

# Foundations

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# Foundations

*Foundations* is an international journal of evangelical theology published in the United Kingdom. Its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, taking in exegesis, biblical theology, church history and apologetics, and to indicate their relevance to pastoral

ministry. Its particular focus is the theology of evangelical churches which are committed to biblical truth and evangelical ecumenism. It has been published by Affinity (formerly The British Evangelical Council) from its inception as a print journal. It became a digital journal in April 2011.

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## EDITORIAL

*Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. (1 Cor 15:49, ESV)*

One of the ways Affinity seeks to serve the church is through its bi-annual theological study conference. It is a great pleasure to see the papers delivered at the 2021 conference now appear in print in Foundations. Commenting on the conference theme, the conference chairman Paul Yeulett said:

*The theme of the 2021 Affinity Theological Study Conference will be “The Undiscovered Country”. The theme of Biblical Eschatology was agreed several months before the word “coronavirus” entered our vocabularies. But it seems more appropriate than ever, given the circumstances through which we are now living. Not only pastors and preachers, but all Christians who know that the Bible furnishes us with a sure and certain hope, will greatly benefit from this Conference.*

Paul’s hope, expressed in advance of the conference, is abundantly fulfilled in the conference papers which are engaging and thought provoking.

The first paper, from Rupert Bentley-Taylor, seeks to equip believers to live in the “last days” from the perspective of “optimistic amillennialism”. We are reminded that as we await Christ’s return that victory is assured, that the preaching of the gospel to all nations is the great activity of the last days, that Satan is active seeking to deceive and persecute, that the antichrist will emerge, that we are to be watchful and that there is glory ahead of us.

In the second paper Paul Yeulett seeks to cover the topic, “Questions About the So-Called ‘Intermediate State’: Is it Biblical and it is Pastorally Helpful?” Paul argues that for believers the “intermediate state is such that the souls of believers, immediately after death, go to be ‘forever with the Lord’, with the risen and exalted Christ himself, which Paul declared to be ‘far better’ (Phil 1:23)”. After an interesting historical overview, Paul argues persuasively from scripture for his position.

Michael Horton of Westminster Seminary California provides the third paper which gives us an “investigation into what the Early Church Fathers, especially Irenaeus and Origen, understood about the human body, soul and spirit, especially in the light of Christ’s ascension and the eternal state.” Aside from the historical theology, and answers to questions like “So, will there be hairdressers in heaven?” we are treated to a rich biblical theological study of Psalm 68 in the light of its citation in Ephesians 4.

The fourth paper covers the much-debated question of the Pauline references to the future of Israel in Romans 11. Whilst Gareth Burke's paper is one of the shorter ones, it generated the most discussion at the Theological Study Conference. After providing an outline of Paul's teaching in Romans through to the end of chapter 11 we are given an exegesis of Rom 11:25-27, and in particular v26a, "And in this way all Israel will be saved." The paper supports the exegetical position of John Murray that this verse (indeed Romans 11 more generally) teaches a future conversion of national Israel.

The fifth, and final, paper from Paul Mallard provides us with biblical and pastoral reflections on the nature and character of the world to come. In this paper we are treated to discussion of the location of the heavenly life, the nature and the activities of the heavenly life, what the Bible sees as the primary business of heaven (the enjoyment of God) and the practical and pastoral implications of these topics. There is much to encourage in this paper, and it is a very fitting note on which to conclude the papers from the conference.

The usual helpful selection of book reviews is also included in this volume, and my thanks to Matthew for his work on these.

My prayer is that this edition of Foundations would enable us to increasingly live out the apostolic injunction to "live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:12-13.)

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*November 2021*

# THE HOPES AND FEARS OF ALL THE YEARS: THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH IN THIS PRESENT AGE

*Rupert Bentley-Taylor \**

## *Introduction*

My purpose in this paper is to address an immensely pressing, practical and pastoral issue – how do we who lead and teach God’s people, prepare and equip the saints to live in these last days? By the last days I mean, as the New Testament does<sup>1</sup>, this whole period between Christ’s first and second comings. There are two things I am not doing: Firstly, I am, of course, not saying all that could be said on such a vast topic. Secondly, I am not going to unpick and critique all the different millennial views. Others have done that most competently.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible, however, to discuss these matters without taking some stance and, as you will no doubt detect, I would espouse what Cornelis Venema calls an “optimistic amillennialism”.<sup>3</sup>

Sadly, in the past, discussion about the Lord’s return has sometimes been so heated, divisive and unedifying that many have backed off the topic. When I decided in my church in 1993 to preach through Revelation I found that there had been practically no preaching on that book for twenty years because there had been such a history of contention in the church surrounding the issue. Thankfully, I think that is less a factor in this current generation. However, even the term “eschatology” sounds like something obscure and complex, best left to theologians and scholars. There is therefore a particular obligation on all of us to teach the Bible so as to show our people clearly the fantastic glory that God has promised and its daily relevance for every one of us of living in the light of it. And we need to do so in a spirit of humility. We have to remember that “now we see in a mirror dimly... Now I know in part” (1 Cor 13:12). Therefore, we should treat each other with due respect and regard, even when we do not understand everything in an identical way.

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\* Rupert Bentley-Taylor served as a pastor for 30 years, firstly in Bournemouth and then in Bath. He and his wife, Margie, are currently involved in a new church, Emmanuel, in Bath.

<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:16-17, Hebrews 1:2.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Cornelis Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000) and Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grands Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> *The Promise of the Future*, 360 fn.

In this paper I am going to identify five aspects of what we are to expect in this present age. But, of course, none of these aspects stands alone; each is part of a bigger whole. Most of them are being worked out simultaneously right now. It is only when we see the whole picture that we can understand the perfect balance of all these truths that God's Word sets out for us.

## *I. Victory Assured*

I think that many believers today in the UK feel that we live in discouraging times. The hearts of people around us are hard; those coming to faith are relatively few. Our own people may feel disheartened in gospel proclamation because it may seem that it is only in other parts of the world that God is powerfully at work today. The tide in our society is increasingly hostile to Christian faith and living. We can point to all sorts of forces of darkness at work in our society such as materialism, immorality, secular humanism and militant Islam. As a result, many believers today feel at least a little intimidated. And, of course, the Scriptures do speak very realistically of the struggles of this age. The Lord tells us, "In this world you will have tribulation" (Jn 16:33); Peter warns that, "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8) and in Romans 8 Paul speaks of the whole creation "groaning together" (v.22) and adds that "we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly" (v.23).

Yet it is absolutely fundamental, if we are to think rightly and biblically about this present age, that we look back, look around and look ahead with the greatest confidence. Our starting point is the victory won in the past and assured in the future. We could deduce that simply from the sovereignty of our God. In Jeremiah 32:27 we read, "Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is anything too hard for me?" Romans 8:31 asks, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" The answer, of course, is not that there is no one against us, but they simply do not count because God is for us! He is gloriously overwhelming!

Moreover, God has given us his promises. On the very day that sin invaded our world, God promised to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15 that an offspring of the woman would crush the serpent's head. In Daniel 2, in the dream God gave Nebuchadnezzar, we read of a rock that hit the huge statue that represented the kingdoms of this world. And then it says, "the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth" signifying that "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever" (Daniel 2:34-35). Isaiah 9:7 speaks wonderfully of the Christ to come, that "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end".

We can look ahead with invincible confidence because the promised Christ came, lived, taught, died, rose, ascended and reigns right now. This is all

already accomplished. Colossians 2:15 declares of Christ that “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them”. Ephesians 1:19-22 speaks of

*the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church.*

In the light of such promises how can we be disheartened? Before his ascension Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt 28:18). When John saw the risen Lord Jesus, we read in Revelation 1, he fell as though dead at his feet because of the sheer glory of who he is. In addition, we who believe have been given God’s Spirit, who in three places Paul affirms is “a deposit, guaranteeing” what is to come and our inheritance (2 Cor 1:22, 5:5; Eph 1:14). As Berkhof rightly says, “The Christian hopes for far greater blessings in the future, not because he has now so little, but because he already has so much”.<sup>4</sup>

In Ephesians 2:5-7 Paul, says with ringing confidence, that God

*made us alive together with Christ... and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

And Christ is not just our king but the king of the entire universe. So Philippians 2:9-11 famously declares that

*God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Venema calls us to

*...a lively expectation of the accomplishment of God’s purpose in Christ. The future does not loom darkly on the horizon as something to be feared. It is*

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 21.



*something to be eagerly expected and anticipated... bright with the promise of the completion and perfection of God's saving work.*<sup>5</sup>

Commenting on the promise in 1 Corinthians 15 of the victory of Christ over death, John Murray says, "Even now there is exultant thanksgiving in anticipation of the glory to be revealed... Pessimism contradicts the Christian faith because it knows not the believer's hope".<sup>6</sup>

Thus the Bible calls us to a robust confidence in this present age. This same point could easily be established from any number of other biblical references. Despite everything Satan throws at us, Paul concludes "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom 8:37). Our hope is not based on what we see around us or the state of our churches. Our hope is based on who our God is, what God has done in Christ and what God promises to us. Satan, of course, wants to quench any such confidence and deprive believers of the oxygen of hope that God has given us. Whatever other things we also want to say about the church in this present age, it is absolutely incumbent on us as teachers of God's Word to thrill the hearts of our hearers with the sparkling assurance of victory.

## *II. The Compulsion of the Gospel*

God Almighty is working out in this present age his eternal plan of salvation to undo the works of Satan, the rebellion of humanity, the grip of sin and the curse of death and to bring into being a redeemed and forgiven people of God from every nation on earth, who one day will be gathered in the glory that lies ahead. The priorities of the church and every individual believer are to be shaped by God's salvation plan.

From the beginning of the Bible, we read of God's world-wide purposes. In Genesis 12:2-3 God promised to Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed". The rest of the Bible is the outworking of that promise. The prophets repeatedly anticipate the coming of a future Messiah whose rule will encompass the whole world. In Isaiah 49:6 God says to his Servant, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth".

It is therefore no surprise that before he ascended, the risen Jesus set out the abiding task for his church in this age: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

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<sup>5</sup> Venema, *The Promise of the Future*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 412-413.

Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). In Acts 1:8 Jesus promised supernatural enabling for this task: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth". The church is not just the product of God's saving purposes but is also his instrument to advance his saving purposes. Acts records the spread of the gospel, starting in Jerusalem and spreading across the Roman Empire and, before his death in Rome, Paul was already anticipating taking the gospel to Spain (Rom 15:24, 28).

The apostle's zeal to take the gospel across the world is not really recorded for our admiration, but for our instruction. Jesus says, "I am the Light of the world" (John 8:12), but he also says to his disciples "You are the light of the world" (Matt 5:14). The most awesome thing that is going on in this world is not found in our media headlines but is that Christ is building his church, fulfilling his salvation plan. In Revelation 20, in the famous and much-discussed description of Satan being "bound for a thousand years" and thrown into a sealed pit (v.2), which I understand as symbolic of the church age, the specified purpose is "that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended" (v.3). The key characteristic of this present age is that it is the age of gospel advance across the world.

Yet when we speak of "the signs of the times" our minds tend to go to wars and rumours of wars, and famines and earthquakes which Christ tells us must take place, and of which he says, "see to it that you are not alarmed" (Matt 24:6), rather than to the compulsion of the gospel. Venema speaks of "The common failure to note that the preaching of the gospel of Christ to the nations is a sign of the period between Christ's first and second coming".<sup>7</sup> He adds that "The preaching of the gospel to all creation and discipling of the nations – these are the great tasks of Christ's church in this present period of history and they express his present rule as king".<sup>8</sup> Hoekema declares that "the preaching of the gospel to all nations is, in fact, the outstanding and most characteristic sign of the times. It gives to the present age its primary meaning and purpose."<sup>9</sup> Surely these brothers are absolutely right. It is our responsibility as preachers to keep the task of taking the gospel to our nation and to the ends of the earth as the number one priority of our churches.

Moreover, in Matthew 24:14 Christ connects the timing of his return with the preaching of the gospel: "This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come". In a similar vein, when Peter answers those who mock the apparent delay of Christ's return, he argues "The Lord is not slow to fulfil his

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<sup>7</sup> Venema, *The Promise of the Future*, 120.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>9</sup> Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 138.

promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). The timing of Christ's return, when it will be too late to repent, is determined by God's longing to save more sinners before that great and terrible Day comes. When, in that curious phrase, Peter goes on to speak of "hastening the coming of the day of God" (v.12) what can he mean in the context but that by preaching the gospel we may be agents of God's mercy to fill up the numbers of all who will repent and believe, thus removing the reason for Christ's apparent delay? There is something fundamentally wrong in any church today if we do not share God's longing for the salvation of sinners across the world before it is too late. The mere fact that Christ has not yet returned is proof that there is urgent gospel work to be done, otherwise he would have already returned.

One aspect of the advance of the gospel to which the New Testament gives particular significance is the conversion of Israel of which Paul speaks in Romans 9 to 11. We have a whole paper on this topic so I will not dwell much on this. But Paul's passion for the conversion of his people is surely not simply the product of a particular identification with his own race, but is there to instruct us in God's salvation purposes that are yet to play out more fully among the Jewish people. The New Testament church began with Jewish believers, and through history there have always been Jews who put their faith in Christ. There is no different gospel for Jewish people. But Romans 11 clearly anticipates a massive turning of Jews to Christ before his return. So, evangelism to Jewish people has to be on our agenda.

Surely, Satan is quite happy if believers engage in debates about eschatology and even run conferences on the topic if it remains theoretical and speculative without urgent outcome. Satan will do his utmost to thwart the preaching of the gospel across the world. We see that happening in Acts, as the Judaisers try to undermine the mission to Gentiles, even causing Peter and Barnabas to stumble, as Galatians 2 records. Satan has a thousand ways to drain the church of zeal for taking the gospel to the world. He loves to drown churches in the spirit of our age. He loves to lock churches into a siege mentality where our priority is not to make Christ known but merely to survive. He also discredits the work of world mission by associating it with immature and superficial exponents who act foolishly. I come from a missionary background and I have been aware of and seen more than enough first-hand of missionary disasters. But in the face of all Satan's attacks, God has called those of us who preach God's Word to keep God's salvation purposes for our nation and all nations, at the forefront of our people's minds. Here are four practical responses.

Firstly, the gospel must thrill believers' hearts in these last days. Satan's simplest way to destroy the work of the church is to diminish Christ and the gospel in our eyes and to distract and divert us. Paul wrote to the Galatian church "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you

in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (Gal 1:6). We must preach the gospel not just to the unbeliever but to the church, not just a simple, predictable summary of the message but the heights and depths of what God has done for us in Christ. At the Lord's Supper we are brought back again and again to the cross, to the death of our Lord Jesus; we never move beyond this gospel. And the need for Christ-exalting, heart-stirring preaching is made very clear by Christ's words of warning in Matthew 24:9-14 about the rising tide of hostility to God and his people and the fact that

*because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*

Jesus speaks of what will be characteristic of the church's experience in the world right through to the end. What is going to stop the hearts of our people growing cold? Christ-enthroning, heart-warming preaching.

Secondly, we must live out the gospel where God has put us. Jesus said in Matthew 5:14 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven". Acts sets before us churches who, with all their struggles, were living out and sharing the good news of Jesus. And our great longing must be that God may use our churches as agents of his gospel right where we live. What is the point of having a missionary weekend, if you still have one, if you have little intention of opening your mouth for Jesus where God has already put you? Those who lead churches are so to preach God's word that, by the Holy Spirit, gospel-heartedness stays central in our churches.

Thirdly, we must actively pray for gospel advance beyond our localities, and in this church leaders should set an example. Paul several times asked churches to pray for his evangelism elsewhere. From Rome he wrote to the Ephesians, "Pray also for me that words may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly as I ought to speak" (Eph 6:19-20). Calvin wrote, "We must daily desire that God gather churches unto himself from all parts of the earth". The Directory for the Public Worship of God produced by the Westminster Assembly in 1645, in the midst of lengthy instructions to ministers how to pray before preaching, calls them "to pray for the propagation of the gospel and kingdom of Christ to all nations, for the conversion of the Jews, the fulness of the Gentiles, the fall of Antichrist and the

hastening of the coming of our Lord".<sup>10</sup> What a great expression of eschatological thinking in church leadership!

Fourthly, sending people from churches to serve in gospel work elsewhere is a natural extension of our praying. Taking active steps to send some of our people to plant gospel communities in areas beyond our immediate locality, has surely been a very welcome feature of church activity in the UK in recent years. Sending people to serve gospel purposes in other countries has had a long tradition in UK church life, and whereas modern technology enables us to play a part in helping God's work in distant countries without any travel, the long-term investment of sending people to learn to understand another culture and language, and give decades rather than weeks to such service, remains very significant.

We must not let Satan quench our zeal for serving Christ's present gospel purposes in this present age in our present circumstances as well as around the world. Let us not lose heart. In Revelation 7:9 we read that the redeemed are "a great multitude that no one could number, from all tribes and peoples and languages". As Venema says "There are ample biblical arguments for the most robust expectation for the success of the gospel".<sup>11</sup>

### III. *Satan's Counter Attacks*

The Bible is deeply realistic. Alongside the realities of Christ's victory and gospel advance, we are told in no uncertain terms of Satan's war against God and his people. Most Christians are very aware of ungodliness, expressed in such things as unbelief, materialism, immorality, injustice and violence across the world. They are also very aware of personal sin and temptation and the battle to live godly lives. However, there are two aspects of Satan's counter attacks which are given special emphasis in the New Testament as characteristic of this present age that maybe Western Christians are less conscious of. If that is correct, that puts our churches in special danger. These are deception, yes even in *our* churches, and persecution. Again and again our attention is drawn to these two things and they are very often referred to side by side, notably in the words of Jesus in Matthew 24.

#### 1. Deception

Right from the beginning, in Genesis 3:1, Satan set out to challenge and distort God's word. False teaching has always been a major issue. In the Old Testament, alongside the true prophets of God, there were false prophets. In

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<sup>10</sup> Joel R. Beeke & Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 761, 766.

<sup>11</sup> Venema, *The Promise of the Future*, 360.

the New Testament, alongside the faithful teachers, there are false teachers. When in Matthew 24 (and also Mark 13 and Luke 21) Jesus describes the features of the end of the age, he begins with, and keeps referring to, deception: “See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ’, and they will lead many astray” (v.4-5); “And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray” (v.11);

*Then if anyone says to you, “Look, here is the Christ!” or “There he is!” do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand (v.23-25).*

The most chilling word is “many” – many deceivers and many deceived. I know there are different views as to where in Matthew 24 Christ was speaking of the fall of Jerusalem and where he was speaking of this present age as a whole. I think it is primarily about the present age as a whole, with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, as Thomas Schreiner puts it, as “a pattern of the future judgement still to come”.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus warned in the Sermon on the Mount of “false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt 7:15). Their key characteristic is that these wolves are not obvious, they appear as sheep among sheep. They are not outside the church, in obviously false religions, but as teachers within the church. Paul uses the same language in his parting words to the Ephesian elders: “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29-30). Warnings about false teachers run throughout the epistles. In their last letters Paul and Peter wrote urgently to alert us to false teachers:

*The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths (2 Timothy 4:3).*

*False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality (2 Peter 2:1-2).*

The same concern about false teachers is evident in 1 and 2 John and Jude and in the letters from Christ to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. As

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 810.

Venema says, "The church's greatest enemy arises not from the world without... but from within her own ranks. This is an aspect of the Bible's teaching which cannot be emphasised too much."<sup>13</sup>

The implications for us who lead and teach in churches are very pressing. In so far as persecution is as yet less overt in the West compared to the rest of the world, we should not be surprised if Satan's primary assault on us is deception. We have churches and whole denominations that are turning away from confidence in and obedience to the Scriptures, yet still calling themselves Christian. And in the age of the internet and health, wealth and prosperity teaching on every hand, false teaching is constantly accessible.

This should make us firstly look to ourselves, remembering the command and promise of 1 Timothy 4:16: "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers". One feature of the false teachers that is especially emphasised in 2 Peter 2 is that their behaviour is bound up with their false teaching. Not only do they bring in "destructive heresies" but also "many will follow their sensuality" (v.1-2). Peter is unsparing on this point. He describes the false teachers as "those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion" (v.10); "they have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin" (v.14) and "they themselves are slaves of corruption" (v.19). I take it that these matters are set before us for our warning now, because Satan repeats himself and does the same thing in every generation. Those of us who teach are most likely to be moved from faithful teaching by moral failure, so we need to watch our own lives, aware of our vulnerabilities as well as our doctrine. But also, of course, we are to heed the command of 2 Timothy 2:15 "to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" and to remember the fact that "each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done" (1 Cor 3:13).

Secondly, we need to alert our people to the fact that deception is a clear and present danger because Christ and his apostles teach us that so clearly. We need in our preaching to directly address unhelpful ideas we believe are infiltrating churches. This is not to make them paranoid but to make them quick to do as the Bereans did, "examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11). We should go out of our way to preach some of those less preached books that are full of warnings such as 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 John, 2 Peter and Jude.

## 2. Persecution

Persecution is to be expected by Christians. Jesus was very explicit in John 15:20. "Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than

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<sup>13</sup> Venema, *The Promise of the Future*, 164-165.

his master'. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you". Jesus makes a very strong connection between what happened to him and what will happen to us. He says in Matthew 24:9, "They will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake". He said in the Sermon on the Mount,

*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matt 5:11-12).*

He connects sufferings now with glory ahead. Paul makes the same connection when he talks about suffering, saying in Romans 8:17 that as children of God we are "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him". Peter uses the same language:

*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed (1 Peter 4:12-13).*

John introduces himself in Revelation 1:9 as, "I John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are ours in Jesus". He sees tribulation as an inescapable part of following Christ. This is no less than what Jesus said in John 16:33. "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world". Shortly after being stoned and left for dead, Paul told the Gentile churches, that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22), for it is not just the apostles who are called to suffer. Paul told Timothy that "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12).

Revelation, too, has repeated descriptions of the persecution of believers. For example, we read of a victory in heaven when

*the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come" (Rev 12:9).*

This image clearly expresses the triumph of Christ over Satan in his incarnation, death and resurrection. But it does not mark the end of Satan's activity. Quite the contrary, for we read that the devil comes down to earth in great wrath "because he knows his time is short" (Rev 12:12) and is "furious



with the woman”, who here symbolises the people of God, and then the dragon “went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (v.17). This a picture of the on-going attack of Satan on the church of Jesus Christ in this present age.

Now in our country we have had an unusual period in the last two hundred years where, due to the impact of Christian faith on our society, overt persecution – Christians being put in prison or being in danger of their lives on account of their faith – has been virtually non-existent. I am not saying there has been no hostility to Christians, but that the severity of that hostility has been relatively mild compared to the experience of the early church and many believers both through the centuries and in many parts of the world today. Now this situation, one imagines, is unlikely to continue. The abandonment of Christian values in our society is such that discrimination against Christians on account of our faith will almost certainly escalate, which may well be the beginnings of much more overt persecution.

But are our people prepared for it? Peter tells us not to be “surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pet 4:12), but I suspect many will be surprised. And it is essential that those of us who teach God’s Word prepare our people for likely persecution, the scale of which we have not seen for centuries. I have quite often attended a pastors’ conference in India, at which, each year there is a session on being prepared for and facing persecution. I have certainly never been to a pastors’ conference in the UK with a whole session devoted to persecution. In India, persecution for many is not a vague possibility but a present reality. They are so much more aware than we are of descriptions and teaching about persecution in the Bible. To prepare our people to face likely future persecution seems to me an essential part of teaching God’s word in our land. This is no more than teaching what the New Testament has always said.

And what is at stake is enormous. Listen to a sample of what Jesus taught in Matthew 10: “you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (v.22); “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (v.28); “everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (vv.32-33);

*a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (vv.36-39).*

But in the midst of all this, Jesus repeatedly encourages us: “When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour” (v.19); “have no fear of them” (v.26); “do not fear” (v.28); “Even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore” (v.30-31). That sort of teaching about the severity of likely persecution and the sufficiency of God for us in facing it, needs to be written into our hearts in advance so that we may not be like “the one who... endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away” (Matt 13:20-21).

### 3. The Antichrist

These realities in our present age of Satan’s attack in deceptions and persecutions reach their climax in the “man of lawlessness” as he is called in 2 Thessalonians 2, or the “antichrist” as John calls him (I think the same person), in 1 John 2:18. The Bible is clear that deception is a feature of the whole of the present age. 2 John 7 tells us that “many deceivers who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist”. In 1 John 2:18 we read, “Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour”. John distinguishes between the presence of many antichrists now and the antichrist that is coming in the future and that corresponds with what is said in 2 Thessalonians 2:7 where we read that “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” and yet there is a future event when “then the lawless one will be revealed” (v.6).

It has been a matter of debate as to whether this language of the “man of lawlessness” refers to an individual human being or not. Berkouwer, for example, argues against a personal Antichrist.<sup>14</sup> However, it seems to me, as most evangelical commentators argue, that the use of the word “the man” in v3 and the personal language of “he, himself and him” in verses 4 and 6, most naturally suggest an individual. Yet there is much more than just an individual man involved.

There are several indications in the New Testament that the things that characterise the whole current age – deception and persecution – will find an almost overwhelming final expression. Revelation has a number of references to a great final battle as the forces of evil come together against the Lord and his people: “demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty” (16:14); “the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to wage war against the rider on the horse and his army”

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14 G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1972), 260-290.

(19:19); “Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth – Gog and Magog – and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore” (20:7-8). 2 Thessalonians 2, I believe, also describes a moment of final confrontation.

Whether the man of lawlessness is understood as fulfilled in an individual person or not, this is Satan at work. So, vv.9-10 tell us that “the coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception”. The endpoint is reached when Christ returns in v.8. The “day of the Lord” (v.2), when Christ returns, will be the day of reckoning. “By the appearance of his coming” (v.8) the Lord Jesus will “kill” and “bring to nothing” the man of lawlessness and end “the apostasy” or “rebellion” (v.8). While we are told the day of Christ “will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction” (v.3), it is equally certain that then, after the man of lawlessness has come, Christ will return. That is the great Day, the climax of everything God has promised.

There is reason to identify here a particular attack on the church. The man of lawlessness will, of course, deceive humanity in general. Verse 10 describes “the wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved”. Indeed, God’s hand of judgment is seen in sending on those who have “refused to love the truth and so be saved... a powerful delusion, so that they may believe what is false” (v.11). However, it seems that at the heart of the wicked activity of the man of lawlessness is an attack on God’s people. He is not a secular figure, he takes over “the temple of God” which seems to be the institution of the church itself, indeed he “exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God” (v.4). And it is striking that the same words used of Christ’s “coming” and being “revealed” are used of the “coming” (v.9) and being “revealed” (vv.3, 6, 8) of the man of lawlessness. If Jesus’ coming is personal, so will his be; if Jesus’ coming is powerful so will his be; if Jesus’ coming is God coming to us, that is how he presents himself. As John Stott writes, it is “a deliberate and unscrupulous parody of the second coming of Christ”.<sup>15</sup> Here deception and persecution reach their climax. And the most terrifying evil supernatural forces are at work.

Yet it is important to identify that all the way through this alarming account, the sovereignty of God is asserted. The man of lawlessness is introduced in verse 3 as “the son of destruction”, which is to say that his very nature is that he is doomed. While there is some mystery as to who or what is “restraining” the man of lawlessness at present (v.6), it is significant that he is restrained and will only be revealed “in his time” (v.6). He is not a free agent; his time is set by Another. And what does the final conflict with the Lord Jesus

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<sup>15</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Thessalonians* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 172.

look like? It is a non-event! The Lord Jesus will destroy him, merely by “the breath of his mouth” and “the appearance of his coming” (v.8). In each image of the final battle in Revelation, the forces of evil are completely destroyed and the devil, beast and false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where “they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev 20:10). At the end of his discussion of Revelation 20, Berkouwer makes a comment which could equally be applied to 2 Thessalonians 2: “[H]ow powerless Satan really is, how short the time of his freedom, how really minor this war, how ridiculous in the face of Christ and His triumph”.<sup>16</sup>

There has been no shortage of attempts through church history to identify the man of lawlessness with a particular person. You can understand why people looked at some Roman emperors, Mohammed, the papacy, Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Mao and others and asked, “Is this him?”. However, we should not scorn past believers too readily over what has so far proved to be wrong identification. As Paul says, “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” (v.7), and as John says “even now many antichrists have come” (1 John 2:18). The spirit of antichrist is already at work. The features that will mark the final man of lawlessness have already been evident to some degree in many others. We need therefore to be constantly on our guard.

However, despite the graphic note of warning in the New Testament about deception and persecution, we should not leave our hearers in any doubt as to Christ’s sufficiency to sustain his people. After the fearsome description of the man of lawlessness, Paul wrote “But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one” (2 Thess 3:3). Jude is full of warning and yet concludes with the glorious affirmation:

*Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen (vv.24-25).*

#### IV. Watchfulness

##### 1. The Command

The repeated command of the Lord Jesus to us in the light of his coming is that we should “keep watch” or “stay awake” or “be ready”. Berkouwer says “The New Testament places such strong emphasis on the Christian’s being ready at all times for the return of the Lord that one might wonder whether the whole

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<sup>16</sup> Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, 307.

essence of the faith is summed up in the word ‘watchfulness’.<sup>17</sup> In Matthew 24:42-44 (and in the parallel passages) Jesus says

*Stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*

After the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, Jesus sums up the message: “Watch therefore for you know neither the day nor the hour” (25:13). In Revelation 16:15 Christ says, “Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!”

Consistently Christ’s command to be awake and ready for his return is based on the fact that we do not know when it will happen. And it is not just that we don’t know when it will be, but we cannot know. Christ makes this crystal clear: “Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Matt 24:36). Jesus, shortly before his ascension, said to his disciples: “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). Despite this, sadly, there have been all sorts of foolish, ungodly and fruitless attempts to work out the specific timing, with which we must have nothing to do.

The image that Christ uses of his coming is that of a thief in the night who gives no advance warning, whom no one is expecting (Luke 12:39, Rev 3:3, 16:15). So well understood was this by the early church that Paul could say to the Thessalonians “You yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night... But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief” (1 Thess 5:2, 4). We will not know the day in advance, but thanks to God’s Word we need not be surprised by it or unready for it.

## 2. The Nearness

The question of the nearness or imminence of the Lord’s return, for which we are watching, has occasioned a lot of debate. What is clear is that in terms of salvation history the next event will be the return of Christ and the New Testament uses language that presses on us the expectation of that return: “The end of all things is at hand” (1 Peter 4:7); “The night is far gone; the day is at hand” (Rom 13:12); “The appointed time has grown very short... the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor 7:29, 31). Particularly

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<sup>17</sup> Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, 236.

striking is the language of Revelation: "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place" (1:1); "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near" (1:3); "I am coming soon" (3:11); "The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place" (22:6); "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near" (26:10); "And behold, I am coming soon" (22:7); "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me" (22:12); "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (22:20). That is the note on which the whole Bible ends.

Yet alongside this repeated emphasis on the nearness of Christ's return there are also passages that teach unequivocally that certain things must happen before that day. In Matthew 24 when Jesus speaks of wars, rumours of wars, famines and earthquakes he adds, "But the end is not yet" and "All these are but the beginning of the birth pains" (vv.6, 8). In verse 14 he says the end will only come when the gospel has been "proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations". We are in no position to judge when that moment has come, but he is. Luke 21:24 says "Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" and Romans 11:25-26 foretells a major future turning of Israel to Christ only after "the fulness of the Gentiles has come in". In the sequence of parables Jesus told about his return in Matthew 24 and 25, there is the note of delay in the master returning (24:48), a delay in the bridegroom arriving (25:5) and the master comes back in the parable of the talents "after a long time" (25:19). And in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 Paul assures us, "That day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed".

In the light of those things which are to happen before Christ's return, John Murray says that if we are to speak of the "imminence" of the second coming, it is "the imminence of eschatological perspective, the imminence of the next and final event... an imminence compatible with the elapse of millennia". A few pages later Murray argues against the use of the term "imminent" which means, "just at hand". He writes that "the insistence that the advent is imminent is without warrant... the use of the proposition is misleading and improper".<sup>18</sup> Don Carson takes a slightly different view: "The truth is that the biblical evidence nowhere unambiguously endorses the 'any second' view and frequently militates against it... Yet the terms 'imminent' and 'imminency' retain theological usefulness if they focus attention on the eager expectancy

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<sup>18</sup> *Collected Writings*, vol 2, Murray, 400, 407.

of the Lord's return characteristic of many NT passages, a return that could take place soon".<sup>19</sup>

One dead-end approach is to argue that the Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul at first expected an almost immediate return in that first generation, which proved false. This is manifest nonsense and contrary to the whole revelation of Scripture about Christ and his apostles. Those verses used to argue that case do not bear the interpretation put on them. Let us take three examples.

Firstly, Jesus says in Matthew 24:34, "Truly I say to you this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened", when he is answering two questions, one about the destruction of Jerusalem and the other about "the sign of your coming and of the end of the age" (v.3). The fact that two verses later Jesus says that no one knows the time of his return strongly suggests that he did not mean in verse 34 that his return must be in that first generation. The fact that he did not return in that generation is decisive evidence of that! Carson helpfully comments "all that v.34 demands is that the distress of vv.4-28, including Jerusalem's fall, must happen within the lifetime of the generation then living. This does not mean that the distress must end within that time but only that 'all these things' must happen within it".<sup>20</sup>

Then there is Jesus' statement in Matthew 16:28 (also Mark 9:1 and Luke 9:27) that "Truly I say to you there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom". This cannot be a reference to his return which he says will be visible to all mankind (Matt 24:27, 30). In each of the three parallel passages there is the same pattern: Jesus speaks of his coming with his angels in glory, then says that some of them would not die before seeing "the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" and then follows an account of the transfiguration when Peter, James and John see the stunning glory of Jesus temporarily revealed. In 2 Peter 1:16-18 Peter directly connects "the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (he uses the word "parousia" which is a major topic in chapter 3) with the transfiguration:

*We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased", we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.*

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<sup>19</sup> Donald A. Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 508.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 507.

In other words, the transfiguration was an event in Jesus' first coming that was a foretaste of his second coming and very satisfactorily explains what Jesus meant in those passages in the gospels.

A third example is the suggestion that Paul is asserting that he would still be alive when Christ returns: "...we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep" (1 Thess 4:15). Paul is making a general statement, as a believer living at the time of writing, about those believers alive when Christ returns. He is not making the specific claim that he will definitely be among them. As Hoekema says, "Any believer from Paul's time until today could use similar language without implying that he is certain he will still be living when Christ returns".<sup>21</sup>

The two strands of teaching, that the Lord is returning soon and that there are things that must happen before he returns, are both in the Scriptures, sometimes in the same passages. They are not in contradiction to each other. We need some humility here; woe betide us if on the basis of our understanding we say that the Lord cannot return yet. Jesus says that he will come like a thief comes, precisely when we do not expect him. The Lord alone is the perfect judge of when the time will be, our job is to be ready for him. The Lord, in his perfect wisdom, means every generation of believers to live constantly alert, constantly watchful for that Day. Berkouwer writes, "the believer is called to an attitude that does not *reckon* but constantly *reckons with* the coming of the Lord".<sup>22</sup>

### 3. The Consequences

Watchfulness is not simply a matter of a private eschatological perspective; watchfulness is demonstrated in our lives. If we are really alert to the Lord's coming, we will live like it. The New Testament sets out a number of key markers of watchfulness. Those of us who teach God's Word must press these challenges and realities into our own hearts and into the hearts of our hearers.

