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The Futurist Interpretation of Revelation: Evidence from the Seal Judgments' Reliance on the Olivet Discourse

by Brian C. Collins[1]

Many Christians find Revelation to be a difficult book. The symbolism seems impenetrable and the variety of viewpoints daunting. A path through the thicket can be found by paying close attention to Revelation's use of previous Scripture—especially in key passages that set trajectories for the interpretation of later parts of the book.[2] Revelation 6 is one of those key passages.

Commentators from a variety of viewpoints recognize that the seals draw from the Olivet Discourse and that the first four seals parallel the "beginning of birth pangs" in that discourse (Matt 24:5–8; Mark 13:5–8).[3] This observation may not seem to help the interpreter of Revelation because interpretations of the Olivet Discourse vary. Some limit the referent of Jesus' teaching exclusively to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70[4] or almost exclusively to that fall (with the eschatological part coming after Matthew 24:36 || Mark 13:32).[5] At the opposite extreme are interpreters who hold the discourse to be entirely eschatological.[6] A common view takes part of the discourse to be historical (referring to the events of AD 70 and to the entire era from the destruction of Jerusalem to the return of Christ) and part of the discourse to be eschatological.[7] A final approach recognizes that the Olivet Discourse

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[2] In an earlier article I argued that the use of Scripture in the prologue indicated that the book should be interpreted from a futurist paradigm. Brian Collins, "The Futurist Interpretation of Revelation: Intertextual Evidence from the Prologue," *Journal of Biblical Theology & Worldview* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2021): 33–52.

[3] Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse* (Andover, MA: Allen, Morrill, and Wardwell, 1845), 159; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 416; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation,* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 373; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation,* BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 276; Peter J. Leithart, *Revelation 1–11,* ITC (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 272–73; Buist Fanning, *Revelation,* ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 245.

[4] John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1812), 9:138–39; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 339–66.

[5] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 500–46; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 890–947; Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew*, EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2022), 602–3.

[6] Noted in Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1962), 489–91, and D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *EBCRev*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 9:552.

[7] John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* (n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 118–51; John Peter Lange, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (n.d.; reprint, Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 418; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew,* NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 353–64; Carson, 556–57. This approach is superior to the preceding

looks with a kind of bifocal vision at the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and at the eschatological Day of the Lord.[8] Anthony Hoekema explains this view:

> As we read the discourse . . . we find that aspects of these two topics are intermingled; matters concerning the destruction of Jerusalem (epitomized by the destruction of the temple) are mingled together with matters which concern the end of the world—so much so that it is sometimes hard to determine whether Jesus is referring to the one or the other or perhaps to both. . . . The passage, therefore, deals neither exclusively with the destruction of Jerusalem nor exclusively with the end of the world; it deals with both—sometimes with the latter in terms of the former. . . . Though the tribulation, persecution, suffering, and trials here predicted are described in terms which concern Palestine and the Jews, they must not be interpreted as having to do only with the Jews. Jesus was describing future events in terms which would be understandable to his hearers.[9]

The remainder of this article is a defense of the view that the first part of the Olivet Discourse refers to both a typological Day of the Lord in AD 70 and to the eschatological Day of the Lord.[10] This interpretation of the Olivet Discourse is then used to guide the interpretation of Revelation 6.

Setting and Question (Matthew 24:1–3; Mark 13:1–4; Luke 21:5–7)

The setting for the Olivet Discourse and the inciting questions from the disciples place the Olivet Discourse in the context of eschatological judgment. All three Gospels note that Jesus had pronounced

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two, but it suffers from three defects. First, the lack of agreement as to what is historical and what is future casts some doubt on this approach. Second, Blaising observes that this approach "renders the discourse somewhat confused." Jesus is supposed to be addressing questions about the Temple's destruction and his return at the end of the age. But for Carson and Blomberg the discourse "begins instead with general remarks about the church age, abruptly returns to the intended agenda with the abomination of desolation, and then rockets forward to the topic of the parousia." Craig Blaising, "A Case for the Pretribulation Rapture," in *Three Views on the Rapture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 38. Third, these interpretations tend to neglect connections to the OT passages that locate the entire discourse within the framework of the eschatological Day of the Lord. Blaising, 39.

[8] Jonathan Edwards, *The "Blank Bible,"* The Works of Jonathan Edwards (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 864; John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (1886; reprint, Valley Forge, PA: Judson, n.d.), 480; Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek New Testament* (n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Guardian, 1976), 1:235; Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), 5:285; Ridderbos, 477–95; Blaising, 39–41.

[9] Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 149. This view reaches back to the church fathers. It is summarized well by the author of the *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew*: "The Lord does not say distinctly which signs pertain to the destruction of Jerusalem and which to the end of the world, namely, so that the same signs may seem to pertain both to the manifestation of the destruction of Jerusalem and to the manifestation of the end of the world because he did not explain to them in order like a history how the things were to be done, but in a prophetic manner he predicted to them the things that were to be done." Thomas C. Oden and Gerald L. Bray, eds., *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew (Opus Imperfectum),* Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010), 372–73. This view has commended itself to other interpreters throughout the ages. It was noted by Thomas Aquinas in his commentary on Matthew (and may have been his view). Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, trans Paul M. Kimball (Camillus, NY: Dolorosa, 2012), 764–90. Thomas lists various interpretations without specifying his preference, so it is not entirely clear whether this is his view or not.

[10] I will draw on commentaries from a variety of perspectives. Citation of a commentary in support of the position for which I am arguing does not imply that the commentator would agree with the overall argument I am making.

judgment on the Jewish leaders, and Matthew records that Jesus had proclaimed, "Your house is left to you desolate" (23:38).[11] Jesus' final departure from the Temple may have implied a verdict of judgment upon it: as Yhwh left the temple prior to the exile (Ezek 10), so the Messiah left the Temple.[12] The judgment aspect of Jesus' departure may have been apparent to the disciples, and the disciples' praise of the Temple buildings may have been a response to Jesus' pronouncement against the Temple.[13]

Jesus responded to the disciples' praise of the Temple by predicting, "There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (24:2 || 13:2 || 21:6). This statement provoked questions from the disciples: "When will these things be?" (24:3 || 13:4 || 21:7). They were clearly asking Jesus when this Temple destruction would take place.

Matthew pairs this question with another, given in two parts: "And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (24:3). Here the disciples linked the destruction of the Temple with the eschatological advent of Christ. Mark records the disciples making the same link: "And what will be the sign when *all these things* are about to be *accomplished?"* (13:4).[14] This question alludes to Daniel 12:6–7 (note the emphasized words), a passage about bringing eschatological events to their completion.[15] According to Luke, as Jesus was leaving the Temple, the disciples asked him, "And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" (21:7). The plural "things" may indicate that more than just the Temple is in view,[16] though it may merely indicate that Luke is more focused on the Temple destruction in his account of the discourse.[17]

Clearly the disciples linked the destruction of the Temple and the Son of Man's coming at the end of the age. Further, it was appropriate for Jesus to link the two events in his answer to the disciples: "The events accompanying those judgments upon the guilty city will be the foreshadowing of the Final

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[11] Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version,* copyright ©2016 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

[12] Oden and Bray, 370; Aquinas, 762; Calvin, *Harmony,* 115; France, *Mark,* 495; Mark L. Strauss, *Mark,* ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 568; O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Prophets* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 297.

[13] Henry Barlcay Swete, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark* (New York: Macmillan, 1898), 295; Peter G. Bolt, *The Cross from a Distance: Atonement in Mark's Gospel*, NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 92.

[14] C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St. Mark: An Introduction and Commentary,* Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 393–94. The *italics* indicate where Mark's wording parallels wording in the Greek text of Daniel.

[15] James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark,* PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 390; Edward Adams, *The Stars of Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and Its World,* Library of New Testament Studies (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 140.

[16] I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke,* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 762; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53,* BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1663.

[17] David E. Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 828; James B. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Luke,* PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 595. When the Gospels are compared, Luke's presentation focuses the reader's attention on the typological fulfillment in AD 70 whereas Matthew's presentation focuses on the anti-typical fulfillment in the final Day of the Lord. Bock, *Luke*, 206.

Judgment at His second advent."[18] Since the Temple was a microcosm of the cosmos,[19] it was fitting for the judgment on the Temple to symbolize the judgment on the cosmos.

The Beginning of Birth Pangs (Matthew 24:4–8; Mark 13:5–8; Luke 21:8–11)

Many interpreters understand these verses to describe the entire inter-advent period.[20] They think that Jesus' statement "but the end is not yet/immediately" (24:6 || 13:7 || 21:9) indicates that this section cannot present the events of the eschatological Day of the Lord.[21] It is best, however, to understand these verses as referring typologically to the first century and ultimately to the final Day of the Lord.[22]

The first-century, typological referent to "the end" is the destruction of the Temple.[23] These verses were clearly fulfilled typologically in the years between Christ's ascension and the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. Blomberg summarizes these typological fulfillments:

> Various messianic pretenders arose, most notably Theudas (Acts 5:36; Josephus, *Ant*. 20.97–99, 160–72, 188, who describes other false claimants as well). The war of Israel against Rome began in A.D. 66–67 and was preceded by the growing hostility incited by the Zealots. Famine ravaged Judea, as predicted in Acts 11:27–30, datable to ca. A.D. 45–47 by Josephus, *Ant*. 20.51–53. Earthquakes shook Laodicea in A.D. 60–61 and Pompeii in A.D. 62 (cf. also Acts 16:26).[24]

The anti-typical end "must be taken as referring to the end of the *dolores Messiae,"* that is the end of Messianic pangs (see v. 8), which signify the time of great trouble that precedes the Son's return to earth.[25] Geerhardus Vos observed,

> As an infant cannot be born without pains, so too the rebirth of the entire earthly creation, which coincides with the end, will occur under terrible labor pains. The beginning of those pains consists of wars, sicknesses, famines, and earthquakes. In itself all of this would not yet be something special, but Luke 21:11 tells us that this will be accompanied by "terrible things and great signs

[18] Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 523.

[19] Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1991), 18–23; G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 31–36.

[20] Carson, 557, 559; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 567; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 874. Even some who adopt a bifocal approach in subsequent verses see these verses as focused exclusively on the entire inter-advent period. David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 565.

[21] Cranfield, 396; Blomberg, 353–54.

[22] Cf. Aquinas, 764–65; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 962–63; Blaising, 41, 45n39.

[23] Garland, 829.

[24] Blomberg, 356; cf. Aquinas, 764–65; Edwards, *Mark*, 391–92.

[25] Heinrich August Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1884), 129.

> from heaven," thus by something absolutely extraordinary, so that it will be easy to distinguish them from ordinary disasters and distresses.[26]

The language of "birth pains" may allude to Isaiah 13:8, another passage that intertwines a typological and eschatological Day of the Lord.[27] Further confirmation of this view is found in Paul's allusion to the Olivet Discourse in his description of the onset of the Day of the Lord as "labor pains (1 Thess 5:3).[28] Since Paul clearly had the eschatological Day of the Lord in view, it is best to recognize that eschatological Day of the Lord as a referent of the birth pangs.

Luz captures the meaning of this section of the discourse well when he states, "Thus begin the 'pangs'—that is, the tribulations of the last days. . . . Thus all of that is not yet the end, but it does deal with the beginnings of the end."[29]

Persecution (Matthew 24:9–14; Mark 13:9–13; Luke 21:12–19)

These verses turn to the issue of persecution. There is a seeming discrepancy between Matthew and Luke at this point. Matthew begins this section with "then," whereas Luke begins with "but before all this." Luke's time reference is clearest. Before the false messiahs, wars, earthquakes, famines, and heavenly signs, Jesus' followers would be persecuted by both Jews and Gentiles. Acts recounts that this persecution began as soon as the church was formed. Acts even uses the words of Jesus' prophecy to describe this persecution:

> "Lay hands on you" (Acts 4:3; 5:18; 12:1; 21:27); "persecute" (Acts 9:4–5; 22:7–8; 26:14–15); "hand over" (Acts 8:3; 12:4; 21:11; 22:4; 27:1; 28:17); "to synagogues" (Acts 6:9; 9:2; 19:8–9; 22:19; 26:11); "jails" (Acts 5:19–25; 8:3; 12:4–17; 16:23–40; 22:4, 19; 26:10); "kings" (Acts 9:15; 12:1; 25:23–28:28); "governors" (Acts 23:24, 26, 33; 24:1, 10; 26:30; see also 13:7; 18:12).[30]

Luke's account of the discourse affirms that this persecution will be an opportunity to bear witness to the gospel—which Acts also recounts (4:5–12, 33; 7:1–60; 23:11).[31] Divine empowering to present this witness without forethought may be exemplified by Stephen (Acts 7).[32] These verses, then, clearly

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[26] Vos, *Dogmatics*, 5:285.

[27] Paul R. Raabe, "The Particularizing of Universal Judgment in Prophetic Discourse," *CBQ* 64 (2002): 654–55; Adams, 43–44; cf. Blaising, 45–46.

[28] George Milligan, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Thessalonians* (London: Macmillan, 1908), 65; Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians,* BNTC (London: Continuum, 1986), 208; Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians,* PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 234; G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians,* IVPNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 137; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, ICC (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 3:340, 342.

[29] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2005), 192. Note that Luz also acknowledges first-century applicability.

[30] Garland, 830n11; cf. Robert H. Stein, *Luke,* NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 516–17.

[31] Garland, 831.

[32] Edwards, *Luke*, 600.

describe the persecution of the church as described in Acts before the events leading up to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70.[33]

Matthew's account is significantly different from Luke's. In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus' followers are delivered up, hated for his name's sake, and put to death. But the wording is different, and within the Olivet Discourse Matthew does not mention the Jewish features (Sanhedrin/councils, synagogues) that Mark and Luke do. The true Matthean parallel to Mark and Luke at this point occurs in Matthew 10:19–21, not in the Olivet Discourse.[34]

In Matthew's version of the Olivet Discourse, Jesus indicated that in conjunction with or following the initial birth pains, persecution would come.[35] This persecution would be exacerbated as people "fall away" from the faith and then "betray" believers. Paul alludes to this part of the discourse as well: "In 2 Thess 2:3 (built on the Olivet Discourse) this becomes the 'apostasy' or 'rebellion' that accompanies the appearance of the 'man of lawlessness.'"[36]

To close out this section, Jesus said, "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" (24:14; cf. 13:10). With regard to the type, this prophecy refers to the spread of the gospel throughout the known

[33] Mark's account is similar to Luke's. He adds that the followers of Jesus would be beaten in synagogues, which also occurred in the earliest days of the church (Acts 5:40; 22:19; 2 Cor 11:24). Strauss, 574.

[34] The parallel between Matthew 10:19–21 and Mark and Luke's account of the Olivet Discourse can be accounted for by the fact that Jesus, as he traveled from place to place, probably often said similar things on different occasions. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: SPCK, 1992), 422–23; Carson, 283. It may be that because Matthew had already presented his readers with the content found in Mark and Luke's version of the Olivet Discourse, he omitted that material here. The omission allows Matthew to emphasize the eschatological aspect of the discourse. While Luke emphasized the first-century aspect, Matthew presented readers with a part of the discourse not fully represented in Mark and Luke.

Interestingly, Matthew 10:17–22 has an eschatological element to it as well. By verse 17 Jesus was looking beyond the initial mission given to the Twelve. Blomberg, 174; Davies and Allison, 2:179, 181–82; Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2001), 89; Nolland, 425. The phrase "you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes" is obviously not true if it refers to the Twelve's evangelistic mission during Jesus' earthly ministry. There are two plausible interpretations that both have a long pedigree. Hilary of Poitiers proposed that conversion of Israel would not take place until just before the Second Advent. Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on Matthew*, Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 119. Many modern commentators have similarly concluded that these verses indicate that the "mission to Israel" will not be complete before the Second Coming. Blomberg, 176; Davies and Allison, 190. Another option is that these words "do not denote the *mission* but the *flight* of the disciples. This is clear from the beginning of this verse, 'When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another.'" Ridderbos, 509; cf. Nolland, 427, and similarly, Oden and Bray, 179.

The eschatological nature of Matthew 10 casts the parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21 in another light. Though Luke certainly emphasizes the typological fulfillment in his presentation, the eschatological element should not be thought to be entirely absent in Luke and Mark. Mark in particular has two eschatologically oriented parallels with Matthew in this section: the gospel will be preached to all the nations (13:10), and the one who endures to the end is the one who is saved (13:13).

[35] Meyer, 131–32.

[36] Osborne, *Matthew*, 875–76.

world of that day.[37] For instance, Paul could say that the gospel was prospering "in the world" (Col 1:6) and even that it "has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven" (Col 1:23).[38]

However, the typological fulfillment of this saying does not exhaust its significance. Alford argues that despite the typological fulfillment, "in the wider sense, the words imply that the Gospel shall be preached *in all the world, literally taken*, before the great and final end come."[39] The OT prophets looked forward to the day when the nations would be gathered to worship God, and there may be an allusion to that here.[40] Hays says, "One suspects that Isaiah hovers somewhere in the background (passages such as Isa 2:2-4, 49:6, 57:6-8; 60:1-3; cf. Ps 22:27-28)."[41] Revelation also predicts the world-wide proclamation of the gospel (Rev 5:9–10; 7:9; 14:6), and the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy will come to pass during the Day of the Lord predicted by Revelation.

Many understand Matthew 24:4–14, Mark 13:5–13, and Luke 21:8–19 to describe the entire inter-advent period. It is certainly true that false Christs, wars, famines, earthquakes, and persecution have existed since the church was established until the present. These verses do not, however, give a disjointed list of events that will happen in a scattered fashion over a lengthy period of time. The events in these verses occur together and form a pattern that was fulfilled first in AD 70 and which will be ultimately fulfilled in the eschatological Day of the Lord.

The Abomination of Desolation (Matthew 24:15–22; Mark 13:14–20; Luke 21:20–24)

Jesus then directed the disciples' attention to Daniel's prediction of the abomination of desolation (Daniel 8:13; 9:27; 11:31; 12:11).[42] Many have tried to identify a first-century fulfillment for the abomination of desolation. Keener observes that "Josephus indicated that the shedding of priestly blood in the sanctuary (Jos. *War* 4.147-201; 4.343; 5.17-18; cf. 2.424) was the desecration." Intriguingly, he observes, "Very close to three and a half years after the abomination (cf. *War* 6.93) the temple was destroyed and violated even more terribly."[43]

However, Mark indicates that the abomination of desolation is a person: "When you see the abomination of desolation standing where *he* ought not to be" (13:14, emphasis added). Though some

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[37] Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, trans. William Crookshank (London: Tegg & Son, 1837), 407–8 (4.15.13); Alford, 1:238; Blomberg, 356.

[38] Paul was probably indicating, with expansive language, that the gospel had gone to all the nations and was continuing to spread among them. John Davenant, *An Exposition of St. Paul to the Colossians* (1627; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2005), 265. The expansive language was used because Paus was stating that "the gospel had *in principle* already been preached world-wide," even though in practice it is still in process of spreading worldwide. N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 89.

[39] Alford, 1:238.

[40] Nolland, 967.

[41] Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 95.

[42] The statement "let the reader understand" [24:15 || 13:14] is probably the Lord's. Ridderbos, 478. The Greek phrase cited in Matthew and Mark appears in exactly the same form in Daniel 12:11 in at least one version of the Greek text.

[43] Keener, 576; cf. Carson, 562; Osborne, *Matthew*, 883; Strauss, 579.

suggest that "he" is a reference to the one who does the desolating or to an inanimate idol,[44] the referent is best understood to be the abomination. Davies and Allison propose that 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4 is based on this teaching of Jesus,[45] and James Edwards suggests that the abomination "refers to 'the man of lawlessness' as conceived in 2 Thess 2:3–4, who will exalt himself in the temple as God."[46] He observes the close correlation between 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4 and Mark 13:14:

> The "man of lawlessness" corresponds to the man *standing* (masculine participle) in v. 14; and the description of him parodying God in the temple correlates with "'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where he *does not belong*." Both texts depict a blasphemous Antichrist who will do a scandalous deed that will trigger the return of the Lord. Both texts also warn disciples against mistaken eschatological assumptions, especially against being deceived by signs and wonders.[47]

Thus Mark "indicates that Jesus foresaw the rise of a terrible antagonist, an Antichrist, who at some future time will unleash a severe tribulation on the people of God, which in turn will usher in the return of the Lord."[48] This fits well with the eschatological context of Daniel 12:11, the OT passage to which Jesus alluded.[49]

The typical event that prefigures this eschatological abomination of desolation is the destruction of Jerusalem (with its Temple) in AD 70 (Luke 21:20).[50] Some commentators on Matthew and Mark argue that the destruction of Jerusalem cannot be the abomination of desolation because there would have been no time to flee as the text proposes (people needed to flee the city before it fell).[51] If, however, the *abomination of desolation* is a future event while the *desolation of Jerusalem* in AD 70 is the type of that desolation, the problem is resolved. The flight in Matthew and Mark would refer to the far future event and the flight in Luke would refer to the AD 70 event.[52] In Matthew and Mark people flee when they see the abomination of desolation, whereas in Luke they are to flee when Jerusalem is compassed with armies—before the desolation of Jerusalem.

Ridderbos, while granting that the events of AD 70 "are in a general way the partial fulfillment of the prophecy, as far as the destruction of the temple is concerned," notes that the abomination of desolation in Matthew and Mark is eschatological: "It is even more striking that, both in Mark and

[44] Strauss, 579.

[45] Davies and Allison, 3:346.

[46] Edwards, *Mark*, 398.

[47] Ibid., 398.

[48] Ibid., 399.

[49] Tremper Longman III, *Daniel*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 287.

[50] Ridderbos, 495; Garland, 832.

[51] Carson, 562; Strauss, 579.

[52] Stein, 519–20; Bock, 1675–78.

Matthew, the tribulation with respect to this abomination is clearly connected with the last days." The abomination is closely tied to a tribulation that is said to "immediately" precede the coming of Christ.[53]

In the description of the days of vengeance and distress that follow the desolation, Luke's focus remains on the events surrounding the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem (21:21–24).[54] This is most clearly indicated in the prediction that the Jews will be "led captive among all the nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (21:24).[55] This statement requires time to unfold. It certainly describes what happened after AD 70 until the present. The "times of the Gentiles" will persist until Christ returns to judge the nations.[56] Notably, Luke also omits the statements in Matthew and Mark that people should not turn back to retrieve forgotten items (24:17–18 || 13:15–16), though he does elsewhere include a record of Jesus giving this warning in the context of his eschatological coming (Luke 17:31).[57] Nor does Luke speak about an "unprecedented tribulation" the way Matthew and Mark do (24:21–22 || 13:19–20).[58]

The details fit well with the fall of Jerusalem. Jews had fled to Jerusalem during the Jewish War,[59] but Jesus predicted that those who are in Jerusalem should leave the city. Those in the country should not enter the city since God's vengeance was being poured out on the city (21:22).[60] As Bock observes, "The focus of these remarks from the Lucan perspective is the events of A.D. 70, but it must be remembered that these remarks are part of a pattern of judgment, so that they apply to the latter period as well."[61]

Matthew and Mark focus on the eschatological tribulation, as interpreters from the patristic period onward have recognized. The author of the *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew* observed, "But this is more fitting to understand about the end of the world, which that tribulation [in AD 70] prefigured. Then there will truly be a tribulation as never was."[62] Though some seek to restrict Matthew and Mark to AD 70, Peter Bolt observes:

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[53] Ridderbos, 494. Carson rejects the eschatological interpretation of 24:15–21 because "the details in vv. 16–21 are too limited geographically and culturally to justify that view" (561). However, the focus of the entire passage is on Jerusalem. This does not entail a denial that the eschatological events have a wider scope. It is simply that this passage has a particular focus.

[54] Ridderbos, 495.

[55] Geldenhuys, 528–29.

[56] Geldenhuys, 528; Edwards, *Luke*, 605. The times of the Gentiles may have both a negative connotation (they trample on the city) and a positive one in the broader canonical context (the gospel goes to the nations during this period) (cf. Matt 24:14; Mark 13:10; Rom 11:25). Garland, 834; Edwards, *Luke*, 605.

[57] Bock, 1678.

[58] Ridderbos, 495; Bock, 1679.

[59] Garland, 832.

[60] Or, possibly, should not enter Judea; cf. the Christians who "prior to the siege of Titus . . . had fled from Jerusalem and Judea to Pella in Transjordan." James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 604.

[61] Bock, 1679.

[62] Oden and Bray, 388.

> Jesus' language sounds rather excessive if this is what is being referred to—despite the fact that France (2002: 521) argues that it 'does not outrun the detailed and lurid description of the siege in Josephus (Jewish War, e.g. 5.424–438, 512–518, 567–572; 6.193–213)'. Evans (2001: 322) is surely right when he says that "unless we view this statement as unbridled hyperbole, the warning that the period of tribulation will be so severe that unless shortened it will extinguish human life argues that the prophecy portends more than the Jewish war . . . [At that time] the fate of the whole of humanity did not hang in the balance."[63]

This is not to minimize the events of AD 70, which truly foreshadowed the eschatological tribulation. Strauss's summary of Josephus's description of the terrors of AD 70 reveals the depth of suffering that occurred at the first-century destruction of Jerusalem:

> Outside the city the Romans crucified so many Jews that they ran out of wood for crosses. Inside there was extreme infighting, murder, famine, disease, and even cannibalism. Thousands were slaughtered when Romans breached the walls (J.W. 6.3.3 §§193–195; 6.8.5 §§403–406). In all Josephus claims that 1,100,000 died during the siege and 97,000 were taken captive (J.W. 6.9.3 §§420–421). These numbers must surely be exaggerations, but they well illustrate the horrible sufferings the city experienced.[64]

Nonetheless Bolt's argument stands. It is bolstered by Jesus' allusion to Daniel 12:1, an eschatological text: "And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time" (in connection with Exod 10:14; 11:6; Joel 2:1–2).[65] Osborne argues that Matthew 24:21 (cf. Mark 13:19) is not exclusively eschatological but refers to "the destruction of Jerusalem as a foreshadowing of the final events of history."[66] This may be so, but the accent in Matthew and Mark is upon the future.

Beware False Christs (Matthew 24:23–28; Mark 13:21–23)

Matthew and Mark record Jesus' warnings against being led away by false Christs. Jesus' coming will be evident, not hidden. With regard to the time of these warnings' applicability, Alford observes, "These verses have but a faint reference (though an unmistakable one) to the time of the siege: their principal reference is to the latter days."[67] There is a parallel in Josephus to the near applicability and

[63] Bolt, 103n4, brackets and ellipses Bolt's; cf. Nolland, 975. Bolt's position, that the tribulation is a reference to the death of Christ, is not accepted.

[64] Strauss, 582.

[65] Nolland, 975; Osborne, *Matthew*, 886.

[66] Osborne, *Matthew*, 886; cf. Strauss, 582.

[67] Alford, 1:241; cf. Osborne, *Matthew*, 887; with reference to the future alone Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark*, BNTC (London: Continuum, 1991), 317; Davies and Allison, 3:351–52.

a parallel in 2 Thessalonians[68] that would apply to the period after the eschatological abomination of desolation:

> Josephus echoes this language when he speaks of various messianic imposters in the first century who deceived the masses, pretending to do "wonders and signs" (τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα; *Ant*. 20.8.6–7 §§167–172). Paul similarly says that the "man of lawlessness," who sets himself up in God's temple as God, will use "all sorts of displays of power through signs and wonders" (ἐν πάσῃ δυνάμει καὶ σημείοις καὶ τέρασιν; 2 Thess 2:9). The impressive nature of these false miracles will be such to deceive, "if possible, [even] the elect."[69]

In contrast to the deceptions, Christ's second coming will be visible—like lightening that flashes across the sky (24:26). There will be no mistaking it.

Christ's coming will also be like vultures gathered over a corpse. Of the eight possible interpretations listed by Davies and Allison, the most likely are either, "The coming of the Son of man will be as public and obvious as eagles or vultures circling over carrion" or "The eschatological tribulation will be concluded by vultures destroying the flesh of the wicked dead, as in Ezek. 39:17; Sib. Or. 3:644-6 and Rev. 19:17-18)."[70] The former is more likely, but the similarity of the latter to Revelation 19:17–18 should not be dismissed.[71]

The Coming of the Son of Man (Matthew 24:29–31; Mark 13:24–27; Luke 21:25–28)

With these verses, the sermon transitions from its bifocal vision of the already (AD 70) and the not-yet to an exclusive focus on the not-yet. For Luke, verse 24 functions as a hinge verse. The times of the Gentiles stretch from the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 until the coming of the Son of Man—the topic of 21:25–28. Matthew and Mark transition by describing the tribulation that follows the abomination of desolation in terms readers now know apply most directly to the final, eschatological tribulation (24:21–22 || 13:19–20). Matthew and Mark then locate these verses "immediately after the tribulation of those days" (24:29) and "in those days, after that tribulation" (13:24).[72]

These verses are the most challenging for the preterist reading of the Olivet Discourse. France argues that Matthew 24:4–35 || Mark 13:5–31 is entirely focused on the disciples' questions regarding the destruction of the Temple. The topic does not shift to the second coming of Christ until Matthew

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[68] Davies and Allison, 3:352.

[69] Strauss, 583.

[70] Davies and Allison, 3:355–56.

[71] Luke's version of the Olivet Discourse does not parallel Matthew and Mark at this point. However, Luke records that Jesus had taught some of these same things earlier in his ministry (Luke 17:23–24).

[72] William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 474. Keener helpfully states the matter in a way that identifies the ambiguities the original hearers and readers would have had in separating out the near and far fulfillments: "'Immediately' ties the tribulation of 'those days' to the unidentified final tribulation, a tribulation that may follow it by only a few years (as some of Matthew's audience could still have held) or, on a more modern reading, can only be identified as the final one by the fact that the parousia concludes it." Keener, 583.

24:36 || Mark 13:32. Thus, for France, the coming of the Son of Man in the clouds is not the return of Christ but his heavenly enthronement.[73] France argues that the cosmic language of Matthew 25:29 || Mark 13:24–26 (cf. Luke 21:27) is OT language for "far-reaching political change" and that Daniel 7, in its original context, is about the enthronement of the Messiah in heaven, not his return to earth.[74] What is seen is not the Son of Man literally returning in the clouds but the effects of his enthronement: "the destruction of the temple (expressed in the strongly 'visual' imagery of vv. 24b–25) and the gathering of the international people of God (v. 27)."[75]

The difficulties of this view are manifold. First, the statement that the Son of Man will be seen coming in the clouds is best taken to refer to his actually being seen by people rather than being "seen" in the events of AD 70, since Acts 1:11 sets the precedent for what coming in the clouds will be. It will be something visible. Second, for Jesus to come "with power and great glory" (24:30; cf. 13:26; 21:27) most likely indicates that his coming is visible. Third, the accompanying allusion to Zechariah 12:10–12 confirms the eschatological timing of this event. Fourth, this event is pictured as lightning that "comes from the east and shines as far as the west" (24:27), which indicates that the coming of Christ referred to is a visible and unmistakable coming.[76] Fifth, the singular "heaven" in Matthew is used to indicate "the visible (earthly) world," and the plural is used to indicate the "invisible (divine) realm."[77] The use of the singular "heaven" in verse 30 indicates that the Son of Man is appearing in the visible heaven.[78] Sixth, the imagery is derived from OT passages about God's end-time coming.[79] Seventh, Marshall rightly notes that "the cosmic signs cannot be interpreted as purely political events."[80] Edward Adams's survey of "cosmic catastrophe language" in Jewish apocalyptic literature demonstrated that "in all those texts [which "employ global and/or cosmic catastrophe language"], more than local socio-political change . . . is in view. In many cases, the final judgment is envisaged."[81] In some cases, the "heavenly disorders" are "preliminary," but even so, "in all cases, actual celestial abnormalities seem to be in view."[82] Eighth, David Turner notes that the "global language" of Matthew 24 points toward an eschatological coming. Ninth, Turner also warns about the danger of minimizing the full scope of Jesus' eschatological teaching:

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[73] France, *Mark*, 498, 500–1; France, *Matthew*, 293–24; cf. R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (1970; reprint, Vancouver, Canada: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 230–39; cf. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of* God, 354–65; Quarles, 628–33.

[74] France, *Mark*, 500–1, 534; cf. France, *Matthew*, 396, 923; cf. Quarles, 629–30.

[75] France, *Mark*, 535.

[76] These first four observations are all drawn from Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 807–9.

[77] Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 132.

[78] Ibid., 156.

[79] Adams, 150–52.

[80] Marshall, 777; cf. Adams, 156.

[81] Ibid., 96

[82] Ibid., 98.

> One difficulty with preterism is its truncation of Jesus's eschatology, which brings the reign of heaven to earth (6:10) and renews the world (19:28). If all this has already occurred, one wonders at the underwhelming denouement of the glorious future promised by the biblical prophets, John, and Jesus himself.[83]

In light of these considerations, it is best to understand Matthew 24:30 || Mark 13:26 || Luke 21:27 as referring to the second coming of Christ.[84]

This marks the end of the first section of the Olivet Discourse. This section unfolds the pattern of the Day of the Lord, with an eye both to its type in AD 70 and its ultimate fulfillment. The next major section, Matthew 24:32–25:30 || Mark 13:28–37 || Luke 21:29–33, consists of instruction about how one should think and live in light of the Day of the Lord just described.

Parousia Parables (Matthew 24:32–25:30; Mark 13:28–37; Luke 21:29–33)

The first reflective instruction comes in the form of a parable. When a fig tree (or any tree) puts it leaves out, it is clear that the summer is near. When all these things are seen, Jesus' disciples should know that Jesus is near, at the very door. This is straightforward enough, but it is complicated by Jesus' explanation: "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (24:34 || 13:30 || cf. 21:32).

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[83] Turner, 584.

