

A Thin Trinity and Distorted Economy

Fountain of Salvation: Trinity and Soteriology, by Fred Sanders. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2021.

Red Sanders, professor of theology at the Torrey Honors College of Biola University, builds upon two decades of inquiry into trinitarian theology in *Fountain of Salvation: Trinity and Soteriology* (hereafter *Fountain*).¹ In *Fountain*, Sanders aims to articulate the relationship between the Trinity and salvation, as he contends that “a great deal is at stake for theology and the Christian life in grasping this relation correctly” (2). Importantly, he suggests that this relation is not merely “a problem to be solved” but “the nexus of theology, the blazing core of biblical revelation where the reality of God and the truth of the gospel are co-positd in dynamic unity” (5). In line with the book’s title, he argues for an explicit connection between the Trinity and soteriology because God is the fountain of salvation, and “the manifestation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the gospel is what opens up that fountain in its fullness and depth” (7). Of these dual themes (Trinity and soteriology), Sanders is emphatically “more concerned about the former” (4) and arranges his monograph accordingly: he begins with “the immanent Trinity in its eternal relations of origin” and thereafter turns to “the external works of the triune God in salvation,” inclusive of details related to “salvation history, Christian experience, and spirituality” (8-9). Overall, Sanders demonstrates an admirable desire to articulate a scripturally grounded trinitarian theology as opposed to extravagant metaphysical speculation that, both historically and presently, mars numerous systematic theologies. As a result, his portrayal of the essential Trinity is broadly accurate. Additionally, he correctly argues that God desires to have a filial relationship with believers (92-93) and that the Spirit economically is “the Spirit of the incarnate, crucified, risen Son” (144). However, his desire to systematically ground his theological project in the essential Trinity results in a thin account of the economic Trinity and a distorted portrayal of the divine economy.

An Overview

Fountain is comprised of ten chapters, each of which is a

revision of a previously published essay (201-202). Chapter 1 offers “an account of the dogmatic function of the doctrine of the Trinity in the overall structure of Christian theology and life” (14). Specifically, Sanders suggests that “the doctrine of the Trinity provides five services that promote the health and balance of Christian theology as a whole” (14). First, this doctrine summarizes the entire biblical story, which, per Sanders, is encapsulated by the statement: “The Father sends the Son and the Holy Spirit” (15). While noting other possible summaries, he argues that only this trinitarian lens reads “salvation history as the revelation of God’s identity” (16). Still, apprehension of this revelation requires both an understanding of “not just the shape of the biblical text but of God’s economy” and, importantly, a recognition that this economy is “a revelation of who God is” (17). A second function of trinitarian theology is that it articulates “the content of divine self-revelation” (18). This is important for Sanders because while the economy is revelatory of God’s

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identity, “not everything that Goes does is to be taken as revelatory of what he is. Some of what happens in the economy stays in the economy” (20). To navigate the extent of God’s self-revelation vis-à-vis the divine economy, Sanders proffers a spectrum with three enumerated possibilities: a “minimalist” position resulting in “monarchian modalism in which one God does three things”; a “maximalist” position resulting in dynamic modalism, where “one God becomes three persons by self-actualizing along with creation”; and a historically “classic” position, where “the missions in the economy of salvation are revelatory of eternal relations of origin” (23-25). A third benefit of trinitarian theology is that it properly orders doctrinal discourse by correlating Christology and pneumatology with monotheism (27). Fourth, the doctrine of the Trinity identifies the God of the gospel against alternative deities as “the God who sent a Son and a Holy Spirit, because he always already had a Son and a Holy Spirit to send” (29). Fifth, “trinitarian theology informs and norms soteriology” by navigating between a soteriological “error of deficiency,” which reduces “a relation of sonship to lordship and obedience,” and an “error of excess,” which “obliterates all distinctions between divinity and humanity” (30-31). Regrettably, Sanders subsumes notions of being “Godded with God and Christed with Christ,”

theosis/deification, and “ontological participation” under this latter error (31).

In chapter 2 Sanders cautions against positing too direct of a relationship between the Trinity and salvation (e.g., finding soteriological triads that correspond to the Trinity). Rather, since “God’s economy is the matrix of both doctrines simultaneously...theologizing about salvation and about the triune God both arise from this context” (32). On one hand, Sanders argues that this recentering of trinitarianism on *oikonomia* reflects a “widespread consensus in contemporary theology,” which offers a corrective both to “a dangerous tendency in older works to construct the doctrine of the immanent Trinity from speculative or metaphysical arguments,” and “propositional reduction” in conservative theologies, which “reduce the knowledge of the Trinity to a merely verbal transfer of information” (38-39). On the other hand, he cautions against mere narration of salvation-history “without allowing the claims of the narrative to push back into the eternal being of God,” as this results in an inability to speak about God Himself (40). Thus, he argues that “what is needed above all is a holistic approach that can assess all of the economic evidence in one massive movement of theological understanding” so that interpreters can make the jump “from the salvation-history level to the transcendent, immanent-trinitarian level” (47). Still, for Sanders this is not merely an academic exercise. Rather, he suggests that since “the doctrine of the Trinity, as an ancient landmark of consensual Christian belief, has long been the site of great ecumenical convergence,” it may serve today as a means to “open new avenues of approach” to deadlocked theological quagmires (52).

Chapter 3 places the doctrines of the Trinity and atonement² in dialogue, which per Sanders, are the only two “complex mega-doctrines at work in the Christian theological system” due to being “thick descriptions of who God is on the one hand, and what God does on the other” (57). Sanders offers three ways to relate the two doctrines. First, the Trinity may be articulated within the atonement, which is “generally an epistemological move”—based upon the premise that “anything we know about the triunity of God we know from what was revealed to us in the saving work of Christ” (57). For Sanders this is problematic, as it purports that the character of God—even in His historical dealings with Israel—was not known until the crucifixion. Moreover, taken to the extreme, this outlook requires a “willingness to call God an event that takes place between Jesus and his Father” (60). The second option, placing the atonement within the Trinity, is similarly dubious for Sanders, since it locates God’s economic attributes (i.e., suffering or hospitality) within the immanent Trinity; he emphasizes, “It simply won’t do. Atonement is not in the Trinity in that way” (64). Pitted against either of these

options is his proposal: discussing these “mega-doctrines” in a doxological setting, where they share a single “orienting task: to praise God in both conceptual profusion and reverent restraint” (65).

In chapter 4 Sanders surveys the three most influential approaches to relating the Trinity to ecclesiology: (1) communion, which “emphasizes the overlap between trinitarian perichoresis and churchly koinonia” (70), tends to be more Catholic and focuses on the immanent Trinity (80); (2) mission, which “connects the Father’s sending of the Son and Spirit with the church’s sending to the world” (70), tends to be more Protestant and focuses on the economic Trinity (80); and (3) structural analogy, which identifies “correspondence between the immanent order of the trinitarian persons and the ordered polity of church leadership” (70), is prone to reading ecclesiological concerns back into the Trinity and has “little to be said in its favor” (85). Ultimately, while placing the Trinity and ecclesiology in dialogue may mutually illuminate each doctrine, he cautions theologians to exercise restraint regarding what can and cannot be said about the church (85); per Sanders, “in theological regimes that prefer to leave the creator-creature boundary unpoliced, the church is in danger of being simply deified” (72).

Chapter 5 discusses the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity for the doctrine of the Christian life by relating the eternal, internal processions of the Son and Spirit in the immanent Trinity to Their temporal missions in the economy of salvation (87). Sanders contends that when the eternal generation of the Son and spiration of the Spirit are understood to be normative, “salvation is adoptive affiliation” (93). Ultimately, he affirms a “soteriology of trinitarian adoption”—wherein believers “imitate the sonship of Christ” by virtue of being “placed in the relationship of created sonship opened up and extended to us by the mission of the only begotten Son”—because it “finds the balancing point and enables us to affirm our distinction from, and our intimacy with, God” (98).

