

A Lucid View of Coinherence and a Clouded Portrait of Deification and Eternal Life

Life in the Son: Exploring Participation and Union with Christ in John's Gospel and Letters, by Clive Bowsher. Apollos, 2023.

Clive Bowsher, provost of Union School of Theology, builds upon past investigations of participation, union, and Johannine literature in *Life in the Son: Exploring Participation and Union with Christ in John's Gospel and Letters* (hereafter *Life*) to articulate an expansive vision of coinherence (or in his preferred verbiage, “in-one-anotherness”) of believers and God—that is, believers dwelling in God and God dwelling in believers (3). Bowsher’s conclusions are admirable on several counts. For example, *Life* rightly affirms a “co-extensive” relationship between believers being begotten of God, possessing eternal life, and coinhering with God (150-151). Moreover, *Life*’s attentiveness to the context of John 14 enables the author to correctly recognize that verse 2 does not describe so-called heavenly mansions—despite a litany of traditional interpretations that argue otherwise.¹ Bowsher, instead, suggests that

‘many dwelling places’ in 14:2 is metaphorical language for the permanent, relational places in the presence of Jesus and the Father that the disciple will finally be taken to and that are described in 14:3. The phrase ‘many dwelling places’ speaks of the future eschatological reality of the life of the age to come *that corresponds directly* to the one already inaugurated in this world in 14:23, where the Father and Son are lovingly present with and make their dwelling with the disciple...

The two uses of *monē* in 14:2 and 14:23 are directly related, both speaking of relationship with and enjoying the presence of the Son, but previous commentators usually overlook the ‘already-not yet’ connection between the two. (35-36)

Additionally, he rightly suggests that Johannine union results in participation; that is, the believers’ oneness with God allows them to participate in the experiences of Jesus so that “the glorified-resurrected-returned Son works, speaks and reveals himself through them as his ones sent on mission” (114). Further, Bowsher aptly notes that the close resemblance of the “in-one-anotherness” of the believers with the “Father-Son” and the “in-one-anotherness” of the

Father and the Son imply that believers can be truly called children of God, that is, those “sharing in the sonship of Jesus” (126). Finally, he properly characterizes the believers’ in-one-anotherness with Christ as a relationship of love: “union with Christ in the Johannine Gospel and epistles consists of the loving, intimate, relational participation of the believer and God, each in the life, affections, ways and work of the other” (148).

Each of these positions is commendable. Apart from these positive elements, however, there are two outlooks that warrant measured critique. First, Bowsher contends that deification, or theosis, fails to properly describe Johannine theology, and he implicitly places the doctrine in conflict with his notions of in-one-anotherness and filiation. Additionally, his notion of the believers’ sharing in Jesus’ sonship requires clarification. Second, he posits a relational, participatory conception of eternal life that misapprehends a most precious scriptural reality—that is, the believers’ eternal life is nothing other than the uncreated, indestructible, incorruptible life of God (Eph. 4:18; Heb. 7:16; 2 Tim. 1:10), even God Himself (John 11:25; 14:6; 1 John 5:12-13). Both issues are discussed in the second half of this review.

An Overview

Life comprises eight chapters and four appendices. Chapter 1 provides an overview of past scholarship related to themes that are integral to Bowsher’s investigation. These include Paul’s portrayal of union with Christ (8), the notion of oneness in the Gospel of John (10), the portrayal of “divine presence” in the Johannine corpus (12), a conception of participation in eternal life as being “participation in the life of the age to come” (15), theosis and believers’ sonship (16), and an interpretation of the Greek participle *en* in Johannine literature as referring to “reciprocal immanence” (19). Bowsher also comments upon the methodology that he employs in *Life*—an “exegetical-theological” approach that is “driven by Johannine rather than systematic categories but clearly positioned in relation to theological work on union with Christ” (20-21).

In chapter 2 Bowsher examines four pericopes in John 6 and 13—17, which illuminate connections between oneness with Christ, participation with Christ, and eternal life (25). The first pericope, John 6:32-40, 47-59, is “the first instance of ‘in-one-another’ language in the Fourth Gospel” (26). A key takeaway from this passage is that eternal life is inextricably related to “relational feeding and drinking,” which, per

Bowsher, cannot refer to a sacramental or “eucharistic referent,” since these theological underpinnings would have been “unintelligible to all of Jesus’ original hearers” (27). He rather suggests that it refers to an “in-one-anotherness with Jesus,” a “relationship with Jesus” that “is not only the source and cause of life but life itself” (30). Bowsher’s analysis of the second pericope, 14:1-11, 15-24, leads him to conclude that believers and God mutually indwell one another both in the present age and in eternity (36). Bowsher suggests that the third passage, 15:1-17, demonstrates that “those that experience lasting in-one-anotherness with Jesus” are fruitful branches (38) who have “a lasting, life-giving, transforming, intimate relationship of mutual love and friendship” with Jesus (41). The final passage, 17:1-26, illumines another aspect of the believers’ in-one-anotherness with God—that it is “likened to the oneness of Father and Son” (47). Bowsher concludes the chapter with a synthetic summary of his foregoing analyses, which includes, apart from other suggestions, that *hē aiōnios zōē* (eternal life) is best understood as the “life of the age to come,” which itself is predicated upon “knowing the Father and Son through personal experience and relationship” (54).

