinctly modern befuddlement” surrounding the doctrine of salvation, both in relation to its objective content and subjective experience (1). Anatolios suggests that this lack of soteriological clarity has three possible explanations: first, the rejection of penal substitution due to “modern discomfort with the claim that ‘Christ’s suffering and death directly effect a salvific reconciliation between God and humanity’” (1-4); second, the “widespread approach of analyzing [soteriology] primarily in terms of various ‘models of salvation’” (2), where “no normative dogmatic core grounds the Christian teaching about salvation” (8); and third, a failure within “modern theology, spirituality, and pastoral practice...to provide adequate experiential access to the contents of this doctrine” (3). In response to these “three complaints,” Anatolios proposes “three positive prescriptions” (25) for any constructive doctrine of salvation. First, *contra* a rejection of the salvific efficacy of Christ’s

death, he argues that any soteriological outlook must display fidelity to the canonical Scriptures (25). Second, he contends that any depiction of salvation must adhere to the normativity of tradition, specifically, “the soteriological judgments embedded within trinitarian and christological doctrine” (30). Third, he argues that soteriology should be

informed and normed by liturgical worship, which he suggests “is itself an experience of salvation and an epiphany of the church’s most essential nature as a participation in the saving and transforming effects of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ” (31). In line with these prescriptions, he proposes that Christ’s salvific work is best understood as “doxological contrition” (32), a phrase he employs to describe the dialectic between God’s glory, human sin, God’s judgment, and human repentance. This notion is built upon two theses:

- (1) Christ saves us by fulfilling humanity’s original vocation to participate, from the position of the Son, in the mutual glorification of the persons of the divine Trinity;
- (2) Christ saves us by vicariously repenting for humanity’s sinful rejection of humanity’s doxological vocation and its violation and distortion of divine glory. (32)

While Anatolios’s first two prescriptions related to the objective content of salvation are both commendable and sufficient to undergird his understanding of salvation as doxological contrition, his third prescription results in an anemic portrayal of salvation, requiring substantial critique.

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## An Overview

*Deification* is comprised of two parts. Part I (chs. 1—3) discusses how a soteriology of doxological contrition arises from three foundational sources—Byzantine liturgical experience, the Scriptures, and “the dogmatic tradition of conciliar trinitarian and christological doctrine” (37). Part II (chs. 4—8) delineates Anatolios’s constructive systematic account of doxological contrition.

Chapter 1 discusses how a soteriology of doxological contrition arises organically from Byzantine liturgy. Anatolios notes that Byzantine liturgy characterizes the condition of sin as human enslavement to “passions,” which “coincides with the breakdown of divine-human communion, ontological corruption, and subjection to external destructive forces,” while the experience of salvation is characterized as “dispassion” culminating in “a deifying access to the vision of trinitarian glory and the indwelling of the Holy Trinity” (68). Yet, he argues that liturgical texts should not merely be analyzed “in their bare propositional form as storehouses of doctrine;” rather, they must be held in tandem with the experiences they inculcate within the worshippers who perform them (45-46). Drawing upon reader-response theory, Anatolios develops what he calls a “worshiper-response analysis” (68) to ostensibly demonstrate how worshippers, through the communal recitation of liturgy, are led into a “dialectic of sorrow over sins and the celebration of divine glory” (81)—in other words, a subjective experience of doxological contrition. Anatolios further suggests that this soteriological claim has Christological import. Specifically, since believers are co-crucified and co-glorified with Christ, this soteriology of doxological contrition “should shed some light on the inner content of Christ’s own crucifixion and glorification,” that is, Christ’s salvific work including vicarious contrition on behalf of human sin, “which took place within his perfect glorification of the Father in the Spirit” (92-93).

In chapter 2 Anatolios turns to the scriptural bases for salvation as doxological contrition. Instead of “a word-study approach, focusing on the lexicon of *glory* and *repentance*,” which, per Anatolios, would be “vulnerable to selective proof-texting,” three narratives are offered as being exemplary of this dialectic: Israel’s exodus from Egypt, Israel’s return from Babylonian captivity, and the appearance of Jesus as Savior (96-97). In the story of the exodus, the burning bush is seen as a manifestation of divine glory, and thus, doxological. This manifestation is also seen in the divine presence of God as a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire and, later, in the building of the tabernacle (100-104). In contrast, the golden calf is anti-doxological, initiating a chain of events involving sin, divine wrath, and divine forgiveness, i.e., contrition (110-111). In the narrative of Israel’s exile and return, Anatolios proposes that the sacrificial system practiced in the good land was for the revelation of the divine glory and, through atoning for sin, the restoration of this glory (116).

Turning to Jesus’ life, Anatolios argues that “there cannot be any serious doubt” that both repentance and doxology “play integral and significant roles in the scriptural proclamation of the person and message of Jesus” (152). Though he admits that there is not “explicit and direct substantiation” of Jesus’ doxological contrition in the New Testament, he contends that Jesus’ baptism provides implicit evidence, as His baptism was a representative repentance for all humanity and was followed by a theophany wherein He was called God’s beloved Son (152).