Chapters 6 and 7 outline the relationship between salvation and the eternal generation of the Son and between salvation and the eternal procession of the Spirit, respectively. In the former chapter, Sanders presents three themes that link salvation to eternal generation: (1) metaphysical sonship, whereby adoption is not a mere metaphor but a relationship between humans and God, grounded in “a higher sonship that belongs to the essence of the living God” (106); (2) a motion of “being from the Father,” which includes the Son coming from the Father by filiation, the world coming from God by creation, the Son’s mission to bring “metaphysical sonship into the realm of creatures,” and fallen creatures who by virtue of being joined to God “are given their share in the trinitarian way of coming from

God as sons” (107); and (3) considering God relatively, which here refers to Jesus Christ and His begottenness being internal to God (108-109). In chapter 7 Sanders is concerned with three tasks: (1) tracing the scriptural and historical data related to naming the Spirit (111-115); (2) tying the temporal mission of the Spirit to the eternal procession of the Spirit (116-121); and (3) examining how the proper names Gift, Love, or Breath for the Holy Spirit might be useful in “anchoring the theology of the revealed names to a mission-procession theology, and making explicit the inherent relationality of the Spirit” who is God and who is in God (124).

In chapter 8 Sanders recapitulates material from preceding chapters, with the goal of fostering a deeper appreciation for and evangelical commitment to trinitarian theology, specifically within the context of theological education. Sanders offers multiple prescriptions, most notably the promotion of, against triangular conceptions of the Trinity, “two-handed theology,” which, channeling Irenaeus’s image of the Father with two hands, draws attention to the “distinguishable and coordinated work of the Son and the Holy Spirit” in the economy of salvation (138) while simultaneously emphasizing that “the Father always sends but is never sent, and is not directly present in the economy of salvation” (141). Sanders also discusses the relationship between Christology and pneumatology (142-144), the pedagogical advantages and disadvantages of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds for presenting the Trinity (148-151), and the lack of unity between disciplines in academic theology (152). However, the key concern of this chapter is simple: “commitment to the Trinity is the one thing that will hold theological education together in the coming age” (153).

Chapters 9 and 10 examine the modern revival of interest in discussing the Trinity alongside soteriology. In chapter 9 Sanders surveys three approaches to recasting the doctrine of the Trinity in modern terms that were utilized in the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment. The first approach reinterprets the Trinity in relation to world history (157). This strategy was spearheaded by Hegel and later taken up by Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Robert Jensen. The second approach recasts the Trinity in terms of Christian experience (165). This outlook originated with Friedrich Schleiermacher and has been recently taken up by Catherine LaCugna and Elizabeth Johnson. A synthesis of these two approaches is exemplified by Karl Rahner, who, per Sanders, is so important to the modern interest

in the Trinity that “it would be possible to tell the whole story of trinitarian theology from 1960 on as the story of how Rahner’s work was accepted, rejected, or modified” (171). The third approach is retrieval—i.e., recapturing the priority of Scripture and the Christian tradition in theology—and its major exponent was Karl Barth (174). Chapter 10 focuses on retrieval, as Sanders contends that “trinitarian theology is inherently retrospective in its deep structures” (182) in three ways: first, it is structured by praise and “looks back along the lines of salvation history *pro nobis* to who God is *in se*...It retrieves divine identity from the divine economy” (199); second, at an exegetical level it takes the form of rereading or reinterpreting earlier phrases in light of the progressive revelation of the Scriptures (199); and third, it is a mystery that is revealed by “a two-part revelation, with an Old Testament corresponding to a New Testament, and the forward pressure of the Old pushing into the greater clarity of the New” (199). Tied to these insights, Sanders concludes *Fountain*

with a noteworthy hope: that trinitarian theology would be “more conspicuously centered on biblical reflection than it typically has been” and “that the way forward in trinitarian theology will also follow this path back to the deeply retrospective trinitarianism of Scripture” (199-200).

While Sanders correctly identifies these eternal processions as “the life of the living God,” the accent of his discussion of the essential Trinity decidedly rests upon the processions themselves, not their organic nature.

The Essential Trinity: Above All, an Organic Being³

A fundamental presupposition of *Fountain*, in line with John Webster, is that systematic theology begins with and emerges from the essential Trinity (8-9, 27, 73). Thus, a proper articulation of the contours and characteristics of the essential Trinity is paramount for *Fountain* as they bear an outsized influence upon the entirety of Sanders’s theological project. For Sanders, the crux of the essential Trinity is the eternal processions of the Son and the Spirit from the Father. While he correctly identifies these eternal processions as “the life of the living God” (98), the accent of his discussion of the essential Trinity decidedly rests upon the processions themselves, not their organic nature. Against this emphasis, Kerry S. Robichaux rightly notes that the revealed names of Father, Son, and Spirit, “even prior to notions such as begetting, procession, expression, and so forth,...are terms related to life (certainly the eternal, divine life),” and “therefore God is an organic Being” (8). Additionally, Robichaux elaborates upon the eternal processions, noting that “within the eternal Trinity there is an eternal dispensing of essence,” and thus, the eternal generation of the Son is based upon “the Father...ever dispensing the divine essence into the Son” while “the Spirit is ever

dispensed as the divine essence by the Father and eternally proceeds from Him” (11). Although consonant with Sanders’s conception, these more precise statements about the nature and internal, dynamic activities of the essential Trinity engender a clearer link between God in Himself and God in His economy.

The Economic Trinity: the Processed God

God “in Himself, that is, in His essence, . . . is uniquely one, self-existing, ever-existing, immutable, triune, and characterized by life, light, love, righteousness, and holiness” (Kangas, “The Economy of God” 4). For the sake of His economy it was necessary for the immutable Triune God to become the processed God, that is, the God who passed through the processes of incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection to become the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45b), even the sevenfold intensified Spirit (Rev. 1:4), in order to dispense Himself into human beings to be their life, life supply, and everything. Additionally, Christ, who essentially is the only begotten Son, was economically begotten in resurrection as the firstborn Son of God to be the prototype for the producing of the “many-born” sons of God as His mass reproduction and His brothers, to be the Body of Christ, which ultimately is the organism of the processed and consummated Triune God (Acts 13:33; Rom. 1:3-4; 8:29; Heb. 2:10; Eph. 1:19-23; 4:4).⁴

In *Fountain*, Sanders correctly notes that “some of what happens in the economy stays in the economy” (i.e., not everything God does in His economy is revelatory of God in Himself) (20), that the processions of the essential Trinity are extended economically via the temporal missions of the Son and Spirit (91-92), that these missions bring humans into a filial relationship with the Father (92), and that “the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ: the Spirit of the incarnate, crucified, risen Son” (144). Each of these insights is commendable. Nevertheless, Sanders’s desire to ground all theological insights within the essential Trinity leads him to neglect important scriptural realities about the economic Trinity—notably, that Christ was begotten as the firstborn Son of God for the producing of a corporate entity—which results in a misapprehension of God’s economy and human salvation.

God’s Economy: The Divine Dispensing of the Divine Trinity Issuing in the Corporate God

For Sanders, God’s desire to have a filial relationship with human beings is accomplished by “the eternal Son who becomes the incarnate Son to propitiate the Father and bring into being adopted sons” (90). To be sure, Sanders is clear that this “adoptive affiliation” is not merely juridical but, rather, effected by “the eternal, internal streaming of the life of God” streaming “forth into the human nature of Christ, whose death and resurrection cause the streaming

forth of new life in redeemed sinners” (90). Still, because he misses the economic begetting of Christ as the firstborn Son of God in resurrection, he falls short of apprehending the truly marvelous *reproduction* of Christ occurring in believers. Without a proper apprehension of the economically processed God, inclusive of Christ as the firstborn Son of God, Sanders is forced to define believers’ sonship in relation to Christ as the only begotten Son, rendering an account of salvation that disallows deification, or theosis (31, 97),⁵ suggesting that believers can only “imitate the sonship of Christ” (98), and per his affirmative quotation of Gilles Emery, identifies believers as only being similar to the Son (97). This problematic portrayal of salvation extends into Sanders’s ecclesiology, where he suggests to readers that within certain “theological regimes . . . the church is in danger of being simply deified” (72). Against such “regimes,” he affirms Francis Turretin’s assertion that the church, though being the “primary work of the Holy Trinity” and “exalted to fellowship with God,” is “yet a creature” (85).