Chapter 3 follows a similar format in its engagement with the Johannine Epistles. After a brief discussion of the themes of “reciprocity” and “the inseparability of behaviour and a person’s experience and knowledge of God” in 2 and 3 John (56), Bowsher divides 1 John into seven sections: 1:1—2:2; 2:3-17; 2:18-28; 2:29—3:10; 3:11—4:6; 4:7—5:4a; and 5:4b-21. Many of the themes discussed in chapter 2 are central to his analysis of John’s first Epistle: the believers’ in-one-anotherness with God (60, 62, 72-73), the relationship between this in-one-anotherness and eternal life (74-75), and the rendering of *zōē aiōnios* as the “life of the age to come” (57). Three elements, however, are unique to his analysis of 1 John: (1) the role of *koinōnia* (fellowship) in the believers’ relational participation in God (59, 62, 77); (2) the co-incidence of eternal life, Christological confession, believers’ being begotten of God, and their in-one-anotherness with God (67-68, 78); and (3) the role of the Spirit in this relationship. These elements, for Bowsher, may be summarized as follows:

To be a child, begotten of God, is to experience life-giving in-one-anotherness with God—a lasting relationship that involves the Spirit of God remaining in and transforming the individual. The assertion that to be begotten of God is, by definition, to be in life-giving relationship with God strengthens the notion that the individual shares and (relationally) participates in God’s life; the language of ‘begetting’ itself suggests such sharing. (78)

Chapter 4 recapitulates past findings of chapters 2 and 3 (81-84), identifies similar and dissimilar elements in the Gospel and Epistles (85-87), and links Johannine union and participation with *Life*’s main thesis: in-one-anotherness with God (87-91).

In chapter 5 Bowsher argues that the Gospel’s portrayal of the in-one-anotherness of the believers with the Son places them “on a journey or trajectory which is, in a sense to be made clear, the journey of Jesus” (93). Jesus, per Bowsher, has a parabolic journey in John’s Gospel: He comes down from heaven and returns to heaven once more (93-94). Between these endpoints, Jesus lived a life of glorification through sufferings, dying on behalf of others (102), making the Father known to the world (107), and being opposed and rejected by the world (109). Believers, or disciples (Bowsher’s preferred term), have a similar (though not identical) origin. They are born according to God’s will and not man’s, their birth is not human but spiritual, and their “genesis,” like Jesus’, is “in in-one-another relationship with the Father” (99). Disciples similarly trace Jesus’ journey for the rest of their lives. Per Bowsher, they: (1) “participate in Jesus’ mission to make the Father known, in part by their love for one another (13:14-16, 34-35), and to bring people into his family as children of God” (107); (2) “share in the opposition and persecution that Jesus experienced from the world because they share in speaking his revelatory word to the world,” and “as a result, they are hated and rejected by the world” (110-111); and (3) “participate in Jesus’ journey from death to glorification” by participating “in his death, both dying to self to bring life to others and having a share in the life that Jesus’ death brings” (102). In sum, disciples of Christ, for Bowsher, are ones who: (1) are sent into the world as a continuation of Jesus’ ministry (114), (2) are instruments through whom the “the Son recapitulates aspects of his own journey” (114-115), and importantly, (3) “have a share in the benefits of key ‘stations’ on Jesus’ journey: in his death (13:8) and in his resurrection-return (14:19)” (115).

Chapter 6 examines the portrayal of Jesus’ journey in 1 John and, thereafter, relates believers’ participation in His journey to “connections with the pattern of sonship, filiation, and theosis, or deification” (117). While Bowsher’s account of Jesus’ journey in 1 John broadly mirrors his discussion of John’s Gospel, two connections that he posits with these “patterns” are noteworthy. First, Bowsher recasts his foregoing discussion of in-one-anotherness in terms of filiation and sonship: “The in-one-another relationship of believers and Father-Son resembles the in-one-another relationship of the Son and Father; or, alternatively put, we have described the ways in which the filiation of believers (or, being children of God) is a sharing in the sonship of Jesus” (126). Second, Bowsher implicitly decouples filiation from theosis, arguing that the language of “in-one-anotherness” is “more elucidatory than the language of theosis” and contends that the notion of participation with Christ, as opposed to theosis, captures little-noticed elements of the believers’ relationship with the Father and the Son (127).

Chapter 7 explores how “in-one-anotherness” with Christ relates to the eschatological fulfillment of biblical covenants,

since, per Bowsher, “Johannine union with Christ is a *relational* participation of the believer and God, each in the life and works of the other” (132), and “the covenants ‘form [a] backbone of the metanarrative of Scripture’ and exhibit an ‘architectural structure that we believe the Scriptures themselves to yield’” (132, quoting Gentry and Wellum). For Bowsher, God’s relationships (and covenants) with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David contain the same patterns as John’s portrayal of union with Christ, which he sums up as “a life-giving, filial, obedient relationship with God, a relationship of reciprocal love, in which believers participate in God’s own work of revelation and mission” (133). Thus, he suggests that these covenants, “which involve God’s relational presence with his people, . . . culminate and climax in in-one-another relationship with Christ” (145). He further argues that the “temples of the OT (the garden of Eden, tabernacle, and physical temple)” follow the same trajectory—finding their fulfillment “in Jesus, in-one-anotherness with him, and the consummated marriage of the Son and his people in the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1 - 22:5)” (145).

In chapter 8 Bowsher summarizes his conclusions about Johannine union and participation with Christ. While the bulk of this chapter recapitulates past discussions, one important claim is advanced in *Life*’s final pages. Based upon past investigations by Susan Eastman and Grant Macaskill—both of whom argue that identity is “constituted relationally” by participation in entities larger than the individual self—*Life* argues that the “Johannine conception of the person” is that “(Christian) identity is constituted at the most basic level by in-one-another relationship with God, a self that is therefore both embodied and embedded ‘in God’” (150).