#### a) *faithful service*

In Matthew 24 the first parable Jesus tells in applying his commands to "stay awake" (v.42) and "be ready" (v.44) is about the servant who is faithful and wise: "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes" (vv.45-46). In the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 the returned master rewards those who been faithful while he was away: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You

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<sup>21</sup> Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 125.

<sup>22</sup> Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, 84.



have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (25:21,23). At the end of 1 Corinthians 15, in the light of the certainty of Christ's return and our physical resurrection and the overthrow of death itself, Paul wrote, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain" (v.58). Faithful service now will have significance when Christ returns. Peter says to those elders who shepherd the flock willingly, eagerly and being godly examples, "when the chief Shepherd appears you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Pet 5:4). If we really believe the Lord is returning, we must get on with serving him faithfully, earnestly and joyfully here and now. However, some of our hearers may have been influenced by an eschatological perspective which puts such a stress on what is done and achieved now in this present age suggesting that some of the specifics of what we create, even works of art and literature, may last into the new heavens and earth. This is argued by some on the grounds of the reference in Revelation 21:24 to the New Jerusalem that "the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it". Some even see themselves playing a role now in bringing into being the new creation. This seems to me to go well beyond the evidence of Scripture and can impose a burden of perfectionism on some in our churches. It distracts from what is unseen and eternal (2 Cor 4:18) in favour of what is seen and actually temporary. It seems to overlook the fact that "the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire" (2 Pet 3:7). While we should do all things seeking God's glory, it is faithful service, not the product of our hands, that God treasures and looks for.

#### *b) holiness*

This is a major outcome of taking the Lord's return seriously. Peter, in particular, strongly connects personal holiness with the anticipation of Christ's return. In 1 Peter we read,

*Set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1:13-15).*

In 2 Peter 3 after describing the awesome fact that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved", Peter goes on to spell out the implications: "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness!" (vv.10-11). And then

having spoken of the promise of new heavens and a new earth he adds, "Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace" (v.14). In the light of the destruction of this present world as it is, be holy now because if we are not holy we will be swept away in "the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly" (v.7). And in the light of the renewed world to come, "in which righteousness dwells" (v.13), be holy now, because only then will we be able to belong in that new heaven and new earth.

Your eschatology determines your morality. That is one of the main points of 2 Peter. The false teachers dismissed the Lord's return and future judgment and then felt free to live ungodly and immoral lives. We must head in the opposite direction. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of "the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (12:14). Paul makes the same connection between what we hope for then and how we live now in Titus 2:

*...the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ (vv.11-13).*

### c) *patience*

Patience is essential for those who sets their sights on glory ahead. At the beginning of James 5, he writes about injustices in this world and the judgment to come. Then he adds,

*Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand (5:7-8).*

Twice he commands patience until the coming of the Lord. He asserts both that it is "at hand", but also that we must be patient. He likens that patience to the farmer patiently waiting for harvest. This is patience because you know what is coming and that it is abundantly worth waiting for. This patience is a perseverance through time because of a settled conviction about the glories that lie ahead. As Hebrews 10:35-36 says, "do not throw away your confidence which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised". It is all going to be abundantly worth it! Paul uses similar language in Romans 2: "He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life" (vv.6-7).

## d) love

At the conclusion of his block of teaching about the end of the age, Jesus in Matthew 25 gives the striking account of the sheep and the goats:

*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats (v.31).*

The criteria for judgment according to the King is this: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (v.40). And those who have lived this way will inherit the kingdom prepared for them. Equally, the grounds for judgment when the King will say “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” is this: “Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (v.45). We will not be ready for Christ’s coming, we will not have been watching for it as we should, if we have not shown love now towards those he calls “my brothers”, because how we have treated other believers is how we have treated him. As Carson says,

*Good deeds done to Jesus’ followers reflect where people stand in relation to the kingdom and to Jesus himself. Jesus identifies himself with the fate of his followers and makes compassion for them equivalent to compassion for himself... The reason for admission to the kingdom in this parable is more evidential than causative.<sup>23</sup>*

It is not that we thereby earn our salvation, but that our love for others shows where our heart is. James 5:9 warns us, “Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged: behold, the Judge is standing at the door”. In Philippians 1 Paul prays for their love to abound, as his does for them, so that they will be ready for the day of Christ:

*God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ (vv.8-11).*

The outworking of watchfulness for the return of Jesus is not optional but essential and we who preach must bring that home to all our people constantly.

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<sup>23</sup> Carson, *Matthew*, 520, 522.

## V. *Glory Ahead*

The return of the Lord Jesus in his glory is, as John Murray says,

*the consummating act of the whole process of redemption, the event that will signalise the cosmic renovation when the creation will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God and the present order will give place to the new heavens and the new earth.*<sup>24</sup>

There are many aspects of that awesome event, such as our physical resurrection, our transformation as we meet the Lord, final judgment and the new earth and the new heavens, which others will be considering in their papers.

What is certain is that Revelation chapters 20 to 22 should be written into the hearts and minds of every believer. We cannot afford for a moment to back off from chapter 20 because of controversies about the millennium. The message of the chapter is that all the forces of evil are entirely subject to God and that the devil and all his agents will be totally defeated and “thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur forever and ever” (v.10). There will be universal judgment that will be entirely just, inescapable and permanent. Sobering as that scene is, we cannot possibly be true to our God and fail to teach it.

Paradoxically, God’s judgment is also the hope of the world, it is the assurance that evil and all injustice will be dealt with and punished, which is what human hearts ache for. Only because judgment will be real is a new world of future glory and perfection possible. Chapters 21 and 22 set before us the glories of the new heaven and the new earth and above all the surpassing beauties of the new Jerusalem, the holy city, the Bride, the perfected people of God, with God himself dwelling among us forever. At last there will be no more death, mourning, crying or pain. There is the river of the water of life and the tree of life, light, holiness, worship and image after image, picture after picture, reality after reality that speak of that which takes us beyond the bounds of what we can fully presently comprehend.

But these things are not a mirage to deceive us. We have God’s own guarantee: “He who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold I am making all things new’. Also he said ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true’” (21:5). And again in chapter 22 “He said to me, ‘These words are trustworthy and true’” (v.6). And the climax of these chapters is the Lord Jesus himself; everything hangs on him and his promises and his coming: “Behold, I am coming soon” (v.7); “Behold I am coming soon” (v.12); “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (v.13); “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify... I am the root and descendant of David, the

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<sup>24</sup> *Collected Writings*, vol 2, Murray, 406.

bright morning star" (v.16); "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon'. Amen. Come Lord Jesus!" (v.20).

The glories set before us at the end of our Bibles are not a novel focus on the eternal future, as if, finally, the Bible gets around to the topic. The whole of Scripture testifies of glory to come. Peter wrote of the Old Testament prophets who "predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories" (1 Pet 1:11). Again and again the prophets lift our eyes to the ultimate horizon. The Day of the Lord, bringing both judgment and salvation, is a major theme in prophecy. Isaiah 11 speaks of the day and place where the wolf, lamb, calf, lion, cow, bear and the little child will lie down together:

*They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples – of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious (v.9-10).*

Isaiah 25 tells us that the LORD of hosts "will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces" (v.8). In Isaiah 65:17 we have the promise, repeated in Revelation 21: "For behold I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind".

Christ's whole ministry was framed by the future: Hebrews 12:2 speaks of Jesus, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God". Jesus prayed in John 17:24, "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world". Jesus comforted his disciples with the words,

*In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. (John 14:2-3).*

Jesus scandalised the Sanhedrin at his trial with his assertion "From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt 26:64).

The apostles never weary of reminding us of the future. As Paul says we are "waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). He writes to the Philippians, "Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself" (3:20-21). In I

Corinthians 15 Paul is graphic in his description of our resurrection hope and in Colossians 1:27 he speaks of “Christ in you, the hope of glory”. John assures us in 1 John 3, “Beloved, we are God’s children now and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (vv.2-3). And Peter rejoices in 1 Peter 1:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you (vv.3-4).*

However, the New Testament does not just inform us of Christ’s return and the glories ahead. It commands a response from us now to these facts. And if we are teachers of God’s people, it is no good for us just to have a correct eschatology; our preaching must set forth a vision of glory that lays hold of us and our hearers in at least two ways:

#### 1. It Must Arrest Our Attention

Satan loves to grab our attention with the concerns of this world, so that which is to come, to which we still happily give lip-service, becomes vague, remote and irrelevant to our present lives. But Paul appeals to us in Colossians 3:

*If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (vv.1-4).*

There is here the assurance of what is to come, but also the present challenge to us therefore to “seek” the things above and to “set our minds” on what lies ahead. There is a response to be made now. Paul says something similar in 2 Corinthians 4:

*For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (vv.16-18).*

That is how Paul survived the many trials and afflictions he faced. Where he looked made all the difference – beyond what is seen today, beyond the prison cell, beyond the shouting mob, to the eternal unseen glories ahead. Peter calls us to “set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the

revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 1:13). There is pause for thought in that word "fully". What you set your hope on fully is something you give your attention to, something you will not be distracted from and something central in your thinking, praying and talking. It is a hope fully shaped by and fixed on the grace and the glory ahead and the person of Jesus coming to us.

## 2. It Must Move Our Hearts

Paul in some of his wonderful final words wrote,

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing (2 Tim 4:7-8).*

What is arresting here is that the crown of righteousness is not just the richly deserved reward of a great apostle, but also for "all who have loved his appearing". Loving his appearing is the defining feature of the true believer; it is more than just agreeing it will happen. It is loving it, longing for Christ to come: "Come Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20). There is to be a passion about our longing for Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5:2 Paul says, "In this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling". The sorrows of this world and our mortality, every funeral we go to, every death we hear of should stoke our hearts' passion for the promised future. Romans 8:23 says "We ourselves who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies". Hebrews 9:28 promises, "Christ will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him". We are not just to be waiting, but "eagerly waiting". That particular Greek word comes seven times in the New Testament and every time it is in relation to Christ's return and the glories ahead. This focus on what lies ahead and above is what has always marked the saints. In Psalm 73:24-25 Asaph wrote "You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you".

That is the heart we need, a heart that is not in love with this world. Hebrews 11 speaks of the patriarchs' example to us, dying in faith, with their eye fixed on a better future beyond their own times: "They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God for he has prepared for them a city" (v.16). The word "desire" means to set one's heart on or to long after; in a negative context it is translated "craving" (1 Tim 6:10). What are you and your people's hearts set on? What are you as pastor going to do to set their hearts in the right place, to have hearts craving for glory?

In the Lord's Prayer the Lord Jesus teaches us to pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). All through the centuries that is how disciples have prayed. That is no vain repetition. That is what Jesus teaches us to pray daily. As Berkouwer writes, "Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer there is reason for us to go and stand at the window of expectation".<sup>25</sup> That is where we need to be every day of our lives, at the window of expectation, until he comes.

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<sup>25</sup> Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, 453.



# “WITH ME IN PARADISE” – QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SO-CALLED “INTERMEDIATE STATE”: IS IT BIBLICAL AND IT IS PASTORALLY HELPFUL?

*Paul Yeulett\**

## *Introduction*

Does this experience sound at all familiar? You are in a spacious hospital waiting room, hoping to see the doctor as soon as possible, although the large number of patients does not give you huge cause for optimism. Then, to your surprise and relief, a mere ten minutes after your appointment time your name is called out, and you are ushered along a couple of passageways, expecting to see the doctor right away. But no – you will not be seen just yet! You find yourself in another waiting room, much smaller and more cramped than the first, perhaps nothing more than a single row of seats in a narrow corridor, and there you must wait for another hour before your name is called again.

In this Paper I want to examine what is commonly called the *intermediate state*, the experience of Christian believers immediately after death. Is it somewhat analogous to the experience I have just described? Is it true that believers, after death, in a disembodied state, find themselves in a “place”, variously termed Sheol or Hades, altogether darker and narrower than this present world, where they will remain for hundreds or even thousands of years before the last day, when the dead are raised? Or might we even imagine that passing from this life to the next is similar to making the transition from physical worship gatherings to their virtual equivalents under interminable Covid lockdowns, in which we seem to lose rather more than we gain?

At the very outset, let me anticipate the conclusion that I will reach and dispel gloomy pessimism. I want to suggest that the terminology “intermediate state” is unfortunate, especially if it conveys the idea of a kind of in-between no-man’s land, a shadowy and indeterminate realm which is neither “heaven” nor “hell”, comparable to the Asphodel Meadows of Greek mythology. Instead, I will conclude that *the souls of believers, immediately after*

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*death, go to be “forever with the Lord”, with the risen and exalted Christ himself, which Paul declared to be “far better”* (Phil 1:23). The great hope of the Christian believer is to be with Christ, forever. Those who die in Christ are unquestionably gainers, not losers!

### *I. Pastoral Considerations*

The question of what happens at death, or more specifically what happens *immediately after* death, will never cease to be one of great pastoral importance. It is a pressing question at the best of times, and at the moment it certainly does not feel like “the best of times”. At the precise time of writing these words – the morning of 27 January 2021 – we have heard that the official death-toll from Covid-19 in the UK has just reached six figures, 100,162 to be exact; how much larger it will be by the time you read these words is anyone’s guess. However we may interpret data, a great number of people have died from Covid-19 in the UK in the last twelve months.

But when we take away each of those qualifying factors: (1) Covid-19 as the *cause* of death, (2) the UK as the *place* of death and (3) the last twelve months as the *time* of death, that number soars to levels which are beyond human computation – “unnumbered souls are dying, and pass into the night”.<sup>1</sup>

“What exactly will happen to me immediately after I die?” is a very direct and immediate question, and a most pastorally pressing question. Are pastors, indeed all Christians, sufficiently equipped and confident to be able to answer it? Attendees at this conference are, I take it, all professing Christians, and many are pastors. We have to comfort and help the dying, and we also need to minister to the relatives and friends of those who die, both before and after death.

So we have to begin by considering the subject of death in general. I wonder if you can remember when it first dawned on you that everyone has to die? I remember being about six years old and being told by an older relative that if someone was very ill, “they might die”. I didn’t know what the word “die” meant; I thought it sounded something like “dive” and a picture of a swimming-pool came into my childish mind. Then I understood that “die” meant something like “sleep”, but never waking up. I do recall a kind of dread at the thought. It was similar with our own children a generation later. We were talking with them about Elijah, the widow of Zarephath and her son who was extremely ill and who died (1 Kgs 17:17). “Why was he so ill? Couldn’t they make him better? But didn’t they have any *Calpol*?” I can well remember the distraught reaction of our children when we told them that we all have to die.

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<sup>1</sup> From Frank Houghton, *Facing a task unfinished*, Moravian Book of Worship, 634.

For the Christian believer, we must say, death has lost its sting (1 Cor 15:55-56). The gospel of Jesus Christ has delivered “all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Heb 2:14-15). As John Calvin says (and we will return to him in far greater detail later):

Let us turn to the examples of other saints, and see how they felt on this subject. When Noah dies he does not deplore his wretched lot. Abraham does not lament. Jacob, even during his last breath, rejoices in waiting for the salvation of the Lord. Job sheds no tears. Moses, when informed by the Lord that his last hour is at hand, is not moved. All, as far as we can see, embrace death with a ready mind. The words in which the saints answer the call of the Lord uniformly are, Here I am, Lord!<sup>2</sup>

But alongside the “ready mind” which saints exhibit as they anticipate their own death, we must place the sorrow and mourning associated especially with the death of loved ones. It was godly men who not only buried Stephen but “made great lamentation over him” (Acts 8:2), though he had “died well”, giving a magnificent testimony. And we should never forget the silent tears of the Lord Jesus himself at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35), even though he was about to summon him out of the grave. It was the sight of weeping relatives and friends that moved Jesus to his own weeping. The bitterness of death is not passed, not for those who mourn and grieve, even though believers do not grieve without hope (1 Thess 4:13). It is unrealistic, unbiblical and un-Christian to make light of death by denying that it remains our “enemy” in certain senses. Death remains a tragedy, a reminder of our sin and fallenness. Those hundreds of Covid victims whose numbers are announced every day – they have indeed “sadly died”, the Christian and the non-Christian alike. As Robert Letham notes, “[m]ourning is not a sign of a lack of faith; it is a demonstration of our humanity”.<sup>3</sup>

But what about the one who has died? What happens immediately after death? H. G. Wells, in his altogether bleak vision of the future, *The Time Machine*, depicts the “Time Traveller” poised to venture into the future: “I suppose a suicide who holds a pistol to his skull feels much the same wonder at what will come next as I felt then.”<sup>4</sup> Macabre though the illustration might be, that “wonder” is entirely understandable. To return to a medical analogy, when you are about to undergo an operation or any significant medical procedure, you are reassured when the doctor, surgeon or anaesthetist tells you, “this is what we are going to do to you over the next couple of hours”. Is it impertinent to wonder what is going to “be done to me” in the months, years, perhaps centuries immediately following my death? Or is it even proper to

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Psychopannychia; or, the Soul's Imaginary Sleep between Death and Judgement*, 1534, in *Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters, Volume 3* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 482.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 825.

<sup>4</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (London: Everyman, 1998), 16.

think in terms of months, years, perhaps centuries? These are among the questions which I will ask.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones crystallises the whole matter by articulating the kinds of questions which should readily come to every human mind:

*What is death? What happens after death? What is our whole life leading to? What is the future? What of the future? ... We all want to know our own destiny, and personal future.*<sup>5</sup>

He continues:

*as we look at these matters we are not animated by some mere theoretical or academic interest. Every one of these subjects is intensely practical and it is the business of Christian people to be familiar with the biblical teaching with respect to them.*<sup>6</sup>

At the most straightforward level of all, is it enough for a believer to be able to say, “when I die I am going to heaven”? Do we immediately feel the urge to nuance and qualify their words by bringing in the vocabulary of the intermediate state, of Sheol and of Hades, of the immortality of the soul, of the bodily resurrection, of the new heavens and the new earth? This paper is written to enable us to think with clarity in these matters.

## II. Mapping our route

The cautionary counsel of Herman Bavinck is extremely apposite as we begin to think about this question:

*The history of the doctrine of the intermediate state shows that it is hard for theologians and people in general to stay within the limits of Scripture and not attempt to be wiser than they can be. The scriptural data about the intermediate state are sufficient for our needs in this life but leave unanswered many questions that may arise in the inquisitive mind.*<sup>7</sup>

It is inevitable that our minds will be “inquisitive” as we probe these areas, but in relation to this doctrine, more than many others, we must be content to let a veil hang over the answers to many of our questions for as long as we live in

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<sup>5</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Church and the Last Things: Great Doctrines Series, Volume 3* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002), 59.

<sup>6</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *The Church and the Last Things*, 59.

<sup>7</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 4: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 614.

this present world. Curiosity has killed cats, and it can also be the undoing of theologians. The danger of an investigation of this kind is that it can encourage indulgent speculation which drifts well away from its scriptural moorings.

But cats are known for their survival rates. The pastoral situations in which we find ourselves – as well as our own very personal and individual reflections on the subject of death – will necessarily prompt a spirit of enquiry which may be edifying rather than distracting or even injurious. So, heeding Bavinck’s advice, I will seek to “stay within the limits of Scripture” as I focus on what I trust are fairly well-defined questions. In particular:

Is the believer conscious after death? Is there any sense in which he/she “sleeps”? Is it right to speak about the immortality of the soul? Does the believer experience the passing of time as we understand it? Can there be any kind of “physical” dimension to their existence? Is the bodiless intermediate state one of incompleteness and imperfection that denies them a level of true joy?

There are possible avenues of inquiry which I will, by and large, choose *not* to investigate. These include the subject of purgatory and the possibilities that those who have died outside Christ will be offered some kind of second chance. I will avoid these questions largely because I believe that the majority of readers of this paper will already share my convictions: that purgatory is an unbiblical accretion and that Scripture itself makes it abundantly clear that “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb 9:27).<sup>8</sup>

I will begin with a historical overview, in which the work of Calvin will occupy much of my attention. Following this I will proceed to an examination of certain biblical texts, before moving to a wider consideration of some relevant questions which are suggested. This will then lead up to some concluding thoughts, the sum of which will be that those who die in Christ, immediately after death, will be “forever with the Lord”.

### III. *Historical Overview*

#### 1. The Early and Medieval Period

In the immediate aftermath of the closure of the New Testament canon there was little thought given to any such concept as “the intermediate state”. The Apostolic Fathers, by and large, looked forward to the impending return of Christ and simply accepted that “at death the devout immediately experience

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<sup>8</sup> A fair bit of my discussion will centre around the subject of soul-sleep. See Bavinck, vol. 4, 612-13, for a historical discussion of many alternative theories which could be placed alongside soul-sleep, including some basic continuation of bodily form; metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls; an extension of the idea of the *limbus patrum* and the possibility of gospel preaching and conversion after death, as well as ongoing purgation.

the blessedness of heaven and the wicked the punishment of hell”.<sup>9</sup> Gradually, however, as the centuries rolled by and it became more likely that the *parousia* might not be so imminent, the idea of an intermediate state began to take hold, as Berkhof explains, “by such men as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Novatian, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose and Augustine”.<sup>10</sup> This is quite a significant roll-call, all the more impressive because it features mighty theologians of both east and west, though the way in which these Fathers formulated their doctrine was far from uniform. However, there were others “who favored the idea that at death the souls of the righteous immediately entered heaven, namely, Gregory of Nazianze (*sic*), Eusebius and Gregory the Great”.<sup>11</sup>

If it were a matter of simply weighing the names on either side of the balance, the support for an intermediate state might seem to win. Berkhof adds a note of caution, however, commenting that “[i]n the Alexandrian School the idea of the intermediate state passed into that of a gradual purification of the soul, and this in course of time paved the way for the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory”.<sup>12</sup> This is a salutary warning, insofar as too great a preoccupation on the intermediate state, specifically its “intermediate” character, could tend towards erroneous and ultimately heretical views which call into question the complete efficacy of gospel grace during the believer’s life. The history of this doctrine tends to suggest that it is difficult to detach a discussion about the intermediate state from related questions dealing with the purgation of souls who are in that state.

Throughout the Early and Medieval period, the influence of Greek philosophy – Plato and his successors in the east, supremely in Alexandria, in the Early period; Aristotle predominantly in the Latin west in the Middle Ages and coming to full development in Thomas Aquinas – was massive. The entire cosmology of the Church during these centuries can only be appreciated when we grasp the extent to which it was shaped, to a greater or lesser extent (but more often greater) by a commitment to the axioms of Greek philosophy. Tertullian to a great measure, and Augustine more than anyone, sought to break that mould. But it is not until the Reformation, and the work of Calvin in particular, that we find a wholehearted return to the supreme authority of the Bible to determine what might be known about the state of believers after death, let alone the whole host of other vital subjects to which Calvin and the Reformers gave their attention.

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<sup>9</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 607.

<sup>10</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 680.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 680-81.

<sup>12</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 681.

2. Calvin's *Psychopannychia*<sup>13</sup>

Calvin wrote *Psychopannychia* in order to combat Anabaptists who were widely perceived to be enemies of the Reformation as well as disorderly radicals. As one of his biographers, Jean Cadier, notes, "Throughout Europe the term Anabaptist was synonymous for a revolutionary, dangerous agitator, a destroyer of the established order and accepted doctrines."<sup>14</sup> This background explains Calvin's rather waspishly polemical style, certainly in his Preface, though he becomes more warmly pastoral as he proceeds.

Perhaps the most immediately imposing feature of Calvin's work is that it was written in Orleans in 1534, in Calvin's twenty-fifth year, two years before he had set sight on any spire in Geneva, and while under the fire of persecution which surrounded him and others joined to the cause of the Reformation in France. It was Calvin's first theological treatise and it is no lightweight offering, running to some seventy-five pages in the Baker edition.<sup>15</sup>

But it is not only Calvin's youth and inexperience in penning this treatise which is impressive. It is, above all else, his theological method, which could be summarised very simply as "Scripture first". Cadier notes that "Calvin begins by refuting [his opponents'] opinions by means of a *thorough biblical study*. Thus from the first he uses the *biblical method* which will always be his method."<sup>16</sup> Calvin himself states that his aim throughout is to state his case "by clear passages of Scripture". Various other authorities, says Calvin, must give place to Scripture, including "human wisdom", "Philosophers", including Plato and Aristotle; indeed "the whole body of Sages".<sup>17</sup>

What error does Calvin seek to combat? According to Cadier, it is "the affirmation that the soul either sleeps after death until the day of judgment, or else that it is a vital breath which, as it is unable to persist without a body, dies

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<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Psychopannychia; or, the Soul's Imaginary Sleep between Death and Judgement*, 1534, in *Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters, Volume 3* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 416-90. The Greek word *Psychopannychia* comes from *psyche*, meaning "soul", and *pannychizo*, "to remain awake throughout the night". A literal translation might appear to be "the night-watch of the soul", quite a different concept to the "soul-sleep" which Calvin opposed. Why then did he give his treatise this title? It is possible that he saw himself as something of a night-watchman during a time of fomentation and error.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Cadier, *The Man God Mastered: a brief biography of John Calvin* (London: IVF, 1964), 55.

<sup>15</sup> It was not, however, Calvin's first publication; that was his commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*, published in 1532.

<sup>16</sup> Cadier, 56, emphasis mine.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Psychopannychia*, 420. Calvin therefore follows in the good Western tradition of Tertullian and Augustine in that he sought to break theology free from its *dependence* on Greek philosophy. But this by no means implies that Calvin despised philosophy or chose to be unacquainted with it – nothing could be further from the truth, as anyone acquainted with his *Institutes* will know. The point is that Calvin's *primary authority* in all his thinking can be none other than God speaking in the Scriptures.

with the body until the resurrection of the whole man".<sup>18</sup> In the Preface, Calvin explains that his purpose is to repress "the extravagance of those who, alike ignorantly and tumultuously, maintain that THE SOUL DIES OR SLEEPS".<sup>19</sup> This is especially important for us to grasp. It is not simply soul-sleep but *soul-death* against which Calvin is taking aim. This he sets out in very graphic language:

*At first, some only vaguely alleged that THE SOUL SLEEPS, without defining what they wished to be understood by "sleep". Afterwards arose those psychoktonoi, who murder Souls, though without inflicting a wound.*<sup>20</sup>

Calvin, therefore, is not combatting the sleep of the soul, if by sleep is meant nothing more than pleasant rest and refreshment. His target is better appreciated as something more akin to death, the cessation of the living, animal functions of the soul, something that might seem closer to annihilation than to "sleep".<sup>21</sup>

Calvin begins the treatise proper with a careful definition of the terms he is going to employ, above all the true identity of the soul. For Calvin, the "soul" is not a substitute or a synonym for "life", which has a wider meaning.<sup>22</sup> Importantly, he maintains that the human soul, and not the body, is the image of God in man, because God "is a Spirit, and cannot be represented by any bodily shape".<sup>23</sup> Therefore, "we hold that nothing can bear the image of God but spirit, since God is a Spirit".<sup>24</sup> But if the human soul is the image of God in man, then that soul cannot die because God himself cannot die. This understanding of the soul is an essential step in Calvin's thinking: to deny thought, understanding, reason and imagination to the soul is to contradict its very nature:

*For those who admit that the soul lives, and yet deprive it of all sense, feign a soul which has none of the properties of the soul from itself, seeing that its nature, without which it cannot possibly exist, is to move, to feel, to be vigorous, to understand.*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cadier, 56.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Psychopannychia*, 414.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>21</sup> I use the adjective "animal" in the sense of "that which animates". Of course, both the Old and the New Testament very frequently speak of death in terms of "sleep", and I will take up this discussion subsequently.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Psychopannychia*, 420.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 424.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 427.



That the soul is distinct from the body; that it is not some subsidiary aspect of the functioning of the body, is clear in Calvin’s understanding. Christ, at his death, committed his spirit into the hands of his Father (Luke 23:46; Psalms 31:6), and Stephen followed the same pattern (Acts 7:59).<sup>26</sup> And when John records that Christ yielded up his spirit at death (John 19:30), “[t]hese words cannot refer to the panting or action of the lungs”.<sup>27</sup>

It is important, then, to understand that Calvin is especially concerned that anything resembling the *death* of the soul is an error which should be combatted with the greatest urgency.

If we accept without reservation that the human soul cannot die, that it continues to live even though the body has died, is it at all permissible to say that the soul “sleeps”? No, certainly not if “sleep” is to be equated with unconsciousness.

Robert Letham describes how soul-sleep, if it existed, might be *experienced*: “In sleep one is unaware of the passage of time, so after death there will be no experience of any intervening interval, but it will feel as though one is passing straight to the judgment.”<sup>28</sup> This is unacceptable to Calvin because it implies the negation of the essential functioning of the soul.

It is not the *soul* that “sleeps” in any sense, argues Calvin; and indeed nowhere in Scripture is it ever said that any human soul “sleeps” in death. “Sleep” is predicated of the whole human person, and is used in Scripture as a euphemism for the death of the body, “as equivalent to lying or being stretched out, as sleepers do when stretched on the ground”.<sup>29</sup>

To substantiate his argument, Calvin makes extensive use of Luke 16:19-31, the narrative of the rich man and Lazarus. I use the word “narrative” quite deliberately, because that is how Calvin viewed it. Following Tertullian, Irenaeus, Origen, Cyprian, Jerome, Ambrose and indeed Augustine, Calvin took this passage as “a narrative rather than a parable, inasmuch as the name [of Lazarus] is added”.<sup>30</sup>

In one of the most important and helpful passages in his treatise, Calvin describes in a most comforting and pastoral manner the experience of “rest” which believers enjoy after death. It is noteworthy that Calvin does not

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<sup>26</sup> It is clear that Calvin subscribes to what might be called a bipartite understanding of human nature, rather than a tripartite view which holds that *soul* and *spirit* are distinct. Calvin uses these two terms more or less interchangeably.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 428.

<sup>28</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 830. Letham does not advocate a doctrine of soul-sleep.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Psychopannychia*, 459.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 431. It is worth asking whether modern-day theologians and preachers would interpret this passage with the boldness and lucidity of Calvin. Venema, for example, appears to sound a note of caution: “*Without attempting to interpret fully* all the details of this passage, it *seems* to affirm clearly that immediately upon death the righteous and the wicked enter upon two separate modes of existence.” Cornelis Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 57, emphasis mine.

disparage the vocabulary of “sleep” – he only wants to guard it against mistaken interpretations:

*Feeling desirous, as far as we can, to satisfy all, we will here say something respecting THE REST OF THE SOUL WHEN, IN SURE TRUST IN THE DIVINE PROMISE, IT IS FREED FROM THE BODY. Scripture, by the bosom of Abraham, only means to designate this rest. First, we give the name of “rest” to that which our opponents call “sleep”. We have no aversion, indeed, to the term sleep, were it not corrupted and almost polluted by their falsehoods. Secondly, by “rest” we understand, not sloth, or lethargy, or anything like the drowsiness of ebriety<sup>31</sup> which they attribute to the soul; but tranquility of conscience and security, which always accompanies faith, but is never complete in all its parts till after death.<sup>32</sup>*

Calvin is quite content not only to concede but positively to affirm the “rest” of the soul following physical death.

For the time being, we will allow Calvin himself something of a “rest”, but we will return to some of these questions a little later in the paper.

### 3. Bavinck v Berkhof

In the briefest fashion I will summarise the somewhat differing thought of two Reformed giants, Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) and Louis Berkhof (1873-1957) on the subject of the intermediate state. Less than twenty years separated their births, but several thousand miles of Atlantic Ocean separated them for most of their lives: Berkhof’s family emigrated from the Netherlands to Grand Rapids, Michigan, when young Louis was just nine.<sup>33</sup>

In general, Bavinck is a good deal happier than Berkhof to use vocabulary associated with the intermediate state, especially that of “hades”. “According to the New Testament”, he writes, “all the dead will be in hades, the realm of the dead, until the resurrection”.<sup>34</sup> He continues:

*Jesus, too, as long as he was in the state of death, dwelt in hades, even though it could not hold him there (Acts 2:27, 31). He, after all, descended to the “lower parts of the earth” (Eph 4:9). And so all the dead are “under the earth” (Phil 2:10). Not only the wicked but also believers find themselves in hades after death. They are the dead in Christ.<sup>35</sup>*

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<sup>31</sup> “Ebriety” is an archaic word, a state of being drunk or intoxicated; its root survives in the word “inebriated”.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 432.

<sup>33</sup> It would make a fascinating study as to why they differ as they do, and the part that history, geography, philosophy, politics and church-state relations play. Paul Helm has made a decent stab at this: <http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2014/05/bavinck-and-berkhof.html>

<sup>34</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 604.

<sup>35</sup> *Idem.*

Consider Berkhof, by contrast: “The usual position of Reformed Churches is that the souls of believers immediately after death enter upon the glories of heaven.”<sup>36</sup> And to quote him at greater length:

*This view [that the souls of believers immediately after death enter upon the glories of heaven] would seem to find ample justification in Scripture, and it is well to take note of this, since during the last quarter of a century some Reformed theologians have taken the position that believers at death enter an intermediate place, and remain there until the day of resurrection. The Bible teaches, however, that the soul of the believer when separated from the body, enters the presence of Christ.*<sup>37</sup>

We notice that Berkhof sounds altogether queasier about “an intermediate place”. Of course, we would very much like to get Bavinck and Berkhof together in one place to discuss this question publicly, but this might prove difficult; not only were they separated by several thousand miles of ocean but, if each of them is right, they are each in entirely different realms at the present time!

Which of them is right, or can they both be right? At this point it is instructive simply to set out what the Reformed Confessions say on the subject of the intermediate state, if indeed they say anything.

#### 4. The Historic Reformed Confessions

*Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 57*

Q. How does “the resurrection of the body” comfort you?

A. Not only will my soul be taken immediately after this life to Christ its head, but also my very flesh will be raised by the power of Christ, reunited with my soul, and made like Christ’s glorious body.<sup>38</sup>

*Second Helvetic Confession, Question 26*

THE STATE OF THE SOUL DEPARTED FROM THE BODY. For we believe that the faithful, after bodily death, go directly to Christ, and, therefore, do not need the eulogies and prayers of the living for the dead and their services. Likewise

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<sup>36</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 679.

<sup>37</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>38</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism#toc-god-the-son>

we believe that unbelievers are immediately cast into hell from which no exit is opened for the wicked by any services of the living.<sup>39</sup>

*Westminster Confession, Chapter 32, Paragraph 1*

The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies: and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.<sup>40</sup>

*Westminster Larger Catechism, Question and Answer 86*

Q. What is the communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death?

A. The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death is, in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united to their souls. Whereas the souls of the wicked are at their death cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, and their bodies kept in their graves, as in their prisons, till the resurrection and judgment of the great day.<sup>41</sup>

If indeed they say anything, not one of these Reformed Confessions acknowledges any third realm to which the souls of those who have died go, other than glory and damnation; yes, heaven and hell. The Westminster Standards are somewhat fuller in acknowledging that the bodies of believers remain in their graves, but even these graves are “beds”, and their bodies, decomposing and buried though they are, remain “united to Christ”.<sup>42</sup>

The language used of believers: “my soul be taken immediately after this life to Christ its head”; “go directly to Christ”; “received into the highest

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<sup>39</sup> *Second Helvetic Confession*, <https://www.ccel.org/creeds/helvetic.htm>

<sup>40</sup> *WCF*, <https://www.apuritansmind.com/westminster-standards/chapter-32/>

<sup>41</sup> *WCF*, <https://www.apuritansmind.com/westminster-standards/larger-catechism/>

<sup>42</sup> We might include bodies that have been cremated, or left unburied, or destroyed and lost in some earthly disaster such as war, or even miscarried, whether by accident or design.

heavens”; “where they behold the face of God in light and glory”, aligns wholly with Berkhof’s understanding as against Bavinck’s.