[84] Broadus, 490; Cranfield, 406; Carson, 568; Blomberg, 362–63; Bock, 1686; Davies and Allison, 3:361–62; Nolland, 983; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 202; Keener, 585–86. The strongest preterist counterargument is that Daniel 7:13 identifies the Son of Man's coming in the clouds as the Son of Man's coming up to the Father's throne in heaven rather than his returning to earth. However, certain contextual factors in Daniel 7 make it more likely that an eschatological coming is primarily in view. Goldingay observes that the perspective of Daniel 7 has been earth-focused, that "the opening phrase of v. 9 implies a continuity of perspective," that the reference to the Ancient of Days "coming" (v. 22) implies an earthly setting for the thrones, and that final judgment scenes often have an earthly location. John Goldingay, *Daniel*, rev. ed., WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 361. The fact that war will be made on the saints until the Ancient of Days comes (to earth) implies that the timing of the coming is eschatological. Longman, 198; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:53; cf. 3:189–90; cf. E. J. Young, *Daniel* (1949; reprint, Carlise, PA: Banner of Truth, 1978), 158, 159. Thus, when the Son of Man comes with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days, he is coming from heaven to earth. Daniel's vision of the Son of Man coming with the clouds is a vision of the Second Coming. See Andrew E. Steinmann, *Daniel*, CC (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2008), 359–60.

Daniel 7 has numerous links with both Psalms 2 and 110. The beastly kingdoms of Daniel 7 correspond to the raging nations in Psalm 2. In all three passages the Son of Man is enthroned over the kings of earth, and the kings who oppose the Son are crushed. In Daniel 7 and Psalm 2 there is blessing for those who follow the Son (Ps 2:12; Dan 7:18, 22, 27). Steinmann, 360. These psalms refer, in part, to the reign of Christ that commenced at his ascension. Steinmann, however, notes a major difference between the two Psalms (2 and 110) and Daniel 7. In Daniel, "the Messiah is not pictured as ruling until after the beasts are shorn of their power, whereas in these two psalms, the Messiah's reign begins the process of defeating the nations." Steinmann, *Daniel*, 360. The similarities and divergences of these passages point to the inaugurated but not yet consummated nature of the kingdom. Psalms 2 and 110 include both the inauguration (Pss 2:1–7; 110:1–4) and the consummation (Pss 2:6, 8–12; 110:5–7) of Christ's reign. Daniel 7:8–14, 20–27 is about the consummation, but some of its imagery can be applied to the enthronement of Christ that followed his resurrection and ascension. Indeed, God himself applied this imagery to Christ's current enthronement by having Christ ascend into a cloud (Acts 1:9).

Critical scholars have argued that since Christ did not return within the lifetimes of the generation then living, his prophecy proved false.[85] This is an utterly impossible interpretation. As if to foreclose it in the most emphatic terms, Jesus followed the prediction of verse 24:34 || 13:30 with the assertion, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (24:35 || 13:31).

For preterists, this verse is the lynchpin of their interpretation:

> The key to understanding the entire discourse is found in verse 34 which says, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place." . . . 1. Every other time the phrase "this generation" is used in Matthew (11:16; 12:41, 42, 45; 23:36), it clearly refers to the generation of Jews to whom Jesus was speaking. 2. In the immediately preceding context, the same phrase clearly refers to the generation of Jews to whom Jesus is speaking (23:36). 3. The phrase is used in Matthew 24 in a discourse that is a response to a specific question by the disciples regarding the time of the temple's destruction (24:1–3).[86]

Mathison's arguments are aimed at those who would explain "this generation" to refer to "the nation of the Jews"[87] or to "the people of this particular disposition and frame of mind who are averse to Jesus and his words."[88] Understanding "this generation" to refer to the generation of Jesus' day does not necessitate a preterist interpretation, however. Herman Bavinck explains:

> The words "this generation" (ἡ γενεα αὐτη, *hē genea hautē*) cannot be understood to mean the Jewish people, but undoubtedly refer to the generation then living. On the other hand, it is clear that the words "all these things" (παντα ταυτα, *panta tauta*) do not include the parousia itself but only refer to the signs that precede and announce it. For after predicting the destruction of Jerusalem and the signs and his return and even the gathering of his elect by the angels, and therefore actually ending his eschatological discourse, Jesus proceeds in verse 32 to offer a practical application. Here he states that just as in the case of the fig tree the sprouting of leaves announces the summer, so "all these things" are signs that the end is near or that the Messiah is at the door. Here the expression *panta tauta* clearly refers to the signs of the coming parousia, not to the parousia itself, for else it would make no sense to say that when "these things" occur, the end is "near." In verse 34 the words "all these things" (*panta tauta*) have the same meaning. Jesus therefore does not say that his parousia will still occur within the time of the generation then living. What he says is that the signs and portents of it, as they would be visible in the destruction of Jerusalem and concomitant events, would begin to occur in the time of the generation then living. Of this Jesus is so sure that he says that while heaven and earth will pass away, his words will by

[85] Davies and Allison, 3:367–68; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 208.

[86] Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999), 111–12; cf. Quarles, 635.

[87] Vos, *Dogmatics*, 5:287.

[88] Ridderbos, 502.

> no means pass away. For the rest, however, Jesus abstains from all attempts at further specifying the time.[89]

The generation that Jesus was speaking to would experience "all these things" in terms of the type. After AD 70 no further events must be fulfilled before the return of Christ. From that time, Christ is at the door and could step through at any time. The objection to this view is that some of the things mentioned clearly are eschatological.[90] Nonetheless, even the eschatological items have their typical counterparts. This remains a possible explanation.[91]

Then Jesus said something that seems in tension with the mention of signs throughout the discourse, including in the preceding parable: "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (24:36 || 13:32). The subject has changed (indicated by "but concerning")[92] from the coming narrowly conceived in its culmination to the entire complex event that the discourse has been about. The day referred to in these verses is the Day of the Lord. Strauss observes, "'That day' often has eschatological significance, referring to judgment day—the eschatological 'day of the Lord' (Joel 3:18; Amos 8:3, 9, 13; 9:11; Obad 1:8; Mic 4:6; Zeph 1:9–10; 3:11, 16; Zech 9:16; Matt 7:22; Luke 10:12; 1 Cor 3:13; 2 Tim 1:12, 18; 4:8). This meaning is likely in light of the close parallel between the parable of the return of the owner of the house that follows (vv. 34–36) and the return of the Son of Man (vv. 26–27)."[93]

There is thus no contradiction between 24:36 || 13:32 and the signs mentioned in the discourse. The signs are all interior to the Day of the Lord. But 24:36 || 13:32 concerns the commencement of the eschatological Day of the Lord.

Matthew 24:36 and Mark 13:32 also set the theme for the following illustrations and parables. It is important to keep in mind that in the illustrations and parables "coming" refers not simply to the climactic coming of the Son to earth but to the entire Day of the Lord as a coming in judgment that culminates in the Son's return to earth. This accounts for the fact that earlier in the discourse certain very specific signs are mentioned whereas in this section the total unexpectedness of the coming is emphasized. The commencement of the coming will be totally unexpected, but once the coming commences the Day of the Lord judgments will serve as signs of the nearness of the culmination of that coming in the visible appearance and return of Christ to earth.

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[89] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 4:687.

[90] Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:367.

[91] Nolland, 989; Osborne, *Matthew*, 899. It is also possible that "the generation that sees 'all these things'" is "perhaps some future generation." Noted in Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:367. The "this" refers not to the generation hearing Jesus speak but to the generation about whom Jesus was ultimately speaking. When they see these things take place, they know the return to earth has drawn near.

[92] Strauss, *Mark*, 595.

[93] Ibid., 595; cf. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Mark*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 336–37.

The Olivet Discourse and the Seal Judgments

A reader inclined to accept the preceding interpretation of the Olivet Discourse would be predisposed to read Revelation's description of the six seals either with the same bifocal vision or within a futurist framework. Within the context of Revelation 6, the futurist reading is more compelling since the focus of the seals is not Jerusalem but the entire earth.[94] In addition, the four horseman allude to Zechariah 6:1–8, which pictures horses and chariots (instruments of war) emerging from God's presence (the two bronze mountains recalling the two bronze pillars at the entrance of the temple)[95] to execute judgment on the nations, especially on Babylon to the north and probably on Egypt to the south.[96] These nations are representative of all the idolatrous nations, and the judgment is eschatological.[97] Thus both of the major passages alluded to by the first four seals are eschatological in nature.

From the earliest interpretations of Revelation to the present, many have identified the rider on the white horse as Christ.[98] A futurist could understand this of Christ beginning his conquest of earth as the Day of the Lord commences.[99] In chapter 19 Christ also rides a white horse, wears a crown, and makes war, and many interpreters think it is most reasonable to expect consistency between these symbols rather than to explain them as representing different persons.[100] In addition, white is always

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[94] See Thomas R. Schriener, *Revelation,* BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023), 271.

[95] Andrew E. Hill, "Zechariah," in *Minor Prophets,* CBC, ed. Philip W. Comfort (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2012), 171; Anthony R. Petterson *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi,* AOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity 2015), 176; cf. Eugene H. Merrill, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 188; George L. Klein, *Zechariah,* NAC (Nashville: B&H 2008), 185; Al Wolters, *Zechariah,* HCOT (Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2014), 173; Mark J. Boda, *The Book of Zechariah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 360.

[96] Wolters, 172; Boda, 376. Wolters and Boda seem to identify the historical fulfillment of this judgment with events that began several years before these visions. Cyrus's conquest of Babylon occurred with little turmoil or devastation upon Babylon. But several revolts in Babylon upon Darius's rise to power led to more serious consequences, including the execution of over 2,000 Babylonians in the year before this vision. Wolters, 179; Boda, 357, 358. Subsequent to this vision Darius ended a revolt in Egypt, which may account for the chariots that headed south. See Merrill, 105; Boda, 109. The difficulty with this interpretation is that in Zechariah 1 the Angel of Yhwh responded to the report of the nations' rest with the cry "how long." This statement was made in relation to a seventy-year span of time that would be completed when the Temple was rebuilt. It would seem odd, therefore, for the fulfillment of the later vision of judgment to precede both the first vision of the nations at rest and the end of the seventy years.

[97] There is contextual precedent for an eschatological reading in preceding visions (cf. 2:11–12; 3:9) and in the following unit (6:9–15). Duguid opts for an eschatological reading by linking this vision with the immediately preceding one. "In that vision, idolatry was driven (carried) out of God's land to the land of Babel, where a temple was prepared for it (5:5–11). . . . Now the focus shifts to answer the question: 'Will these idolators possess Babylon for ever, in an ongoing enmity to God? Will there always be a threatening location from which to launch regular attacks on God's people form the uttermost north. . . ?" No, God will judge the idolatrous nations, here represented by Babylon and Egypt, for their idolatry. Iain M. Duguid, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi,* EPSC (Carlisle, PA: Evangelical, 2010), 124.

[98] Irenaeus of Lyons, "Irenaeus against Heresies," in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885), 1:493. [4.21.3] Victorinus of Petovium, "Commentary on the Apocalypse," in *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, ACT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), 10; Schreiner, *Revelation,* 267.

[99] William De Burgh, *An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, and Co., 1857), 142; Joseph A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse,* 8th ed. (New York: Cook, 1901), 315–16.

[100] De Burgh, 142; Schreiner, *Revelation*, 267; noted in Beale, *Revelation,* 375.

used in Revelation for that which is holy.[101] Christ is also identified as the conqueror in Revelation 3:21; 5:5; 17:14.[102] A futurist following this interpretation would understand Christ, in chapter 6, "*going forth* to his work of conquest," while in chapter 19 "we have his appearing to strike the last blow."[103] This harmonizes with the Olivet Discourse, which can speak of the entire Day of the Lord sequence as the *coming* of Christ (Matt 24:39).

However, Jesus began the Olivet Discourse with the words, "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." Given the close connection between the four horsemen and the beginning of birth pangs in the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24:4–8), the connection of the first horseman with the Antichrist is the best interpretation.

In both Zechariah 6 and Revelation 6, the horses function as a unit, signifying similar realities.[104] This means that the white horse must signify some calamity. Either of the futurist interpretations proffered above would be consistent with this observation, but the common view that the white horse symbolizes Christ advancing his kingdom through the gospel is not compatible with it.

The second item in Jesus' list of birth pangs is, "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars." The red horse and the rider with a sword most likely represent wars that will commence at the beginning of the eschatological Day of the Lord.[105]

The imagery of the third seal signifies famine, which Jesus included among the birth pangs that marked the onset of the Day of the Lord (Matt 24:7).[106] This judgment follows logically upon conquest and warfare. Warfare often leads to the destruction of land and thus to famine.[107] It is also the birth pang that Jesus mentioned after mentioning war.

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[101] Schreiner, *Revelation,* 267; noted in Beale, *Revelation*, 372.

[102] Noted in Beale, *Revelation*, 375. Further confirmation of the unity of these two horsemen is found in Psalm 45, which speaks of the Messiah as a rider with a sword and arrows. De Burgh, 143; noted in Beale, *Revelation*, 375.

[103] De Burgh, 142.

[104] Beale, *Revelation*, 376. Note that Beale connects the first seal with "(1) the antichrist, (2) governments that persecute Christians, or (3) the devil's servants in general" (377).

[105] Victorinus, 11; De Burgh, 141, 146–47; Thomas, 426; Fanning, 244. Note also that the reference to the sword, in the second seal, followed as it is with famine and pestilence in the third and fourth seals, may constitute an allusion to Ezekiel 14:12–19. In that passage Yhwh stated emphatically that "when a land sins against me," he could punish it by famine, wild beasts, sword, and pestilence. The application was made to Jerusalem, but the principle was stated generically. It should not surprise readers to find these judgments in the ultimate Day of the Lord. De Burgh, 144–45; Beale, *Revelation*, 372–73. Beale also sees an allusion to Ezekiel 21:14, noting, "The phrase 'a great sword' (μάχαιρα μεγάλη or ῥομφαία μεγάλη) occurs apparently in only three OT passages: Isa. 27:1; Jer. 32:24 (25:38); and Ezek. 21:14." The prophets apply "the sword judgment to both Israel and the nations." Beale, *Revelation*, 380. Beale links the church and Israel and identifies the referent of the second seal as purifying persecutions. However, judgments on disobedient Israel do not neatly correspond to the persecution and martyrdom of Christians. It is more likely that the Day of the Lord judgments that disobedient Israel faced historically are typological of the Day of the Lord judgments that the disobedient nations will face.

[106] Victorinus, 10–11 (Victoriunus specifically links this famine to the time of Antichrist); Andrew of Caesarea, "Commentary on the Apocalypse," in *Greek Commentaries on Revelation,* ACT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), 133–34; De Burgh, 146; Thomas, 430; Brian J. Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone,* NSBT (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2019), 147 (it is unclear where Tabb locates this famine chronologically).

[107] Osborne, *Revelation*, 280.

The fourth seal is a continuation of the birth pangs that mark the beginning of the Day of the Lord. Victorinus observed, "The Lord had foretold these very things" when he mentioned pestilences in the Olivet Discourse (Luke 21:11).[108]

When the Lamb opened the fifth seal, John saw not another horse but martyrs. Nevertheless, the seals continue to follow the pattern of the Olivet Discourse.[109] Following his recitation of the beginning of birth pangs, Jesus said, "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death" (Matt 24:9). Beale observes that the phrase "rest a little longer" "appears to allude to an imminent end of history."[110] At last the final judgment, long delayed, has drawn near.

When the sixth seal was opened, John saw events that recall Jesus' description of events "immediately after" the "great tribulation" and just preceding the return of Christ (Matt 24:29–30, cf. 24:21).[111] However, unlike in the Olivet Discourse, Christ does not immediately appear. Instead, Revelation 7 initiates a delay in the narrative. The return of Christ is foreshadowed by the sixth seal, but Revelation delays the account of his return until chapter 19.

Conclusion

The connections between the Olivet Discourse and the seal judgments do not prove a futurist interpretation of Revelation. Other interpretations of the Olivet Discourse remain possible. Some may remain convinced that the first part of the Olivet Discourse describes events that span the inter-advent period. These interpreters will be inclined to understand the first five seals as referring to the inter-advent period. This does not necessarily tell against an overall futurist interpretation of Revelation. A futurist could see a transition to the eschatological Day of the Lord take place with the sixth seal.

Nonetheless, this article has sought to make the case that the best interpretation of the Olivet Discourse understands its first section to be about both the events culminating in the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 and about the eschatological Day of the Lord of which those events were types. On this understanding of the Olivet Discourse, the best interpretation of seal judgments is a futurist interpretation.

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[108] Victorinus, 11; cf. Caesarius of Arles, "Exposition on the Apocalypse," in *Latin Commentaries*, 75; Thomas, 435; Fanning, 245. This seal also alludes to Ezekiel 5:16–17 and 14:12–20, which mention famine (5:16; 14:12–14), wild beasts (5:17; 14:15–16), sword (5:17; 14:17–18), and pestilence (5:17; 14:19–20). Stuart, 158; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation,* rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 145; Beale, *Revelation*, 383; Osborne, *Revelation,* 283; Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, BNTC (London: Continuum, 2006), 112; Tabb, 147; Fanning, 244.

[109] Alford, 4:620 (claiming a partial fulfillment in AD 70 and an ultimate eschatological fulfillment); Thomas, 441 (eschatological fulfillment); Beale, *Revelation,* 390; Boxall, 114; Fanning, 244 (eschatological fulfillment).

[110] Beale, *Revelation*, 395. For Beale, this allusion "presents a theological problem" since this "little longer" extends throughout the entire inter-advent period. He resolves this problem by noting that "time in heaven . . . may be reckoned differently than time on earth" (ibid.). However, the futurist interpretation does not suffer a difficulty here. The eschatological Day of Yhwh began with the opening of the seals. These initial birth pangs may not seem like a final judgment of the wicked (given that the first seal marked the ascendency of Antichrist), but if the martyred saints would but "rest a little longer" they would see justice executed.

[111] James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation,* PTW (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 184; cf. Fanning, 249.

Sessio Ad Sinistram : God the Father's Spatial Manifestation in Heaven

by Judson Greene[1]

He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.[2]

These lines from the Apostles' Creed articulate central doctrines of the Christian faith. While Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, and coming judgment are obviously central facets of the faith, in a creed of under twenty lines Jesus' session at the Father's right hand may strike us as a surprising inclusion. Further, what does it actually mean that Jesus sits "at the right hand of the Father"? The other lines of the creed read in a very straightforward manner, but the picture that comes to mind when I imagine Jesus seated at the Father's right hand entails—well—the Father seated at Jesus' left hand. Is that accurate to the biblical witness?

This article will explore what is at Jesus' left hand with particular regard to spatiality. By examining (1) the nature of space, (2) the spatiality of heaven, and (3) the Father's spatial presence in heaven, this paper will demonstrate that God the Father possesses a spatial manifestation—that is, a spatially circumscribed theophany of the First Person—at Jesus' left hand in heaven.

The Nature of Space

There are two main views on the nature of space: the "receptacle" (or "absolute") view and the "relational" view.[3] The receptacle view of space understands space to be a container of all material objects. This spatial container, or "box space," is spatial whether or not it has any real spatial objects

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[2] This translation is from the 2019 Book of Common Prayer.

[3] For a succinct history of these contrasting theories, see Albert Einstein's foreword to Max Janner, *Concepts of Space: The History of Theories of Space in Physics,* 3rd ed. (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2012), xiii–xvii. For the same material from a more theological perspective, see Chan Ho Park, "Concepts of Space," in "Transcendence and Spatiality of the Triune Creator" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2003), 22–51; Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 56–59.

within it.[4] Conversely, the relational view understands space to be a "positional quality" of material objects.[5] For space to exist, spatial entities must be proximate to one another. Newton advocated the receptacle view since he grounded his thought in absolute views of space and time, but physicists today follow Einstein in holding to the relational view, which allows for the theory of relativity.

The Father would possess a spatial manifestation in heaven if the following syllogisms could be demonstrated.

From the receptacle view:
Premise 1: An entity is spatial if it resides in a spatial receptacle.
Premise 2: God the Father's manifestation resides in a spatial receptacle.
Conclusion: God the Father's manifestation is spatial.

From the relational view:
Premise 1: An entity is spatial if it is spatially related to other spatial entities.
Premise 2: God the Father's manifestation is spatially related to other entities.
Conclusion: God the Father's manifestation is spatial.

Below, Section 2 will argue that heaven is a spatial receptacle containing spatial entities, and Section 3 will argue that the Father manifests himself within heaven in spatial relationship to these entities, demonstrating that the Father manifests himself spatially regardless of one's view of space.

A Better Country: The Spatiality of Heaven

While some theologians argue that heaven is best understood as a state or spiritual metaphor,[6] biblical authors typically present heaven as a *place*. That heaven is a spatial realm is clear because spatial

[4] Einstein, xv.

[5] Park, 24.

[6] Arthur Tait argues that heaven is a state: when "the cramping influence of this idea of locality" in heaven "has been cast off," he writes, one can understand that "heaven is no longer a distant kingdom whose boundaries are determined by space . . . but it is a spiritual kingdom the entrance into which lies open before men in this life." *The Heavenly Session of Our Lord* (London: Robert Scott Roxburghe, 1912), 221. Similarly, Donald Guthrie states that "Paul does not think of heaven as a place, but thinks of it in terms of the presence of God." *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981), 880. Guthrie's use of the adversative "but" creates an unnecessary bifurcation.

For Wolfhart Pannenberg, heaven is best understood as a metaphor: "To speak of heaven as the place of God is to use a spatial image but it is to express in this way the differentiation between God and the space of earthly creation." Heaven is "a figure of speech for the eternal presence of God in which he is present to all temporal things." God dwells in heaven, which means he is "in the sphere of his eternal presence that is inaccessible to us," a sphere that can hold no bodily forms. *Systematic Theology,* vol 1., trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 412–13. Calvin and Augustine also interpreted references to the Father "in heaven" as metaphor. John H. Mazaheri, "Calvin and Augustine's Interpretations of 'The Father in Heaven,'" *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 106, nos. 3–4 (2011): 440–51.

At times, theologians argue simultaneously that heaven is the place of Christ's ascended body but also not a "place" at all. See Ralph V. Norman, "Beyond the Ultimate Sphere: The Ascension and Eschatology," *Modern Believing* 42, no. 2 (2001): 7–10. For Millard Erickson, "While heaven is both a place and a state, it is primarily a state." *Christian Theology,* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 1232. What Erickson means by "primarily" is not very clear.

beings dwell within it. This section will demonstrate that angels and Christ's resurrected body are spatial entities that dwell in heaven, necessitating heaven's spatiality.

Angels Spatially Dwell in Heaven

The following section will demonstrate that angels are (1) spatial entities that (2) dwell in heaven, necessitating heaven's spatiality.

Angels Are Spatial

Angels change locations and are not omnipresent.[7] Daniel 9:21 describes the angel Gabriel coming to Daniel "in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice."[8] Similarly, Daniel 10 depicts a man of angelic description (Dan 10:5–6; cf. Ezra 9:2; Matt 28:3; Luke 24:4) who touches Daniel (Dan 10:10) and was prevented from coming to the Tigris river by the "prince of Persia" (Dan 10:13).[9] The context is not visionary, referencing earthly time (Dan 10:1, 2, 4) and place (4b) as well as Daniel's physical

[7] "There is only one God. All other spirit beings are creatures (Col 1:16). Only God is omnipotent (Rev 20:10). It is natural to infer that only God is omnipresent (Jer 23:24). Hence angels and demons alike operate in some spatially limited way." Vern S. Poythress, "Territorial Spirits: Some Biblical Perspectives," *Urban Mission* 13 (December 1995): 37–49. No biblical evidence supports angelic omnipresence. Cf. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology,* vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1940), 638. For the purposes of this paper, the following biblical entities (when contextually appropriate) will be referred to as "angels": אָבִיר ("mighty, valiant," Pss 78:25; 103:20), אֱלֹהִים ("gods," "divine beings," Pss 8:6 [LXX: ἄγγελοι]; 82:1; 138:1 [LXX: ἄγγελοι]),בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים ("sons of God," Job 1:6; 2:1; Dan 3:25; Pss 29:1; 89:7), כְּרוּב ("cherub," Exod 25:18–20; 1 Kgs 6:23–35; 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; Isa 37:16; Pss 80:2; 99:1; cf. 2 Sam 22:11; Ps 18:11; Ezra 1, 10), גַּבְרִיאֵל ("Gabriel," Dan 8:16; 9:21; cf. Luke 1:19, 26), מִיכָאֵל ("Michael," Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1; cf. Rev 12:7), מַלְאָךְ ("messenger, angel," Gen 19:1; 32:1; Ps 91:11), מְשָׁרְתָיו ("ministers," Ps 103:21), עֲבָדָי ("servants," Job 4:18), עִיר ("watcher," Dan 4:10, 14, 20), צָבָא ("host," 1 Kgs 22:19; Neh 9:6; Ps 148:2), קָדוֹשׁ ("holy, sacred," Ps 89:6, 8; Job 5:1; 15:15; Zech 14:5; Dan 8:2, 13), שָׂרָף ("seraph," Isa 6:2–3; 6:6), קָהָל ("the assembly" Ps 89:5), סוֹד ("council," Ps 89:7), ἄγγελος ("angel," Matt 1:20; Luke 2:15; Rev 5:2), στρατιᾶς οὐρανίου ("heavenly host," Luke 2:13), πνεύματα ("spirits," Heb 1:7, 14), ἀρχάγγελος ("archangel," 1 Thess 4:16; Jude 9). This list draws from the following: Erickson, 408; William G. Heidt, "Angelic Nomenclature," in *Angelology of the Old Testament: A Study in Biblical Theology,* The Catholic University of America Studies in Sacred Theology (Second Series) (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1949), 1–17. For a discussion of the possibility of angelic identity for Paul's terms translated as "principalities," "powers," "thrones," "dominions," and "authorities" (Col 1:16; Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 6:12; Col 2:15), see Ronn A. Johnson, "The Old Testament Background for Paul's Use of 'Principalities and Powers'" (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2004).

[8] Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version,* copyright ©2016 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The participle from נגע ("to touch") may carry the idea "that Gabriel literally 'touched' Daniel (KJV); but since the arrival time immediately follows . . . the meaning is that Gabriel reached him, that is, 'came' to Daniel." Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel,* NAC (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 250. Miller argues that "in swift flight" should be translated "in extreme weariness," noting that angels did not have wings and that "weariness" fits the context (250–51). However, Daniel's emphasis seems to be on describing Gabriel and his coming, not the circumstances of his previous vision, making "swift flight" the better option. The context is historical narrative. As Daniel L. Smith-Christopher notes, it "is not clear that Daniel is having a vision. Daniel has seen Gabriel before in a vision, and that is why Daniel now recognizes him." "Daniel," in *NIB,* vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 126.

[9] Poythress argues that the "prince of Persia," "prince of Greece," and "Michael, your prince" are all references to territorial spirits of "a particular geographical and political area." "Territorial Spirits," 39. Cf. Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary,* TOTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978), 201.

characteristics (Dan 10:3, 4b, 5a, 10) and surroundings (4b, 7).[10] The parallel between Daniel's three weeks of mourning (Dan 10:2) and the angel's three weeks of delay (Dan 10:13) as well as the effect of the angelophany on Daniel's companions (Dan 10:7) imply that the author intends this section to be taken as historical, not symbolic.[11] These changes in location combined with no scriptural reference to angels being omnipresent evinces angelic spatiality.

Other texts corroborate angelic spatiality. Angels roll away stones (Matt 28:23)[12] and are located in physical places ("standing on the right side of the altar of incense," Luke 1:11).[13] These references along with other passages that use the "language of movement and spatial location in connection with spirits . . . impl[y] that spirits are spatially localized."[14]

Angels Spatially Dwell in Heaven

The biblical authors conceive of angels as dwelling in the heavenly realm. Jesus frequently refers to angels residing in heaven (Matt 22:30; 24:36; Mark 12:25; 13:32).[15] Luke describes the "heavenly host (στρατιᾶς οὐρανίου)" coming suddenly to the shepherds and then going "from them [the shepherds' location] into heaven (ἀπῆλθον ἀπ᾽ αὐτῶν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν)."[16] Angels descend "from

[10] "Daniel was beside the Tigris . . . in bodily presence, not in vision, when a heavenly being appeared to him." Miller, *Daniel,* 279.

[11] In keeping with a more straightforward narrative, Daniel's editorial note that he understood this vision (10:1) stands in contrast to his lack of understanding concerning his previous vision (8:27). So Baldwin, 199.

[12] Matthew 28:23 presents a "robustly physical" angel who is "rolling a huge stone, sitting on it, and visible not just to the women but also to the guards." R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1100. "The visual description in v. 3 recalls that of other supernatural beings as seen by humans, for example, in Dan 10:5–6 (and cf. the description of God in Dan 7:9); Rev 1:13–16; 1 En. 62:15–16; 71:1; 87:2" (1100).

[13] The passive of ὤφθη "is used frequently with the sense of 'to appear', usually but not exclusively (Acts 7:26) of the advent of heavenly visitors and the risen Lord. It denotes a real appearance rather than a dream." I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text,* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 55. Joel Green argues that the angel's spatial description emphasizes "Zechariah's presence in the sanctuary." *The Gospel of Luke,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 71. This would seem to put Zechariah and the angel in spatial relationship. Darrell L. Bock argues that this is not "Zechariah's spiritual, psychological perception" but a depiction of reality. *Luke,* BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 1:80–81. John Nolland concurs. *Luke 1–9:20,* WBC (Dallas: Word, 1989), 29.

[14] Poythress, 40.

[15] "By the use of the phrase, 'the angels which are in heaven' (Mark 13:32), Christ definitely asserts that angels inhabit heavenly spheres." Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology,* vol. 2 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 14. Jesus also says that if a sinner repents there is "joy in heaven" (Luke 15:7), a statement he later parallels with "joy before (ἐνώπιον) the angels of God" (v. 10), indicating that angels dwell in heaven. Note the spatial ἐνώπιον ("in the presence of," BDAG, 342). In the parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd seems to correspond to God, the angels to the neighbors. The rejoicing is "*before God's angels.* I.e. by God himself in the presence of angels, or perhaps with them." Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X–XXIV),* AB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 1077, 1081 (emphasis original). Cf. Bock, 2:1304; Marshall, 602, 604.

[16] My translation. The spatial relation to the shepherds, who are clearly spatial entities, is significant. Luke uses plural and singular οὐρανός "indifferently for the sky and heaven." Marshall, 112. "The Gospel thus portrays angels as coming to earth to interact with humans." David K. Bryan, "A Revised Cosmic Hierarchy Revealed," in *Ascent into Heaven in Luke-Acts: New Explorations of Luke's Narrative Hinge,* ed. David K. Bryan and David W. Pao (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 75. Bock points out that it is very unusual for the heavenly host to be out of heaven (Dan 7:10; 1 Kgs 22:19; 2 Chr 18:18;

heaven (ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ)" (Matt 28:2; Luke 22:43). Perhaps the background for this concept is in Genesis 28:12, where Jacob sees a "ladder" from earth to heaven on which "the angels of God were ascending and descending."[17] This vision comports with the idea that angels typically dwell in heaven, though they can descend to the earth. Paul (Gal 1:18; 2 Thess 1:7) and John (Rev 4:18; 10:1; 12:7; 14:17; 18:1; 20:1) also describe angels as dwelling in and descending from heaven. Since angels spatially dwell in heaven, then heaven must be a spatial realm.

Christ's Resurrected Body Spatially Dwells in Heaven

Christ's resurrected body is a human, spatial body. This same body ascended into heaven where it now resides, necessitating heavenly spatiality.

Christ's Resurrected Body Is Spatial

Christ's resurrection was a bodily resurrection (Matt 28:9; Luke 24:39–40; John 20:20, 24–29). After the resurrection, Jesus' body changed locations (Matt 28:16; Luke 24:15, 28–29, 36; John 20:19, 26), assumed various postures (Luke 24:30, 50; John 20:20; 21:12–13), ate and drank (Luke 24:42–43; Acts 10:41; cf. John 21:9–14), and was touched by other humans (Matt 28:9; John 20:27).[18] Jesus took pains to ensure that the disciples would recognize that he had a physical and haptic body of "flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39).[19] Though Jesus' body seems to have had some unique properties, it did not cease from being a real human body.[20] The author of Hebrews argues that Jesus was "made like his

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4 Macc 4:11). *Luke,* 1:219. Bock takes στρατιᾶς as a "partitive genitive, which means that the multitude is a select group that comes from the entire heavenly array of angels" (219).

[17] "Jacob's ladder" is a misnomer on two fronts. First, the "ladder" (סֻלָּם, a hapax legomenon) is better translated "stairway," and it likely implies the idea of an ancient ziggurat. Understanding סֻלָּם as a ziggurat also strengthens the literary parallels with Babel, a self-proclaimed "gate of heaven," yet one that is man-centered and man-made. Second, the ziggurat is clearly God's, not Jacob's, as Jacob's response makes clear (Gen 28:16–17). Cornelis Houtman, "What Did Jacob See in His Dream at Bethel: Some Remarks on Genesis 28:10–22," *VT* 27, no. 3 (1977): 337–51. Cf. Roger B. Stein, "Searching for Jacob's Ladder," *Colby Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2003), 34–54.

[18] In taking hold of Christ's feet "Matthew makes it clear that Jesus' risen body was a real body—the Evangelist is not describing a vision." Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew,* PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 739. Cf. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28,* WBC (Dallas: Word, 1995), 874. Interestingly, the physicality of Jesus' resurrected body did not provoke Thomas to doubt that Jesus could be true divinity. The contrary is true (John 20:28). The disciples did not consider Jesus' material body a defect or sign of imperfection. Rather, the God who can raise such material back from the dead is the God that they worship.