Per Ron Kangas, “in the New Testament the Triune God is revealed primarily in relation to the divine economy. If we would know Him, we must know Him in His economy” (“Knowing the Triune God” 21). To know the Divine Trinity in His economy we must be willing to carefully examine the pure Word of God like the Bereans (Acts 17:11)—without being constrained by traditional terms, organized theological systems, or incomplete summaries of divine realities articulated by historic creeds.⁶ The Bible reveals that the Triune God is an organic Being with an eternal, divine dispensing—One who has passed through an economic process to extend His divine dispensing into His predestined elect so that they would become reproductions of the firstborn Son of God by virtue of being regenerated, sanctified, transformed, conformed, glorified, and fully deified (John 3:6; Rom. 6:22; 12:2; 8:29-30). Ultimately, these “many sons” constitute a corporate entity, the Body of Christ, which, by virtue of the believers’ union, mingling, and incorporation with the processed God, is “the corporate God, or, as it may be preferable to say, the ‘four-in-one God’” (Kangas, *Corporate God* 3). Though it is not a traditional term or a notion articulated in the ecumenical creeds, Witness Lee lucidly explicates the scriptural basis for this divine reality:

According to Ephesians 4:4-6 the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and the Body are all one. This is the oneness of the Body. It is altogether proper to say that the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and the Body are four in one. The Triune God is three, yet He now has a fourth part, a counterpart. However, only the first three are worthy of our worship. The Triune God and His counterpart are now four in one. (*Central Line* 97)

To be clear, God in His essential nature forever remains

immutable, self-existent, ever-existent, and triune; for this reason, the church will never be in the Godhead. Yet, in His economy the Triune God has been processed to be united, mingled, and incorporated with His many sons, and thus, in this sense, the Godhead is in the church. Any portrayal of the Trinity, the divine economy, or soteriology that distorts these precious truths, however systematized or logical it may appear, falls short of properly articulating the most crucial revelations conveyed by the pure Word of God.

Conclusion

Sanders is broadly successful in his portrayal of the essential Trinity, though this presentation would have been strengthened by emphasizing God's organic nature as opposed to just the eternal processions. He correctly identifies important aspects of God's economy, such as God's desire to have a filial relationship with believers (92) and the economic identity of the Spirit as the "Spirit of the incarnate, crucified, risen Son" (144). However, due to an overriding impulse to organize his theology around the eternal processions of the essential Trinity, he regrettably neglects Christ's economic identity as the firstborn Son of God, which results in distorted soteriological and ecclesiological ramifications, and ultimately, misapprehends the goal of God's economy—a corporate, deified entity, composed of redeemed, regenerated, and transformed humanity mingled with the divine life of the processed economical Trinity. *Fountain* accomplishes its stated goal—i.e., presenting a scripturally grounded portrayal of the essential Trinity placed in dialogue with other doctrines—and is a valuable addition to the academic line of inquiry related to the Trinity and soteriology. However, both the Trinity and the divine economy resist manmade attempts to systematize them. Believers must choose whether to uphold organized theology or rightly apprehend the pure revelation of the Word of God: they cannot pursue both.

by Michael Reardon

Notes

¹Sanders's monographs in this line of inquiry include: (1) *The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner's Rule and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (2004), which maps the influence of "Rahner's rule" (the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa) on the modern revival of interest in trinitarian theology; (2) *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*

(2017), which links the Trinity and the gospel; and (3) *The Triune God* (2016), which is a systematic presentation of the Trinity emphasizing a procession-mission schema.

²Though 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)

³As space disallows adequate discussion of the Trinity, God's economy, and salvation, readers are invited to read past issues of *Affirmation & Critique*: (1) vol. 1, nos. 1-4 and vol. 2, no. 1 discuss the Triune God; (2) vol. 10, no. 1 discusses the processed God; (3) vol. 10, no. 2 examines the corporate God; (4) vol. 4, nos. 1-4 and vol. 5, no. 1 are devoted to the economy of God; (5) vol. 6, nos. 1-2 and vol. 7, nos. 1-2 detail four of the stages of salvation: regeneration, transformation, glorification, and deification.

⁴While identifying the church as the "organism of the Triune God" may be new for some readers, it points to the reality that the Body of Christ is an organic entity—as opposed to a lifeless organization—that visibly expresses the invisible Triune God. Concerning this, Witness Lee notes,

The Body of Christ is the organism of the Triune God. The Triune God has an organism. An organism and an organization are entirely different. To illustrate this difference, we may compare a living person to a wooden stand. The wooden stand is without life, but a living person is full of life. The wooden stand is an organization of pieces of wood put together, but a living person has many members that are joined together organically. A person is a living, moving, functioning organism, unlike a robot, which is an organization

of inorganic parts. The church is not an organization without life but an organism with life...

The organism of the Triune God is a Body (Eph. 4:4). The very abstract and mysterious God has an organism. God is invisible, yet He has a visible organism, the Body of Christ. The church as the Body of Christ is for His fullness, His expression. (*Organism of the Triune God* 7-8)

⁵Sanders' dismissal of deification is puzzling, as he argues that historic "clarifying moments in the development of the Christian doctrine of God were yoked to moments of greater clarity about the character of Christian salvation" (89). To support this statement, he proffers Athanasius's defense of Christ's divinity at the Council of Nicaea. Yet, the crux of Athanasius's defense of Christ's consubstantiality with God is inextricably tied to Christ's ability to deify:

And as we had not been delivered from sin and the curse, unless it had been by nature human flesh, which the Word put on (for we should have had nothing common with what was foreign), so also the man had not been deified, unless the Word who became flesh had been by nature from the Father and true and proper to Him. For therefore the union was of this kind, that He might unite what is man by nature to Him who is in the nature of the Godhead, and his salvation and deification might be sure. (386)

⁶To be clear, this statement is not meant to denigrate the proper conveyance of divine truths by traditional terms or historic creedal formulations but, rather, to affirm the necessity of upholding the complete testimony of Scripture beyond these systematized strictures. Per Witness Lee,

The embodiment of God is Christ, the realization of Christ is the Spirit, the issue of the Spirit is the Body of Christ, and the consummation of the Body of Christ is the New Jerusalem. These five mysteries cannot be clearly explained by today's traditional theology in Christianity... We cannot say that traditional theology is all wrong; in fact, some of it is quite right. Nevertheless, it is incomplete. The Nicene Creed is an excellent creed, and to this day it is still kept by the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches. Yet the Nicene Creed is lacking in that it does not refer to the compound Spirit, nor to the consummated Spirit, the all-inclusive Spirit, or the sevenfold intensified Spirit. It also does not tell us what it means that "the Spirit was not yet" (John 7:39). (*Governing and Controlling Vision* 46-47)

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Not Receiving the Divine Revelation in Revelation

The Book of Revelation: What the Spirit Says to the Churches in America, by Scott Storbakken. Wipf & Stock, 2021.

In *The Book of Revelation: What the Spirit Says to the Churches in America* (hereafter *Revelation*), Ph.D. candidate Scott Storbakken purports to present to the "average Christian" an "accurate interpretation" of John's epistles to the seven churches in Asia Minor and an "appropriate application" of it to modern, mainly American, churches (ix, xi). *Revelation* deems that "once we know what the Holy Spirit communicated to the congregations in Asia Minor, then we can begin discerning what he might be saying to us through the same words" (xiii). Such an endeavor is an ambitious undertaking for the author and an intriguing study for its readers. Regrettably, readers will be soundly disappointed to find that *Revelation* is scant on interpretation but rife with partisan opinions masquerading as application. To regard *Revelation's* application as the Spirit's speaking would be an insult to the Spirit, whose rich unveiling of Christ and the completion of God's economy constitutes the proper conclusion to the divine revelation. *Revelation's* discussion on select portions and truths from the book of Revelation appears to be chosen to provide a platform for politically charged rants that are overwhelmingly critical of President Trump on the hot-button topics of American political culture from 2016 through 2020. Apart from the author's translation of the entire text of Revelation, which is unnecessary though convenient for reference, and suggestions for liturgical reflection in certain chapters, there is little of value to recommend *Revelation* due to the repetitive ire against Trump and his administration that quickly becomes the focal and central point of the majority of its chapters.

This disproportionate focus on the former president’s supposed personal faults and policy failures, whether true or false, exposes *Revelation*’s biased understanding of the book of Revelation. It stands to reason that the speaking of the Spirit to the churches in the present age cannot possibly be of a political nature, much less align principally to the ideological left. Despite such a stark failure of this study of Revelation, the most egregious fallacy that *Revelation* proffers is actually its unscriptural definition and explanation of marriage and sexual immorality. In combination, the failures of *Revelation* display an utter deficiency of the divine revelation and amount to a gross misrepresentation of the Spirit’s speaking to the churches today.

