

Bodily Redemption: A Reformed Perspective

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For purposes of the present volume, I was asked to concentrate on our redemption or salvation as embodied beings. I was also asked to represent mainstream Protestant Christianity. I am happy to do both. But I had best admit at the outset that the position I develop in this chapter is shaped both by my Reformed or Calvinist theological heritage and by my fairly traditional theological views. In other words, there are doubtless many mainstream Protestants—both those whose heritage is not Presbyterian and those whose theology is more revisionist than mine—who will disagree with at least some of what I will say.¹

Since this chapter will touch on several different topics, let me provide a brief roadmap of where we will be going. After dealing with introductory issues in this opening section, I will turn to some of the theological and salvific implications of our existence as embodied beings.

Next, I will discuss the Christian notion of God, since it undergirds everything that is said in soteriology. Then I will consider Jesus Christ and His relation to redemption. Then I will turn to the questions of how, why, and to whom redemption occurs; I will specifically discuss the notion of justification by faith, especially traditional Catholic and Protestant differences on that issue. I will then return to the notion of human embodiment and will consider two possible bodily resurrection scenarios. Finally, I will consider briefly what the medieval theologians called the beatific vision.

Let me begin by noting a fact about human life that is highly relevant to the topic of redemption. Humans face two over arching problems; namely, guilt and death.

Most humans experience at least some degree of guilt. Indeed, we call those people sociopaths who experience no feelings of guilt or are not influenced by the guilt they do experience. We want to be admired and respected by others, and especially by ourselves. Unfortunately, we are acutely aware of our own moral failings and do not excel at obeying even the precepts of our own (usually flawed and self-serving) moral standards. When we compare our behavior with the ethical standards prescribed in the Ten Commandments or the teachings of Jesus, we clearly see our shortcomings. Thus, we feel guilty and, according to Christianity, *are* guilty. So the first great human problem is what to do about our guilt.

Most humans want to live forever. Death ends our lives, careers, and projects, bringing hopes for future accomplishments to naught. We do not know with certainty what, if anything, awaits us after death, and many are frightened at the prospect. We do not want to deprive our loved ones of our presence and support, nor do we want to be deprived of theirs. The thought of no longer existing—of literally not being—frightens most people. Thus, the second great human problem is what to do about death and our fear of it.

Christianity insists that these two problems—guilt and death—are connected. It also claims to offer to human beings, through Jesus Christ, the solution to both problems. This paper is about that solution.

Salvific Implications of Existence as Embodied Beings

Almost from the beginning of recorded philosophy, thinkers have recognized that human beings have both an inner and an outer aspect. The public, outer aspect is our lives as embodied beings. Information about our outer aspect is public in the sense that anybody—myself or anyone else—in principle can look and see, for example, that I have grey hair, or even (if I were, say, scowling and shouting) that I seem to be angry. There are also inner things about human beings that are private; they can be known directly only by the person to whom they belong. For example, you can infer by observing my behavior that I am angry, but I am the only one who knows that fact directly. I do not have to infer that I am angry (or that I am in another mental state, such as thinking, remembering, intending, or feeling); I simply *know* these things.

Also quite early in philosophy, some thinkers emphasized the inner (mental and spiritual) aspects of humans and deemphasized the bodily aspects. Indeed, both Plato and Descartes share (with some differences) a doctrine that illustrates what I am talking about. Let us call it metaphysical dualism. This doctrine says that (1) human beings have two parts, physical bodies and incorporeal souls; (2) the soul is the essence of the person (that is, the real Steve Davis is Steve Davis's soul, not his body); (3) the soul, although united with a body in this life, can exist quite apart from the body; and that (4) after bodily death the soul, and thus the person, quite naturally go right on existing.

Some have even combined these sorts of notions with the further idea that the body is essentially evil, while the soul, or spirit, is essentially good. In light of this view, our task as humans is to escape from the body into the realm of pure spirit or intellect.

The point that I wish to make is that the picture I have just painted is not a Christian picture (this is not to deny that it has influenced Christian thought at various times). Christianity says the following four things: (1) Humans are, in their most complete and perfect form, embodied persons. Accordingly, while disembodied human existence is in some sense possible, it is an attenuated form of

life, and not at all what God intended for us. (2) Matter, and thus bodies, were created by God as parts of a world that was originally “very good” (see Genesis 1:31). Therefore, matter is not inherently evil. (3) Embodied humans fell into sin and corrupted both themselves and the whole of creation; consequently, the material universe, including embodied humans, needs redemption (see Romans 8:19–22). (4) God is effectively at work in the world; accordingly, one day all of creation will be redeemed (see Revelation 21–22).