[19] In Luke 24:39, Jesus uses no less than seven words to refer to himself, including the emphatic αὐτός, emphasize that it is truly he (μου . . . μου . . . ἐγώ εἰμι αὐτός . . . με . . . ἐμὲ). "In this context, there is an incidental (but not unintended) affirmation of the inalienable materiality of the human body (resurrected or not)." John Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53,* WBC (Dallas: Word, 1993), 1213. Possibly the hands and feet are mentioned because they hold Christ's wounds, as in John 20:25, 27. But in the absence of an explicit reference to his wounds, "the corporeal nature of Jesus" was "foremost in Luke's mind." Robert H. Stein, *Luke,* NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 617. Cf. Green, 854–55. Nolland writes, "I cannot avoid the impression that the extensive scholarly difficulty with this particular resurrection account betrays an underlying tendency to be scandalized by materiality. Ancient Hellenistic dualism lives on!" *Luke 18:35–24:53,* 1214.

[20] Jesus' resurrected "body is flesh and bone transformed into a form that is able to move through material matter. . . . There is no way to distinguish the person of Jesus from the risen Christ except that his existence now takes place at an

brothers in every respect," including a body of "blood and flesh" (2:14), so that he could become a high priest for humanity (Heb 2:17), an office he holds permanently (Heb 7:23–25). Christendom has historically affirmed that the God-Man Jesus Christ, having been incarnated, shall never become discarnate.[21] Because human bodies are spatial, spatiality is a necessary property of Christ's human body.[22]

Christ's Resurrected Body Is in Heaven

NT authors explicitly state that Jesus is in heaven. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul argues that the saints will have resurrected bodies that will be glorified as "spiritual bodies" like Jesus' "heavenly" (ἐξ οὐρανοῦ) body,[23] in the "image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor 15:44, 47, 49).[24] Paul's description of Jesus as the "heavenly man" may imply he possesses a body suited for a new heavenly location.[25] In Ephesians 1:20 and 2:6, Paul speaks of Christ as being "in heavenly places." Brannon argues that "the

additional dimension of reality. They are basically one and the same. A spirit has not taken his place, nor is he just a spirit." Bock, *Luke,* 2:1933–34. Wayne Grudem, however, argues that these unique abilities some theologians have pointed out—such as the ability to appear/disappear (Luke 24:31) and pass through walls (Luke 24:36; John 20:19, 26)—may not be as radical when these texts are studied closely. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 608–14. "Paul stresses the transformed nature of the body of the exalted Christ, but nevertheless maintains its physical nature." Peter Orr, *Exalted above the Heavens: The Risen and Ascended Christ,* NSBT (London: IVP Academic, 2018), 114. Perhaps Christ's resurrected body could not pass between walls but could pass between the earthly and heavenly dimensions, giving that appearance.

[21] "[Jesus'] human nature [has] not lost its properties, but remained a creature, having beginning of days, being a finite nature, and retaining all the properties of a real body. . . . These two natures are so closely united in one person, that they were not separated even by his death." Belgic Confession, article 19. Cf. SHC 6–8; WCF 8.2; WSC Q. 21; WLC Q. 36. Quotation from Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson, eds., *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 66–67.

[22] "Fleshly bodies, because they're bodies, are also matter extended in spacetime" that possess "temporal and spatial . . . boundaries." Paul J. Griffiths, *Christian Flesh* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 2. Peter Orr argues Christ "remains localizable" in his "on-going humanity and possession of a discrete, localizable body that cannot be collapsed into believers" (78).

[23] "This qualitative interpretation of ἐξ οὐρανοῦ is confirmed when we note that in verses 48, 49 ἐπουράνιος is used as its equivalent and applied to believers as well as to Christ, and this can hardly mean that believers have come from heaven. . . . The category of the heavenly dimension is associated with Christ as the inaugurator of the resurrection life of the age to come." A. T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought with Special Reference to His Eschatology,* SNTSMS 43 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 46. Cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text,* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1287.

[24] The phrase σῶμα πνευματικόν does not refer to a non-bodily spiritual reality, but rather a "supernatural" body "animated and enlivened by God's Spirit." Πνευματικόν bears the -ικός ending, which generally implies an ethical or functional meaning, not a one of material or substance (which would be -ινός). Volker Rabens, *The Holy Spirit and Ethics in Paul: Transformation and Empowering for Religious-Ethical Life,* WUNT 2. Reihe 283 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2010), 95–96. "The risen Christ in heaven remains a human being. Finally, Christ's humanity has an important eschatological transformative function in that believers will be transformed to bear his image (εἰκών), just as they have borne the image of Adam (15:49)." Peter Orr, "The Bodily Absence of Christ in Paul," *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 3, no. 1 (2013): 115.

[25] John McClean, "A Search for the Body: Is There Space for Christ's Body in Pannenberg's Eschatology?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 14, no. 1 (2012): 91–103.

appearances of ἐν τοῖς ἐπουράνιος in Ephesians demand a local translation."[26] Paul (Acts 9:3–6; Rom 10:6; Eph 4:8–10; 6:9; Col 3:1–2; 1 Tim 3:16), Peter (Acts 11:5, 9–10; 1 Pet 1:4, 12; cf. John 14:32; 15:26; 16:7; 1 Pet 3:18, 22), the author of Hebrews (Heb 4:14–15; 7:24–26; 8:1; 9:24), John (Rev 5:6), and Stephen (Acts 7:55–56) all locate Christ in heaven.

Conclusion: Heaven Is Spatial

The foregeoing data demonstrate that the following polysyllogism is warranted:

Premise 1: Only a spatial realm can contain spatial entities.
Premise 2: Angels and Christ's resurrected body are spatial entities.
Premise 3: Angels and Christ's resurrected body are contained in heaven.
Conclusion: Angelic and Christological spatiality necessitates heavenly spatiality.

To reject that heaven is a spatial realm, one must argue that either angels and Christ's resurrected body are not spatial or that these entities do not inhabit heaven. If either of these entities both is spatial and dwells in heaven, heaven must be a spatial realm. As Berkhof observes, "Some Christian scholars of recent date consider heaven to be a condition rather than a place." But the "local conception" is indicated by the way that "heaven is represented in Scripture as the dwelling place of created beings (angels, saints, the human nature of Christ). These are all in some way related to space."[27]

"Before the Face of God": The Father's Spatial Manifestation

To ascribe spatiality to the Father's heavenly manifestation, one of the following must be demonstrated. (1) If one espouses the relational view of space, then it must be demonstrated that the Father's manifestation is proximate to other spatial entities. (2) If one espouses the receptacle view of space, then it must be demonstrated that the Father's manifestation dwells within a spatial realm.

The Father's Manifestation Is Proximate to Angels

The following section will make two arguments. (1) OT texts present angels as spatially proximate to Yahweh in the heavenly divine council, and (2) NT texts understand the character of Yahweh enthroned in the divine council to be God the Father.

[26] M. Jeff Brannon, *The Heavenlies in Ephesians: A Lexical, Exegetical, and Conceptual Analysis,* Library of New Testament Studies (London: T. & T. Clark, 2011), 13. While "ἐπουράνιος can have various meanings and nuances, it always refers to that which is spatially distinct from the earth. As a result, from our examination of ἐπουράνιος in the NT, we conclude that there is no precedent or basis for a spiritualization of the heavenlies in Ephesians" (100).

[27] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1958; reprint, Bath: The Bath, 1998), 350.

Angels Assemble in the Divine Council

The divine council is "the heavenly host, the pantheon of divine beings who administer the affairs of the cosmos."[28] The divine-council scenes form a type scene in the OT.[29] A type scene is "an indispensable narratorial framework" that uses "a fixed sequence of motifs common to the type-scene" that occurs at a critical point in a narrative.[30] The following table catalogs major divine-council type scenes with their accompanying motifs.[31]

	Yahweh Central	Yahweh Enthroned	Attendants Near By	Deliberation/ Judgment
1 Kgs 22:19–23 (2 Chr 18:18–22)	•	•	•	•
Isa 6	•	•	•	•
Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6	•		•	•
Ps 82	•		•	•
Zech 3	• (?)[32]		•	•
Dan 7:9–14	•	•	•	•
Rev 4–5	•	•	•	• (Rev 6)

[28] Michael S. Heiser, "Divine Council," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings,* ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 112. H. Wheeler Robinson, one of the first to trace the divine-council theme through the OT, offers a helpful primer on the subject. "The Council of Yahweh," *JTS* 45 nos. 179–180 (July 1944): 151–57.

[29] David Marron Fleming, "The Divine Council as Type Scene in the Hebrew Bible" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989); Min Suc Kee, "The Heavenly Council and Its Type-Scene," *JSOT* 3 (2007): 259; idem, "A Study of the Heavenly Council in the Ancient Near Eastern Texts, and Its Employment as a Type-Scene in the Hebrew Bible" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Manchester, 2003).

[30] Fleming, 37. While agreeing overall with Kee, Fleming categorizes Isaiah 40:1–11 as a divine-council type scene and questions whether Daniel 7:9–14, though a divine-council scene, ought to be classified as a type scene due to its lack of obvious narrative time (230–31). Conversely, Kee thinks that seeing Isaiah 40:1–11 as a divine-council scene is "highly speculative." "A Study of the Heavenly Council," 24. It is somewhat surprising that Kee missed Fleming's work in his bibliography despite post-dating it by over thirteen years. Kee also does not interact with Robert Alter despite the latter's extensive work with the idea of the type scene. See Robert Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene," *Prooftexts* 3, no. 2 (1983): 115–30. These oversights, however, may indicate that these works are not suffering from an echo chamber. On another defense of Isaiah 40 as a divine-council scene, see Frank M. Cross, "The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah," *JNES* 12, no. 4 (1953): 275–76.

[31] Table 1 is partly adapted from Kee, "A Study of the Heavenly Council," 19–24; "The Heavenly Council," 259; Marylyn Ellen White, "The Council of Yahweh: Its Structure and Membership" (PhD diss., University of St. Michael's College, 2012), ii.

[32] The Angel of Yahweh takes center stage in this account. Kee thinks the implication is that "YHWH is withdrawn in the background of the scene of the heavenly council but the angel of YHWH appears in the foreground." "A Study of the Heavenly Council," 23.

Kee argues that these motifs are largely "derived from the royal court-scene" (Exod 18:13; 1 Sam 22:6ff; Zech 6:13).[33] Like a king over his royal court, Yahweh presides over his council, depicting God in spatial relationship to the other members of the council.

In 1 Kings 22:19–23, Micaiah sees Yahweh "sitting on his throne (יֹשֵׁב עַל־כִּסְאוֹ) with all the host of heaven standing on his right and left (עֹמֵד עָלָיו מִימִינוֹ וּמִשְּׂמֹאלוֹ)" (v. 19). As Yahweh and the council debate how to make Ahab go to war, "a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD (וַיֵּצֵא הָרוּחַ וַיַּעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי יְהוָה)" (v. 21).

Micaiah's oracle is not parabolic, metaphorical, or symbolic. A prophet would reveal the application behind the parable and explain the metaphors in it (e.g., 2 Sam 12:7), but Micaiah's interpretation confirms the literal details of his account (1 Kgs 22:23). Additionally, note the parallel between kings Ahab and Jehoshaphat each "sitting on his throne (יֹשְׁבִים אִישׁ עַל־כִּסְאוֹ)" in their court with their councilors "prophesying before them (לִפְנֵיהֶם)" (1 Kgs 22:10) and Yahweh on his throne and his councilors coming before him. This parallel indicates that the account of Yahweh's council is also a narrative.[34] Micaiah says, "That which Yahweh says to me, it I will speak (כִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר יְהוָה אֵלַי אֹתוֹ אֲדַבֵּר)" (1 Kgs 22:14).[35] Rather than inventing a parable or metaphor, "[t]he oracle was merely the relaying of what Micaiah had seen and heard."[36] Therefore, the aspects of the account that point to a narrative genre indicate that the original readers and hearers would have understood this vision as a glimpse into the reality of the divine council in the heavenly sphere. Thus, the spirits described should be understood as being in spatial relationship with Yahweh: some spirits are on his right and left hands, and one comes before him.

The divine-council scene in Daniel 7:9–14 presents the Ancient of Days with white hair and a white robe, his court in session, thousands standing before him.[37] The "one like a son of man" coming with the clouds "came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him (וּקְדָמוֹהִי הַקְרֵבוּהִי[38] מְטָה)" (Dan 7:13). Daniel 7 depicts Yahweh in spatial relationship both with his courtiers and the "son of man."

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[33] Kee, "A Study of the Heavenly Council," 23. Kee classifies minor divine-council scenes as those that seem to hint at the council's presence but do not have all of the motifs of the type scene: Gen 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Exod 15:11; Deut 4:19; 17:3; 32:8; 33:2–3; Judg 5:20; 1 Chr 16:25; Neh 9:6; Job 15:8; 38:7; Pss 25:14; 29:1–2; 49:19; 58:1–2; 73:15; 89:5–8; 96:4–5; 97:7, 9; 148:2–3; Isa 14:13; Jer 8:2; 23:18, 22a; Amos 8:14; Zech 14:5. "The Heavenly Council," 260–62.

[34] Zedekiah likely parallels the "lying spirit" (רוּחַ שֶׁקֶר). Cf. Ezra 14:9.

[35] My translation.

[36] Edwin C. Kingsbury, "The Prophets and the Council of Yahweh," *JBL* 83 (1964): 280. As Job 15:8 says, "Have you listened in the council of God?" (אֱלוֹהַּ הִבְּסוֹ). A true prophet must be able to answer, "Yes." Polley says, "The heart of the prophetic credentials is to have stood within the council of Yahweh." Max E. Polley, "Hebrew Prophecy within the Council of Yahweh, Examined in Its Ancient Near Eastern Setting," in *Scripture in Context: Essays on the Comparative Method,* ed. Dikran Y. Hadidian (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980), 148. The "true prophets have stood and listened in Yahweh's divine council; false prophets have not." Michael Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2015), 239.

[37] The "Ancient of Days" is a title for Yahweh. John J. Collins, "The Son of Man in First-Century Judaism," *NTS* 38, no. 3 (1992): 464.

[38] Citing this verse, HALOT gives קֶדֶם the sense "with spatial significance, in front of the king."

Isaiah 6, Job 1–2, Psalm 82, and Zechariah 3 all depict Yahweh surrounded by his angelic entourage. At times, the texts foreground a human's physical presence (Isa 6:5; Zech 3:3). Angels move from Yahweh to physically interact with Isaiah (Isa 6:6). Thus, these texts also place Yahweh in spatial relationship to angels.

The NT Authors Considered God the Father to Be in the Divine Council

The NT authors likely would have considered God the Father to be the Yahweh character in these divine-council scenes. First, the NT authors conceive of the Father as enthroned in heaven, like Yahweh in his council (Heb 8:1; Acts 7:55–56). Second, Jesus indicates that the Father is the central character in divine-council scenes. When Jesus is on trial, he is charged with blasphemy for saying that he will be seated at the right hand of God (Luke 22:69) and come with the clouds of heaven (Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62). This "coming" is discussed elsewhere as coming with "the glory of the Father" and with "angels" (Matt 16:27; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26). Collated, Jesus' sayings contain all the motifs that demarcate a divine-council scene: the Father is given a central position,[39] seated on a throne, surrounded by angelic heavenly attendants, and executing judgment. Third, the NT's only divine-council type scene (Rev 4–5) presents the Father enthroned in the divine council.[40]

Viewing the Father as the enthroned character comports with Daniel's vision as well. Daniel 7 presents the Messiah, "one like a son of man,"[41] in spatial proximity to God the Father. Luke describes Jesus' ascension as a literal going up of his body (Luke 24:50–51; Acts 1:9–10), and "one like a son of man" indicates that it is a human that is in proximity to "the Ancient of Days." Due to the substantial continuity in the divine-council motifs, the NT authors likely would have seen the Father as the enthroned character of 1 Kings 22, Isaiah 6, Job 1–2, Psalm 82, and possibly in the background of Zechariah 3.[42]

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[39] The Son's position ("at the right hand") is described in relation to the Father's position, indicating the Father has the central position (Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69).

[40] That Revelation 4–5 is a divine-council type scene can be drawn from the scene's heavenly location (Rev 4:1), where God is in the central position on his throne (Rev 4:2–3), surrounded by divine beings (Rev 4:4, 6–8, 9–10), deliberating (Rev 5:2) and passing judgment (Rev 5:5, 12; Rev 6). See R. Dean Davis, "The Heavenly Court Scene of Revelation 4–5" (PhD diss., Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1986), 104–33. Note the shared motifs in Table 1. Alan S. Bandy also concludes that Revelation 4–5 is a divine-council scene. "The Prophetic Lawsuit in the Book of Revelation: An Analysis of the Lawsuit Motif in Revelation with Reference to the Use of the Old Testament" (PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007), 229–31. The elders may be members of the divine council (cf. Isa 24:21–23). See Timothy Willis, "Yahweh's Elders (Isa 24:23): Senior Officials of the Divine Court," *ZAW,* 103, no. 3 (1991): 375–85.

[41] "The Son of Man" is Jesus' favorite self-designation. See, for example, Matthew 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27; 22:69.

[42] Some might think the preincarnate Son is the enthroned character in these texts, citing as evidence John's citation of Isaiah 53:1 and 6:10 and John's explanation that "Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him" (John 12:41). Does this mean Isaiah 6 is a vision of the enthroned Jesus? Catrin H. Williams makes a good case that John is referring to Isaiah's foreseeing Jesus' earthly glory, not the Temple vision specifically. "Isaiah in John's Gospel," in *Isaiah in the New Testament: The New Testament and the Scriptures of Israel,* ed. M. J. J. Menken and Steve Moyise (London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 110–13. If one does not find Williams's interpretation compelling, one should at least concede that seeing Christ as the enthroned character of Isaiah 6 is inferential and that the dual quotations of Isaiah 6 and 53 likely

These conceptual categories can be used to understand the NT's depiction of the Father in spatial relationship to angels. Angels dwell in heaven,[43] where the Father is.[44] Thus, the Father and angels are frequently associated.[45] Jesus taught that some angels "always see the face of [his] Father who is in heaven" (Matt 18:10). R. T. France notes that the description of the angels as those "who always behold the face of God" is "a phrase derived from courtly language for personal access to the king."[46]

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point to a broader referent. So Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 309–10; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 605.

Viewing the Son as the enthroned Yahweh ignores the transition that Christ undergoes. In Daniel 7, which clearly distinguishes the two characters, it is the Ancient of Days (the Father) seated on a throne in the central position (Dan 7:9–10) when the Son of Man comes to him (cf. Rev 4–5). Both Daniel 7 and Psalm 110 were not depictions of a current reality but prophecies of a future one. It is when Jesus ascends with the clouds (Acts 1:9) that he comes to receive his kingdom. It is after Jesus arrives in the heavenly sanctuary that the words of Psalm 110:1 and 4 are spoken and Christ takes his seat. See Robert B. Jamieson, *Jesus' Death and Heavenly Offering in Hebrews,* SNTSMS (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 34. This transition into Jesus' session is also indicated by the verb tenses that predict or describe it:

Time period	Tense	Text	Verb
Pre-ascension	Future	Matt 26:64	ὄψεσθε, they "will see" Jesus at the right hand
		Mark 14:62	ὄψεσθε, they "will see" Jesus at the right hand
		Luke 22:69	ἔσται . . . καθήμενος, Jesus "will be seated" at the right hand
Post-ascension	Aorist	Mark 16:19; Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12	ἐκάθισεν, Jesus "sat down" at the right hand
		Eph 1:20	καθίσας, Jesus "was caused to sit" at the right hand
	Perfect	Heb 12:2	κεκάθικεν, Jesus "has sat down" at the right hand
	Present	1 Cor 15:25	δεῖ . . . αὐτὸν βασιλεύειν, Jesus "must continue to reign" (alludes to Ps 110:1b)
		Rom 8:34	ἐστιν, Jesus "is" at the right hand
		Col 3:1	καθήμενος, Jesus "is, seated" at the right hand
		Heb 10:13	ἐκδεχόμενος, Jesus "is waiting" at the right hand (alludes to Ps 110:1b)
		1 Pet 3:22	ἐστιν, Jesus "is" at the right hand

Thus, the NT authors more likely would have understood the Father to be the centrally enthroned figure, not the Son.

[43] Matt 18:10; Mark 12:25; Luke 2:13; John 1:51; Gal 1:7; Heb 12:22.

[44] Matt 5:16; 7:11; Mark 11:25; Luke 15:7, 10; John 12:28; Acts 7:55–56; Heb 12:9; Jas 1:17.

[45] "The glory of the Father" is associated with "the holy angels" (Matt 16:27; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26). Jesus assumed that angels are typically privy to the Father's council (Matt 24:36; Mark 13:32).

[46] R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary,* TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985), 276 (emphasis original). Leon Morris argues that "certainly the angels to whom Jesus refers are *in heaven;* he further says that they *continually see the face of my Father*. . . . The whole expression is surely a way of saying that these angels have immediate access to God." *The Gospel according to Matthew,* 465 (emphasis original). "In line with the belief which finds expression elsewhere in the Bible (Gen xlviii 16; Dan x 11, 20) Jesus asserts that those apt to be despised because of their status have representatives in the heavenly courts, just as nations have such representatives (cf. also Acts xii 15). Such representatives naturally have access to the Father." W. F. Albright and Christopher Stephen Mann, *Matthew,* AB (Garden City, NY:

These texts likely reflect the OT depictions of the divine council, conceiving of the Father's manifestation as spatially related to angels.

The Father's Manifestation Is Proximate to Christ's Body

While there are many texts that present Jesus as absent from the Father during his earthly ministry[47] and present Jesus with the Father after his ascension,[48] Hebrews offers the clearest presentation of Jesus' spatial proximity to the Father. Hebrews presents a heavenly tabernacle that is a spatial realm, as demonstrated by the fact that (1) the heavenly tabernacle was the pattern for the earthly tabernacle (Heb 8:2, 5; 9:23; cf. Exod 25:9; Acts 7:44), and (2) Jesus ascends to and enters this tabernacle in his human body.[49]

Christ has not entered into the earthly "hand-made sanctuary . . . but into heaven itself, now to make an appearance before the face of God (τῷ προσώπῳ τοῦ θεοῦ) on behalf of us . . . to offer himself" (Heb 9:24–25).[50] Several factors indicate Jesus enters heaven in his humanity. (1) How could Christ's God-ness enter into the presence of God (cf. John 1:18)? (2) How can Christ offer "himself" (Heb 9:14), his material body and blood (10:10, 19), except in his humanity? (3) It is Christ's humanity that qualifies him to act on behalf of humanity in the heavenly tabernacle (Heb 2:16–18; 10:5). This means that Christ offered his body in the heavenly tabernacle in a unique spatial relationship with the Father (Heb 9:24).

Christ's enthronement in heaven brings his spatial relationship to the Father into clear focus. Like his entrance into the heavenly tabernacle, Jesus' session on the heavenly throne must also be in his body. (1) The session marks the completion of his embodied priestly work (Heb 1:3; 4:14–15; 7:23–

Doubleday, 1971), 218. Cf. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew,* NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 276. There seem to be what have been called "angels of the face" (Jub. 2:2, 18; 1QH 6:13; 1QSb 4:26; Luke 1:19), while "some angels may not look directly at God (Isa 6:2; 1 En. 14:21)." R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 686. Hagner points out that the present tense "behold" (βλέπουσιν) seems to rule out notion that the "angels" are the departed spirits of the "little ones." Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28,* WBC (Dallas: Word, 1995), 526. Cf. Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew,* ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 680–81; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 450–51. Contra D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *EBCRev*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 9:454–55. Angelic presence before God is underscored by Gabriel's words to Zechariah (Luke 1:19) previously discussed.

[47] Matt 3:16–17; Matt 5:16–17, 45, 48; 6:1, 9, 14, 26, 32; 7:11, 21; 10:32–35; 12:50; 15:13; 16:17; 17:5–6; 18:10, 14, 19, 35; 23:9; 26:64; Mark 1:10–11; 14:62; Luke 3:21–22; 22:69; John 3:12–13; 6:32–35, 38; 12:28–29; 13:1–4; 15:15; 16:5–7, 28–30.

[48] Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69; John 15:26; Acts 2:30–35; 5:31–32; 7:55; Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20; 1 Pet 3:18–21.

[49] "The heavenly sanctuary is a place where Christ goes, not a metaphor for something else. Christ went there, remains there, and from there will return (6:19–20; 8:1–5; 9:11–12, 24, 28; 10:12–13; cf. 1:3; 12:2). Any reading of the sequence of Christ's sacrifice that makes 'metaphor' programmatic founders on the intractably referential quality of Hebrews' assertions that Jesus entered heaven. Jesus' entry to the heavenly sanctuary not only explains how he obtained redemption but specifies his present location (8:1; 9:24)." Jamieson, 92. In Scott D. Mackie's words, "As the place where Jesus' sacrifice is completed, the Heavenly Sanctuary must be as 'real' for both author and audience as the cross where Jesus' self-offering began." *Eschatology and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Hebrews,* WUNT 2/223 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2007), 159.

[50] My translation. English speakers frequently use the word "appear" to connote a lack of reality. The phrase "make an appearance" better conveys the idea of true presence (as ἐμφανίζω does, Matt 27:53).

8:2; 9:11–12; 10:10–12; 12:24), and (2) the session was granted to Jesus because of work accomplished in his capacity as a human, not because of his divine status, as the contrast with the angels (whom he has "become" greater than) clarifies (Heb 1:4, 7, 9, 13–14; 2:5–18). Additionally, (3) Hebrews embeds Christ's session within contexts that emphasize Jesus' bodily death, resurrection, and ascension (Heb 1:3–4; 7:23–8:6; 10:1–14; 12:2; cf. Acts 2:22–35; 5:30–32; Rom 8:32–34; Eph 1:20; 1 Pet 3:18–21),[51] contexts that imply a physical understanding of Christ's session.

Since Jesus has appeared "before the face of God (τῷ προσώπῳ τοῦ θεοῦ)" (Heb 9:24) and taken his seat "at the right hand of the throne of God (ἐν δεξιᾷ τε τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ κεκάθικεν)" (Heb 12:2) in his humanity, what should we make of the Father at Jesus' left hand? The biblical evidence demonstrates that from the relational view of space:

Premise 1: Entities that are spatially related to other entities are spatial.
Premise 2: Angels and Christ's resurrected body are spatial.
Premise 3: The Father's manifestation is spatially related to angels and Christ's body.
Conclusion: The Father's manifestation is spatial.

And from the receptacle view of space:

Premise 1: Entities within a spatial receptacle are spatial.
Premise 2: Heaven is a spatial receptacle.
Premise 3: The Father's manifestation resides in heaven.
Conclusion: The Father's manifestation is spatial.

Conclusion

So the language of the Apostles' Creed is precise after all. Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father. But perhaps we would benefit from more precision concerning what exactly a "spatial manifestation" is. When we say that God the Father possesses a spatial manifestation, we are not saying that God is an essentially spatial being.[52] All that is being asserted is that God the Father has a theophany located in heaven.

That God reveals himself through theophany is supported by many OT examples. OT narratives depict people seeing God (Gen 32:30; Exod 24:10; 33:23; Num 12:8; Judg 6:22; 13:22; Isa 6:1; Amos 7:7) and being touched by him (Exod 33:22; Jer 1:9). God and humans share a meal (Gen 18:1–8)

[51] Richard D. Nelson terms this smooth movement from crucifixion to session a "single sacrificial script" (though the timing and location of Jesus' sacrifice in Hebrews is debated). "'He Offered Himself': Sacrifice in Hebrews," *Interpretation* 57 (2003): 255.

[52] For an argument that spatiality is one of God's perfections, see Chan Ho Park, "Transcendence and Spatiality of the Triune Creator" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2003). For an argument that materiality is one of God's perfections, see Stephen Webb, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

and even have a wrestling match (Gen 32:24–32).[53] God's manifestation is described as a "likeness like an appearance of a man (דְּמוּת כְּמַרְאֵה אָדָם)" (Ezek 1:26), complete with hair and clothing (Dan 7:9). Any theology that accounts for a God who can make such appearances need only copy and paste: the God who can manifest himself before Moses and the elders with sapphire stones "under his feet" (Exod 24:10) can just as easily appear in heaven in a spatial, even bodily, manifestation. To assume de facto that only the Son can manifest himself spatially belies a tacit essential subordinationism, as though the Father or Spirit were endued with a greater measure of the divine essence, or a latent Arianism that assumes that becoming incarnate is incompatible with full deity (Col 1:19).

A doctrine of the Father's spatial heavenly presence contributes to theologies of revelation, immanence, cosmology, and eschatology. With regard to revelation, God's spatial manifestation is simply another way that God reveals himself to his creatures, whether they be on earth or in heaven, human or angelic. In his immanence, the Father participates in his creation by presiding over his angelic court. Biblical cosmology must account for the spatiality of heaven and the Father's place within it. And our eschatology looks forward in hope to a time when the dwelling place of God will be with man and the pure of heart shall see God face to face (Matt 5:8; Rev 21:3; 22:4).

[53] Esther J. Hamori observes that nothing in Hittite and Greek mythology—the closest parallel being "the story of Kothar's visit to Danil in Aqhat (KTU 1:17 V 2–33)"—displays "this type of anthropomorphic realism in the depiction of the visiting god. . . . In the two Genesis theophanies [Gen 18; 32], God appears in human form and is in fact indistinguishable from humans." *When Gods Were Men: The Embodied God in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature,* BZAW 384 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 150. Hamori's work demonstrates that even the radically transcendent perfect being of classical theism can be reconciled with such theophanies.

Between Whitefield and Finney: The Evangelism of Asahel Nettleton

by Mark Sidwell[1]

Christians sometimes think of "worldview" in terms of how Christianity applies to cultural issues in such areas as economics or the fine arts. But a true biblical worldview must be centered on understanding what the Scripture both teaches and emphasizes. For example, however one views the Christian's cultural mandate that many Christians espouse, it is more important for a Christian to fulfil the gospel mandate stressed in the NT. Part of this gospel mandate is evangelism. This article is the second in a series on noted evangelists in American history—their work, methodology, and philosophy—a series that is intended to deepen understanding of the successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses, of historic American evangelism.[2]

Anyone wanting to trace the history of American evangelism could do so by lining up its notable figures who—for better or worse—have stood above their fellows. Imagine the story of American evangelism as a chain of mountains. One can easily discern the highest peaks: George Whitefield at the furthest distance, succeeded by Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and finally Billy Graham.

One peak is obscured, however. Between Whitefield and Finney stands that of Asahel Nettleton (1783–1844). To his contemporaries, Nettleton was the heir to Whitefield, the leading evangelist of his age. And, significantly, he was one of the fiercest critics of Finney, who rose to fame in Nettleton's later years. Although comparatively forgotten, Nettleton may well be a model for modern evangelism.

From Halfway Christian to True Believer: Nettleton's Early Years

The chief source of information about Asahel Nettleton is a biography by his friend Bennet Tyler written shortly after Nettleton's death. Following the style of the biographies of his era—and fortunately for the historian—Tyler loads his work with extensive extracts from primary sources: Nettleton's own writings, contemporary periodical articles, and correspondence from those who knew

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[2] For the first installment in this series, see Mark Sidwell, "George Whitfield and the Rise of American Evangelism," *JBTW* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 53–75.

the evangelist.[3] From this trove and a few additional sources, one may reconstruct Nettleton's career. Yet Tyler's purpose went beyond memorializing to setting Nettleton's career in opposition to Finney's, an objective that shaped Tyler's selection and presentation of his material.

Nettleton was born in North Killingworth, Connecticut, in 1783. A member of a nominally religious family, Nettleton gave little thought to God or religion until he was in his late teens. The nominalism of Nettleton's parents, and therefore of Nettleton himself, may be rooted in the fact that they had become members of the church under provisions of the famed "Half-way Covenant," a compromise of the ideals of America's Puritan forefathers. The Puritans of New England stressed the idea that every church member must "own the covenant," that is, give testimony and evidence of salvation for church membership.[4] At the same time, these Puritan Congregationalists practiced infant baptism. What happened if a child was baptized as an infant but did not profess conversion when he or she came of age? Could such people present their own children for baptism? A majority of the New England pastors devised a solution: those who could not own the covenant could still present their children for baptism and maintain a "half-way" membership.

Under the provisions of this agreement, Nettleton's parents, who were not in full communion with the church, submitted formally to the church covenant in order to present their children for baptism in this "half-way" manner. It is not surprising, then, that young Nettleton did not possess what that era called an "experimental [experienced] religion." He recalled that his first serious thoughts about life and death occurred one evening as he watched the sun set and meditated on the fact that one day he would die. This event initiated a long struggle with a perceived burden of sin. He sought relief in reading the Bible, attending church, and praying as he wandered in the fields or lay in bed at night, and he was finally converted during a revival at North Killingworth in 1801.[5]

After his conversion, Nettleton began to consider whether God was calling him to be something more than a farmer, as the rest of his family had been. Stirred by reading articles about foreign mission work, he determined to become a missionary. He saved his money for three years until, in 1805, he

[3] Bennet Tyler, *Memoir of the Life and Character of Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D.D.,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Doctrinal Tract and Book Society, 1852). All quotations are from this edition. This work is most familiar to modern readers through the version edited by Andrew Bonar, originally published in Britain in 1854 and reissued by Banner of Truth in 1976. Bonar notes that he omits "some parts of the documents" Tyler cites, inserts excerpts from Nettleton's sermons, and includes a few comments of his own. A short sketch of Nettleton, also by Tyler, is found in William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit* (1857; reprint, New York, Arno, 1969), 2:543–54. A good modern biography is John F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening* (Welwyn, England: Evangelical, 1977). Also very helpful is George Hugh Birney, Jr., "The Life and Letters of Asahel Nettleton" (PhD diss. Hartford Theological Seminary, 1943). Birney gets behind Tyler more than most writers on Nettleton by investigating Tyler's primary sources. His view is somewhat more liberal (cf. "dreadful doctrines of New England Calvinism," 19, and his contrast of Nettleton and Tyler with Nathaniel Taylor, 176–77), but his perspective is distinctive. Perhaps the most useful feature of Birney's work is that he includes extensive appendices (236–459) containing transcriptions of primary works from Nettleton (mostly correspondence) that are not readily available elsewhere. A more recent study of some value is Sung Ho Kang, "The Evangelistic Preaching of Asahel Nettleton and Charles G. Finney in the Second Great Awakening and Applications for Contemporary Evangelism" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004).