Since *Revelation* structures its chapters according to the sequence of John’s Apocalypse, this review will follow suit with a chapter-by-chapter summary, affirmation, and critique of *Revelation*, though not of every point.

Chapter 1: Revelation 1—3

In its first chapter *Revelation* establishes the way in which readers should approach “John’s Apocalypse,” explaining that the word *apocalypse* in Greek means “revelation” (5). The book of Revelation is the divine revelation of God, “something that gives God’s people a clearer picture of who God is,” rather than the fearful, mysterious unveiling of prophetic events (5-6). In the same vein, *Revelation* properly interprets “the revelation of Jesus the Messiah” in the first verse to mean that the revelation was given to Jesus by God and reveals Jesus and that Revelation is the unveiling and prophetic speaking of Jesus through John (1, 16).

To understand John’s Apocalypse, *Revelation* emphasizes that Christians must realize the cultural and historical context of John’s writing. While recognizing the eschatological aspect of Revelation, *Revelation* simultaneously notes the relevance of John’s letters to their immediate audience—the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (1:4). John’s thrust is related to the churches’ lack of faithfulness in their worship of God, a theme demonstrated throughout the book: “The real purpose and message of Revelation is easily applicable to any time period and culture, since every phrase asks the question, ‘Who do you worship?’” (18). It is this theme that drives *Revelation* to see John’s letters to the churches as a rhetorical document, a text that seeks to persuade its recipients to affect some form of change. On the basis that Greco-Roman rhetoric was prevailing in that

ancient culture, *Revelation* argues that once we understand that John sought to speak persuasively to the seven distinct audiences, we can more readily decipher his symbolic language:

The more we learn about the historical situation of the seven congregations, the more we understand Revelation’s primary purpose. It functions as a call for all who profess Jesus to shun the ways of empire and to come fully in line with the ways of the kingdom of God, to worship God and not the emperor or his gods. (23)

In applying the message to the churches in modern times, *Revelation* warns that Christians, especially those of the American mindset, may experience “culture shock” when they begin to “uncover the true meaning of what God revealed” to those seven churches in the ancient world, arguing that “then and only then, we can begin to apply that revelation to our present situations” (7). *Revelation*

contends that the Western culture in the twenty-first century tends toward anti-intellectualism and the avoidance of debates, confrontations, and challenging ideas. According to *Revelation*, such resistance to learning keeps us from seeing new viewpoints, breeds ignorance, causes us to succumb to cultural brainwashing, and

“prevents intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth” (24). Moreover, it prevents us from loving those who have opposing worldviews, thereby thwarting our carrying out of the Great Commission. *Revelation* further counsels that, as John battled against external influence (*influo* in Latin, meaning “to flow into”) in the seven churches, modern churches must allow the Holy Spirit and God’s Word, instead of culture, to inform and speak to us; otherwise, we will acquiesce to the comfort of our “American religious worldview that might contradict what the Bible truly teaches” (25-26). *Revelation* says that if believers are willing to remove their “culture-tinted lenses” through which they look at the biblical text, they will experience cultural shock and be faced with unfamiliar ideas and customs (26). Thus, *Revelation* encourages critical thinking in reading Revelation so that believers may “weigh through options and evidence and learn to be persuaded by presentations and interpretations of facts rather than by the sway of culture” (26).

Revelation’s firm belief in intellectual methodology and rhetorical discourse is evident throughout the book. The depths of Revelation, however, cannot be probed through “critical thinking” (26). Despite asserting correctly that

Revelation properly interprets “the revelation of Jesus the Messiah” in the first verse to mean that the revelation was given to Jesus by God and reveals Jesus.

John's writings are the unveiling of God concerning Christ, *Revelation* depends incorrectly on theological, historical, and textual analysis for exposition throughout the book. While these tools can sometimes provide helpful contexts, divine revelation is received only through the Triune God's shining of the divine reality into our spirit (4:2).¹ This principle, clearly set forth in the very first verse of chapter 1, was not heeded by *Revelation*. This is why, after its historical and textual analysis of the first few verses of chapter 1, *Revelation* does not proceed to expound on the revelation of the church as the testimony of Jesus, the content of the epistles to the seven churches as the seven golden lampstands in Revelation 2—3, and especially the rich vision of Christ as the Son of Man in the midst of the churches in 1:13-18. Furthermore, *Revelation* fails to expound on the significance of the epistle to each of the seven local churches and the speaking of the Spirit to the overcomers in each church.² This failure is illustrative of the intellectual bent of this book and is manifest in both its interpretation and application of John's Revelation as a whole.

Chapter 2: Revelation 4—5

In its second chapter *Revelation* returns to specific image-ries in Revelation 2 and 3 that it connects with Revelation 4 and 5. The first is the open door in heaven in 4:1, which *Revelation* deems to be related to the opened door which no one can shut in 3:8 and the closed door on which the Lord is knocking in verse 20. *Revelation* interprets the open door as our entering into God's presence and worshipping Him alone. *Revelation* considers the door in Philadelphia that God opened and no one can shut to signify the perpetual access that the congregation has to His presence, though that access to the heavenly realm that is promised in 4:1 will be available only in the age to come. According to *Revelation*, the Laodiceans would have a different reaction when hearing of the open door in heaven. They suffered from a "stagnant spirituality" due to their reluctance to sacrifice their wealth and heed God's call to "holy and fruitful lifestyles" (35-36). Hence, *Revelation* contends, the closed door to God's presence was a call for the Laodiceans to repent from their earthly pursuits in order to pursue God, and the open door in heaven was a further call to repentance from their "wandering and idolatrous pursuits" back to a relationship with God and a full partnership with Him to build His kingdom (36-37). *Revelation* associates many American Christians with the Laodicean pursuit of "personal comfort, wealth, and prestige" and a mistaken claim of religious persecution (38). *Revelation* argues that American, especially white, believers consider themselves to be "poor" and "wretched" due to supposed religious persecution, which they define as political correctness, and that this delusion of their being in poverty and under persecution was bolstered by President Trump's

policies and rhetoric, including tax cuts, to save them from poverty, and his condemnation of political correctness (39). *Revelation* points out that the concern with blaming others for Christian "persecution" and condemning political correctness compromises the gospel message; that the pursuit of the American Dream, as promoted by the prosperity gospel, spreads idolatry; and that the love and holiness required by God are unattainable without social justice (40-45).

Not knowing the historical and spiritual significance of the seven local churches prevents *Revelation* from properly interpreting the open and closed doors in Revelation 2—4. Concerning the significance of the seven churches, Witness Lee says,

The seven epistles in chapters 2 and 3 are the record of the actual situation existing in the seven churches at the time these epistles were written. However, since this book is a book of signs with a prophetic nature, the situations of the seven churches also are signs, signifying prophetically the progress of the church in seven stages. The first epistle, to the church in Ephesus, provides a picture of the end of the initial church, the church in the first stage, during the latter part of the first century. The second epistle, to the church in Smyrna, prefigures the suffering church under the persecution of the Roman Empire, from the latter part of the first century to the early part of the fourth century, when Constantine the Great, the Caesar of the Roman Empire, brought the church into imperial favor. The third epistle, to the church in Pergamos, pre-symbolizes the worldly church, the church married to the world, from the day Constantine accepted Christianity to the time the papal system was established in the latter part of the sixth century. The fourth epistle, to the church in Thyatira, depicts prophetically the apostate church, from the ordaining of the papal system in the latter part of the sixth century to the end of this age, when Christ comes back. The fifth epistle, to the church in Sardis, prefigures the Protestant Church, from the Reformation in the early part of the sixteenth century to Christ's coming back. The sixth epistle, to the church in Philadelphia, predicts the church of brotherly love, the recovery of the proper church life, from the early part of the nineteenth century, when the brothers were raised up in England to practice the church outside all denominational and divisive systems, to the second appearing of the Lord. The seventh epistle, to the church in Laodicea, foreshadows the degraded church life of the brothers in the nineteenth century, from the latter part of the nineteenth century until the Lord's return. (*Recovery Version*, 2:1, note 1)

Based on the historical and spiritual significance of Philadelphia, the door in 3:7 that is opened by the Lord, the One who has the key of David, is the door to the proper church life. Despite opposition from organized Christianity,

this door cannot be shut. The recovered church, which began with the Brethren in the early 1800s, was outstanding in brotherly love, in keeping the Lord's word, and in not denying His name (vv. 7-8). To keep the Lord's word is to recover the truths in the pure word of the Lord, and to not deny His name is to not denominate the church by taking any name other than the Lord's name. Deviating from the pure revelation in God's Word, embracing religious traditions, and denominating itself by various names are striking characteristics of degraded Christianity. The Lord opened a door to the proper church life, a door that cannot be shut, so that whosoever wills to be recovered can return to the church of brotherly love with the rich revelation and presence of the Lord.