Chapter 3 traces the development of trinitarian and Christological doctrines through the first seven ecumenical councils in order to unearth their soteriological foundations. Anatolios contends that, though not explicitly stated in creedal statements, these soteriological premises “inform the logic of the creedal definitions and thus implicitly share in their normative status” (168). He notes that these soteriological foundations include a normative understanding of salvation as deification:

The normative trinitarian and christological doctrines of the first seven ecumenical councils presumed and prescribed *a conception of salvation as the deification of human beings through their graced inclusion into trinitarian life*. This deification was understood to be accomplished through the hypostatic union of divinity and humanity in Christ, whereby divinity transforms the humanity, assimilating it to itself. Salvation thus essentially consists in graced incorporation into Christ’s humanity, which brings about assimilation to Christ’s divinity and inclusion into trinitarian life from the position of the Son’s relations to the Father and the Spirit. *None of these constituent elements of this normative, albeit implicit, definition of salvation—neither deification nor hypostatic union nor the assimilation of Christ’s humanity to his divinity—can be construed as soteriological “models” from which we may pick and choose. Rather, any legitimate conception of Christian salvation, whatever metaphors or imagery it may choose to employ, must not conflict with this dogmatic core and, more than that, must positively depend on it as the source and goal of its inner logic*. Conversely, any soteriology that does not manifest this dependence must be deemed an inadequate conception of what it means to be saved by Jesus Christ. (168, emphasis added)

Ultimately, Anatolios notes that doxological contrition is an “inflection of the doctrine of deification,” whereby deified humans are included in “the divine self-glorification” of the Triune God (226).

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss trinitarian theology. In chapter 4 Anatolios synthesizes insights from Roman Catholic theologian Mattias Scheeben and Romanian Orthodox theologian Dumitru Staniloae to construct “a theology of intra-trinitarian mutual glorification,” which he notes is foundational to a soteriology of doxological contrition (231).

Scheeben, utilizing Western categories of self-knowledge and self-love, argues that the Father's generation of the Son and breathing forth of the Spirit result in the glorification of the three divine persons (250-251). Staniloae, utilizing the notion of perichoresis, proposes that the divine persons experience "perfect reciprocal interpenetration and transparency," so that They experience one another as "pure subjects," resulting in a mutual delight, witness, and affirmation amongst Them (253-254, 263). In chapter 5 Anatolios draws from Irenaeus, Anselm, Gregory Palamas, and especially Nicholas Cabasilas to describe human participation in this intra-trinitarian glorification. He contends that humanity's glorification of God is actuated by "an integral obedience to the divine commandments that is accompanied by a disposition of love toward God and is consummated in eucharistic worship" (283).

Chapter 6 discusses the conception of sin in a doxological soteriology. Here, Anatolios forgoes the traditional (and in his estimation, false) dichotomy of conceiving of sin as primarily "ontological" or "forensic" (286) and suggests that since humans are created in the image of God, all human acts are actually "making images" of God (297). Viewed in this way, sin is not merely nor primarily a corruption of human nature, an offense against divine law, or a disordering of human relations. Rather, sin is "a kind of divine-identity theft that brings harm to the self-identification of God" (298) and "a violent usurpation, misrepresentation, and falsification of the self-utterance of the Father through the Word and in the Spirit" (303).

In chapter 7 Anatolios synthesizes the Christology of Scheeben, who emphasizes the doxological or latreutic character of Christ's salvific work, along with Thomas Aquinas, who conceives of Christ's suffering as vicarious contrition (335), to detail how Christ's salvific work transforms sin and brings about humanity's "deifying inclusion into the intra-trinitarian mutual glorification" (313). Additionally, Anatolios notes that apart from these two thinkers, Cabasilas harmonizes both doxology and contrition within a single soteriological framework, and thus, "models and anticipates both the method and the content" of the soteriology presented in *Deification* (340). This close relationship with Cabasilas is significant, as Cabasilas's theological framework strongly stresses the role of the sacraments in making "Christians 'partakers' of Christ—'begotten and formed and absolutely united to the Savior'—and sharers in his death and resurrection" (362). Ultimately, Anatolios argues that: (1) Jesus' vicarious contrition, which "was

completed and perfected on the cross," enabled human beings to attain to an adequate repentance; (2) Christ's ascension brought His humanity into full integration with divine glory; and (3) Christ's pouring out the Holy Spirit upon the believers granted them the capacity "to enter fully into his own saving doxological contrition" and, by doing so, become fully integrated into the mutual glorification of the Triune God (381-382).

In his final chapter Anatolios places doxological contrition in dialogue with three modern soteriological outlooks: liberation theology, Girardian mimetic theory, and penal substitution. Both liberation theology and mimetic theory possess parallels with Anatolios's conception of "contrition." However, both outlooks tend to be "teleologically immanentist"—that is, primarily focused on the enhancement or improvement of the human condition—whereas doxological contrition must "insist on the absolute priority and teleology of the love and glorification of God" (408).

Regarding penal substitution, Anatolios suggests that doxological contrition safeguards its essential content while addressing opponents' most serious criticisms (416). Still, differences exist; for example, while penal substitution focuses on the transfer of penalty from sinful humanity to Christ, doxological contrition speaks about the transformation of

that penalty at the point of transference (418). Yet, the consummate claim that Anatolios advances, both in relation to these three outlooks and all others, is that a soteriology of doxological contrition is not merely another "model" but, rather, "an indispensable datum that must be accommodated in any interpretation of the Christian doctrine of salvation in Christ" (422).