Christian Notion of God

From the beginning of recorded philosophy, thinkers have asked, What is ultimately real? Christianity denies many of the answers that have been given. Reality does not ultimately consist of water, as Thales thought. Nor does reality ultimately consist of atoms in motion, with physical matter being eternal and uncreated, as most contemporary philosophers think. Nor does reality ultimately consist of a karmic cycle or the law of karma, as many Hindus believe. Christianity says that ultimate reality is God.

In Christianity there can be no talk about redemption apart from talk of God. Who, then, is God? Let me list what I take to be eight essential characteristics of God held by most Christians.²

First, contrary to all versions of polytheism, Christianity insists that God is *one* (see Deuteronomy 6:4–6; see also 1 Corinthians 8:4–6); God is absolutely unique (see Isaiah 40:13–28), and there is no other like God (see Psalm 113:4–6; see also Isaiah 43:10; 44:6–8; 45:21–22). Second, unlike the limited gods of some religions, God is both *sovereign* (see Deuteronomy 10:14; see also Isaiah 45:5–7; 46:9–10; Jeremiah 10:6–7) and *transcendent* over all existing things, including human beings (see Numbers 23:19; see also Psalm 50:21; Hosea 11:9; Romans 9:20). Third, God is a spirit (see 2 Chronicles 6:18; see also Jeremiah 23:24; John 1:18; 4:24; 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16) not a physical object, like rocks and trees and human beings. Fourth, contrary to all views that make God limited or dependent on other beings, God is *eternal*, *uncreated*, and (in God’s essential nature) *changeless* (see Psalms 90:1–4; 102:25–27; see also Malachi 3:6; James 1:17; Revelation 22:13); there is no moment when God has not or will not exist or be God.

Fifth, God is *personal*, which contradicts all views in which an impersonal absolute (such as Brahman, the Dharma, the Tao, or emptiness) is ultimate reality. This means that God, like us, is a person; that is, a being who has desires, formulates intentions, and works to achieve them. It also means that, unlike the absentee God of the Deists, God lovingly cares about the Creation and works to achieve His purposes for it. Sixth, God is the *creator* of the heavens and the earth and of all existing things apart from God (see Genesis 1:1; 2:4; see also Psalms 33:6, 9; 100:3; Isaiah 41:4; 44:24; 64:8; Romans 4:17; Hebrews 11:3; Revelation 4:11), including human beings and the spirit of human beings (see Psalm 8:3–5; see also Zechariah 12:1). Seventh, God is *omnipotent* (see Genesis 18:14; see also Job 42:2; Psalms 115:3; 135:6; Jeremiah 32:17, 27; Daniel 4:35; Matthew 19:26; Ephesians 1:19) and *omniscient* (see Psalms 139:1–6; 147:5; see also Hebrews 4:13; 1 John 3:20). God is all-powerful; unlike humans, God has the ability to bring about any state of affairs that it is logically possible for Him to bring about. And God is all-knowing; in the case of any proposition whatsoever, that proposition is true if and only if God believes it. Finally, contrary to the semidemonic god or gods of some religions, God is *perfectly morally good* and *loving* (see Psalms 100:5; 107:1; see also Mark 10:18); there is no evil in God, and God works lovingly for the salvation of human beings.

Ultimate reality, then, is God. But Christianity also affirms that we humans are important to God. We were created for the sake of an intimate, loving relationship with God. Our supreme goal in life is to glorify God (see Isaiah 43:7; see also 1 Corinthians 10:31) and to enjoy fellowship with God forever.

Cosmically, the relationship between God and humans was shattered by the entrance of evil into the world. Personally, it is severed whenever we separate ourselves from God by sin. All of God's actions in history are expressions of God's love and providential care for us (including His acts of judgment). God is working to redeem us.

But what exactly is the nature of the relationship between God and human beings? It is a covenant. A covenant is simply a two-way agreement between two persons who are not peers. It is initiated by the superior party, and involves obligations and mutual responsibilities:

“I will do this if you will do that.” God is the initiator of this covenant, not human beings. The prophet Jeremiah sublimely sums up the essence of the covenant that God offers to human beings in this way: “I will be your God, and you shall be my people” (see Jeremiah 7:23).