[4] See Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1963).

[5] Tyler preserves a lengthy extract by the young Nettleton describing his conversion but adds that Nettleton told him that a pastor had edited the account and changed a few details (13–16).

was able to enroll at Yale College. Although Nettleton was only an average student there, he read deeply in theology. Furthermore, he was personally affected by a campus revival that broke out during the 1807–8 school year.

College revivals were one of the chief features of the Second Great Awakening in the East. Although almost invariably established on religious foundations, many Eastern schools had become spiritually lukewarm or even openly hostile to orthodox religion. Nowhere had this tendency been more evident than at Yale College, until the ministry of President Timothy Dwight (1795–1817), a grandson of Jonathan Edwards, when Yale experienced a series of revivals that transformed its spiritual landscape.

One can see, perhaps, the seeds of Nettleton's later ministry in his college years, because at Yale he underwent another lengthy struggle with conviction before finding peace with God. Later as an evangelist Nettleton's usual course was to offer prolonged counseling for those under conviction and wait for them to reach a crisis rather than press for an immediate decision. Nettleton had followed this course in dealing with his college classmates. Jonathan Lee, Nettleton's roommate during the revival of 1807–8, describes Nettleton's concern, prayer, and counsel not only to Lee himself but also to underclassmen, an attention unusual for upperclassmen of the period.[6]

Preaching and Counseling: Nettleton's Ministry and Methodology

The Second Great Awakening lent impetus to the first great foreign missions movement in American history. Among the leaders of this movement were Samuel Mills (instrumental in founding the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, America's first mission board), Adoniram Judson (heroic pioneer missionary to Burma), and Luther Rice (leading organizer of Baptist mission efforts). Nettleton desired to be part of this effort.

When illness prevented Nettleton from going to the mission field, however, he still refused to become the pastor of a church, hoping to be free to go overseas when his health improved. Nettleton also decided not to marry because he believed, like Samuel Mills, that marriage could be a hindrance in mission work.[7] Inadvertently, then, he took steps toward an evangelistic career. He decided, as Tyler phrases it, "to confine his labors to waste places, and destitute congregations."[8] Nettleton began to preach either for small congregations that had no pastor or in places where he thought he could help a struggling minister, working primarily in New England and the upper mid-Atlantic states with forays into the South. Nettleton ministered primarily in Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches, because the two denominations were at that time cooperating in missionary and evangelistic efforts under the Plan of Union (1801). Because his evangelistic preaching was church based, he never participated in interdenominational efforts, like those of Whitefield earlier and those of Finney, Moody, and others later on.

[6] Tyler, 32–33.

[7] Ibid., 334.

[8] Ibid., 51.

In 1815 the preaching of Nettleton sparked a revival at Salisbury, Connecticut. Before Nettleton came, the church was without a pastor and was reduced to seventeen men. In these circumstances, the congregation "felt a deep conviction of the necessity of the effusions of the Spirit, to strengthen the things that were ready to die."[9] The allusion to the words of Christ to the church at Sardis ("strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die," Rev 3:2) provides a theme for Nettleton's evangelistic career. His work was mostly among the churched, in contrast to the western preachers during the Second Great Awakening, where the circuit-riders and camp meetings often sought to reach those outside the church. Nettleton targeted nominal Christians in a society where churchgoing was proper, even if conversion was not.

Nettleton's admirers believed he was well qualified for such a ministry because he supported pastors, practiced restraint in his ministry, and eschewed undisciplined enthusiasm. The Congregationalist churches of New England feared the wildfire extremes of some itinerant evangelists during the First Great Awakening, chief among whom was James Davenport, who precipitated exceptional disorders and who reminded Nettleton's supporters of Charles Finney.[10] Tyler could well have had both targets in mind when he described Nettleton's heritage: "These revivals exerted a most benign influence upon the churches. They did not divide churches, and dissolve the relation between pastors and their flocks. On the contrary, they built up churches—healed divisions, where they had previously existed—promoted union and brotherly love among the members, and greatly strengthened the hands of pastors."[11] When the Congregational Association of Connecticut in 1820 offered to establish a regular order of paid evangelists, Nettleton not only turned it down for himself but also successfully argued against the entire idea.[12] Despite his own experience, Nettleton apparently shared a common wariness about itinerant evangelists.

Unlike later evangelists who held campaigns lasting several weeks with daily services, Nettleton limited his preaching to a few times a week, even when he spent months in a single location. Tyler says, for instance, that during his most active years (1811–22) Nettleton "preached, generally, three sermons on the Sabbath, and several during the week besides spending much time in visiting house to house, and conversing with individuals on the concerns of their souls."[13] Relating Nettleton's work in Farmington, Connecticut, in 1821, the local pastor describes what seems to be the typical pattern: "Public meetings . . . were not very frequent. They were so appointed, as to afford opportunity for the same individual to hear preaching twice a week, beside on the Sabbath. Occasionally there were also meetings of an hour in the morning or at noon, at private dwellings, at which the serious in the neighborhood were convened, on short notice, for prayer and conference. The members of the church

[9] Tyler, 72.

[10] Tyler provides no less than a four-page footnote describing Davenport and warning against his extremes (45–49).

[11] Ibid., 234.

[12] Ibid., 53–54.

[13] Ibid., 148. Tyler relates an anecdote of a man who confronted Nettleton because he opposed religious meetings other than on Sunday (321).

also met weekly, in convenient sections, for prayer, and commonly on the evenings selected for the meetings of the anxious."[14]

Nettleton was not an eloquent preacher. H. Humphrey of Amherst College noted that there "was nothing particularly captivating in his voice, in his style, or his delivery—nothing to make you admire the man, or his writing, or his speaking."[15] Yet his published sermons show a simplicity and directness that is not without its own eloquence.[16] One minister in Taunton, Massachusetts, said that during a meeting in 1825 "an intoxicated Universalist stepped within the door and cried out with a stentorian voice, and with a horrid oath, 'that's a lie,'" but that "scarcely an eye was turned from the speaker toward the door."[17]

Without doubt Nettleton's most unusual quirk is what one writer calls "the case of the missing preacher."[18] Always sensitive that people might look to him rather than to God as the instrument of their salvation, Nettleton sometimes simply packed his bags and left without telling anyone. Congregations often did not realize he had gone until they appeared for a service, and the preacher did not.

Significantly, the inquiry meeting was at least as large as—if not larger than—the preaching service. Ministering to inquirers was central to Nettleton's work. His inquiry meetings involved a "short address," solemn in nature, followed by a prayer. Then he spoke briefly with everyone present, unless the numbers were so large that he had to have assistants talk with some. After speaking to the concerned, he gave another address and another prayer and then urged listeners to leave and engage in private prayer and meditation.[19] In the course of his counseling, he would advise inquirers to read the Bible, meditate, and pray. He would offer no hopeful words about their condition of conviction but would stress the necessity of repentance and press the uselessness of all good works for salvation.[20]

Nettleton recalled one meeting on May 21, 1820, that spilled over into several rooms in a "public house" in Nassau, New York: "They were crowded so closely together, that I could not pass among them to converse. So I spoke to one and another here and there at a distance, as I could catch their eyes as they lifted them streaming with tears. All were utter strangers whom I addressed, and not a name could I call. My only method of designation was, by pointing and saying, I mean you, and you,

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[14] Tyler, 128.

[15] Ibid., 357.

[16] There is a published collection of Nettleton's sermons: William C. Nichols and Bennet Tyler, eds., *Asahel Nettleton: Sermons from the Second Great Awakening* (Ames, Iowa: International Outreach, 1995), hereafter *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening.* There are actually two sets of sermons in this volume. Those in the first half were edited and compiled by Nichols from manuscripts in the Hartford Seminary Library. Those in the other half were originally published by Tyler shortly after Nettleton's death; Nichols notes that Tyler edited these sermons for publication and that, to his knowledge, the manuscripts of these sermons no longer exist.

[17] Tyler, 158. He identifies the minister as "the Rev. Mr. Cobb."

[18] Thornbury, *God Sent Revival,* 73.

[19] Tyler, 214–15.

[20] Ibid., 208. Tyler says Nettleton's "uniform practice" in counseling was as follows: "He never told persons that they had reason to hope. He would set before them with great plainness, the distinguishing evidences of regeneration, and enjoin it upon them to be faithful and honest in the application of these evidences to themselves" (116–17).

or this sinner, and that sinner."[21] A pastor in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, describes inquiry meetings in 1820 that seem to be typical: "Nearly twenty attended, and some of them were found to be under very serious impressions. No professor of religion was invited or expected to attend. It was a meeting exclusively for those who were beginning to realize their exposure and their guilt."[22]

Some meetings left a profound impression on those present, including the preacher himself. Nettleton describes an inquiry meeting held in a Masonic Hall during a revival around Saratoga Springs and Malta, New York, in 1819:

> This evening will never be forgotten. The scene is beyond description. Did you ever witness two hundred sinners, with one accord in one place, weeping for their sins. Until you have seen this, you can have no adequate conceptions of the solemn scene. I felt as though I was standing on the verge of the eternal world; while the floor under my feet was shaken by the trembling of anxious souls in view of a judgment to come. The solemnity was still heightened, when every knee was bent at the throne of grace, and the intervening silence of the voice of prayer, was interrupted only by the sighs and sobs of anxious souls.[23]

In New Haven in 1820 Nettleton held meetings gathered at designated times with groups ranging from ten to up to thirty people. Nettleton would "speak a word to all in general, pray and pass on to another circle." The meetings were "generally short,"[24] though one afternoon of August 25 lasted three hours as a group of twenty included several under conviction of sin. Nettleton advised them to go home and pray, but a woman named Emily came back saying, "O, I cannot go home, I dare not go" and then threw herself into a chair with her head on a table. A few minutes later, she raised her head and said, "O, I can submit, I can love Christ. How easy it is; why did I not do it before." She began quietly to exhort the others and soon several others professed conversion, a total of nine altogether.[25]

One can see how the elements of Nettleton's ministry combine in an account by Joab Brace, pastor in Newington, a parish in Wethersfield, Connecticut, describing Nettleton's work there in December 1820. Nettleton preached on the text "Behold I stand at the door and knock," and then, Brace says,

> The discourse was closed with surprising effect, by repeating the hymn, "Behold a stranger at the door." When prayer was ended, while the people were standing, he made a very close application of the subject to their hearts, in a short address, which was very silently and solemnly heard. He requested them to retire without making a noise. "I love to talk to you, you are so still. It looks as though the Spirit of God were here. Go away as still as possible. Do not talk by the way, lest you forget your own hearts. Do not ask how you like the preacher; but retire to your closets, bow

[21] Tyler, 108. Birney says of this Nassau revival that it is the only one of Nettleton's revivals "of which so minute an account is preserved" (75).

[22] Tyler, 132.

[23] Ibid., 97.

[24] Ibid., 114.

[25] Ibid., 114–16.

> before God; and give yourselves to him this night." After the benediction, he inquired of many persons individually, "have you made your peace with God? Do you calculate to attend to this subject?" Many promised that they would try to make their peace with God immediately—that they would repent that night—and a permanent impression was made. From this, the flame spread over the parish.[26]

In October 1822 Nettleton contracted typhus, which forced him into inactivity for two years and to scale back his labor even after he recovered. Although he continued to preach whenever his health allowed and, according to Tyler, saw some remarkable meetings, his intensive period of evangelistic work ended after only about a dozen years.

Foundation for Evangelism: Nettleton's Theology

Asahel Nettleton was a Calvinist,[27] an heir to what was known as the New England Theology. From the fountainhead of Jonathan Edwards (for whom it is sometimes called "Edwardsean Theology"), the New England Theology later took forms that Edwards himself might only dimly have recognized.[28] Under names such as the New Divinity School (or Hopkinsianism, after Samuel Hopkins) and the New Haven Theology, later versions of the New England Theology took on distinct, even eccentric, forms. A distinguishing tenet of Hopkinsianism was its stress on disinterested benevolence so that a mark of piety was wishing oneself damned for the glory of God. Some proponents of the New England Theology, notably Nathaniel Taylor, modified the doctrine of inherited depravity to eliminate any imputation of Adam's guilt in original sin and to insist that sin is only voluntary. With some curiosity, then, one notes Tyler's comment that Nettleton's standard was "the system of doctrines maintained by Edwards, [Joseph] Bellamy, Dwight, and other standard theological writers of New England,"[29] theologians who did not precisely agree with one another.

By no means were all New England divines followers of theologians such as Nathaniel Taylor. Bennet Tyler, Nettleton's biographer and close friend, was in fact a staunch opponent of Taylor.[30] Later in life, Nettleton and Tyler launched an offensive against Taylor and his teachings,[31] though all

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[26] Tyler, 124.

[27] Tyler quotes extensively from Nettleton to demonstrate his Calvinistic orthodoxy (273–301). See Kang, 94–122, for a survey of Nettleton's evangelistic preaching with its theological underpinnings.

[28] The standard histories of the New England Theology have long been George Nye Boardman, *A History of New England Theology* (New York: A. D. F. Randolph, 1899), and Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of the New England Theology* (1907; reprint, New York: Russell and Russell, 1963). Another valuable source is Joseph Haroutunian, *Piety Versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* (1932; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1970). A fresher interpretation is found in Douglas A. Sweeney, *Nathaniel Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[29] Tyler, 273.

[30] In light of Tyler's view of Taylor, it is curious that he quotes a letter of appreciation from Taylor for Nettleton (350).

[31] See Thornbury, *God Sent Revival,* 189–94, and Sweeney, 129–36. Birney devotes a chapter to the "Taylor-Tyler controversy," 155–94, and transcribes some extensive notes by Nettleton on Taylor's views, 416–56.

claimed allegiance to Jonathan Edwards and his brand of Calvinism. Nettleton fell within the broad outlines of orthodox Calvinism,[32] and, while an opponent of innovators such as Taylor, he clearly bore the Edwardsean stamp. For example, he made the standard New England distinction that traced back to Edwards between moral inability and natural inability. "Inability" means that human beings, apart from divine grace, lack the capacity to do what is spiritually pleasing to God. Inability is said to be "natural" in that it is inherent in all humans by nature; it is "moral" in that humans reject the spiritual good as a result of their own willing, conscious choice.[33] Nettleton, like Edwards, affirmed moral inability but rejected natural inability.[34]

But Nettleton does not fall neatly into any particular school of the New England Theology. Against the New Divinity, which stressed passivity to the extent of almost making inaction a virtue, Nettleton specifically stressed the danger of waiting for an impression or moving of God.[35] At the same time, against New Haven, he appears much stronger on the nature of inherited depravity. In his sermon "Total Depravity," Nettleton states "that all men, by nature, are destitute of love to God, and consequently wholly sinful."[36] The president of Amherst College wrote of Nettleton, "A full believer in the total depravity of the human heart, he arraigned sinners, whether young or old, as rebels against God, and made the threatenings of the law thunder in their ears, as but few preachers have power to do."[37]

On a point more typical of all Reformed theology, Nettleton asserted that regeneration precedes conversion, despite the paradoxes this fact presented to evangelism. In the sermon "Genuine Repentance Does Not Precede Regeneration," he notes the challenge of some who see "inconsistency and absurdity" in calling people to repent, while saying repentance is a gift of God, and in telling people to come to Christ, then saying they cannot come. He replies, "We are guilty of all this absurdity; and the Bible talks just so too," going on to cite Christ's words in Matthew 11:28 ("Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden") and John 6:44 ("No man can come to me, except the Father .

[32] Robert E. Grossmann, although admitting certain irregularities from a Calvinistic point of view among the Calvinists of the Second Great Awakening, nonetheless asserts that they were fundamentally Calvinistic and that Nettleton was a model of Calvinistic evangelism. "The Calvinistic Ground of True Evangelism," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 3 (Fall 1987): 223–28.

[33] Kling says the New Divinity followed Edwards in distinguishing natural and moral ability and in the need for immediate repentance, emphases that characterized Nettleton. See David W. Kling, "Edwards in the Second Great Awakening: The New Divinity Contributions of Edward Dorr Griffin and Asahel Nettleton," in Oliver D. Crisp and Douglas A. Sweeney, eds. *After Jonathan Edwards: The Courses of the New England Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 130–41. For a good discussion of Edwards' views on this point and their ramifications, see Gerald L. Priest, "Andrew Fuller's Response to the 'Modern Question'—A Reappraisal of the Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation," *Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary Journal* 6 (2001): 58–63.

[34] Nettleton says, for example, "It is not for want of power to alter your disposition or make you willing to repent. You have all the faculties that Christians have. The true penitent has no more natural power than the impenitent." *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening,* 17. See Alan Cairns, "Inability," in *Dictionary of Theological Terms,* 2nd ed. (Belfast and Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald, 1998), 190. The implication of the New England position would seem to be that God need not change the nature of the sinner but only his will.

[35] Tyler gives a lengthy excerpt from a sermon to this effect (209–12).

[36] *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening,* 395.

[37] Tyler, 363.

. . draw him") as manifesting the same "absurdity." Rather than attempting to reconcile such texts, he simply accepted them.[38]

Nettleton followed his Puritan/Congregationalist heritage on an issue that may have affected his methodology. The first generation of Reformers had viewed saving faith as entailing assurance of salvation. The Puritans and their descendants tended to make assurance a subsequent, or even an uncertain, aspect of the Christian experience. Nettleton followed this line of reasoning, viewing assurance of faith as separate from saving faith: "A person may be a christian [*sic*], without certainly knowing it."[39] Christians "may arrive at the full assurance of hope," he says, and adds "that some actually have attained to this assurance in the present life" though it "may not be common."[40]

This point in Nettleton's theology explains his surprising comment, "I have never allowed myself to be very confident of arriving at heaven, lest the disappointment should be the greater. I know that the heart is exceedingly deceitful, and that many will be deceived. And why am not I as liable to be deceived as others?"[41] Even more, this belief highlights the fact that Nettleton's ministry was not only to preach to the unregenerate but also to counsel with those who might very well be saints but who had not come to assurance of faith. Since most of his hearers had been "churched" in New England Congregationalism, they were rarely open scoffers. Rather, his ministry involved a constant sifting to discern among congregations the hypocritical from the troubled but genuine believer. Nettleton's consistent stress on inquiry meetings may rise in part from his need to reassure saints as well as to awaken sinners.

Nettleton had no formal "theology of revival," but he affirmed the need for revivals, their utter necessity for the health of the church. In this emphasis he was fully the heir of Edwards and other New England theologians. In revivals the truths of Christianity become fully evident. "*If genuine religion is not found in revivals,*" Nettleton wrote to Lyman Beecher in May of 1822, "*I have no evidence that it exists in our world.*"[42] Revivals were gifts of the sovereign God for the vindication of his name and his own glory. Yet Nettleton did not, as one might think from his later opposition to Finney, oppose the use of means in revival. A sovereign God may choose to use human instruments in such work, allowing one to discern—at least on occasions—a pattern in revival. In a letter written in 1823, Nettleton says,

> A revival *begun,* is likely to subside, without the constant pressure of gospel motives on the consciences of the awakened. It is obvious from experience, that God generally blesses, far more extensively, the means for extending his work, than he does for commencing it in the midst of surrounding darkness. As the conversion of one sinner is often the means of wakening every

[38] *Sermons from the Second Great Awakening,* 64.

[39] Ibid., 323. He does hasten to add "that we do not assert that a person can be a christian, and yet know nothing about it. He who is a christian has been born again—he has passed from death unto life—he has been called out of darkness into marvelous light. That a person can experience all this, and know nothing about it, is plainly impossible" (324).

[40] Ibid., 326.

[41] Tyler, 306.

[42] Ibid., 218 (emphasis original).

> member of the family, and the impulse is again felt through every kindred branch, and through the village and town; so one town may be the means of a revival in another, and that in another.[43]

The controversy with Charles Finney was not about the use of means but about what means were used and what the preacher saw as their purpose.

"Civil War in Zion": Controversy over the New Measures

On January 13, 1827, after a second unhappy interview with fellow evangelist Charles Finney, Nettleton wrote to a Rev. Mr. Aikin of Utica and said, "As we now have it, the great contest is among professors of religion—a civil war in Zion—a domestic broil in the household of faith."[44] Many leading ecclesiastical figures in the Northeast took part in the controversy, notably Boston pastor Lyman Beecher—the dominant personality among New England preachers—who first supported Nettleton against Finney and then switched sides.

Charles Finney emerged in the 1820s as America's most popular evangelist, just as Nettleton's career was declining because of ill health. Finney was a sensation, a fact which alone would have worried Nettleton and his supporters, to whom sensation was not a commendable quality. In their eyes, Finney was something of a James Davenport returned from the grave. The clash between Nettleton and Finney centered on methodology. Finney was the evangelist of the "New Measures," the most controversial of which are described by Tyler as he describes the sort of work Nettleton did *not* do:

> Dr. Nettleton never adopted the anxious seat, nor any of its kindred measures. He never requested persons to rise in the assembly to be prayed for, or to signify that they had given their hearts to God, or that they had made up their minds to attend to the subject of religion. He never encouraged females to pray and exhort in promiscuous assemblies. He never held his meetings to a late hour in the night; nor did he encourage loud praying and exhorting. He did not encourage young converts, and others who had more zeal than discretion, to take the charge of religious meetings, or to go forth as public exhorters. He was never personal in his prayers and exhortations, nor did he countenance it in others. He did not allow himself to denounce ministers and professors of religion, as cold and dead, and as the enemies of revivals. He entirely disapproved of all such measures, and considered them as suited to mar the purity of revivals, and to promote fanaticism and delusion.[45]

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[43] Tyler, 201 (emphasis original).

[44] Contained in *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton on the "New Measures" in Conducting Revivals of Religion with a Review of a Sermon by Novanglus* (New York: G. &. C. Carvill, 1828), 11.

[45] Tyler, 213–14. The contrast between Nettleton and Finney is a major theme of Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750–1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994). Murray regards Nettleton as representing the traditional view of revival as a divine initiative apart from human effort. Finney, on the other hand, is for Murray the embodiment of "revivalism," religious efforts relying on human effort and calculation to produce spiritual results.

Some of these methods are familiar to modern Christians. The "anxious seat" (or "anxious bench") was a form of the altar call, or "invitation system," as some critics called it. Finney called on those under conviction to come forward during a service and sit in a special section in the front to show their concern for their souls and to receive special prayer. Other measures, such as loud or pointed praying and late services, may seem odd without being necessarily offensive to modern believers. Still others, such as opposition to women praying in public (or in mixed, "promiscuous," assemblies of men and women), may appear merely quaint. The point, however, seemed to be not just the measures themselves but the psychological purpose behind them. Nettleton also used "measures" in his services, but he "held no protracted meetings; nor did he adopt any new measures apparently *for effect.*"[46] To Nettleton, Finney seemed to substitute psychological devices for the work of the Holy Spirit.

During this "civil war in Zion," Nettleton launched his offensives in letters, later gathered and published in pamphlet form.[47] He took Finney to task for his methods: "This talking to God as a man talks to his neighbor, is truly shocking—telling the Lord a long story about A or B, and apparently with no other intent than to produce a kind of stage effect upon the individual in question, or upon the audience generally."[48] All of these methods, said Nettleton, reflected "*the awful irreverence of the manner!*"[49] Furthermore, Nettleton professed to be troubled by the lack of warnings against false conversions or the dangers of hypocrisy,[50] concerns that lay at the heart of his own approach.

In later years, Finney said he was unconcerned by these attacks, that they did not deter him at all.[51] Finney challenged his critics to "show me a more excellent way. Show me the *fruits* of your ministry; and if the fruits of your ministry so far exceed mine as to give me evidence that you have found out a more excellent way than I have, I will adopt your views. But do you expect me to abandon my own views and practices and adopt yours, when you yourselves cannot deny that, whatever errors I may have fallen into, or whatever imperfection there may be in my preaching in style, and in everything,—yet the *results* unspeakably surpass the results of yours?"[52]

Although Finney wrote these lines years after Nettleton's death, pragmatic defenses such as these must have been common during the controversy, for Tyler quotes an 1827 letter from Nettleton, in which the evangelist says,

> It is said that God has blessed these measures to the conversion of sinners. The same may be said of female preaching; and it may be asked in reference to that, "How can that be wrong which God

[46] "Dr. Humphrey," pastor in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, quoted in Tyler, 137 (emphasis original).

[47] Notably Nettleton's letter to Aikin (238–50 in Tyler) and his letter to "Rev. Dr. Spring" of Durham, New York, 4 May 1827 (250–65).

[48] Ibid., 259.

[49] Ibid., 259 (emphasis original).

[50] Ibid., 259.

[51] See Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis, ed., *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 223–31, where Finney responds to Nettleton's criticisms, notably those found in Tyler's biography. Finney says of Nettleton's "pamphlet of letters" against him, for example, that "they fell dead from the press, I believe, for I scarcely heard them spoken of" (225).

[52] Ibid., 83 (emphasis original).

> has blessed to the conversion of a soul?" I answer, it is an acknowledged fact, that profane swearing, opposition to revivals, mock conferences have all been overruled to the conviction and conversion [of sinners]. And shall we not encourage and defend these things? The man who defends the principle in question appears bad in argument and worse in practice.[53]

However unconcerned Charles Finney claimed to have been in his *Memoirs,* he nonetheless agreed to meet with his critics at New Lebanon, New York, in July 1827. Leading the opposition was Lyman Beecher with Nettleton at his side, somewhat reluctant in his involvement but active in his criticism. The New Lebanon Convention failed to deter Finney. Indeed, it was an unmitigated disaster for Nettleton's views. Finney bluntly refused to change his methods. In fact, the main result was that shortly afterwards Beecher went from being a steadfast opponent of Finney to his staunch ally. Tyler commented that Nettleton saw no hope of rescuing Finney from his excesses "so long as he was upheld and encouraged by ministers of high respectability."[54]

Observers have long puzzled about why Nettleton focused on Finney's methodology rather than his theological views. John Thornbury, whose sympathies are with Nettleton, charges that the New Measures "were only outward manifestations of more profound deviations: the skin blisters caused by poison in the bloodstream."[55] One would think that Nettleton was orthodox enough in his Calvinism to see the problems in Finney's theology. Finney, after all, promoted a system that, as Warfield puts it, was founded on "the unordered Pelagianism of the man in the street," [56] and further shaped by the more controversial aspects of the New England Theology, such as those represented in Taylor's New Haven Theology. The same doctrines that Nettleton opposed in Taylor were flagrantly present in Finney: stress on human ability, the nature of sin only as conscious transgression, and other tenets that critics did not hesitate to call "Pelagian."[57] Thornbury hints that Nettleton's allies may have been the problem. Perhaps Nettleton hesitated to confront Finney's theology at New Lebanon because the theology of Nettleton's allies differed only in degree from Finney's.[58] A simpler solution may be that

[53] Tyler, 338.

[54] Ibid., 238. Beecher did not turn against Nettleton, however. After the evangelist's death, Beecher wrote to Tyler: "Considering the extent of his [Nettleton's] influence, I regard him as beyond comparison, the greatest benefactor which God has given to this nation; and through his influence in promoting pure and powerful revivals of religion, as destined to be one of the greatest benefactors of the world, and among the most efficient instruments of introducing the glory of the latter day" (v).

[55] John Thornbury, "Asahel Nettleton's Conflict with Finneyism," *Baptist Reformation Review* 6 (Summer 1977): 18.

[56] Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 2:18. Warfield uses the phrase to describe Finney's theology at the beginning of his theological education.

[57] The term *Pelagian* refers to the teachings ascribed to the British monk Pelagius (active c. 383–410). In contrast to the teaching of Augustine, Pelagius taught that humans are born neutral, without taint of original sin, and have complete natural ability to obey the commandments of God.

[58] Thornbury, "Asahel Nettleton's Conflict with Finneyism," 18.

Nettleton was simply unaware of Finney's theological views. While Finney's methods were evident to all, his theology received less attention until years later when he began to set it forth in print.[59]

Regardless, the New Lebanon Convention changed neither Finney's views nor his methods, nor did they slow the ascent of his star. Finney became America's leading evangelist, and his methods (and to a lesser extent his theology) became the evangelistic model. Meanwhile Nettleton's reputation declined until he was remembered by many largely for his opposition to Finney.

Nettleton's Place in the History of Evangelism

Despite his illness and the controversy with Finney, Asahel Nettleton's last years continued to be profitable. He preached on occasion, and often to great effect. He took the side of his friend Bennet Tyler in New England's religious conflicts by warmly supporting the founding of the Theological Institute of Connecticut (later Hartford Theological Seminary) as a counterweight to Yale and the New Haven Theology of Nathaniel Taylor.

Nettleton also made his mark on American hymnology, compiling one of the first American hymnbooks: *The Village Hymns* (1824). Not surprisingly, even in his hymnal, revival and evangelism were not far from his mind. In the introduction, Nettleton says, "I had hoped to find, in the style of genuine poetry, a greater number of hymns adapted to the various exigencies of a revival. Laborious research has, however, led me to conclude, that not many such compositions are in existence."[60] Later he observes,

> There is a numerous class of hymns which have been sung with much pleasure and profit in seasons of revival, and yet are entirely destitute of poetic merit. . . . I am satisfied from observation, as well as from the nature itself of some hymns, that they must be ephemeral. They should be confined to seasons of revival: and even here they ought to be introduced with discretion; for on this their principal utility must depend. A book, consisting chiefly of hymns for revivals, however important in its place, would be utterly unfit for the ordinary purposes of devotion—as prescriptions, salutary in sickness, are laid aside on the restoration of health.[61]

As important as Nettleton regarded revivals, he understood that they were not the whole of the ministry of the church and were not to shape its worship.

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[59] Charles Hambrick-Stowe notes that theological attacks on Finney did not appear until a few years after the New Lebanon Convention when Presbyterian and Congregational theological controversies aroused closer scrutiny of Finney's doctrinal teaching. *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 124–26.

[60] Asahel Nettleton, *Village Hymns for Social Worship Selected and Original,* 6th ed. (New York: Elisha Sands, 1826), v. Birney devotes an entire chapter to Nettleton's contribution to hymnody (86–113).

[61] Nettleton, *Village Hymns*, vi. There is a minor mystery concerning Nettleton's work with hymns. Is he the source of the name for John Wyeth's tune "Nettleton," which is commonly sung to Robert Robinson's "Come Thou Fount"? Since *Village Hymns* contains only lyrics (the music being published in a separate volume) and Nettleton had no musical skill, the answer is at best uncertain and probably unlikely. *Village Hymns* includes "Come Thou Fount" as a hymn appropriate for "Rejoicing in Revival" (435).

Of course, it is as an evangelist that Nettleton left his greatest heritage. Today the reputations of Whitefield and Finney overshadow that of Nettleton. How contemporaries compared Nettleton with Finney is evident above. How they compared him with Whitefield—a much more positive model to New England Calvinists—is also interesting. Bennet Tyler contrasted Whitefield's success in the pulpit with Nettleton's success through a combination of preaching, use of the inquiry room, and private counseling.[62] In fact, Tyler was not afraid to say that Nettleton's preaching "addressed more to the conscience, and less to the passions than that of Whitefield," an approach that resulted in fewer disorders and firmer converts.[63] H. Humphrey of Amherst College noted that while Whitefield blew "the trumpet over the dead and buried formalism of the churches," Nettleton sought "to 'strengthen the things that remained and were ready to die' in destitute churches."[64]

The typical way to judge an evangelist is by the results of his work, either in number of converts (or other "decisions") or the apparent impact of his work on society at large, such as Billy Sunday's measure of success in promoting the cause of prohibition. Nettleton's localized meetings within the religious establishment of New England do not appear to have had a remarkable effect on society—although unlike the frontier in that same era, the Northeast possessed a high standard of at least superficial social rectitude and public morality. Though Nettleton interested himself deeply in the growing temperance movement, temperance was always subsidiary to evangelism.[65] The number of converts is harder to pin down. Birney says that Nettleton oversaw fifty revivals in his ministry.[66] Exerting due caution, Thornbury estimates a total of 25,000 converts as the result of Nettleton's ministry, further suggesting that the evangelist's care and diligence in the inquiry meetings and in counseling resulted in an extremely low proportion of lapsed converts.[67] If Nettleton's numbers were not large, compared to more famous evangelists, they at least seem to have been more firm.

Part of the value of studying Nettleton's career is that the pattern of his ministry more closely resembles that of a modern evangelist than that of, say, D. L. Moody or Billy Sunday, who addressed millions in multi-week urban campaigns. Like Nettleton, a modern evangelist in America is likely to minister to a single congregation over a period of a few days and to professing church members rather than the unchurched.

Therefore, the counseling emphasis of Asahel Nettleton may provide a closer model for the modern evangelist: on making sure the message is communicated clearly and personally, even if Nettleton's "inquiry meetings" might be difficult to arrange today. Finally, the repeated theme that observers offered for Nettleton's ministry—to "strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die"—underscores the role of evangelists in the contemporary church. Facing the assault of western culture, evangelists can strengthen and rally believers by holding firm for the gospel. Such a course is not a

[62] Tyler, 200–1. Tyler explains the "lecture room" as a form of inquiry meeting (205–6).

[63] Ibid., 201.

[64] Ibid., 360.

[65] See Birney, 81–85.

[66] Ibid., 75.

[67] Thornbury, *God Sent Revival,* 233.

mere holding action. To "strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die" is the counsel of Christ himself, counsel that many contemporary churches can not only heed but even embrace. That was the course Asahel Nettleton followed to great blessing.

Managing Our Differences: Biblical Norms for Navigating Our Inevitable Disagreements

by Layton Talbert[1]

Evangelicalism and fundamentalism are peppered with differences over a plethora of issues: soteriology (Calvinism vs. Arminianism vs. Amyraldianism, with various versions of each); ecclesiology (dispensational theology vs. progressive dispensational theology vs. covenant theology vs. progressive covenant theology); eschatology (multiple views on the rapture and the millennium); spiritual gifts (continuationism vs. cessationism); the significance of the Lord's Table; the mode and subjects of baptism; church polity; church music; church worship. The list could go on.