### **The Objective Content of Salvation: Christ's Efficacious Death**

Three aspects of Anatolios's understanding of the objective content of salvation deserve further discussion. First, numerous modern biblical scholars and theologians have sought to deny the efficacy of Christ's "atonement" (Anatolios's preferred verbiage),<sup>1</sup> as it undercuts their notions of what it means for God to be loving, merciful, and kind. The most prominent stratagem to deny the efficacy of Christ's death emerges from a historical-critical reading of the Scriptures, that which ascribes all texts speaking of His death's explicit effectiveness to New Testament traditions outside of "the historical Jesus's self-understanding" (4). As examples of this tendency, Anatolios quotes Stephan Finlan, who states that this notion is found in "only 39 percent of

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*Numerous modern biblical scholars and theologians have sought to deny the efficacy of Christ's "atonement," as it undercuts their notions of what it means for God to be loving, merciful, and kind.*

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the New Testament,” and Karl Rahner, who relegates texts speaking of Christ’s “expiatory sacrifice” to “New Testament soteriological Christology” (4-5). Against such hermeneutic formulations, Anatolios rightly insists that “everything in the Scriptures counts,” and thus, any soteriological account must rely upon the normative witness of the Scriptures (27). He aptly notes that this witness “undeniably affirms, in many places, the salvific efficacy of the suffering and death of Christ” (3) and that to deny this explicit reality “is to deny salvation itself” (27).

### The Objective Content of Salvation: Deification and Doxological Contrition

Second, as previously noted, Anatolios argues that the concept of deification is a “doctrinal core” that “cannot be placed on the same level as the motifs and metaphors through which it is elaborated” (10). Rather, he proposes that deification is not merely a salvific metaphor among many others (e.g., *Christus Victor*, penal substitution, redemption, regeneration) but, rather, the undergirding or supporting structure of all conceptions of salvation. This recognition of the central place of deification in the Christian faith—that deification is beyond being foundational for soteriology and can be understood as embodying the entire revelation of God’s New Testament economy—is commendable.

Third, tied to deification (indeed, per Anatolios, an “inflection” on it) is the key soteriological claim forwarded in *Deification*—that both Christ’s salvific actions and humanity’s salvific experience are best characterized as doxological contrition, which as noted, describes a dialectic between God’s glory, human sin, divine judgment, and human repentance. While these elements are certainly present within the human salvific experience, Anatolios’s desire for a neatly parallel Christological account meanders into dubious territory. While he rightly notes that Jesus was not a sinner and only bore the sins of humanity, he concludes, in line with Richard Hays, that Jesus undertook John the Baptist’s “baptism of repentance” to carry out a “vicarious repentance” on behalf of Israel (153-154). This proposal does not properly apprehend the rationale behind Jesus’ baptism. Jesus’ baptism was related to His identification with humanity but, more accurately, was carried out due to the relationship between His human nature and the old creation. Concerning this, Witness Lee states,

With respect to His deity, there was no need for the Lord Jesus to be baptized. With respect to His humanity, to His being a man among men, there was the need for Him to be baptized. The Lord Jesus as a man needed to be terminated, to be buried.

Of course, the Bible does not say that at the time of His baptism the Lord Jesus repented. Because He had nothing

of which to repent, there was no need for Him to repent. The Lord did not have sin, and He never sinned. Because He had neither sin nor sins, He did not need to repent. Nevertheless, He had a humanity that was related to the old creation, and for this reason He needed to be baptized. In His baptism the Lord was willing to have Himself put aside. (*Life-study of Mark* 478-479)

Though Christ’s human nature was free of sin, it was still rooted in the old creation, and necessarily so. In harmony with Gregory of Nazianzus’s Christological axiom that “what is not assumed is not redeemed,” Christ’s humanity had to be part of the old creation—per Lee, “if the Lord Jesus did not have anything to do with the old creation, how could He be the Savior of the old creation?” (478). Rather than offering vicarious repentance for the people of God, Christ’s accomplishment was far greater—the termination of the old creation for the bringing forth of the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

Turning to how doxological contrition describes the human salvific experience, it is correct that human sin, repentance, and God’s judgment jointly result in the manifestation of God’s glory. Yet, further clarity is needed, specifically in defining *what* the manifestation of God’s glory entails. One of the scriptural narratives that Anatolios analyzes, the exodus, is instructive. The ultimate result of Israel’s sin, repentance, and God’s judgment in the exodus was the building of the tabernacle, which upon completion was filled with the glory of Jehovah (Exo. 40:34-35). Another Old Testament narrative, David’s transgression with Bath-sheba, follows a similar pattern—David committed a great sin, repented, and received God’s judgment (and ultimately, forgiveness) (2 Sam. 12:13). As a result, Solomon came forth (v. 24), and it was he who built the temple, which upon completion was filled with the glory of God (2 Chron. 7:1-3). In both narratives it is evident that the issue of man’s sin, repentance, and God’s judgment is not merely God’s glory manifested in a nebulous or individualistic sense; much rather, the manifestation and expression of God’s glory are inextricably tied to the building that He desires.