Life’s appendices discuss four issues. The first compares Johannine and Pauline portrayals of union with Christ. While the accounts have several commonalities, Bowsher argues that “union as an intimate relationship of reciprocal love between God and believers seems to be a Johannine distinctive” (154). The second appendix briefly outlines the themes of oneness and participation in the book of Revelation. While Bowsher does not detect the same level of emphasis upon “in-one-another relationship with Christ” in Revelation, he argues that the book “does emphasize participation in Christ’s kingdom, present and future” (159). The third appendix analyzes the Greek discourse of John 14:15-24, and the fourth examines the hortatory imperative use of the third person indicative in New Testament Greek outside of 1 John.

Coinherence, Sonship, and Deification: Complementary Truths, not Conflicting Doctrines

As noted, Bowsher correctly proposes that the in-one-another relationship of the believers and Father-Son resembles that of the Father and the Son (126)—though for the sake of clarity it would be remiss not to note that the neologisms *in-one-another* and *in-one-anotherness* are synonymous with the more common terms *coinherence* and *perichoresis*.

Life further argues that the filial relationship of believers with the Father is a “sharing in the sonship of Jesus” (126). While this claim is broadly accurate, specific nuances related to this claim warrant further clarification lest there be confusion about the aspects of Christ’s sonship that are tied to His unique redemptive person and work and those aspects that are shared and/or communicated with His regenerated believers. The “sonship” of Jesus has two aspects. First, from eternity past He is the only begotten Son of God according to His divinity (John 3:16). As the only begotten

Son of God, He had nothing to do with the human nature. In His incarnation, however, He put on human nature—yet even at that point, His human nature was not yet divinized, that is, not yet born of God. Second, after Christ passed through death and resurrection, His human nature was “designated the Son of God in power” (Rom. 1:4). In other words, the prophetic word of Psalm 2:7, “You are My Son; /

Today I have begotten You,” was fulfilled on the day of resurrection (Acts 13:33) when Christ was begotten as the Son of God—not as the only begotten Son of God, which He had always been and will always be according to His divinity, but as the firstborn Son of God, who, by virtue of being the “Firstborn,” has many brothers. These many brothers, from God’s view, were corporately born on the day of His resurrection (1 Pet. 1:3). Concerning this, Witness Lee states,

On the day of His resurrection Christ was begotten by God in His humanity. He became the firstborn Son of God in order to produce many sons of God. We need to realize that the date of our regeneration was the date of Christ’s resurrection. When Christ was resurrected from among the dead, we, all the believers, were resurrected with Him (1 Pet. 1:3). Through His resurrection He was born to be God’s firstborn Son, and at the same time all His believers were born to be the many sons of God. On the day of Christ’s resurrection, all God’s chosen people were resurrected and were born to be God’s many sons. Now God has many sons with both divinity and humanity. But among these many sons, only the Firstborn is His only begotten Son.

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This only begotten Son of God, in His resurrected humanity, is also the firstborn Son of God. As the firstborn Son of God, He has both divinity and humanity, and we His believers as God's many sons also possess both the human nature and divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). (*Secret* 42-43)

While believers participate in the aspects of Jesus' sonship as the firstborn Son of God according to the mingling of His human and divine natures, they have no share in His sonship according to His divinity, that is, as the only begotten Son of God. This latter aspect of Jesus' sonship is reserved for Christ alone, from eternity past to eternity future.

Bowsher's discussion of these truths meanders into significant error when he places them in dialogue with deification. By suggesting that deification is not as "elucidatory" of Johannine theology as in-one-anotherness or filiation (127), he implicitly separates these three doctrines from one another and, in a significant sense, places the latter two in conflict with the former. This contention is unscriptural, ahistorical within the Christian tradition, and an especially bewildering claim to make, given that Bowsher voices approval of the central role of filiation within the theology of the Greek Fathers (127). The Greek Fathers (as well as their Latin counterparts) were unequivocal and univocal in positing an inextricable relationship between sonship and deification, both in relation to Christ's sonship and the believers' sonship. Athanasius, for example, a key defender of orthodox Christology at the Council of Nicaea, utilizes Christ's ability to deify believers as evidence for His true divinity and divine sonship, and he further links these claims to the believers' relationship with the Father and the Son:

But this would not have come to pass, had the Word been a creature...For man had not been deified if joined to a creature, or unless the Son were very God; nor had man been brought into the Father's presence, unless He had been His natural and true Word who had put on the body. 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. (*Four Discourses*)

Elsewhere, in *De Incarnatione et Contra Arianos*, Athanasius argues that the believers' sonship and deification are interchangeable concepts:

Whatever Scripture says that the Son has received, it says because of His body; which is the first-fruits of the Church. For "Christ is the first-fruits" (1 Cor. 15:23). When the

first-fruits received the name that is above all names, then the entire mass was raised up with Him and seated with Him on His throne, according to the words: "He hath raised us up and seated us in Christ Jesus in the heavenly places." It is thus that men have received grace to be called gods and sons of God. (qtd. in Mersch 282-283)

For good measure, we note that Augustine, perhaps the most significant Latin theologian of the patristic era, also equates the believers' sonship with deification:

Since you are humans, you are the sons of humans; and if you are not sons of the Most High, then you are liars, for every human is a liar. But if you are sons of God—if you are redeemed by the grace of the Saviour, if you have been touched by his precious blood, if you have been reborn by the water and the Spirit, if you are destined to inherit the heavens—then you are truly the sons of God. Therefore you are also gods. (qtd. in Morrocco 191)

While space disallows a comprehensive treatment of the inextricable link between coinherence, sonship, and deification, the following passage from Lee is instructive:

If we believe in Him and receive Him, we will have the eternal life to be the sons of God. Christians today admit that all the believers in Christ are the sons of God or the children of God, but they do not dare admit that the believers in Christ are God. At the end of this age, we are teaching and preaching the truth that God became a man in order to make man God, the same as He is in life and in nature but not in the Godhead. (*Life-study* 28)

Those *in Christ* are those who "believe in Him and receive Him," and to receive Christ is to have Christ *in them*. This is coinherence. These ones, believers, are sons of God who are becoming God. While coinherence, sonship, and deification highlight distinct aspects of the relationship between believers and God, they are most assuredly complementary truths, not conflicting doctrines.