Christians believe that God not only initiates but, through God’s actions in the world, fully restores the covenantal relationship between God and human beings. These actions are of many sorts (see Hebrews 1:1), but the restoration occurs preeminently through the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ—the incarnation of God (see Hebrews 1:2). Thus, at the center of reality is a God who acts to reconcile us to Himself.

Jesus Christ and His Relation to Redemption

As noted, redemption occurs, according to Christians, through Jesus Christ. Salvation is not our own doing. We are forgiven and reconciled to God through His work, not through anything we do or deserve. Indeed, we do not deserve redemption. That God loves us and works for our salvation is a sheer fact of grace. Grace (unmerited favor) means that God loves us even though we are unlovable, accepts us even though we are unacceptable, and forgives us despite our being unforgivable. God did not have to redeem us. That God freely chose to redeem us despite our inability to merit redemption is what is meant by grace.

Redemption occurs through the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Following Calvin, most Reformed Christians would place great emphasis on the cross. Although I am not going to explore the topic of incarnation in this paper, I would add that on the cross and in the Resurrection we see most fully who Jesus is; namely, God Himself condescending to the point of death on our behalf.

The life and teachings of Jesus. The redemptive power of Jesus’s life and teachings comes through showing us what God is like and how we are to live in such a way as to honor God. In Jesus, we see that God loves us unconditionally and loves us enough to have sent His Son to live with us in the midst of the fears, contingencies, and perils of human life. Jesus Christ is the supreme example of how human life should be lived. In His perfect obedience Jesus fulfilled all the

requirements of the law; accordingly, in His death He became a perfect sacrifice for our sins.

The death of Christ. As Anselm of Canterbury argued, the death of Christ on the cross is redemptive, because Jesus, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (see John 1:29), paid the full penalty for our sins and thus set right a disturbed moral order. The penalty for sin is death, for God had said to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (see Genesis 2:17). And the penalty had to be paid. Jesus died on our behalf, paying with His blood (see Romans 5:9; see also Hebrews 9:21–23) the penalty for our sins. Thus, we can be forgiven and a right relationship with God restored.

The Resurrection of Jesus. God redeemed us through the Resurrection by defeating death and promising us eternal life. Since death—along with all God’s other enemies—has been defeated, we too can be raised from the dead. Christians take the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead as both the model and promise of our Resurrection (see Romans 8:11; see also 1 Corinthians 15: 20, 23; Philippians 3:20–21; 1 Thessalonians 4:14; 1 John 3:2), which takes place at the time of the general Resurrection.³

How, Why, and to Whom Redemption Occurs

For whom does the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus result in redemption? Here virtually all Christians would answer that those who have faith in Christ will be redeemed. Those who are redeemed are redeemed not because of any good deeds that they have ever done, laws they have obeyed, or lifestyle they have lived. It is because they entrust their lives to Jesus Christ. The Protestant reformers called this notion “justification by faith.”

Our sinfulness is such that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. Theologians in the Reformed tradition speak of “total depravity.” The idea is not that human beings are incapable of doing anything good or that we are morally despicable; of course we can do morally good deeds. People do them frequently. The point is rather that evil corrupts and taints everything we do—even our good deeds. We do our good deeds for mixed reasons—so that others will think

highly of us, for example, or so that we can feel good about ourselves. We can do good, but not any good that contributes to our salvation.

Since we can do nothing to earn God's approval, if salvation were based on the works that we do, we would all be condemned. It would be hopeless. No matter how hard we might try, no matter how many self-sacrificial acts we might perform, no matter how many tears we might shed, it would be impossible to redeem ourselves. God is holy and demands absolute and perfect obedience from us. We cannot save ourselves.