Today this building is the church, for it is through the church that God is expressed. The human salvific experience is not merely concerned with the manifestation of God’s glory to and through individuals, precious as it may be. Rather, God’s ultimate goal is that He would be glorified in the church (Eph. 3:21), which is the corporate manifestation of God in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:15-16). Ultimately, God’s glory will be manifested to the fullest extent when the church consummates in the New Jerusalem—the universal incorporation of the processed and consummated Triune God with His “chosen, redeemed, regenerated, sanctified, renewed, transformed, and glorified people who have been deified, that is, made the same as God in life and nature but not in the Godhead (John 3:6; Heb. 2:11; Rom. 12:2;

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8:29-30)” (Kangas 6). Though consonant with Anatolios’s proposal of doxological contrition, this precise and expansive understanding of God’s desire to be glorified through a corporate building, that is, a corporate God-man, is necessary to fully apprehend the complete trajectory and purpose of God’s salvific economy for human beings.

**The Subjective Experience of Salvation:  
Not through Liturgy, Sacraments, Icons, or Mary  
but through Contacting the Mingled Human Spirit**

Throughout *Deification* Anatolios bemoans the lack of “reliable and authoritative experiential access to the reality of salvation” in modern systematic theologies (90). In fact, a key impetus behind his writing of this volume was to overcome the modern befuddlement surrounding soteriology and “replace it with an authentic ‘joy of salvation’” (2). Anatolios’s desire to discuss a reliable means to experience salvation and for this experience to be characterized by joy is commendable.

However, the means that he proffers to experience this salvation are erroneous and fall woefully short of the divine revelation. For Anatolios the “ultimate touchstone of Christian experience” is Byzantine liturgical worship (24, 36, 44). Two key supports for this claim are that liturgical worship “induces” worshippers to repentance unto the glory of God (68-69, 82, 91-92) and “mediates” their experience of salvation (167). Regarding this, he notes that it “must be remembered that in the actual performance of these liturgical prayers, the worshiper who utters these prayers of repentance does so within the glorious ambience of icons, light, and incense, all of which mediate not the squalor of sin but the glory of God-with-us” (83). He elsewhere proposes that Byzantine liturgy ensures an “extroverted, Christo-verted orientation of the worshiper’s doxological contrition...by giving a prominent role to Mary, Jesus’s mother and Theotokos” (87). Last, he explicitly acknowledges the close kinship of his theological outlook to that of Nicholas Cabasilas, who discusses the sacraments as “the source and ultimate content of the life in Christ” (278) and deification as effected “especially in the sacraments” and as that “which is ultimately a sharing in the divine glory itself” (373).

Against such conceptions, it must be clearly stated that programmatic liturgical worship emasculates the Body of Christ by disallowing believers from prophesying for the building up of the church (1 Cor. 14:4, 31) and directly contradicts the plain teaching of 1 Corinthians 14:26 regarding

church meetings, where “each one has” a portion to contribute, whether it be a psalm, teaching, revelation, tongue, or interpretation. Additionally, the theologies of sacraments and the veneration of icons are nothing other than an inclusion of idolatry within Christian worship that physicalizes uniquely spiritual realities and results in believers’ treasuring the temporary, seen things below as opposed to the eternal, unseen things above (cf. 2 Cor. 4:17-18; Col. 3:2).

“Reliable and authoritative experiential access to the reality of salvation” (90) is not through liturgy, sacraments, icons, or Mary but, rather, uniquely afforded by the mingling of the divine, eternal Spirit of God with the human spirit, the deepest part of the tripartite man created for the purpose of containing and contacting God (1 Cor. 6:17; John 3:6; Rom. 8:16; 1 Thes. 5:23; Heb. 4:12). Believers can and should spontaneously contact their mingled spirit, both privately and corporately, by calling on the Lord’s name (Rom. 10:13; 1 Cor. 12:3), singing, praying, and pray-reading—that is, mingling prayer with the reading of Scripture, hymns, or spiritual writings (Eph. 6:17; 5:19). Such practices are fundamentally different from and even diametrically opposed to ritualized liturgy, which exemplifies what Jesus condemned in Matthew 6:7: “In praying do not babble empty words as the Gentiles do; for they suppose that in their multiplicity of words they will be heard.” While Anatolios is correct that believers should endeavor to experience the joy of their salvation regularly, even in a daily and moment-by-moment way, such experiences are entirely related to the divine dispensing of the Divine Trinity into their tripartite being, whereby their spirit has already been instantaneously regenerated with the life of God (John 3:6); their soul, composed of the mind, emotion, and will, is being progressively sanctified, renewed, transformed, and conformed to the image of the firstborn Son of God (1 Cor. 1:30; Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29); and their body is eagerly anticipating an instantaneous future glorification (v. 23; 1 Cor. 15:52; Phil. 3:21) while presently experiencing the vivifying life of God afforded by the indwelling Spirit (Rom. 8:11).