#### IV. Scriptural Overview

Why have I dealt with the historical aspect first before coming to Scripture second? Because we are true heirs of Calvin when we give pride of place to Scripture, but Scripture seldom speaks into a vacuum. We are now in a better position to make greater sense and use of the biblical data. We find, first of all, that there is development of this doctrine – it is true of all doctrines, of course – as we progress from the Old to the New Testament.

##### 1. Old Testament

If I were to select one adjective that may *appear* to describe Old Testament data on the subject of the life after death, it would be “murky”. At first blush, there may seem to be little substantial difference between the Old Testament’s position and that of the pagan nations which surrounded Israel. Martyn Lloyd-Jones speaks of “the belief that the soul goes on to some vague, ill-defined condition where everything is nebulous and indistinct with no definition”.<sup>43</sup> This is very similar to the Greek conception of the underworld.

But is this a fair statement of the Old Testament’s teaching? First of all, we should appreciate the generally earth-bound context of Old Testament hope. Bavinck notes that:

*[t]he eschatological hope of Israel’s pious was almost exclusively directed towards the earthly future of the nation, the realization of the kingdom of God. The question concerning the future of individuals in Sheol remained totally in the background. God, nation, and land were inseparably bound up with each other, and individuals were incorporated in that “covenant” and viewed accordingly.*<sup>44</sup>

If “murkiness” has decidedly negative connotations rather than positive ones, then *Sheol*, the key vocabulary in the Old Testament, has so far more. It is not a “place” that anyone would wish to go. Jacob would go down to Sheol with sorrow (Gen 37:35); the rebels in the wilderness would “go down alive” into Sheol as a punishment (Num 16:30); God’s anger burns “to the depths of Sheol” (Deut 32:22); the one who goes down to Sheol does not return (Job 7:9); no one in Sheol praises God (Psa 6:5); it is seen as somewhere where the wicked go in silence (Psa 31:17). Many more examples could be given.

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<sup>43</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *The Church and the Last Things*, 69.

<sup>44</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 601.

But what exactly is Sheol? Is it one “place” to which everyone, both righteous and wicked, go without exception? If Jacob feared to go to Sheol, and Korah and his rebels were likewise plunged into Sheol, what other conclusion could we draw?

Berkhof helpfully navigates the biblical data:

*When sheol and hades [sic] designate a locality in the literal sense of the word, they either refer to what we usually call hell, or to the grave. Descent into sheol is threatened as a danger and as a punishment for the wicked. Ps. 9:17; 49:14; 55:15; Prov. 15:11; 15:24; Luke 16:23 (hades). The warning and threatening contained in these passages is lost altogether, if sheol is conceived of a neutral place whither all go. From these passages it also follows that it cannot be regarded as a place with two divisions. The idea of such a divided sheol is borrowed from the Gentile conception of the underworld, and finds no support in Scripture. It is only of sheol as the state of death that we can speak as having two divisions, but then we are speaking figuratively. Even the Old Testament testifies to it that they who die in the Lord enter upon a fuller enjoyment of the blessings of salvation, and therefore do not descend into any underworld in the literal sense of the word, Num. 23:5,10; Ps. 16:11; 17:15; 73:24; Prov. 14:32.<sup>45</sup>*

There is, maintains Berkhof, no such thing as a “divided sheol”, but Sheol, broadly speaking, denotes *either* the grave *or* the realm of punishment for the wicked, that is hell. The same conclusion, in general, can be stated in relation to Hades, effectively the New Testament equivalent for Old Testament Sheol.

But note how Berkhof also says that “[e]ven the Old Testament testifies to it that they who die in the Lord enter upon a fuller enjoyment of the blessings of salvation”. The references to this enjoyment may not be nearly as prominent on the pages of the Old Testament as they are in the New, but that does not mean that they are any less valuable and authoritative, nor that Christian preachers should not declare them with wholehearted and full-throated confidence. I give a few of the most striking examples here without any additional comment.

*For I know that my Redeemer lives,  
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.  
And after my skin has been thus destroyed,  
yet in my flesh I shall see God,  
whom I shall see for myself,  
and my eyes shall behold, and not another. (Job 19:26-27)*

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<sup>45</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 685.

*Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;  
my flesh also dwells secure.  
For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,  
or let your holy one see corruption.  
You make known to me the path of life;  
in your presence there is fullness of joy;  
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Ps 16:9-11)*

*As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;  
when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness. (Ps 17:15)*

*But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol,  
for he will receive me. (Ps 49:16)*

*Nevertheless, I am continually with you;  
you hold my right hand.  
You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will receive me to glory.  
Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.  
My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (Ps 73:23-26)*

The reading of these passages should dispel any idea that Old Testament hope, even Old Testament eschatological hope, was merely vague and “murky”.

## 2. New Testament

Nevertheless, in the New Testament, the doctrine of personal eschatology is taught far more fully than in the Old Testament. Why is this? It is because now, in these last days, God’s saving purpose “has been manifested through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and *brought life and immortality to light* through the gospel” (2 Tim 1:10).

The light of the gospel of Christ is like the light of the sun compared to the light of the stars which are drowned out by comparison. And the great announcement of the apostolic gospel is, of course, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, that bodily resurrection in which all who obey the gospel will share.

In that clearer and brighter light of the gospel, many more features of our eschatological hope come into view, including those which we might categorise as belonging to the “intermediate state” – if indeed such a category is to be admitted. It remains the case, overwhelmingly, that the great burden of the New Testament future hope is bound up with the bodily resurrection

from the dead.<sup>46</sup> But that does not prevent us from shining that “greater light” into those texts which speak more specifically about what happens *immediately* after death to those who die trusting in Jesus. And one factor predominates throughout: those who die *in* Christ go to be *with* Christ *immediately*.

I will look at several verses and make brief comments which underline this theme of the believer going to be *with Christ* when he/she passes from this life:

*And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43).*

The dying Jesus told the dying criminal that “Today”, on that very day, the two of them would be in “paradise”.<sup>47</sup> Paradise is the word used by the Septuagint to describe the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:8-15), where God himself walked among the first created people (Gen 3:8). So what is the essence of “paradise”? It is juxtaposed alongside “with me”, which suggests that “paradise” is to be with Christ. As I have written elsewhere:

*[E]verything which is symbolized by this picture of paradise is bound up in the presence of Jesus Christ himself. To be in everlasting fellowship with the Saviour, freed from the body of sin and delivered from death is to truly be in paradise. The believer, when he dies, goes to a destination of complete peace and rest, because there he is with his beloved Saviour... If the Lord promises paradise to this man, then surely every dying believer has a right to say, “I am on my way to paradise.”<sup>48</sup>*

*I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. (Philippians 1:23)*

If for Paul, living meant “Christ” and departing meant something “better” than Christ then what, we imagine, could “better” possibly mean? Who or what is “better” than Christ? The only plausible solution is that Paul means he will be *yet closer* to Christ, will *know more* of Christ, than he did during his earthly life. Letham elaborates on this:

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<sup>46</sup> This is reflected in N. T. Wright’s magisterial *The Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God* (London: SPCK, 2017), in which references to the intermediate state, as presented in this paper, are very fleeting indeed.

<sup>47</sup> The interpretation which suggests that “Today” simply meant that Jesus was specifying that he was speaking *on that day* is both redundant and sterile.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Yeulett, *Jesus and His Enemies* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2013), 256, emphasis mine.



*It would consist of heightened communion with Christ; he would be in close personal proximity to Christ, taking up residence with him; his union with Christ would be expressed in new ways that would surpass his present condition. Perhaps Paul's experience when the glorified Christ encountered him on the road to Damascus gave him a foretaste of that heightened communion and so whetted his appetite that he had a strong desire... to depart and be with Christ.<sup>49</sup>*

It seems quite clear that a communion and enjoyment of this kind can scarcely be compatible with anything resembling soul-sleep, if by that expression we mean unconsciousness. William Hendriksen, commenting on this verse, has some helpful insights on this subject:

Now it cannot be argued that it is “far better” to be in a state of sleep, with the soul in an unconscious condition. No, that would not be “far better” than the conscious communion of the believer with our Lord in this world. Paul is enjoying his present communion: “For to me to live”, he says, “is Christ”. To go into a state of unconsciousness cannot be better than that. No, Paul says that to die is far better because it means he will be with Christ, and will enjoy His presence face to face. It must mean that, otherwise Paul has no argument.<sup>50</sup>

*Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him (2 Corinthians 5:8-9).*

Paul's preference to be “away from the body and at home with the Lord” is entirely consistent with his “desire is to depart and be with Christ” in Philippians 1:23. One question that should be asked – and I will come back to it later – is whether his present body is itself a hindrance to his enjoyment of Christ. It is clear from 5:4 that Paul is “burdened” while he is in the “tent” of his body, and it is not being “unclothed” that he seeks so much as being “further clothed”. And whilst this seems to be a reference to a future resurrection body rather than a disembodied state, the impetus of this passage is on being “at home with the Lord”. Charles Hodge comments on these verses:

*The Christian's heaven is to be with Christ, for we shall be like him when we see him as he is. Into his presence the believer passes as soon as he is absent from the body, and into his likeness the soul is at death immediately transformed; and when at the resurrection, the body is made like unto his glorious body, the work of redemption is consummated. Awaiting this*

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<sup>49</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 824.

<sup>50</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Bible on the Life Hereafter* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 71.

*consummation, it is an inestimable blessing to be assured that believers, as soon as they are absent from the body, are present with THE LORD.*<sup>51</sup>

The key element of the transition, then, is not so much that believers go from “body” to “no body”, but that they are with Christ in a dimension which was not possible while they were in the body. It is noteworthy in this connection that Hodge is quite unembarrassed to speak of “seeing” Christ even though this seeing would not be the kind of physical “seeing” we are familiar with in this life, on the assumption that the believer, immediately after death, is in a disembodied state.

Indeed, even now, true “seeing” is not a matter of the physical organ of sight, but of the soul being enlightened.<sup>52</sup> We will consider in a later section how it is that the soul of a departed believer might function in the absence of a physical body.

*I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).*

Granted, this passage does not deal with any “intermediate state” – or does it? At what point in his life did this “man in Christ” make this sublime journey? It is tantalising to speculate that when Paul was stoned in Lystra, was taken for dead and subsequently got up and continued his work (Acts 14:19-20) that he was actually dead for a time. But given that Paul himself did not know whether he was “in the body” or “out of the body”, and especially in view of his own prohibition on what could be related from his experience, Bavinck’s warning that theologians should “not attempt to be wiser than they can be” rings loud and clear.<sup>53</sup>

We are on firmer ground when we identify the “third heaven” of verse 2 with the “paradise” of verse 3. In the cosmology with which Paul was familiar, the “first heaven” was the realm of meteorology, the “second heaven” that of astronomy, and the “third heaven” was the dwelling-place of God and the angels who serve him. That realm is here equated with “paradise”: where God is, there Christ is (Luke 23:43); and there, we can deduce, believers will be after death.

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<sup>51</sup> Charles Hodge, *1 & 2 Corinthians: Geneva Series* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 499.

<sup>52</sup> e.g., Matt 6:22, John 9:39, 2 Cor 4:4, Eph 1:18.

<sup>53</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 614. Perhaps this passage in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 is the NT equivalent of the statement about Enoch in Genesis 5:24, briefly and tantalisingly drawing back the curtains of heaven. *Perhaps* – we must heed Bavinck’s cautionary advice!

*And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed”, says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them!” (Revelation 14:13)*

Is there a degree of risk in taking verses from the Book of Revelation and applying them, perhaps over-literally, to the matter at hand? That might be more the case with a passage like Revelation 6:9-11, which I almost included in this section but eventually cut out. Unlike that passage, this verse does not form part of a vision but is a direct verbal communication from heaven. It speaks of the “blessedness” of those who die in Christ and also their “rest”.

As we have seen in other New Testament verses, this “blessedness” comes from the fact that believers die “in the Lord” and cannot be separated from their Lord by death (Rom 8:38). A doctrine of going to be “with Christ” at death is therefore wholly consistent with this verse. Moreover, and interestingly in the light of Calvin’s theology, the state of believers following their death is one of “rest”, but not “sleep”.

The passages I have considered here suggest a number of questions which will be addressed in the section which now follows.

## V. Further Questions

I cover six questions here. The fact that I will habitually place quotation marks around the words “intermediate state” should be understood as conveying my general discomfort with that terminology, a discomfort which I trust is already evident and will become more so as I continue!

### 1. Did Christ Enter Any “Intermediate State”?

The question appears to be of paramount importance. If our doctrine of soteriology is bound up with union with Christ, then what happened to Christ between his death and his resurrection might seem of some interest if believers are to draw conclusions about their *own* experience between death and resurrection. Paul affirms this union with Christ in both death and resurrection (Rom 6:5; Phil 3:10). But we need to apply careful caveats here. There are both continuities and discontinuities between Christ’s experience and ours in this regard. There are some obvious discontinuities: Christ had no “body of death” (Rom 7:24) as do those who put their trust in him. Christ died as sin-bearer; none of us ever will. Christ yielded up his soul to death voluntarily in a way that his followers do not. Christ was in the grave for just three days; for the vast majority of believers it will be much longer than this.

Against that, however, Calvin argues that Christ's experience of death must be seen as the paradigm for the experience of those who follow him, because it is in his *human* nature, not his divine, that Christ suffers and dies:

*[b]elievers in the midst of death acknowledge him as their leader, and while they behold their death sanctified by his death, have no dread of its curse. This Paul intimates when he says, that he was made conformable to his death, and should attain to the resurrection of the dead (Phil 3:10). This conformity, here begun by the cross, He followed out until He should complete it by death.<sup>54</sup>*

Referring to Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost, and to Acts 2:27 in particular, Calvin explains that

*Christ asks and expects two things of his Father – not to abandon his soul to perdition, nor allow himself to be subjected to corruption. This was fulfilled. For his soul was supported by divine power, and did not fall into perdition, and the body was preserved in the tomb till its Resurrection.<sup>55</sup>*

Because the Father answered his Son's prayer, he is sympathetic to all who are in union with Christ: Christ has drawn the sting from death, as Calvin goes on to describe:

*There is no doubt that Christ, when he offered himself to suffer in our stead, had to contend with the power of the devil, with the torments of hell, and the pains of death. All these things were to be done in our nature, that they might lose the right which they had in us. In this contest, therefore, when He was satisfying the rigour and the severity of the Divine justice, when he was engaged with hell, death and the devil, he entreated the Father not to abandon him in such straits, not to give him over to the power of death, asking nothing more of the Father than that our weakness, which he bore in his own body, might be freed from the power of the devil and of death. The faith on which we now lean is, that the penalty of sin committed in our nature, and which was to be paid in the same nature, in order to satisfy the Divine justice, was paid and discharged in the flesh of Christ, which was ours.<sup>56</sup>*

The real value of Christ's own "intermediate state" – here I use the expression in a merely temporal sense to denote the time between his death and

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<sup>54</sup> Calvin, *Psychopannychia*, 436.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 438.

<sup>56</sup> Calvin, *Psychopannychia*, 482.

resurrection – is that he drew the sting of death, in order to “deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Heb. 2:15).

## 2. Can the Human Soul Function Without the Body?

This has been one of the main objections raised by advocates of soul-sleep. The human constitution is composed of body and soul, these two being distinct but not separable. The suggestion that the soul is active while the body is dead and decomposing might seem to be too significant a concession to the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul; it might even head us off in the direction of Gnosticism. Venema summarises the problem:

*Because human beings are a psychosomatic unity (not souls “having a body”, but “living souls” or “ensouled bodies”) death cuts them off from the possibility of any meaningful experience or continued conscious existence. It is therefore inconceivable that human beings, their bodies having dissolved, could enjoy an intermediate state of fellowship with the Lord or others apart from their bodies, which are indispensable to all meaningful human experience.<sup>57</sup>*

On account of this difficulty, some have raised the suggestion of some kind of “intermediate corporality”. And it may seem at first sight that the Scriptures lend this idea some support. We read of Samuel (1 Sam 28:14), earthly kings (Isa 14:9) and the Gentile dead (Ezek. 31:18; 32:19) in corporeal terms, as well as Moses and Elijah (Matt 17:3; Mark 9:4; Luke 9:30). But Bavinck is quite insistent that

*from this mode of speech in Scripture one cannot infer anything about the corporeality of souls after death. Scripture can speak of God and angels, of the souls in Sheol, of joy in heaven and torment in hell only by using human language, with imagery derived from earthly conditions and relations. But alongside this it states clearly and decisively that God is spirit and that the angels are spirits, and by saying this it gives us a standard by which all these anthropomorphic expressions need to be understood. And it does the same with respect to the dead.<sup>58</sup>*

He continues:

*We know only of spirit and matter. An “immaterial corporeality” is a contradiction that was inauspiciously taken from theosophy into Christian*

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<sup>57</sup> Cornelis Venema, *The Promise of the Future* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 48.

<sup>58</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 619.

*theology and seeks in vain to reconcile the false dualism of spirit and matter, of thesis and antithesis.*<sup>59</sup>

It is true, Bavinck concedes, that in terms of human beings in this present life, “all their activities are bound to the body and dependent on it, not just the vegetative and animal functions but also the intellectual ones of thinking and willing”. And yet,

*the soul’s dependence on the body does not necessarily exclude its independence... Thinking and knowing are activities of the soul; it is not the ear that hears or the eye that sees but the psychic “I” of a human being that hears and sees through the eye.*<sup>60</sup>

If this kind of instrumentality can be predicated of certain human organs, such as the eye, why can it not be predicated of the entire human body? Hendriksen agrees. “A man who is a genius of an organist can have music in his soul without having any organ on which to express it. His musical consciousness is not removed from his soul by taking the organ away from him.”<sup>61</sup>

It must be acknowledged that these types of consideration take us to the very limits of what we can reasonably know and say about the respective functions of the body and the soul. We simply do not live in a realm in which the two can be decoupled from one another. Death, in this present world, is the only true decoupling – and it is to be understood as an unnatural and indeed grievous decoupling. For that reason, the climatic eschatological hope of God’s people consists not in the immortality of the soul, but in the resurrection of the body according to the pattern of Christ, a body which, of course, is joined to an eternal soul.

### 3. How Should Believers View Their Souls and Their Bodies *Before* Death?

This question is, in one sense, a corollary of the previous one, and it does not address the “intermediate state” as such; rather it back-projects the question into this present life. To return to Calvin once more; there are times when, to us, he appears to write like an ascetic at best; and a Gnostic at worst:

*[b]oth in the body and out of the body we labour to please the Lord... we shall perceive the presence of God when we shall be separated from this body – we will no longer walk by faith but by sight, since the load of clay by which we*

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<sup>59</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 620.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 616-17.

<sup>61</sup> Hendriksen, *The Bible on the Life Hereafter*, 54.

*are pressed down, acts as a kind of wall of partition, keeping us far away from God.*<sup>62</sup>

The “load of clay”?! Calvin’s view of the body seems, to our twenty-first century ears, which are accustomed to hearing so much about a “holistic” view of our “psychosomatic unity”, disparaging as well as dualistic. However, it is not the material nature of the body *per se* that Calvin is considering but rather *this body*, the present body of sin and corruption, which believers will gladly put off at death. He goes on to clarify:

*The body, which decays, weighs down the soul, and confining it within an earthly habitation, greatly limits its perceptions. If the body is the prison of the soul, if the earthly habitation is a kind of fetter, what is the state of the soul when set free from this prison, when loosed from these fetters? Is it not restored to itself, and as it were made complete, so that we may truly say, that all which it gains is so much lost to the body?*<sup>63</sup>

It may be that in our days of gyms (remember those?), Pilates, Joe Wicks and Urban Outfitters, that Christians need to ask whether we have begun to esteem the body too highly and the soul too lightly. Paul reminds Timothy, “for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Tim. 4:8).

The body and the soul are not opposite and equal components of our nature, like two symmetrical parts in an Ikea flatpack.<sup>64</sup> The fundamental difference between the body and the soul needs to be understood. What is that difference? For Calvin, it is that the present “body of death” is subject to decay; the soul, which is immortal, can never decay. Calvin, of course, lived in an era in which bodily decay was far more evident wherever he looked; he buried a wife, a son and possibly a number of daughters as well. A century later, John Owen was bereaved of his wife and eleven children.

It needs to be re-emphasised that Calvin is very far from being any kind of anti-materialist. It is not that the body is inferior to the soul by virtue of being material rather than spiritual. The original material creation was “very good”; God’s judgment on sin plunged it into decay. And the resurrected bodies of believers, along with the entire renewed creation, will all be “very good”, and will never be liable to sin, decay or death.

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<sup>62</sup> Calvin, *Psychopannychia*, 442-43.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 443.

<sup>64</sup> One error we should safeguard against is that of Apollinarianism, which held that Christ had a human body but a divine mind, or soul. Such a heresy is of course the offspring of Gnostic tendencies which exalted what was spiritual, *per se*, and demeaned what was physical, *per se*. But more to the point, if Christ’s soul was divine and not human, he could not represent the human race as their substitute because he would not have the wholly human nature of his people.

#### 4. Is There Any Sense At All In Which Believers “Sleep” After Death?

We have noted how frequently the Bible speaks of death as “sleep”. This appears to be, essentially, a euphemism, as Berkhof explains:

*[t]his Scriptural representation is simply based on the similarity between a dead body and a body asleep. It is not unlikely that Scripture uses this euphemistic expression, in order to suggest to believers the comforting hope of the resurrection.<sup>65</sup>*

But might it be the case that Scripture intends to convey something more profound when it speaks of “sleep”? After all, we are more aware today than ever, in our culture of sleeping tablets, sleep clinics and sleep counselling, that the sleeping person – body *and* soul! – is far from inactive or merely unconscious. Bill Bryson, in what may be one of the last of his phenomenally popular (as well as readable and interesting) books, makes the observation:

*Sleep has been tied to a great many biological processes – consolidating memories, restoring hormonal balance, emptying the brain of accumulated neurotoxins, resetting the immune system... It would seem to be, in short, a kind of nightly tune-up for the body... Sleep is clearly about more than just resting... Whatever sleep gives us, it is more than just a period of recuperative inactivity.<sup>66</sup>*

In Bryson’s work, the complete absence of the Creator is, for any Christian, its saddest feature. But it provokes some fascinating questions. Is the “rest” of our souls, after death, any kind of “tune-up” for the resurrection which is to follow? We are all aware of the healing properties of sleep, and how a really sound and deep night of sleep can, without exaggeration, *revive* both the soul and the body. Why does the Lord give “his beloved” sleep? (Ps 127:2) Might it be, in a measure, because our present (and pleasant!) sleep is intended to be a picture or even – dare we say – a “type” of the true “sleep” that believers will know between death and resurrection?

Hendriksen picks up on some of these ideas:

*This comparison of death to sleep is very appropriate; for (1) sleep implies rest from labor; the dead also rest from their labors (Revelation 14:13); (2) sleep implies a cessation of participation in the activities pertaining to the sphere in which one has been busy during the hours of wakefulness; the dead also are no longer active in the world which they have left; and (3) sleep is generally a prelude to awakening; the dead also will be awakened.<sup>67</sup>*

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<sup>65</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 689.

<sup>66</sup> Bill Bryson, *The Body: a guide for occupants* (London: Penguin, 2019), 302-03.

<sup>67</sup> Hendriksen, *The Bible on the Life Hereafter*, 54-55.



Each of Hendriksen’s three points merits our careful thought. But perhaps the most poignant is the final one. Jesus, having told her parents that she was “sleeping”, spoke to Jairus’ daughter and said, “*Talitha cumi*”, “Little girl, I say to you, arise” (Mark 5:41). It may be compelling to see this as a foretaste of what will take place when all the “sleeping” dead in Christ will hear the voice of the Son of God, and live (John 5:25-29).

Again, there is a measure of speculation in some of these observations, which we do well to watch closely. But we can surely say that if indeed “sleep” is an accurate description of the experience of believers between death and bodily resurrection, it will not be mere unconsciousness. That could scarcely be anticipated by Paul as “far better” (Phil 1:23) than the communion with Christ which he already enjoyed in his earthly life.

#### 5. Do Believers in the “Intermediate State” Experience Any Measure of Dissatisfaction?

Enough may have already been said to provide a fairly clear and short answer to this question. But lingering concerns may still arise. Are believers, when all is said and done, confined within that narrow corridor or waiting room, frustrated and champing at the bit to be united with their future resurrection bodies? Letham’s handling of this subject might seem to suggest a semblance of resignation, almost disappointment. Commenting on 2 Corinthians 5:6-9, he says:

*Here the verbs lack the visceral power associated with our expectation of the resurrection. “We are always of good courage” (v.6). This is not Paul’s number one hope; it is something to be accepted. The reason for this is that there are pluses and minuses associated with our condition after death.<sup>68</sup>*

He continues, perhaps in a somewhat more optimistic vein:

*From one perspective we will suffer loss, but yet, in an enfeebled and broken condition, we will be given access to the heightened communion with the glorified Christ, an experience beyond our current calculations.<sup>69</sup>*

Letham, more than many scholars, emphasises the negative, privative aspects of an “intermediate state” perhaps seeking to prepare believers for the reality that it will not be a matter of going straight to *fully consummated* glory. But to think in terms of an existence which we might describe as “better, but not that great”, or “a bit of a let-down”, or something akin from going from full

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<sup>68</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 826.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 827.

lockdown to Tier 4 restrictions during a Covid outbreak, would be highly mistaken, and entirely contrary to the consistent witness of faithful believers in both Old and New Testament.<sup>70</sup>

To be fair to Letham, the vocabulary of “heightened communion with the glorified Christ, an experience beyond our current calculations”, is entirely in keeping with apostolic witness. At the same time, it is a joyful communion tinged with *anticipation* of something even better, perhaps like the first stage of a long-awaited holiday: all the packing and hard work is done and there is a sense that the final destination, very best of all, is yet to come – and it will last forever. There is no dissatisfaction or frustration in this phase, though there is still longing. Calvin, once again, strikes the most helpful balance:

*Still, something is wanting which they desire to see, namely, the complete and perfect glory of God, to which they always aspire. Though there is no impatience in their desire, their rest is not yet full and perfect.*<sup>71</sup>

That desire is only met when Psalm 17:15 is fulfilled: “As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.”

## 6. What About Those Who Die Outside Christ?

This question is bound to be asked and it needs to be addressed.

It should be quite clear by now that there is no spiritual realm of Sheol/Hades where the souls of both believers and unbelievers go after death. There is no “waiting room” where all are kept together, waiting to be called higher, or sent lower, as it were. Can we speak of Sheol or Hades in any sense? Only if we mean that the *bodies* of all people – believer and unbeliever – are alike in Sheol/Hades, if by those expressions we mean the grave, or the earth. But just as it is appropriate to speak of the souls of believers being in “the third heaven”, or “Abraham’s bosom”, or “Paradise”, or simply “heaven”, so we must think of the souls of unbelievers being in “hell”, or “Hades”, rightly understood.<sup>72</sup>

W. G. T. Shedd outlines the classic Reformed position which we have already seen in the case of Berkhof, in particular:

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<sup>70</sup> I would emphasise that the phrases and analogies in this sentence are all mine, not Letham’s! Having said that, the phrase “enfeebled and broken condition” is liable to misunderstanding; perhaps not to be recommended in pastoral practice.

<sup>71</sup> Calvin, *Psychopannychia*, 436.

<sup>72</sup> That is, understood as equivalent to hell, the place of punishment of the wicked, as opposed to the grave. See especially Matt 11:23, 16:18; Luke 16:23.

*The substance of the Reformed view, then, is, that the intermediate state for the saved is Heaven without the body, and the final state for the saved is Heaven with the body; that the intermediate state for the lost is Hell without the body, and the final state for the lost is Hell with the body. In the Reformed, or Calvinistic eschatology, there is no intermediate Hades between Heaven and Hell, which the good and evil inhabit in common. When this earthly existence is ended, the only specific places and states are Heaven and Hell. Paradise is a part of Heaven; Sheol, or Hades, is a part of Hell. A pagan underworld containing both Paradise and Hades, both the happy and the miserable, like the pagan idol, is “nothing in the world”. There is no such place.<sup>73</sup>*

This is important because it emphasises that the great, final and permanent separation between the righteous and the wicked is established at death. Shedd cites both Old and New Testament to substantiate his argument:

*According to Asaph, when the wicked die they are plunged into ruin. They become a desolation in a moment. They are swept away utterly by terrors (Psalm 73:12-19). When “the rich man” dies, he descends to a place of torments, from which there is no escape (Luke 16:23, 26). And when Judas committed suicide, he went “to his own place”, the place of perdition naturally (Acts 1:25).<sup>74</sup>*

Those brief and sombre words of Acts 1:25 – “to his own place” – are ominously powerful. I am sure that many powerful sermons could be preached from this text. Christian preachers must of course speak openly and clearly about the reality of everlasting punishment. Nevertheless, preachers do not “preach hell” any more than the historic creeds of the Christian faith “confess hell”. At one level God’s eternal punishment is “strange” and “alien” to him (Isa 28:21). The church must proclaim Christ crucified and risen, and the promise of eternal life, to a world that is already under just condemnation due to sin. At the same time, we must not hide the fact that, left to ourselves, we are under the just sentence of eternal condemnation.

## VI. *Space, Time and T. F. Torrance*

One final question merits a little more space before I conclude. It amounts to this: *Does the believer, after death, experience the passing of time as he/she did during earthly life?* If time passes at the same rate as it does on earth, then the

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<sup>73</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 59-60.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

“intermediate state” could last for many centuries, indeed millennia. How long has Abel, for example, been waiting for the resurrection? Has that vast stretch of time, for him, whipped by in a matter of days or even seconds; or did he/does he/will he experience a more or less instantaneous transition to a resurrection body? Is it even plausible to speak of *time* at all when considering the existence of departed believers?

This is a subject which could fill a paper in its own right. 2 Peter 3:8 tells us that “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day”. The context here is the apparent slowness of God in bringing his promises to a fulfilment; these words are given to assure waiting believers that the Lord will not delay any longer than is necessary according to his counsel. In Revelation 10:6 we read about there being no more *delay* in the execution of God’s purposes; Abraham Kuyper was among those who held that Revelation 10:6 teaches the suspension of *time*.<sup>75</sup> More recently, Anthony Thiselton has dealt with this matter and has arrived at the conclusion that the believer “will know nothing of the intermediate state... his or her ‘sleep’ cannot be interrupted”.<sup>76</sup>

But perhaps the fullest and most interesting treatment of this subject comes from Thomas F. Torrance (1913-2007), for twenty-seven years Professor of Christian dogmatics at New College, Edinburgh. Torrance was one of the intellectual giants of the twentieth century, as much at home with the metaphysics of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics as he was with modern quantum physics and Einstein’s theories of relativity. A student of Karl Barth, and to a large extent imbibing Barth’s doctrine of Scripture, he differed more widely from others generally categorised as neo-orthodox, especially Bultmann, whom he believed was guilty of minimising the importance of the historical, this-worldly aspect of Christ’s life and work on earth, from incarnation to resurrection, reducing it to a merely existential “Easter-faith”.<sup>77</sup> It is fair to say that Torrance is viewed with a measure of suspicion by theologians who hold to Reformed confessionalism; he was viscerally opposed to the idea of limited

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<sup>75</sup> In the ESV Rev 10:5-6 reads, “And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more *delay*.” The Greek for “delay” is *chronos*, usually translated “time”, but “delay” fits the immediate context – the fulfilment of the “mystery of God” (10:7) – very appropriately.

<sup>76</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Last Things: A New Approach* (London: SPCK, 2012), 79.

<sup>77</sup> “If the resurrection is not an event in history, a happening within the same order of physical existence to which we belong, then atonement and redemption are empty vanities, for they achieve nothing for historical men and women in the world.” Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 87. Torrance does not want believers to abstract themselves now from the realm of space and time. This is the continuum in which we operate while we are in this present age; it is the same continuum into which the human Jesus entered two thousand years ago.

atonement, although it would be unfair to describe him as a universalist.<sup>78</sup> But there is a profound brilliance about his mind that sometimes – not always! – makes his writing almost intoxicating.

Torrance’s two key works that concern us now are his *Space, Time and Incarnation*<sup>79</sup> followed by *Space, Time and Resurrection*.<sup>80</sup> The first work, which is a far stodgier read than the second – Torrance never “tweeted” in his life – deals more specifically with the subject of space, whereas the second work, which I am referencing in this paper, considers time; although Torrance never detaches space from time but perceives them as a unified continuum. He rejects the Aristotelian idea of the universe as a “receptacle” or “container” which exists necessarily, and instead sees space-time, not as a void which God must populate with created entities, but as a created entity in itself. For Torrance,

*it is necessary to see that the resurrection means the redemption of space and time, for space and time are not abrogated or transcended. Rather are they healed and restored, just as our being is healed and restored through the resurrection. Of course we cannot separate our being from space and time for space and time are conditions and functions of created existence and the bearers of its order. The healing and restoring of our being carries with it the healing, restoring, reorganizing and transforming of the space and time in which we now live our lives in relation to one another and to God.*<sup>81</sup>

Therefore, for Torrance, God’s redemption of all creation includes the redemption of space-time itself. We need to grasp this in order to make sense of statements such as the following:

*The kind of time we have in this passing world is the time of an existence that crumbles away into the dust, time that runs backward into nothingness. Hence the kind of historical happening we have in this world is happening that decays and is so far illusory, running away into the darkness and forgetfulness of the past.*<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Paul D. Molnar, “Thomas F. Torrance and the problem of universalism”, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Volume 68, Issue 2, May 2015, 164–186. In the abstract, Molnar argues that “Torrance expressly believed in the ‘universality of Christ’s saving work’ but rejected ‘universalism’ and any idea of ‘limited atonement’”. He considered both of these views to be rationalistic approaches which ignore the need for eschatological reserve when thinking about what happens at the end when Christ comes again and consequently tend to read back logical necessities into the gospel of free grace.”

<sup>79</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (London: T & T Clark, 2005).

<sup>80</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (London: T & T Clark, 2019).

<sup>81</sup> Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 90–91.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

This is the nature of time in the present, earthly age, characterised by death and decay, and “illusory” in the sense that its events and achievements crumble into dust and will not stand for ever. But by contrast, what about Christ’s resurrection?