The door in 3:20 signifies the door of the church in Laodicea, and the Lord was outside knocking because the Laodiceans considered themselves rich, with need of nothing, when in reality they were wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (v. 17). *Revelation* is accurate in pointing out that the closed door signifies the lack of the Lord's presence and that the knocking of the Lord is His calling for individual repentance from backsliding. However, this interpretation merely scratches the surface. Given that the wretchedness, poverty, and blindness of the Laodiceans were spiritual in nature, it is simply inaccurate to apply this verse to American Christians' complaints of poverty due to religious persecution; the Laodiceans were actually claiming the opposite—that they were rich, which they were in knowledge of doctrines, when in reality they were "poor in life, blind in sight, and naked in conduct" (Lee, *Recovery Version*, v. 17, note 1). In short, the Laodiceans claimed to be wealthy in doctrinal truths but were suffering spiritual, not physical, poverty.

The opening of the door in heaven in 4:1 signifies not the invitation to God's presence but the opening of His plan hidden in the heavens (19:11). When God finds a man who is according to His heart, He opens to him His plan through a vision (Ezek. 1:1; Matt. 3:16; Acts 7:56; 10:11; John 1:51). John was such a one and was inwardly in such a position so as to receive the vision of the fulfillment of God's eternal plan recorded throughout the rest of *Revelation*.

Revelation goes on, after expounding the open door in 4:1, to tackle the throne imagery in the epistles to Pergamos and Laodicea in connection with the scene of the thrones around God's throne in *Revelation* 4:2-4. The Lord told

Pergamos, "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is" (2:13). *Revelation* explains that Satan's throne "alludes to all the demonic works that flowed out of the system of emperor worship" prevailing during the Roman Empire (50). While Christ commended Pergamos's faithfulness to hold fast His name and not deny His faith, the Lord also chastised her for tolerating idolatry (v. 14). According to *Revelation*, the scene of the throne in 4:2 would have reminded the church in Pergamos that only God is worthy of worship. To the Laodiceans, the reward to sit with Christ on His throne reiterates their need to "conquer the complacency, idleness, and pretensions of self-sufficiency" (51). *Revelation* goes on to apply the symbolism of Satan's throne in Pergamos to American nationalism as a religion, which nationalism *Revelation* says breeds idolatry that threatens the sole worship of God among Christians and that hampers the gospel message. *Revelation* claims that national arrogance over the country's founding and perceived exceptionalism begat systemic racism and bred

white supremacist organizations active in America today (56). It also argues that the "founding fathers initiated their own religion centered around individualism, self-interest, and intolerance of other people," creating a sense of entitlement among the white Americans that "paved the way for both American nationalistic religion

and all forms of American racism" (58). *Revelation* argues that the "thrones of American history," such as slavery and the notion of America being established as a Christian country, continue to infect modern American society (60) and that Christians who support Trump are stoked by a leader who turns a blind eye to white nationalism and whose cult personality gave rise to nationalistic syncretism.

Storbakken reads too much into the throne imagery, leading him to dwell on the American political landscape; this is due to his partially incorrect understanding of the spiritual meaning of the letter to Pergamos. The name Pergamos in Greek means "marriage" and prefigures in history the church that entered into a marriage union with the world (Lee, *Recovery Version*, 2:12, note 1), symbolized by Satan's throne. The sphere of Satan's reign is the cosmos, the world, which he corrupted and in which he dwells (John 12:31; Luke 4:6; Rev. 2:13). Historically, the church in Pergamos prefigures the church in existence when Constantine inaugurated Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire, baptizing many unbelievers, who brought in various pagan practices, eventually resulting in the Roman Catholic Church. The main features of the

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Roman Catholic Church are Balaam's teachings, which issue in idolatry and fornication, and the teaching of the Nicolaitans, which produces a hierarchy by separating believers into classes of clergy and laity. The church, which should be a pure expression of God, thus devolved into a worldly and idolatrous organization. The varied points that *Revelation* presents regarding American nationalism being an idolatrous religion are highly debatable and even damaging, violating the spirit of receiving the believers, spoken of in Romans 14. Surely, *Revelation* has not furnished sufficient evidence to prove many of its wide-ranging claims, such as the founding fathers' formulating a nationalism that privileged only white Americans. What is certain is that the Spirit is not warning the Pergamon and American believers to renounce every form of nationalism; rather, He encourages the believers to eat of the hidden manna, which signifies the hidden Christ as our heavenly food supply to overcome degradation and the worldly forms of the church (Rev. 2:17).

Chapter 3: Revelation 6:1—8:5

In chapter 3 *Revelation* turns its focus to the seven seals of Revelation 6. According to *Revelation*, the four horsemen altogether "represent the totality of human violence and destruction" (106). Thus, *Revelation* dismisses the notion that the rider of the white horse represents Jesus, because He could not be involved in the bloodshed. For Storbakken, the white horse symbolizes warfare and is a call to spiritual warfare (107); the red horse represents legalism that "attempts to divide people with malicious intent," even to the extent of inciting murder (108). This interpretation is drawn from the Lord's words in Luke 12:51: "Do you think that I have come to give peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." *Revelation* extends this division to division caused by Christians who uphold unbiblical beliefs, including labeling as nominal Christians those in other denominations with whom they disagree and insisting that all Christians must be Republicans and subscribe to an anti-abortionist stance. *Revelation* states that the black horse signifies economic disparity, which is a natural effect of warfare. *Revelation* finds a connection between the economic disparity caused by famine and Ephesus's falling from her first love, her love of God and people, surmising that the Ephesians, who once displayed their love through financial support, became complacent as the Roman Empire prospered. The more comfortable they became, the less they cared to maintain their Christian responsibility to meet others' needs. This reading of the third horseman provides *Revelation* a base to criticize the United States government regarding its guilt in two economic sins: "disparity within the country and unwillingness to share its wealth with others around the world" (117). The fourth horse, *Revelation* asserts, is the result of the preceding causes—death in all its forms. According to *Revelation*, the fifth seal is the cry of the martyrs for divine

vindication. As with Smyrna, their sacrifice will be met with a promise of hope and an expectation of reward. They will be given white robes that symbolize purity to match their loyalty to "God's own purity even in the face of death" (132). *Revelation* considers that, to contemporary Americans, the reference to white robes is a call to purity, not merely sexual purity but purity in the midst of difficulties that cause them to suffer the "martyrdom" of the discomforts and inconveniences of life. *Revelation* links the opening of the sixth seal to the destruction of idols by God rather than earthly calamities.

Revelation correctly declares that the rider of the pale horse symbolizes death and that the rider of the black horse is famine. However, there is insufficient basis to interpret the rider of the red horse as meaning division. That the rider of the red horse is given the authority to take peace from the earth and a great sword and that men should slay one another clearly indicate that the rider of this horse, not the white horse, represents warfare (Rev. 6:4). More importantly, *Revelation* misses what the rider of the white horse signifies, which is actually the preaching of the gospel. The riders of these four horses personify the gospel, war, famine, and death; these four horses have been running concurrently throughout history and will continue to do so until the Lord returns.

Chapter 4: Revelation 8:6—11:19

Revelation points out that the seven trumpets in Revelation 8—11 are future judgments on all idolatry—"God's eventual end to all gods of the earth from all periods of time" (143). *Revelation's* main focus in this chapter is the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpets, in which we see John's measuring of the temple (11:1-2) and the testimony of the two witnesses (vv. 3-12). The former, readers are told, should be understood as "a prophetic depiction of judgment, not a picture of any God-ordained sanctuary" (145). The latter is seen by Storbakken as the entire church, God's collective people, at the end of the current age, who will become a conduit for the release of God's judgments (146).