**Conclusion**

As the title suggests, *Deification* aims to present an Eastern Christian theology of salvation,<sup>2</sup> a task that it successfully carries out. Nevertheless, its focus, however valuable, is embedded within a theological framework that upholds liturgical worship as a means of inducing repentance and mediating salvation, the sacraments as mediators of grace

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and salvific experience, the veneration of icons, and the veneration of Mary. These are serious flaws, albeit expected ones, which disallow an articulation of Christian salvation that coheres with the testimony of the Scriptures. Notwithstanding, *Deification* contains positive elements. Both Anatolios's affirmation of the efficaciousness of Christ's death and his insistence that the teaching of deification itself forms a normative doctrinal core to which all soteriological outlooks must adhere are to be commended without reservation.

Additionally, *Deification* contains careful exposition of multiple patristic, medieval, and modern theologians examining trinitarian, Christological, and soteriological themes, all of which makes the volume an excellent academic resource. Anatolios's account of doxological contrition is broadly compelling within the sphere of the human salvific experience, though it requires further clarification as to what the manifestation of God's glory actually entails—a corporate expression of His glory, which is the church consummating in the New Jerusalem. However, his Christological account of doxological contrition is less convincing, due to an overriding desire to read this soteriological outlook back into Christology, resulting in a misapprehension of the rationale, character, and result of Christ's baptism. In sum, *Deification* is a welcome contribution to a rapidly expanding sphere of scholarship that aims to articulate soteriology in a deiform manner, an outlook that has been historically and for far too long ignored or opposed by Protestant Christianity.

by Michael Reardon

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>While many Christians use *atonement* interchangeably with *redemption*, there exists a crucial distinction. Per Witness Lee,

Many theologians use the words *atonement* (an Old Testament matter) and *redemption* (a New Testament matter) interchangeably...What we have in the New Testament is not atonement but redemption.

*Atonement* means at-one-ment. To make atonement is to cause two parties to be one; it is to bring these parties into an at-one-ment, to make these parties one. In the Old Testament this atonement, this at-one-ment, equals propitiation...

There is a difference between propitiation in the Old Testament and redemption in the New Testament. In the Old Testament sins were covered, but they were not taken away. This covering of sin and sins in the Old Testament was a matter of propitiation. In the New Testament sins are taken away. "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Here *sin* is a totality of sin and sins. The crucial point is that sins are not covered but are

taken away. This is a matter of redemption. (*Life-study of Leviticus* 406)

<sup>2</sup>Anatolios characterizes his soteriology as "Eastern Christian," not "Eastern Orthodox," because he is a member of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, which "claims the same Byzantine dogmatic, liturgical, and spiritual heritage of the Byzantine Orthodox Churches, while also maintaining communion with the Church of Rome" (38).

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## Not Seeing the Organic Factor of the Corporate Christ

*Jesus and the Church: The Foundation of the Church in the New Testament and Modern Theology*, by Paul Avis. T & T Clark, 2021.

In *Jesus and the Church: The Foundation of the Church in the New Testament and Modern Theology* (hereafter *Foundation*), the first volume in a planned series that explores the theological foundations of the Christian church, Paul Avis, Anglican priest and ecclesiologist, seeks to understand the role and connection of the historical Jesus to the church that we experience or observe today, an enquiry that "lies at the heart of ecclesiology" (14). Employing mainly the "historical-critical method," while also acknowledging that there are "several complementary methods of biblical study and interpretation," *Foundation* poses two pivotal questions for its examination of the Jesus-church connection, peruses modern theology's views on the matter, and posits an explanation at the end (8). The first question, primarily historical in nature, asks whether Jesus of Nazareth intended to originate the church as the institution that developed throughout Christian history. The second, which is theological, queries how the "New Testament writers and modern historical-critical scholars of various Christian traditions...make sense of the originating connection between Jesus and the church" (xiii). *Foundation's* approach to the open-ended inquiry of the relationship between the church and Jesus is implemented through objective academic scrutiny, even when its probing diminishes scriptural authority



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and detaches the “historical Jesus” from the “Christ of faith” revealed in the Bible (xiii).

Despite *Foundation’s* commitment to objective inquiry, the author’s reliance on modern theological methodology hampers its study of Christ as the foundation of the church. Within the first half of its study, *Foundation* reaches two main conclusions, both containing instances of a historical and theological grasp of Scripture but being ultimately devoid of revelation, particularly of God’s eternal purpose with relation to the church, Christ’s salvific role to produce the church, and the organic factor that unites Jesus Christ to the church and that invigorates and continues to operate within the church—the divine life. While *Foundation’s* detailed and eloquent presentation includes notable insights, such as an examination of New Testament prepositions with respect to Christ and the church, its findings steer believers further from the revealed truth and rich experience of the great mystery—Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32).