As happening within this kind of time, and as event within this kind of history, the resurrection, by being what it is, resists and overcomes corruption and decay, and is therefore a new kind of historical happening which instead of tumbling down into the grave and oblivion rises out of the death of what is past into continuing being and reality. This is temporal happening that runs not backwards but forwards, and overcomes all illusion and privation of being. This is fully real historical happening so real that it remains real happening and does not slip away from us, but keeps pace with us and outruns us as we tumble down in decay and lapse into death and the dust of past history and even comes to meet us out of the future.<sup>83</sup>

Christ’s resurrection, for Torrance, is the great event by which the entire plane of God’s existence intersects with our own space-time existence in this world which is in bondage to decay. When we embrace Christ by faith, we are caught up into his own existence, his own glorious life which cannot decay or grow old:

*That is how we are to think of the risen Christ Jesus. He is not dead but alive, more real than any of us. Hence he does not need to be made real for us, because he does not decay or become fixed in the past. He lives on in the present as real live continuous happening, encountering us here and now in the present and waiting for us in the future.<sup>84</sup>*

What are the implications of this view for the intermediate state? Torrance recognises that this is a specific and important area of application:

*But what about the individual, and what about the death of the believer? This is where it is impossible for us to think completely together the two times in which we are involved, yet we may discern something of how the two “moments” fall together in our being in Christ. When the believer dies, he goes to be with Christ and is in his immediate presence, participant in him and made like him. This is to each believer the parousia of Christ to him. Yet when this is regarded on the plane of history and of the on-going processes of the fallen world, the death of each believer means that his body is laid to sleep in the earth, waiting until the redemption of the body and the recreation of all things at the final Parousia. Looked at from the perspective of the new creation there is no gap between the death of the believer and the*

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<sup>83</sup> Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 88.

<sup>84</sup> *Idem*.

*parousia of Christ, but looked at from the perspective of time that decays and crumbles away there is a lapse in time between them. How do we think these together? Only by thinking of them exclusively in Christ, in the one person of Christ in whom human nature and divine nature are hypostatically united, and in whom our human existence and history are taken up into his divine life. We must think Christologically here. But when we relate Christology to the time form of this world what we do see is that the Church is sent out in the mission of the everlasting Gospel into history, under the sway of earthly authorities and powers, and within the structures of space and time.<sup>85</sup>*

It is worth reading this paragraph through at least three times. Torrance’s thinking in this area is deeply absorbing and to my mind, highly plausible. He does not hold to soul-sleep, as did the Anabaptists whom Calvin opposed. Indeed, his solution completely avoids any kind of “intermediate state”. It is not that the believer’s soul advances through the remaining time before the resurrection in such a way that it seems to pass instantaneously; it is rather that he/she is translated to an entirely different plane or realm of being, outside the space-time continuum which is characteristic of this present world.

It is true that Torrance’s thesis might not have been reached apart from his imbibing large doses of Aristotle and Einstein, as well as Barth; but the question we need to ask is whether he is faithful to Scripture. Of course, we are under no obligation to accept his views. For some people they are too abstruse, opaque or philosophically conditioned. Letham is unwilling to take them on board:

*It seems that the claims of neither Torrance nor Thiselton are entirely in harmony with the classic teaching. As for me, I am in no rush to find out whether this is so; besides, once I do find out, I will be unable to inform you. It is more than sufficient to know that we will be “with Christ”.<sup>86</sup>*

Amen to at least two-thirds of that. And a double Amen to the last sentence.

## VII. Conclusion

I choose to finish with some stirring, even exhilarating, thoughts from the saintly Thomas Boston (1676-1732). It is noteworthy that in his famous *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, and in the course of a fairly lengthy section entitled *The Difference between the Righteous and the Wicked in their Death*, Boston gives no hint of anything remotely “intermediate” about the believer’s

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<sup>85</sup> Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 102.

<sup>86</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 830.

condition immediately after death. The righteous man “is adorned with robes of glory”<sup>87</sup>; in departing from this present world “they enter on their eternal state”<sup>88</sup>; “they shall have a joyful entrance into the other world”.<sup>89</sup> For Boston, as for many in the mainstream Reformed tradition, it is unthinkable to interpose any kind of intermediate “world” which comes between “earth” and “heaven”. He continues:

*Death can do them no harm. It cannot even hurt their bodies: for though it separates the soul from the body, it cannot separate the body from the Lord Jesus Christ. Even death is to them but sleep in Jesus (1 Thess. 4:14). They continue members of Christ, though in a grave. Their dust is precious dust, laid up in the grave as in their Lord's cabinet. They lie in a grave mellowing, as precious fruit laid up to be brought forth to him at the resurrection.*<sup>90</sup>

So much for the body. And what about the soul?

*When the dying saint's speech is stopped, his eyes set, and his last breath drawn, the soul gets safe away into the heavenly paradise, leaving the body to return to its earth, but in the joyful hope of a reunion at its glorious resurrection. But how can death hurt the godly? It is a foiled enemy: if it cast them down, it is only that they may rise more glorious. “Our Saviour Jesus Christ hath abolished death” (2 Tim 1:10). The soul and life of it is gone: it is but a walking shade that may fright, but cannot hurt saints: it is only the shadow of death to them, it is not the thing itself; their dying is but as dying, or somewhat like dying. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, though stoned to death, yet only fell asleep (Acts 7:60). Certainly the nature of death is quite changed, with respect to the saints. It is not to them, what it was to Jesus Christ their Head: it is not the venomous ruining thing wrapped up in the sanction of the first covenant.*<sup>91</sup>

So, our conclusion must be one of joy and triumph. The believer who belongs to Jesus Christ is going to be with Christ immediately and forever! There is no cramped corridor, no waiting room in which we will wearily see out the remaining centuries. No dying believer, as far as I know, ever gloried in going to the “intermediate state”. No hymn, as far as I know, contains the words

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<sup>87</sup> Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State: of Primitive Integrity, Entire Depravity, Begun Recovery and Consummate Happiness or Misery* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 341.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.



“intermediate state” and if any did, they probably would never be sung.<sup>92</sup> But heaven, paradise, glory, immortality – above all the Lord Jesus Christ himself – all this is the stuff of countless hymns:

*Forever with the Lord!  
Amen! So let it be.  
Life from the dead is in that word,  
'Tis immortality.*

*Here in the body pent,  
Absent from Him, I roam,  
Yet nightly pitch my moving tent  
A day's march nearer home.*

*My Father's house on high,  
Home of my soul, how near  
At times to faith's foreseeing eye  
Thy golden gates appear!*

*Ah, then my spirit faints  
To reach the land I love,  
The bright inheritance of saints,  
Jerusalem above!*

*Forever with the Lord!  
O Father, 'tis Thy will.  
The promise of that faithful word  
E'en here to me fulfil.<sup>93</sup>*

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<sup>92</sup> How about *Immortal, Imperishable, Intermediate?* Or *Shout for Sheol*, or *Hallelujah Hades?* Or perhaps not.

<sup>93</sup> James Montgomery, *Forever with the Lord*,  
[https://hymnary.org/text/forever\\_with\\_the\\_lord\\_amen\\_so\\_let\\_it\\_be](https://hymnary.org/text/forever_with_the_lord_amen_so_let_it_be)

# THE END IS NOT THE BEGINNING... IN FACT, NOT EVEN THE END

*Michael Horton \**

## *Introduction*

The relation between Christianity and Platonism has always been a controversial topic – even since the second century. For a variety of reasons, Plato’s school was a more obvious conversation partner than any of the others of the Hellenistic age. Nevertheless, the differences were just as stark. Like many ancient Mediterranean and Eastern cultures, time moves in a circle: The end is like the beginning. But in Israel, especially evident in the Hebrew prophets, the circle is broken out into a line of promise and fulfillment. The end therefore cannot be like the beginning, but is something completely new. The goal is not a return to a pristine beginning (“Paradise Restored”), but something “no eye has seen nor ear heard” (1 Cor 2:9). Even in the hearts of Christians today these two eschatologies intermingle, vying for control. That conflict is the interest of this paper.

A few centuries before Socrates, a strange doctrine entered the Hellenic bloodstream via a ribald Thracian cult that celebrated death. Known far and wide for their courage on the battlefield, Thracians embraced a myth attributed to Orpheus, said by some to have been the founder of all mystery religions, in which the body is considered a tomb or prison. A. H. Armstrong summarises well the core of the Orphic myth:

*The divine in us is an actual being, a daimon or spirit, which has fallen as a result of some primeval sin and is entrapped in a series of earthly bodies, which may be animal and plant as well as human. It can escape from the “sorrowful weary wheel”, the cycle of reincarnation, by following the Orphic way of life, which involved, besides rituals and incantations, an absolute prohibition of eating flesh.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> A. H. Armstrong, “The Ancient and Continuing Pieties of the Greek World” in A. H. Armstrong, ed., *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 99.

The inmost part of the self – soul, spirit or mind – is buried in this fleshly tomb, reincarnated many times, until it regrows its wings and can return to the divine All of which it is a part. Thus, the end is like the beginning, as the soul returns precisely to its Origin, like a drop of water absorbed into the sea.<sup>2</sup> Nothing like this had been taught in Athens until Orphism arrived. It has been called “a drop of alien blood in the veins of the Greeks”.<sup>3</sup> Pythagoras was not only the spiritual father of Socrates and Plato, but he was also an Orphic priest who sought to reform the cult into a more esoteric and allegorical philosophy. From there, as they say, the rest is history. “Plato paraphrases Orpheus everywhere”, said Olympiodorus.<sup>4</sup> The Homeric myth of Odysseus’ voyages and return to his homeland became an allegory of the soul.

I dare to suggest that this is the primary myth assumed by most westerners still today, and even many Christians, even if contrary doctrines are laid on top of it. Philo, at the time of Christ, tried to graft the Hebrew scriptures onto the Orphic vine. Yet, while Hellenistic influences were present in Second Temple Judaism, the whole stream of biblical apocalyptic, especially

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<sup>2</sup> See Algis Uždavinys, *Orpheus and the Roots of Platonism* (London: The Mathison Trust, 2011); Yuri Stoyanov, *The Other God: Dualist Religions from Antiquity to the Cathar Heresy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 28-30; Robert Parker, “Early Orphism”, in *The Greek World*, ed. Anton Powell (New York: Routledge, 1995), 483-510. Martin P. Nilsson, *The Dionysiac Mysteries of the Hellenistic and Roman Age*. Acta Instituti Atheniensis Regni Sueciae 8.5; [Lund: Gleerup, 1957], 146-47; Stephen Peter McNicholl, *Reason, Religion and Plato: Orphism and the Mathematical Mediation between Being and Becoming* (D.Phil. Thesis, University of Canterbury, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Stoyanov, *The Other God*, 28. Uždavinys offers a sustained and weighty argument in favour of Egyptian sources for Orphism (*Orpheus and the Roots of Platonism* especially pp. 57-62). Other scholars favouring this connection include Pierre Hadot, Gilles Quispel and Jan Assmann. Iranian sources are also plausible. As Stoyanov reminds us, “Some late classical writers said that Plato, who stated in the *Republic* [379c] that the cause of evil lay outside God, was himself introduced to the Zoroastrian dualist doctrine in Phoenicia. Within Platonism itself there emerged tendencies that sought to associate Zoroastrian and Platonic dualism and tried to make ‘Zoroaster a precursor of Plato or Plato a reincarnation of Zoroaster’” (*The Other God*, 34, from Eudoxus, quoted in E. Benveniste, *The Persian Religion According to the Chief Greek Texts* [Paris, 1929], 20-21). Hermeticists certainly highlighted Zoroaster as the fountainhead of the perennial tradition. However, at least in its original form, Zoroastrianism exhibits more of an ethical dualism (truth versus falsehood) than the ontological dualism that generates a soul-body antithesis, notes Stoyanov: “In Zoroastrianism, although created after the soul, the body was regarded as being of like substance and man was described as formed of five parts – body, vital spirit, soul, form (image) and pre-existent soul (*Greater Bundahishn* 3:13)” (Stoyanov, *The Other God*, 32-33). Further afield, although Plato was born only a half-century after Gautama Buddha, comparisons have been made between Plato and Buddhism, as Mani (father of the Manichaean Gnostics) encouraged. Edward Conze, “Buddhist Philosophy and Its European Parallels”, *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer Verlag, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> Olympiodorus, *In Phaed.* 10.3.13, quoted in Algis Uždavinys, *Orpheus and the Roots of Platonism*, (London: The Mathison Trust, 2011), 42. Uždavinys explains, “Like Orpheus, Plato’s Socrates is a servant of Apollo, maintaining that the best music is philosophy. Hence, philosophical talk is analogous to the prophetic song of Orpheus or the theological hymn of ‘Apollo’s philosophical swan who sings that this life is a prelude to a disincarnate afterlife.’”

the prophets, pushed against this current. Jewish sensibilities have always stood at odds with Greek, despite Philo's best attempts to make the marriage work. Even the atheistic Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas could still say in the twentieth century, "To the myth of Ulysses [Odysseus] returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land and forbids his servant to even bring back his son to the point of departure."<sup>5</sup> Disagreeing over the central character, Christianity nevertheless inherits this horizontal plot-line of redemption anchored in the Abrahamic promise.

When Christianity met the Greco-Roman world, it was the Orphic myth and its doctrines that formed the principal antithesis. In a way, this was because Platonism was more congenial than other philosophies. Platonism taught that the supreme principle, the Good (also called the One) is "beyond being", transcendent: immutable, impassible and simple spirit. Although it shared with all Greek schools the belief that the world is eternal, Platonism held that the Demiurge (or Logos) formed everything into a designed cosmos and that the soul could exist apart from the body. Stoics were fatalistic pantheists and Epicureans denied any involvement of the gods in creation or providence. So it made sense that Platonism would be the school most likely to be engaged by Christian apologists.

This engagement led sometimes to a frank dismissal of philosophy, especially Platonism, as the mother of all heresies. The second-century Christian writer Tertullian is particularly famous for this view. Like Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, Tertullian regarded the Gnostic heresy as Platonism on steroids. Another second-century pastor, Irenaeus, sounded the alarm against the Gnostic threat in his *Against Heresies*, opposing to it a full account of the unity of Scripture, Old and New Testaments, around Christ's person and work. But in Alexandria, Clement and Origen took a different tack. Opposing Gnosticism, they nevertheless called themselves the true Gnostics and set about to advance a Christian philosophy that could appeal to the cultured despisers of the faith.

I begin this paper, first, by comparing and contrasting the eschatologies of Irenaeus and Origen. Second, I focus more specifically on the ascension. Finally, from these contrasts I draw some conclusions about the significance of the ascension for our own reflection on the relation between the "already" and the "not-yet" of the salvation won for us in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other", in M. C. Taylor, ed., *Deconstruction in Context* (Chicago, 1986), 348.

## I. *The Beginning and the End*

Origen of Alexandria (c. 184-253) played an immense role in conveying Orphic hermeneutics, doctrines and spirituality to a major and enduring stream of Christianity. Since his own time, Origen has aroused widely divergent appraisals, including official condemnations in the ancient Christian East. Origen was not setting out to assimilate Christianity to Platonism; he was reared by a father who steeped him in the Scriptures and was martyred for his faith. But Origen was also a philosopher who had studied under Ammonius Saccas, the teacher also of Plotinus and therefore the true father of Neoplatonism. Philosophy – in particular, the Orphic core of Platonism – is the ultimate meaning of Scripture, which the literal sense merely clothes for the lowly “many” – i.e., the Christian faithful. Writing a half-century earlier, Irenaeus stands out in rather bold relief to Origen. Comparing Irenaeus and Origenist trajectories invites reductionism, but it indicates genuine cleavages among ancient Christian thinkers that had ongoing influences on Christian theology. Irenaeus and Origen represent different trends that we may characterise as distinctively Christian and traditionally Orphic. Origen himself drew the contrast and Irenaeus is an arch-defender of what Origen calls the temporal gospel, the preaching of “the many”.

A number of Origen’s doctrines germane to his eschatology cannot be considered here, but will only be mentioned briefly. Foremost, Origen assumed the trichotomist division of humanity into body, soul and spirit, which also determined his cosmology (three levels of reality) and hermeneutics (literal, moral and allegorical or spiritual interpretation).<sup>6</sup> So, for example, there is a simple message taught to “the many” (viz., “Christ crucified and raised”) and a higher meaning for the advanced (viz., a spiritual resurrection). He referred to these as “two gospels”: the temporal versus the eternal gospel. “There is not one gospel, but two: the temporal gospel for the

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<sup>6</sup> Origen, *On First Principles* (OFP), 4.2.4: “Just as man consists of body, soul and spirit, so in the same way does the Scripture.” All of my quotations from *First Principles* are taken from the G. W. Butterworth edition (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973). Much of Origen’s work was mediated (and translated) by Rufinus, who tried to make Origen (and himself) more amenable to the catholic faith in general and to the Latins in particular. Butterworth therefore includes many citations of *First Principles* from Jerome. Although Jerome was a critic, his quotations suggest points at which Rufinus modified Origen’s bold speculations at their most controversial points. Butterworth helpfully weighs these different translations and frequently places them in parallel lines. Some scholars such as Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar are sympathetic to Origen and his legacy, downplaying the contrast with an “Irenaeus” stream. However, the latter rests much of his case on the relative accuracy of Rufinus’ Latin translation (as in Balthasar’s Introduction to *Origen: Spirit & Fire, A Thematic Anthology of His Writings* [ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar; trans. Robert J. Daly, S. J.; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984], 21).

simple, which treats of Christ's work in the flesh; and the eternal gospel, for the wise, which treats of his invisible heavenly glory."<sup>7</sup>

While Irenaeus was busy trying to show Gnostics a single biblical plot, from Genesis to Revelation, each piece of scripture contributing a piece in "the mosaic of Christ", Origen was fascinated with the world *before* this one. Pagan thought imagined an eternal circle governed by emanation and return, a falling away from the Sun of being and the re-ascent of these rays back to their origin. Irenaeus realised – against the Gnostics – that this eternal cycle of descent and return had been broken out into a temporal line of promise and fulfillment. Although Origen was not a Gnostic, he shared the Orphic horizon of fellow-Platonists. "For the end is always like the beginning..." he said.<sup>8</sup> In fact, as sympathetic an Origen specialist as Henri Crouzel notes, "One principle dominates Origen's cosmology: the end is like the beginning."<sup>9</sup>

Origen follows Plato's own stated goal for philosophy in the *Phaedrus*: "What we must understand is the reason why the soul's wings fall from it, and are lost" (246A-247C). According to Origen's version, the hierarchy that we observe in the cosmos and among human beings originates with a rebellion of rational souls prior to this world, meriting different levels of being.<sup>10</sup> "And when they reach the neighborhood of the earth" Origen writes, "they are enclosed in grosser bodies, and last of all are tied to human flesh."<sup>11</sup> Falling by their free will, these incarcerated spirits may ascend by their free will and merit higher stations; this world was created as a reform school for winning back our wings. Our lives here and now serve as an opportunity to win back our wings and re-ascent by moral effort and contemplation.

There was only one soul that remained fastened in its contemplative gaze upon the One, the soul of Jesus. In fact, his soul was so ardent that it became practically fused with the Logos, like a lump of iron in a red-hot fire. This

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2011), 20-21; cf. Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *First Principles* 1.6.2 (p. 53).

<sup>9</sup> Henri Crouzel, *Origen: The Life and Thought of the First Great Theologian*, trans. A. S. Worrall (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 205.

<sup>10</sup> Origen, *First Principles*, 1.6.2; 1.7.1-1.8.4 I hope to have described accurately the relevant aspects of Origen's thinking in this essay, but am aware that the interpretation I follow here is highly contested. Any fuller engagement would have to take into account the massive body of research contained in Henri de Lubac's *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen* (Ignatius, 2007) and in other works of Origen specialists.

<sup>11</sup> Origen, *First Principles*, 1.3.1. Butterworth observes, "This doctrine of the descent of the soul is found in Plato, *Phaedrus* 246 B-D, a passage clearly referred to by Origen in *Con. Cels.* IV. 40. Jerome says (*Con. Joh. Hieros.* 19), in connexion with this doctrine: 'What you admire so much we long ago despised when we found it in Plato.'" It is also a view put forward by the Gnostics, according to Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* I, XXV.4). "Jerome says also in *Con. Joh. Hieros.* 19 that 'Origen used Jacob's ladder to teach that rational creatures descend gradually to the lowest step, namely, to flesh and blood'" (Butterworth in Origen, *On First Principles*, 41 n. 1).

Logos-infused soul descended willingly to teach us how to win back our wings. This cyclical view is opposed to the traditional Christian interpretation of history as broken out into a line from promise to fulfillment. In this respect, Origen is anchored in the theosophy of Alexandrian Platonism. Andrew Louth writes, "As souls, they dwell in bodies which, as it were, arrest their fall and provide them with the opportunity to ascend again to contemplation of God by working themselves free from their bodies and becoming minds, *noes*, again."<sup>12</sup>

God's clothing of the fallen couple in animal skins to clothe their nakedness (Gen 3:21) also has "a certain secret and mysterious meaning" (*CCels.* 4.40). The "animal skins" are actually human bodies, an interpretation adopted by Philo (*Q&A in Gen.*), the Hermeticists (*CH* X.18) and Gnostics (*GPhil* 66,16-20; *GThom* Logion 37; related also by Irenaeus, *AH* 1.5.5, Clement, *Exc.* 55.1 and Hippolytus, *Haer.* 10.13.4).<sup>13</sup> "Tunics of skin" as a trope for human bodies was a common phrase used in Hellenistic Jewish texts.<sup>14</sup> E. R. Dodds explains, "The word *kitôn* [garment] seems to have been originally an Orphic-Pythagorean term for the *fleshly* body", found for example in Empedocles (fragm. 126 Diels) and Plato (*Gorg.* 523C). "The clean linen tunic of the Orphic votary perhaps symbolized the purity of his 'garment of flesh'."<sup>15</sup> It is this mortal coil – the "garments of flesh" – not of animals (to cover their nakedness), but human flesh, that will be sloughed off upon death. The true resurrection is spiritual, not physical.

Origen also accepted Philo's belief that Genesis 1 and 2 represent two creations: the archetypal "spiritual Adam" followed by the ectypal "physical Adam". Something like Philo's teaching, I believe, is behind Paul's rather polemical point in 1 Corinthians 15 that the *first* Adam was physical, not spiritual. *Christ* is the "spiritual" Adam – which is to say, the eschatological life-giver. In any case, the idea that the "animal skins" of Gen 3:21 are *human bodies* rather than actual *animal skins* places Origen on the Platonist rather than Judaic-Christian side of interpretation. A host of Christian writers,

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 59-60.

<sup>13</sup> A superb analysis of the term's use especially in the *GThomas* but also in many other texts, see April D. De Conick and Jarl Fossum, "Stripped Before God: A New Interpretation of Logion 37 in the Gospel of Thomas", *Vigiliae Christianae* 45 (1991): 123-50. A different interpretation of the "tunics of skin" is given by Origen in his *Homilies on Leviticus* 6.2.7 (FC 83:120). For an extensive treatment of Origen's different interpretations of the "tunics", see Peter W. Martens, "A Fitting Portrait of God: Origen's Interpretations of the 'Garments of Skin' (Gen 3:21) in Caroline Vander Stichele and Susanne Scholtz, eds., *Hidden Truths from Eden: Esoteric Readings of Genesis 1-3*. Semeia Studies 76 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 55-83.

<sup>14</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: SPCK, 1935), 193.

<sup>15</sup> E. R. Dodds, Commentary in Proclus, *The Elements of Theology: A Revised Text with Translation, Introduction and Commentary* by E. R. Dodds; 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 307.

especially veterans of the wars with the Gnostics, such as Hippolytus, condemned this interpretation as pagan rather than Christian.

The main difference between Origen and Irenaeus is that they read the Bible differently. Reacting against Gnostic allegorising, Irenaeus' hermeneutic is governed by (1) an ordinary-sense interpretation; (2) christocentric integration of all Scripture – a “mosaic” or “symphony” directing us to Christ; (3) a “presbyterial reading” – that is, eschewing idiosyncratic conclusions; instead, interpreting within the church and guided by its pastors and elders. After carefully summarising Gnostic exploitation of John's Prologue as a myth of the Aeons, Irenaeus concludes that “it simply does not fit with the text”.<sup>16</sup> There is no higher hermeneutic of philosophical religion by which the ordinary sense of the text can be judged. Jesus indeed taught parables, Irenaeus acknowledges, but he explained them and did not give us licence to interpret historical narratives parabolically.<sup>17</sup> Parables should be interpreted in the light of clearer statements in Scripture, so that “the parables will receive a similar interpretation from all, and the body of truth remain complete, structured harmoniously, and unshaken” (2.27.1).<sup>18</sup>

The ecclesial reading of Scripture with Christ as the unifying center begins already with the apostles themselves, who interpreted the Old Testament as being fulfilled in Christ. While Gnostics gain credit for their myths by taking biblical expressions out of context and allegorising them, Irenaeus announces that in the fifth book he will draw up “the rest of the words of the Lord, which he taught concerning the Father not by parable but *by expressions taken in their obvious meaning*, and the exposition of the epistles of the blessed apostle” (4.41.4).<sup>19</sup> Not only now, but in eternity, we will still be learning the truth (2.28.3). So we must ignore speculative questions, such as what God was doing before he created the world (2.28.3).<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus rejects the Gnostic interpretation of the animal skins in Gen 3:21 as fleshly bodies. Rather, Adam sewed fig leaves in repentant acknowledgment of his transgression: “Inasmuch as, he says, I have by disobedience lost that robe of sanctity which I had from the Spirit, I do now also acknowledge that I am deserving of a covering of this nature, which affords no gratification, but which gnaws and frets the body. And he would no doubt have retained this clothing for ever, thus humbling himself, if God, who is merciful, had not clothed them with tunics of skins instead of fig-leaves” (3.2.3).

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<sup>16</sup> John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity*. Christian Thought in Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 108.

<sup>17</sup> He has an illuminating reading of the Parable of the tax-collector and the Pharisee at 4.36.

<sup>18</sup> Citations of Irenaeus are from *Against Heresies* in Philip Schaff, ed., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ANF), Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001 [1885]). The original title is *On the Detection and Overthrow of Knowledge Falsely Called* (alluding to 1 Tim 6:20).

<sup>19</sup> John Behr, *Irenaeus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 97, emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup> For a fuller exposition of these points see Behr, *Irenaeus*, 118.



For Origen, the Orphic horizon was predominant and Christian teaching was accommodated to it. The soul that will “climb to the heights of heaven shall no longer be a man, but according to his word, will be ‘like an angel of God’” or perhaps divine; but in either case, “he shall *certainly no longer be a man*”.<sup>21</sup> For Irenaeus, however, “The glory of God is *man fully alive*”.<sup>22</sup> This could only happen because the eternal Son, equal to the Father, descended in flesh to save that same humanity in which he was born, lived, died, was raised and ascended. Jesus Christ – God incarnate – raises us from mortality, not humanity; from enmity with God, not from physicality. The bodily resurrection of Jesus, Irenaeus claims, is the great watershed in human history. The Jesus who sits at the Father’s right hand interceding for his people did not leave his flesh behind, and in him our humanity is not left behind, but redeemed and glorified. “For by the hands of the Father, that is, by the Son and the Holy Spirit, man, and not [merely] part of man, was made in the likeness of God.” To strip away his flesh would be to save not the man but merely a part of man (5.6.1).

The whole direction of divine-human interaction is different. For Irenaeus, the gospel is *God’s descent in the flesh* to save the whole body-soul person and for Origen the eternal gospel is *our ascent of mind* to take the station we have merited. The eternal Son was sent by the Father, says Irenaeus, to be “united to his workmanship... so that what we had lost in Adam – namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God – that we might recover in Christ Jesus.”<sup>23</sup> Regarding the ascension of Jesus, Origen taught, “If we understand the ascent of the Son to the Father with holy insight and in a way suitable to God, we shall realize it is the ascent of mind rather than the body.”<sup>24</sup> However, Irenaeus had emphasised that Christ did bodily “ascend to the height above, offering and commending to His Father that human nature which had been found, making in His own person the first-fruits of the resurrection of man.”<sup>25</sup> Origen interprets passages like Romans 8 as the escape from embodiment, contrary to the ordinary sense of the text, which speaks of the restoration of all creation. While for Origen “the restoration of all things” (Ac 3:21) includes only spirits, with this world being annihilated, Irenaeus says against the Gnostics, “neither is the substance nor the essence of the creation annihilated

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<sup>21</sup> Origen in *Origen: Spirit & Fire*, 358, emphasis added. In the soul’s fall before the creation of this world, “because he abandoned life and chose death, man became a human being; and not just a human being, but also earth... In the resurrection, however, the flesh will cleave to the soul and will become a soul which... will become ‘one spirit with him’ (1 Cor 6:17), and become a ‘spiritual body’ (1 Cor 15:44).” Cf. Origen, *On Prayer*, 23.2.

<sup>22</sup> Irenaeus, *AH* 1.4.20.6-7, emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> Irenaeus, *AH* 3.18.1.

<sup>24</sup> Origen, “On Prayer,” XXIII.2, in *Origen: The Classics of Western Spirituality* (trans. Rowan A. Greer; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), 126-127.

<sup>25</sup> Irenaeus, *AH* 3.19.3.

(for faithful and true is He who established it)".<sup>26</sup> Origen considered the *apokatastasis* as a uniting of *all spirits* in the Logos who is no longer human. In contrast, Irenaeus, drawing on Romans 5 and other passages, describes recapitulation in historical (horizontal) and covenantal terms, as being united to Adam as head in a "first covenant", which was a "covenant of law", distinguished from being united to Christ as head in "the gospel covenant".<sup>27</sup> He focuses on the economy as it was revealed historically in Scripture.

For Irenaeus, everything in salvation turns on the activity of the three divine persons in this economy rather than in the believer's ascent to God.<sup>28</sup> We do not rise up, as quasi-divine spirits returning to the One; rather, the Holy Spirit lifts us up into the eschatological life of the embodied Son. "Oscillating between exclusion and fusion", Julie Canlis observes, "Gnostic anthropology can best be seen as schizophrenic. In neither scenario can the human *as human* participate in God *as God*." However, "For Irenaeus, the secret was not 'a casting away of the flesh, but by the imparting of the Spirit.'" <sup>29</sup> Douglas Farrow notes that for Irenaeus "deification is hominization through the commending of the whole man, body and soul, to the Spirit, as the eternal inheritance of God in Jesus Christ".<sup>30</sup>

On Origen's Neoplatonic map, souls become spirits and therefore divine. Our spirits become "something of the divine nature". This was Athanasius' view at first, but he rejected it during the Nicene council. In fact, Athanasius insists that we will be deified only in the Son, "without losing our own proper substance".<sup>31</sup> It is the same point that Irenaeus made above: "neither is the substance nor the essence of the creation annihilated".<sup>32</sup> The Son "became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself", says Irenaeus.<sup>33</sup> A little further, he stipulates that this consummate union "will render us like unto Him... the image and likeness of God".<sup>34</sup> Among the post-Nicene theologians, deification consists of immortality, pertaining to body and

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<sup>26</sup> Irenaeus, *AH*, 5.36.1.

<sup>27</sup> Irenaeus, *AH* 1.10.3 (*ANF* 1:429). Cf. book 4, ch. 25 in *ANF*: 5.16.3, 4.13.1 (1:24); 4.15.1 and 4.16.3 (1:25-26).

<sup>28</sup> Canlis makes this point in *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 177, from Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading? A Guide to Irenaeus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 118: "Irenaeus's approach is through description of the divine activity in the economy rather than through description of the stages of mystical ascent to God. The result in either case is union with God: Irenaeus's concern is with the divine role in effecting this union... This principle distinguishes the Irenaean position from platonic, Gnostic, and later patristic teaching on the ascent of the soul."

<sup>29</sup> Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 183-84, quoting Irenaeus, *AH*, 581.

<sup>30</sup> Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology*, 144, 150.

<sup>31</sup> Athanasius, *De Decretis* 3.14; cf. *Against the Arians*, 1.39.

<sup>32</sup> Irenaeus, *AH* V.36.1.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Preface to Book 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.8.1.

soul; restoration of the image of God and confirmation in holiness and righteousness; adoption, and the vision of God.<sup>35</sup>

The contrast between Irenaeus and Origen may also be seen in their view of the church and its ministry. Origen was a churchman. Indeed, we may even say that Origen has a high ecclesiology, to the point of assimilating Christ's natural body to the church. And yet, his ecclesiology – like his cosmology, Christology and soteriology – is so high that it seems not to touch the earth. It divides sharply into earthly and heavenly, not unlike the higher and lower churches asserted by Gnostics. In addition, it is more individualistic. The *Song of Songs* was interpreted by many, including Irenaeus' student Hippolytus, as prefiguring Christ's relationship to the church.<sup>36</sup> However, Origen sees it as an allegory of the individual soul's union with God. He applies the three stages common in Neoplatonism: After being purified from everything visible and associated with the body and its passions, the intellect achieves illumination and finally union with God.<sup>37</sup> And union with Christ is the goal, not the basis, of the search.<sup>38</sup>

The tripartite anthropology reaches into his ecclesiology with the division between "the many" or "simple believers" (*pistikoî*), the "soulish" (*psychikoî*), and the "spiritual" (*pneumatikoi*), correlated with historical, moral and allegorical senses of Scripture.<sup>39</sup> This would have to lead to an elitist view of the spiritual prophet-philosopher like Origen himself as superior to the average minister of the "temporal gospel". While he participates in the regular ministry of the church when called upon, Origen is clearly dissatisfied with "the multitude", "the many who cling to Christ according to the flesh", never wanting to ascend beyond the "literal gospel". The institutional church is different from the true church led by the real heirs of the prophets and

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<sup>35</sup> Carl Mosser notes that in the Orthodox tradition deification includes motifs such as adoption, participation in God, immortality, restoration of the *imago Dei*, glorification, and "consummation of the marriage between Christ and the Church". Carl Mosser, "The Greatest Possible Blessing: Calvin and Deification", *SJT* 55 (1):36 (2002).

<sup>36</sup> Louth, *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 54. Louth notes that "in Hippolytus' commentary we find an ecclesiological interpretation dominant; that is, the relationship between the Bridegroom and the Bride is interpreted as referring to the relationship between Christ and the Church. The background to that is probably rabbinic interpretation, which saw the Song as expressing the relationship between God and Israel."

<sup>37</sup> Louth, *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 53.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>39</sup> Origen, *First Principles* 4.2.1-4.3.7. Origen frequently contrasts the "outer shell" (the historical, earthly and ordinary sense of things as understood by "the many" with the "inner truth" that is mystical. See *Origen: Spirit & Fire*, 44, 50, 51, 53, 55, 63, 65, 93, 102-109, 102-105, 115, 125, etc. Trigg notes that "he frequently paid no attention to the literal meaning of the Bible even when he accepted it. Origen always assumed that any purely historical information was irrelevant" (*Origen*, 179). Trigg adds on p. 142, "Removing the skin of the sacrificial victim was the removing the veil of the literal sense to reveal the mystical meaning of the Bible..." Trigg explains. So, for example, when Jesus called the disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee, "this symbolized his call to pass from the literal to the spiritual sense of Scripture".

apostles who are called directly by the Spirit, among whom Origen considered himself.<sup>40</sup> The spiritual gospel is for the individual athlete, like Plotinus' (and Numenius') "flight of the alone to the Alone".