These are not insignificant minutiae. And the fallout from these and other differences has divided Christians into disparate groups for centuries. Whether that is, in itself, wrong or sinful will be addressed later in this essay. But the operative principle underlying this essay was stated by J. Gresham Machen a century ago: "It is perfectly possible for Christian fellowship to be maintained despite differences of opinion."[2] The more immediate focus is how we manage those disagreements. God has a will about how we handle our differences, and those with whom we differ. That fact is apparent from a number of biblical passages and principles that illustrate, exemplify, inform, and model how to manage the differences that divide us.[3] This article highlights just twelve of those principles.

God Never Uses Flawless Vessels

One of the most memorable examples of Christian disagreement emerges surprisingly early in the history of the Church and, even more surprisingly, in a larger context of unity: Acts 15. The identity of the believers at odds in this heated confrontation—both recognized leaders in the church—is even more astonishing: Paul (Latin for *small, humble*) and Barnabas (meaning, *son of consolation*)! Acts 15 exemplifies several principles that speak to the issue of managing our differences, so this passage will surface more than once in our discussion.

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[1] Layton Talbert (PhD, Theology) is professor of theology at BJU Seminary and the author of several books, including *The Trustworthiness of God's Words: Why Every Word from God Matters* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2022) and *Soteriology for Beginners: What Does the Bible Say About Salvation?* (n.p.: Equip Discipleship, 2023).

[2] J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism*, 100th Anniversary Edition (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2023), 48. Among the examples he discusses that should not undermine Christian fellowship are differences in eschatology (he thought premillennialism a "serious" though "not a deadly error"), "the efficacy of the sacraments," "the nature and prerogatives of Christian ministry," and Calvinism versus Arminianism.

[3] This article focuses on differences in doctrine, interpretation, and practice only among genuine believers within the Church of Jesus Christ who subscribe to—as they have been described historically—the fundamentals of the Christian faith. It does not address the broader issue of differences with liberalism or other views outside conservative evangelicalism, nor does it propose to be a full-fledged essay on biblical separation (though it will address that issue briefly). Those topics are handled admirably and more fully elsewhere. See, for example, Mark Sidwell, *Set Apart: The Nature & Importance of Biblical Separation* (Greenville, SC: Journeyforth Academic, 2016).

The extraordinary unity that emerged from what could otherwise have been a rather stormy conference (Acts 15:22ff) is unexpectedly marred by a disagreement between two of the major participants. The disagreement came "after some days" (v. 36),[4] but from the standpoint of its literary juxtaposition, the argument is particularly jarring on the heels of the theological harmony established at the Jerusalem Council. Later, when Paul proposed that he and Barnabas revisit the churches in Asia Minor, Barnabas agreed and suggested they again take John Mark along with them. Paul objected; as far as he was concerned this was non-negotiable, since John Mark had proved unreliable on their previous journey (vv. 37–38; cf. 13:13). The result?

> And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. (15:39–40)

Is someone always completely *right*—in motive, reasoning, and conclusion—and someone always entirely *wrong* in every disagreement? Does the text demand that we side with either Barnabas or Paul in Acts 15? Did *God* take sides? Are there times when the Lord is neutral—or at least silent? Might the Lord approve for one of his servants what he would not approve for another? Can God lead two presumably prayerful, surrendered servants to two divergent conclusions?

Luke seems to imply that the church at Antioch, at least, generally sided with Paul (Acts 15:40).[5] But Luke himself studiously avoids any editorial comment beyond a historical description of what happened. And what happened was a heated confrontation. The word translated "contention" or "sharp disagreement" is a graphic one. The Greek term (παροξυσμός) has passed into English to denote a convulsion or sudden violent emotional reaction (paroxysm). In the context of Acts 15, the term portrays "anger, irritation, or exasperation in a disagreement."[6] This was a heated confrontation not over a doctrinal issue but a pragmatic one: *who should, or should not, participate in their next mission trip*.

It is, ironically, both embarrassing and encouraging that Paul and Barnabas were unwittingly demonstrating the very humanness they sought to impress on the pagan inhabitants of Lystra (Acts

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[4] Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version,* copyright ©2016 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Quotations marked NASB are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, © Copyright The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995. Used by permission. Quotations marked NET are from the NET Bible® https://netbible.com copyright ©1996, 2019 used with permission from Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. All rights reserved.

[5] The juxtaposed conclusions of Acts 14 and 15 are arresting. Acts 14 ends with a reference to the Antiochian church's "commendation" of Paul and Barnabas (14:26, a passive plural participle of παραδίδωμι). Acts 15 ends with a reference to the Antiochian church's "commendation" of Paul (15:40, a passive singular participle of παραδίδωμι) upon his selection of Silas as his ministry companion. The passage does not expressly state that the church withheld their blessing from Barnabas and Mark, but neither does it say that they gave it.

[6] Darrell Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 519.

14:15).[7] It adds to our understanding of this incident when one factors in additional information from other passages. (1) John Mark had deserted them early on their previous journey (Acts 13:13). (2) Barnabas was, by nature and temperament, a peacemaker (Acts 9:27). But (3) Barnabas also happened to be related to Mark (Col 4:10). And (4) Paul had previously been disappointed by even Barnabas's poor judgment (Gal 2:13). These same factors—past experiences, temperament, relationships, previous mistakes—can complicate some of our disagreements. "Sometimes disagreements among Christians seem to be intractable because they arise from differences of experience, insight, or character."[8]

Neither of these men claimed to have definitive scriptural direction or Spirit-leadership, but both of them had legitimate concerns. Paul was not yet prepared to trust John Mark on another lengthy and potentially dangerous journey where so much was at stake. As John Mark's cousin, Barnabas evidently thought it important to give the young man a second chance, and as soon as possible. The complexity of this uncomfortable confrontation is reflected among a wide range of interpreters.

> Barnabas . . . wanted to restore Mark to the ministry and serve in Cyprus. He was right. . . . God built up Mark into being the revered author of the Gospel of Mark! Paul wanted helpers that would not desert the cause under fire. He was right. . . . God provided Silas to go with him and in due time raised up Timothy and a number of other workers.[9]

> Paul and Barnabas could not agree, perhaps precisely because no basic principle of the faith was involved; it was a practical matter on which much could be said on both sides, and people of different temperaments would naturally give different weight to different considerations.[10]

> Even those that are united to one and the same Jesus and sanctified by one and the same Spirit, have different apprehensions, different opinions, different views, and different sentiments in points of prudence. It will be so while we are in this state of darkness and imperfection; we shall never be all of a mind till we come to heaven, where light and love are perfect.[11]

I regularly remind my students that God never uses flawless vessels. God uses *only* flawed vessels, and for one very obvious reason. It might console us to propose a theological explanation—namely, so that he receives all the glory. That's true enough. But there is an even more pedestrian reason that

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[7] "The two apostolic friends were separated from each other by a quarrel, which proved that they were indeed, as they had lately told the Lystrians, 'men of like passions' with others." W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (1864; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 192.

[8] David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 448.

[9] Stewart Custer, *Witness to Christ: A Commentary on Acts* (Greenville; BJU Press, 2000), 226.

[10] David Gooding, *True to the Faith: Charting the Course through the Acts of the Apostles* (West Port Colborne, Ontario: Gospel Folio, 1995), 221.

[11] Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), 6:200. Some may be embarrassed that I would cite so "unscholarly" a commentator as Matthew Henry. I do not share the generally low opinion of Henry's insights. Moreover, it is both Philip and Matthew Henry's insightful language relating to managing our differences that fuels the impetus for this article.

is much less flattering; it is because flawed vessels are all God has to work with. Think about that: *that is all he has*. That observation is so elementary that we are prone to overlook it and run directly to the somewhat less humbling theological explanation. But there is another side to this disagreement and division.

The first church conference ended with an expression of unity (Acts 15:22ff)—a unity all the more significant given the high doctrinal stakes and the highly charged nature of the discussion. But Acts 15 does not close on that happy note. Instead, Luke gives us a front row seat to a vigorous debate between two long-time friends and ministry partners. That disagreement ended not with one admitting he was wrong and conceding to the other. It ended in an impasse. They each chose different ministry companions and went their separate ways. And the Scripture seems to be okay with that!

God Can Use Our Differences to Advance His Kingdom

Despite the discomfort we instinctively feel when we read Acts 15:39–41, it is not hard to spot shafts of light shooting through the ominous clouds of disagreement and division between these two stellar Christian leaders. "It was a pity that the present dispute was allowed to generate such mutual provocation, but in the providence of God it was overruled for good."[12] The result of this significant dispute was, in retrospect, an obvious and even better solution than either of them had imagined or anticipated.

> They reach a solid compromise and create two missions instead of one. . . . In sum, here is an example where a disagreement was so great that the ability to work side by side was affected. What resulted was a solution that allowed the advance of the gospel to continue, but in a way that recognized a need for distinct ministries. Sometimes this is the best solution.[13]

Some may lament that Paul and Barnabas failed to display the unity for which Christ prayed. At the risk of furthering disunity, I disagree. I suggest that they preserved that unity by how they managed their differences and their division. How they spoke of each other after they divided is one window into that management.

The disagreement at the end of Acts 15 initially seems to have closed the chapter on their "working partnership." "We have no positive scriptural evidence that Paul and Barnabas ever worked together again."[14] But there is no reason to "think that Paul and Barnabas went off shaking their fists at one another. They were good and great men. They certainly agreed to disagree."[15]

How do we know that? Because Paul continued to refer to Barnabas with respect and esteem as a positive example of Christian leadership (1 Cor 9:6). Paul's reference to Barnabas in this verse does not surprise us as it should; very few interpreters even note the fact that this statement comes after the

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[12] F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (1954; reprint, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1981), 319.

[13] Bock, 520.

[14] D. Edmond Hiebert, *In Paul's Shadow: Friends & Foes of the Great Apostle* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 1992), 50–51.

[15] Custer, 225.

Acts 15 episode. We are so accustomed to hearing about Paul and Barnabas in the same breath that we breeze past 1 Corinthians 9:6 without batting an eye. But Paul's statement comes some three to four years after the Pauline-Barnaban paroxysm; and there is no record or reason to suppose that Barnabas had ever been to Corinth. A reference to Timothy or Silas would have made sense, since they were well known to the Corinthians; but the name of Barnabas appears like a bolt out of the blue. How would the Corinthians have known enough about Barnabas for Paul to be able to drop so casual a reference to him as an exemplary fellow-laborer? Though Luke never mentions Barnabas after Acts 15, Paul must have kept up with him and his ministry to be able to make such a reference four years later.

After such a fallout, some believers can barely spit out one another's names. They are like Joseph's brothers, who "hated him and could not speak peacefully to him" (Gen 37:4). "When Paul has occasion to refer to Barnabas" after their Acts 15 dispute, "he does so with the warmth of old affection."[16] Paul even ended up valuing and working closely with Mark, the very one he refused to take on the disputed missionary endeavor (Col 4:10; 2 Tim 4:11). That makes it nearly impossible to believe that Paul and Barnabas never worked together again, despite the silence of the historical record. And the fact that Silas (Paul's chosen ministry partner in Acts 15) and Mark (Barnabas's chosen ministry partner in Acts 15) are later found working *together* alongside Peter indicates there was no lasting breach or suspicion between the two respective co-workers either (1 Pet 5:12–13).

The point in Acts 15 is not whether Paul or Barnabas was right, but that God can turn our divisions into his multiplications. That does not mean that the apostolic paroxysm provides a biblical sanction for our disagreements with one another. But it is recorded and preserved for our instruction. Among other things, the incident in Acts 15 teaches us that God may use our differences to multiply the ministry of the Church, and that godly people can disagree, even heatedly, and still be godly and God-used.

Nothing in Acts 15 indicates that the dispute was itself evil, or that either man said things that were sinful, or that either had to repent of their disagreement or division on this point before God could use them. Differences, disagreements, and even divisions between Christians are not necessarily sinful. They are a fact of life among finite followers of Christ in a fallen world. And they can be God's way of multiplying our impact on the world around us.

God Can Use Our Differences to Glorify Himself

A prime directive concerning differences over issues of liberty is 1 Corinthians 10:31. The verse makes a great life motto. But it is far more than a call to sanctify the mundane activities of life by doing them in a way that glorifies God. The contextual application is quite specific.

This verse is *the determinative dictum* for choosing whether or not to exercise a liberty. When read through the lens of context, the gist of Paul's statement is this: in any situation potentially involving the testimony or conscience of yourself or others, whether you choose to eat or not eat, whether you choose to drink or not drink, or whatever you choose to do or not do in such situations,

[16] F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (1977; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 212.

make the choice that most glorifies God. The deciding factor is not whether I have the liberty. The deciding factor is what decision will most glorify God in such a situation.

"Gospel-centered" and "cross-centered" have long been influential buzzwords. Some have suggested that this focus is too narrow, and that there is more to the Bible than the gospel and the cross. That is true. But it is also true that some who use those terms fail to apply them broadly enough. Notice how Paul leverages his argument against exercising a liberty: "If your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one *for whom Christ died"* (Rom 14:15).

According to Paul, reining in my personal liberty to avoid grieving a brother in Christ is about as gospel-centered and cross-centered as it gets. In both 1 Corinthians 8–10 and Romans 14–15, Paul is dealing with potentially different conclusions between believers on a broad range of issues. Nevertheless, we find Paul propelling the discussion to the same applicational conclusion in both passages: a call to make the choice that most glorifies God (1 Cor 10:23–31; Rom 15:2–6). The rhetorical and even linguistic parallels between the two passages are instructive (emphasis added):

1 Corinthians 10 (NASB)	Romans 15 (NASB)
[23] . . . . All things are lawful, but not all things *edify.* [24] *Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor*.	[2] *Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.* [3] *For even Christ did not please himself* . . . .[5] Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be
[31]Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, *do all to the glory of God.* . . . [33] *just as I also please all men in all things,* not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many . . .	of the same mind with one another . . . [6] so that with one accord you may with one voice *glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Our decisions in various circumstances may often differ from each other's. But if the basis on which we make those decisions is (as Paul exhorts us) the good of others for the glory of God, then God will be glorified even in and by our differences.

Commenting on Jeremiah 35, Derek Kidner describes the Rechabites (facetiously and ironically) as "those obstinate puritans who, as everyone knew, needed dragging into the sixth century!" But he proceeds to make the secondary observation that

> God, who loves unity and truth, is no lover of uniformity. By his own order of Nazarites, he called some people, but not others, to an austerity not unlike that of the Rechabites, to make a particular point; and the fact that Jesus and John the Baptist glorified God by different lifestyles should open our minds to the reality and value of specialized callings.[17]

That emphasis on our differences raises an important question that begs investigation: why do we differ from each other so much?

[17] Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 119 (emphasis added).

We Need to Understand Why We Differ[18]

Christians are indwelt by the same Spirit, read the same Bible, and use more or less the same tools to interpret it. So why are there so many differences among Bible believers? In part, it is because we do not use all the same tools with the same care, in the same proportions, in the same order, with the same presuppositions, or priorities, or proficiency—or any combination of those factors.

Give a dozen random people of varying carpentry skills and experience the same materials and set of tools, and ask them to build a birdhouse. Most of them may look roughly the same (some more roughly than others). Some will be notably better than others. A few may be barely functional or recognizable. To make the analogy only slightly more apropos, ask the same dozen people to construct a one-tenth scale model of the Biltmore House. Theology, after all, is a considerably more complex endeavor than building a birdhouse.

> It is no good asking for a simple religion. After all, real things are not simple. They look simple, but they are not. . . . [Some people complain] that if there really were a God they are sure He would have made religion simple. . . . as if 'religion' were something God invented, and not His statements to us of certain quite unalterable facts about His own nature.[19]

The Bible is not designed to mean different things to different people, but it often does—not because of the Bible but because of us. Sometimes we can form conclusions different from each other simply on the basis of the translation we're using. Some think the solution is for all of us to use the same translation; but church history, transmission history, hermeneutics, and human nature all argue against that proposition. The same goes for everyone joining the same denomination.

Why Do We Disagree?

Some of the reasons for our divisions are providential and subjective—our spiritual, intellectual, emotional, volitional, cultural, and experiential differences from each other. And none of those differences necessarily involve any inherent acts of sin. Consequently, several factors contribute to hermeneutical differences among us. And differences of interpretation naturally translate into differences of opinion, doctrine, practice, and (hence) inevitable disagreement.

Some disagreements are the result of *differing theological predispositions.* Whether consciously or not, all of us have a basic theological system that furnishes the lens through which we tend to read the biblical text. We are inclined to see texts in ways that make them fit with the preconceptions of our system, or even with our own personal paratextual preferences and opinions.

Some disagreements are the result of *differing gifts* (Eph 4:7). Some interpreters are simply more or less gifted than others. That is not necessarily a matter of education or raw intelligence. It involves investigative skill, diligence and thoroughness, level of training, and functional familiarity with the

[18] I cannot now tell to what degree I have further developed the content in this section over years of teaching it, but the basic points originated (for me) from my seminary professor and longtime pastor, Dr. Mark Minnick.

[19] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1980), 47–48.

whole range of scriptural revelation. Nor does greater giftedness necessarily guarantee rightness of interpretation; the other issues in this list still factor into everyone's conclusions. But it does help explain some of the differences among us.

Some disagreements are the result of *differing personal backgrounds and individual consciences* (Rom 14:14). This particularly explains differences and disagreements in areas of praxis, but it impacts our doctrinal differences as well.

Those three factors focus on the human element in interpretation. Other reasons are more objective. Some disagreements are the result of *genuine ambiguities in the Bible* (2 Pet 3:15–16). In other words, an objective divine element contributes to our differences, because not all Scripture is equally clear. The meaning of many passages is (at least from our perspective) susceptible of two or more equally legitimate interpretations. Not everything in the Bible is as clear as it could possibly be. Which raises a related question.

Why Are There Ambiguities?

Why did God not banish ambiguity from the Bible? Certainly, he could have made the Bible utterly unambiguous at every point. Clearly, he chose not to do so. So why did God build ambiguities into the Bible? I am not aware of any biblical explanation for that question, but such ambiguities have a number of positive results that may suggest at least some tentative and partial answers to the question.

Ambiguities compel us to search God's words more thoroughly and diligently (cf. 1 Pet 1:10). Ambiguities prompt our meditation on Scripture, which is (or ought to be) a form of fellowship (cf. Pss 19:13–14; 119:148). Ambiguities help us personalize truth that we search out, transmuting it from abstract to impact (cf. Prov 2:1–7; cf. Dan 9:1ff). Ambiguities measure our interest in discerning God's mind and will (cf. Job 23:12; Ps 119:162). Finally, and most to the present point, ambiguities exercise and cultivate our maturity, our charity, and our unity when we disagree with one another (cf. Rom 14:1–15:6).

These reflections are not novel. At the Council of Trent, one of Cardinal Robert Bellarmine's arguments against the perspicuity of Scripture was the admission on the part of the reformers that the Bible contains difficulties. William Whitaker, an Anglican Calvinist (whose portrait reputedly hung in Bellarmine's study, so much did he admire the Protestant's genius), rebutted that "by such difficulties God calls us to prayer, excites our diligence, keeps our interest, causes us to value the Scriptures, subdues our pride, and much else besides."[20]

Ambiguities and disagreements will help us grow up, if we let them. Part of managing our differences involves recognizing, and accepting as a reality of the human condition, why we come to different conclusions in the first place.

> It appears that God has deliberately left us in a quandary about many things. . . . He could have eliminated the loopholes, prevented all the schisms over morality and false teaching that have

[20] Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 154.

> plagued the church for two thousand years. Think of the squabbling and perplexity we would have been spared. And think of the crop of dwarfs He would have reared![21]

But this is where it gets challenging. Remember, God uses only flawed vessels because that is all he has. God's use of us, and even God's blessing on our work and ministry, does not mean we are not flawed. Scripture repeatedly demonstrates that divine use does not even necessarily imply divine approval. In the same passage in which God guarantees Israel's success in taking the land, he nevertheless announces that he will *not* go with them because they were stubborn and liable to provoke him to destroy them along the way (Exod 33:2–3).

> Now why would God be guaranteeing their success in the very moment that He is withdrawing His presence? . . . In one word, it's because of His covenant (v. 1), and His faithfulness to that. . . . Maybe we have not been prepared to acknowledge this, but is it possible that there can be gross disobedience to Scripture and, at the same time, indisputable success due only to God's miraculous work? . . . This is a passage in which God said that it would be so. . . . But what would be missing was God's *approving* presence.[22]

It is possible to enjoy a considerable measure of success through the blessing of God but forfeit God's "approving presence" in the process. God may use men and women with whom he is actively, even seriously, displeased. That may disturb our assumed paradigm that divine blessing of ends necessarily implies divine approval of the means or motives or men; but the reality is amply exemplified in Scripture. God uses Balaams to declare prophetic blessing on his people (Num 22–24). God blesses carnal Samsons with success (Judg 14–16). Those are admittedly pretty negative examples; hopefully we do not view all those with whom we disagree in that light. Because God also uses Jehoshaphats, despite repeated rebukes and severe expressions of God's displeasure and disapproval of some of his actions. Our goal should not be God's use or even God's blessing, but God's pleasure.

Sometimes It Is Appropriate to Disagree (Even Vigorously)

The Jehoshaphat narrative furnishes an instructive example of God's use of disobedient giftedness and godliness—counterintuitive as that may sound. Jehoshaphat is roundly commended by the Chronicler. He was one of only eight godly kings in Judah (out of twenty). He was one of only three kings in Judah compared to David (2 Chron 17:3–4). He had a positive spiritual influence on Judah and instituted many great reforms (2 Chron 17:6–9; 19:4–11). He experienced God's blessing on his reign (2 Chron 20:1–30). Scripture's overall evaluation of him personally is highly complimentary (2 Chron 19:3; 20:32). But Jehoshaphat had a defining flaw: a habitual association with the ungodly kings of Israel (2 Chron 18:1–2ff; 20:35–36; 1 Kgs 22:48–49; 2 Kgs 3:6–12). And in every instance, God sent a prophet to communicate his disapproval (2 Chron 19:1–2; 20:37; 2 Kgs 3:13ff).

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[21] Elisabeth Elliot, *The Liberty of Obedience* (Waco, TX: Word, 1968), 56–57.

[22] Mark Minnick, "Speak, Lord, in the Stillness" (Mount Calvary Baptist Church, Greenville, SC, Whetstone Conference, June 2007).

For example, after his military confederacy with Ahab, God sent Jehu the prophet to deliver this message: "Do you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord? Because of this, the Lord's wrath is upon you" (2 Chron 19:2). The alliances of God's leaders are extremely important to God. When such alliances betray the orthodoxy or the holiness for which they profess to stand, it confuses God's people. Some might object that applying this to religious alliances is taking it out of context. After all, this is a military alliance not a spiritual alliance. But if God so severely rebukes a merely military alliance—for spiritual *reasons*—we can hardly conclude that he is less concerned or less severe when it comes to religious alliances.

God's rebuke of Jehoshaphat's actions through his prophet Jehu in 2 Chronicles 19:2 is instructive. The verse makes the point that even when a man is—like Jehoshaphat—good, godly, and sincere, with an edifying ministry to God's people that is blessed by God, it does not mean (a) that all his actions are, therefore, right; (b) that his wrong actions should be overlooked or unrebuked because he is, after all, a good and godly and sincere man; (c) that there is not "wrath on him from the Lord" for his wrong actions or alliances, whether we see evidence of that wrath or not; or (d) that his wrong actions and alliances necessarily nullify his good, godly, and sincere character. How do we know that? From the next verse in the text.

Our evaluation of others must be as honest and even-handed as God's. Can a serial compromiser like Jehoshaphat be genuinely sincere and do good things for the Lord? The answer to that question is 2 Chronicles 19:3: "Nevertheless, some good is found in you." God takes the rest of chapters 19 and 20 to record all the genuinely good and godly things Jehoshaphat did after this. That must mean Jehoshaphat repented at the word of the prophet and reformed his compromising ways, right? If only that were the case (2 Chron 18:1; 18:2; 20:35; 2 Kgs 3:6–7).

Jehoshaphat's apparent tone-deafness to the divine word regarding his alliances is astonishing. Scripture commends Jehoshaphat to us as a good and godly man greatly used by God. But part of his legacy is long-term damage to his own family and to the people of God. Because of Jehoshaphat's intermarriage and cooperation with the house of Ahab, both his son and grandson abandoned his own example of personal godliness and followed the ways of Ahab's family (2 Chron 21:6; 22:3–4). Thanks to his daughter-in-law, Athaliah, the royal Davidic line was very nearly eradicated (2 Chron 22:10ff). Finally, Jehoshaphat's alliance with the house of Ahab contributed to the propagation of Baal worship in Judah for years to come (2 Chron 23:17). God sent three different prophets to rebuke the godly Jehoshaphat for the same habitual sin.

In the narrative of Jehoshaphat, the prophets Micaiah, Jehu, Eliezer, and Elisha represent God's perspective on this godly king's repeated, problematic alliances. With whom in the narrative are we meant to identify? Whom are we intended to emulate? The genuinely godly but habitually compromising Jehoshaphat? Or those "negative" but honest prophets? Who is most clearly and consistently on the Lord's side? That is what matters most. Even when we try to apply the inspired Scriptures as accurately as we know how, we cannot claim the divine inspiration of a prophet. But if the prophets are our primary exemplars, then sometimes it is appropriate to disagree with a brother, even vigorously.

Jehoshaphat's sin is pretty blatant; he repeatedly aided the Yahweh-abandoning, Baal-worshipping Northern Kingdom. That is the kind of association that the passage is specifically talking about. Beyond that, the applications can be messy. Even if we are trying to ground our applications in scriptural principle, we will not always come to identical conclusions.[23]

At the same time, the Jehoshaphat narrative reminds us that a really godly person can sometimes make really bad decisions—even in the face of repeated rebukes from God's word—and still be a really godly person with whom we are compelled to disagree, perhaps vigorously. The point is that such disagreements, when rightly managed, neither negate the reality of an underlying unity nor consign those with whom we disagree to the dustbin of apostasy.

It is a scripturally demonstrable fact that some differences demand confrontation. One of the most glaring and disconcerting biblical examples of this reality is Paul's confrontation of Peter in Antioch.[24] Personal godliness or divine usefulness does not exempt one from severe divine displeasure or from the censure and rebuke of fellow believers. That weighty observation requires a counterweight that highlights the importance of *how* we disagree.

Do Not Confuse Righteous Indignation with the Wrath of Man

I am using *confuse* here in two senses. The first is the common definitional sense of *confuse*: do not *mistake* human wrath for righteous indignation (Jas 1:20). The second is the more etymological and theological sense of *confuse*: do not *mix* sinful human wrath into an otherwise legitimate expression of righteous indignation (Eph 4:26).

The textual basis for this scriptural norm is, of course, located in James 1. Note the linkage between unbridled speech, worthless religion, and worldliness.

> But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. . . . If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father . . . to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Returning to Acts 15 for a moment, Marshall notes that "the reason for the contention between Paul and Barnabas has seemed so trivial that some deeper cause has been suspected."[25] Accordingly,

[23] We are given minimal textual insight into Jehoshaphat's decision-making policy. Given his otherwise extraordinarily exemplary godliness, however, one cannot at least help wondering whether Jehoshaphat was trying to ground his policy on basic scriptural principle and biblical-historical precedent: "I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses" (1 Kgs 22:4; 2 Kgs 3:7).

[24] It is critical to note that the rift between Paul and Peter was not an issue of doctrine but of practice that contradicted and undermined the doctrine on which they were both in perfect agreement (Gal 2:11–21).

[25] I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, TOTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 257.

some commentators have invented all sorts of ulterior motives in order to explain the "real" issues underlying the dispute.[26]

For example, Mark allegedly resented Paul's apostolic priority over his Uncle Barnabas; *that* is why he left the previous mission, and that is why Paul did not want him along this time. Or, Paul still distrusted Barnabas after the Antioch debacle (Gal 2:11–13) and was actually looking for a pretext to go without him (which raises the question of why Paul would approach Barnabas with the idea in the first place, Acts 15:36). Or again, Mark actually left the first mission in protest over Paul's Gentile focus, so he returned to Jerusalem to stir up the Judaistic faction of the church against Paul. But this is all speculative rubbish.

Even fog will look like a smoking gun to someone who is convinced that there must be a smoking gun. Sometimes we can be so inebriated by our own prejudices that we see only what we expect to see. If we feel compelled to disagree—especially publicly—we have at least four scriptural obligations to meet in doing so.

First, *be slow*. That is the core of James's charge—"slow to speak, and slow to anger." Do not fire off posts or emails in the intensity and heat of the moment. Second, *be informed*. That is the "quick to hear" component of James's counsel. Paul condemns those who "do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions" (1 Tim 1:7 NASB). In short, they do not really know what they are talking about. Informing and influencing others entails an obligation to inform ourselves first. Communicate, confirm, and understand accurately. Third, *be honest*. Speak truth (Eph 4:25). It is dishonest to misrepresent a view with which you disagree; go out of your way to present it in its best light. Fourth, *be charitable*. Speak truth in love (Eph 4:15; 1 Cor 13:4–6). Do not insinuate evil motives or mock brothers in Christ who hold a view with which you disagree. We ought to be willing to hold our friends and fellow believers to these standards; and we ought to expect to be evaluated by those standards as well.

Earlier, I quoted a portion of Matthew Henry's comment on the Paul-Barnabas dispute in Acts 15 ("we shall never be all of a mind till we come to heaven"). I want to return to that remark because he adds something uniquely insightful along the lines of this biblical norm: "Even those whom we justly condemn we should condemn *moderately*, and with a great deal of temper[ance], because we know not but afterwards we may see cause to think better of them . . . and we should so regulate our resentments that if it should prove so, we should not afterwards be ashamed of [our previous words]."[27]

There is sound and scriptural wisdom in that. The alternative is regret in retrospect. The eighteenth-century Scottish minister John Brown of Haddington expressed such remorse. In an address to young theological students, he reflected on his participation in the secession from the Scottish church. "I look upon the Secession as indeed the cause of God, but sadly mismanaged and dishonoured by myself and others. Alas! For that pride, passion, selfishness, and unconcern for the

[26] The view is accommodatingly put by twentieth-century Episcopalian priest and seminary professor Theodore P. Ferris: "Though Luke puts down the estrangement from Barnabas to disagreement concerning Mark, it is certain that the cause must have lain deeper." "The Acts of the Apostles," *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1954), 9:209.

[27] Henry, 6:201.

glory of Christ and spiritual edification of souls, which has so often prevailed. Alas! For our want of due meekness, gentleness."[28]

Unbridled speech is worldliness. We can become so conditioned by our culture (contra Rom 12:2) that we will post on social media any ungenerous thought that occurs to us—or perpetuate those of others—ignoring in the process the most basic biblical principles that govern our speech and our disagreements with fellow believers. Our reaction to a fellow believer's error can be just as unscriptural, our attitude toward their perceived worldliness just as worldly.

Every Believer Is Individually Accountable to the Master

Another principle that must inform how we go about managing our differences is far weightier than the space I can give to it here; it, nevertheless, deserves mention. Every man must be fully persuaded in his own mind (Rom 14:5) because each of us will be judged not by one another but by our Master (Rom 14:4). Packaged in this passage like nonidentical twins are both liberty and sobriety. Here is the liberty: the basis of our evaluation before Christ will not be what other people thought of us and our choices (1 Cor 4:2–3). Before you belt out a confirmatory hallelujah, however, here is the sobriety: the basis of our evaluation before Christ will not even be our own conscience (1 Cor 4:3–4) but, rather, *Christ's* assessment of our faithfulness to the words of God. And that includes his assessment of our faithfulness to his words regulating how we express and manage our differences with each other.

Truth Matters More than Me

One might form the impression from the NT that Paul was a rather narrow-minded, short-fused, pugnacious apostle ready to dispute in the twinkling of an eye. We have already referenced his run-ins with both Barnabas and Peter. To be sure, when "the truth of the gospel" was at stake, he was not prepared "to yield in subjection . . . for even an hour" (Gal 2:5 NASB). When it comes to situations in which he stands to lose *personally*, however, Paul models an exemplary self-effacing spirit.

We tend to be touchiest when we are most vulnerable and wronged. But that is precisely when Paul displays an astonishing magnanimity. Writing from prison, Paul references those who took advantage of his absence from the church circuit. Some, emboldened by his example, preach the word fearlessly out of loving solidarity with the apostle and his mission. Others, emboldened rather by his *absence*, preach the word out of envy, rivalry, insincerity, and selfish ambition, hoping to add to Paul's burdens and concerns (Phil 1:14–17).

Paul's response is extraordinary: "What is the result? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is being proclaimed, and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice" (Phil 1:18 NET). Even when the motive behind the preaching was ignoble, selfish, and sinful, Paul did not concern himself with that; that was the Lord's business (1 Cor 4:1–5). The damage or cost to him

[28] John Brown, "Address to Students of Divinity," in *Young Preacher's Manual, or A Collection of Treatises on Preaching,* ed. Ebenezer Porter (Boston: Charles Ewer, 1819), 25. Thanks to my friend and colleague Robert D. Vincent for alerting me to this quotation.

personally was, to his mind, irrelevant so long as truth was being preached. "It is impossible to conceive a finer piece of broad-minded tolerance."[29]

Unity Is Possible without Unanimity

In his book *Exegetical Fallacies,* D. A. Carson identifies a number of logical and hermeneutical flaws that are common even among practiced and informed scholars. In his preface, he explains that one of his driving concerns is the Church's "hermeneutical disarray." An express goal for the book is to contribute to hermeneutical uniformity.