As noted, the term *grace* means that God loves us despite the fact that we are unlovable, and acts to save us despite our lack of merit. Justification by faith means that God forgives us (see 1 John 1:9), justifies us (see Romans 5:1), adopts us (see Romans 8:15, 23; see also Galatians 4:5), and reconciles us to Himself (see 2 Corinthians 5:18–20) because of our faith in Jesus Christ (see Romans 3:22–24; see also Galatians 2:21). *Faith* means both believing *that* and believing *in*. The first (which the medieval theologians called *fides*) is cognitive; it entails believing that certain things are true, for example, that Jesus is the Messiah, Son of God, and our Savior. The second (*fiducia*) involves trust, specifically entrusting one's life to God in Christ. Faith is a response—a believing and entrusting response—to the gospel. It is the result of hearing the gospel (see Romans 10:17; see also Galatians 3:2, 8) and being drawn by the Holy Spirit (see Acts 16:14; see also Ephesians 1:17; Philippians 2:13).

Through faith we are united with Christ; Christ dwells in us and we are incorporated into His risen life. Thus we are transformed. We are born again (see John 3:3). We become new creations (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). We are sanctified (see 1 Corinthians 6:11). Because of our faith, we are able to fulfill our responsibilities under the covenant. The person of faith is part of "God's people."

It is important to see that faith is not itself a good work. Indeed, Reformed Christianity insists that faith is not our own doing. Faith is a gift of God (see 2 Corinthians 4:6; see also Galatians 3:23–26; Ephesians 2:8).⁴

We are not saved by our good works, but Reformed Christians insist that faith is followed by obedience. "So faith by itself, if it has no

works, is dead” (see James 2:17). Good works are a necessary sign that faith is genuine. Motivated by the Holy Spirit, they are a response of gratitude on our part for what God has done for us. Obedience is a natural consequence of our new sanctified life in Christ.

Since the Reformation, important differences on the doctrine of justification have separated Roman Catholics and Protestants. In recent years, there have been efforts to reconcile some of those differences.⁵ The issues here are complex; let me try to contribute just a bit to the enterprise.

One point of disagreement between Catholics and Protestant in the area of justification concerns the righteousness of justified human beings.⁶ Catholics typically hold that Christians are justified by an infusion of Christ’s righteousness and thus that they are *made righteous* by God (“so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” Romans 5:19). Just as my sin was imputed to Christ on the cross, so His righteousness is imputed to me in justification, and infused into me through faith, love, obedience, and the sacraments. Although it is provided by God, justifying righteousness becomes a righteousness that is inherent in me.

Protestants typically hold that in justification God forensically forgives human beings⁷ and thus that they are regarded by God as righteous (or declared righteous) (see Romans 9:6–8; see also Galatians 3:6). Justification is accordingly a kind of legal fiction, since justified human beings clearly remain sinners. Justifying righteousness is imputed to me but remains external to me.

Both sides agree, of course, that we are not able to save ourselves (see Ephesians 2:8–9), that justification is a gift of God, based on the work of Christ, to those who have faith (see Romans 5:1), that in justification God does not count our sins against us (see 2 Corinthians 5:19), that in Christ we “become the righteousness of God” (see 2 Corinthians 5:21), and that good works are the natural result of genuine faith.⁸

Let me make two points about this controversy. First, although there are real differences here, terminological confusion has made the differences appear to be much larger than they in fact are. The two sides have understood the term *justification* differently. Protestants

typically sharply distinguish between *justification* (the event that begins the Christian life; namely, God regarding us as righteous) and *sanctification* (the process after justification of the Holy Spirit helping us to grow in living a holy life). Catholics understand the word *justification* to include what Protestants mean by both terms. So when Protestants insist that justification is by faith alone and Catholics insist that justification is by faith and love, they are not necessarily disagreeing.

When Catholics object to the slogan “Justification is by faith alone,” they are (quite understandably) arguing that this motto omits the obedience and acts of love that are supposed to characterize the Christian life. When Protestants object to the Catholic formula “Justification is by faith and love,” they are (quite understandably) arguing that we cannot contribute anything to our justification, that we are not saved by any loving deeds that we do. As Alister McGrath points out, “In fact, there is general agreement between Protestant and Roman Catholic that the Christian life is *begun* through faith and *continued and developed* through obedience and good works.”⁹

My second point concerns the difference between being righteous and being regarded as righteous. When the person doing the regarding is a fallible human being, the difference between being *x* and being regarded as *x* can be huge. Obviously, this is because the perception and judgment of a human being may be mistaken. But when the person doing the regarding is a divine person, the difference collapses. Just as God’s word is effective (see Hebrews 4:11–13), so too is God’s regard. If God regards me as righteous, I *am* righteous. All talk of fiction is misplaced.