External preaching and sacraments are contrasted with the inner word.<sup>41</sup> Origen says that "an eternal gospel (Rev 14:6), which would properly be called a spiritual gospel", offers symbols to those who already see God "face to face". While there is scriptural justification for a distinction between sign and reality (Rom 2:29), Origen's ontological dualism presses beyond this distinction to a division. "The Spirit" and "the letter" in 2 Cor 3 become assimilated to these categories of outward and inward, which are all assimilated to body and spirit. Origen says that baptism "is not corporeal, since the Holy Spirit fills the one who repents, and a more divine fire removes everything material, and utterly destroys everything earthly, not only from the one who contains it but also from the one who hears those who possess it".<sup>42</sup> Like John the Baptizer, Origen is particularly vexed by those who come to water but without repentance.<sup>43</sup> Yet his dualistic ontology governs his counsel. The miracles of Jesus and the apostles were "symbols" of a spiritual, inward healing. "In the same way also, the washing through the water", he says, "is a symbol of the soul's purification..." However, the true "bath of rebirth" takes place "*above the water*", since it is from God, but it does not appear in everyone after the water".<sup>44</sup> The waters above and the waters below must be not only distinguished but divided, just as the Christ of spirit is higher than the Jesus of the flesh.

Origen also interprets the Eucharist in a higher, spiritual manner. Edwards notes, "nowhere does Origen say that the commandment to eat Christ's flesh can be obeyed by our attendance at the Eucharist".<sup>45</sup> Bread is "the ethical teachings" [*mathêmata*] that sustain life, "but the esoteric and mystical doctrines" [*theôrêmata*] come from the 'true vine' and are called 'wine' because they cheer and produce ecstasy..."<sup>46</sup> In fact, where the Passover was regarded by the wider church as fulfilled in Christ's passion, whose benefits are received in the Eucharist, Origen says nothing about this sacrament in his *Treatise on*

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<sup>40</sup> Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen* (Philadelphia: John Knox, 1983), 125-26, 144-46.

<sup>41</sup> Trigg, *Origen*, 191, 194. Trigg notes, "Origen held the material bread and wine of the eucharist in the same disdain we have seen him display toward the material water of baptism as a vehicle of God's grace." Yet it is important to note, with Trigg, "For him as a Platonist, the eucharist was incomparably more real as a symbol than it could be if there were a material transformation since the intelligible world is far more real than the material" (195).

<sup>42</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 214-15.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>44</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 216, emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> Mark Edwards, "Christ or Plato", in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 22.

<sup>46</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 75.

the Passover. Even as sympathetic an interpreter of Origen as Robert Daly concludes,

*It would also be a somewhat anachronistic application of a later theology to an earlier figure. Nevertheless, the very fact that Origen, so skilled at bringing in ideas and insights from any and all sources, did not make even one obvious allusion to the sacramental Eucharist in this whole section, suggests at least that this doctrine did not hold a strong place in his imagination and consciousness, or at least that he did not feel constrained to emphasize it on every possible occasion.<sup>47</sup>*

If we were to compare Origen to his Neoplatonic counterparts, we might conclude that he stands with Plotinus' contemplative ascent over against Iamblichean theurgy, including the emphasis of the former on merit and of the latter on grace. All of these distinctive elements of Origen's view of the church, preaching and the sacraments contrast with Irenaeus' interpretation. In fact, against the Gnostics, Irenaeus draws a correlation between affirming a literal incarnation of the Son and the union of the bread and wine in the Eucharist to Christ's body and blood (AH 5.2).

Origen's eschatology gives us the picture of souls as lumps of coal placed in the fire of the Logos, in red-hot contemplation of the Father. By contrast, Irenaeus directs our hope to the wedding feast with the redeemed enjoying everlasting blessedness in a new creation. For Irenaeus, there is no "spiritual gospel" or higher allegorical meaning beyond "Christ and him crucified" and there are no spiritual saints who are higher than ordinary believers. There is no higher sacrament of the Eucharist than the one that occurs by feeding on Christ through eating the consecrated bread and wine, even though the ultimate reality in which it participates will be far greater still. It is hard to resist the judgment of Vladimir Lossky that Origenism is "Platonic intellectualism and spiritualism alien to the spirit of the gospel".<sup>48</sup> As it stands, Irenaeus' description of the Gnostic's idea of salvation is indistinguishable from the position that Origen endorses repeatedly throughout his writings: "This, then, is the true redemption... that their inner man may ascend on high

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<sup>47</sup> Robert J. Daly, S. J., in *Origen: Treatise on the Passover and Dialogue of Origen with Heraclides and His Fellow Bishops on the Father, the Son, and the Soul*, trans. and annotated by Robert J. Daly, S. J., *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation* 54 (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 88n.32.

<sup>48</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God* (Bedfordshire: The Faith Press, 1973), 55. In my view, Origen should be relegated to the category of interesting figures like the author of *Sivanus* or Synesius, the bishop of Ptolemais. Had he not been so esteemed a student of Ammonius and faithful servant during the persecutions, Origen would have had his career cut short by Demetrius and, if not, by Heraclas, converted under his ministry (and a student of Ammonius) who nevertheless rightly saw the danger of his errors and would not accept him in communion.

in an invisible manner, as if their body were left among created things, while their soul is sent forward to the Demiurge.”<sup>49</sup>

Behr concludes, “Irenaeus is, of course, the most important theologian in the articulation of Christian orthodoxy to his time, and, arguably, thereafter.” Marcion broke away. So did the Valentinians, after trying unsuccessfully to turn “psychic” Christians into “pneumatic” *gnostikoi*. It was they who condemned the orthodox believers as of a lower nature and condemned the church for refusing salvific knowledge.<sup>50</sup>

Yet, for all his importance as an architect of “orthodoxy” and an expositor or exegete of the divine economy, Irenaeus is *par excellence* the theologian of the flesh. His theological vision is “incarnational” through and through. While much modern theology wants to emphasise the “incarnational” dimension of Christianity, to underscore the fact that the body and material reality are good, its focus on human beings as “persons” betrays something of an uneasiness about the body, as something the “person” has rather than is. For Irenaeus, on the other hand, the human being *is* essentially and profoundly skillfully fashioned mud: the flesh is the handiwork of God, fashioned in a hands-on manner by Christ and the Spirit, the Hands of God, leading it from animation by a breath of life to vivification by the Spirit directly, transfiguring the flesh “inside out” (*haer.* 4.39.2), to be a living human being, “the glory of God” (*haer.* 4.20.7).<sup>51</sup>

This is different from the usual view of the use of the term “incarnational” in contemporary theology. “The assumption of the flesh by the Word is less a reduction of the Word to the level of flesh than it is the raising of the flesh to the level of the Word.”<sup>52</sup> Origen was not a Gnostic, but he could never be called “a theologian of the flesh”. In the Origenist stream, the end is always like the beginning: a return to the origin. For Irenaeus, the end could never be like the beginning. Adam forfeited the crown of immortality and glory, but the Last Adam has won it for us, entering the true sanctuary as the pioneer of our glorification. Awaiting us therefore is something “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9).

Origen’s legacy gave powerful impetus to the monastic movements and inspired formative theologians who rejected his heretical views but appreciated his spirituality of ascent. A philosophical stream flows from Pseudo-Dionysius to Eriugena, Eckhart, radical mystics, Anabaptists and pietists, Romantic philosophers and many critical theologians and biblical scholars to the present day. Yet the Irenaeian stream continues to course

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<sup>49</sup> Irenaeus, *AH* 1.21.5.

<sup>50</sup> Behr, *Irenaeus*, 206.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

vigorously in the proclamation, theology and spirituality of various ecclesial traditions. It would be more accurate historically to say that these rivers flow in and out of each other in ongoing interactions between Christ and Gnosis.

## II. *The Ascension*

Most discussions of Origen in relation to the teaching of “the many” focus on the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection. There is plenty to compare and contrast on these points. If we had the space here, I would draw attention to a host of passages where Origen allegorises all of these events. Again, he does not outright deny the literal interpretation, but he says that this is only true symbolically, at the level that “the many” can understand. The ultimate truth is not just higher than the “temporal gospel”, but totally contradicts it. No more than the myth of Er at the end of the *Republic* does Origen believe that after the resurrection Jesus’ body was the same (though in a different condition) as the body that nursed at Mary’s breast and was crucified. Nevertheless, I wish to focus on the ascension.

Why the ascension? Because even when we still today affirm that Christ rose again in the flesh, there is a tendency to imagine that he left his humanity behind. Of course, if the head of the church is less than human, then that is the destiny too of his members. “Will there be hairdressers in heaven?” We might expect this rhetorical question from philosophers like Celsus, but actually it is pressed by Origen in opposition to a literal resurrection (*OFP* 2.3, 2.10, 3.6, 4.4). Origen would acknowledge that Jesus ate fish after the resurrection. In his diatribe against Christians, the Platonist philosopher Celsus said that “the great church” never tires of pointing out this episode to show the earthiness of Jesus’ bodily resurrection. In engaging Celsus, Origen seems hardly more disposed to the argument. But whatever the nature of Jesus’ resurrected body, the ultimate question is: With what body did he leave this earth, entering the Holy of Holies above, to take his place at the Father’s right hand?

At Christ’s ascension, the angels said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). What does “in the same way” mean? An ordinary interpretation is that whatever the change in condition – namely, the glorification of Jesus in body as well as soul, Jesus’ present intercession and future return are *in the flesh*. He will not return as an omnipresent spirit, but as the same person who he has always been since he became incarnate in the womb of a Jewish virgin.

A higher (i.e., Orphic) interpretation of “the ascent of the Son to the Father”, says Origen, recognises it as “the ascent of mind rather than the

body”.<sup>53</sup> If one were to have heard Origen preach an average sermon to the many, it may well have included references to “Christ crucified” and raised, even ascended. He would even have spoken of the final judgment. However, all of this would have been nothing more than a moral goad to the fleshly or soulish believers who cannot yet rise to the spiritual understanding. Mark Scott suggests, boldly but correctly, that for Origen “a fleshly resurrection” is more likely to encourage people to lead better lives. “Origen allows these misconceptions only insofar as they promote virtuous living. Intellectually, however, they have no merit. The truth about the resurrection body is much deeper.” The literal meaning may be used to encourage virtue among the multitude, but the higher truth is veiled, says Origen, in a “secret and hidden meaning” (*OPF* 2.2.2).<sup>54</sup>

Therefore, even if Origen acknowledges some bodily existence beyond the grave, as Mark Edwards believes, Origen understands “spiritual body” in 1 Corinthians 15:44 not as a different condition of the same body but as a different body altogether. In fact, Scott concludes that “the logic of his eschatology necessarily entails the end of corporeality”.

So while only God is incorporeal, when the soul unites with God, it, too, will become incorporeal. This is the “secret and hidden meaning” of the mystery of the resurrection that he will not disclose to the multitude... In Origen’s eschatology, the end mirrors the beginning, so we must speculate on the end in view of the beginning. Bodies, then, are not constitutive to the identity of the soul.<sup>55</sup>

As goes the head, so go the members of his body. Like Jesus’ repatriation – “the ascent of mind rather than the body”,<sup>56</sup> the soul that will “climb to the heights of heaven shall no longer be a man, but according to his word, will be ‘like an angel of God’” or perhaps divine; but in either case, “he shall *certainly no longer be a man*”.<sup>57</sup> A literal interpretation of the ascension entails that we too will be embodied forever in heaven. This leads to ludicrous conclusions, Origen believes: Will there be hairdressers in heaven (*OPF* 2.3, 2.10, 3.6, 4.4)?

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<sup>53</sup> Origen, “On Prayer”, XXIII.2, in *Origen: The Classics of Western Spirituality* (trans. Rowan A. Greer; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), 126-127.

<sup>54</sup> Mark S. M. Scott, *Journey Back to God: Origen on the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 125, from *Princ.* 2.2.2.

<sup>55</sup> Scott, *Journey Back to God*, 126.

<sup>56</sup> Origen, “On Prayer”, XXIII.2, in *Origen: The Classics of Western Spirituality* (trans. Rowan A. Greer; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), 126-127.

<sup>57</sup> Origen in *Origen: Spirit & Fire*, 358, emphasis added. In the soul’s fall before the creation of this world, “because he abandoned life and chose death, man became a human being; and not just a human being, but also earth...In the resurrection, however, the flesh will cleave to the soul and will become a soul which... will become ‘one spirit with him’ (1 Cor 6:17), and become a ‘spiritual body’ (1 Cor 15:44).” Cf. Origen, *On Prayer*, 23.2.



Instead, Origen encourages the adept to move from the temporal gospel for the simple to the eternal gospel for the spiritual, fixing our eyes not on Christ crucified and raised in the flesh but on Christ as the post-incarnate Word filling the universe (*OPF* 2.6.7; 2.11.6). Origen calls believers “to remove the earth from each of you and open up your fountain. For he is within you and does not come from outside, just as ‘the kingdom of God is within you’.”<sup>58</sup> The ascent upward is a descent inward, into the inmost self.<sup>59</sup>

On the other hand, he only accepted as the word of God his *allegorical* interpretations of Scripture and the doctrines included in the rule of faith: “One must understand the divine scripture intellectually and spiritually; for the sensible or physical way of knowing that is according to the historical meaning is not true.”<sup>60</sup> Just as the body is left behind, when it comes to the “letter” of Scripture, he advises, “Cast all this aside like the bitter rind of a nut.”<sup>61</sup> “[L]et us seek out not the letter but the soul... If we can do this, we will also ascend to the spirit.”<sup>62</sup> Strictly speaking, Jesus’ soul entered a body that he later left behind after showing people how to return to the Father by the same ascent of mind. Consequently, for believers as well, “the end is like the beginning”: Having fallen into various bodies according to merits in a previous life, purgation will lead all souls finally to a restored contemplative gaze in the next world. The visible world will be no more as God is all in all.

The “Platonizing cast of his thought” is obvious enough, says Robert J. Daly, S. J., adding, “Origen seems to take pains to avoid a reference to the humanity and historical Incarnation of Jesus”.<sup>63</sup> The extant writings of post-apostolic Christian leaders from Clement of Rome to Tertullian of Carthage exhibit the incarnational theology that Origen associated with the rule of faith. Yet for Origen this is the “temporal gospel” that “the many” imbibe. No more than Plato believed in the literal truth of the Myth of Er did Origen believe that the historical claims of scripture were literally true.

### III. For What Do We Hope?

So, *will* there be hairdressers in heaven? It is unwise to speculate about the state of glory, but if God created hair, then Jesus still has it and we will too.

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<sup>58</sup> Origen from *Origen: Spirit & Fire*, 31.

<sup>59</sup> Origen from *Origen: Spirit & Fire*, 55.

<sup>60</sup> Origen in *Origen: Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings*, ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar; trans. Robert J. Daly, S. J. (Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), Origen in *Origen: Spirit & Fire*, 93.

<sup>61</sup> Origen in *Origen: Spirit & Fire*, 103: So “there is a threefold mode of understand in the holy scripture: a historical, a moral and a mystical. We understand from this that there is in scripture a body, a soul, and a spirit.”

<sup>62</sup> Origen in *Origen: Spirit & Fire*, 105.

<sup>63</sup> Robert J. Daly, S. J., in *Origen: Treatise on the Passover*, 97-98n.27.

Even if posed in sarcasm, this question does point up the thoroughness of the redemption that the Father has accomplished in Christ and by his Spirit.

Ephesians 4 is a lodestar for ascension theology: "Therefore it says, 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives and gave gifts to men.' (In saying, 'He ascended', what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)" (vv 8-10). The heart of Paul's argument turns not on a philosophical principle or political ideal, but on the redemptive-historical event of Christ's ascension. Before focusing directly on these verses, it may be helpful to place them in the wider context of Israel's exodus-conquest motif. The antecedent in "Therefore it says", is Psalm 68.

### 1. Conquest

Jewish scholar Jon D. Levenson develops the theme of Yahweh's march (Israel in tow) out of Egypt to Sinai and then on to Zion.<sup>64</sup> Psalm 68 (probably dated somewhere between the thirteenth and tenth centuries BC) is a war psalm, recounting a march through the wilderness led by "the God of Sinai", where the camp is fed and its thirst quenched by Yahweh himself (vv 7-10). Rich with a combination of martial and liturgical elements, the verses that follow "record a march of YHWH from Sinai, a military campaign in which the God of Israel and his retinue... set out across the desert".<sup>65</sup> (It is this Psalm that Paul will cite in our passage below.)

As important as Sinai is in the march, it lies midway between Egypt and Canaan (Zion). It is a covenant of law, prescribing the work to be done, rather than the Sabbath rest; the place of trial rather than the place of victory and consummated blessing. Levenson observes that the focus shifts from Sinai to Zion, for example, in Psalm 97, but also in Psalm 68:8-9 (cf. Ps 50:2-3). In fact, the shift can be seen already in Deuteronomy 33:2. "The transfer of the motif from Sinai to Zion was complete and irreversible, so that YHWH came to be designated no longer as 'the One of Sinai', but as 'he who dwells on Mount Zion' (Isa 8:18)... The transfer of the divine home from Sinai to Zion meant that God was no longer seen as dwelling in an extraterritorial no man's land, but within the borders of the Israelite community."<sup>66</sup> And in the Zion traditions, "there will emerge something almost unthinkable in the case of Sinai, a pledge of divine support for a human dynasty".<sup>67</sup> In other words, God's unilateral

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<sup>64</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry Into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 19.

<sup>65</sup> Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 19. Levenson concurs with W. F. Albright's dating of this Psalm to the 13<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

promise to Abraham is similar in form and content to his pledge to David's heirs (2 Sam 7:1-17).

Thus, the march from Sinai to Zion also speaks of a progress in covenantal history from conditionality and temporality to unconditional and everlasting blessing, notes Levenson.<sup>68</sup> While the Sinai covenant is always threatened by the unfaithfulness of Israel to its conditions, the heavenly Zion exists "by his grace alone".<sup>69</sup> This is why Jeremiah 7 faults those who "have taken the cosmos out of the cosmic mountain", turning it "into a matter of mere real estate". They do not long in joy and awe for the mountain. "Why should they? They are standing on it. The edifice on Mount Zion does not correspond to the gate of heaven; it is the gate of heaven. In other words, they have lost the sense of the delicacy of relationship between the higher and lower Jerusalem, and have assumed that the latter always reflects the former perfectly."<sup>70</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that this failure to see the earthly Zion as merely a type or foreshadowing of the heavenly Zion that would descend from heaven is the result of confusing the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants.<sup>71</sup> Levenson comes close to saying something identical, yet he concludes that for Judaism Sinai always has the last word.<sup>72</sup> Hence, "Even in modern Israel, the Judaism practiced is not that of the Hebrew Bible, but the continuation of its rabbinic successor, which fashioned a tradition that could deal with a world without a Temple, Jewish sovereignty, or, increasingly, a homeland."<sup>73</sup> After richly exploring the contrast between the Sinai and Abrahamic/Davidic covenants (as conditional treaty and unconditional grant, respectively), Levenson concludes, "In fact, the Davidic theology is the origin of Jewish messianism and the Christology of the church."<sup>74</sup>

Recapitulating the trial of Adam in Eden and Israel in the desert, Jesus Christ leads the exiles out of the ultimate bondage into the liberation of the Sabbath rest (Heb 4:1-13), with the powers of the age to come penetrating this evil age through word and sacrament (Heb 6:4-19). The march from Sinai to Zion is at last completed by Jesus Christ: those who look to Christ, Jews and Gentiles, have arrived not at Sinai but at Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem in festive assembly (Heb 12:18-24). For Paul, too, Sinai and the earthly Jerusalem correspond to Hagar and bondage, while all who trust in Christ are citizens of Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, and children of Sarah (Gal 4:21-31). With Christ's fulfilment of the work of new creation-and-conquest, all prior history – including the Sinai theocracy – now belongs to the old order that is "passing

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<sup>68</sup> Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 165.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>71</sup> Michael Horton, *Covenant and Salvation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 11-36.

<sup>72</sup> Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 180.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

away”, “fading”, “becoming obsolete”. Christ’s resurrection has inaugurated the age to come, so that the Abrahamic promise – and Israel’s commission to the world – can finally be fulfilled. As Robert Jenson finely puts it, “By Jesus’ Resurrection occurring ‘first,’ a sort of *hole* opens *in* the event of the End, a space for something like what used to be history, for the church and its mission.”<sup>75</sup>

In Ephesians 4:8, Paul appeals to Psalm 68, especially verse 19, although I will quote verses 15-20 for a fuller context:

*O mountain of God, mountain of Bashan; O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan! Why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain, at the mount that God desired for his abode, yes, where the LORD will dwell forever? The chariots of God are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary. You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there. Blessed be the LORD, who daily bears us up; God is our salvation. Our God is a God of salvation, and to GOD, the Lord, belong deliverances from death.*

Verse 1 (“God shall arise, his enemies be scattered; and those who hate him shall flee before him”) echoes the battle cry in Numbers 10:35. In that event, the ark of the covenant was leading the people of Israel through the wilderness on their way to Zion.

It may be that Psalm 68 was composed to commemorate the arrival of the ark in the sanctuary at Zion. In any case, it celebrates the procession: “O God, when you went out before your people, when you marched through the wilderness, the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain, before God, the One of Sinai, before God, the God of Israel” (vv 7-8). The fighting men sleep while the Lord lays the enemies to waste and scatters kings, and the women announce, “The kings of the armies – they flee, they flee!” and “divide the spoil” of precious treasures from the Lord’s victory (vv 11-14). Housing the sacred tablets, the ark is a portable Sinai, which has now moved into its sanctuary. Verses 24-27 report “the procession of God, my King, into the sanctuary”, with singers and congregation. “Summon your power, O God, the power, O God, by which you have worked for us” (v 28). The days are envisioned when God will break the spears of his enemies and bring many captives to worship on his holy hill in peace (vv 32-33). “O kingdoms of the earth, sing to God; sing praises to the Lord... Awesome is God from his sanctuary; the God of Israel – he is the one who gives power and strength to his people. Blessed be God!” (v 35).

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<sup>75</sup> Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 85.

The God of Sinai is now the God of Zion. Although Sinai is not forgotten, it yields to a broader, fuller and richer future, when a remnant of all the warring nations will find safety and peace in the presence of the God of Israel. God ascends his own mountain in conquest and enters his sanctuary in triumph, while the mighty men of Israel slept.

Some have argued that this Psalm was part of the Jewish liturgy of Pentecost, since it was this annual feast that celebrated the giving of the law at Sinai.<sup>76</sup> According to Rudolf Schnackenberg,

*"You have received gifts among humanity" was understood as "received gifts for humanity", so that he (Moses) might give the gifts to them... Originally taken [in the OT and Judaism] to apply to God who, coming from Sinai majestically rises to Zion, and in Judaism taken to mean Moses who climbs the Mountain of God (Sinai) and there receives the Tables of the Law, the text is now interpreted in the style of a midrash and is understood in a Christian way as referring to Christ."<sup>77</sup>*

Already the transfer from Moses to Jesus may be seen in Peter's Pentecost sermon: "Exalted at the right hand of God, he received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father and poured it forth, as you [both] see and hear" (Acts 2:33; cf. 5:32-33).

## 2. Distributing the Spoils

Like the Book of Joshua that Psalm 68 reprises, conquest is followed by the distribution of the spoils of victory. Near the end of Joshua, God gives rest to his land and people from all enemies that defile. God himself has assumed Adam's role of casting the serpent out of his typological garden. The emphasis throughout the book is upon God's victory. It is not the Israelites but Yahweh who has cleansed his garden of all that defiles and has given them rest on all sides: "And I sent the hornet before you, which drove them out before you, the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not laboured and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant" (Josh 24:12-13). It is the same emphasis in Psalm 68: God triumphed "while the mighty men slept and the women divided the spoils".

Then, after God distributes the inheritance of land to the twelve tribes, Joshua declares, "And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all

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<sup>76</sup> For sources on this point, see Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 291. Harold Hoehner disputes this association (*Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 527).

<sup>77</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Ephesians*, 177.

the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed" (Josh 23:14). And now, the Abrahamic promise having been fulfilled, Israel swears its oath to the Sinai covenant as the terms for remaining in the good land.

Paul's otherwise puzzling editing of the Psalm from "you received gifts" to "he gave gifts" makes perfect sense, therefore, in the light of the ascension as the fuller reality to which the Psalm pointed.<sup>78</sup> "Like Adam, Israel sinned and transgressed the covenant" (Hos 6:7). Yet Christ, as the Last Adam and faithful Israel, has fulfilled the trial as servant of the covenant. In the light of Christ's ascension after having defeated his enemies, he is now distributing the spoils of victory to his people. Consequently, there is no way to interpret this event other than to refer to Jesus Christ as the gift-giver rather than the recipient. Christ has ascended in triumphant procession, not to an earthly Zion but to its heavenly archetype. He enters not with the ark of the covenant and its sacred tablets – Sinai in miniature (Ps 68:17) or with the sacrifices it prescribed – but with his own blood (Heb 9:11-12). It is a covenant founded on better promises, since they are based on God's faithfulness rather than the people's, extend to all nations and not only Israel, and pertain to an everlasting rest rather than a temporary land of blessing.

Just as ancient rulers would divide the spoils of conquest (see Gen 14; Jdg 5:30; 1 Sam 30:26-31), and then erect a temple-palace in honour of their victory, Zion's sanctuary is the house that the conquering King of Israel builds to celebrate his victory over all the earth. The captives in the victorious train of the conquerors (Yahweh/Christ) are Satan, death and hell.<sup>79</sup> Paul adds that

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<sup>78</sup> Commentators observe that there are traces in the Targum and rabbinical tradition that substantiate the translation of Psalm 68:19 as "he gave" rather than "he took", and some Syriac and Aramaic manuscripts of the LXX support it as well (Schnackenburg, *Ephesians*, 177; cf. M. Barth, *Ephesians*, 472, 475; Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 290; R. A. Taylor, "The Use of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8 in Light of Ancient Versions", *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 [1991], 332-35). Given Paul's extensive rabbinical training, however, it seems unlikely that he would have relied upon a version of Psalm 68 that was less widely available and attested among contemporary Jews. Harold Hoehner thinks it might simply be a summary, not an exact quotation (Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 528). However, it is more than inexact; it changes the subjects of giving and receiving. The simplest answer is that Paul is interpreting this Psalm Christologically, just as the psalmist interpreted the history recounted in Numbers 10 in the light of the reign of David and the temple. Paul is not engaging in mere typology, using Psalm 68 as a proof-text for the antitype. Rather, like other NT writers, he is interpreting redemptive history in the light of its greater fulfilment.

<sup>79</sup> Who are the captives? Probably Satan, sin and death (the view of Chrysostom, Theophylact, Calvin, Bengel, Alford, Eadie, Dibelius, et al.) rather than the people rescued by Christ (the view of Justin Martyr, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Aquinas, Murray, et al.). Nevertheless, especially in light of Psalm 68:30-35, the triumph over the violent enemies of God results in their being included in the procession to the holy sanctuary. The most obvious interpretation of the "captives" in Psalm 68 are, as G. V. Smith argues, rebellious Israelites (G. V. Smith, "Paul's Use of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8," *JETS* 18 [1975], 181-89. However, Paul frequently has in mind the satanic "powers" that hold us in bondage. Ephesians 6 supports this interpretation. Obviously, Satan and

there is no ascent without a prior descent, which I take to refer not to a literal descent into hell, but into the depths of the earth.<sup>80</sup> There is no conquest without the exodus, no victory without the battle, no ascension without the incarnation, cross and resurrection.

### 3. Theological and Practical Implications

*Where* is Jesus? This question is determinative for our view of *who* Jesus is. If we follow Origen's path, Jesus has left his personal history behind along with his fleshly body. Now, at last, he can return to his beginning, as the Logos-infused soul that never lost its contemplative gaze upon the One. Origen could not distinguish the humanity of Christ from his lowly estate. The idea of Jesus being forever the one who nursed at Mary's breast and was crucified *yet now glorified* found no place on his Neoplatonist map. Instead, the Jesus of history had to surrender to the Christ of faith and even more of spiritual and philosophical contemplation.

When we look away from the historical Jesus, now glorified in our humanity, we search for substitutes. In much of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theology, the church has replaced its ascended Lord as his bodily form. Just as in transubstantiation the earthly signs of bread and wine are annihilated and replaced by the reality (Christ's body and blood), the visible church simply *is* Jesus in his now-visible activity in the world. Augustine's expression, *totus Christus*, which he used to refer to the intimate union of Christ and his body, downplayed crucial differences. Interpreted in even more deeply Neoplatonic terms throughout the Middle Ages, this idea justified a hierarchical ecclesiology according to which grace flowed down the ladder of being from its highest to lowest rungs. Indebted to Fichte, Hegel and Schelling, nineteenth-century "Reform Catholicism" (as well as liberal Protestantism in the wake of Schleiermacher) also spoke of the church as an extension of Christ's incarnation and redeeming work in the world.

Douglas Farrow shows the extent to which this paradigm is generated by a failure to recognise the significance of Christ's bodily ascension. Origen

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his minions are not converted into true worshipers, but many "captives" of his domain are transferred to Zion.

<sup>80</sup> See John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1965; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 176. Peter O'Brien notes, "The unusual expression 'the lower parts of the earth' is better interpreted as 'the earth below' than as the abode of the dead" (*The Letter to the Ephesians*, 294). Ralph P. Martin follows G. B. Caird's intriguing suggestion that "ascent" / "descent" refers to Christ's ascension and the descent of the Spirit (Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1991], 50). However, this does not seem plausible. Christ is the subject of both actions. Furthermore, as Harold Hoehner points out, this interpretation of verse 9 "makes verse 10 useless" (Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 532).

represents the extreme limits to which a thinly Christianised Platonism can go. If Jesus Christ's own glorification was, as Origen said, "more of an ascension of the mind than of the body",<sup>81</sup> then it follows that ours is as well. As the spiritual educator of the human race, Jesus leads us away from the shadows of time and matter into the reality of being. Even in less radical accounts (such as that of Athanasius and Augustine), the absence of Christ in the flesh is no longer a loss but becomes the occasion for his "return" in and as the church. Increasingly, the particular person, Jesus of Nazareth, was forgotten, yielding to a cosmic Christ whose visible-earthly existence was now transferred to the church. "Indeed, it meant that the church now controlled the parousia", notes Farrow. "At the ringing of a bell the *Christus absens* became the *Christus praesens*... Seated comfortably with the Christ-child on its lap, the church soon became his regent rather than his servant. In short, its Marian ego, already out of control at the beginning of the eucharistic debates, afterwards knew no bounds".<sup>82</sup>

With the rise of German Idealism (especially Fichte and Hegel), the synthesis of Christology and ecclesiology seemed complete in many Roman Catholic and Protestant systems. In our own day, this synthesis is pursued to its fullest extent by writers like Graham Ward, who scolds those who grieve over and long for "a lost body" – "the body of the gendered Jew", instead of realising that in his ascension Christ's body is not loss but expansion. His natural body becomes transcorporeal; he returns (has already returned) in and in fact as the church.<sup>83</sup>

However, Paul's "body of Christ" analogy is neither to be taken literally, in the sense of replacing Christ, nor as a mere figure of speech. Taken univocally, the theory of the church "as 'the extension of the Incarnation'", as Lesslie Newbigin observes, "springs from a confusion of *sarx* with *soma*." "Christ's risen body" – that is, his ecclesial distinguished from his natural body – "is not fleshly but spiritual". "He did not come to incorporate us in His body according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." Hence, his promise that when he ascends he will send the Spirit.<sup>84</sup> Newbigin's point reminds us of the importance of both the ascension of Christ in the flesh and the descent of the Spirit. Our union with Christ does not occur at the level of fused natures, but as a common participation of different members in the same realities of the age to come by the same Spirit.

It is the difference as much as the affinity between Head and members that constitutes Paul's ecclesiology. Just as husband and wife become "one flesh"

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<sup>81</sup> Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2009), 97, citing Origen's *de princ.* 23.2.

<sup>82</sup> Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 157.

<sup>83</sup> Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 93-116.

<sup>84</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church*, 80.



without becoming one person, so also with Christ and his church (Eph 5:31-32). In fact, Avery Cardinal Dulles recognises, “The root of the metaphor”, he says, “is the kind of treaty relationship into which a suzerain state entered with a vassal state in the ancient Near East”. In addition to providing the background for the Body of Christ analogy, “That kind of military and political treaty afforded the raw material out of which the concept of ‘People of God’ was fashioned”.<sup>85</sup> Overlooking this covenantal context of the body analogy, warns Dulles, may lead “to an unhealthy divinization of the Church”, as if the union “is therefore a biological and hypostatic one” and all actions of the church are *ipso facto* actions of Christ and the Spirit.<sup>86</sup> Drawn from the realm of politics rather than philosophy, the analogy of a covenantal body makes otherness and plurality as essential as unity. It is that unity that is so deeply dependent on the work of the ministry that Paul describes as God’s gift.

As John Webster points out, the emphasis on the church as an extension of Christ’s person and work, which owes “as much to Hegelian theory of history as to theology... has become something of a commonplace in some now dominant styles of modern theology and theological ethics”. God’s work of reconciling the world in Christ merges with the church’s moral action.<sup>87</sup> Interpreted within a more cultural-linguistic paradigm, Stanley Hauerwas, Timothy Gorringe and others join this trajectory. They still speak of the Trinity and grace, but the emphasis falls on the acts of the church, “often through the idiom of virtues, habits and practices”.<sup>88</sup> According to Timothy Gorringe, “the community of reconciliation” is “the means through which atonement is effected, which is the reason, presumably, Christ bequeathed to us not a set of doctrines or truths, but a community...”<sup>89</sup> The force of Christ’s completed work, Webster judges, “is simply lost” in this inflated talk of the church’s redemptive activity.<sup>90</sup> Christ’s person and work easily becomes a “model” or “vision” for ecclesial action (*imitatio Christi*), rather than a completed event to which the church offers its witness.

At the other extreme – often in reaction against this first paradigm, is the tendency to separate the invisible, eternal and spiritual reality from everything visible, temporal and creaturely. The democratic reaction against special offices is consistent with an anti-institutional and anti-sacramental bias. As a result, however, the logic of Paul’s argument – namely, that Christ is delivering the spoils of *his* victory to his people is easily exchanged for a model

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<sup>85</sup> Avery Dulles, S. J., *Models of the Church*, 22-23.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>87</sup> John Webster, *Word and Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 226.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>89</sup> Cited by Webster, “Christ, Church and Reconciliation”, in *Word and Church*, 217, from Timothy Gorringe, *God’s Just Vengeance* (London: Verso, 1991), 268.

<sup>90</sup> Webster, *Word and Church*, 217. Webster evaluates Miroslav Volf’s *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) along similar lines (*Word and Church*, 218-220).

of the church that focuses on the activity of believers. “One Lord” easily becomes assimilated to a one-sided emphasis on “my personal Lord and Saviour”. “One faith” succumbs to my act of believing. “One baptism” no longer refers to the objective sacrament, but to the inner experience of new birth. Identified by the Reformers as “enthusiasm”, this radical Protestant trajectory is especially evident in the history of various groups ranging from the most extreme (e.g., the Gnostics) to more orthodox (e.g., the Montanists and Spiritual Franciscans). This heritage reaches us today through Anabaptism, pietism and evangelical as well as Pentecostal groups. At the time of the Reformation, Zwingli represented the view that Christ is truly absent in the flesh – the “not-yet” of the salvation awaiting us, but without a sufficiently robust pneumatology to support the “already” of his presence – even physical presence – with us now in the power of the Spirit. In more recent times, Karl Barth and his students have defended Zwingli’s basic outlook.<sup>91</sup>

However, these two paradigms are not our only options. What is missing is the perspective of Luther, Calvin and the Reformation confessions that speak of the Spirit binding himself in his ordinary operation to the creaturely ministry of weak and sinful ambassadors. The Triune God works when and where he will, remaining sovereign in his gracious activity. Nevertheless, he condescends to work through means. Just as there is a “sacramental union” between sign and reality in the means of grace, there is a sacramental union between Christ and his church. This union is never determined by epistemological or ontological distance, but by the eschatological coordinates of “already” and “not-yet” – coordinates that are set by the concrete events of our Lord’s descent, ascent and return in the flesh.