### The Necessary Question and the Answer from Modern Scholarship

First Corinthians 3:11 says, “Another foundation no one is able to lay besides that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” *Foundation* acknowledges that the foundation of the church is Jesus—not the Bible, doctrine, our shifting notions of His person, or the gospel “but Jesus Christ himself, in his person and his work,” which concurs to a degree with Paul’s understanding (6). *Foundation* quotes A. C. Thiselton, who states that “the one essential thing about the building is that it depends on Jesus Christ as the foundation of its existence, coherence, and identity” (5-6). It follows then that the fundamental and perennial question in ecclesiology is: “What connects the figure of Jesus Christ, as we see him in the pages of the Gospels, with the great institution, in many diverse branches, spreading out geographically and historically, that bears his name: ‘the church of Christ?’” (13). More pointedly, it inquires, “Did he in any sense anticipate the emergence of a great international institution, divided into innumerable parts large and small, each with its structures of governance, bodies of law and weight of tradition?” (15). While recognizing the divine act of establishing the one foundation of the church, *Foundation* nevertheless observes that Christianity must reconcile with the variety and diversity of Christian traditions that burgeoned and with the “continuous struggle, conflict and negotiation” both with external influences and internally among its divergent groups (16). That it took several centuries for the community of believers to settle upon the faith, agree upon the New Testament canon,

and develop “ministerial order, congregational structure and patterns of worship” and even longer for the adoption of the episcopate, *Foundation* argues, further complicates any seam that joins Jesus to the church (16). Thus, *Foundation* contends that Jesus could not have envisaged the church in its current institutional form without endowing it with certain key features as a proper framework. The absence of such an institutional framework led modern scholars (modern not necessarily from the standpoint of the recent past but from a cadre of researchers who have challenged traditional theology since the Enlightenment and who mainly employed historical-critical methodology in biblical research) to explore other historical and theological veins for the origins of the church as it relates to Jesus of Nazareth (81).

*Foundation’s* first conclusion, informed by modern biblical scholarship’s understanding of the New Testament, as it relates to this pivotal question is that the historical Jesus “neither founded by any explicit act, nor intended as part

of his purpose” the “Christian church as a coherent organization, institution or structured society that was set to continue indefinitely through time” (199, 27). This conclusion is based on two reasons. The first reason, also supported by unanimous consensus of modern scholars, is that His mission was directed to God’s Old Testament people,

to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The second is that Jesus and His disciples expected an imminent manifestation of the kingdom of God as a new world order (77). Hence, from a historical viewpoint, Jesus would have lacked the impetus to establish any institution, ordain any leadership, or set up any ministry or service to maintain any organization of a body of believers with a short shelf-life.

The second major conclusion *Foundation* asserts is that Jesus gathered a group of followers whom He sent out as His apostles to preach the good news of messianic salvation and the coming reign of God, thereby forming communities of Christians with certain core beliefs, “a few essential sacred rites” (such as baptism, the laying on of hands, the Lord’s Supper, and the love feast), and “a rudimentary and flexible structure of leadership, especially the ministry of the word and of pastoral oversight and discipline” (78-79). With the backdrop of Israel as the Old Testament church, the “ecclesial nation” (33) under God’s theocracy, and the “eschatological horizon” (18) of the imminent manifestation of His kingdom, *Foundation* explains that the church (*ekklesia*), as it came to be known, is described in the Gospels and the Epistles in images or metaphors—Body of Christ, people of God, royal priesthood,

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*The book reaches two main conclusions, both containing instances of a historical and theological grasp of Scripture but being ultimately devoid of revelation, particularly of God’s eternal purpose with relation to the church.*

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household of God, bride of Christ—that reveal an “intimate connection and unbreakable bond” with Jesus (199).

In its concluding section *Foundation* highlights the connection between the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, which it refers to as the Paschal Mystery, and the church. Particularly, it is the church’s baptism that “unite[s] believers intimately with Christ and his redemptive destiny,” that which “culminated in the Paschal Mystery,” for we die with Christ on the cross and we rise in His resurrection to walk in newness of life (211). Furthermore, the believers’ participation in the Eucharist, the partaking of the bread and the cup, is the heart of the Paschal Mystery, for the bread that is broken is a participation in His body broken for us, and the cup that is blessed is a participation in His blood that was shed for redemption. Therefore, “the Paschal Mystery is being—and would continue to be—carried forward in the church and as the church” (211). From *Foundation*’s description, this connection appears largely symbolic, being ensconced as a sacramental rite.

### The Organic Factor of the Corporate Christ—the Divine Life

There are points of truth within each of the conclusions that *Foundation* reaches in examining the undeniably fundamental question concerning the church, but its investigation into the connection between the person and work of Jesus and the church is ultimately bereft of revelation. *Foundation*’s overreliance on systematized theology produces a systemic failure in conveying the reality that underlies the truth and experience of Christ and the church. This failure stems primarily from an ignorance concerning God’s eternal purpose and the lack of understanding of both the person and work of the God-man Jesus Christ, sustained by separating the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. The unfortunate issue of this blind reading is that it deprives believers of the revelation of Christ as the foundation of the church and the rich experience of the corporate Christ made possible by the divine life.