***Zōē Aiōnios* (eternal life): Not Merely "Relational Participation" in the Divine Life but the Uncreated, Indestructible Life of God and Even God Himself**

The above statement from Lee links yet another element to coinherence, sonship, and deification—that is, eternal life. This is a key theme for Bowsher, who often employs its Greek rendering, *zōē aiōnios*, to promote what he deems to be a better understanding of the concept: not merely as eternal life (though he still employs this term) but as "the life of the age to come" (28-29, 35, 42, 79, 103). Of greater import than this translation decision is his definition of *zōē aiōnios*: "the in-one-another relationship of the believer with the Son, as a *relational participation* in the divine life and

love (John 17:3)” (4). While it is true that believers depend upon an initial relational participation in God to obtain their eternal life once and for all, and it is further necessary for them to continually participate in Christ (or in Johannine language, to continually abide in Christ (John 15:4-5)) in order to experience the riches of this life, Bowsher’s contention that the believers’ eternal life is only relational to and participatory in the divine life creates a subtle, but nevertheless real, distinction between the life possessed by believers and the life of God. Concisely stated, it appears that for Bowsher, the believers’ eternal life only relationally participates in the divine life but is itself something different, that is, not the divine life itself.

Positing this distinction is a grave error. There is only one life in this universe that is “really life” (1 Tim. 6:19)—the uncreated, indestructible, incorruptible life of God (Eph. 4:18; Heb. 7:16; 2 Tim. 1:10). The Gospel of John demonstrates that this life was in Jesus (1:4; 5:26), that Jesus gives this life to whom He wills (v. 21), that Jesus’ words convey this life (6:63), that the object of Jesus’ earthly ministry was that humans “may have life and may have it abundantly” (10:10), and that believers today “may have life in His name” (20:31). There are no grounds to distinguish life, as mentioned in these verses, from the believers’ eternal life, which: (1) is afforded by belief in Jesus (3:15-16; 6:40), (2) is secured by coming to Jesus (5:40), and (3) enables believers to know God and Christ (17:3). In fact, John’s first Epistle explicitly disallows any such distinction or separation between the life that was in Jesus and the eternal life received by believers: “This is the testimony, that God gave to us eternal life and this life is in His Son” (5:11).

Perhaps even more amazing than the fact that the believers’ eternal life is the very life of God is the fact that Jesus not only has this life in Himself and not only gives this life to us but that He Himself is actually this life. When addressing Martha’s anxiety over her brother’s death, the Lord proclaimed, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes into Me, even if he should die, shall live” (John 11:25). Three chapters later, Jesus unveiled this matter once more to Thomas: “I am the way and the reality and the life” (14:6). An explicit link between the Son as life and the believer’s eternal life is found in 1 John 5:12-13: “He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. I have written these things to you that you may know that you have eternal life, to you who believe into the name of the Son of God.” This reality is similarly attested by Paul, who proclaims that “when Christ

our life is manifested, then you also will be manifested with Him in glory” (Col. 3:4). Here Paul does not say that our eternal life, which relationally participates in the divine life, is linked to glory but that Christ Himself is indeed our life, and this life will be manifested when both Christ and His believers are manifested in glory. A fitting summary is this:

In general, among Christians the eternal life, which is called “everlasting life,” has been understood not as a kind of life but as a kind of blissful environment for the believers of Christ to enjoy for eternity in heaven after they die...What a blunder this is! But thank the Lord that in the last seventy years He has recovered among us the scriptural view and the proper realization of the eternal life of God, which we have received of God through believing in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. It is a life on the highest plane, being the divine life of God and even the complete Triune God Himself, uncreated, incorruptible, indestructible, and also eternal. To be eternal means to be perfect and complete in quality, quantity,

time, space, and existence...It is with this eternal and everlasting, perfect and complete, incorruptible and indestructible, wonderful and marvelous life that we have been regenerated, that we are being transformed, and that we will be glorified with the consummated Triune God Himself as our eternal glory. This is eternal life! (1993 *Blending Conference*)

THE ETERNAL LIFE OF GOD IS A LIFE
ON THE HIGHEST PLANE, BEING
THE DIVINE LIFE OF GOD AND EVEN
THE COMPLETE TRIUNE GOD HIMSELF,
UNCREATED, INCORRUPTIBLE,
INDESTRUCTIBLE, AND ETERNAL.

Conclusion

Life represents a significant advancement in scholarship situated within the modern guild of biblical studies—and especially in relation to the Johannine corpus—that examines the themes of coinherence, union, and participation. Several arguments advanced by Bowsher are to be commended without reservation: (1) *Life* rightly affirms a “co-extensive” relationship between believers being begotten of God, possessing eternal life, and coinhering with God (150-151); (2) *Life* rejects the traditional interpretation of John 14:2 as referring to heaven and, instead, suggests that it refers to the believers’ abiding and coinhering relationship with the Father and the Son, both presently and eschatologically; (3) *Life* argues that the believers’ oneness with Christ allows Him to express Himself through their daily living (114); and (4) *Life* notes that the believers’ coinherence with God is an intimate relationship that exists within the sphere of love (148). *Life* also rightly suggests that the believers’ sonship is a “sharing” in Jesus’ sonship (126), though clarification of this claim is needed, as believers participate in the aspect of Jesus’ sonship related to His being the first-born Son of God but not in the aspect of His sonship related to His being the only begotten Son of God.