The ascension highlights the paradox of our Lord’s real absence in the flesh and his real presence in saving action in the power of the Spirit. This parenthesis in redemptive history cannot be mapped onto a Platonic ontology, whether in the direction of Hegelian synthesis or Kierkegaardian antithesis.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Reflecting on this fact, Barth wrote, “The Reformed Church and Reformed theology (even in Zürich) could not continue to hold” to Zwingli’s teaching, and took a “backward step” toward Calvin’s “sacramentalism”. “We for our part cannot deny that both negatively and positively Zwingli was basically right” (cited by Webster, *Word and Church*, 130). Even as sympathetic an interpreter as John Webster concludes concerning Barth’s treatment of baptism in the final fragment of the *Church Dogmatics*: “The exegesis is sometimes surprisingly shoddy, dominated by special pleading, as well as by what seems at times an almost Platonic distinction between water baptism (an exclusively human act) and baptism with the Spirit (an exclusively divine act)... Clearly the Reformed tradition on sacraments had lost its appeal for him, though what replaced it lacked the nuance and weightiness of earlier discussion” (Webster, *Barth* [New York: Continuum, 2000], 157).

<sup>92</sup> Often overlooked in contemporary ecclesiologies is Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s doctoral thesis, *Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Works, edited by Joachim von Soosten; English edition edited by Clifford J. Green; trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998). This is a trenchant critique of Hegelian monism without falling into Barth’s dualism between Christ and the church.

Rather, the ascension keeps us in the tension between the already and the not-yet, as subjects of and witnesses to Christ's saving action rather than co-agents of it. Neither the sacramental body of Christ (baptism and the Supper) nor the ecclesial body of Christ can be allowed to substitute for the personal body of Jesus of Nazareth. Christ cannot be made present in the flesh by the church or by pious believers. As Paul argues in Romans 10, it is "the righteousness that is by works" that seeks to ascend into heaven to bring Christ down or descend into the depths to bring him up from the dead, while "the righteousness that is by faith" receives Christ as he delivers himself through his Word (vv 5-17). Jesus Christ cannot be made bodily present on earth until his second coming, and all attempts to jump the eschatological gun end up reinterpreting Christ as someone other than the particular "gendered Jew" (to borrow Ward's phrase) who as the first-fruits determines the nature of our own future bodily existence.

Farrow suggests that Calvin, like Irenaeus, brought attention back to the economy and thus to the *problem* of Christ's absence. "'But why', asked Calvin, 'do we repeat the word "ascension" so often?' To answer in our own words, it was because he found it necessary to reckon more bravely than the other reformers with the absence of Christ as a genuine problem for the church."

Especially in the Eucharistic debates, Calvin returns our focus to the economy of redemption. Like Irenaeus, he challenges every docetising tendency in Christology by focusing on the actual history of Jesus of Nazareth from descent (incarnation and his earthly ministry of redemption), to his ascension and heavenly ministry, to the parousia at the end of the age.

To maintain a real absence is also to maintain a real continuity between the Saviour and the saved. All of this demonstrates that Calvin had a better grasp on the way in which the Where? question is bound up with the Who? question. That indeed was his critical insight into the whole debate. Calvin saw that neither a Eutychian response (Jesus is omnipresent) nor a Nestorian one (absent in one nature but present in the other) will do, since either way Christ's humanity is neutralised and his role as our mediator put in jeopardy. It is the God-man who is absent and the God-man whose present we nevertheless require... A "species of absence" and a "species of presence" thus qualify our communion with Christ, who remains in heaven until the day of judgment. It is *we* who require eucharistic relocation.<sup>93</sup>

Instead of moving from Eucharist to Ascension, Calvin moved in the other direction and this led him to stress "the particularity of Jesus without sacrificing sacramental realism". In other words, Calvin took with equal seriousness both Christ's real absence from us in the flesh until he comes again and his real presence in Word and sacrament. If Christ is truly absent from us in the flesh, and our entire salvation depends on being united to him (the

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<sup>93</sup> Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 176-177.

whole person, not just his divinity), then we are completely dependent on the Spirit's work. This "forced him to seek a *pneumatological solution* to the problem of the presence and the absence" (emphasis added).<sup>94</sup>

Jesus Christ did not ascend spiritually, leaving behind his body and world history; rather, he ascended in the flesh, opening up space within history for the in-breaking of the powers of the age to come. Our personal and ecclesial existence is determined not by supra-historical realities, but by the history that Jesus has opened up for us in these last days. The gift of salvation comes to us *extra nos*, outside of us. We dare not divert our attention from Christ and his gift-giving reign by focusing on the church and its activity, whether conceived in hierarchical or democratic terms.

This present evil age, dominated by the flesh, is under judgment that is nevertheless postponed until the unfolding mystery of his plan for the church is fully realised. In the meantime, it is the historical career of Jesus Christ that determines world events. The Father raised his Son "and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:20-22). A church that does not acknowledge Christ's absence is no longer focused on Christ, but is tempted to idolatrous substitutions in the attempt to seize Canaan prematurely. The parallel with Moses is striking: "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him'" (Ex 32:1). In view of this survey, Farrow seems quite justified in concluding, "Looking away from Jesus has become a natural reflex."<sup>95</sup>

Yet the Reformation traditions are riveted to the argument in Ephesians 4: Christ has ascended as victor and is *now* distributing his gifts by his Spirit through "the gifts that he gave". These gifts are ministers of the gospel who, through preaching and sacrament, build up the whole body in Christ (Eph 4:11-16). The *historical* body of Jesus *glorified* is the presupposition for the *ecclesial* body being *built up*. Even now, then, there is an "already" to the penetrating powers of the age to come breaking into this present evil age (cf. Heb 6:1-5). Through the ministry of the means of grace, the Spirit who united the Son to our humanity now unites us as the new humanity to the glorified Son. When the church either confuses itself with its head or divorces itself from its head in a cacophony of competing individuals, it fails to stand where Paul calls us to stand in this passage: under the reign of the gift-giving King.

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<sup>94</sup> Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 177-178.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

# ALL ISRAEL WILL BE SAVED: THE FUTURE OF “ISRAEL” WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO ROMANS 11:26A

*Gareth Burke\**

## *Introduction*

Some years ago in Belfast the pastor of a well-known independent evangelical church was systematically preaching through Paul's Epistle to the Romans. The congregation consisted of faithful men and women committed to the gospel and very much of the view that man was lost in sin and that the only way of salvation was through faith in Jesus. The general theological tilt of the congregation was Arminian, with Dispensational leanings. There were, however, a number within the church of Reformed convictions who were very much looking forward to the pastor's exposition of Romans chapters nine to eleven. His treatment of both election and the future of Israel was much anticipated. Amazingly, when the appropriate Sunday morning arrived when the next passage for consideration was Romans 9, the pastor announced that he had been praying and reflecting on the situation and had decided that it would be best to "omit consideration of Romans chapters nine, ten and eleven and instead to move directly to the opening verses of Romans twelve"!

These chapters have caused much debate and controversy within the Christian Church throughout the years. Much of the discussion has centred on the question which is at the very heart of this paper – the future of Israel. An attempt to interpret and understand Romans 11: 26a is our goal but before we arrive at this point there are certain steps we need to take along the way. As such, taking Romans 11:26a as our text (hereinafter referred to as "the text"), our approach will be as follows:

### *I. Approaching the Text*

- 1. A Brief Consideration of the Epistle up to Romans 8*
- 2. A Brief Consideration of the Teaching of Romans 9 and 10*
- 3. A Brief Consideration of the Overall Teaching of Romans 11*

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## *II. Examining the Text*

### *1. A Consideration of Romans 11:25-27*

### *2. A Consideration of the Different Interpretations of Romans 11:26a*

## *III. Discussing the Text*

### *1. Questions for Discussion*

## *I. Approaching the Text*

### **1. A Brief Consideration of the Epistle up to Romans 8<sup>1</sup>**

#### **1:1-17**

Paul, an apostle, writing from Corinth, introduces himself and his theme in the opening verses. He has not been to Rome personally but he greets his recipients warmly knowing that they “are loved by God and called to be saints” (v.7). His great theme is the gospel which he describes as being a powerful message by which men and women can be made right with God (vv.16-17). At the heart of the good news of the gospel is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose two natures are referred to by the Apostle in verses 3 and 4.

#### **1:18-32**

Having, in verses 16 and 17 introduced his theme – the gospel – and having set forth his conviction that it is through the gospel that the righteousness of God is revealed, Paul now shows the lost and fallen condition of mankind. Although the existence and power of God can be clearly seen in God’s creation, men and women have rejected God. This rejection manifests itself in depraved and sinful conduct. Another significant matter in this section is the Apostle’s conviction that God is a “God of wrath” (v.18) This wrath is “a fixed, unchanging, perfectly controlled attitude of God to sin. God hates it and is irrevocably set against it”<sup>2</sup>. This wrath towards sin is seen by him “giving them up” to impurity, to dishonourable passions and to a debased mind (vv.24, 26, 28).

#### **2:1-16**

All men, both Jews and Gentiles, will ultimately face the judgment of God. There is a day approaching when Jesus will be the judge of all mankind (v.16),

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, published by Harper Collins, 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Alexander, Sermon on Romans 1:18-32 (Audio).

a judgment based on the law of God. Jews have received the law while the Gentiles have not. Yet,

*When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law (v.14).*

### **2:17-29**

Paul responds to the Jews who believe that by possessing the law and being circumcised they are automatically favoured by God and not liable to his judgment like everyone else. He argues rather that,

*Circumcision is indeed of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? (vv.25-26).*

### **3:1-8**

Paul counters the argument that there is therefore no advantage in being a Jew since all men, Jews and Gentiles, will be ultimately judged by God with whom there is no favouritism. Instead, the apostle outlines the privileges of being recipients of the “oracles of God”. He shows that it is not the mere possession of the law but what you do with it that really matters.

### **3:9-20**

The apostle reinforces the truth that “none is righteous, no not one” (v.10) by several Old Testament quotations.

### **Recap**

- All are sinners
- All are under the wrath of God
- All will be judged
- The Jews have been wonderfully blessed (law, circumcision etc) but these blessings are only spiritually advantageous if acted upon.

### **3:21-31**

Once again, the apostle clearly asserts that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v.23), but there is also good news for all, both Jew and Gentile. He writes in this section of “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (v.22). He clearly demonstrates that there is only one way of salvation: “He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith” (v.30).

**4:1-12**

Paul now cites two Old Testament believers – Abraham and David – as examples of those who were saved (justified) by grace, through faith, in Christ:

*He (Abraham) received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised (v.11).*

**4:13-25**

In this section Paul asserts the necessity of faith and demonstrates that Abraham, “the father of us all” (v.16), was supremely a man of faith.

**5:1-11**

Paul now begins to outline the particular blessings that belong to those who believe in Christ. In these verses he reminds his readers of the particular blessings that flow from justification:

*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (v.1).*

**5:12-21**

The first Adam and the last Adam (Jesus) are compared and contrasted. Essentially, through Adam, ruin came to all who are united to him. Christ brings justification and salvation to all who are united to him.

**Recap**

- All are sinners
- All are under the wrath of God
- All will be judged
- The Jews have been richly blessed but these blessings are only spiritually advantageous if acted upon
- The good news is that God has made it possible for men and women to be in a right relationship with him
- Through faith in Jesus Christ all can be justified in God’s sight
- Faith in Jesus Christ is crucial. The mere possession of the law or outward adherence to Jewish rites and ritual will not achieve salvation.
- This faith is clearly seen in Old Testament believers with Abraham in particular providing for us a clear example of faith
- When men and women trust by faith in Jesus Christ, they are not only made right with God but they receive numerous blessings from the hand of God



**6:1-23**

Paul now shows how those who have faith in Jesus Christ are to live. It is not that there is uncertainty about who they are to serve – the old master (sin) or the new master (Jesus). No, those who are in Christ must consider themselves “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (v.11). He urges them:

*Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but rather present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life... (v.13).*

**7:1-25**

Paul outlines the believer’s relationship with the law. He is free from the law in the sense that he does not need to keep it in order to be saved. However, as one who is saved, he wants to keep it to demonstrate his love for God, the giver of the law.

However, attempts to keep the law are often thwarted by indwelling sin. In verses 14-25 Paul speaks out of his own personal experience about the great ongoing struggle with sin. He looks forward to being “delivered from this body of death” (v.24) – a reference to the glory that awaits the believer.

**8:1-39**

Here Paul outlines the blessings that belong to those in whom “the Spirit of God dwells” (v.9). There is now “no condemnation” for them (v.1), an assurance that God is at work in every detail of their lives (v.28), and the certainty of future glory (vv.18ff). In this life there will be suffering and groaning (vv.18-23), but ultimately we will be glorified (v.30).

**Recap**

- All are sinners
- All are under the wrath of God
- All will be judged
- The Jews have been richly blessed but these blessings are only spiritually advantageous if acted upon
- The good news is that God has made it possible for men and women to be in a right relationship with him
- Through faith in Jesus Christ all can be justified in God’s sight
- Faith in Jesus Christ is crucial. The mere possession of the law or outward adherence to Jewish rites and ritual will not achieve salvation.
- This faith is clearly seen in Old Testament believers with Abraham in particular providing for us a clear example of faith

- When men and women trust by faith in Jesus Christ, they are not only made right with God but they receive numerous blessings from the hand of God
- Those who have faith in Jesus Christ must recognise that sin is no longer the reigning, dominant influence in their life
- Christians need to recognise that they are to live to God's glory and they are to obey the law of God, not as the means of obtaining salvation, but as an expression of their love for God
- Whilst sin is no longer the reigning dominant influence in our lives as believers, we must acknowledge that sin has not been eradicated and that until we enter into glory we will be involved in an ongoing struggle with indwelling sin
- However, "life in the Spirit" is an indescribable blessing which means that although we are not free from suffering, we have the privilege of knowing that glory most certainly awaits us

Having spoken much in the letter about the Jews – their immense privileges but their sad rejection of God and the gospel – Paul now turns in Chapters 9-11 to a consideration of his own people, Israel. Essentially, he is asking the question in these chapters – "Is God finished with the Jews?"

## 2. A Brief Consideration of the Teaching of Romans 9 and 10

### 9:1-5

Paul expresses here his deep-seated longing for the salvation of Israel. He details in verses 3-5 the enormous privileges that have been given to the Jews, not least that "from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen" (v.5).

### 9:6-13

However, Paul is clear that to be born a Jew does not mean that you are automatically saved, "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" (v.6). The apostle then sets forth God's purpose of election and demonstrates that this is a key doctrine in terms of understanding his gracious purposes. The reality is that some are chosen and some are not: "Jacob I loved but Esau I hated" (v.13).

### 9:14-32

To those who feel that God's choosing of some for salvation and of passing others by is unfair, Paul compares God to a potter who has the right to "make out of the same lump (of clay) one vessel for honoured use and another for dishonourable use" (v.21). There is no injustice with God. He says: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have

compassion" (v.15). In this section Paul also asserts that not all Israel will be saved but "only a remnant..." (v.27). Towards the end of this section the apostle indicates that God has been gathering in his people, his elect, from among the Gentile nations (vv.25-26, 30-33).

### **10:1-21**

In this chapter Paul again alludes to the Lord being at work among the Gentile nations (vv.19-20). He also asserts that Jew and Gentile will be saved in exactly the same way: "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek" (v.12) and "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (v.13). His heart for the salvation of Israel is laid bare in the opening verses and his distress at their rejection of the gospel is also clearly seen: "But they have not all obeyed the gospel" (v.16).

## **3. A Brief Consideration of the Overall Teaching of Romans 11**

### **11:1-10**

Paul is looking at the question of whether God has rejected his people (v.1). He begins answering the question by referring to himself who, as a Jew, has trusted in Christ. He also refers to the seven thousand who, in Elijah's day, did not bow the knee to Baal. He develops this theme by speaking of "the remnant": "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace" (v.5). Yet the reality is that the majority of Israel rejected the Saviour and the salvation to be found through faith in him. This "hardening" was foretold in the Old Testament (vv.7-10).

### **11:11-12**

Paul declares that the "fall" of the Jews has meant salvation for the Gentiles. But now he also begins to look forward to the restoration of Israel and suggests that something greater lies ahead in terms of God's blessing: "how much more will their full inclusion mean!" (v.12). What exactly this fuller blessing is, or what exactly it will look like, is not developed at this point.

### **11:13-16**

This idea that the restoration of Israel will lead to great blessing for the world is developed further in this section when the apostle says that "their (the Jews) acceptance will mean life from the dead" (v.15). It seems best to understand the term "life from the dead" spiritually and to see it as a reference to future spiritual blessing rather than a reference to the resurrection of the last day.

### **11:17- 21**

Here Paul describes the Jews as an olive tree. Because of their unbelief some branches have been cut off and, in their place, wild olive branches (the

Gentiles) have been grafted in. These Gentiles must be careful not to become arrogant or boastful because “if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you” (v.21). Also, the Gentile believers must forever maintain an attitude of humility, recognising “It is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you” (v.18). By this statement Paul is reminding the Gentile believers of the root – our Jewish forefathers like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – to whom they owe so much.

### **11:22-24**

Continuing with the analogy of the olive tree, Paul reminds the Gentile believers (the wild olive branches that have been grafted in) that God is able to save the Jews and that the “natural branches can be grafted back into their own olive tree” (v.24).

### **11:25-32**

These verses will be treated more fully in the next section. Paul is repeating, in a slightly different way, what he has taught earlier that once “the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (v.25) there will be a significant movement spiritually among the Jews – “all Israel will be saved” (v.26).

### **11:33-36**

Paul concludes this section with an outburst of praise to God: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” (v.33).

## *II. Examining the Text*

### **1. A Consideration of Romans 11:25-27**

Before beginning to examine the different interpretations of Romans 11:26 and especially the different views as to what “all Israel” means it would be best for us to pause for a moment and to closely consider the text itself. We shall consider verses 25 to 27 in order to place the opening words of verse 26 in their proper context:

*Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,*

*“The Deliverer will come from Zion,  
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob;  
and this will be my covenant with them  
when I take away their sins” (vv.25-27).*

**“Lest you be wise in your own conceits”**

Paul warns the Gentile believers not to be puffed up with themselves and not to adopt an attitude of superiority, thinking that the Jews have been cast off forever.

**“I want you to understand this mystery, brothers”**

A “mystery” in the New Testament is something that has been previously hidden from men. It is something that God reveals, that he makes known – something previously unseen and unknown (see, for example, Romans 16:25).

**“A partial hardening has come upon Israel”**

In referring to ‘Israel’ Paul speaks of ethnic Israel, the Jews. In the eleven references to Israel in Chapters 9-11 it is evident that the term refers to “his kinsmen according to the flesh” (9:3). Great significance should be attached to the word “partial”. Yes, as has been already demonstrated in these chapters, there has been a “hardening” among Israel but here Paul makes it clear that it is not total as there is a remnant who have believed.

**“Until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in”**

What does it mean, the fullness (or times) of the Gentiles? To my mind it is this: God begins with the Jewish nation as his chosen people. The Jewish nation, in large measure, falls into apostasy; the olive tree that God cultivated becomes rotten and many branches are cut off. God does not cut down the tree, but he grafts in the wild olive branches. He brings Gentiles into the community of faith and he has a definite number of such. When the last wild olive branch is grafted on to the tree, then God is going to do something again with the original tree.<sup>3</sup>

**“And in this way all Israel will be saved”**

Leon Morris suggests that “in this way” refers to what precedes:

*...that is, through the divinely appointed process whereby the hardening of part of Israel brought salvation to the Gentiles, a temporary hardening effective only until the “fullness of the Gentiles” has come in.<sup>4</sup>*

“All Israel” will be discussed more fully below, but it is appropriate at this point to note that however we understand the term, men and women of whatever nationality can only be saved in one way – through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

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<sup>3</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Romans: Focus on the Bible* (Christian Focus Publications, 1994), 189.

<sup>4</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 420.

*As it is written,*

*The Deliverer will come from Zion,  
He will banish ungodliness from Jacob:  
And this will be my covenant with them  
When I take away their sins (vv. 26-27)*

Paul quotes from Isaiah 59:20 and Jeremiah 31:33 to prove that he is propounding no novelty, but is only bringing to more explicit expression what has been long foretold in scripture.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. A Consideration of the Different Interpretations of Romans 11:26a

There are essentially three main interpretations of the term “All Israel” in verse 26. Each of these views is supported by excellent, faithful, Bible-believing scholars whose research and writings have been of great usefulness to the church of Christ throughout the ages. It is my intention to simply state the three main views and then to quote from one of the exponents of each interpretation.

### View 1

“All Israel” refers to the elect of God, both Jews and Gentiles, throughout all the ages of time and has no particular or exclusive reference to the Jewish nation or people.

Essentially, all that Paul is saying when he states that “All Israel will be saved” is that God will ultimately, before the end of time, gather in all the elect from “every tribe, nation and tongue”.

Supported by **John Calvin** in his commentary:

*Many understand this (and so all Israel) of the Jewish people, as though Paul had said, that religion would again be restored among them as before: but I extend the word Israel to all the people of God... The same manner of speaking we find in Galatians 6:16. The Israel of God is what he calls the Church gathered alike from Jews and Gentiles.<sup>6</sup>*

### Critique

Paul makes it clear that something special is going on here in this section of the epistle. He wants his readers to understand “a mystery” – that is,

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<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey B. Wilson, *Romans* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 194.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, reprinted 1989), 437.

something that was previously kept hidden but which God has now wonderfully revealed to him and perhaps to others as well. Without in any way minimising the grace of God or taking away from the blessings of salvation it can hardly be described as a mystery – a special revelation – that God is going to save his elect! This view also involves us understanding “Israel” not to refer to the Jewish nation, whereas in all the other ten references to Israel in chapters nine to eleven it always refers to the Jewish people.

## View 2

“All Israel” refers to the elect of God from among the Jewish people. “All” has a particular reference to the elect among the Jews. Paul is saying that all the elect among the Jews will be gathered in and will be saved.

Supported by **Louis Berkhof** in his *Systematic Theology*:

*“All Israel” is to be understood as a designation not of the whole nation but of the whole number of the elect out of the ancient covenant people.<sup>7</sup>*

## Critique

Again, in common with View 1, it can hardly be described as a “mystery” that God is going to save the elect! These two views do not do justice to the special nature of the situation which Paul is obviously outlining here.

## View 3

“All Israel” does not refer to every last Jew that will be found alive at the moment of Christ’s second advent but, nevertheless, Paul is suggesting that before the return of Christ there will be a significant, notable and definite turning among the Jews to the Lord for salvation. This restoration will take place once “the fullness of the Gentiles have come in” which the present writer understands to mean that once the full number of the elect among the Gentiles have been gathered in to the kingdom of God then the Lord will be pleased to work mightily in salvation among the Jewish people. The natural branches will be grafted in again.

Supported by **John Murray** in his commentary:

*If we keep in mind the theme of this chapter and the sustained emphasis on the restoration of Israel, there is no other alternative than to conclude that the proposition, “all Israel shall be saved”, is to be interpreted in terms of the fullness, the receiving, the ingrafting of Israel as a people, the restoration of*

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<sup>7</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 699.

*Israel to gospel favour and blessing and the correlative turning of Israel from unbelief to faith and repentance. When the preceding verses are related to verse 26, the salvation of Israel must be conceived of on a scale that is commensurate with their trespass, their loss, their casting away, their breaking off, and their hardening, commensurate, of course, in the opposite direction. This is plainly the implication of the contrasts intimated in fullness, receiving, grafting in, and salvation. In a word, it is the salvation of the mass of Israel that the Apostle affirms.<sup>8</sup>*

### Critique

While the present writer holds to this view it has to be acknowledged that none of the views are free from difficulty. Perhaps the weakness of this position as outlined above is that it is evident from verse 12 and from verse 15 that once Israel is restored there will be even greater gospel blessing to come upon the world. It is hard to understand what that blessing will look like if the elect among the Gentiles have been gathered in and the Jews have been spiritually restored.

Iain Murray, in his book *The Puritan Hope* has a section in which he considers the Puritan treatment of Israel in Romans 11. He states that, among the Puritans, the following view was adhered to by many:

*Nothing is told us in Romans 11 of the duration of time between the calling of the Jews and the end of history. The end of this world shall not be till the Jews are called, and how long after that none can tell (Parr).<sup>9</sup>*

Parr's quotation is certainly worth pondering long and hard, but the present writer is of the view that the ingathering among Israel will occur just before the return of Christ. The language of Romans 11:25-26 is very much the language of completion. There is a finality to what Paul is speaking about – the “fullness of the Gentiles coming in”, Israel being restored and the end of the world occurring as Christ returns in power and glory. Perhaps the future blessing spoken of earlier in the chapter is the glory of the new heavens and the new earth.

By God's grace we look forward to these days of blessing in the future.

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<sup>8</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1959), 98.

<sup>9</sup> Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1971), 76.



### III. *Discussing the Text*

#### 1. Questions for Discussion

1. If we accept View 3 as being the correct understanding of Romans 11:26a and, as such, we believe that Jesus will not return until there is a significant movement spiritually among the Jews, how do we reconcile this conviction with Matthew 24:43-44?
2. No reference was made in the paper to the whole question of the land of Israel or the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. The present writer rejects the premillennial position – both historic and dispensational premillennialism – but is intrigued to know what others think about the vexed question of the land. The following quotation from R. C. Sproul might aid us in our discussion:

*I don't know what the significance of it all is. But I will tell you this, we should be watching very carefully. It is a remarkable event in history that the city of Jerusalem is now back in Jewish hands, under Jewish control. As Jesus said, Jerusalem will be trodden under foot until the fullness of the Gentiles be fulfilled (Luke 20:24). And Paul says that after the fullness of the Gentiles have come in, there will be a restoration of the Jewish nation. All of these things are put in context by Jesus when he tells his followers to watch and pray, for their salvation is drawing near'.<sup>10</sup>*

3. If your church is located in an area of the UK where the Jewish population is very small, what is the significance for you and the fellowship to which you belong of Romans 11:26?
4. Should every evangelical church in the UK give support, both prayerfully and financially, to a missionary society which is exclusively devoted to Jewish evangelism?
5. To what extent, if any, should we as evangelical Christians be involved in the ongoing debate within the UK media and society on anti-Semitism?

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<sup>10</sup> Sproul, *Romans*, 191 (footnote).

# THE BUSINESS OF HEAVEN

*Paul Mallard\**

## *Introduction*

Close to St. Mary's church in the centre of Kidderminster stands the statue of Richard Baxter. Raised in 1875, it pays tribute to his most influential book. "In a stormy and divided age, he advocated unity and comprehension pointing the way to The Everlasting Rest."<sup>1</sup>

Baxter's literary output was prestigious, but it is book about heaven which has made the greatest impact on later generations. *The Saint's Everlasting Rest* was published in 1650, though it was written four or five years earlier, when Baxter was just thirty years old. It was the product of pain:

*Whilst I was in health I had not the least thought of writing books... but when I was weakened with great bleeding, and left solitary in my chamber at Sir John Cook's, in Derbyshire, without any acquaintance but my servant about me, and was sentenced to death by the physicians, I began to contemplate more seriously on the Everlasting Rest which I apprehended myself to be just on the borders of.*<sup>2</sup>

Baxter experienced depression because of the adverse circumstances of the English Civil War and the sad divisions between Christians: "Melancholy, born of a sick body and mind tinctures it more or less throughout, and particularly some of its most characteristic passages."<sup>3</sup>

Baxter challenges us to live our lives in the light of eternity and it is difficult to read it without spiritual benefit:

*There are few with any solemn feelings of religion who can read it unmoved; the fervour and passion of its heavenly feeling, blending with scenes of glory that it depicts, the pathos of its appeals, the ardour of its descriptions, the enraptured sweetness of some of its pictures, the affection, the force of its*

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*. Abridged by John T. Wilkinson (Vancouver: Regent College Publications, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> [www.baxterianae.com/reliquiae.html](http://www.baxterianae.com/reliquiae.html), 1696, l.108.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick J. Powicke, *The Story and Significance of Rev. Richard Baxter's "Saints' Everlasting Rest"*, 1920.

*eloquence... all render it one of the most impressive treatises which have descended to us from the seventeenth century.*<sup>4</sup>

It is certainly an emphasis which needs to be rediscovered in the twenty-first century, in which the concept of heaven is dismissed as an intoxicant designed to enslave the masses – “the opium of the people”.<sup>5</sup> The secular miasma that surrounds us today is chilling to any thoughts of heaven.

Even to one without religious commitment and theological convictions, it should be an unsettling thought that this world is attempting to chart its way through some of the most perilous waters of history, having now decided to ignore what was for nearly two millennia its fixed point of reference – its North Star. The certainty of judgement, the longing for heaven, the dread of hell: these are not prominent considerations in our modern discourse about important matters of life. But they once were.<sup>6</sup>

Liberal theology is dismissive:

*The concept of a Christ who pre-existed as a heavenly being, and the corresponding concept of man's own transition to a heavenly world of light, in which the self is destined to receive a celestial vesture, a spiritual body, are not merely inapprehensible by any rational process, they are totally meaningless.*<sup>7</sup>

This “eclipse of heaven” is a mark of contemporary Christianity:

Though few churchmen explicitly repudiate belief in a future life, the virtual absence of references to it in modern hymns, prayers and popular apologetic indicates how little part it plays in the contemporary Christian consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

Even though the Bible says more about heaven than hell, William Shedd's *Dogmatic Theology* contains 87 pages on hell and two on heaven.<sup>9</sup> Shedd is not atypical.

On the fringes of the evangelical world there is a fascination with post-death experiences and accounts of heavenly visits. However, we are right to be suspicious of such reports which lack Paul's reticence when describing his visit to the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2-4).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Tulloch, *English Puritanism and its Leaders* (Wentworth Press, 2016), 331.

<sup>5</sup> A. M. McKinnon, “Reading ‘Opium of the People’: Expression, Protest and the Dialectics of Religion”, *Critical Sociology*, vol 31, no. 1-2, 2005, 15-38.

<sup>6</sup> A. J. Conyers, *The Eclipse of Heaven* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Miegge, *Gospel Myth in the Thought of Rudolf Bultmann* (10, 94).

<sup>8</sup> *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Alan Richardson and John Bowden (eds.) (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), 146.

<sup>9</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (P&R, 1888), 882-883.

<sup>10</sup> For a rebuttal of these experiences see John F. MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1996), 13-51.

The aim of this paper is to explore what the Bible teaches about the nature of our heavenly life. Paul reminds us that “no eye has seen, and no ear has heard, and no human mind has conceived the things God has prepared for those who love him”, so we should approach with caution. However, Paul goes on to assure us that “these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit” (1 Cor 3:9-10).

We have a joyful duty to explore what God has revealed: “It has pleased our Father to open his counsel, and to let us know the very intent of his heart, to acquaint us with the eternal intent of his love.”<sup>11</sup> Leon Morris reminds us, “Men cannot raise themselves to heaven and penetrate divine mysteries... Jesus, however, really has been in heaven and he has brought heavenly realities to earth.”<sup>12</sup>

Contemplating the business of heaven is necessary for our spiritual health. Jonathan Edwards asserts:

*It becomes us to spend this life only as a journey towards heaven... to which we should subordinate all other concerns of life. Why should we labour for or set our hearts on anything else, but that which is our proper end and true happiness?*<sup>13</sup>

Number 22 of Edward’s personal resolutions, framed in his twenties, reads:

*Resolved, to endeavour to obtain for myself as much happiness, in the other world, as I possibly can, with all the power, might, vigour, and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of.*<sup>14</sup>

Here is a man who is serious about the business of heaven. As Baxter himself says, “There is nothing else worth setting our hearts on.”<sup>15</sup>

### *I. Conflicting Emphases*

The older theologians, like Baxter and the Puritans and those influenced by their theology, such as Jonathan Edwards and Charles Spurgeon, emphasise the vision of God as the central attraction of heaven. This conception of the “beatific vision” as the highest good has pre-Reformation roots.<sup>16</sup> From

<sup>11</sup> Richard Baxter, *Practical Works XXII*, Ulan Press, 2016, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 232-234.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Basic Writings* (New York: New American Library, 1966), 142.

<sup>14</sup> JonathanEdwards.com, <http://www.jonathanedwards.com/text/Personal/resolution.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Baxter, *The Saint’s Everlasting Rest*, 121.

<sup>16</sup> See Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018) and Michael Allen, *Grounded in Heaven*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

earliest times people saw the hereafter in terms of God himself: our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him. This emphasis does not deny the resurrection of the body or the reality of the new creation, but it focuses on the vision of God and the fellowship which flows from this as the fundamental glory of heaven.

However, another emphasis has emerged. Within the stream of Dutch Calvinism which springs from Abraham Kuyper there has been a suspicion of the otherworldliness often associated with the “beatific vision”. Kuyper’s famous dictum, “There is not a square inch of our human existence of which Christ cannot say it is mine”<sup>17</sup>, has given birth to a strong emphasis on the cultural mandate. Less attention is paid to the inner movements of the heart and more on our engagement with political, economic and cultural affairs; we need to shift our attention from heavenly to earthly concerns. The beatific vision no longer fits in with the broader framework of our lives – modernity is loath to accept that our ultimate goal lies outside of this world.

Herman Bavinck, for example, argues that we will carry our cultural achievements over into the next world and will engage in social and cultural endeavours of various kinds. A. A. Hoekema dismisses the idea that we will “...spend eternity somewhere off in space, wearing white robes, plucking harps, singing songs and flitting from cloud to cloud as we are doing it”.<sup>18</sup>

This newer emphasis has been popularised by N. T. Wright: Our hope should be focused on this world and its redemption. He dismisses the “blatant Platonism” of a hymn like “Abide with me”<sup>19</sup>: “Heaven’s morning breaks and earth’s vain shadows flee...” We need a complete re-orientation of our eschatology so that it is “this worldly” in its concerns. This will reshape our mission.

In his book “A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology”, J. Richard Middleton launches a polemic against any “otherworldly hope”: “Although there many New Testament texts that Christians often read as if they teach a heavenly destiny, the texts do not actually teach this.”<sup>20</sup> We must dismiss the idea that the “final destiny of the faithful is an unending worship service of perpetual praise in God’s immediate presence in another world”.<sup>21</sup>

There is much to be commended in this emphasis. The picture of heaven as a place of eternal disembodied hymn singing is an unhelpful caricature. We want, quite rightly, to affirm the goodness of the creation and the continuity

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<sup>17</sup> “Sphere Sovereignty” in *Abraham Kuyper, A Centennial Reader*, James D. Bratt, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

<sup>18</sup> A. A. Hoekema, *The Bible and The Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 274.

<sup>19</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2011), 28.