Contrary to *Revelation*, the two witnesses are, in fact, Moses and Elijah, who will speak for God while the Antichrist is blaspheming God for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, that is, the last three and a half years of this age (11:2-3; 13:5-6). Supporting this interpretation is the fact that the acts of these two witnesses in 11:5-6 mirror those of Moses and Elijah (Exo. 7:17, 19; 9:14; 11:1; 2 Kings 1:10-12; 1 Kings 17:1); moreover, Moses and Elijah were preserved after death and rapture, appearing before the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-3). Representing, respectively, the law and the prophets in the Old Testament (Luke 16:16), Moses and Elijah will testify on behalf of God and warn

against the worship of Antichrist during the great tribulation, the time of the greatest trial of the inhabitants of the earth.

Revelation notes not the testimony of the two witnesses but their deaths, which will cause a global celebration by those who cooperate with the beast to erupt (Rev. 11:10). Storbakken extends the principle of this “global death party” to anyone who “calls evil good and good evil” (148), including churches and church leaders who intertwine politics and religion so tightly that they are convinced they are right even if their views contradict Scripture (149). Claiming the Spirit’s speaking, *Revelation* again turns its attention to Trump’s deficits, arguing vehemently that “no previous president of the last century placed himself so firmly against the teachings of the Bible and against its principles of truth, love, and justice as Trump has” (151). Another comment appears to boldly disregard Paul’s teaching in 1 Timothy 2:1-2: “Since we have a president who has made himself the enemy of these three concepts [truth, love, and justice], we are remiss and should not bother praying for him at all if we do not ask God to lead him to repentance” (154). Comments like these expose *Revelation*’s failure to see that Revelation is a book of God’s administration. Contrary to what *Revelation* emphasizes, the central significance of the throne in 4:2 is not the worship of God but His authority. The throne of God in heaven is the center of His administration, that is, His government (5:1; 6:16; 7:9; 8:3; 12:5; 16:17; 19:5; 20:11; 21:5; 22:1).

To begin to understand God’s administration, we need to see His sovereignty. Revelation shows that from His throne, God sovereignly rules over every person, situation, and matter in the universe and executes His judgments. “Divine sovereignty refers to God’s unlimited authority and power...God, the sovereign One, is above everything, behind everything, and is involved in everything. He has the full capacity to carry out whatever He intends according to the desire of His heart and His eternal economy” (Kangas 4). Perhaps the most telling of *Revelation*’s ignorance of God’s sovereignty follows:

We should...avoid listening to the *influo...* of church leaders who suggest that Trump’s presidency is the will of God. Such a belief skews the biblical truth of God’s sovereignty, treating God as if he chooses presidents directly. We live in a democracy, not a theocracy. Therefore, the American people vote to choose their leaders. (152)

Although the political system of the United States is a form of democracy, the universe in its entirety is under a theocracy. Everything that happens has its source in God’s decisions and is under His control. Although God does not cast votes, He is nevertheless reigning and in full control over every election, regardless of which candidate assumes office. Whether we like, dislike, agree, or disagree with Trump, all Americans must accept God’s absolute sovereignty. Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, was made to learn the principal lesson for any human ruler—that “the heavens do rule” (Dan. 4:26). According to his dream, Nebuchadnezzar was to be humbled with the intention that “the living may know that the Most High is the Ruler over the kingdom of men and gives it to whomever He wills and sets up over it the lowliest of men” (v. 17). God is not only sovereign but also has a will that He wants to accomplish (Rev. 4:11). God exercises His sovereignty over kingdoms of man, including allowing Donald Trump to assume the duties of the Oval Office; all of this is to pave

the way for God’s ultimate move to end the present age and to bring His kingdom to earth.

Chapter 5: Revelation 12—19

Revelation correctly believes that the pregnant woman in Revelation 12 represents “all of God’s people throughout all time

periods” (168). However, it misinterprets the child whom she gives birth to as Jesus. *Revelation* sees the events in chapter 12 as occurring in the past, stating that this portion is “a creative retelling of the birth of Jesus and the beginning of the church age” (175) and a story of “spiritual warfare that Satan wages against God and God’s people” (168). According to *Revelation*, the moral of this story is that as we follow Jesus in the spiritual realm, we “join with all the people of the past and present to give birth to spiritual victory” (168). The book reads the signs in Revelation 12—19 not prophetically, pertaining to future events, but historically, pointing to what transpired during the Roman Empire and to the cult of its emperors. Thus, *Revelation* suggests that the three beasts in Revelation 13, following Satan as the red dragon in the previous chapter, “represent realities of the Roman Empire that flow out of Satan’s own monstrosities” (169) and that John is speaking of Rome’s imperial power as being demonic, guilty of portraying itself as a god. Moreover, *Revelation* says that “those who received the ‘mark of the beast’ represent people who willingly gave themselves to an economic system that was also an idolatrous religious institution” (170). The fall of Babylon in Revelation 14 is basically expounded as a cautionary tale against idolatry and sexual impurity.

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As mentioned above, *Revelation* is correct to interpret the woman who is with child and travailing in pain to give birth as the church throughout time. It is therefore neither logical nor biblical to say that the church then gives birth to Christ, no matter the time period. Actually, the man-child signifies stronger believers, by virtue of their spiritual maturity, in the church. These believers have faithfully grown and matured in the spiritual life and are experienced in spiritual warfare. According to Revelation 12:5, the man-child whom the woman brings forth will shepherd the nations with an iron rod, a responsibility tasked to the overcomers (2:26-27), indicating that the man-child consists of overcomers, the spiritually stronger and matured ones in the church. *Revelation's* neglect to expound the significance of the overcomers is particularly telling for a study of Revelation that purports to convey what the Spirit is speaking to the churches, He who is calling for overcomers in the church. The phrase *what the Spirit says to the churches* is repeated at the end of each epistle to the seven churches (vv. 7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22) and is spoken closely with a proclamation of reward to the overcomers, showing that in each local church the Spirit is calling for overcomers, those who will prevail over the degradation of the church seen in Revelation 2 and 3 and fulfill God's eternal purpose on behalf of all of God's people.

Chapter 6: Revelation 20—21

In the final chapter *Revelation* considers the timing of the millennial reign of Christ and the last judgment and conclusion of John's Apocalypse. Storbakken's comments regarding Revelation 20 are limited to giving voice to and explanation of various theories: historic premillennialism, dispensational premillennialism, postmillennialism, Augustinian amillennialism, and adjusted amillennialism. It is interesting that while *Revelation* does not take a stance on any one of these theories, preferring to keep an open door to "many possibilities without requiring commitment to one," it specifically disagrees with dispensational premillennialism, citing without proof that its belief in the certain timing of Satan's bondage and release contradicts "many portions of Scripture" (192-193). Similarly, *Revelation* sees the question of the eternal judgment of unsaved sinners in the lake of fire as open-ended, presenting both the traditional (eternal suffering) view and annihilationism's (ceasing to exist) view, with admitted uncertainty about both. Regarding eternity, *Revelation* is right to question the traditional belief of saved ones going to heaven upon death and is correct to point out that the new heaven and new earth "will be the resurrection of the same heaven and earth he first created" (203). Inhabiting the renewed earth is the new creation, which is the church as the bride of Christ, an "analogy" of the "promised unity

between God and humanity" (204). Excluded from the new creation and destined for the lake that burns with fire and brimstone are the cowardly, the unbelieving and defiled, the murderers, the sexually immoral, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars (21:8). Lastly, *Revelation* understands the New Jerusalem to be an eternal, physical city on the site of the old Jerusalem in the new earth, and its inhabitants are "every human on God's side of eternal judgment" who will have been "restored to the state of humanity that God originally intended before sin entered the world" (230). *Revelation* finds that the depiction of the New Jerusalem with the river of living waters and the tree of life mirrors the description in creation, showing that the "new creation is a restoration of God's original intent for humanity" (234).