All biblical interpretation must be based upon and corroborated by the divine revelation of God’s eternal purpose, which is to have a redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified people for His corporate expression and representation (Gen. 1:26; Rom. 8:30). For this express purpose, created man was placed before the tree of life so that he might partake of the divine life (Gen. 2:7-9). Only the life of God, which is just the Triune God Himself, can carry out His eternal purpose, for it is only the divine life that can express God and represent Him. However, created man’s fall, succumbing to death by partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, did not hinder God’s plan to accomplish His purpose (3:1-7). Through His called race in the Old Testament, Israel, God sovereignly worked out the incarnation of the God-man Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:1-18), who by His redeeming death and

life-dispensing resurrection would constitute His corporate people as the church, which is also the Body of Christ (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12), the bride of Christ (Rev. 19:7; 21:2), and the one new man (Eph. 2:15; Col. 3:10-11). The church will ultimately become the New Jerusalem as the fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose (Rev. 21:2, 10).

To emphasize Jesus’ mission to the Jews and to relegate the aspects of the church to “images” and “metaphors” reverses the trajectory that God embarked on beginning from eternity past with His counsel to create man and continuing during Christ’s earthly ministry, starting from His incarnation. A crucial verse showing Jesus’ mission is Matthew 16:18, in which Christ clearly states His intention to build His church. *Foundation* treats this verse briefly, mostly to debate whether the said pronouncement should be ascribed to Jesus or to Matthean editing (revealing modern scholars’ willingness to negate scriptural authority) and whether *rock* (*petra*) actually refers to Peter (*petros*) or Jesus’ own teaching (37-39). Sadly, the same modern theologians whom *Foundation* culls to deliberate these matters do not recognize the enormity of the revelation contained in Jesus’ words. The phrase *My church* directly indicates that the church, God’s called-out ones, belong to Him and are His possession. The word *church* in singular denotes the universal church, that there is one manifestation of the church in the universe. All of God’s people, His entire household, are gathered as the one universal church. Furthermore, His declaratory statement—“I will build”—is permeated with significance, underscoring His intention to undertake a building project with respect to His people. While *Foundation* is correct to conclude that Jesus had no desire to construct the religious institution that is divided into numerous denominations and that subscribes to various theological persuasions, which many Christians today consider to be the church, Christ’s prophetic statement discredits *Foundation*’s notion that He had nothing else in mind but to leave a small remnant of followers to spread His good news. Quite the contrary, as seen in the revelation of His death and resurrection in verse 21, Jesus was about to embark on a momentous step to realize the eternal intention of God.

To see what the church is and how Christ builds His church, we must understand the context of verse 18. In verse 15 Jesus posed to His disciples a vital question: “Who do you say that I am?” Immediately, Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). Contrary to *Foundation*, the Bible does not separate the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. Jesus, the complete God and perfect man, is simultaneously the Christ. Witness Lee says,

The Christ, as the anointed One of God, refers to the Lord’s commission; whereas the Son of the living God, as the second of the Triune God, refers to His person. His commission is to accomplish God’s eternal purpose through His crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and second advent, whereas His

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person embodies the Father and issues in the Spirit for a full expression of the Triune God. (*Life-study* 565-566)

Before we can know the church, we must first see Jesus Christ, the Son and embodiment of the living God. As such, Christ is saturated and permeated with the divine life, and through His death and in His resurrection, the church was produced (1 Pet. 1:3; Eph. 2:6). Lee also points out: “The church is the product of Christ’s resurrection, the result of the life dispensing. The church is altogether not natural but purely a matter in resurrection...The church was not created by God but resurrected by God” (*Divine Economy* 61-62).

The key revelation that *Foundation* fails to convey in its study is the primacy of the divine life in the connection between Jesus and the church. The divine life not only links the church to Jesus but also animates every aspect of the church. At the most basic level, the church consists of all the regenerated children of God, that is, all who have been justified through Christ’s redemption and have received the divine life. The church is the product of Christ’s resurrection; His life was released through His death and dispensed into the believers to constitute them as the church. To speak of the church as a development of a community of Christians, with loose organizational structure and shared rites and awaiting the coming kingdom of God, lays bare *Foundation*’s acute deficiency of New Testament revelation. The church’s intimate connection to Christ begins with the divine life, by which all believers are corporately united with Christ, making Christ and the church the corporate Christ.

The organic union of Christ and the church is the essential relationship that animates what *Foundation* claims are the “images” and “metaphors” of the church, such as the Body of Christ, the bride of Christ, and the one new man. To its credit, *Foundation* correctly points out that these images of the church are not mere metaphors (51). Still, it notes only that these images or metaphors, like symbols, are channels to convey the depths of reality; it does not indicate that these images of Christ and the church are experiential realities. Moreover, *Foundation* gives a scriptural presentation of some images and veers from the mark with others. For example, *Foundation* presents a fairly accurate concept of the church as the mystical Body of Christ when it says, “When Paul calls the church the body of Christ, he means that the church is the *actuality* of Christ in the world, his personal being in our midst” (54) and when it quotes a scholar, saying, “The body that he [Paul] has in mind is as concrete and as singular as the body of the Incarnation. His underlying conception is

not of a supra-personal collective, but of a specific personal organism” (57). In another instance, *Foundation*’s notion of the bride and spouse of Christ stresses the imagery of our union with Christ in spirit—“The New Testament depicts all baptized Christians as united to Christ *as though in a marriage bond*” (73, emphasis added); however, *Foundation*’s exposition has no thought of the believer’s loving relationship with Christ (seen clearly in Song of Songs) but rather devolves into a discussion of gender stereotypes (73). In none of these discussions is the central thought of the divine life brought up as being integral to the organic union that Christ has with His church.