> The importance of this sort of study cannot be overestimated if we are to move toward unanimity on those matters of interpretation that still divide us. I speak to those with a high view of Scripture: it is very distressing to contemplate how many differences there are among us as to what Scripture actually says. . . . There is a disturbing array of mutually incompatible theological opinions.[30]

We all need help identifying and rooting out erroneous reasoning and fallacious conclusions, exegetical and otherwise. To that end, Carson's book is invaluable for evaluating the hermeneutical strengths and weaknesses of ourselves and others. But I want to raise what may seem to some a nearly heretical question: is hermeneutical unanimity actually necessary? For that matter, given all the factors at work in our fallenness and the wide array of reasons for our differences, is hermeneutical unanimity even possible? "It is," after all, "the peculiar trait of men to war over ideas, not least, theological ones."[31] Often that is badly done; but that does not necessarily mean it is bad to do.

Unity is a critical biblical concern. But unity and unanimity are not the same thing; and the difference is more than merely syllabic. Unanimity would be nice, but it is not a biblical obligation. Romans 14 testifies that a lack of unanimity in the Church is not only tolerable; it is to be expected. In fact, lack of unanimity is one of the best tests of unity.

Think again about Acts 15. Is it not ironic—and instructive—that the very chapter that records the remarkable unity of mind that emerged from the Church's first major debate (vv. 22, 25) should conclude with a falling out between the two men who are, at the beginning of the chapter, inseparable? Rather than speculating where the text is silent, or assuming that only one of them was Spirit-filled, scripturally informed, and exclusively in the right, everything else we know about both of these men should lead us to assume that both of them were actively seeking God's guidance and that God was either directing or allowing different conclusions. The whole chapter illustrates that God may use even sharp disagreement to further his purposes without eroding unity—that, in fact, even division need not undermine an underlying unity, *depending on how we manage those disagreements and divisions*.

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[29] Machen, 22.

[30] D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 18.

[31] Austin Brown, *A Boisterously Reformed Polemic Against Limited Atonement* (Pensacola: independently published, 2022), 158. See my review of this work later in this issue of *JBTW.*

It is our differences that drive us to re-evaluate our own positions and those of others in the light of Scripture. We all ought to be studying Scripture more closely as a result of our differences than we would if we all agreed on everything. And that is a good thing.

We have the right, the privilege, and indeed the obligation to differ when a scripturally informed conscience compels us to do so. As long as membership and matriculation are voluntary, every church and institution has not just the right but the obligation to be as precise in their doctrines and positions and policies and practices as they believe Scripture requires them to be. At the same time, we are equally obligated to seek to have a mind as fully informed by Scripture, as open to the insights of other godly people, as sensitive to the Holy Spirit's illumination, and as free from the motivations of either the fear or the pleasure of man as possible.

That is easier said than done. But so is sanctification. And that, in essence, is what this whole essay is about. Philip Henry, the lesser-known father of Matthew Henry, remarked:

> *It is not so much our differences of opinion that doth us the mischief* (for we may as soon expect all the clocks in the town to strike together, as to see all good people of a mind in every thing on this side of heaven), *but the mismanagement of that difference*.[32]

You can hear in Matthew Henry's comments on Acts 15 (cited earlier) the echo of his father's wisdom. Put another way, the problem is not *disagreement* (lack of unanimity), but *ill will* (lack of unity) that tarnishes God's glory in the Church.

Unity Is Not a Goal, but a Fact—Act Like It

The NT does not present unity as a goal we are to strive towards, a dream we nourish and hope someday to attain. Unity is a present reality we are supposed to recognize, guard, and live in light of. Two major passages corroborate this perspective.

John 17

Some interpretations of Jesus' prayer for the unity of his followers (John 17:11, 20–23) make it sound as if the answer to that request is entirely up to us. Some give the impression that his request for unity remains miserably unanswered—again, because of us. But Jesus' prayer was not an appeal aimed at his followers; it was a request directed to the Father. As such, it was answered just as definitely and definitively as his request that the Father would glorify him (17:1) or that he would preserve the elect (17:11). Jesus did not ask the Father that we might someday be unified; he prayed to the Father to make all his followers a unity—or, to use the term the Spirit would later direct Paul to use, a body. Christ prayed that the Father would inaugurate the mystery of the unity of the Church as one new man, a previously unrevealed mystery known only to the Godhead.

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[32] Matthew Henry, *The Life of the Rev. Philip Henry, A.M.,* corrected and enlarged by J. B. Williams (London: J. S. Hughes, 1825), 54 (emphasis added).

> Now, foreseeing the addition of many more who would increase the diversity of temperaments, backgrounds, and interests, he made a special plea that all might be one. . . . He was not calling for uniformity . . . nor was he calling for agreement in external opinion. The concept parallels the Pauline concept of the body of Christ, that all believers belong by a vital rather than a merely formal relationship (1 Cor 12:12–13).[33]

I am suggesting that the correlation between the prayer of Jesus and the teaching of Paul is more than mere parallel. Rather, the revelation to Paul of the mystery of the Church, and his teaching of the unity of Jew and Gentile in one body, is the *answer* to Jesus' prayer. *The problem is not that the Church has miserably failed to make the request of Christ a reality*; answering the prayer of the Son of God is hardly within our prerogative or power. *The problem is that the Church miserably fails to live out the reality requested by Christ and fulfilled by the Father*.

The Father granted every other request the Son ever made,[34] and he granted this one as well. The proof of that is the NT teaching that all believing Jews and Gentiles *are united* in *one body* in Christ—not in theory, and not in anticipation, but in present reality. It is the teaching of the NT that this is an accomplished fact, a spiritual reality (cf. 1 Cor 12; Eph 2–4).

Ephesians 4

Paul confirms that this unity is not an elusive ambition we aspire to; it is a present reality. There is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Eph 4:4–6). This unity is not to be gained but to be maintained (Eph 4:3). You cannot maintain something that does not already exist.

The unity of all true believers in Christ, created by our mutual union with Christ and possession of the same Spirit, is a fact, a prayer uttered by Christ and infallibly answered by the Father. Our union with Christ and unity in the Spirit is an established reality that we need to treasure and guard and in which we need to grow as we progress in our study and mature in our understanding of Scripture.

In the meantime, sometimes one of the best ways to preserve that unity and peace is to agree to divide and live out our Scripture-informed consciences. Philip and Matthew Henry were right. It is not our differences or even our divisions that are the enemy of unity. The true enemy of unity is the manner and spirit in which our differences and divisions are managed.

Unity is not a goal toward which the Church must strive in order for Christ's prayer to be realized; it is the reality in light of which we are to live and act. That unity does not mean we never disagree; it does not even mean we never divide. Sometimes division is necessary not just to maintain purity but to preserve unity. The key is how we manage those differences and divisions. When we do differ with

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[33] Merrill C. Tenney, "The Gospel of John," in *EBC,* ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 9:167. Few interpreters that I am aware of connect Christ's request and the doctrine of the unity of the Church in one body. Cf. a passing, second-hand reference in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John* (1873; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 3:227. See also Matthew Henry, 5:1164, who notes that Jesus' request for unity includes "that they might all be *incorporated in one body*" (emphasis original). This is, in my opinion, a significant oversight that misshapes many applications of Jesus' prayer.

[34] Any objection that the cup-request in the garden (Matt 26:39) is an exception fails to take into account the full request: "nevertheless not as I will, but as you will." That was granted.

one another, sometimes even vigorously, it is necessary to remind ourselves of another biblical principle.

Keep the Bigger Picture in View: He Is Not the Enemy; He Is a Brother

The obvious text for this point is 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15. But we have to hold and practice and think and pray in terms of *both* 3:14 and 3:15. Christ's disciples have differences that will sometimes necessarily divide them, especially when some choose not to obey apostolic instruction: "Note that man, and have no company with him" (v. 14). But the passage compels us to counterpoint that division with a recognition: "Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (v. 15).

Think about that. A believer's disobedience to clear apostolic commands is serious and warrants division. But even in those circumstances, he is to be regarded as a brother not an enemy. If that applies even to those who disobey clear apostolic commands, it certainly applies to those who disagree with us on the interpretations and applications of some of those apostolic commands.

A minister planning to write a public article criticizing a fellow minister first wrote to John Newton for his advice. Newton gives some insightful, practical counsel along these lines of managing controversy with brothers in Christ.[35]

> Dear Sir,
>
> As you are likely to be engaged in controversy, and your love of truth is joined with a natural warmth of temper, my friendship makes me solicitous on your behalf. . . . *I would have you more than a conqueror, and to triumph not only over your adversary, but over yourself*. . . . I may reduce my advice to three heads, respecting your opponent, the public, and yourself.
>
> Consider Your Opponent
>
> As to your opponent, I wish that before you set pen to paper against him, and during the whole time you are preparing your answer, you may commend him by earnest prayer to the Lord's teaching and blessing. This practice will have a direct tendency to conciliate your heart to love and pity him; and such a disposition will have a good influence upon every page you write.
>
> If you account him a believer, though greatly mistaken in the subject of debate between you, [remember] the Lord loves him and bears with him; therefore you must not despise him, or treat him harshly. The Lord bears with you likewise, and expects that you should show tenderness to others, from a sense of the much forgiveness you need yourself. In a little while you will meet in heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts; and though you may find it necessary to oppose his errors, view him personally as a kindred soul, with whom you are to be happy in Christ forever. . . .

[35] The following excerpts are from Letter XIX, "On Controversy," in *The Works of John Newton* (1839; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2021), 1:186–91 (emphasis added).

Consider the Public

> By printing, you will appeal to the public, where your readers may be ranged under three divisions: First, such as differ from you in principle. . . . Though you have your eye upon one person chiefly, there are many like-minded with him. . . .
>
> [Second, those who are not doctrinally or theologically informed.] These are very incompetent judges of doctrine; but they can form a tolerable judgment of a writer's spirit. They know that meekness, humility, and love are the characteristics of a Christian temper. . . . The scriptural maxim that "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God," is verified by daily observation. If our zeal is embittered by expressions of anger, invective, or scorn, we may think we are doing service of the cause of truth, when in reality we shall only bring it into discredit. . . .
>
> [Third, those who are already inclined to agree with you and the arguments you advance.] You may be instrumental to their edification if the law of kindness as well as of truth regulates your pen, otherwise you may do them harm. There is a principle of self, which disposes us to despise those who differ from us; and we are often under its influence when we think we are only showing a becoming zeal in the cause of God. . . . *Self-righteousness can feed upon doctrines as well as upon works; and a man may have the heart of a Pharisee, while his head is stored with orthodox notions.* . . . I hope your performance will savor of a spirit of true humility, and be a means of promoting it in others.

Consider Yourself

> This leads me, in the last place, to consider your own concern in your present undertaking. It seems a laudable service to defend the faith once delivered to the saints; we are commanded to contend earnestly for it, and to convince gainsayers. . . . [But] what will it profit a man if he gains his cause and silences his adversary, if at the same time he loses that humble, tender frame of spirit in which the Lord delights . . . ?
>
> Be upon your guard against admitting anything personal into the debate. If you think you have been ill-treated, you will have an opportunity of showing that you are a disciple of Jesus, who "when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not." This is our pattern, thus we are to speak and write for God, "not rendering railing for railing, but contrariwise blessing; knowing that hereunto we are called."

Managing our differences well demands maturity, humility, and Christlikeness. That brings me finally to a dubious-sounding conclusion. My word choice is admittedly droll but, at the same time, serious.

Celebrate Perspicuity!

We are bombarded with the cry to "celebrate diversity!" Here's another angle on that. Underneath our differences in interpretation and application as brothers and sisters in Christ is a doctrine that is central to our theological heritage: the perspicuity of Scripture.[36]

> Perspicuity is one of the foundations for religious liberty in the West. Implicit in the affirmation of Scripture's clarity is the recognition that individuals have the responsibility and the ability to interpret Scripture for themselves. . . . Of course, this . . . doctrine has opened a door to all sorts of problems—factions, eccentric interpretations, rampant individualism, and the like. But despite these dangers, the freedom that perspicuity protects is worth the cost. . . . The biblical doctrine of perspicuity can be abused. But a raft of bad interpretations and the sometimes free-for-all of Protestantism is still worth the price of reading the Bible for ourselves according to our God-given (and imperfect) consciences. Freedom of religious inquiry and expression would not be possible without confidence in the clarity of Scripture.[37]

Every difference and disagreement is a reminder that God has spoken his words not just to one man but to all, not just to a spiritual hierarchy or a scholarly aristocracy but to his people at large.

And every difference and disagreement that is managed well is a testimony that, despite those differences and disagreements and even divisions, we are

> elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth;
> our charter of salvation: one Lord, one faith, one birth.
> One holy name we bless, partake one holy food,
> and to one hope we press, with every grace endued.[38]

May we seek, and may God grant, the grace to live in light of the unity of the body of Christ by agreeing where we can, being willing to disagree and even divide when we must, and managing those disagreements and divisions well—to the glory of God.

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[36] For an excellent and thorough study of this topic, see the previously cited work by Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture.*

[37] Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 67–68.

[38] Samuel Stone, "The Church's One Foundation" (adapted).

Appendix: A Model Expression of Unity

Ezra's prayer for the sinning people of God (Ezra 9) displays an exemplary solidarity between leader and people. The issue was not only intermarriage among the people but intermarriage among the leaders—intermarriage with the very kinds of surrounding unbelievers that had historically corrupted their relationship with the Lord and that finally led to their decimation and captivity only four generations earlier. Ezra's reaction was severe (Ezra 9:1–4) because he understood the broad historical perspective and what was at stake in this tilt toward compromise with the surrounding world.

When we listen carefully to his prayer, we hear something quite surprising. It is his pronouns. Ezra does not pray about "them" and "their" sin; he prays about "us" and "our" sin.

> [6] O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for *our* iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and *our* guilt has mounted up to the heavens. [7] From the days of our fathers to this day *we* have been in great guilt. And for *our* iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today. . . . [13] And after all that has come upon us for *our* evil deeds and for *our* great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than *our* iniquities deserved . . . , [14] shall *we* break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with *us* until you consumed *us*, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? [15] O LORD, the God of Israel, you are just, . . . Behold, *we* are before you in *our* guilt, for none can stand before you because of this. (Ezra 9:6–7, 13–15)

Why did Ezra pray this way? He had not participated in those sins that were once again endangering the nation. Moreover, what does his prayer have to do with us as Gentile members of the Church? First, the NT teaches that passages like this are for our instruction and encouragement (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11). Second, Bible prayers are not just interesting historical artifacts; they model not only scriptural ways of praying but a scriptural spirit in praying as well. Third, we are not members of Israel or part of a theocratic nation; we are part of something even more intimate and spiritually binding—a universal body of true believers united in what is called the Church—whether we like it or not, whether we like all of them or not, and whether we agree with all of them or not. They are brothers and sisters (as Paul reminds us) "for whom Christ died," and for whom Christ will return, and with whom we will live in perfected love and respect forever. If they are brothers and sisters, that means they are family. We are members united in one body, just as Jesus prayed. In a very real way—more real than if we were united merely by blood or race or nationality—what happens to one of us affects all of us. And fourth, the kinds of things that threatened individual Israelites and therefore the nation Israel—things for which Ezra prayed with such astonishing solidarity—are the same kinds of things that threaten not just our churches but our Church as a whole.

This ancient passage is pregnant with a number of strikingly timeless applications. First, the principle extends beyond individuals marrying unbelievers. Literal marriage to unbelievers is the obvious first-level application. But the spiritual significance of such marriages indicates that even bigger issues are at stake as well. The mixed marriages were wrong because (as with Jehoshaphat's

marriage alliances with the house of Ahab) they created relationships and loyalties (to family) that conflicted with higher and fundamentally opposed relationships and loyalties (to God). Such relationships function as the means of introducing pagan elements of the world into the community and worship of Yahweh (Ezra 9:1).

Second, the principle includes marrying the Church to the culture. The reason God forbade physical marriages with the people of the land was because such physical marriages implied a metaphorical marriage with the culture (Exod 34:11–16). The language of Ezra 9:2 ("the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands") is pregnant with application to the effects of marrying the Church to the surrounding unbelieving culture and the practices that accompany it, particularly when they undermine God's words.

Third, the principle involves particular emphasis on the responsibility of leadership. The passage's specific attention to the involvement of even the priests and the Levites (Ezra 9:1) and the fact that "the hand of the princes and rulers have been chief in this trespass" (Ezra 9:2) has compelling implications for the unique responsibility of leadership in maintaining the purity of the church.

Fourth, the prayer contains a humbling lesson for separatists. It is easy for separatists to cultivate the attitude that we are not the problem and have nothing to confess—our job is to identify problems and warn people. But the biblical pattern goes beyond praying for the purity and growth of our church or our group. Why not pray that way for genuine believers and churches outside yourself and your circle? Of all people, separatists should pray for the purification of the body of Christ at large. Such praying provides a powerful lesson and example to God's people—to foster, alongside a scriptural explanation of the issues that divide us, a sense of solidarity, a largeness of spirit toward the people of God who are not a part of *our* church or *our* movement. That spirit is reflected in what and how we pray for others.

Finally, this kind of praying is part of a broader biblical pattern. Ezra is not alone in this kind of solidarity praying (cf. Dan. 9). In Scripture, it is the separatists who take the lead in confessing the sins of the community of God's people and interceding for God's people at large. If anyone could have pointed fingers, it was men like Ezra and Daniel. But these men prayed and confessed with this sense of solidarity as though they too were guilty; you hear it in their pronouns when they pray. Worldliness and compromise in the Church need to be identified, but it is not just *their* problem. It is *our* problem because it is the Church's problem. It is *our* problem because Christ's honor and cause and people are at stake. The Church is not divided between "us" and "them." The Church is all about *us*—all of us—and *Christ*. Ezra's and Daniel's examples suggest that our attitude—both in censure and in intercession—needs to reflect that awareness. But the pattern extends beyond Ezra and Daniel.

Praying like this—whether individually and privately, or pastorally and publicly—is an expression of the spirit of Paul in Philippians 1:15–18, and of Jesus in Luke 9:49–50. Read what was going on in some of the churches in Revelation 2–3; we would not dare fellowship with some of them, and rightly so. Yet Christ still claims them, addresses them as his churches, and displays an astonishing willingness to acknowledge good things even in some of the worst of those churches. Correction and warning are biblical necessities because solidarity and unity are biblical realities.

This is no argument for an ecumenical spirit. It is an argument for a biblically ecclesiastical spirit that embraces what Scripture itself teaches is a single body with one Head. It is an argument for maintaining an awareness of our unity in Christ despite our differences, and for thinking and praying with a sense of solidarity and passion for the purification of the whole body of Christ, for the glory of Christ. "Union in religious duties, especially in the duty of prayer, in praying for one another, and jointly for their common welfare, above almost all other things, tends to promote mutual affection and endearment."[39]

Even when it was others who were clearly in the wrong, Ezra and Daniel did not pray about "them"; they prayed about "us." Even more than Israel was, we really are all in this together. We cannot remain faithful to the NT and ignore that reality.

[39] Jonathan Edwards, "An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth, Pursuant to Scripture-Promises and Prophecies Concerning the Last Time," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (1834; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 2:295. Thanks to my friend and colleague Robert D. Vincent for this quotation.

Trammel, Madison. *Fundamentalists in the Public Square: Evolution, Alcohol, and Culture Wars after the Scopes Trial.* Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2023. 133pp. + 30pp. (front matter) + 37pp. (back matter).

Trammel does remarkable yeoman research for the years 1920–1933 in the newspaperarchive.com database that includes Illinois, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, and uses important published primary sources. Previous studies on fundamentalists have relied on published theological works, periodicals, and manuscript collections. Trammel's case study provides evidence, although limited by the geographical focus, for the conclusion that the Scopes Trial did not mark a defeat or decline for fundamentalism. The author's "central question" is whether the antievolution crusade and Prohibition efforts square with retreat from the culture. His conclusion is that "cultural engagement" continued after the Scopes Trial (123).

Efforts against evolution, less visible before events in Dayton, Tennessee, intensified afterwards, based on newspaper coverage—in a number of articles and content. In coming decades, despite the ultimate legislative failures in states, a creationist movement sustained the long-term fight against Darwinism. Newspaper interest in fundamentalism and Prohibition peaked after the Scopes Trial.

The constituencies opposing evolution and alcohol were not synonymous; furthermore, Prohibition counted less toward fundamentalist identity than antievolution. While the book concludes that theological conservatives were the "strongest core of support for Prohibition" (61), it does provide nuance. For example, prominent Baptist leader Edgar Young Mullins equivocated on evolution, but he eventually joined forces against alcohol. Aimee Semple McPherson, Los Angeles Pentecostal evangelist, also serves as evidence for fundamentalist Prohibition efforts.

The book uses Lewis Sperry Chafer, president of Dallas Theological Seminary, an advocate of dispensational theology, as a case study on fundamentalist social action for the era. It concludes that this theology was inconsistent: it both encouraged social action (legislation banning evolution and alcohol) while theoretically focused on the second coming of Christ, who would bring the perfect society. The author concludes that "dispensational activists began to chart a practical theology of cultural engagement at the grassroots level by entering the public fray" (123). Integrating Chafer into the antievolution and Prohibition narratives—rather than presenting him in a separate chapter—would have improved the organization of the book.

The inclusion of Chafer, McPherson, and Mullins in the study raises the important question: should historians use them as evidence although they deliberately did not self-identify as fundamentalists? McPherson was Pentecostal, and few fundamentalists at the time cooperated with her. Many opposed her ministry. J. Gresham Machen, cited in the book, avoided the label *fundamentalist* but found common cause with them. Chafer and Mullins, more so, resisted the association. Their inclusion is appropriate for understanding context, but the "identity" issue needed to be addressed.

One of the best features of the book is the expansive meaning of *fundamentalist* and *evangelical*. The author borrows notions about "cultural engagement" (xxi) and the parameters of fundamentalism and evangelicalism from David W. Bebbington, a British historian who gives an international

understanding to the religious contexts. In addition, chapter 1 provides an overview of fundamentalist historiography.

The founding generation of fundamentalists between the wars opposed evolution and alcohol, but what did they support? They had diverse views on creation and time—literal, long-day, and gap theory. Some were Republicans and others Democrats. The newspapers covered omit the South and the West Coast. Prohibition Party candidate Robert Shuler was active in California. The Reformed wing gets minimal attention; Presbyterian James O. Buswell of Wheaton College was a staunch Prohibitionist. Machen opposed Prohibition, and it cost him a promotion at Princeton Seminary.

Fundamentalist cultural engagement post-Scopes is not a new idea. Several historians have focused on such a participation. Virginia Brereton concentrated on religious education and Tona Hangen on radio. David H. Watt and others (the author of this review included), see a more complex relationship to modern culture, from adaptations to psychology, consumerism, film, and political pluralism, as well as cooperation among denominations. A commitment to the standards of the modern university helps explain the movement's resilience. Keith Bates's *Mainstreaming Fundamentalism* on John R. Rice (missing in Trammel's book) is an example of the modern "book culture."[1] Daniel Bare's *Black Fundamentalists,* on minority participation,[2] is also absent in Trammel's study, as are women in the books by Margaret Benroth and Arlin C. Migliazzo.

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[1] Keith Bates, *Mainstreaming Fundamentalism: John R. Rice and Fundamentalism's Public Reemergence,* America's Baptists (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2021).

[2] Daniel R. Bare, *Black Fundamentalists: Conservative Christianity and Racial Identity in the Segregation Era* (New York: New York University, 2021). For a review of this work, see *JBTW* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2021): 103–5.

Schreiner, Thomas R. *Revelation.* BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023. 771pp. + 22pp. (front matter) + 102pp. (back matter).

Thomas Schreiner, a professor of NT interpretation and biblical theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, contributed this commentary on Revelation as a replacement for Grant Osborne's commentary in the Baker Exegetical Commentary series.

While Osborne identified his commentary as prioritizing the futurist, rather than the idealist or preterist approaches,[1] Schreiner prioritizes idealist perspective (though he does read chapters 19–22 as predicting the future). Within that framework Schreiner has produced an excellent commentary. G. K. Beale's commentary in the New International Greek Testament Commentary series has been, and remains, the definitive idealist commentary since its publication in 1999. Schreiner notes, "I have not attempted to write the kind of in-depth commentary that we find in Aune (1997, 1998a, 1998b), Beale (1999), and Koester (2014). My hope is that my commentary is substantial enough for serious exegesis but short enough for the busy pastor to read. I have tried to write in an accessible style for readers so that they can grasp what is being said in scholarship" (xi). Schreiner succeeded in these goals. Thus, while this commentary does not displace Beale, it presents the idealist position in sufficient depth but with greater clarity than Beale. In addition, Schreiner at times exercises more restraint in his interpretation of the symbolism of the book. For instance, in the fifth trumpet judgment Schreiner notes, "Beale (1999: 494) says the darkness symbolizes deception, but that is likely an overreading and too specific. Darkness symbolizes the evil atmosphere pervading the scene" (338). Finally, unlike Beale and most other idealists, Schreiner does not adopt an amillennial position but instead proposes new-creation millennialism as a mediating millennial view. In short, for those looking for a commentary on Revelation in the idealist vein, this would be an excellent purchase.

Most readers of this journal likely subscribe to a futurist approach to Revelation.[2] The remainder of this review will therefore examine Schreiner's objections to a futurist approach, evaluate his idealistic approach, and examine his new-creation millennialism.

First, Schreiner is correct to critique the claim that Revelation "must be read as literally as possible" (45). The goal of literal interpretation is not to be as literal as possible but to discern what the author intended. Those advocating an "as literally as possible" approach have conflated two senses of the word *literal. Literal* in the sense of author-intended meaning as discerned by grammatical, historical, theological exegesis should be affirmed. Accurate reflection of authorial intent does not exist on a spectrum. One either does this or does not do it. *Literal* in the sense of without metaphor or symbolism is not the standard that the futurist ought or need aspire to. If the author employed symbolism or metaphor, the careful futurist will want to recognize this fact and interpret accordingly. Thus, this critique is not against futurism per se but against particular futurist interpreters. Second, Schreiner is correct to critique "newspaper eschatology" but wrong to link it with futurism (5). Those doing "newspaper eschatology" are practicing a species of historicism, not futurism. At best they are fusing

[1] Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation,* BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 21–22.

[2] For a defense of a futurist reading of Revelation, see Brian Collins, "The Futurist Interpretation of Revelation: Intertextual Evidence from the Prologue," *JBTW* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2021): 33–52.

the two, and the "arbitrary and capricious" nature of their interpretations is due to their historicist approach. Their errors should not be used as an argument against futurism.[3] The true futurist believes that the events of the ultimate Day of the Lord described in the book could begin to happen at any time—tomorrow or millennia hence—and that they will happen in such a way as to catch people completely unawares. Therefore, the approach of the Day of the Lord cannot be discerned by looking for signs of the times in the news. Third, the argument that futurism negates the book's significance to all but the final generation of readers is a curious claim (5). The OT is full of prophecies about the coming Day of Yhwh. Are those passages irrelevant to all believers from the time they were given until the final generation? Schreiner recognizes that at least the final chapters of Revelation are about the Second Coming and the new creation. Are those chapters irrelevant to believers throughout history? I do not think Schreiner would say so. Thus, while some of Schreiner's critiques are valid, they are not necessarily critiques of futurism; his direct critique of futurism is not valid.

The adequacy of the idealist approach can be tested by examining Schreiner's treatment of the trumpet judgments. First, the idealist approach involves a tension between the symbolism employed and the proposed referent. Schreiner, like all idealist interpreters, recognizes that the trumpet judgments allude to the plagues of the exodus. Indeed, Revelation presents the trumpet judgments as intensifying and universalizing the Egyptian plagues. The idealist, however, must place these events in the inter-advent period and must locate the referents within the normal range of human experience. Thus, the idealist interpretations are much less intense than the plagues on Egypt even as Revelation presents the judgments as intensifications of the exodus plagues. Second, idealist interpretations are often very general: "Life on earth is constantly beset by danger," "Life on the seas isn't what it could be and what it would be if it were not for human sin," "The spatial realm is also touched by God's judgment so that life isn't all that it should be for the flourishing of the human race. The fall touches every part of the created order" (329, 330, 333). For all the energy of the imagery and language in Revelation, these are fairly banal conclusions. Again, there is a mismatch between what Revelation says and what the idealist says it means. Third, when Schreiner's referents become more specific, they do not escape the problems of "newspaper exegesis." The newspaper exegetes he criticized saw, for instance, the locusts as representing attack helicopters (imagery that made sense against the background of the Vietnam War). However, identifying water pollution as the referent of the third trumpet and psychological issues as the referent of the fifth trumpet also reads the imagery in light of modern concerns and experiences. The futurist interpretation is less strained and more faithful to John's original context: bitter waters are bitter waters. And a scorpion-like sting is a sting that brings physical pain. These interpretations are also more consonant with the Exodus narrative to which they allude. Fourth, idealist interpretations run counter to the analogy of Scripture. Plausible interpretations of Revelation should align with the ways that similar kinds of symbolism were used in the OT. When the OT interprets imagery like that found in Revelation, the symbols refer to specific historical persons, kingdoms, and events. For instance, the goat in Daniel chapter 8 is identified as the

[3] To be fair to Schreiner, the error of confusing "newspaper exegesis" and futurism occurs among professed futurists as well.

king of Greece (now known to have been Alexander the Great). Neither the goat of Daniel 8 nor the beasts in chapter 7 represent abstract ideals. The historicists were not wrong to think that the symbolism of Revelation should be applied to concrete historical events. Their error was in attempting to relate that symbolism to the events of the inter-advent period. The futurist follows the lead of the OT in seeing the referents as concrete, historical persons, institutions, or events.

Finally, something must be said about Schreiner's approach to the millennium. In his first commentary on Revelation, he spoke highly of both premillennialism and amillennialism, but he gave the edge to amillennialism.[4] In this commentary, Schreiner opts for a third way between premillennialism and amillennialism—new-creation millennialism. In this view, the millennium is the first stage of the new creation. There are no unglorified people living during the millennium. The nations who attack the saints at the end of the millennial period are the resurrected unrighteous dead, who will subsequently be judged and condemned to the lake of fire.

The claim that the millennium is the first stage of the new creation fits well with the biblical evidence; however, the claim that there are no unglorified sinners living on earth during the millennium is difficult to square with Isaiah 65:17–25 or Zechariah 14:16–19. Further, Schreiner's interpretation of Revelation 20:7–10 is not entirely convincing.

Schreiner's commentary on Revelation provides readers with a well-executed commentary on Revelation from an idealist perspective. It also presents readers with an intriguing interpretation of Revelation 20, which gestures in the right direction on many points but which ultimately fails to satisfy. The commentary is worth buying as the now clearest in-depth exposition of the book from an idealist perspective. However, for those who believe a futurist perspective is correct, Grant Osborne's contribution to the Baker Exegetical Commentary (which remains available) and Buist Fanning's recent commentary in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series are to be preferred.[5]

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[4] Thomas R. Schreiner, "Revelation," in *Hebrews–Revelation*, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 724–25.

[5] See Brian Collins, review of *Revelation,* by Buist Fanning, in *JBTW* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 98.

Vlach, Michael J. *The New Creation Model: A Paradigm for Discovering God's Restoration Purposes from Creation to New Creation.* Cary, NC: Theological Studies, 2023. 405pp. + 6pp. (front matter) + 15pp. (back matter).

Michael Vlach's *The New Creation Model* argues that eternity involves nations, culture, government, and more as mankind fulfills God's mandate to rule the earth. The book interacts with theological journal articles and monographs, but Vlach keeps a direct, first-person tone and intends this book for a wider Christian audience than scholars and seminarians.

The book unfolds in five parts. The first explains the two models, and the second further expounds the New Creation Model and contrasts it with the Spiritual Vision Model. The third traces the models through church history. The fourth and fifth parts trace how the models interact with millennial views and with various theological systems.

Vlach begins part one by tracing Scripture's use of new-creation language, which he divides into three categories. First, Scripture describes redeemed persons in terms of new creation (2 Cor 5:17; cf. Rom 5:12–21; Eph 4:22–24; Col 3:9–10). Second, Scripture describes the church with new-creation language (Gal 6:15; Eph 2:11–3:6; Col 3:10–11; cf. Isa 19:16–25; Zech 14; Rev 21:1–3, 24, 26). Third, the Bible speaks of the restoration of the physical world with new-creation language (Isa 43:19–20; 65:17–25; Matt 19:28–30; Acts 3:21; Rom 8:19–23; Col 1:20; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1, 5, 24, 26). In chapters 5–9, Vlach argues that Christ's office of King means that he will rule over all nations (Ps 2:8–9; Isa 2:2–4; Zech 9:10; 14:9, 16–19; Rev 19:15) and will be "*Restorer of creation*" (Isa 11; Hos 2:18; Rom 8:19–20) (59). Christ's priestly role is also not limited to spiritual salvation—it brings about the resurrection of the body and the restoration of all creation (Col 1:15–20). This comprehensive nature of salvation is also needed because of the comprehensive nature of sin. Sin afflicts the individual, but it also has effects on the family, society, and the natural world. Thus, salvation must extend as far as the effects of sin. In chapters 6 and 7 Vlach outlines sixteen elements of the present creation that will characterize the new creation: "1. Earth as Man's Destiny," "2. Resurrection of the Body," "3. Restoration of Earth," "4. Nations and Ethnicities," "5. Israel," "6. Land," "7. Governments," "8. Society," "9. Culture," "10. Eating/Drinking/Celebration," "11. Houses and Farms," "12. Economic and Agricultural Prosperity," "13. Relationships and Friendships," "14. Animals, Birds, Fish," "15. Natural Resources," "16. Time" (112). Vlach turns to survey key texts in chapters 8 and 9. These include foundational texts about the purpose of creation, such as Genesis 1:16–28; texts about the Messiah's reign, such as Psalms 2, 8, 72; and texts that speak directly about the new creation, such as Romans 8:19–22, Colossians 1:15–20, and Revelation 20–21. In the end he surveys almost forty texts from all parts of the Old and New Testaments.