The most shocking and controversial statements in *Revelation* revolve around the definition and identity of the sexually immoral people in Revelation 21:8, whose portion will be the lake of fire and brimstone. *Revelation* holds that the Bible does not specifically define marriage and points out that "biblical marriages are not always between one man and one woman" (208). *Revelation* then argues that American churches should not be so quick to call premarital sex a sin, noting that although the demarcation of the beginning of a marriage is, in Western culture, by the ceremony, it is not necessarily the same in other cultures. Moreover, *Revelation* says that "the Bible's consistent message is not that sex before a wedding ceremony is wrong, but that sex without lifelong commitment simultaneously makes and breaks a covenant" (209). Hence, Storbakken believes that "the 'sexually immoral people' subject to the lake of fire consist of those who willingly and unrepentantly give themselves sexually outside of a lifelong covenant relationship" (212). Furthermore, *Revelation* states, "The Bible never directly condemns all homosexual behavior," arguing that the homosexual behaviors condemned in Scripture are those related to either rape or cultic prostitution and not "relational homosexuality," that is, homosexuality with a lifelong commitment (213).

Revelation's teaching on marriage and sexual immorality should be utterly denounced. It is absurd to claim that the Bible does not define marriage. Genesis 1:27 says, "God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Then 2:24 says, "A man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." The clear revelation established by God in man's creation is that one man and one woman are to be united as one flesh in marriage. This ordination was reiterated by the Lord Jesus Himself when some Pharisees tested Him with a question on divorce. They argued that Moses permitted man to divorce his wife, but the Lord said,

Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, He made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife; and the two shall be one flesh. So then they are no longer two, but one flesh. (Mark 10:5-8)

This retort, including the phrase *from the beginning of creation*, is evidence that God ordained marriage to be a lifelong relationship between a man and a woman. Any relationship that strays from this divine decree or that breaks its sanctity, such as fornication, adultery, or divorce, is not only sinful in God's eyes but also a deviation from God's original ordination (v. 9). *Revelation* further fails to see that God's ordination of marriage is related to His eternal purpose for humanity. Genesis 1:28 says, "God blessed them; and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it." On the one hand, man was created in God's image for His expression; on the other hand, man represents God with His dominion to subdue, conquer, and recover the earth for God. To carry out God's purpose, believers must have marriages according to God's ordination.

The goal of God's eternal purpose is the New Jerusalem. The limited treatment that *Revelation* affords this crucial matter exposes this study's grave deficiency in its adherence to the divine revelation. *Revelation's* ultimate failure is in not seeing the concluding vision of not only Revelation but, indeed, the entire Bible. Both aspects of God's purpose in man's creation coalesce and find consummation in the holy city presented as the bride, the wife, of Christ (Rev. 21:9-10). The New Jerusalem is not a physical city or a rebuilt old Jerusalem. Quite the contrary, the New Jerusalem must be a person in order to be Christ's counterpart, as Eve was to Adam. Witness Lee says,

Adam and Eve, being one, lived a married life together as husband and wife. This portrays that in the New Jerusalem the processed and consummated redeeming Triune God as the universal Husband will live a married life with the redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified humanity as the wife, forever. (*Recovery Version*, Gen. 2:25, note 1)

The New Jerusalem is not constituted with humanity restored to its original creation, because Adam and Eve did not fulfill God's purpose to have man as His expression and

representation. Even before sin corrupted humanity, man could not become Christ's counterpart; this is because he had not yet partaken of the tree of life and, thus, did not have God's life and nature. It is not until we reach the conclusion of the Bible that God's eternal purpose is fully fulfilled. Lee says,

The entire revelation of the Bible shows us the love story of a universal couple. That is, the sovereign Lord, who created the universe and all things, the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—who went through the processes of incarnation, human living, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, and who ultimately became the life-giving Spirit, is joined in marriage to the created, redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified tripartite man—composed of spirit, soul, and body—who ultimately constitutes the church, the expression of God. In the eternity that is without end, by the divine, eternal, and surpassingly glorious life, they will live a life that is the

mingling of God and man as one spirit, a life that is superexcellent and that overflows with blessings and joy. (*Recovery Version*, Rev. 22:17, note 1)

The man-child signifies stronger believers, by virtue of their spiritual maturity, in the church. These believers have faithfully grown and matured in the spiritual life and are experienced in spiritual warfare.

Conclusion

Revelation's reliance on intellectualism, depending solely on critical thinking and rhetoric, issues in interpretations lacking divine revelation. Because it is only through the exercise of the spirit along with the shining of the divine light that divine revelation can be apprehended, *Revelation* is unable to probe and present the depths of the person of Christ, the rich speaking of the Spirit to the seven churches, the solemn call for overcomers, the significance of the events near the end of this age, and the vision of the New Jerusalem. Consequently, *Revelation's* exposition of the Spirit's speaking to the churches in America is largely driven by politics, rather than being focused on truth and spiritual in nature. Nearly all discussions regarding the application of the truth in *Revelation* lack supporting facts and are highly disputable. Despite *Revelation's* justification for its stance on the Trump administration, *Revelation's* particular aversion to President Trump is palpable in comments such as, "Why can't God use a different flawed candidate?" (151). As a result, much of the alleged speaking of the Spirit to the churches in America is demonstrably partisan and even opposes biblical truth. *Revelation's* highly partisan slant, ironically, indicates that its critique of modern, mainly American, churches is filled with bias from a different political perspective. *Revelation* is devoid of divine

revelation and is not much more than an op-ed disguised as a study of John's Apocalypse.

by Kin Leong Seong

Notes

¹For a more thorough presentation of receiving revelation, see John Pester, "Receiving Revelation from the Book of Revelation," *Affirmation & Critique*, vol. 22, no. 1, Spring 2017, pp. 17-32.

²For a more thorough presentation of the seven churches in Revelation, see Witness Lee, "The Epistles to the Seven Churches," *Affirmation & Critique*, vol. 24, no. 2, Fall 2019, pp. 7-14.

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An Unnecessary Choice

Faith in the Son of God: The Place of Christ-oriented Theology within Pauline Theology, by Kevin W. McFadden. Crossway, 2021.

In *Faith in the Son of God: The Place of Christ-oriented Theology within Pauline Theology* (hereafter *Faith*), Kevin W. McFadden enters into the ongoing theological debate over the source of justifying faith, initiated largely by the publication of Richard B. Hays's *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*. The debate centers on whether justification is sourced in the faith or faithfulness of Christ as the subject of faith or sourced in a person's belief in Christ as the object of faith, presumably viewed as an individually initiated response to hearing the gospel. The two sides of the debate are often presented in terms of being mutually exclusive, but there are minor exceptions. *Faith* strongly argues for the latter view on justification, and many of its points are valid. After all, the Scriptures seemingly support such a view, with verses that echo the thought in Romans 4:3: "What does the Scripture say? 'And Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him as righteousness.'" In the foreword by Robert W. Yarborough, Professor of New Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary, this point is clearly stated: "This is a book with a clear and striking central contention:

'Paul significantly emphasizes Christ-oriented faith in his theology.' This is a bombshell in an interpretive world in which 'the faith/faithfulness of Christ' (hereafter FOC) has for many largely supplanted the older notion that 'faith in Christ' was the key to salvation" (12). He further suggests that

Faith in the Son of God will certainly be a valuable resource and foundational for rereading Paul by a new generation of PhD students, seminarians, and intellectually active pastors who may be willing to admit that the FOC interpretation seems a bit thin and out of sync with too many New Testament passages, as McFadden shows. (15)

The "Faithfulness of Christ" View

The "thinness" of the FOC view is its interpretive reliance upon just eight verses (Rom. 3:22, 26, Gal. 2:16 [x2], 20; 3:22; Phil. 3:9; Eph. 3:12). In contrast *Faith* points to many other verses that it asserts support the traditional view of justification by faith in Christ as an object (e.g., Gal. 2:16b; Rom. 9:33; 10:9-11, 14; Phil. 1:29; 1 Tim. 1:16, Philem. 5; Col. 1:4a). The thrust of *Faith* is to lessen the encroaching influence of the FOC view among the academy.