Accordingly, in my opinion, the debate between Catholics and Protestants at this one point is largely about a distinction that does not make much difference. Catholics do not hold that we save ourselves, and Protestants do not hold that justification occurs without sanctification. It turns out, then, that Catholics and Protestants simply use two equally legitimate ways of talking about the same reality. Justification can equally be said to be an act of God that *pronounces* sinners righteous and an act of God that transforms sinners by grace so that they *are* righteous.¹⁰

There is, of course, a genuine difference between justification as a once-and-for-all forensic event and justification as a process in

part of which we cooperate. And this fact will lead to two objections from traditionalist Protestants to the reconciling line that I have been following.

First, they will point out that the Council of Trent infallibly declared that good works are a necessary condition of salvation, which of course the Reformers strongly opposed.¹¹ Despite the fact that Catholics always add that those good works necessary to salvation are prompted by God's grace, it will be insisted that the Catholic notion seems clearly contrary to the "faith alone" motto of the Reformation.

But both Catholics and Protestants agree that good works are a necessary implication of genuine faith; that is, there is no genuine faith without good works; good works are a necessary criterion of genuine faith. Accordingly, if faith is necessary to salvation (as all sides agree), then so is everything entailed by faith. If the Constitution of the United States requires that you cannot be president without being a native-born citizen of the United States, it also requires anything that is logically entailed by being a native-born citizen. Thus, it does no violence whatsoever to the Constitution to say that you have to have been *born* (which is logically entailed by being a native-born citizen) in order to be president.

Second, traditionalist Protestants are likely to object that the Catholic theory raises the specter of our never really being justified, since growth in holiness is never complete in this life. If what God demands and requires is absolute holiness, there will never exist in this life a sufficient basis for our acceptance by God.¹²

But is this an important difference? Perhaps not. Catholics and Protestants can still agree that our acceptance and forgiveness by God depend on the action of God and not on how much progress we make in holiness. They can agree that our salvation depends on what God has once-and-for-all done for us in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Bodily Resurrection

Let us return to the fact of our embodiment as human beings.¹³ The basic Christian claim about the general Resurrection is this: on some day in the future all the dead will be bodily raised, both the

righteous and the unrighteous, to be judged by God, and the guarantee and model of the general Resurrection is the already accomplished Resurrection of Jesus Christ. But from here Christian tradition diverges. There seem to be two main ways of understanding the general Resurrection, and especially the “intermediate state” (that is, the state of the person after death and before the general Resurrection in the eschaton). I will call the theories “temporary nonexistence” and “temporary disembodiment.”

Temporary nonexistence (sometimes in its non-dualistic versions misleadingly called “soul sleep”¹⁴) is by a wide margin the minority report, so to speak, of Christian theology. On this theory (which is neutral vis-à-vis metaphysical dualism or physicalism), a given person (we will call him Smith) is born and then dies. After Smith’s death, Smith simply does not exist until the eschaton, when God raises Smith’s body from the ground and reconstitutes Smith as a living person.

This theory has some assets. The first is purely philosophical, namely, the fact that it is consistent with both metaphysical physicalism and dualism. That is, you can consistently believe in temporary nonexistence no matter which theory of the mind-body problem you ascribe to. The second is that defenders of temporary nonexistence often argue that scriptural texts (see John 11:11; see also Acts 13:36) support this view. But there are problems as well; much of the Bible seems not to support this theory (see the texts listed under the next theory). Moreover, some philosophers argue that the temporal gap in the existence of Smith that the theory requires raises grave doubts about whether the resurrected Smith-like person really is Smith. (I will not attempt to adjudicate that dispute here.)

The majority of Christian theologians who speak of the intermediate state defend temporary disembodiment. The theory (which is based on metaphysical dualism as defined earlier) says that: a given human being (Jones) is born, lives as a soul incarnate in a body, and dies. When the body dies, Jones’s soul goes on existing in an incomplete, disembodied state with God until the general Resurrection in the eschaton, at which point Jones’s body is resurrected and permanently reunited with Jones’s soul.

This theory, too, has a weakness (in the eyes of some): it essentially depends on at least some version of metaphysical dualism. If that theory turns out to be philosophically indefensible, temporary disembodiment is in trouble. The theory need not depend on the dualist notion that the soul alone is the essence of the person; it merely requires that personal identity be retained during a period when a once embodied person temporarily exists without a body. Nor need it depend on the dualist notion that souls survive death naturally, so to speak. That is, it can retain the Christian notion that we survive death only if and when God miraculously steps in and causes it.