Vlach's exegetical case for the New Creation Model was helpful, but it also fell short in several areas. The interpretation of several of the texts surveyed is disputed. Engaging those disputes would have made Vlach's case stronger. Second, many of the texts surveyed were millennial texts, and a premillennialist holding to the Spiritual Vision Model could argue that those texts apply only to the millennium. Some indication in this part of the book about how the millennium and eternal state relate would have helped address those concerns. Third, Vlach did not engage with texts used to argue

against his position. Even among those who hold to the New Creation Model, there is debate about whether the present earth will be destroyed prior to the new creation. Engaging with the texts relevant to that debate and with other texts that are used to argue against the New Creation Model would also have been helpful.

Vlach introduces the Spiritual Vision Model in chapter 2 and then circles back to further expound it in chapters 10 and 11. He seems to poison the well by identifying the Spiritual Vision Model with Hinduism and Buddhism—before granting, "Christian versions of the Spiritual Vision Model are less severe and less dualistic than those of the eastern religions." Instead of connecting the Spiritual Vision Model to Hinduism, why not engage with fellow dispensationalist John Feinberg's arguments for a heavenly eternity? A failure to engage with Spiritual Vision proponents directly is a deficiency of Vlach's treatment. He quotes only from secondary sources already aligned with his viewpoint. A final problem in Vlach's presentation is a tendency to present what he acknowledges to be a spectrum of viewpoints as a binary. The Spiritual Vision Model is often presented in extreme forms not held by any evangelical scholar (e.g., evangelicals who hold to the Spiritual Vision Model do not embrace "cosmic dualism," cf. p. 165), while the New Creation Model is presented in an idealized version (e.g., many who hold to the New Creation Model do not hold to a millennial kingdom or to the future importance of national Israel).

Part three is a historical survey. The most significant aspect of this survey for Vlach's argument is his claim that the roots of the Spiritual Vision Model are "(1) Non-Christian influences—eastern religions, Platonism, and Neo-Platonism; (2) Gnosticism and Marcion; and (3) Augustine" (173). While repeatedly raising Hinduism and Buddhism as exemplars of the Spiritual Vision Model, Vlach does not demonstrate that these religions influenced Christians. His case is more plausible with Platonism and Neo-Platonism. Vlach notes that Plato influenced Philo and Neo-Platonism influenced Augustine. Through these significant figures the Spiritual Vision Model entered the bloodstream of Christian theology. There may be truth to what Vlach is arguing, but he did not make his case. General claims about Platonism's influence on early Christian theologians are not helpful; they are used in many different ways to further many different theological agendas. The effort to discredit certain teachings due to the alleged influence of Greek thought can be traced back to Adolf von Harnack's claim that orthodox theology had abandoned the "Hebraic" thought of the Bible for "Hellenistic" thought. Von Harnack's argument has not stood the test of time. More careful scholars note that Neo-Platonic thought did influence the church, but they also argue that Christian theologians adapted and transformed Greek thought in light of Scripture. Thus, any charge of a Platonic infection or early Christian theology—or, on the other end of the spectrum, any claim that Christians must embrace Platonism—needs to be tested by the details of what Platonism taught, what the church fathers in question taught, and what the Scriptures teach. The closest Vlach approaches to this is in chapter 15, which claims that Neo-Platonic influences led Augustine to see heaven as the eternal destiny of believers, to reject premillennialism, to remove "the kingdom of God from history and the physical realm" (208), and to engage in allegorical interpretation. But these claims are not rooted in Augustine's writings, countervailing factors in his theology are not mentioned, and no link to Platonism is demonstrated. Vlach's claims regarding Platonic influence are too sweeping and are ungrounded in

data. This does not mean Vlach is wrong about a Platonic influence; it does mean, however, that he did not present evidence to demonstrate that his claims are true.

In part four Vlach turns to millennial systems. He observes that there are four different ways of relating the millennium and the eternal state: "1. Spiritual Millennium and Spiritual Eternal Kingdom (Thomas Aquinas; medieval scholastics) 2. Earthly Millennium and Spiritual Eternal Kingdom (Jonathan Edwards; some Puritans) 3. Spiritual Millennium and Earthly Eternal Kingdom (New Earth Amillennialists; Hoekema, Poythress) 4. Earthly Millennium and Earthly Eternal Kingdom (Revised and Progressive Dispensationalists; Historic Premillennialists)" (261). From this enumeration, it would seem that both positions 3 and 4 would fall within the New Creation Model. Vlach grants that many modern amillennialists have a new-creation view of eternity. He asserts, however, that they still fall short because they do not have a place for a restored Israel or (in the case of Poythress, who does have a place for a restored Israel, do "not assert a unique functional role for Israel in the future, as dispensationalists do," 295). In addition, Vlach alleges that they cannot see a fulfillment of Genesis 1:26–28 in the new creation because they have spiritualized the kingdom of Christ. He concludes that dispensational premillennialism is the most consistent with the New Creation Model. He does not, however, reckon with contemporary dispensationalists, like John Feinberg, who hold to the Spiritual Vision Model of eternity. He will grant in the next section that classical dispensationalism did hold to a heavenly destiny for the church.

In the final section, Vlach relates the New Creation and Spiritual Vision models to the theological systems of dispensationalism, covenant theology, progressive covenantalism, and New Christian Zionism. Vlach concludes that dispensationalism (apart from classical dispensationalism), non-Laddian historic premillennialism (e.g., some at the Westminster Assembly, the Bonar brothers, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, and J. C. Ryle), and New Christian Zionism are the most consistent with the New Creation Model. He raises the issue of new-earth amillennialism, but he argues that it falls short in its view of the millennial kingdom (though he grants that it holds that "many physical promises will be fulfilled in the Eternal State") and in not interpreting prophecies about Israel. He concludes, "A system cannot be consistently new creationist if it spiritualizes Israel" (387).

As one who holds to a new-creation eschatology, I found this book a disappointment. First, the exegetical case of the New Creation Model could have been stronger. Second, Vlach did not engage primary sources arguing for the Spiritual Vision Model. He did engage Michael Allen's book *Grounded in Heaven* in an appendix, but Allen, while critical of certain presentations of the New Creation Model and while seeking to place more emphasis on God himself and the beatific vision, does not reject the New Creation Model. Third, Vlach worked too hard to tie the New Creation Model to dispensationalism. This is difficult to do since classical dispensationalism, key revised dispensationalists such as Ryrie and Walvoord, and important contemporary dispensationalists such as John Feinberg all held (or hold) to the Spiritual Vision Model. On the other hand, important non-dispensationalists such as Herman Bavinck, Anthony Hoekema, Vern Poythress, Michael Horton, Russell Moore, N. T. Wright, Richard Middleton, and others hold to the New Creation Model. One can argue, as Stephen James does effectively in *New Creation, Eschatology, and the Land*, that a consistent New Creation

viewpoint should have a place for nations and a restored Israel in its land.[1] However, it is difficult to argue that these theologians do not adhere to the New Creation Model when some of them have been some of the most significant promoters of the model. Furthermore, Vlach's attempt to link millennial views to the New Creation Model is not successful. As he notes, there are premillennialists who hold to a Spiritual Vision viewpoint and amillennialists who hold to the New Creation Model. It is only by defining the New Creation Model idiosyncratically as including a millennium and a restoration of Israel within the land that Vlach is able to exclude new-creation amillennialists from his New Creation Model. It is with some regret that I register these critiques. I have greatly benefited from Vlach's other writings, and I am in agreement with his positive articulations of the New Creation Model.

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[1] See Layton Talbert, review of *New Creation Eschatology and the Land: A Survey of Contemporary Perspectives,* by Steven L. James, in *JBTW* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 108–10.

Austen, Lucy S. R. *Elisabeth Elliot: A Life.* Wheaton: Crossway, 2023. 515pp. + 7pp. (front matter) + 83pp. (back matter).

It is a mark of human nature to want heroes—people who are, perhaps, bigger than life; people who, while not perfect, always beat the "bad guys" and win in the end. Similarly, believers often want their Bible characters to be such heroes—Abraham sacrificing Isaac, Moses parting the Red Sea, David fighting Goliath. However, God's presentation of these and other characters rejects the hero-worshipping motif. Instead, God shows us the flaws and failures along with the victories and triumphs. So it is in Lucy S. R. Austen's *Elisabeth Elliot: A Life.* Austen paints a vivid picture of a complex woman whom God greatly used, showing both her triumphs and her flaws.

Austen is a wife, mother, and writer from the Pacific Northwest. She earned a B. A. from the University of Washington and wrote *British Christian Authors* and *American Christian Authors* for Hewitt Homeschooling Resources. The latter book led Austen to write a short biography of Elisabeth Elliot, but she soon realized that while much had been written about Jim Elliot and his missionary companions, very little had been written about Elisabeth herself.[1] This discovery launched Austen on a years-long intensive dive into Elliot's writings, along with interviews of her friends and family. The result is this comprehensive and compelling biography (perhaps surprising since Austen's book is not an authorized biography).[2] Undoubtedly, however, Austen's contribution will be a foundation for future works on Elisabeth Elliot.

Austen was unable to access most of Elliot's journals, instead relying "heavily on Elliot's published work in surveying her thinking over the course of her life" (1). Other source material comes from *Devotedly: The Personal Letters and Love Story of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot* by Valerie Shepard (Elliot's daughter) as well as materials found in the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton University, Elliot's alma mater. Finally, interviews with Valerie Shepard and Elliot's third husband, Lars Gren, are referenced, as well as personal recollections by friends and family members. Austen skillfully weaves these source materials into an engaging whole, though at times she tries to fill in the gaps that result from missing information. In such instances Austen acknowledges those attempts, and, for the most part, seems to draw the best conclusions possible.

Austen organizes her work into three sections. Chapters 1–3 comprise the first section, covering Elliot's life from her birth until she leaves for Ecuador (1926–1952). The second section (1952–1963) details Elliot's time in Ecuador and is the most thorough and compelling; clearly, the "Betty" who went to Ecuador was not the same as the one who returned to the United States. The final section, covering the years 1963 until her death in 2015, shows the results of these life changes. Throughout these sections, key emphases emerge and merge—among them literary pursuits, missions, grief, and divine guidance, which will be the focus of this review.

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[1] Lucy S. R. Austen, interview with Nick Fullwiler and Peter Bell, "Guilt, Grace, Gratitude" podcast, June 29, 2023; accessed April 12, 2024, https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/gggpodcast/episodes/Lucy-S--R--Austen--Elisabeth-Elliot-A-Life-e2684je.

[2] Elisabeth Elliot's authorized biography is written by Ellen Vaughan in two volumes: *Becoming Elisabeth Elliot* (Nashville: B&H, 2020), and *Being Elisabeth Elliot* (Nashville: B&H, 2023).

Elisabeth "Betty" Howard was born into a happy and highly literate family. Both her grandfather and father were editors of the *Sunday School Times,* and "the Howard household revolved around books and writing" (19). As a result, Elliot read widely from both sacred and secular materials. Amy Carmichael's writings were a favorite throughout her life, and her younger brother, Tom, frequently recommended books for her to read. In God's providence, this laid the foundation for and enhanced her later writing ministry. Austen, an avid reader and gifted writer, spends considerable time on Elliot's writings, providing invaluable information on the background, process, and reception of these various books and articles. For example, while many people familiar with Elisabeth Elliot have read her first book, *Through Gates of Splendor,* fewer are aware that she was not the originally intended author, and Austen's account of how the book came to be is fascinating. Another of Elliot's early works, *The Savage, My Kinsman,* blacklisted her for a time among her fellow evangelicals. In addition to helpful background information, Austen provides invaluable and insightful analyses of Elliot's works. A helpful chronological bibliography appears at the end of her book. This love of books and reading of both the author and her subject highlights the value of extensive reading among Christians.

Elliot was also born into a missions-minded home. Austen traces Elliot's path toward missions beginning in the book's first section but makes it the primary focus of the second. In this section, more familiar episodes emerge, particularly Elliot's time at Wheaton, but Austen also references other interesting yet lesser-known events, such as Elliot's time at the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Kansas immediately after graduation, followed by more training at the Prairie Bible Institute. Austen skillfully weaves together these influences, along with Elliot's marriage to Jim Elliot, but her chapter titled "Where Is Rehoboth?" serves as the vital transition between Jim's martyrdom and Elisabeth's eventual departure from Ecuador, and it lays the groundwork for the many changes in her life that follow. This chapter title comes from Genesis 26. Here, Isaac and his servants dig well after well, only to have others come and claim them. Finally comes the well at Rehoboth, one that was not fought over, leading Isaac to declare, "For now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land" (Gen 26:22 ESV). Here Elliot saw a parallel to her own situation after Jim's death. While her willingness to take her young daughter to live among the very people who had killed her husband (the Waorani) usually elicits awe and admiration, it was a time of both growth and frustration as all of her earlier missionary efforts seemed to dry up. Her training as a linguist seemed to go nowhere, and her relationship with Rachel Saint, with whom she worked while living among the Waorani, was never smooth. And while others thought of the Waorani as ignorant and backward, Elliot began to see that their way of life was actually well adapted to their environment and that she had much to learn from them. Even so, it became clear that living among them was not a viable long-term option, particularly given the relationship with Saint. In a letter to her mother written while she lived among the Waorani, Elliot wrote, "'It sort of makes me chilled when I think that possibly I've been here <u>just</u> to write a book [*Through Gates of Splendor*] and get my name identified with this heroic effort! . . . It does seem strange that I've really done almost nothing else but write books, when I'm supposed to be a missionary'"

(344). This letter to her mother is one of many windows into her evolving view of missionary work, [3] making Austen's work a must-read for those either interested or involved in missions. Elliot learned early in her experience that missions was not about transferring American culture elsewhere, an outgrowth of 1950s American optimism, which viewed missions "as an excellent vehicle for spreading democracy and winning the Cold War" (295). Rather, as Austen points out, "for Elliot, this missed the point entirely. It was not American culture for which she had risked losing Jim. It was not American culture she was risking her life and Valerie's to spread. It was the love of God for people, expressed in Jesus Christ. She wanted to present Christ in context," that is, the context of whatever group of people being reached with the gospel (295–96).

No doubt, Elisabeth Elliot's life was marked by intense grief. Her marriage to Jim lasted only two years and three months, but its effects lasted the rest of her life. An intensely private person, Elliot had to contend with *Life* magazine reporters documenting a tragedy not yet confirmed. Elliot then decided to continue the work she and Jim started, but she had no sending church, not even a mission board to give her guidance and support. Austen relates the early challenges of well-meaning people who added to Elliot's workload (all while she mothered a young child). Others would not talk about Jim at all, and still others felt sorry for her, "an attitude she found almost unbearable" (226). Perhaps if Elliot had known more about trauma and its effects, her response to Jim's death (and even her second husband's death) would have been different, but she approached grief with a form of stoicism typical of her generation. I, too, have experienced loss, widowed at the age of thirty-two, and I have learned that grief changes a person and motivates reevaluation of core beliefs and life direction. While Austen does not overtly link the changes in Elliot's life direction and beliefs to grief, she demonstrates it as she traces Elliot's redirection toward a writing ministry, her return to the United States, and her changes in theology.

Divine guidance, another major theme, emerges in the book. Elliot was deeply influenced by, among other things, Keswick theology that emphasized deep heart-searching as one pursued God's calling. This may have influenced Elisabeth's relationship with Jim, which is honestly portrayed in the book. Austen writes, "Betty and Jim were afraid that the easier or more comfortable path must be deceptive, second best—and that second best was the same thing as *wrong*. Although they were genuinely in love with each other, there was perhaps also a part of them that was in love with being in love, and with the idea of a glorious sacrifice, of giving up their one true love for Jesus" (77). After Jim's death, "she felt that if she could get her response right [to his death], her obedience would facilitate the good things God planned to bring out of the situation; if she got it wrong, it would prevent those good things and waste Jim's death" (232). Her introspection, Austen contends, caused her to internalize her grief and suppress her emotions. Over time, however, Elliot came to recognize "that her emotions were not signs of sin or failure" (301). In addition, Elliot turned from her initial belief "that when faced with two otherwise acceptable paths, the follower of Jesus is obligated to choose the more difficult" (303) to understanding "that God was not a hard taskmaster; that where her desires

[3] Austen also mentions another shift in Elliot's thinking about missions after studying Isaiah 43:10: "Perhaps to be a missionary was ultimately to be a witness to the nature and character of God. A witness observes and reports. This she could try to do. The discovery of this verse in this context produced a lifelong paradigm shift for her" (310).

were not proscribed in Scripture she could do what she wanted and still be within his will; that God could be trusted to see that she did not stray from the narrow path" (374). This change in thinking eventually led Elliot to leave Ecuador and pursue writing. The earlier introspective thinking seeped back into Elliot's second and third marriages, however. Her third marriage to Lars Gren was a mistake—or so Elliot related to some of her friends (481, 501). That, along with Elliot's battle with Alzheimer's, provides some of the most painful and poignant moments of the book.

While believers would prefer a Genesis-24-type life—one where God clearly directs and quickly answers specific prayers for guidance—*Elisabeth Elliot: A Life* demonstrates that the Christian journey is often one of wondering, "Where is Rehoboth?" Throughout this book, Austen traces the journey of a beloved, influential believer along with the ups and downs, the triumphs and mistakes, that her journey entailed. "Elliot had weaknesses and strengths," Austen concludes. "She got things right and she got things wrong, and she did not necessarily know which were which. Nor do we. We are too small to see very far" (525). Elisabeth Elliot's story, as related in this book, should cause us not only to examine our own failings but also to rejoice in the God that she clung to throughout her journey. She was loved with an everlasting love, and always, underneath were the everlasting arms (525).

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Irwin, Brian P., and Tim Perry. *After Dispensationalism: Reading the Bible for the End of the World*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2023. 297pp. + 23pp. (front matter) + 107pp. (back matter).

In *After Dispensationalism*, Irwin and Perry suggest that three distinct areas of study—church history, ancient Near East (ANE) culture and hermeneutics, and biblical theology and exposition—combine to influence modern popular beliefs about the end times. Part I presents an essentially historical survey of end-times beliefs from the early church to the present, from the sensational to the staid, and from the unsystematic to the heavily systematized. This section addresses everything from doomsday cults to standard orthodox views, and it strolls through history, theological beliefs, and an explanation of the distinctives of dispensationalism. Part II shifts to ANE culture. It argues the authors' positions on genres and hermeneutics and asserts that dispensationalism blends prophecy and apocalypse. Part III purports to expound the meaning of apocalypses in the Scriptures.

The authors do not clearly identify their own theological position, but the reader gleans the following from the tenor of the text. (1) They admit the value of dispensationalism as a catalyst for serious Bible study, as an impetus for significant evangelistic and missionary activity, and as an encouragement to serious theological application of Scripture to life, while mischaracterizing it as essentially provincial, unscholarly, and hermeneutically ignorant. (2) They seem to hold eclectic views on prophecy—blending futurism, preterism, and idealism. (3) They seem to wish to be viewed as conservative evangelicals, given their insistence on the authority of Scripture; however, their acceptance of a second-century date for Daniel (the book was not written by Daniel, who was not demonstrably a prophet, and the book has no *prophetic* value; 159, 162–63) and their ready acceptance of the assertions of liberal scholars in regard to the nature, type, and prevalence of apocalypse, the integrity of Isaiah, and the integrity of the Pentateuch give the reader pause. Additional research shows that one author is an Anglican priest and the other teaches at a liberal seminary—both in Canada.

In spite of the book's forty-three pages of endnotes and thirty-four-page bibliography, the reader will observe that it exhibits an almost studied refusal to engage dispensational academics of the past forty years. Thus, the book feels incredibly dated—as though the writers are sparring with theologians and a theological system from the nineteenth century instead of their theological and academic peers. *After Dispensationalism* characterizes dispensationalism by its fringe representatives (like Harold Camping) and avoids substantive research in the realm of actual dispensational thought. All conservative theological systems suffer the infelicity that if they are to be characterized by their oddest and least orthodox representatives, they can be construed as nearly heterodox. To proffer a purported answer to current dispensationalism by engaging only old and extreme representatives (and even these on a superficial level) disappoints.

The book itself is difficult to classify. Is it supposed to be historical? If so, the reader will be puzzled that it overlooks crucial facts of church history, especially those that touch the pronounced chiliasm (an early and unsystematized form of premillennialism) of the early church. Readers will also be surprised to learn from the authors (contra 2 Kgs 25:7) that Nebuchadnezzar killed King Zedekiah (the biblical text explicitly says that Nebuchadnezzar kept him alive).

Is *After Dispensationalism* supposed to be theological? If so, the reader will wonder at demonstrably false statements such as, "In almost all cases, biblical prophecies were *fulfilled during the lifetime of the original audience*" (27, emphasis original). Perhaps the writers have merely forgotten the protoevangelium, the hundreds of specific prophecies concerning the coming of Messiah, or the hundreds of prophecies not yet fulfilled regarding Israel's restoration, but to assert or imply that prophecy is (nearly) always short-range is, itself, short-sighted. Similarly, the authors *frequently* repeat the theologically odd dictum that unless prophecies were fulfilled in the days of the original audience, then it had no meaning for them (158).[1] Adam and Eve would be shocked to discover that the promise of a Descendant who would reverse the curse had no value for them since he would not appear for another four thousand years. King David must have been profoundly ignorant of the assured results of such modern scholarship to mistake the Messianic prophecies of the Psalms as having any value of encouragement or blessing for himself. It would seem that the authors of *After Dispensationalism* overlook the fact that the value of Scripture prophecy stems not from fulfillment in the lifetimes of the immediate listeners, but from divine intent.

While quite willing to entertain the unfounded assertions of theological liberals, the authors take shots at fundamentalism in ways that have no bearing on the argument (e.g., 33–34). They make historically specious claims (e.g., that fundamentalists refused to cooperate across denominational lines—a fact provably false in that fundamentalist schools of the 1940s frequently represented nearly fifty denominations simultaneously) (35).

The book asserts that "pseudonymity is a literary strategy that was common in the ancient world" and "that ancient authors used pseudonymity not to claim authority through deception, but to serve the overall message through a device well-known to the audience" (162–63). This statement is both exaggerated (as Metzger has demonstrated, anonymity was common; pseudonymity was not; moreover, pseudonymity was regarded as a fraud) and demonstrably false when it comes to the Scriptures. The early church was highly critical of the *falsarius*. Given the propensity of the authors to credit highly the assertions of theological liberals, perhaps their waywardness on this point is understandable.

Finally, the book offers few advances historically, theologically, or hermeneutically, especially regarding the hermeneutics of prophecy (and apocalypses). The reader will not find a summary that brings the theological conversation up to its current situation. *After Dispensationalism* omits both recent dispensational scholarship and recent studies that question the assertion that Revelation and its OT counterparts are apocalypses. It claims to offer a new thesis (that "prophecy is primarily God's word of hope for his people") without proving the "primarily" aspect and without recognizing that the people of God have *always* known and confessed that prophecy expresses hope. Those who enjoy reading subjective speculation on the symbols of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation will find ample fodder for their imaginations in the third part of the book.

The summary theses for the book (285–95) offer mixed value. Some of the statements are clearly true (numbers 2, 3, 4, 7, 11, 12), and some need to be qualified to be true (numbers 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10,

[1] This is one of the demonstrably false claims of amillennialism that appears frequently in published works.

13). The authors' definition of "literal sense" assumed in the fifth thesis ("When reading apocalyptic and prophetic genres, a good reader will always read the text in its literal sense.") is so plastic as to allow any preferred reading whatsoever to be designated as literal. To them, "literal sense" equals whatever meaning *they* decree that the "original hearers or readers" held, even if that meaning is entirely symbolic and entirely the subjective assertion of the authors' own theological tradition.

Those who are determined to disagree with dispensationalism will find the book concurring with their desire. Those who are committed to the "assured results" of liberal scholarship will similarly find many rallying points. Those wishing to investigate dispensationalism more fully will be better profited by reading Vlach's *He Will Reign Forever,*[2] since it comes from a dispensationalist who is explaining the system from inside the camp, or perhaps the recent "views" book *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies*.[3] Dispensationalists will find *After Dispensationalism* a frequent mischaracterization of their beliefs. Interpreters who grasp the basic biblical reality of long time lapses between prediction and fulfillment will find the book's counter assertions to be both puzzling and unorthodox.

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[2] Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (n.p.: Lampion, 2017).

[3] Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas, eds., *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture,* Spectrum Multiview Book Series (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022). For a review of this work, see *JBTW* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 95–98.

Prior, Karen Swallow. *The Evangelical Imagination: How Stories, Images, and Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis.* Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2023. 289pp. + 10pp. (back matter).

Because this book is essentially a personal ramble through contemporary notions, it is best to begin with a biography of the author.

Karen Swallow Prior, born in 1965, was reared in a conservative home by parents who were adult converts to evangelical Christianity, the sort who read Chick tracts and Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). Nevertheless, Prior was educated in secular schools, "read what I wanted to read, got to date boys and make mistakes, was encouraged to ask questions, and was never told my life or value would be ruined or lessened by any of those things" (230). At nineteen, she married Roy Prior, a guitarist in a local rock band, who became a high school vocational education teacher. Although the Priors are childless, they have been married for nearly forty years.

After earning a PhD in English literature at SUNY Buffalo, Karen Prior taught English—her specialty, Victorian literature—at Liberty University from 1999 to 2019, before resigning to take a position as a research professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. In 2018, while assuming a "public role in fighting the mistreatment of women by the leadership and culture of my Southern Baptist denomination," Prior was literally hit by a bus and spent some months recovering.[1] Then, shortly after publication of this book, she resigned from Southeastern, stating only that "the institution and I do not share the same vision for carrying out the Great Commission."[2]

Reporters have repeatedly queried Prior about the nature of her evangelicalism, and she has continued to declare herself "orthodox." Even so, controversy swirled around her at Liberty after she participated in an attempt to create "safe space for dialogue about faith, gender and sexuality through the arts." On campus, she was known as a "gay magnet" because of the number of students who confided to her their sexual proclivities.

The Evangelical Imagination reflects Prior's life and career. According to the publisher's blurb, the book "analyzes the literature, art, and popular culture that has surrounded evangelicalism and unpacks some of the movement's most deeply held concepts, ideas, values, and practices." Non-Christian historian Henry Reichman praised the book because it called "on evangelicals to examine their fundamental assumptions and to shed their faith of unwanted elements more cultural and political than religious."

Obviously, choosing the title *The Evangelical Imagination* required Prior to define "evangelical," and her attempt to do so launches the book into confusion from the get-go. Though she identifies evangelicalism as a Protestant movement originating with Wesley and Whitefield in the eighteenth century, she focuses mostly on the Victorian era and, when so inclined, reaches back to John Bunyan

[1] Karen Swallow Prior, "Thoughts on my 5-year anniversary of getting hit by a bus," Religion News Service, May 24, 2023; accessed April 12, 2024, https://religionnews.com/2023/05/24/thoughts-on-my-5-year-anniversary-of-getting-hit-by-a-bus/.

[2] Jeff Brumley, "Prior explores the origin of evangelicalism's 'empire mentality,'" Baptist News Global, September 19, 2023; accessed April 12, 2024, https://baptistnews.com/article/prior-explores-the-origin-of-evangelicalisms-empire-mentality/.

in the seventeenth century, and even the Reformers in the sixteenth. Prior never tells us why Bunyan and the Reformers do not officially qualify as evangelicals even though they fit the oft-noted formula of evangelical historian Thomas Bebbington. Bunyan and most of the Reformers emphasized conversion, missionary activity, the authority of the Bible, and the sacrifice of Christ as necessary to salvation. After all, Luther called his church the *evangelische Kirche,* and *Britannica* says that Bunyan had a gift for clothing "evangelical theology with concrete life."

Prior notes that use of the word *evangelical* declined during the Victorian era but then was revived, with different connotations, in the mid-twentieth century following "the rise of Billy Graham and his decision to adopt the term as a way of distinguishing his 'big tent' Protestantism from the increasingly separatist fundamentalists" (26). Evangelicalism (more accurately, in my view, "new evangelicalism") then became synonymous with a middle way between mainline liberalism and (says Prior) "the anti-intellectualism that characterized the fundamentalist movement" (26)—a change in meaning that would have baffled Wesley and Whitefield.

The remainder of the book runs riot with similar sloppy definitions and loosely organized ideas, liberally cribbed from secular academics. Their use trumpets the author's intellectual bona fides. (I'd give a list, but the book has no index, a failure for which I hold the publisher responsible. A non-fiction book without an index is book just asking to be treated as ephemeral.) In other words, Prior has created a work that tries to gratify non-Christian intellectuals while simultaneously convincing middle-brow evangelicals that they are reading something profound. For instance, Prior declares that the "way of Jesus is not in the power, celebrity, and corruption that has borne the fruit of sexual abuse, spiritual abuse, systemic racism, and imperialism" (232). That is, she denounces behavior condemned in the Bible but wraps it in politically correct language to score points with her academic colleagues.

Though Prior is fully aware that language changes over time, she becomes truly testy about those "asleep to systemic racism" who have altered the meaning of the word "woke," using it "as an insult or accusation." "To destroy a metaphor," she scolds in a series of opaque sentences, "is to destroy more than a word. It is to destroy a likeness seen and articulated by those made in God's likeness. To allow a metaphor to dull is to dull, too, the perceptions that allow us to make, recognize, and weigh connections. Dulled perceptions create false intuitions, and flawed imaginations construct a distorted sense of reality" (48). (Note that the actors in these sentences are abstractions rather than real people, suggesting an authorial vantage point above the common fray.)

Prior regularly quotes non-evangelicals, men like Samuel Richardson (1689–1761)—who suggested that the truly pious can be found beyond Christianity—or Charles Dickens (1812–1870)—whom Prior describes as "a Christian, although not entirely orthodox and not at all fond of evangelicals" (138)—or the agnostic Edmund Gosse (1849–1928), before claiming that their views reflect those of contemporary evangelicals. It is true that Dickens's Ebenezer Scrooge experiences a transformation, but no true Christian would equate it with the sort of conversion urged on the hearers of Wesley or Whitefield or even Charles Grandison Finney. (As for Gosse's *Father and Son* [1907], Prior is unaware that the specifics of his beautifully written and highly regarded memoir—which

depicts Gosse père as an evangelical tyrant—have been thoroughly demolished by Anne Thwaite.[3]) Prior reprints Rudyard Kipling's "White Man's Burden" in its entirety in order to pillory evangelical foreign missions; but she does not mention that Kipling was inscrutably unorthodox, a man who enjoyed manipulating religious themes without subscribing to any religion himself and who, at forty-two, described himself as a "God-fearing Christian atheist."

Often Prior's sentimentalism gets the better of her. She aptly skewers Victorian romanticism and its modern posterity while discussing Sallman's *Head of Christ* and Thomas Kinkade's fantastically popular paintings. (Having grown up in a more iconoclastic corner of evangelicalism than Prior, I was told that Sallman's paintings might well depict the *anti-Christ*.) But Prior seems confident that her readers will not call her out for her own sentimentalism. For instance, she recounts Louisa May Alcott's description of the March sisters in *Little Women* who are in the process of preparing a domestic dramatization of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Meg March says, "It is only another name for trying to be good, and the story may help us, for though we do want to be good, it's hard work and we forget, and don't do our best." Prior adds, "No one more than Bunyan would have been pleased with such a result" (96). Of course, Bunyan would have been appalled at such a result. In *Saved by Grace* (1675), he wrote, "None are received for their good deeds." God "has rejected the persons that have at any time attempted to present themselves . . . in their own good deeds for justification."

I was half-disappointed that Prior did not tackle some of the sentimental religious lyrics of the Victorian era, but perhaps she realized that contemporary Christian music can be just as vacuous and as vulnerable to the charge of sentimentality. In a truly silly piece of writing, Prior recalls attending a rock concert where the headline band lowered the volume on its final number: "We in the audience could hear only ourselves as our voices rose above those of the band members, lifting upward and outward into the darkness, singing and pleading, 'Awake, my soul!' Many in the crowd held up their cell phones like prayer candles lit to an unknown god as we sang on. . . . All—drunken college boys, cutoff-clad teenage girls, aging hippies, and cool aunts—were, in singing these words, whether we realized it or not, praying" (33–34).

In the book's introduction, Prior pleads that she is simply an English professor. "I am not a historian. I am not a theologian. I am not a philosopher" (5). A systematic student of any of those disciplines will find additional discipline-specific problems. (One for theologians: "Not only the conversion testimony itself but the retelling of it, too, helps deepen the assurance of salvation" [84].) Prior is not wrong all the time, but few serious students of Scripture will care to rifle through so many woke-wrapped commonplaces in a search for memorable truths.

While taking notes on Prior, I was also reading Iain Murray's *Heroes,*[4] a book of almost exactly the same size with a nearly opposite goal, to honor evangelicals of the Victorian era and present them as models for our own. One of Murray's heroes is Charles Colcock Jones (1804–1863), an owner of three antebellum plantations and hundreds of slaves, a man of both learning and persistence who exhausted himself evangelizing the enslaved people of coastal Georgia. Jones's unlikely ministry was no theory or

[3] See *Glimpses of the Wonderful: The Life of Philip Henry Gosse* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002).

[4] *Heroes* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009).

abstraction, so I do not think Prior would be likely to accept his sacrifice at face value or could even find intellectual room for it in the misty flats of her evangelical imagination.

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Byrd, James P. *A Holy Baptism of Fire and Blood: The Bible and the American Civil War.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 376pp.

Toward the end of the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln declared: "Both [the North and the South] read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other." James Byrd seeks to elaborate on the meaning of those words in his recent quantitative history, *A Holy Baptism of Fire and Blood: The Bible and the American Civil War*. To accomplish this task, Byrd examines over 2000 resources, including sermons, diaries, letters, newspapers, tracts, and slave narratives (15, 303). Throughout his book, Byrd chronicles the usage of Scripture by participants on both sides, starting with the secession crisis and ending with the war's immediate aftermath. Then in the appendix the author provides three charts that identify what he believes to be the most cited texts for the Union, Confederate, and combined "Bibles" (303–7). Byrd notes: "Americans cited the Bible in various ways. Sometimes a text from Scripture was a rhetorical allusion, used to support a viewpoint but with little or no elaboration on the Scripture, its context, or its full meaning. At other times, biblical passages received extensive focus. Most often Americans looked for analogies between biblical wars and the Civil War" (3).