Perhaps nothing is more axiomatic in the church than the idea that we believe in Christ. But as Martin Luther warned us, the doctrine of faith "is indeed easy to talk about, but it is hard to grasp; and it is easily obscured and lost." While faith in Christ may seem axiomatic to the church, it has been highly debated in the academy, especially among those who study Paul's letters. Many have argued that Paul did not actually teach that we are justified by our faith in Christ but rather taught that we are justified by Christ's own faith or faithfulness. (17)

Faith then summarizes the FOC position: "*Paul does not teach that we are justified out of faith by our own faith in Christ but rather teaches that we are justified by Christ's faith or faithfulness*" (26). *Faith* recognizes Hays's motivation for the FOC view, stating, "He introduces his argument about πιστις by presenting it as a solution to the risk that the Lutheran doctrine of justification turns 'faith into another kind of work, a human achievement'" (34). This is a valid point because a human action, initiated by human effort, even in response to hearing the gospel, a so-called leap of faith, places justification outside of the realm of grace. *Faith* never truly addresses this point, merely acknowledging it. In its last chapter *Faith* stresses the human aspect of the view of Christ being the object of faith, saying, "In Paul's letters, faith is human belief or trust in the gospel proclaimed by the apostles," and "This faith dwelling in Paul and his readers begins with and corresponds to the preaching of the gospel" (250). *Faith* sees justifying faith as an objective response to hearing

the contents of the gospel, notably the content pertaining to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (Acts 2:31; 4:2, 33). There is certainly a sequential aspect to the process and outcome of the hearing of faith (Rom. 10:17), because the word of Christ, which is actually Christ Himself, is received through the preaching of the gospel. There is then an objective response of faith, but this response comes after the subjective faith of Christ has been received through hearing the word of Christ. In this receiving, there is no human work, only an appreciative acceptance of Christ's person and work. *Faith* fails to see this point, and it spends the vast majority of its subsequent argumentation to buttress the traditional view of justification as being an issue of objective, Christ-oriented faith.

The "Faith in Christ" View

Faith begins its defense of faith being the object of justification by stating, "The positive thesis for which this book is arguing is that *Paul significantly emphasizes Christ-oriented faith in his theology*" (49). It then structures this defense in its five chapters as follows:

The first chapter explores the historical context of Paul's understanding of Christ-oriented faith. The second chapter considers direct statements of Christ-oriented faith in Paul's letters. And the third chapter examines conceptual parallels to Christ-oriented faith in Paul's letters. The fourth chapter then addresses the translational debate head-on, interacting deeply with Hays's influential argument. And the final chapter of the book provides a theological synthesis of Christ-oriented faith within Pauline theology. (49)

This arrangement stems from *Faith's* view that "advocates of the 'faithfulness of Christ' view have overreached with their theological argument and significantly de-emphasized the role of Christ-oriented faith within Pauline theology" (47). *Faith* attacks this "de-emphasis" of the role of Christ-oriented faith not so much because it strays from the actual nuances of Pauline theology but more so because it simply challenges the traditional interpretation of Pauline theology. In order to buttress the primacy of the traditional interpretation of justification, *Faith*, in an overreaching statement, declares, "All the passages referenced by Paul in his teaching about faith view it as a one-way street in which human beings (the subject) trust in God (the object)" (92, emphasis added). In *Faith*, the traditional interpretation, the "axiomatic" idea in the church

that we believe in Christ, is regarded as a paramount necessity. *Faith's* pursuit of this necessity covers the remainder of the book, but this pursuit is unnecessary because even *Faith* begrudgingly acknowledges that both a subjective and objective accounting for faith can be supported by the language and grammar of the eight verses referring to the word *faith* in the letters of Paul.

An Unnecessary Choice

Hidden within the vast majority of its text in support of an objective understanding of faith, *Faith* glancingly acknowledges the possibility of both a subjective and objective view of faith, an acknowledgment that undermines its contention that all of Paul's references are a "one-way street in which human beings (the subject) trust in God (the object)" (92). For example, *Faith* points to a question posed by Morna D. Hooker: "It may well be that the answer to the question 'Does this phrase [πίστις Χριστοῦ] refer to Christ's faith or ours?' may be 'Both'" (42). *Faith* presents Hooker's answer but makes no effort to challenge it. Rather, *Faith* lets the answer stand; elsewhere it even refers to grammatical and theological support for both a subjective and objective interpretation for the source of justifying faith.

Faith spends the vast majority of its subsequent argumentation to buttress the traditional view of justification as being an issue of objective, Christ-oriented faith.

While this phrase [πίστις Χριστοῦ] has historically been understood as a reference to Christ as the object of our faith (the "faith in Christ" view), many English-speaking scholars now understand it as a reference to Christ's own faith or faithfulness (the "faithfulness of Christ" view). So much ink has been spilled over this debate in the last few decades that one might legitimately ask, Why does it really matter? At the level of grammar, these phrases can really be translated either way. And at the level of theology, both our faith and Christ's faithfulness are important. (24)

The FOC view is a reflection of the scriptural depiction that the faithfulness of Christ is a divine characteristic: God is faithful (1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:18). Because He is faithful, He cannot deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:13). When the word of Christ is heard, the faithful Christ is imparted and received along with His inability to deny Himself, and thus faith, even the faithful Christ, is realized. Then the hearer's response is to believe in the One who has been spoken of and who has been organically infused into him, the new believer, through the word of Christ. In light of this organic process, the need to choose, as specified by

Faith, between a subjective or objective interpretation of justifying faith is a false and unnecessary choice. Such a position violates the two sides of justifying faith: the faithfulness of the faithful Christ as the source of faith and the faithful response of a believer to Christ's imparted faith. Both Christ as the subject of faith and Christ as the object

of faith are necessary to fully understand the process of justification, and it is regrettable that *Faith* fails to more deeply explore this.

by John Pester

Christ as the Righteousness of God to the Believers

Many Christians say incorrectly that they have the righteousness of Christ...Our righteousness is not the righteousness of Christ; it is Christ Himself. Christ Himself as a person, not His attribute of righteousness, has been made the righteousness of God to us...Do not say that the righteousness of Christ has become your righteousness. Instead you should say, "Christ is my righteousness. My righteousness before God is the living person of Christ, not an attribute. The righteous Christ is mine." God has made Christ, who is the very embodiment of God Himself, our righteousness.

Second Corinthians 5:21 says that the believers are made the righteousness of God in Christ. Paul does not say that the believers are made righteous; he says that they are made righteousness. We have been made the righteousness of God in Christ...Christ is the embodiment of God, and...God, as a living person, is righteousness. Therefore, righteousness, God, and Christ are one. The righteousness of God is God Himself. Since this God is embodied in Christ, Christ is the righteousness of God. Christ has been wrought into us, and we have been put into Christ. We have been mingled together with Christ as one. Thus, we become the righteousness of God...Christ has been wrought into us...Since Christ has been wrought into us, we become one with Him.

The righteousness of God is not only God Himself in His justice and rightness, and it is not only the living person of Christ; it is also we who have been made one with Christ. The living person of Christ as God's righteousness has been wrought into us, and we have been put into Him. Therefore, we have been made the righteousness of God. We must proclaim, "I am the righteousness of God. I have been justified. God is righteousness, and I am too. I am the righteousness of God in Christ. I am what God is. I'm fully justified. God and I have been identified. I approve God, and He approves me. We mutually approve each other." This is justification by faith.

Some may think we should not say that we approve God. Nevertheless, we all must approve Him. God likes to be judged and approved by us (Rom. 3:4). Thus, we can say to God, "You approve us, and we approve You."

What is justification? Justification is God's action in approving people according to His standard of righteousness. His righteousness is the standard, not ours. Although we think we are righteous, our righteousness is only a quarter inch high. Regardless of how righteous we are or how righteous we think we are, our righteousness is just a fraction of an inch high. How high is God's righteousness? It is unlimited! Can you be approved by God according to your own righteousness? This is impossible. Although you may be right with everyone—with your parents, your children, and your friends—your righteousness will never justify you before God. You may justify yourself according to your standard of righteousness, but that does not enable you to be justified by God according to His standard. We need justification by faith. Justification by faith before God means we are approved by God according to the standard of His righteousness.

How can God do this? He can do it because our justification is based upon the redemption of Christ. When the redemption of Christ is applied to us, we are justified. If there were no such redemption, it would be impossible for us to be justified by God. Redemption is the basis of justification.

What is the meaning of propitiation? How shall we distinguish it from redemption on the one hand and reconciliation on the other? If we read the New Testament carefully, we will discover that reconciliation includes propitiation. Nevertheless, there is a difference between them. Propitiation means that you have a problem with another person. You have either offended him or else you owe him something. For instance, if I wrong you or am otherwise in debt to you, a problem exists between us. Because of this problem or debt, you have a demand upon me, and unless your demand is satisfied the problem between us cannot be resolved. Thus, there is the need for propitiation.

From *Life-study of Romans* by Witness Lee, pp. 49-51, 54