Notwithstanding these highlights, *Life* also contains two incorrect proposals. First, *Life* argues that deification is separate from, and implicitly in conflict with, coinherence and sonship. This is an indefensible claim, both in respect to the Scriptures and the historic Christian tradition. It is an especially perplexing argument, given that *Life* upholds the portrayal of filiation by the Greek Fathers, who unequivocally affirm a synonymous relationship between sonship and deification. Second, *Life* posits a subtle, but nevertheless real, distinction between the believers' eternal life and the life of God. While the congruence of eternal life and the life of God may perhaps seem incomprehensible to the human intellect, the Bible is unequivocal about this issue: the eternal life received and enjoyed by the regenerated believers is none other than the uncreated, incorruptible, indestructible life of God and even God Himself. While much more could be said, it suffices to note that believers are privy to the greatest honor in the entire universe: to be born of the life of God, to grow in the life of God, to mature in the life of God, and in doing so, to even become God in life, nature, expression, and function but not in the Godhead and never as an object of worship. This is the glorious destiny of those who are united to Christ, participating in Christ, and living a "life in the Son."

by Michael Reardon

Note

¹For a cogent refutation of the traditional interpretation of John 14:2-3 as speaking of heaven and/or heavenly mansions, see an article by Ron Kangas entitled "'In My Father's House': The Unleavened Truth of John 14" (*Affirmation & Critique*, vol. 5, no. 2, Apr. 2000, pp. 22-36).

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An Incomplete Revelation of the Life-giving Spirit

The Same God Who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations in Trinitarian Theology, by Adonis Vidu. William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2021.

In *The Same God Who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations in Trinitarian Theology* (hereafter *Inseparable*), Adonis Vidu, a professor of theology, forwards a "full-scale articulation and defense of the doctrine" (vi) of *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* ("external works of the Trinity are indivisible") in attempt to rectify the scarcity of consideration and clarification on "the theological question of what it means for the Trinitarian God to act" (xi-xiv). *Inseparable* accepts the "burden of proof" to defend the classical principle of inseparable operations of the Trinitarian persons, which it deems as "hard inseparability" ("every act token of any Trinitarian person is also an act token of the other persons"), not "soft inseparability" ("the divine persons participate in shared and collective actions together") (xv). To prove its case, the book tests the classical rule against the notions of contemporary Trinitarian theologians along multiple lines of divine actions, including creation, incarnation, atonement, ascension, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In all accounts *Inseparable* finds that "these various dogmatic engagements...exhibit the continued vitality of the rule of inseparable operations and...that the rule is properly biblical, that it can handle objections coherently and clearly, and finally that it is fecund in terms of its resources for additional constructive work in dogmatics" (xix). The prime reason *Inseparable* contends for the continual adherence to "the doctrine of inseparable operations [as] a dogmatic rule" is its "fidelity to scriptural revelation": "the inseparability rule in its classical interpretation...is grounded in Scripture, not in speculative deduction from the unity of divine essence" (xiv). Nevertheless, despite achieving its mission admirably and being worthy of overall affirmation and recommendation, *Inseparable* makes a critical error in its exposition of the crucial revelation of Christ becoming the life-giving Spirit for the believers' experience of the Divine Trinity.

Affirming the Defense of the Principle of Inseparable Operations

Inclusive of its deference to divine revelation, we must, at the outset, affirm *Inseparable's* epistemological humility applied throughout the volume but most cogently set forth in its concluding chapter. *Inseparable* correctly professes that the reality of Trinitarian attributes, such as divine simplicity, aseity, and transcendence, far exceeds our conceptual ability. According to *Inseparable*, grasping transcendent reality is akin to two-dimensional inhabitants of a flat plane trying to comprehend a three-dimensional sphere; at most, what they can register by sense is a circle (123, 319). On the counterbalance, the Scriptures reveal an immanent God who made Himself knowable by revelation, and that through faith we can come to realize, albeit limitedly, this One who surpasses

our finite senses and perception (319). Thus, it is by revelation that we finite creatures are able to register through our senses the visible effects of the divine operations and “learn to interpret what we experience as a manifestation of something that ultimately transcends our finite province as well as our capacities” (319). Hence, *Inseparable* maintains that “basic Trinitarian concepts cannot be directly explained and fully defined” and that “theological progress takes the form of a gradual purification of our speech about God, by stipulating grammatical rules rather than shining the light of comprehension on transcendent realities” (95). By our hearing and seeing the revelation of the Trinity in His inseparable operations, we are guided to formulate certain propositions to describe divine actions that equally uphold Their “numerical unity of the divine substance” while preserving the “real distinction of the three persons” (95). In other words, “in faith we confess that since God is triune—something we have learned not from observing separate effects, but having been taught propositionally to ascribe the same effects to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—we have to describe every divine action in inseparable-Trinitarian terms” (322).

In the first three chapters *Inseparable* outlines the dogmatic rule of inseparable operations and preliminarily introduces the arguments that effected a general withdrawal from it among modern scholars. While contemporary studies eschew denouncing the said rule, *Inseparable*’s examination of current literature manifests their softening stance on the hard rule and reveals their suggestions of “much better ways of making sense of the data of Scripture and of Christian practice” while retaining the “general idea of noncompetitiveness and cooperation between the triune persons” (xv).