But the theory also has several strong points. First, it does not entail a problematic temporal gap. Since there is no moment in time when Jones does not exist in some form or other, it will surely be Jones and not a replica of Jones who exists in the kingdom of God. Second, if the real Jones is Jones's soul (as dualism requires), then Jones's premortem and postmortem bodies do not have to consist of the same particles, nor do they even have to be similar; Jones's resurrection body can be a whole new "glorified" body, and it will still be Jones. Third, defenders of temporary disembodiment claim to see a close fit between their theory and biblical—and especially Pauline— notions of the afterlife. The Apostle seems to hold that human beings consist of both material bodies and immaterial souls, that the body is not merely an adornment or drape for the soul, but that it is indeed good, since it can be the temple of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:19–20), and that the soul is in some sense separable from the body (see 2 Corinthians 5:6–8; 12:2–3; see also Philippians 1:23). Fourth, temporary disembodiment solves an otherwise tricky problem in biblical theology: how it can be true both that the general Resurrection will not occur until the eschaton (which seems to be taught in the New Testament; see 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18) and that Jesus said to the good thief on the cross, "*today* you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43; emphasis added). The solution is that the thief was and is with Jesus in paradise in the form of a disembodied soul; his body will be raised later.

Temporary disembodiment is the standard theory in the tradition and appears to be the stronger theory in any case. Accordingly, that is the view of the intermediate state that I accept and defend.

Seeing God—The Beatific Vision

The whole of the Christian tradition unites in seeing the end or goal of redemption as our eternal presence with God in paradise. One concrete way of conceptualizing heaven in the tradition is in terms of the “beatific vision.” That is, in paradise, redeemed humanity will see God’s face.

Is it possible to see God? Well, if God is what is ultimately real, and if God desires a loving relationship between Himself and human beings, and if the incarnation of the Logos is permanent (as the tradition holds), and if resurrected human beings are embodied beings, then it should be possible for us in some sense to see God. This despite the fact that apart from the incarnation God is not an embodied being (see John 4:24).

The Bible takes us on a long journey on this issue of seeing God. Let me make three points about this topic. First, several texts insist that seeing God, or at least seeing God’s face, is forbidden. There is, for example, the curious passage in Exodus 33 where Moses wants to see the glory of God. Eventually God does pass by, while Moses is hidden in the cleft of a rock, and (speaking anthropomorphically) he only gets to see God’s back. But the key phrase of the text is clearly Exodus 33:20: “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.”

Second, many biblical passages stress that it is because of our sinfulness that we are forbidden to see God’s face. This follows from the fact that the scriptures declare that people who are upright, holy, and pure in heart do get to see God. Psalm 11:7 says that “the upright shall behold his [the Lord’s] face.” The sixth beatitude says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8). And Hebrews 12:14 says: “Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” These are wonderful thoughts, but if our aim is to see God, to achieve the beatific vision, these words sound like bad news. Which of us can truly claim to be upright, pure, or holy?

Still, the hope of seeing God persists. In Psalm 27:7–8, the poet pleads for the sight of God:

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,
 be gracious to me and answer me!
“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
 Your face, O Lord, do I seek,
 Do not hide your face from me.

And although there are thorny textual and lexical problems connected with this passage, the New Revised Standard Version translates Job 19:25–27 as follows:

For I know that my Redeemer lives,
 and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
 then in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see on my side,
 and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

Third, this hope that we will see God is surely eschatological. In 1 John 3:2, it says, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” And in the text about the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation, it says, “But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it [the city], and his servants will worship him; they will see his face” (Revelation 22:3–4).