<sup>20</sup> Richard J. Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2014), 14.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

between activities of this world and the next. The original cultural mandate lost by Adam and restored by Christ, becomes the focal point.

However, it seems to me that it is an over-reaction, which reduces heaven to human proportions. In his book “Grounded in Heaven: Recentring Christian Hope and Life in God”<sup>22</sup>, Michael Allen presents a more nuanced and, I would argue, more biblically balanced view. He argues that the “this worldly” emphasis of Wright and Middleton “... minimizes or mocks the heavenly, the beatific, the liturgical, and especially anything they might deem Platonic”.<sup>23</sup>

Their emphasis has come to “tar and feather the classic tradition, accusing it of having lapsed into middle Platonic dualism”.<sup>24</sup> He goes on to argue that “[w]e need to be wary, therefore, of unwittingly falling into eschatological naturalism that speaks of God’s instrumentality (as a means to, or instigator of, an end) but fails to confess communion with God as our one true end (in whom alone any other things are to be enjoyed)”.<sup>25</sup> And again, “we must recognize that God is not only the cause but also the centre of the Christian hope”.<sup>26</sup>

In the final analysis, we do not need to make a choice between fulfilling the cultural mandate and seeing and knowing God. In the Garden of Eden Adam both tended the garden and walked with the Lord; there was no conflict between the two.

Ray Ortlund puts it like this:

*How big is your hope? Is the wingspan of your hope big enough to get you soaring? Is your hope big enough, imaginative enough, with wolves and lambs and lions thrown in for good measure? Hope on this grand scale – this is the gospel. It is big. It offers both the prospect of personal intimacy with God forever and a renewed world of peace and righteousness. It is not just one or the other. God has a plan for you and for this whole world. The Lord Jesus Christ died for this, and he will not be denied.*<sup>27</sup>

In the next section we will investigate the location of the heavenly life. In the two sections which follow we will explore the nature and the activities of this life. We will then examine what the Bible sees as the primary business of heaven – the enjoyment of God. The final section will deal with the practical and pastoral implications of our study.

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Allen, *Grounded in Heaven*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *Preaching the Word: Isaiah: God Saves Sinners* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 445.

## II. *The Location of Heaven*

The Hebrew word *shamayim* and the Greek *ouranos* are both used in three fundamental ways.<sup>28</sup>

1. The “atmospheric heaven” refers to the sky or blanket of air which surrounds the earth (Deut 28:12; Ps 147:8 Isa 55:9-11; Job 38:29).

2. The “celestial heavens” are the sphere in which the sun, moon and stars appear (Gen 1:14; Ps 19:1-6; Isa 39:12).

3. The “heaven of heavens” is the dwelling place of God. It is his habitation (Isa 57:15; 63:15; Matt 5:16), where his throne is located (Matt 5:34) and to where our prayers are directed (Matt 6:9). Jesus descended from heaven and returned there in his resurrected body (Luke 9:51; John 6:33-51; Acts 1:11; Eph 4:7-16; 1 Cor 2:9).<sup>29</sup> It is the present abode of the disembodied saints who have died in Christ (Heb 12:23).

In the future, God’s throne room will descend to earth and heaven and earth will be united in a new creation (Rev 21:1-4). Our eternal destiny is located here. Without minimising the gravity of sin, we should emphasise its continuity with the present creation. Revelation 21:1-4 is not describing *creatio ex nihilo* but re-creation and restoration – it is this current universe, but radically and splendidly different.

Edward Thurneysen describes it like this:

*The world into which we shall enter in the Parousia of Christ is therefore not another world; it is this world, this heaven, this earth; both, however, passed away and renewed. It is these forests, these fields, these cities, these streets, these people, that will be the scene of redemption. At the present they are battlefields, full of the strife and sorrow of the not yet accomplished consummation; then they will be fields of victory, fields of harvest, where out of seed that was sown with tears the everlasting sheaves will be reaped and brought home.*<sup>30</sup>

Berkouwer commends his statement: “Better the extreme concreteness of Thurneysen than the dualistic spiritualization of the expectation, which is foreign to the works of God and wraps the future in impenetrable darkness.”<sup>31</sup>

The next world is not a strange and futuristic fantasy, but a wonderfully recognisable home. R. L. Dabney puts it like this:

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<sup>28</sup> Wilbur Smith, *The Biblical Doctrine of Heaven*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 27-76.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 123-142.

<sup>30</sup> “Christus und seine Zukunft” (Zwischen den Zeiten, IX 1931), quoted in J. A. Schep, *The Nature of the Resurrection Body* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 218-219.

<sup>31</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 232.

*This conclusion gives us a noble view of the immutability of God's purposes of grace and the glory of his victory over sin and Satan. The planet was fashioned to be man's heritage; and a part of it, at least, adorned with the beauties of a paradise, for his home. Satan sought to mar the divine plan, by the seduction of our first parents. For long ages he seemed to triumph and has filled his usurped dominion with crime and misery. But this insolent invasion is not destined to obscure the Almighty's beneficent design... Messiah will come and re-establish his throne in the midst of his scarred and ravaged realm; he will cleanse away every stain of sin and death, and make the earth bloom forever with more than its pristine splendour; so that the very plan which was initiated when "the morning stars sang together and the sons of the morning shouted for joy", will stand to everlasting ages.<sup>32</sup>*

And listen to John Piper:

*What happens to our bodies and what happens to the creation go together. And what happens to our bodies is not annihilation but redemption... Our bodies will be redeemed, restored, made new, not thrown away. And then so it will be with the heavenlies and the earth.<sup>33</sup>*

In what way will this new creation be different from the present creation?

# 1. Heaven and Earth Will Be United

In Revelation 21:2-3, John describes the descent of the new Jerusalem: Earth becomes the place where God has his kingly throne; the new creation becomes the temple where God dwells (Rev 21:22-23).

In Eden, Adam walked with God in the cool of the day. Sin led to banishment from God's presence (Gen 3:8, 23-24). The harmony of heaven and earth were destroyed. In the new creation this separation comes to an end. Christ, the last Adam, reigns on this earth uniting everything under his rule:

*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Col 1:19-20).*

And again,

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<sup>32</sup> Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reprint Edition, 1972), 852.

<sup>33</sup> John Piper, *Future Grace* (Sisters: Multnomah Press, 1995), 394-395.



*With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (Eph 1:8-10).*

The work of Christ is not just to save a few individuals, but to redeem the entire cosmos!<sup>34</sup>

The Bible teaches that the future is not an immaterial “paradise” but a new heaven and a new earth. In Revelation 21, we do not see human beings being taken out of this world into heaven, but rather heaven coming down and cleansing, renewing and perfecting this material world.<sup>35</sup>

## 2. The Curse Will Be Removed

The second great difference is the absence of the curse: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev 21:4; 22:3). Everything that currently mars God’s good creation is banished forever. There is no more pain, disease or sickness. Believers may have come out of great tribulation but,

*Never again will they hunger;  
never again will they thirst.  
The sun will not beat down on them,  
nor any scorching heat (Rev 7:16).*

In his earthly ministry Jesus stood toe-to-toe with disease, the disruption of the created order and death itself. In each case he prevailed and conquered. This was intended to be a temporary foretaste of the perfections of the eternal state, with the removal of all pain – physical, emotional, relational and spiritual – forever:

*And doubtless there is not such a thing as grief and sorrow known there. Nor is there such a thing as a pale face, a languid body, feeble joints, unable infancy, decrepit age, peccant humours, dolorous sickness, griping fears,*

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<sup>34</sup> Anthony Hoekema argues that the Old Testament prophecies that speak of a restored creation are referring to the eternal state, not an earthly millennium. Premillennialists point to these prophecies as justification for their prophetic scheme. Hoekema argues that they are correct when they say that such passages as Isaiah 2:1-4; 65:17-25 cannot be so spiritualised that they are made to refer to somewhere off in space with no connection with this world. They clearly contain symbolic features, but once we realise that the eternal realm involves the renewal of this earth, they can readily be applied to this rather than a temporary millennial reign. See A. A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1964), 201-212, 274-287.

<sup>35</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 32.

*consuming cares nor whatsoever deserves the name of evil. Indeed, a gale of groans and sighs, a steam of tears accompanied us to the very gates, and there bid us farewell forever.*<sup>36</sup>

Richard Bauckman makes the point that it is not simply the return to Eden, but a completion of the unfinished work of God: "Salvation is both restorative (repairing the damage done by sin) and progressive (moving the work of creation on to its completion)."<sup>37</sup>

### III. *The Nature of the Heavenly Life*

The heavenly life is marked out by several characteristics:

#### 1. It is a Bodily Life

In the popular imagination, heaven is of a non-corporeal, dream-like existence:

*Our redeemed spirits can live in a spiritual realm like heaven. Therefore, the life we know now as spiritual reality will continue in heaven, but we shall not need or desire the things associated with our present physical bodies, simply because we shall not possess bodies in heaven.*<sup>38</sup>

Such a view owes more to Platonic philosophy than biblical revelation. Plato vilified the body as the prison cell which entombed the mind. Liberation involved escaping from the tomb. This is why the intelligentsia of Athens sneered when Paul preached the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 17:32).

The biblical view is very different. According to Genesis 2:7, man is a combination of the physical ("the dust of the ground") and the non-physical ("the breath of life"). These two components are diverse in origin but form one organic unit without disharmony or conflict. We are indisputably material beings. There is nothing despicable or sinful or degrading about matter or the body.

Death occurs when the unity of the body and soul/spirit is temporarily disrupted. The intermediate state involves the ongoing conscious existence of the soul/spirit while the body "sleeps", awaiting resurrection (1 Thess 3:13; 4:14,16). In 2 Corinthians 5:1-7 Paul speaks of the frailty of the human body or "earthly tent" (5:1,4). His longing is not to escape from the body, but to be

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<sup>36</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 39.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Bauckman, "First Steps to a Theology of Nature", *Evangelical Quarterly* 58.3 (1986), 240.

<sup>38</sup> Arthur E. Travis, *Where on Earth is Heaven?* (Nashville: Boardman, 1974), 16.

clothed with his new body (5:4). Being unclothed or bodiless is not natural and Paul shrinks from it.

Paul's frankness about the undesirability of nakedness may have been conditioned by the romanticism associated with super-spirituality arising from over-realized eschatology in Corinth. Nonetheless, there is also a sober balance. While the general resurrection of the believer is a joyful prospect, death itself is viewed ambivalently. Paul's words realistically reflect the tension.<sup>39</sup>

The ultimate Christian hope is the resurrection of the dead, not the immortality of the soul. The business of heaven requires a resurrection body. John Murray warns, "...whenever the focus of interest and emphasis becomes the immortality of the soul, then there is a grave deflection from the biblical doctrine of immortal life and bliss." Glorification, he adds,

*... is not the vague sentimentality and idealism so characteristic of those whose interest is merely in the immortality of the soul. Here we have the concreteness and realism of the Christian hope epitomized in the resurrection to life everlasting and signalized by the descent of Christ from heaven with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God.<sup>40</sup>*

When Christ returns, he will bring all his saints with him (1 Thess 3:13; Jude 14). Their bodies will be raised from the ground and the bodies of living saints will be transformed and all God's people will meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess 4:16-17). Although it is perfectly natural for believers to desire to depart and be with Christ at death (Phil 1:21-26), this is not their ultimate hope.

What will be the nature of the resurrected body? The best place to begin is with Christ. His resurrection is the pledge and guarantee of our own resurrection (John 14:19). It is also the foretaste of our resurrection. It is not just that he is alive; he is alive in a particular way. It was

*not merely a great event upon the plane of history, but an act that breaks into history with the powers of another world. It is akin to the creation in the beginning; and the Gospel is the good news that God is creating a new world.<sup>41</sup>*

His resurrected body had three characteristics: Firstly, it was a real body. The disciples were able to grasp his feet (Matt 28:9), to see him and to touch him

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<sup>39</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 263.

<sup>40</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 180-181.

<sup>41</sup> A. M. Ramsay, quoted in Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 31.

(Luke 24:36-40). As a final confirmation he ate a piece of broiled fish (Luke 24:41-43).

Secondly, it was the same body in which he had lived and died. There was a recognisable continuity between his earthly body and his risen body. This explains the significance of the empty tomb (John 20:2-7). The body had not somehow dissipated or disappeared – it had risen. To confirm this, he showed them his scars (Luke 14:39) and invited them to touch his wounds (John 20:24-28).

Finally, it was a transformed body. It was not like the body of Lazarus, who rose only to die again. He did not simply come back from the dead – his new body had new properties and possibilities. He could suddenly appear (John 20:19,24) or disappear (Luke 24:36). In this body he was able to ascend to heaven (Acts 1:9). His resurrection body is the template for the resurrection bodies of his people:

*But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Phil 3:20-21).*

Paul emphasises this in 1 Corinthians 15: “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (15:20). We would therefore expect that the three characteristics of Jesus’ resurrection body identified above will also mark out our resurrection bodies.

For believers there will inevitably be a radical discontinuity between our current experience and our future hope. Resurrection is more than the resuscitation of a dead corpse and the new creation will be purged by fire:

*In its present fallen condition, this body cannot withstand the glory of the heavenly city; it must be glorified, as Christ’s body was, in order to participate in the age to come. Flesh and blood in its present, fallen condition cannot endure the joys of Zion... We cannot imagine the glory of our future existence, but we can look to Christ as our forerunner.<sup>42</sup>*

Paul describes the nature of the resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15:39-41. Without denying the continuity between our current bodies and our resurrection body, Paul shows the radical discontinuity between the two by making a series of contrasts:

*The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body (15:42b-44).*

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 916.

Firstly, our present bodies are marked by corruption – they are “perishable”. Because of the curse we carry the seeds of decay and death within us from the moment of conception. The resurrection body is incorruptible. It will never again be touched by decay, disease or death.

Secondly, our current bodies are “dishonourable”. They are marked by sin and unrighteousness. They fail to come close to God’s glory. But the new body will be marked by glory and partakes of the divine nature (John 17:24; 2 Pet 1:4).

Thirdly, the present body is marked by “weakness”. In all our activities we are aware of our human frailty and limitations. Like Paul we know that we have the treasure of the gospel in earthen vessels (2 Cor 4:7). The resurrection body is characterised by “power”. All decay and frustration are gone forever.

Finally, the “natural body” (*soma psychikon*) will be replaced with the “spiritual body” (*soma pneumatikon*). On the surface this may appear to suggest that the resurrection body will be incorporeal, composed of “spirit” rather than “flesh”. However, this would be to misunderstand Paul’s meaning. Paul has already used the terms “natural” and “spiritual” in 1 Corinthians 2:14-15:

*The psychikos person belongs to the present age and is susceptible to temptation. The pneumatikos person here is not a non-material being, but one who is guided by the Holy Spirit. The future resurrection body will also be animated and empowered by the Spirit. Christ’s resurrection body was directed by the Spirit (2 Cor 3:17). The same will be true of our resurrection bodies. As a result of this they will be no longer vulnerable to temptation.*<sup>43</sup>

This transformation is necessary if man is to experience and enjoy the full expression of the future life. This is because “...flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (1 Cor 15:50). To continue into God’s holy and glorious kingdom in our present weak bodies would be horrendous. This change is therefore necessary and will be experienced by all believers (1 Cor 15:51-54).

In summary:

*Resurrection is not the mere resuscitation of a corpse, returning to the same state as before. It is a far greater in kind. So “we look for the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come”. No wonder the early church prayed standing and facing the east, the direction from which Christ was to return, in eager anticipation.*<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See J. A. Schep, *The Nature of the Resurrection Body* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), chapter 6; Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (Lutterworth, 1963), 537-551; Richard B. Gaffin Jr, *The Centrality of the Resurrection: A Study in Pauline Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 78-92.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 865.

## 2. It is a Morally Perfect Life

If the resurrected body is free from the physical and psychological limitations of its current experience, it is also free from the power and the presence of sin. Justified believers still face the daily battle with indwelling sin in this life (Gal 5:17). The acts of the flesh manifest themselves in our lives and in our churches (Gal 5:19-21), causing the most acute pain and sorrow. We feel deeply the waywardness of our hearts and are often worn down by the daily battle with sin.

One of the great joys of heaven is the perfection of our moral nature so that not only will we never sin again, but we will find it impossible to sin. The church will be glorious without spot and wrinkle (Eph 5:27), clothed in fine linen (Rev 19:8) and delivered from the bondage of sin (Rom 8:21).

The freedom of heaven, then, is the freedom from sin: not that the believer just happens to be free from sin, but that he is so constituted or reconstituted that he cannot sin. He does not want to sin, and he does not want to want to sin.<sup>45</sup>

Jonathan Edwards puts it like this:

*Even the very best of men, are, on earth, imperfect. But it is not so in heaven. There shall be no pollution or deformity or offensive defect of any kind, seen in any person or thing; but everyone shall be perfectly pure, and perfectly lovely in heaven.*<sup>46</sup>

And Edward Donnelly expresses it this way:

*Never again will we break God's commandments. Never again will we fail our Saviour or cause pain to anyone. Never again will we have to beg for forgiveness. God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom 8:29)*<sup>47</sup>.

The last phrase reminds us that the ultimate purpose of God is not just the removal of sin, but also our transformation into the likeness of Christ. To be human is to be made in the image of God. It underpins all that is distinctively human. The image has been damaged but not destroyed by the fall. Jesus alone is the full and perfect image and likeness of God. Sanctification is the process by which God restores the marred image in man after the likeness of Christ, who is the mirror of our true humanity (Rom 8:29; Eph 4:23,24; 2 Cor 3:18). He is the firstfruits of his people who are joined to him by faith.

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<sup>45</sup> Paul Helm, *The Last Things* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1989), 92.

<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Heaven: A World of Love* (Amityville: Calvary Press, 1999), 16.

<sup>47</sup> Edward Donnelly, *Heaven and Hell* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001), 99.

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes puts it like this:

*This process of transformation into the image of Christ is none other than the restoration of the image of God which was marred through the fall of man... Indeed, as Calvin explains, the design of the gospel is precisely this, that the image of God, which has been defaced by sin, may be repaired within us.*<sup>48</sup>

John Howe emphasises the positive aspects of this transformation:

*Now the soul will be equally disposed to every holy exercise that shall be suitable to its state... There will be no remaining blindness of mind, nor error of judgement... 'Tis culminated glory, glory, added to glory. 'Tis growing progressive glory, we are changed into the same image from glory to glory.*<sup>49</sup>

When he returns and we see him we will be like him. A. J. Gossip refers to Principal Rainy's ringing challenge at a communion service in Edinburgh:

*Do you believe your faith? Do you believe this I am telling you? Do you believe that the day is coming, really coming, when you will stand before the throne of God, and the angels will whisper together and say, "How like Christ he is?" That is not easy to believe. And yet not to believe is blasphemy. For that, not less than that, is what Christ promises.*<sup>50</sup>

### 3. It is a Social Life

A popular concept of heaven is of solitary communion between the soul and Christ. However, it is clear from Scripture that although the experience of heaven is intensely personal, it is not private. John sees a great crowd that no one can count gathered from all the nations (Rev 7:9). The emphasis is always on the Church, the Bride for which Christ died and for whom he is preparing an eternal home. There will be one flock (John 10:16; 17:21), and one church of the firstborn (Heb 12:22-23). We will meet the Lord together (1 Thess 4:17). For those who feel acutely the sting of bereavement and separation, there is the promise of reunion with those of our loved ones who have died in Christ – we are to comfort each other with this prospect (1 Thess 4:13-18).

One of the most popular images used to describe heaven is the feast or banquet (Matt 26:29-30; Luke 14:15; Rev 19:9). Most commentators explain this in metaphorical terms and deny the necessity of eating food in the new

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<sup>48</sup> Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> John Howe, *The Blessedness of the Righteous Opened*. Works, London, 1832, 213.

<sup>50</sup> A. J. Gossip, *From the Edge of the Crowd* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), 12.

creation. This may be the case, but we should not be overly dogmatic. In his resurrection body Jesus ate a piece of fish (Luke 24:41) and prepared breakfast for his disciples (John 21:1-14). This suggests the possibility that one of the joys of heaven will be feasting with God's people. Eating and drinking are not just functional. They are a source of great pleasure and an opportunity for corporate celebration.

One of the principal attractions of this eternal fellowship is that all division and disunity is ended. Disunity among Christians deeply grieved Baxter; the prospect of the cloudless love between all God's people thrilled his heart:

*O sweet, O happy day of the Rest of the Saints in glory! When, as there is one God, one Christ, one Spirit, so we shall have one judgement, one Heart, one Church, one Imployment for ever.*<sup>51</sup>

Baxter looks forward to a time when "There is no discipline erected by state policy, nor any disordered popular rule: no government but that of Christ..."<sup>52</sup> This will be a time of social equality and corporate joy:

*The poor man shall no more be tired with his incessant labours... no stooping of the servant to the master, or tenant to the landlord: no hunger, or cold, or nakedness... no parting of friends asunder, nor voice of lamentation heard in our dwellings... Then shall the ransomed of the Lord return and come to Sion with songs, and everlasting joy will be on their heads: they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*<sup>53</sup>

Will we know each other in heaven? Most theologians give a positive answer to this question. Christ's disciples recognised him in the upper room (Luke 24:36-39) and on the shore (John 21:1-14). J. C. Ryle argues that there would be no comfort in the words of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18 if we do not recognise each other in heaven.<sup>54</sup>

Listen to Baxter again:

*Surely there shall no knowledge cease which now we have, but only that which implieth our imperfection; and what imperfection can this imply?... Nor is it only our old acquaintance, but all the saints of all the ages, whose faces in the flesh we never saw, whom we shall there both know and comfortably enjoy.*<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 7.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-81.

<sup>54</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Heaven* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2000), 34-35.

<sup>55</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 66.



How can we be happy when some of those we love will not be with us in heaven? It may be argued that in heaven we will not know of the existence of hell. However, this suggests an ignorance which the Bible does not teach. Jim Packer argues that because we will be transformed into the likeness of Christ, we will rejoice in the justice of God.

*God will judge justly, and angels and saints and martyrs will praise him for it. So, it seems inescapable that we shall, with them, approve the judgment of persons – of rebels – whom we have known and loved.*<sup>56</sup>

The martyrs cry out for justice (Rev 6:9-11). In heaven we will share their passion not for revenge but for the glory of God. Our salvation will be a cause of eternal gratitude:

*They shall see the dreadful miseries of the damned, and consider that they deserved the same misery, and that it was sovereign grace and nothing else, which made them so much differ from the damned.*<sup>57</sup>

Beyond this we can be sure that he will wipe away all our tears (Rev 21:4).

Will there be gender in heaven? Once again this is not a matter about which we can be dogmatic. We will be like the angels (Matt 22:30), but this does not necessarily mean that we will be genderless. John Frame argues that broad biblical principles lead in the direction of affirming the immutability of gender. Those who appear after death are similar in form to their earthly bodies (e.g., 1 Sam 28:11-15; Matt 17:1-3). Jesus' resurrection body continued to be masculine. Sexuality is part of the image of God and is fundamental to our identity as human beings.<sup>58</sup>

Will there be marriage in heaven? Married couples are heirs together of life (1 Pet 3:7). However, although there may be gender in heaven, it is clear that the marriage bond will cease. Jesus affirmed this: "At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven" (Matt 22:30). Like weeping and rejoicing, it is one of those things which is passing away (1 Cor 7:29-31). Because there is no marriage there will be no sexual intercourse. There is no need for procreation in heaven. God has always confined sexual intimacy to the marriage covenant. Once marriage ceases there is no context in which this would be needed or, indeed, appropriate.

John Frame expresses it like this:

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<sup>56</sup> J. I. Packer, "Hell's Enigma", Christianity Today, April 2002, 84.

<sup>57</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "The End of the Wicked Contemplated by the Righteous", The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 207-212.

<sup>58</sup> John Frame, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 232.

*Our earthly families will be transcended by the worldwide family of God. But doubtless the new creation is not a time of lesser intimacy, but of greater intimacy with God and with other members of his body... I don't know what will replace sexual pleasure, but I know that our intimacy with God and one another will be something greater and better than anything we know and enjoy on this earth – as everything will be.<sup>59</sup>*

#### IV. *The Activities of our Heavenly Life*

What will we do in heaven? What will be the actual business of heaven? Heaven is described as a place of rest and this is the image which is incorporated in the title of Baxter's book. In this life we experience the crushing cares of responsibility, temptation and pain. The kind of frustration described in the book of Ecclesiastes is our common lot; life is often remorseless, exasperating and wearisome: "What more welcome news to men under public calamities, unpleasing employments, plunderings, losses, sad tidings – which is common case – than this of Rest?"<sup>60</sup> Christians are also engaged in vicious conflict, instigated by a relentless and malicious foe. The rest of heaven means that we know an end to such trials and troubles: "No flesh to crucify. No pain to face. No malice to fear."<sup>61</sup>

More than that, we will share in God's Sabbath of delight (Isa 58:13). Just as God delights in his Son and in his completed creation, we will eternally delight in Christ and in the glories of the new creation. However, we should not think of rest as inactivity. In the new creation the original creation mandate (Gen 1:28) is re-issued and resumed. In our resurrected bodies we will engage in physical, intellectual, creative and cultural pursuits:

*Paradise is no mere seminary where Adam and Eve whiled away the hours in theological discussion. I'm sure they did that, and they did it with more relish than any of my students. But Eden offered scope for art, science and technology as well as theology. The same will doubtless be true in the world to come.<sup>62</sup>*

Therefore, the eternal rest, "no more excludes all action and activity in the age to come than it does in the present dispensation".<sup>63</sup> The rest is not the cessation of activities, but the experience of reaching a goal that is crucially important to us. The Promised Land was the typological place of rest for Israel (Heb 3:11,18). It was a place of satisfaction but also of joyful and fruitful

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<sup>59</sup> John Frame, *Systematic Theology*, (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2013), 1079.

<sup>60</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 27.

<sup>61</sup> Donald Macleod, *A Faith to Live By* (Fearn: Mentor, 2010), 309.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>63</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 727.

labour. Wilbur Smith expresses it like this: "In heaven we will be permitted to finish those worthy tasks which we had dreamed to do while on earth but which neither time nor strength nor ability allowed us to achieve."<sup>64</sup>

Heaven is not static. Perhaps we will develop new skills unknown to us in the present dispensation. These may include musical, artistic, technological or intellectual abilities which are as yet unrealised. The cultural mandate involves reigning over this new creation with Christ and discovering its secrets and its beauties. Our supreme joy is in God, but this does not exclude rejoicing in the glories of his creation and gladly employing his gifts to tame and serve it.

If there is development, this suggests that we will experience time in heaven. Since our existence there will be physical it will also be temporal. A physical body demands a time-space existence. Times and seasons will exist, and one event will follow another (Rev 21:24-26; 22:2). There will therefore be opportunities to grow and develop and to see old projects completed and new projects begun.

When it comes to intellectual development, Jonathan Edwards is clear; after millions of years, the saints' ideas

*...shall be a million more in number than when they first entered into heaven, as is evident, because by supposition the number of such ages will be a million times more in number; therefore, their knowledge will increase to eternity.*<sup>65</sup>

It is no great surprise that Edwards, the intellectual giant, thinks in terms of a growth in knowledge. We are justified in applying the principle to less cerebral aspects of our human nature:

*Bearing the image of the heavenly, we shall explore, colonise, serve, keep and enhance our magnificent environment... It will challenge our intellects, fire our imaginations and stimulate our industry... With energy, dexterity and athleticism here undreamed of, we shall explore horizons beyond our wildest dreams.*<sup>66</sup>

So, we will continue to work, but it will be a work which is free from toil and fatigue; work in which we take great delight and find satisfaction and fulfilment.<sup>67</sup> The original cultural mandate is finally realised:

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<sup>64</sup> Smith, *The Biblical Doctrine of Heaven*, 195.

<sup>65</sup> Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* vol.2, 618.

<sup>66</sup> Macleod, *A Faith to Live By*, 308.

<sup>67</sup> David Gregg, *The Heaven-Life*, (New York, 1895), 62ff.

*With the curse of sin gone, the apocalypses past, surely human beings will become active stewards of the Lord in completing or extending the universe of things and ideas. The whole creation groans, said Paul, awaiting human redemption. Civilization is not old: it has barely begun.*<sup>68</sup>

The ultimate calling of the church, Christ's bride, is to reign with her royal husband for eternity (Rev 22:5). This is the fulfilment of the original creation mandate. In a creation which has been wholly redeemed and is wholly new, we will sit with Christ as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Jesus speaks of reigning over cities (Luke 19:17,19). If we endure, we will reign with him (2 Tim 2:12) and will even judge angels (1 Cor 6:2-3): "Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Rom 8:17).

It is in this context that we should address the issue of rewards. There are no degrees in justification, as is clearly seen in Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-6). The dying thief entered into a full enjoyment of this inheritance (Luke 23:39-43). Eternal life is promised to all who believe, and this is unequivocal (John 3:16; Rom 2:7).

However, there seems to be no doubt that there will be rewards for believers. Some have questioned this on philosophical grounds. Immanuel Kant's ethical theory argues that an act can only be considered moral if its motivation is the moral rectitude of the act itself without the incentive of a reward. But this is clearly contradicted by the plain teaching of the Bible which often motivates our good works by the promise of reward. This is one of the principal themes in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:3-13; 6:1-18; c.f. Matt 10:41-42; 16:27; 19:29). The desires for treasure in heaven affects our hearts now:

*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matt 6:19-21).*

Paul warns that our service must be conducted with the right materials:

*If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a*

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<sup>68</sup> Arthur O. Roberts, *Exploring Heaven* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 148.

*reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved – even though only as one escaping through the flames (1 Cor 3:12-15).*

A desire for rewards motivated his service:

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing (2 Tim 4:7-8).*

Jesus uses the promise of rewards to encourage his church to endure persecution and not be seduced by the enticements of the world or false doctrine (Rev 2:10, 26; 3:11, 21; 4:10; 5:9-10).

Some rewards are promised to all faithful believers:

*“Truly I tell you”, Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – along with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30).*

One of the greatest rewards enjoyed by all God’s people is what Tom Barnes calls “reputational transformation”:<sup>69</sup> “Someday it will be revealed who Christians truly are... the world will no longer look upon the saints as the scum of the world, those to be pitied or as a threat.”<sup>70</sup> The cry for vindication will be answered (Rev 6:9-11). This vindication is a motivation for faithfully following a Saviour who was despised and rejected by men. God vindicated his Son, and he will vindicate the saints.

However, there also appear to be degrees of reward, as is seen in the parables of the minas or pounds (Luke 19:12-15). How are we to understand this?

Every believer is promised a life which is full of happiness, joy and satisfaction. There is no sin in heaven, so there can be no envy or jealousy or covetousness. Members of Christ’s body will not feel cheated, inadequate or undervalued. The works for which the rewards are awarded are no indication of earned merit but are the effects of God’s gracious work in us (Phil 2:13).

Augustine explained it thus: “God crowns not our merits, but his own gifts. The reward is given not for our merits, but to the recompense of grace previously bestowed.”<sup>71</sup> The rewards are associated with our labours for the

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<sup>69</sup> Tom Barnes, *Living in Hope of Future Glory* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2006), 211-224.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>71</sup> Cited in John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol II, Book 5, Section 2.

gospel. So, for those who are faithful shepherds of the flock Peter gives this encouragement: "...when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away" (1 Pet 5:4).

We may distinguish *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* rewards: "A parent may offer a reward for practicing the piano (an extrinsic reward), while the intrinsic reward is learning to play the instrument."<sup>72</sup>

The reward here is a good secondary motivation which supports the primary goal of pleasing our Saviour. Gratitude and hope combine to motivate sacrificial service. Heaven is defined as communion with Christ (1 Thess 4:17). The rewards may be understood in terms of closer communion with him – the difference in the rewards may lie not in external or objective circumstances, but in the subjective awareness and comprehension of these objective blessings.

## V. *The Consummation of our Heavenly Life*

### 1. The Consuming Desire of the Heart

In the Bible the consummation of our heavenly delight is the vision of God and the worship which flows from this. God is not only the cause of our hope – he is its centre and heartbeat. Allen criticises those who teach that "...God's sovereignty brings about that kingdom but then seemingly slides off stage-right upon its culmination".<sup>73</sup> Human beings were created for God and the desire to see and know and enjoy him is deeply embedded in our human nature: "I was created to see thee, and not yet have I done that for which I was made."<sup>74</sup>

Thirsting for God is a picture of intense desire (Ps 42:1; 63:1). Every other joy in heaven will be secondary and derived from this ultimate joy. The essence of eternal life is to know God (John 17:3), so we may postulate that our eternal joys will consist in an ever-deepening and growing experience of the eternal God. Indeed, it is the presence of God which makes heaven into heaven.

After the sin with the golden calf God promises that the people will still inherit the land but goes on to declare, "Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people, and I might destroy you on the way (Exod 33:3). The people respond with lamentation: "When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn, and no one put on any ornaments" (Exod 33:4).

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<sup>72</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 901.

<sup>73</sup> Allen, *Grounded in Heaven*, 47.

<sup>74</sup> Anselm, "Proslogion", *Basic Writings* (Chicago: Open Court, 1962).

What is the point of having the gifts without the giver? Without the Lord the land is an empty promise. Without God heaven is an empty promise. Paul longed to be with Christ, which is the essence of the intermediate state (Phil 1:21-26) and the driving force of his life (Phil 3:10-14). Peter expresses this as an inheritance which can never perish, spoil or fade (1 Pet 1:3-5). God is the inheritance of his people, just as they are his inheritance.<sup>75</sup> Peter Kreeft puts it like this:

*Finding him is heaven. Seeking him is heaven's door. Not finding him is hell, and not seeking him is the door to hell. The road to hell is not paved with good intentions, but with no intentions...*<sup>76</sup>

Pascal expressed it thus: "The infinite abyss of the human soul can be filled only with an infinite object, in other words, with God himself."<sup>77</sup>

And listen to Samuel Rutherford:

*O my Lord Jesus Christ, if I could be in heaven without thee, it would be hell; and if I could be in hell, and have thee still it would be heaven to me, for thou art all the heaven that I want.*<sup>78</sup>

Jonathan Edwards agrees:

*God is the highest good of the reasonable creature, and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied... Fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, children or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows. But the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but the scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but the streams, but God is the fountain. These are but the drops, but God is the ocean.*<sup>79</sup>

## 2. The Beatific Vision

Roman Catholic theology refers to this as the "beatific vision". Protestant theology has tended to avoid this phrase. However, it continues to see the vision of God as the biblical reference point for the experience of the saints in glory. Calvin, for example, gives no detailed discussion of the beatific vision in

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<sup>75</sup> Deut 18:1-2; Ps 16:5; Eph 1:13-14; Heb 8:10.

<sup>76</sup> Peter Kreeft, *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1980), 183.

<sup>77</sup> Pascal, Blaise, *Pensées* (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 74.

<sup>78</sup> Samuel Rutherford, quoted in Charles H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, January 17 morning reading.

<sup>79</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "The Christian Pilgrim", quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 115.

the Institutes, but in his Commentaries, he exegetes the nature of the face-to-face vision of God described in Scripture.