In chapter 1 *Inseparable* begins by painting the current state of a biblical theology of inseparable operations with the backdrop of Jewish monotheism. *Inseparable* shows that the biblical record confirms that Christ and the Spirit are identified with YHWH by “their sharing in the divine agency” (50) but that modern scholarship proposes that other divine agents also exist. Although it is possible to delegate certain “covenantal activities” to lesser beings (e.g. angels), for these lesser beings to “mediate divine presence and even to command worship,” the ascription to Christ of the very act of creation evidences His status of divinity as well as His “inseparability from the Father”: “to say that Christ creates is the same as saying that God creates” (50). Christ creates not as a mere instrument but *ex nihilo* as God Himself, for there was no instrument to be had prior and no preparatory acts required (51). The ascription to Jesus Christ of God’s creative activity is “a step of momentous significance and

the strongest possible biblical support for the doctrine of inseparable operations” (23). Moreover, Christ discharges His covenantal duties in a qualitatively different manner from other divine agents, not as delegated authority but by His innate authority (51).

Christ’s immanent identity as the Creator, the second chapter elucidates, became the chief argument for the church fathers concerning His divinity, along with His operative inseparability in the Godhead. The chapter explains the emergence of the doctrine from patristic (e.g., Athanasius, Didymus, and Basil) and medieval (e.g., Aquinas) theologies, which “affirm the unity of the divine will, divine energy, and divine power,” and the modern decline from, indeed abrogation of, hard inseparability so established (52-53, 62). The fundamental objection to the doctrine grew out of its rigid application and is principally epistemological: “The inseparability rule (1) makes it impossible to individuate the persons [the *individuation problem*]; (2) condemns theology to austere descriptions of the persons simply in terms of their relations of origin [the *personal description problem*]; and (3) depersonalizes divine action and fails to account for the self-donation of the distinct persons to created natures” (88-89). *Inseparable* observes that “the primary interest of modern Trinitarianism is to recover the personal distinctiveness of the triune hypostases, correcting the perceived one-sidedness of the traditional emphasis on unity” (90).

A CRUCIAL REVELATION
IN THE SCRIPTURES
IS CHRIST BECOMING
THE LIFE-GIVING SPIRIT
FOR THE BELIEVERS’ EXPERIENCE
OF THE DIVINE TRINITY.

In the third chapter *Inseparable* examines the unity and distinction in divine action by explaining the metaphysical logic of the doctrine of inseparable operations. At the outset *Inseparable* is cognizant of the limitations of any theological efforts to comprehend, much less explain or define, transcendent realities of the Divine Being and His movements or acts; at most, advances in theological concepts are a “form of a gradual purification of our speech about God” (95). Like a two-dimensional being existing on a flat plane trying to grasp three-dimensional existence and actions, a responsible theologian must be mindful to not take his experience of God’s economic actions at face value but remain conscious of the extra-dimensionality of divine causality (123). *Inseparable* upholds the traditional understanding of the “equiprimordiality of persons and nature” and that “each divine person is identical with the substance, but under a particular and irreducible relational aspect” (123-124). Arguing that this “leads us to the logic of *ad extra* inseparability,” the book concludes that the persons act by virtue of Their one essence yet in a differentiated triune causality: “Just as the persons are different modes of existence of the divine substance, so they have different modes within the

selfsame operation of God” (124). This “differentiated operative modality” counters the modern stance toward triune personalism, which places the divine will to act in the persons, and sides with “orthodoxy by grounding will in nature” (124). Hence, “the triune persons too act on the basis of a common will and power of nature, and yet they enact this will in three irreducible modalities” (124).

In the remaining chapters *Inseparable* continues its principled defense of the doctrine along the lines of the major operations of the Trinity that have drawn attention and disputation from modern theologians—creation, incarnation of the Son, atonement and subsequent resurrection, ascension and Pentecost, and the indwelling of the Spirit. Of these, we will highlight *Inseparable*’s defense of the hard version of inseparable operations in the incarnation, since the doctrine “stands or falls with its ability to account for the orthodox claim that it was the Son of God alone who became incarnate” (158). The obvious dilemma posed to the doctrine with regard to incarnation is that if the Son becomes incarnate, it would follow that both the Father and the Spirit also undertake incarnation, which is unacceptable. *Inseparable* mitigates this conundrum, à la Augustine and Aquinas, by distinguishing between actions and states. An action must entail some change of state in an event and be ascribed to an intentional agent. To help grasp this, *Inseparable* offers the analogy of the dressing of a lord by his butler. Although the lord himself could be a participant, the butler takes the *action* of dressing, but the *state* of being dressed rests with the lord alone. In the event of incarnation, the entire Trinity has the agency of causing the Son to assume human nature, but the “action results in a state that characterizes the Son alone” (162). Thus, it is not contradictory to say that the Son alone has human nature as long as the assumption of humanity “does not designate the action but the state resulting from the action” (162). In other parts of the chapter, *Inseparable* engages other challenges to the *opera ad extra* rule that continues to demonstrate its resilience.

Critiquing the Incorrect Understanding of Christ Becoming the Life-giving Spirit

We can affirm *Inseparable*’s stand with the traditional and orthodox Trinitarian dogma and generally agree with its astute responses to challenges from modern theology. However, we must also be faithful to point out the significant flaw in *Inseparable*’s understanding of the promised Spirit after Christ’s glorification. Before delving into the main critique, we turn first to a relatively minor issue, which is that the book’s articulation is inaccessible to the majority of believers, in part because they are mostly uninitiated in Trinitarian debates and in part due to the philosophical and metaphysical speak employed by *Inseparable*, which can often appear to be a “forest” of abstraction and terminology. Although, to be fair, *Inseparable* may have been strictly written for the academic audience, it is nonetheless unfortunate that such

a forceful defense of a fundamental theological principle is not more accessible to the general Christian audience, since the Word reveals that the Divine Trinity is for our Christian experience (Eph. 1:3-14; 2 Cor. 13:14), not primarily for theological study, much less doctrinal debates. Although there are efforts to mitigate the difficulty of theo-linguistics with analogies and examples, and despite the book’s limited scope, it often seems impenetrable, nearly impossible to derive from its text guidance for the application of the rich experiences of the Divine Trinity, which is the purpose of God’s being triune.