The expression “seeing God” can be used in two different senses. The first is the sense in which believers do and nonbelievers do not, here and now, see God. This is clearly to use the word *see* in a metaphorical (or at least nonliteral) way. It means roughly that believers cannot avoid interpreting their experience (and indeed all of life and reality) in terms of the presence of God and that nonbelievers do not do so. The second is the sense in which no one can now see God, not at least God’s face, and that one day the redeemed *will* see God. This, I think, is a literal sense of the word *see*. Believing as I do in both (1) the permanent incarnation of the Son of God, and (2) bodily redemption (that is, in a general Resurrection that is essentially bodily), I have

no trouble accepting the idea that the redeemed will one day literally see God.¹⁵

Conclusion

We began with the idea that human beings face two great problems: guilt and death. Christian redemption—salvation through faith in Jesus Christ—is the divine solution to those problems. To those who are troubled by guilt (and we all are), Christianity says that God has freely and graciously provided for our forgiveness. To those who fear death (and nearly everyone does, to some degree or another), Christianity says that God freely and graciously grants us new life after death. Together, forgiveness and resurrection make possible our eternal life in the presence of God.¹⁶

Notes

1. My frequent quotations from scripture are from the New Revised Standard Version. This reflects the Christian conviction that all theological proposals are ultimately to be evaluated in terms of their agreement with scripture. I also believe in an important role for church tradition in evaluating theological claims. See my “Tradition, Scripture, and Religious Authority,” in *Philosophy and Theological Discourse*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997).

2. I will list scripture references after each claim. This is to record my conviction that these claims have little to do with the influence of Greek philosophy on Christian thinking, as some claim. They have to do with clear teachings of scripture.

3. Although it is important for the topic of salvation, I will say little in this paper about atonement and theories of atonement. This is because Christian thinkers, in my opinion, are allowed to try out various theories to see what best fits with the biblical data and church teachings. No one theory is theologically mandatory.

4. I do not have the space to address in detail the (to some, notorious) Reformed notion of election. I will make just one point: Calvin argued that the doctrine ought to constitute a source of comfort rather than fear for believers. I agree with him. Knowing how fickle, mercurial, and erratic human beings are (and as I know myself to be), I do indeed find it comforting to believe that my salvation is primarily a matter of God’s choice, not mine (see Ephesians 1:4).

5. I refer both to the official Catholic-Lutheran discussions on justification, and to the “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” document.

6. There are other differences that I will not discuss, for example, the debate between Catholics and Protestants about Luther’s notion of *simil justus et peccator*, and the debate between Catholics and Reformed Protestants about the degree of libertarian or incompatibilist free will that is involved in justification.

7. Not all Protestants believe in forensic justification. The Anabaptists and John Wesley, among others, struggled with the idea.

8. I will not speak on this occasion about those practical or ecclesiastical implications of the Catholic view of justification that still divide Catholics and Protestants, such as indulgences, purgatory, masses for the dead, prayers to the saints, baptismal regeneration, and so forth.

9. Alister McGrath, *Studies in Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan: 1997), 400. I have been assisted in writing this section by several of McGrath’s fine essays on justification.

10. As I understand it, this is similar to the solution found in the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue in the United States in the 1980s. See *Salvation and the Church: An Agreed Statement* (London: Church House Publishing/Catholic Truth Society, 1987), “Justification by Faith,” §158, page 298.

11. See Norman Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 221–48.

12. See Michael S. Horton, “What Still Keeps Us Apart?” *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 255.

13. I have addressed the issues discussed in this section of the paper in much more detail in *Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), especially on pages 85–131.

14. The term is misleading because (1) the soul does not actually sleep during the intermediate period, it simply does not exist; and (2) sleeping is essentially a bodily activity, and during the intermediate period the body is incapable of any activity (except perhaps rotting away, if that is an activity).

15. Having no wish to preempt the papers by Dr. Pappas and Professor Keller on this topic, and having run out of space, I relegate to a footnote a brief thought about “theosis” (divinization, deification). This concept was used by several of the church fathers (such as Irenaeus and Athanasius), and is an important part of the soteriology of Eastern Orthodox Christianity to this day. Some contemporary Latter-day Saint scholars have made reference

to theosis, presumably as a way of deflecting the criticism that the Latter-day Saint notion of “eternal progression” is heretical or unorthodox. I briefly make two comments: (1) I believe the church fathers (as well as Orthodox theologians today) who speak of theosis would be shocked and horrified at the suggestion that their notion entails that human beings can ontologically become God, and (2) it is my view that nowhere in the classical Christian tradition is there any hint of the correlative Latter-day Saint idea that God was once a man and has progressed to godhood.

16. I would like to thank Jack Bonavich, Gerald O’Collins, S. J., Roger Olson, Susan Peppers-Bates, and Marguerite Shuster for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.