It is the presence of God which is the supreme attraction of the new creation. Here we will serve God day and night in his temple (Rev 7:15). The city is a perfect cube, reminiscent of the Holy of Holies in Solomon's temple (Rev 21:16; 1 Kgs 6:20). Revelation contains more songs than any other New Testament book (Rev 4-5; 7:10; 11:16-18; 15:2-4). The river of life flows from the throne and satisfies God's people (Rev 21:9; 22:1). The theophanies of Moses, Paul and John were a foretaste of the beatific vision. But they all recognised that their creatureliness and fallenness limited their perceptions (Exod 33:20; 1 Tim 6:16; John 1:18). In our perfected nature we will be able to delight in God as never before.

Baxter again:

*The more perfect the sight is, the more delightful the beautiful object. The more the appetite, the sweeter the food. The more musical the ear, the more pleasant the melody. The more perfect the soul, the more joyous those joys.<sup>80</sup>*

Jonathan Edwards describes it as an intellectual vision: "It is an intellectual view by which God is seen. God is a spiritual being, and he is beheld with the understanding."<sup>81</sup> This does not mean that this will not involve our physical eyes:

*And there will doubtless be appearances of a divine and inimitable glory and beauty in Christ's glorified body, which it will indeed be a ravishing and blessed sight to see. The majesty that will appear in Christ's body will express and show forth the spiritual greatness and majesty of the divine nature. The pureness and beauty of that light will express the perfection of divine holiness. Thus, it was that the three disciples beheld Christ at his transfiguration upon the mount. They beheld a wonderful and outward glory in Christ's body, an inexpressible beauty in his countenance: but that outward glory and beauty delighted them principally as it was an expression or signification of the divine excellencies of his mind, as we may see by their manner of speaking of it. It was the sweet mixture of majesty and grace in his countenance that ravished them.*

Our experience of God in heaven involves the apprehension of his boundless love. Baxter writes:

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<sup>80</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 14.

<sup>81</sup> Edwards, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Sermon on Matthew 5:8.



*Thou shalt be eternally embraced in the arms of that love, which was from everlasting, and will extend to everlasting: of that love which brought the Son of God's love from heaven to earth, from the earth to the cross, from the cross to the grave, from the grave to glory: that love which was weary, hungry, tempted, scorned, scourged, buffeted, spit upon, crucified, pierced; which did fast, pray, heal, weep, sweat, bleed and die – that love will eternally embrace thee.*<sup>82</sup>

Jonathan Edwards speaks of the infinite progress of the vision of God from this life, through the intermediate state and reaching into eternity after the resurrection. This means that there will never be eternal boredom. The soul is like a vessel which God fills with an endless supply of his presence. We will discover more and more of the loveliness of God. God will eternally communicate more and more of himself.

This suggests that in heaven we continue the journey we began on earth. The difficulties of our earthly pilgrimage are over – we have reached home and entered into our rest. However, as we follow Christ and drink more deeply from the wells of salvation, we will find an ever-increasing delight in God:

*When we've been there ten thousand years,  
Bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise  
Than when we'd first begun.*

### 3. Seeing Jesus

In heaven there is to be a much fuller vision of God, but will we see God himself in his essence? Bavinck argues that this is impossible, because it would lead to erasing the boundary between Creator and creature and the danger of the “deification of humanity”.<sup>83</sup> How can we see God “who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (1 Tim 6:16)?

The Bible teaches God's invisibility (Exod 33:20; John 1:18; 4:24; 1 John 4:12; 1 Tim 6:16; 1:17; Col 1:15). Yet it also promises that we will see him face-to-face (Matt 5:8; Rev 22:4). How do we understand this apparent contradiction? The answer is that we see Christ. Says Edwards:

*The seeing of God in the glorified body of Christ is the most perfect way of seeing God with the bodily eyes that can be. It is seeing a real body that one of the persons of the Trinity has assumed to be his body and that he dwells*

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<sup>82</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 45.

<sup>83</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* vol 2, 190-191.

*in for ever as his own and in which the divine majesty and excellency appear as much as it is possible for it to appear in outward form and shape.*<sup>84</sup>

In the shadow of the cross the Redeemer prays that his people might be with him forever and see his glory (John 17:24). We will see the glory of God in his face (2 Cor 4:6). "For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev 7:17). The Son is our Shepherd and he actively leads his people in heaven (Rev 14:4). He will continue to pastor us for eternity, as he leads his people to streams of living water.

We find the same emphasis in John Owen. Christ is the focus of our vision in heaven. This vision involves "full clear apprehensions which all the blessed ones have of the Glory of God in Christ, of the work and effects of his Wisdom and Grace towards mankind".<sup>85</sup>

Perhaps the only appropriate way of describing this future hope is in song:

*The Bride eyes not her garment,  
But her dear Bridegroom's face;  
I will not gaze at glory  
But on my King of grace;  
Not at the crown He giveth  
But on His pierced hand:  
The Lamb is all the glory  
Of Immanuel's land.*<sup>86</sup>

## VI. The Blessings of our Hope

One of the common criticisms of emphasising our hope and calling for "heavenly-mindedness" is that it destroys our concern for the present world. C. S. Lewis makes a helpful riposte:

*If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world are just the ones that thought the most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set afoot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely*

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<sup>84</sup> Jonathan Edwards, quoted by John Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 317.

<sup>85</sup> John Owen, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth), 347.

<sup>86</sup> Anne Cousins, "The Sands of Time are Sinking".

*ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Think about Heaven and you'll get the earth "thrown in": aim at earth and you'll get neither.*<sup>87</sup>

As we examine this we will return to Baxter's masterpiece. This is probably the most comprehensive treatment of our subject that has ever been penned. His concern, which flows from the tribulations of his own life and the turbulence of the times in which he lived, is to apply this doctrine to the hearts of his hearers. It is fascinating to examine its influence on the church and there are some unexpected discoveries.<sup>88</sup>

After defining the rest and affirming its desirability, Baxter explains how we may best contemplate heaven and then applies this contemplation to practical godliness.

### 1. Enjoying the Rest Now

Baxter encourages us to begin by recognising how important the rest is and how much we should desire it. We are constantly "in motion" and feel our distance from God.<sup>89</sup> We must pursue God's rest with persevering faith: "Christ brings the heart to heaven first, and then the person... He that had truly rather have the enjoyment of God in Christ, than anything in the world shall have it."<sup>90</sup>

Baxter challenges us to examine our hearts to make sure we have a true hope. There is a danger that we may know that it exists but fail to enter into it.<sup>91</sup> Baxter helps us to focus on this heavenly hope. We must recognise that heaven is the only treasure worth seeking and we must labour to apprehend how near it is.<sup>92</sup> He has an extensive section in which he explains what he means by "heavenly contemplation".<sup>93</sup> Such contemplation involves the powers of both the mind and the affections. We are to strain our minds to apprehend the nature of our rest, but we are then to feel the power of it in our affections.<sup>94</sup> Baxter also warns about the danger of mere intellectual apprehension:

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<sup>87</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 135.

<sup>88</sup> For example, the Duke of Wellington, the victor of Waterloo, possessed a copy and it was known to be the last book he was reading a few days before his death. A. B. Grosart, *Annotated List of the Writings of Richard Baxter* (1668), 10.

<sup>89</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 32.

<sup>90</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 36.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-93.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-139.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-180.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

*I entreat every one of my brethren in ministry, that they search and watch against this temptation; this is but gathering the materials and not erecting the building itself; this is but gathering our manna from others and not eating and digesting it ourselves... you may describe the joys of heaven, and yet never come near it in your hearts.<sup>95</sup>*

Such an exercise demands self-discipline, so we need a set time and place to meditate and to be constant in our observation.<sup>96</sup> Baxter suggests at least half an hour every day. In particular we can use our Sabbaths as steps to glory. We need to prepare our hearts by laying aside thoughts of work or the distractions of pleasure. Our meditation will lead to a number of affections: love, desire, hope, courage and joy. We must awaken these affections through meditation:

*For the present purpose, you may look over any promise of eternal life in the Gospel; any description of the glory of the saints, or any article of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Some one sentence concerning those eternal joys may afford you matters for many years' meditation.<sup>97</sup>*

We must preach these truths to our souls:

*First, explain to thyself the subject on which thou dost meditate, both the terms and the subject matter; study the difficulties till the doctrine is clear. Secondly, confirm thy faith in the belief of it, by the most clear, convincing Scripture-reasons. Thirdly, then apply it according to its nature and thy necessity.<sup>98</sup>*

As we do this, we will be struck by the massive advantages that heavenly joys have over earthly ones, and this will loosen our love for worldly things.<sup>99</sup>

Baxter gives a summary of this process:

*As thou makest conscience of praying daily, so do thou of acting of the graces of meditation: and more especially in the meditating on the joys of heaven. To this end set apart one hour or half an hour every day, wherein thou mayest lay aside all worldly thoughts; and with all possible seriousness and reverence, as if thou wert going to speak to God himself, or to have sight of*

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<sup>95</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 130.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-152.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-174.

*Christ, or of that blessed place; so, do thou withdraw thyself into some secret place and set thyself wholly to the following work.*<sup>100</sup>

## 2. The Blessings of Enjoying the Rest Now

### a) *comfort*

“We shall rest from all perplexing doubts and fears... doubts will be weeded out and trouble the gracious soul no more.”<sup>101</sup> Contemplating heaven will bring us comfort in the furnace of affliction:

*The frequent and believing views of glory are the most precious cordial in all afflictions: first to sustain our spirits, and make our sufferings far more easy; secondly, to stay us from repining and make us bear with patience and joy; and thirdly, to strengthen our resolutions, that we forsake not Christ for fear of trouble.*<sup>102</sup>

We are like David who affirmed “I had fainted unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”<sup>103</sup>

### b) *courage*

Contemplation of heaven is designed to give us courage and boldness in the face of opposition and persecution. Like Jesus, persecuted believers are to set their minds on the things that lie ahead of them (Heb 12:1-3). Jesus reminds those who are facing persecution that the blessings of heaven await those who persevere and overcome (Rev 2:7,11,17,29; 3:5,12,21). Paul teaches us that our present suffering is light and momentary compared to the eternal weight of glory God is preparing for us (2 Cor 4:17).

Now suppose both death and hell were utterly defeated. Suppose the fight was fixed. Suppose God took you on a crystal ball trip into your future and you saw with indubitable certainty that despite everything – your sin, your smallness, your stupidity... Would you not return fearless and singing? What can earth do to you if you are guaranteed heaven? To fear the worst earthly loss would be like a millionaire fearing the loss of a penny – less, a scratch on a penny.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 179.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 116; Psalm 27:13.

<sup>104</sup> Kreeft, *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing*, 183.

c) *holiness*

Baxter reminds us that thinking about our rest will motivate us to live a holy and heavenly life now.<sup>105</sup>

*I require thee as thou hopest for a part of this glory, that thou tenderest thy allegiance to the God of heaven, as ever thou hopest for a part in this glory, that thou presently take thy heart to task; chide it for its wilful strangeness to God; turn thy thoughts from the pursuit of vanity; bend thy soul to study eternity; busy it about the life to come... drench thine affections in these rivers of pleasure, or rather, in the sea of consolation; and if thy backward soul begin to flag and thy loose thoughts fly abroad, call them back, hold them to their work... and keep close guard upon thy thoughts till they are accustomed to obey...*<sup>106</sup>

As long as the heart is employed with thoughts of heaven there is less room for the devil to tempt us:

*When thou hast had a fresh, delightful taste of heaven, thou wilt not be so easily persuaded from it; you cannot persuade a child to part with an apple while the taste of its sweetness is yet in his mouth.*<sup>107</sup>

It is unmortified sin which often prevents us from thinking about heaven.<sup>108</sup> So, longing for this “heavenly life” will spur us on to put sin to death. It is an antidote to the love of money or an addiction to ungodly company or a factious and divisive spirit. As we contemplate the cost paid to purchase this rest, it will humble our “proud and lofty spirit” and challenge our wilful laziness and slothfulness of spirit.

John Owen writes in a similar vein, encouraging us to fill our thoughts with the glory of Christ:

*For if our future blessedness shall consist in being where he is, and beholding of his glory, what better preparation can there be for it than in constant previous contemplation of that glory in the revelation that is made in the Gospel, unto this very end, that by a view of it we may be gradually transformed into the same glory.*<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 107-122.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-131.

<sup>109</sup> John Owen, *Meditation on and Discourse on the Glory of Christ*, Works vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth), 274.

d) *pastoral care*

According to Baxter, contemplating heaven will equip us to minister comfort and encouragement to other pilgrims:

*It is he that has his conversation in heaven, who is the profitable Christian to all about him: With him you may take sweet counsel and go up to the celestial house of God. When a man is in a strange country, far from home, how glad is he of the company of one of his own nation. How delightful is it to them to talk of their country, of their acquaintance, and the affairs of their home? With a heavenly Christian thou mayest have such a discourse, for he hath been there in the Spirit, and can tell thee of the glory and rest above.<sup>110</sup>*

e) *evangelism*

In one section Baxter encourages us “to help others to this rest”.<sup>111</sup> If we have assurance of this rest, we should share our faith with those around us:

*Why then do not all the children of this kingdom bestir themselves more to help others to the enjoyment of it? Alas! How little are poor souls about us beholden to the most of us!... get your hearts affected with the misery of your brethren's souls; be compassionate towards them: yearn after their recovery to salvation.<sup>112</sup>*

He goes on to analyse some of the reasons why we fail in this area – a lack of compassion, a fear of rejection and a failure to recognise the serious condition of those who miss the rest.

### *Conclusion*

We need to remember that the decisions we take in this life have repercussions in eternity. Our experience here is transitory. In whatever colours we paint our hope, it will prove to be more intense than anything we have ever imagined. It will include the full enjoyment of all the wholesome earthly pleasures we currently enjoy, but the heart of heaven is the enjoyment of God's presence. In Eden, Adam had perfect health and relationships, and a mandate to serve as God's vice-regent on earth. Sin forfeited this; Christ regained it. He grants the saints more than Adam lost. But the greatest blessing of Eden was the proximity of Adam to his God. The most grievous loss for

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<sup>110</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 117.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-106.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

Adam was exclusion from God's presence. This relationship is restored in Christ and fully realised in heaven. Whether we are gathering around the throne to join with the angels in the worship of God, or whether we are serving God as we explore and enjoy the new creation, it is the presence of God that makes heaven the place that it is.

In the light of this we must constantly contemplate the glories of our heavenly rest:

*Moses before he died, went up Mount Nebo, to take a survey of the land of Canaan; so, the Christian doth ascend the Mount of Contemplation, and take a survey, by faith, of his Rest. As Daniel in his captivity did three times a day open his window to Jerusalem, though far out of sight, when he went to God, so may the believing soul, in this captivity of the flesh, look towards Jerusalem which is above; and as Paul to the Colossians, so may he be, with the glorified spirits, absent in the flesh, but present in spirit, joying in beholding their heavenly order.*<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, 183.



## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Sacrifice of Praise: Meditations Before and After Admission to the Lord's Supper*

Herman Bavinck, Hendrickson, 2019, 152pp, £13.78 pb (Amazon)

The appearance of a new translation of Bavinck's *The Sacrifice of Praise* is a most welcome addition to the reading options of a new generation. Although over a century has passed since the work was penned it retains a freshness and sweetness that should find a ready audience amongst all warm-hearted believers.

In an age of superficial Christian profession this book deals with the subject of confessing Christ with a warm seriousness. Bavinck seeks to pastorally guide those who have been raised under the teaching of God's Word through a personal engagement with the truths they already know to a heartfelt and sincere confession of Jesus Christ before the church and the world.

The chapters display a balance of theological understanding and sane exegesis (which should surprise no one acquainted with his four-volumed *Reformed Dogmatics*) and suffuses it with a deep pastoral sensitivity (which may surprise a few) that speaks directly to the heart of those he is addressing.

As he weaves together covenant theology, practical godliness and the personal implications for his reader, Bavinck firmly and faithfully directs us to our responsibility to confess Christ publicly:

*In the midst of all creation that is speaking and praising, man, who has received words to express his thoughts, may not be silent. He cannot remain silent. Even his silence is counted as assent. Neutrality is as impossible for the mouth as for the heart. Whoever does not confess Christ denies him. (61)*

The role of family, church and school to work together to instruct the rising generation is a welcome note that is sounded throughout the book. He points out the united aim that should exist between these varied instructors of youth to produce in them a genuinely informed confession of the Saviour:

*If it happens like this, according to the rule of the word of the Lord, then family, church, and school work together in a beautiful way. They do not stand independent, side by side, and much less in opposition to each other. One does not break down what the other builds up, but together they labor in the one great task: the reformation of humanity to the image and likeness of God. It is one faith and one baptism that tie them together. It is one confession upon which they all rest. It is one view of the world and life that*

*they pass on to their children for comfort and support in the struggle of this earthly life. Each in its own way, and yet in a mutual relation, they warn and teach every person in all wisdom, that they may present that person perfect in Christ Jesus. (53)*

While such a picture may seem an almost unimaginable dream to believers today, it is good to be reminded that this should remain our desideratum.

The book is one which should find an appreciative audience amongst different kinds of reader: serious enquirers, parents, preachers, and those who have followed in the footsteps of the flock for many years, will all find much to instruct and encourage them.

If I have any regret regarding this book, it is simply that I did not read it twenty-five years earlier. I heartily commend this work to all who care for their own souls and to any who take seriously their responsibility to care for the souls of a rising generation.

*Timothy McGlynn*

*Minister, Grace Reformed Church, Aberdeen*

*The Journey to the Mayflower: God's Outlaws and the Invention of Freedom*  
Stephen Tomkins, Hodder & Stoughton, 2020, 384pp, £7.42 hb (Amazon)

In September 1620 a band of intrepid pilgrims boarded the Mayflower and set off for a new life in the New World. The colony they founded helped to shape what became the United States of America. They were Separatists, that is men and women who had left the Church of England to gather themselves into congregations that were governed by their understanding of the biblical model of church life. That was a radical step during the late 1500s and early 1600s. The Monarch was the Supreme Governor of the Church of England; to leave the Anglican Church was not to exercise a legitimate religious right – it was an act of sedition against the State.

While the Puritans agitated for a further reformation of the Church of England from within, as permitted by the authorities, Separatists advocated *Reformation Without Tarrying for Anie*, as Robert Browne put it in one of the key works of Separatism. The hostile attentions of government and the bishops drove the Separatist churches underground, initially in London and then elsewhere in England. If caught, their leaders were left to fester in prison, or even faced execution. Henry Barrow and John Greenwood were hanged in April 1593 for writing seditious books; John Penry was similarly charged and executed one month later.

Separatists were often labelled “Brownists” after their leader, Robert Browne. He fled persecution in England, founding a Separatist Church in Holland, but the work was riven by factions and infighting. Not finding Separatism to his liking after all, Browne returned to the Church of England. The Separatists hated being labelled with the name of a turncoat.

They longed to be free to gather their congregations, composed of true believers and their children, outside of the Church of England. Some regarded the Established Church as hopelessly corrupt and false, others as a true Church that was badly in need of further reform. Separatist thinkers noted that coercing people into belonging to a certain church was alien to the spirit of true Christianity. The New Testament model of church life was not that of the bishop-dominated Church of England, but congregational, where church members had a say in the government of the church and the appointment of its leaders.

Some, like John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, took Separatism to the next logical step and became Baptists. After all, if the church was to be composed of true believers covenanted together, infants could neither believe nor willingly covenant to belong to a congregation. Smyth and Helwys came under the influence of Arminianism while in Holland; they were “General Baptists”, believing that Christ died for all people in general. Separatist Hanseard Knollys and others advocated believer’s baptism, but within a Calvinistic framework; they were “Particular Baptists”, teaching that Jesus laid down his life for the elect in particular.

John Robinson (1576-1625) led a Separatist congregation in Leiden, Holland, where it was possible to “do church” free from the persecution they would have faced in England. Robinson was a strong advocate of religious liberty and freedom of conscience. The Separatist imagination was fired by the story of the children of Israel leaving oppression in Egypt in search of freedom to serve the Lord in the Promised Land. For Robinson and members of his flock the Promised Land was the New World. And so it was “All aboard the Mayflower” in September 1620.

The governing document of their Plymouth Colony was the “Mayflower Compact”, in which 41 of the 101 passengers elected to covenant together to form a “Body Politick” to govern the colony in line with “just and equal laws”. The original Separatists often faced brutal harassment and persecution – they were regarded as a threat to the good order of church and state. But their key ideas would exert a powerful influence on the development of modern society – ideas such as the separation of church and state, freedom of religion and the democratic right to self-determination. Congregationalists and Baptists are now sizeable groups in the global Christian family.

Stephen Tomkins’ account of *The Journey to the Mayflower* tells the compelling story of a despised sect who changed the world. Well worth a read.

*Guy Davies, Pastor, Providence Baptist Church, Westbury, Wiltshire*

*The Triune God (New Studies in Dogmatics)*

Fred Sanders, Zondervan, 2016, 243pp, £15.02 pb (Amazon)

In many treatments of the doctrine of the Trinity the theologian's basic approach is to attempt to bring together the scattered bits and pieces of the Bible's teaching into a coherent whole – something like assembling a jigsaw puzzle. The theologian will often begin by identifying trinitarian hints in the Old Testament and then give attention to some of the key passages in New Testament Scripture.

Fred Sanders proposes an alternative approach. He argues that God is revealed as three persons primarily in the redemptive-historical missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit. The role of Scripture is to bear witness to and interpret those missions for us. Contrary to "Rahner's rule", Sanders is not saying that the economic Trinity we encounter in the missions *is* the ontological Trinity; rather, that the eternal processions within God are disclosed in the economic missions of the Son and Holy Spirit.

The Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son; the Son and the Spirit are fully God, of the same divine essence as the Father. Given the eternal relations of origin, it was fitting that the Son should be sent into the world by the Father in order to save us from sin and that the Holy Spirit was poured out from the Father by the Son on the Day of Pentecost to give us new life.

Hence the church confesses its belief in one God in three persons. But according to Sanders we can say no more of what it means to be a divine "person" than that the Three have distinct eternal relations of origin. The Father in his person is unbegotten, the Son is begotten of the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. We certainly should not suffuse the personhood with any notion that the Three are separate centres of self-consciousness, each with their own distinct will, who happen to cooperate together for certain ends. Any such account shatters the simplicity of God and veers in the direction of tritheism.

We need to tread carefully when it comes to defining what is meant by "persons" and not lapse into social trinitarianism. But we should also factor in the way Scripture enables us to eavesdrop on communications between the persons of the Trinity, where the Father affirms his love for the Son (Matthew 3:17) and the Son expresses his love for the Father (John 14:31). God's love in Christ is poured into the hearts of his people through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). The missions reveal the mutual love between the persons of the Trinity from eternity: The only begotten Son of the Father is the beloved Son of the Father. This has implications for our understanding of how, as persons, the Three relate to each other in loving, communicative action. Certainly "person" is to be preferred to some of the other alternatives such as "mode of subsistence". As Robert Letham affirms, "Since God is personal, he is love, the

living God, for life and love go together.” (*Systematic Theology*, Crossway, 2019, 128). Louis Berkhof adds further clarity when he says, “but [we] should not... lose sight of the fact that the self-distinctions in the Divine Being imply an ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ and ‘He,’ in the Being of God, which assume personal relations to one another.” (*Systematic Theology*, Banner, 95).

While Sanders’ treatment is enriched by the theological reflection of the church, he is keen to underline that, “Trinitarianism is a gift of revelation before it is an achievement of the church” (23). Biblical exegesis is therefore the key factor in constructing a doctrine of the Trinity, but this does not mean exegesis of individual texts in glorious isolation; biblical revelation as a whole is trinitarian in character. The Old Testament sets the scene for the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit; the New Testament bears its witness to their coming into the world for our salvation. Individual texts need to be seen in that light. This overall approach has had the advantage of rescuing trinitarian theology from the “jigsaw puzzle” method.

Giving attention to the biblical materials, the author discusses “New Covenant Attestation” to the Trinity, focusing on “The Trinitarian Life of Jesus”, “Epiphany at the Jordan”, “The Threefold Name” and “Paul and the Presupposition of Salvation”. He then discusses “Old Covenant Adumbration”. Sanders is not happy to label manifestations of God in the Old Testament as “Christophanies”. Evangelicals have sometimes used that label on the basis that it is the Son’s nature to be visible in a way that the Father is not, which is a contradiction of “homousios”, that the Son has the same essence as the Father. Also, the idea that it was always the Son who put in a temporary appearance in Old Testament narratives deprives the eventual enfleshment of Jesus of its uniqueness. Better to say with Augustine that the theophanies represent, “simply the one and only God, that is the Trinity without any distinction of persons” (225). In the New Testament, Isaiah’s vision of the Lord seated upon the throne is predicated of both the Son (John 12:40-41) and the Father (Revelation 4:2, 8; cf. Isaiah 6:3).

That is not to say that we cannot glimpse distinct revelations of the three persons in the pages of the Old Testament. Sanders commends the Fathers’ “retrospective prosoponic (personal)” reading of Old Testament Scripture. The author cites the examples from the writings of Gerhohus the Great (1093–1169):

*Psalm 1: Wherefore: Glory be to the Father, Who knoweth the Way of the righteous; glory be to the Son, Who is the Way of the righteous, the Man Who is blessed, and prosperous in whatsoever He doeth; glory be to the Holy Ghost, Who is the Wind that scattereth the ungodly. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be: world without end. Amen. (236).*

Evangelicals have got themselves into something of a muddle on the doctrine of the Trinity of late. A narrowly biblicist approach has led to denials of eternal generation; some have posited that the Son's will is eternally subordinate to that of the Father, attributing will to the persons of the Trinity rather than the divine nature. Sanders' approach provides a necessary corrective to these harmful tendencies. In an online article <https://scriptoriumdaily.com/adding-eternal-generation/> the theologian engages with Wayne Grudem's handling of the doctrine of the Trinity in the second edition of his *Systematic Theology*.

Evangelicals are by definition people of the *Evangel*. That is why we need to get the doctrine of the Trinity right. The revelation of the Trinity is umbilically joined to revelation of the mystery of the gospel, for in the gospel is nothing less than the good news that the Father has sent the Son to be the Saviour of the World and to raise up ruined humanity by the power of his Spirit. In the words of the Second London Baptist Confession, 1689, "which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence on Him" (2:2). Sanders' study demands careful thought as he develops his argument and interacts with a range of other scholars, but the work is no way dryly academic. As he points out, to contemplate the Trinity is to seek the face of God and tune one's mind to doxology:

*Glory be to God the Father,  
Glory be to God the Son,  
Glory be to God the Spirit,  
Great Jehovah three in One.  
Glory, glory while eternal ages run.*

*Guy Davies*  
*Pastor, Providence Baptist Church, Westbury, Wiltshire*

*None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God*  
Matthew Barrett, Baker Books, 2019, 296 pages, £8.95 pb (Amazon)

"Behold your God!". That is the message given to the herald of good news in Isaiah 40:9. But what kind of God should we expect to "behold"? Is he just like us, but bigger and better? After all, the Bible tells us that we are made in his image (Genesis 1:26). According to classic theism, God is a perfect being, "without body, parts or passions". But "perfect being theology" has had a bad press of late. We want a God who can enter into the suffering of wretched humanity, not a remote Being who is sublimely undisturbed by the woe of the world.

But if the God we behold is a domesticated deity, cut down to size and shorn of his divine majesty, can we trust him? Does he command our highest worship? Of course, the key thing is what God has revealed of himself in the pages of Holy Scripture. It is the case, however, that our reading of the Bible can be skewed by our twenty-first-century perspective. Our psychological age demands a therapeutic deity who can feel our pain and soothe our troubled minds. That is why it is helpful to listen to the voices of those who have read God's Word in previous centuries. They also were people of their times, but their insights can at least make us aware of our own biases.

Matthew Barrett wheels on the "A Team" – no, not Mr T and the gang, but Augustine of Hippo, Anselm and Thomas Aquinas. These three theological greats were attentive readers of the Bible and it was from its pages that they understood that God is the perfect being than which none greater can be thought. If he were anything less, he would not be God at all. While the focus here is on the being of God, the theologian does not lose sight of the three persons who share the one divine essence: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The book's subtitle speaks of the *Undomesticated Attributes of God*. We domesticate God when we dissolve the fundamental biblical distinction between God our Creator and the creature. As finite creatures we cannot know God as he knows himself. Our knowledge of him is true, yet analogical. The Bible may speak of God in creaturely terms, but that is on account of it being divine revelation accommodated to our capacity. God is pure Spirit. He therefore has no "hands", "eyes", or "nose". Neither does the sovereign Lord have regrets or change his mind. If the Scripture's anthropomorphic language is not to be taken literally, neither are its anthropopathic descriptions of God's "emotions". All that is in God is God. He is therefore eternal, infinite and immutable in his being and attributes.

As Barrett explains, God's attributes are not the various components that comprise his being, some of which could in theory be detached from him. God is simple and unconflicted; his righteousness does not pull him one way and his mercy another. He is always righteous and merciful; his love is holy love. And that love is not a "flash in a pan" that can be switched off in response to the sinful rebellion of human beings. That is where God's aseity and impassibility come in. His life and love are self-generated, totally independent of the creature. God does not need us to complete him. He is complete in the fulness of his own being and in the fellowship of the persons of the Trinity. It is precisely because God is not needy or vulnerable that we can trust him to be faithful to his promises and never let us down.

The author describes the way in which his own life was enriched as he was helped to "behold his God" afresh as the "A Team" enabled him to see divine self-revelation with fresh eyes. While the work is technical in parts and demands attentive reading, Barrett's style is lively and interesting. You will find references to holidays in beautiful Pembrokeshire, delicious caramel

apple pies and baseball games. (No Rugby Union illustrations, though, which struck me as a bit odd. I think Barrett is American.) More importantly, his treatment of God's being and attributes is thoroughly biblical and full of practical application. You will be filled with wonder and worship. You will be stirred to renewed faith in God and obedience to his commands. As Daniel says, "the people who know their God will stand firm and take action" (Daniel 11:32).

*Guy Davies*

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*The History of Christianity in Britain and Ireland: From the First Century to the Twenty-First*

Gerald Bray, Apollos (IVP), 2021, 720pp, £24.85 hb (Amazon), £23.61 (Kindle)

We are indebted to Dr Bray for this possibly unique attempt at giving a complete history of Christianity in these islands, all the way from a point somewhere in the second century down to the present day. As he admits, it is a daunting task but he does it very well.

We all know parts of the story – the Reformation, the rise of Methodism, life since 1980, etc. – but most of us do not know all of the story and often we do not know how one part follows on from another. Dr Bray does, and he takes us through the main parts of the story, step by step, with consummate skill.

We begin with the early history and are soon on to the Celtic church, Augustine's arrival, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, Wyclif, Cranmer, the Puritans, the Westminster Assembly, dissent, etc. His determination to cover the history of all four nations is to be commended but that is no easy task and goes a long way to showing that the history of Christianity in Ireland is just as complicated as one always thought. To describe Wales as a backwater and to deny the very existence of the Scots language is probably unwise, whether he is right or not.

One enjoyed some of the etymological notes (e.g., sinecure, Dingwall, church ales, etc.), the very occasional displays of humour and the judicious use of poetry and hymns. I was amazed to learn that rural deaneries began in Norman times. Bray's explanation of the origin of Sabbatarianism, "a peculiarly British phenomenon" (265) is controversial, to say the least.

Some statements will come as a surprise to some. For example, we are told that the piety of Alfred the Great has been exaggerated by his admirers (48) and that Wyclif is unlikely to have done any Bible translation himself (136).

The scholarship in this volume is immense but the narrative mostly rattles along at a good pace, although there are inevitably some dull moments too. Strictly speaking, we have to say that this is an *Anglican* history; few



opportunities are missed to downplay whatever is not of that ilk. Hence, we are told, contentiously, the number involved in the Great Ejection of 1662 was likely to have been half the figure of 2000 so often quoted. William Carey was not the big deal in missionary work that some of us thought and as for people like Matthew Henry or Andrew Fuller, they merit not even a mention. On the plus side, Bunyan and Spurgeon receive due attention.

Inevitably, just as Homer nodded so there are slips. For example, to say that the 1859 revival in Wales mainly affected the Welsh speaking areas is rather redundant as at that time that was most of Wales. Whoever told Mr Bray that Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones' first name was Dafydd misled him; it was David.

The Protestant Truth Society will be disappointed to learn (517) that almost nothing has been heard from (or about) them since 1982. Members of FIEC churches will similarly be interested to learn (582) that the FIEC has "made no impression outside its own very limited circles".

The book, on the whole, is a sterling piece of work, well worth obtaining to read through or to use for reference, something facilitated by the clear contents page and the two-part index. There are 27 pages of bibliography covering primary and secondary sources too and it contains 12 statistical tables of variable usefulness. Some illustrations and maps may have further enhanced an already handsome tome.

*Gary Brady*

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### *Providence*

John Piper, Crossway, 2021, 752pp, £29.33 h/b (Amazon), £18.36 (Kindle)

Piper has now produced over fifty books. Like the others, this latest one is careful and exact, fresh in tone, homiletic in style and eager to present biblical truth. It contains some few recycled older pieces but this is primarily fresh material, even where the themes are familiar. It is, may we suggest, his "Hamlet".

It is in three parts. Part 1 seeks to define the subject. Typically, Piper makes use of traditional material such as the Westminster Confession but seeks a new spin, here including the idea of our enjoying God. He also tackles the push back that such high views of God's sovereignty can tend to provoke.

Part 2 looks at the ultimate goal of providence. In three sections, it goes back first to creation and even before that, then looks at the history of Israel from Abraham to the return from the exile. A third section introduces the new covenant.

It is not until Part 3 and the nature and extent of providence that we begin to touch on more expected themes such as earthquakes, the 2004 tsunami and the testimony of Nate Saint and Elizabeth Elliot (379). This final part has nine sections and is very practical. The topics are nature, Satan and demons, kings and nations, life and death, conversion and sanctification, ending with the triumph of Christ and his return. This part of the book is full of helpful statements on living the Christian life in the light of God's sovereign providence. Perhaps a quotation will give you the flavour:

*... in this one night God created perhaps one hundred thousand widows in Assyria and hundreds of thousands of fatherless children. These are not just numbers. They were real people with real families. This calls for great trust in the wisdom and justice and goodness of God. The same sovereignty that can kill 185,000 soldiers in one night can work a million circumstances of widows and fatherless children for their eternal good if they look away from the false gods of Assyria and from themselves to the God of Israel and call on him for mercy. (367)*

One would not wish to defend every piece of exegesis, e.g., Hebrews 12:15-17, (452) but the overall drift of the argument is sound and reliable.

Mind-stirring and heart-warming, the book closes with ten reasons to see and savour God's providence. Doing so, it is asserted, will awaken awe in us and lead to true worship and make us marvel that we are saved, humbling us because of our sin. It will cause us to see that everything is part of God's design; will help protect us from the trivialising effects of culture and from trifling with things divine and help us be patient and faithful amid life's most inexplicable circumstances. Further, it will expand our understanding of God's sovereignty in suffering; make us alert and resistant to man-centred substitutes claiming to be good news and make us confident that God has the right and power to answer prayer and change people's hearts. Finally, it will show us that evangelism and missions are essential as God uses means and, sounding a very Piperian note, will assure us that for all eternity God will be increasingly glorified in us, as we are increasingly satisfied in him.

A general index and Scripture index add to the book's usefulness. If you have not read Flavel's *Mystery of Providence*, read that first but do make time for this excellent volume too.

Gary Brady

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