There is a more significant issue with which we disagree and must critique. In the penultimate chapter, entitled “Ascension and Pentecost,” *Inseparable* examines the “apparent handoff between the departing Son and the descending Spirit” (247). *Inseparable* particularly relies on the interpretation of John 16:7 in relation to 7:39. In John 16:7 Jesus said, “It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Comforter will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.” John 7:39 says, “This He said concerning the Spirit, whom those who believed into Him were about to receive; for the Spirit was not yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.” *Inseparable* insists that 16:7 shows “beyond doubt that Jesus did condition sending the Spirit on his having ascended” (260). Simultaneously, citing Jesus’ warning to Mary to not cling to Him until He ascended to the Father (20:17), *Inseparable* contends that the Johannine record confirms that Jesus was unable to “send the Spirit even after the resurrection” (260). *Inseparable* is cognizant of the “so-called Johannine Pentecost” (20:22) but curiously explains the event as an empowering of the Spirit, rather than the Spirit coming to indwell the believers. *Inseparable* bases this empowering of the Spirit, which it considers as being within the “framework of the Old Testament dispensations of the Spirit,” on “a significant strand of the [theological] tradition” and cites the forgiving and withholding of forgiveness in verse 23 as the “task for this empowering work” (260).

Moreover, *Inseparable* argues that the outpouring of the Spirit could not occur before Christ’s ascension, because His human nature needed to be filled with the Spirit, a process that took time and was not completed until His ascension. *Inseparable* agrees with the claim that Christ’s human nature was gradually and “progressively deified, culminating in his transfigured resurrection body” (273). To add to the misconception, *Inseparable* also accepts the notion that while the Spirit was present and active in Jesus’ life from His conception, He did not receive the “*indwelling of the Spirit in his human nature*” until His baptism (264): “The Spirit whom Jesus receives at baptism is indeed proceeding from the common love between the Father and the Son. But that which commences at baptism is only ready to be poured out once it completes the process of glorification and transformation of Jesus’s own human nature” (265). According to

Inseparable, the reason that the Son could not send the Spirit was the “inability of Christ’s human nature to fully mediate the coming forth of the Spirit until its full transfiguration” (266). This full transfiguration, in *Inseparable*’s understanding, occurred at Pentecost (269).

Inseparable makes the critical error of relating Christ’s ascension to Pentecost as the only instance of the receiving of the Spirit. Although Jesus did state that it was required that He had to go away so that the Comforter could come (16:7), the first ascension of the resurrected Jesus was privately to the Father in 20:17, prior to His ascension in Acts 1:9-11, shortly before Pentecost. By not seeing the difference between these two ascensions, *Inseparable* misses the significance of the one Spirit in two aspects—Christ’s breathing into the believers the essential Spirit (John 20:22) for their Christian life and living (14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13) and the Holy Spirit’s coming upon them to be the Spirit of power to them economically (promised by the Father in Luke 24:49 and fulfilled in Acts 2:1-4) for their Christian ministry and work (1:8). It is this latter aspect of the Spirit’s work that matches the Spirit of power that rested upon the Old Testament prophets (2 Kings 2:9, 13-15). *Inseparable* is incorrect to infer that the “Johannine Pentecost” in John 20:22 represents the Spirit’s empowering; rather, it is the Lord’s breathing of the Spirit into the believers as their life and everything for them to live the Christian life.

These two aspects of the Spirit’s operating within and upon the believers mirror the essential aspect of the Spirit present and constitutive in Jesus’ conception (Luke 1:35) and the economical aspect of the Spirit who came upon Him during His baptism for His ministry (Matt. 3:16). Witness Lee says,

Before the Spirit of God descended and came upon Him, the Lord Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). This proves that at the time of His baptism He already had the Spirit of God within Him. The Spirit’s being within Him was for His birth. Now for His ministry the Spirit of God descended upon Him. This was the fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1; 42:1; and Psalm 45:7, and was carried out to anoint the new King and introduce Him to His people. (*Recovery Version*, Matt. 3:16, note 3)

I do not agree with *Inseparable*’s assertion that it was at the moment of His baptism that Jesus received the indwelling Spirit in His humanity (264); this is true neither for Jesus nor for His regenerated believers. He was constituted with the Spirit by virtue of His miraculous conception just as we

were indwelt by the Spirit through regeneration, our divine birth. There is little, if any, scriptural evidence presented to support *Inseparable*’s understanding that the outpouring of the Spirit was predicated on the gradual deification through glorification of Jesus’ human nature (273-274). That Christ was present in His breathing out of the Spirit into the disciples and that He remained with them—appearing at times in His resurrected body while still present invisibly at other times—refute *Inseparable*’s notion that He could not send the Spirit while He had an earthly presence.

At the end of the chapter, *Inseparable* points out that to speak of the “second Adam” becoming a life-giving Spirit is not to confuse the Spirit and Christ but to recognize the transfiguration and pneumatization of His human nature and that the Spirit who came down on Pentecost is the Spirit of Christ (276-277). Though correct, this view falls far short of the divine revelation in both 1 Corinthians 15:45 and John 7:39. First of all, the context of 1 Corinthians 15 being Christ’s resurrection contradicts *Inseparable*’s argu-

ment that the life-giving Spirit, the pneumatized form of Christ, the Spirit of Christ, came to be in the “ascension-Pentecost sequence” (274). In fact, the Spirit who gives life had already been breathed into the believers for Christ to indwell them spiritually prior to His public ascension and Pentecost (John 6:63; 20:22; Rom. 8:11). Furthermore, *Inseparable* does not speak on the significance of the Spirit whom