From reading *A Holy Baptism*, one can get the impression that people used Scripture during the Civil War predominantly "to lend divine sanction" to their political and patriotic persuasions (17). It is undeniable, as Byrd records, that Union and Confederate sympathizers (mis)appropriated the Bible to support their partisan causes and to interpret "God's providential plan" in military and political events of that time (287). But many of these same people utilized the Scriptures for another objective, in a far greater proportion. They read it, preached it, sang it, and prayed it for the purpose of worshipping "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29 KJV). American evangelicals, especially in the South, saw the Scriptures preeminently as a spiritual book; hence Chaplain J. William Jones (a Baptist) could say in *Christ in the Camp:*

> I do not believe that . . . any of the missionaries or chaplains were ever able, before or since, to preach sermons of such power as they were stirred up to preach in the army [during the war]. If any man had any capacity whatever to preach, it would be developed under circumstances which would have stirred an angel's heart; and if he knew anything about the Gospel at all, he would tell it to these congregations. . . . And so, when the preacher stood before these congregations of veterans, his very soul was stirred within him, and he "determined to know nothing among them save Jesus Christ and Him crucified."[1]

In the same book, Methodist Chaplain J. C. Granberry "add[ed his own] testimony to that of Dr. Jones on the evangelical tone of the preaching and worship in [the Army of Northern Virginia]." Granberry said:

[1] *Christ in the Camp, or Religion in the Confederate Army,* 2nd ed. (1904; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1986), 245.

> Chaplains and visiting ministers determined not to know anything among [the soldiers] save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. It was always assumed that the cause for which they contended was righteous; on it was invoked the divine blessing, and the troops were exhorted to faithful service. But the grounds of the war were not discussed; constitutional and historical questions were passed by, except a certain local coloring, such as illustrations drawn from active military life and appeals based on the perils of war. The sermons in the camp would have suited any congregation in city or country, and with even less change might have been preached to the Union armies. Eternal things, the claims of God, the worth of the soul, the wages of sin which is death, and the gift of God which is eternal life through Jesus Christ—these were the matter of preaching. . . . The man of God lifted up, not the Stars and Bars, but the cross, and pressed the inquiry, "Who among you are on the Lord's side?"[2]

Robert L. Dabney, a Presbyterian seminary professor turned parson-adjutant, compiled the only known collection of army sermons from the war, which confirms Jones and Granberry's thesis in the main. Although Dabney could drift into political statements (particularly in his commemorative discourses), the vast majority of his ministerial labors in Confederate camps were spiritually oriented.[3] Unfortunately, Byrd does not reference Dabney's compilation, *Christ in the Camp,* William Bennett's *The Great Revival in the Southern Armies, The Central Presbyterian, The Southern Presbyterian Review, The New York Observer,* or any of the works of John Broadus, James Pettigrew Boyce, John L. Girardeau, Moses Drury Hoge, William Hoge, Thomas E. Peck, Benjamin Mosby Smith, C. R. Vaughan, Joseph C. Stiles, William S. White, Stuart Robinson, Samuel McPheeters, Archibald A. Hodge, George Junkin, Gardiner Spring, or William S. Plumer (regrettably, there is no bibliography in *A Holy Baptism* to assist readers; only endnotes and an index).[4] Byrd recognizes that his book "is not flawless" and "may be subject to revision with additional information" (360); so in light of the information above, perhaps an updated edition will be forthcoming that will include these resources.

But *A Holy Baptism* suffers from a much greater malady: an embrace of postmodernism. Byrd says:

> Although many Americans claimed to follow "the Bible alone," everyone read scripture in a place and time, and those conditions influenced how people interpreted the Bible. Although Americans often thought of the Bible as their highest authority in life, they also dealt with other authorities in their lives—governments, laws, churches, parents, spouses, ministers, presidents, and (for many) slaveholders, just to name a few. To say some person, or text, has authority only makes sense when we think of the relationships between that authority and other authorities. The key, as Seth Perry

[2] *Christ in the Camp*, 14–15.

[3] See Jonathan W. Peters, ed., *Our Comfort in Dying: Civil War Sermons by R. L. Dabney, Stonewall Jackson's Chief-of-Staff* (Destin, FL: Sola Fide, 2021). An enlarged and updated edition is being prepared for future publication.

[4] During the Civil War, Rev. Plumer fought hard to keep politics out of his pulpit at Central Presbyterian Church in Allegheny City, PA, and was severely criticized for it. Sean A. Scott, "'Patriotism Will Save Neither You Nor Me': William S. Plumer's Defense of an Apolitical Pulpit," in *Contested Loyalty: Debates over Patriotism in the Civil War North,* ed. Robert M. Sandow (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018): 168–197.

> writes, is to examine "the Bible's *authoritative use* by individuals in their relations with others, not from the assumption that the inert book itself possessed authority." (17, emphasis original)

Confessional Protestants, regardless of social location, would contend that this last statement is biblically and experientially untrue. The Bible is "the word of God [,which] is quick [i.e., living], and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12 KJV). While some passages are harder to understand than others (2 Pet 3:16), biblical texts do have meanings (Matt 9:12–13; Luke 24:27), and "those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due sense of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them."[5]

Additionally, confessionalists would argue that God has also ordained certain authorities to expound his Word (Neh 8:5–8; 2 Tim 4:1–2; Titus 1:5–9), and while these finite creatures sometimes make mistakes due to indwelling sin (Rom 7:18, 23; Phil 3:12–14; 1 John 1:10), they can proclaim the Scriptures truly and authoritatively, even if not exhaustively (1 Cor 13:12).[6]

Despite the aforementioned criticisms, *A Holy Baptism* remains a good source for discovering how the Bible was used during the Civil War to justify political allegiances and to interpret God's providence in contemporary events. After completing this work, readers may agree with Benjamin M. Palmer that "'providence is always hard to be interpreted, when we are in the very current of events, drifting and whirling us along too rapidly for the comparison and thought which are necessary to scan the mysterious cypher in which God writes his will upon the page of human history'" (221).

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[5] Westminster Confession of Faith, "Of the Holy Scriptures," Chapter I, Section 7. Cf. London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, "Of the Holy Scriptures," Chapter I, Section 7. See also Ps 119:105, 130; John 5:39; Acts 17:11; 2 Tim 3:15.

[6] Kevin DeYoung, "Postmodernism's revenge," *WORLD*, December 1, 2021; accessed April 12, 2024, https://wng.org/opinions/deyoung-on-postmodernism-1638355746.

Brown, Austin. *A Boisterously Reformed Polemic against Limited Atonement.* Pensacola: independently published, 2022. 172pp. + 6pp. (front matter) + 26pp. (back matter). [1]

"Who could ever have thought that the death of Christ, which was destined to secure peace and destroy enmity . . . could have been so fruitful in the production of strife?"[2]

The answer is both obvious and a little disconcerting: God. He foresaw the debates that would be engendered—for centuries, even among his own true children—by how he chose to explain in Scripture the meaning of the death of Christ. God could have circumvented virtually all such strife and put the precise implications of the atonement beyond all reasonable doubt. Many on opposite sides of the debate are convinced that he has; and there seems little doubt that those on all sides of the debate will, in glorified retrospect, recognize that God's explanation is obvious and (glorious prospect!) agree on it.[3]

But in the meantime, Brown reflects, "It is the peculiar trait of men," fallen and finite as we are at present, "to war over ideas, not least, theological ones. . . . The extent of the atonement is not a doctrine to die over, however, and yet, here we are, standing in a pool of blood, still squaring off, fists raised" (158–59). He is not talking about Calvinists versus Arminians. He is talking about Calvinists versus Calvinists.

Brown is humorous,[4] blunt, incisive, sometimes abrasive, and certainly boisterous (strict particularists may be inclined to take that adjective in its more negative connotation). The reason for both his posture and his tone is autobiographical: "The amount of vitriol I have suffered at the hands of my fellow kinsmen is legion, and it explains why my tone is rather cheeky, if not mildly tart. The question of the extent of the atonement is a full contact sport, and I'm not going to pretend that it isn't" (3). (He includes a bit more detail about his personal experience in Reformed circles in chapter 21, "Some Practical Implications"—a chapter worth reading twice, as a preface as well as a prologue.) Though he is not an academician or professional theologian, he is an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church in America (though currently a member of a church in the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches), and deeply and widely read especially in Reformed theology.[5]

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[1] Note that this work is available for free download at https://soundofdoctrine.files.wordpress.com/2022/10/a-reformed-critique-of-limited-atonement-100.14.pdf.

[2] John Davenant, the mostly seventeenth-century Church of England Calvinist theologian and proponent of hypothetical universalism, quoted by Brown (158).

[3] Relatedly, see my essay earlier in this issue of *JBTW,* "Managing Our Differences: Biblical Norms for Navigating Our Inevitable Disagreements."

[4] One of my favorite parts of Brown's book is his semi-facetious Catechism of Strict Particularism (98–100), along with his reference to "Make Owen Great Again" baseball caps (115). Even the book's cover is an ironic play on the cover of limited atonement's authoritative volume, David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013). Though Brown takes pointed issue with Carl Trueman's particularism, I suspect he would subscribe to Trueman's maxim: "Pomposity is antithetical to piety, and humor is the best way to avoid it."

[5] Some of the supplemental information included in this review has been gleaned from personal email correspondence with the author.

Brown demonstrates throughout the book what he claims on page 1: that "various stalwarts of the Reformed tradition happily embraced universal satisfaction: Calvin, Luther, Edwards, Baxter, Davenant, Charles Hodge, Dabney. The list goes on." Indeed, the list continues in a couple of appendixes—one including a collection of quotations from a number of those stalwarts, from Baxter to Zwingli, and another containing an extensive chart listing proponents of Arminianism, Classic/Moderate Calvinism, High Calvinism, and Hyper-Calvinism. Brown himself identifies as a classically moderate Calvinist who holds "that Christ did in fact pay an objective price for the sins of humanity," alongside the view "that Christ did not die with an equal intent for all men" (5).

Calvinists typically assert that Christ's death is efficient only for the elect but sufficient for all. Brown, as an avowed Calvinist, questions the logic of that assertion for the strict particularist: "How could Christ's death be *at all* sufficient outside of his dying for their sins in some sense?" On the view of strict particularism, when it comes to the non-elect, "Christ didn't do anything for their sins. Therefore (and here's the rub), what he didn't accomplish on their behalf is allegedly sufficient to deal with their sin. Since Christ didn't die in any sense for the sins of the non-elect, how is his death *presently* sufficient for them? Answer: It isn't. It could have been, but it isn't" (9–10).

This, of course, has ramifications for the NT's universal gospel call. If atonement is explicitly *not* made for the non-elect, then there is no atonement available for the non-elect, leaving no basis for a universal gospel call. In short, a strictly particularistic atonement pulls the rug out from under any meaningful, legitimate universal offer (nothing new here). To illustrate his point, he entertains the hypothetical supposition that Christ made no atoning sacrifice for anyone, in which case there would be no gospel. "In order for the gospel to be truly offered, there has to be a reality behind it that legitimizes the offer" (15). Consequently, "as soon as we establish that it would be absurd to offer the gospel to a world of non-died-fors, it necessarily follows that there is no gospel for the non-died-fors" (16). It may be objected that in this hypothetical scenario there is no atonement of *any* kind to ground *any* offer; and yet, that is the point—if Christ did *not* die for the non-elect (in some sense), then no atonement exists to ground a universal gospel offer to the non-elect. Whether we know who the elect are is irrelevant to the *logical* inconsistency of trying to append "a legitimate, universal gospel offer" to a "limited expiation" (17).

From this point on, Brown's progression spreads out into a variety of related considerations. The fact that the non-elect reject offers of eternal life—which can be offered only on the ground of Christ's atoning death—presupposes the reality of what is rejected. Additionally, Brown asks whether the non-elect can be "held accountable for rejecting something that was never really [objectively] available to them" because it was, in retrospect, obviously never objectively made for them (34). Citing John Murray's defense of a universal gospel offer in conjunction with a strictly limited atonement, Brown asks: "If it is strenuously objected that Christ did not, in fact, die for the non-elect, as he [Murray] does, then how is Christ's death perfectly sufficient for the non-elect?" (38).

In addressing "The Scope of John 3:16" (chapter 8), Brown traces the descriptions of Jesus' mission in John, and the implications of the context of John 3:16, to demonstrate that "the world of men, to which Christ came and offered himself, was unequivocally comprised of the non-elect" (49–50). Additionally, the universal language used in Numbers 21:8–9 indicates an unlimited provision of a

means of healing—an incident to which Jesus explicitly parallels his atonement in John 3:14–15 (50). Brown also devotes chapters to other key universal texts (1 Tim 2:4; 4:10; 2 Pet 2:1; 3:9; 1 John 2:2) and addresses particularistic efforts at exegetical circumvention with help from other notable Reformed thinkers.

In a chapter that may annoy some particularists as much as Arminians must be annoyed by Calvinist charges of Pelagianism, Brown highlights the fine and perforated line dividing High Calvinism from Hyper-Calvinism. One is in danger of breaching that boundary when he makes a legitimate biblical doctrine (e.g., divine sovereignty or, more specifically, election) "the absolute controlling element whereby all seemingly contrary evidence is brought into submission to this fundamental point" (81). The result is a reductionistic theology—one that concludes, for example (as one pastor whom Brown quotes says), that God obviously cannot possibly love the non-elect or else he would save them. "The fundamental problem here is an unwillingness to allow" complementary and equally authoritative "biblical data to nuance" the favored, chosen doctrine (86). It is a problem that bedevils not a little Reformed theology.[6] In words very dear to my heart (because they echo my own teaching for years), Brown asks: "What is acceptable mystery, dear Christian, and what is not acceptable mystery, and why?" (86). Everyone agrees there is a curtain of mystery; where we disagree is where that curtain drops, and how much Scripture we allow to influence *where* it drops.[7] Brown is hardly accusing all strict particularists of Hyper-Calvinism. "But we should be prepared to say that a person who denies God's universal saving desire (or balks at the word 'offer' or is afraid to say to the unconverted that God loves them) is wading out into the unbiblical waters of reductionistic Calvinism. And they should stop. It carries the notable scent of Hyper-Calvinism" (87).

Chapter 13 ("Harmony, Not Confusion") makes the point that skewed questions produce bad answers (e.g., the excluded middle fallacy). To construe an irreconcilable contradiction between God's intention to secure the salvation of the elect and, simultaneously, demonstrate his love for the world, is both unbiblical and wrong-headed. "All that needs to be shown is that God has a variety of complementary reasons for doing things the way he does" (94).

Brown disarms Owen's trilemma, along with the double jeopardy argument, citing Charles Hodge's insightful discussion of *penal* vs. *pecuniary* substitution and the related issue of conditionality (100–1, 103) and Ursinus's commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism (102). He also addresses "a technical component to this discussion that is often lost on strict particularists"—viz., the "idea that Christ suffered a just equivalent (*tantundem*), and not the exact penalty the Law demands of sinners (*idem*)" (108), citing Richard Baxter's lengthy answer to the question "Is it not unjust to punish him that Christ died for, even one sin twice?" (short answer: no) and an extended explanatory illustration of these categories by Tony Byrne (109–12). Brown closes the chapter with a rather telling interview excerpt featuring Carl Trueman, in which he admitted that he generally ignores the theology of the

[6] Granted, it bedevils Arminian theology as well, but that is not the subject under the microscope here.

[7] For a detailed exploration of this phenomenon in a specific theological context, see my article, "An Inquiry into the Hardness, and Hardening, of Pharaoh's Heart," *JBTW* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2023), 56–78.

Hodges and Dabney, and that the double jeopardy argument is not a weight-bearing component of the limited-atonement position (113–14).

Any extended argument against limited atonement worth its wood pulp would have to interact with the imposing collection of particularistic essays in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her.* Brown does so, selectively but effectively. He cites and/or interacts with chapters by Schreiner, Letham, Williams, Trueman, Williamson, Haykin, Gatiss, and the editors (David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson). He interacts with Trueman's essay on Owen rather extensively to demonstrate the kind of theological tunnel vision that shapes strict particularism (115–20). Schreiner's essay figures most prominently in Brown's discussions of 2 Peter 2:1 (130–34) and 1 Timothy 4:10 (135–38).

Beneath the surface of Brown's wide-ranging polemic against the limited-atonement view of his fellow Reformed brethren is a bottom line. The bottom line of Brown's argument is not that 4-point Calvinism, or 4.5-point Calvinism, or historic hypothetical universalism are entitled to be considered and treated as legitimate expressions of Calvinism or Reformed theology. Rather, while none of these align entirely with TULIP, all of them are legitimate expressions of 5-point (Dortian) Calvinism, precisely because the ubiquitous TULIP acronym subtly distorts the statement of Dort on the atonement. And the corroboration he provides for that argument—including the venerable historical theologian Richard Muller—is compelling (161–63). Even the modern magisterial anthology defending particularism, *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, includes an essay by Lee Gatiss that makes the same concession.[8]

In detective series, the private investigator is typically the gadfly of the professional constabulary: unconventional, interfering, and annoying even (and especially) when he is right. Brown is, by any normal definition, a lay theologian—sometimes considered the bane of professional theologians and, therefore, often ignored. But as Lewis observed, we are all theologians; Brown has just taken that intrinsically human calling far more seriously than most, and his work deserves a serious reading because of it.

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[8] See "The Synod of Dort and Definite Atonement," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her,* 162–63.

Naselli, Andrew David. *Predestination: An Introduction.* Short Studies in Systematic Theology. Wheaton: Crossway, 2024. 206pp. + 14pp. (front matter) + 34pp. (back matter).

A chief goal of this series—featuring a dozen titles so far, covering topics from Atonement to Trinity—is (as the editors put it, quoting Calvin) "lucid brevity." The parameter of brevity requires that the author be selective, accurate, and simple (without becoming simplistic). Naselli's treatment of the complex doctrine of predestination displays those qualities admirably. The book's brevity is its genius but, at times, also its most frustrating feature. Then again, the subtitle signals that it is, after all, designed to be *An Introduction*.

In his Introduction to this *Introduction*, Naselli helpfully addresses several preliminary issues including anxiety over the topic and how to approach such a controversial but important doctrine. His definitions of the key terms are concise and (in my opinion) correct (7). Predestination: "*God predetermined the destiny of certain individuals for salvation and others for condemnation"* (emphasis original). Technically, in biblical theological usage predestination refers exclusively to God's appointing believers to a destiny beyond salvation, including sonship, inheritance, and conformity to Christ (Eph 1:5, 11; Rom 8:29); but Naselli's definition reflects a wider, standard systematic-theological usage that incorporates other NT terms (8). Election: "*God sovereignly and graciously chose to save individual sinners."* Reprobation: "*God sovereignly and justly chose to pass over nonelect sinners and punish them"* (emphasis original). The definition of both "election" and "reprobation" are particularly contested by theologians. I will offer only two simple observations at this point. First, Naselli's definition of reprobation aligns with what is usually labeled *preterition*, though that term shows up only twice (7n9, 196n14). Second, his definition of reprobation also invites the possibility of a small but worthwhile tweak to his definition of election; for election is not only sovereign and gracious but equally as *just* as reprobation, since God *chose to save individual sinners and* (it could be added for definitional symmetry) *to punish Christ instead.*

In the introduction and throughout the book, discussions are often condensed into concise charts (a total of twenty-one tables)—an enormously useful feature when discussing complex theological ideas. Such compression offers simplification and clarity, but sometimes at the expense of a fully accurate picture. For example, the comparison between key doctrinal points according to Arminianism and Calvinism (11–12) omits a significant and differing body of interpretation that resides historically within the body of Calvinism. Granted, the focus of the book precludes detailed delineation of all the shades of theological variation (11, 16); this being *An Introduction*, the presentation must necessarily be simplified. But the lack of nuance can be misleading, as though these two views (as Naselli has defined them) stake out the only available options.[1]

[1] A couple of corroborating quotations from J. I. Packer in the Introduction are mildly disconcerting. "'It has become usual in Protestant theology to define God's predestination as including both his decision to save some from sin (election) and his decision to condemn the rest for their sin (reprobation), side by side'" (16). One can only assume that Packer sees "Protestant" as synonymous with Reformed and exclusive of Arminianism, which seems a bit theologically myopic. Later, after presenting TULIP as a summary of Calvinist soteriology, Naselli notes that "Packer summarizes Calvinism in three words: 'God saves sinners'" (16). One can only imagine an exasperated Arminian exclaiming, "That's not 'Calvinism.' That's Christianity!"

To many, election and reprobation may seem like theoretical, esoteric, top-shelf doctrines of minimal practical import except to sparring theologians. But Naselli understands that all theology has immediate, personal implications. Consequently, once the book moves into the full-bodied discussion of these doctrines, Naselli helpfully breaks down and arranges each topic according to engaging questions—the kinds of questions thoughtful Christians have about these issues.[2] And each chapter ends with a personalized prayer focused on how to respond to the doctrine set forth.

Part 1 takes about 130 pages to explain positive predestination (election). The discussion develops along these lines:

- What Is the Goal of Election?
- When Did God Choose to Save Humans?
- Did God Choose to Save Individuals?
- Did God Choose to Save Individuals Based on Foreseen Faith?
- Is Unconditional Election Unfair?
- Do We Have Free Will?
- Does Election Contradict God's Desire That All Humans Be Saved?
- How Does God Accomplish His Plan to Save Individuals?
- How Do I Know If God Has Elected Me?
- Did God Elect Babies Who Die?

Naselli opens with eight scripturally grounded divine goals in election (chapter 1), a divine decision that preceded creation (chapter 2). The discussions of conditional versus unconditional election (chapter 4), free will (chapter 6), and how God accomplishes his elective purpose (chapter 8) occupy the most space. At every point, Naselli seeks to anchor his reasoning and conclusions solidly in Scripture. In chapter 3 (individual versus corporate election), he works through seven reasons to "reject the Arminian view of corporate election" (48ff). While I agree with the position he stakes out, some of the reasoning offered seems, at points, ineffective. After citing several passages that imply individual election based on their use of singular pronouns (45–47), Naselli cites Romans 8:29–30 to argue that "God foreknows, calls, justifies, and glorifies particular individuals"—even though the pronouns throughout this passage are plural, not singular. Arguing simultaneously that singular-pronoun passages *and* plural-pronoun passages prove individual election seems less than compelling. Bruce Demarest's explanation is more convincing: since the verbs in Romans 8:29–30 are both aorist and sequential, "if the election and calling were exclusively corporate, so also would be the justification. . . . But God does not justify an empty class; he justifies individuals."[3]

In chapter 4, Naselli follows an argument for the decisiveness of God's sovereignty (53–56) with the magnificent observation that "the basis for election is God's forelove" (56; Naselli cites Eph 1:4–

[2] For a "Quick View" version of the answers to the questions that occupy each chapter, you can go straight to an Appendix on "Chapter Summary Questions and Answers." The author confirmed, however, that the Q&A for chapter 7 contains a typographical error; the question should read, "Is election compatible with God's desire that all humans be saved?"

[3] *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation,* Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997), 129.

5, 1 Thess 1:4, and 2 Thess 2:13; but see also Eph 2:4–6). While the author does try to represent Arminians fairly, I suspect Arminians will think he could have tried a little harder. Naselli admits that they would never say that they are saved because they are smarter than other people, but that "they are radically depraved and thus in need of God's special grace in order to repent and believe in Jesus." Their view of universal prevenient grace, however, implies "that a believer decisively chose God, and has a ground for boasting" (64). But then, an Arminian would never say *that* either! Naselli concedes that both "Arminians and Calvinists agree that we need God's special grace *before* we can believe because we are radically depraved. But we disagree on five key issues regarding God's special grace"—differences which he then concisely charts out. In an extensive footnote (75) quoting two Arminian theologians who insist that "the decisive factor" in salvation "is the grace of God" not human choice, Naselli nevertheless defends his insistence that the Arminian doctrine of universal prevenient grace logically entails that "man's choice is decisive" in election, not God's. It seems the two sides talk past each other by insisting on asking the same question differently: the Calvinist's question is, "Which is decisive, man's choice or God's choice?" whereas the Arminian's question is, "Which is decisive, man's choice or God's (choice to give) grace?"

The chapter on free will is superb, differentiating between natural ability and moral ability. The former is the "natural freedom to choose what I want" in accordance with my nature—a capacity all humans exercise every day. The latter is the "moral freedom to choose what God wants"—a capacity that all humans, by virtue of depravity, lack apart from the intervening grace of God. Naselli offers ten arguments in support of the idea that divine determination and human freedom harmonize (compatibilism).

Chapter 7 addresses whether the doctrine of individual, unconditional election contradicts God's desire that all humans be saved. Similar to the differentiation between two kinds of human will, Naselli differentiates between two aspects of the divine will: God's commanded or moral will, and God's decreed or sovereign will (112–16). I was puzzled by a chart that distinguishes between (a) God's command to Pharaoh ("Let my people go") as "what God would like to see happen" and (b) God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart as "what God actually wills to happen" (113); but surely both of those are God's decreed will, since both of them were divinely purposed *and* both of them actually happened.[4] Naselli ends the chapter with a series of five real-life examples designed to demonstrate the feasibility of two competing wills in God (117–19). The problem with the examples is not so much the issue of two competing wills but (in the case of God) the utter impossibility of one of the options, depending on how one defines the atonement—which, to be fair, was not the focus of this book and is mentioned only briefly (12, 14). If God's choice not to save certain people means that he also decided *not* to provide for those people the atoning sacrifice that renders their salvation possible in the first place, it is legitimate to question the meaningfulness of saying that God desires and offers to save those

[4] For a more thorough treatment, see Layton Talbert, "An Inquiry into the Hardness, and Hardening, of Pharaoh's Heart," *JBTW* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2023), 56–78.

people *on that view* (viz., an exclusively particularistic atonement). The NT does teach particularity, but it consistently locates that particularity in election not in the atonement.[5]

Chapter 8 (how God accomplishes his elective purposes) argues for the priority of regeneration (123–26), God's use of the means of Scripture, prayer, and witness (126–28), and our obligation to obey God even if we do not understand how all this works (128–29).[6] The final chapter on election ("Did God Elect Babies Who Die?") offers a perspective that is biblically insightful and pastorally sensitive. Naselli concedes that though "the Bible does not directly answer this difficult question" (143), there is sufficient biblical data to conclude that it "is almost certainly true" (147). He even offers a feasible explanation for why the Bible is *not* clearer on this issue: given human depravity, "people would be more inclined to do horrible things" if the Bible's answer were explicit (148).

Part 2 devotes about fifty pages to negative predestination (reprobation) and follows this succession of questions:

- Who Ultimately Causes Reprobation?
- How Does God Accomplish Reprobation?
- What Is the Result of Reprobation?
- What Is the Goal of Reprobation?
- Who Deserves Blame for Reprobation?

The answer to the first question is "God," but that requires some explanation (chapter 11). To begin with, God does not reprobate neutral or innocent humans; the entire human race consists of fallen rebels who already reject God as he has revealed himself (159–60). Naselli differentiates "equal or symmetrical double predestination" (God actively chooses to work unbelief in some and faith in others) from "unequal or nonsymmetrical double predestination" (God actively chooses to save some, and passes over others), and then offers five reasons for defending the latter (160–63). Indeed, a robust biblical understanding of depravity makes the former nonsensical; why would God need to work unbelief in those whose natural disposition is unbelief? As Naselli writes, "Reprobation does not mean that God decreed to transform innocent humans into wicked ones and then damn them," because there are no innocent humans (161). He cites corroborative statements from other theologians, including this one from Moo: "'God's mercy is given to those who do not deserve it; *his hardening affects those who have already by their sin deserved condemnation'*" (162, emphasis added)—a statement well worth applying to the hardness, and hardening, of Pharaoh. Naselli's explanation of some passages, however, seems confusing and inconsistent with his view of negative predestination as preterition. For example: "First Peter 2:8 teaches that God *destined certain people to disobey* and thus stumble—that is, *he destined them to rebel against him* and thus take offense at and reject Christ the cornerstone" (156, emphasis added). How is this different from symmetrical predestination, in which

[5] To be clear, I am not faulting the author for not addressing this issue, nor am I attributing to him any particular view of the atonement. I am simply observing that the issue that complicates the universal call rests less in the issue of the nature of God's will, and more in the nature of the atonement. Cf. my review of Austin Brown's *A Boisterously Reformed Polemic against Limited Atonement* immediately above in this journal issue.

[6] It is just my opinion—as, indeed, all of this review is—but the citation of a rap song lyric that reads like a rather banal advertising cliché (122) does not contribute much to the dignity and sobriety of the subject.

God equally *actively chooses* (destines) "certain people" to not believe and to be condemned? Perhaps some would appeal to mystery here (see below). But to say that God *both* passively "passes over" the non-elect *and also* actively chooses to work unbelief in them sounds more like logical contradiction than mystery.

How does God accomplish reprobation (chapter 12)? The biblical term Naselli zeroes in on is that word *hardening*. He correctly asserts, "When God hardens individuals, he is not merely *reacting* to how they previously decided to harden their hearts for themselves" (170, emphasis original). God does not need to wait for them to decide to harden themselves; rather, when God hardens individuals he is *confirming* the *native hardness* of their already-fallen condition.[7] After all, God did not *make* them that way; as Naselli already argued, "God does not harden or condemn *innocent* humans" (161, emphasis original; cf. 175). But how does this divine hardening work? Naselli offers examples of several kinds of hardening: God hardens (a) by withholding grace, (b) through sinful people, and (c) with the truth. The first category is the clearest; in the cited words of A. A. Hodge and R. C. Sproul, "'God *withdraws* from sinful men . . . and *leaves* them to the *unrestrained* tendencies of their own hearts, and to the *uncounteracted* influences of the world and the devil,'" and he "'*lets them have their own way* . . . and *lets them do their own will*'" (173, emphasis added).[8] Later, Naselli also quotes Michael Horton at some length: "'Scripture does speak of God hardening hearts. . . . Yet it also speaks of sinners hardening their own hearts. . . . *Human beings alone are responsible for their hardness of heart*. . . . *God only has to leave us to our own devices in the case of reprobation*'" (176, emphasis added).

So, when Naselli asks how can God ordain "both (1) what we choose and (2) that we freely and responsibly choose what we most want?" I am somewhat mystified by his answer: "I don't know how. It's a mystery" (177). Is it? Isn't it depravity, in conjunction with preterition and withheld grace? Naselli and those he quotes have explained it admirably. Hardening is allowing sinners to choose what we most want in keeping with our fallen nature, without the intervention of persuasive grace to change what we want. Where is the mystery in that? As to "how God can ordain sin but not be guilty of it," John Piper explains it in essentially the same way: not divine instigation, but divine permission.[9] The objection may be raised, "But that's not how Paul answers in Romans 9; he seems to think it's a mystery (9:19) answerable solely by a silencing appeal to God's absolute sovereignty (9:20)" (cf. 61). But as I have argued elsewhere, 9:20 is not all Paul had to say on the subject.[10] To be sure, there is a

[7] This is my conclusion, not Naselli's. The author admits, on the one hand, that hardening is just and deserved by virtue of our depravity; but he also seems to want to maintain that such hardening is an utterly independent and unconditional act of divine sovereignty (171). But if hardening is God's just dealing with those already guilty by virtue of the depraved human condition, then it's not really "un*condition*al."

[8] I found the second category particularly confusing. Under "God Hardens through Sinful People" Naselli shows how "God uses wicked people to accomplish his purposes"—such as Joseph's brothers, the Sabeans who attacked Job's flocks and servants, the Babylonians, and Judas (173–74). But these are not equivalent or synonymous propositions. *Whom* is God hardening "through" these wicked people? The examples do not seem to make sense of the category. The meaning and explanation of the third category ("God Hardens with the Truth," 174) could also use more clarification.

[9] *Providence*, 175–79 (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020). See my review of this work in *JBTW* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2023) and my article in the same issue, "An Inquiry into the Hardness, and Hardening, of Pharaoh's Heart," especially 70–72.

[10] See ibid., 67–70.

mystery attached to election and reprobation. Naselli hits on it earlier: "Why did he love us *and not others* in this way? We don't know because God doesn't tell us" (56). Aye, there is the mystery.

Naselli does a masterful job summarizing the goal of reprobation. God's mercy and grace are seen and appreciated most vividly against the backdrop of his wrath and power—attributes that are just as inherent to God's nature and character as his mercy and grace. He rehearses the seven doxologies in Revelation that glorify God specifically for his righteous judgments on the earth (187–89). "If reprobation did not exist then there would be aspects of God's glory that we could not see and praise God for" (191).

Who, then, deserves blame for reprobation (chapter 15)? Naselli marshals a series of passages that lay the blame squarely upon humanity. It is because of "*your hard* and impenitent heart" (Rom 2:5 ESV). Paul does not explain Israel's unbelief in terms of election; that may be "a theologically correct answer, but it is only part of the answer. And . . . it is not what Paul emphasizes in [Rom] 9:30–10:21. Paul emphasizes the *human* reason: . . . *They* have not pursued . . . *They* have stumbled . . . *They* have sought . . . *They* have not confessed . . . [*they*] have not called . . ." (200–1, emphasis added). In short, "an individual non-elect sinner is responsible for his or her own reprobation because sinners are responsible for their sins" (199)—which roots the justice of reprobation in depravity, in native human hardness not just divine hardening. That is why I am again mystified when Naselli raises the question, "How can God be the ultimate cause of reprobation and humans still be responsible for their condemnation?" only to answer, "That's a mystery" (203). In my opinion, Naselli does a pretty good job of explaining the mystery.

If you want a concise, accessible, well-organized, Reformed-oriented primer to the vexed and complex topics of election and reprobation, you could hardly do better. Despite some disagreements and differences in emphasis (which the author and I have shared, in friendship, for a long time), I warmly commend Naselli's thorough, thoughtful, and reverent work on predestination.

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