*Foundation*’s discourse on the kingdom of God, which is comparatively more extensive (a given, since it argues that Jesus’ mission kept the coming kingdom in His purview), likewise suffers from a deficiency of revelation concerning the divine life. New Testament scholars are in consensus in their belief that “the concept of the kingdom of God was the key to the correct understanding of Jesus’ mission” (22). Summarizing others, *Foundation* states that, through development, the kingdom has become “not a place or a state...but essentially the rule or reign of God,” with “the concept of the kingdom includ[ing] both the active presence of God’s reign here and now and the fuller manifestation of God’s inherent universal kingship in the future” (26). We can agree with these arguments, but we must also call attention to what is missing, namely that the kingdom of God is a realm of the divine life, an organic sphere where He can rule and reign with and in those who share His life. This understanding of the kingdom reveals that God reigns by the consciousness of life in those who possess His life and nature—His children. Hence, the kingdom of God is not merely the rule of God but a sphere of the life of God. Just as the human kingdom is the totality of human life and activity, the kingdom of God is the totality of the divine life and activity. At the time of the Gospels, only Christ possessed the divine life; hence, He alone was the reality of the kingdom. After the Lord’s death and resurrection, those who hear the gospel receive the divine life as a seed and enter into the kingdom of God as a realm of the divine life (Mark 4:26). Therefore, the church in actuality is the kingdom God.<sup>1</sup>

### Conclusion

*Foundation*’s response to the question of Jesus Christ’s connection to the church is woefully inadequate because it lacks a revelation of the divine life, which organically unites Christ and the church, the corporate Christ. Revelation, the

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*The unfortunate issue of this blind reading is that it deprives believers of the revelation of Christ as the foundation of the church and the rich experience of the corporate Christ made possible by the divine life.*

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unveiling of the truth, is necessary to see the centrality of the divine life in the relationship between Christ and the church as well as all the aspects of the church, all of which are rich, experiential realities. This is seen in Jesus' response to Simon Peter's bold declaration: "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in the heavens" (Matt. 16:17). What Peter saw of the person of Jesus Christ did not come by theological investigation, regardless of methodology, but by the Father's unveiling of the truth accompanied by the enlightening of Peter's inner eyes.

by Kin Leong Seong

## Note

<sup>1</sup>For a more thorough presentation of the kingdom of God, see Ron Kangas, "The Kingdom of God in the New Testament: A Panoramic View," *Affirmation & Critique*, vol. 14, no.1, Spring 2009, pp. 3-14.

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### The Divine Dispensing "Deifying" the Believers

If our ancestor Adam had not fallen and we had not sinned, we would still need to be regenerated. The reason for this is that God wanted to have many sons who would have His life and who would be His expression. Although He created man perfect and flawless, He Himself had not come into man and had not been joined to man. If man were merely perfect but did not have God within, this would still be short of what God wants. When God created man, He created him as a vessel. However, he was but an empty vessel. God's purpose is to fill up this vessel with Himself. However, before God filled man up, man became defiled and corrupted. Hence, God came to redeem man and cleanse him. But this is only the means; it is not God's goal. God's ultimate desire is to enter into the created man to be his life so that he would gain Him and be joined and mingled with Him to live God's living...

This concept is not found in Christianity. Although the Bible does contain this truth, those in Christianity have not been able to see it. This can be compared to reading a book. If there are words that we do not understand, no matter how many times we read through it, we will not be able to understand its true meaning, and we will not be very concerned about its significance. The ultimate purpose of God is to work Himself into us that He may be our life and everything to us so that one day we can become Him. But this does not mean that we can become part of the Godhead and be the same as the unique God. We have to know that although we are born of God and have God's life to become God's children, His house, and His household, we do not have a share in His sovereignty or His Person and cannot be worshipped as God.

In church history, beginning from the second century, some church fathers who were expounding the Bible used the term *deification*, which means to make man God. Later they were opposed by others and were considered as heretics. But John 1:12-13 does say, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave authority to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." We the believers are begotten of God. What is begotten of man is man, and what is begotten of God must be God. We are born of God; hence, in this sense, we are God. Nevertheless, we must know that we do not share God's Person and cannot be worshipped by others. Only God Himself has the Person of God and can be worshiped by man.

The traditional concept in Christianity is that God wants us, the saved ones, to be good, to be spiritual, and to be holy, but there is no concept that God wants us to be God-men. When God became flesh and came to earth, He was both God and man, a wonderful God-man, having both divinity and humanity. As for us, we are not only created by Him, but we have Him begotten into us, so that every one of us has God's life and nature, and we are now God's children (2 Pet. 1:4). Therefore, as those begotten of God, we are all God-men...

In the end, He and we, we and He, all become God-men. Hence, it is not enough for us to be good men, spiritual men, or holy men. These are not what God is after. What God wants today is God-men. God does not expect us to improve ourselves, because God is not after our being good men. He wants us to be God-men. He is our life and everything to us for the purpose that we would express Him and live Him out.

From *A Deeper Study of the Divine Dispensing* by Witness Lee, pp. 52-54.