Jesus promised to send in John 16:7 and about whom He prophesied in 7:39. The Greek text of verse 39 was ostensibly a cause of unease among English translators, most of whom may have been puzzled at the seemingly abrupt stop after the phrase *the Spirit was not yet* and saw fit to provide a verb, often *given*, to complete the thought. This presumption obfuscates the intended revelation while introducing an erroneous connection to the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. If Bible readers take John at his literal word—that “the Spirit was not yet”—they are then required to confront the revelation that the Spirit who “was not yet” is actually the Spirit whom Christ became upon His resurrection. Lee explains this succinctly:

The Spirit of God was there from the beginning (Gen. 1:1-2), but at the time the Lord spoke this word, the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9), the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:19), was not yet, because the Lord had not yet been glorified. Jesus was glorified when He was resurrected (Luke 24:26). After Jesus’ resurrection, the Spirit of God became the Spirit of the incarnated, crucified, and resurrected Jesus Christ, who was breathed into the disciples by Christ in the evening of the day on which He was resurrected (20:22).

THE FIRST ASCENSION
OF THE RESURRECTED JESUS
WAS PRIVATELY TO THE FATHER
IN JOHN 20:17, PRIOR TO
HIS ASCENSION IN ACTS 1:9-11,
SHORTLY BEFORE PENTECOST.

The Spirit is now the “another Comforter,” the Spirit of reality promised by Christ before His death (14:16-17). When the Spirit was the Spirit of God, He had only the divine element. After He became the Spirit of Jesus Christ through Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, the Spirit had both the divine element and the human element, with all the essence and reality of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. Hence, the Spirit is now the all-inclusive Spirit of Jesus Christ as the living water for us to receive (vv. 38-39). (*Recovery Version*, v. 39, note 1)

The Spirit is deeply significant in the scheme of the New Testament and essential to the ultimate fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose because the term denotes the consummate form of the Triune God for His constitution and operation within the believers. The life-giving Spirit, the Spirit whom Jesus became and breathed out into the disciples on the day of His resurrection, is the fulfillment of the promised Spirit of reality (1 Cor. 15:45b; John 20:22).¹ In John 14:16-17 Jesus said, “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Comforter, that He may be with you forever, even the Spirit of reality, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him; but you know Him, because He abides with you and shall be in you.” This Spirit of reality was breathed into the believers in John 20:22 not only to be their life, life supply, and everything but also to begin a new dimension of Trinitarian operation—operating within the believers as the indwelling Spirit (Rom. 8:11). The Son is the embodiment of the Father (Col. 2:9), but in resurrection the Son became *the Spirit* for the purpose of bringing the reality of all that the Triune God is in His communicable attributes and all that He has attained and obtained through Christ’s incarnation, human living, death, resurrection, and ascension into regenerated humanity through His indwelling.

The object of the indwelling Spirit being the subjective God to the believers is revealed in John 16:13, in which the Lord Jesus said, “When He, the Spirit of reality, comes, He will guide you into all the reality; for He will not speak from Himself, but what He hears He will speak; and He will declare to you the things that are coming.” As the Spirit of reality who indwells the believers, He guides them into all the reality—all that the Son is and has—that is, into the subjective experience of the attributes of the Triune God, including love and knowledge. In its final chapter *Inseparable* attempts to counterbalance contemporary efforts to “conceptualize the union” between the believer and the divine persons “metaphysically” (279). While *Inseparable*’s efforts are, again, generally affirmable, it touches on but fails to sufficiently emphasize the point that the Divine Triune is essentially one but economically three so that the believers can experience God subjectively. One among many biblical examples is 2 Corinthians 13:14: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Lee explains,

This verse is strong proof that the trinity of the Godhead is not for the doctrinal understanding of systematic theology but for the dispensing of God Himself in His Trinity into His chosen and redeemed people. In the Bible the Trinity is never revealed merely as a doctrine. It is always revealed or mentioned in regard to the relationship of God with His creatures, especially with man, who was created by Him, and more particularly with His chosen and redeemed people. (*Recovery Version*, v. 14, note 1)

That this verse speaks of the fellowship of the Spirit and the love of God while other verses speak of the love of the Spirit (Rom. 15:30) and the fellowship of the Son (1 Cor. 1:9) demonstrates not merely that They operate inseparably but also that Their operation is to give, to dispense, Himself into His redeemed and regenerated people for their experience and even enjoyment, meeting all their needs.²

Conclusion

Inseparable’s defense of the classic interpretation of the doctrine of inseparable operations is worthy of our attention and affirmation. Balanced by a healthy sense of humility before the unfathomable depths of the mystery that is the Divine Trinity, *Inseparable* meets the burden of proof for showing the resilience and fertility of the hard inseparability rule, against some modern theologians’ efforts of distinguishing the persons of the Trinity in ways that risk Their unity. While *Inseparable*’s attempts to ground its stance on biblical revelation is admirable, it nevertheless is unscriptural in parsing the sequence and significance of Christ’s resurrection and ascension, as well as the outpouring of the Spirit at the Pentecost. This shortcoming renders it off the mark in seeing the crucial revelation of Christ as the life-giving Spirit—the Spirit sent by the Father in the Son’s name, the Spirit who gives life to and indwells all the believers for their experience and enjoyment of the Trinity in their Christian life and work.

by Kin Leong Seong

Notes

¹For a more thorough discussion of the central points of Christ as the life-giving Spirit, see Ed Marks, “The Second ‘Becoming’ of Christ,” *Affirmation & Critique*, vol. 1, no. 4, Oct. 1996, pp. 10-22.

²For an insightful discussion of the Triune God as our experience, see Ron Kangas, “The Subjective God: The Trinity in Christian Experience,” *Affirmation & Critique*, vol. 2, no. 1, Jan. 1997, pp. 28-43.

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