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*To*  
GAZE  
UPON  
GOD

*The Beatific Vision in  
Doctrine, Tradition, and Practice*



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## WHAT IS THE BEATIFIC VISION?

WHAT MAKES HEAVEN, HEAVEN? Christianity's resounding answer to that question throughout the centuries has been the beatific vision. This is no exaggeration. In fact, the beatific vision is one of the few doctrines that can truly boast ecumenical status; it is not the exclusive doctrine of Eastern Orthodoxy, nor Roman Catholicism, nor Protestantism—the beatific vision is the blessed hope of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. This is not to suggest that each of these traditions has no unique contribution to make. As we will see in this book, there are variations of how the beatific vision is articulated within the various rooms of mere Christianity's house (to use C. S. Lewis's analogy).<sup>1</sup> But for all its variegated formulations to the precise nature of the beatific vision, Christian tradition speaks in unison when it declares that the hope of heaven is the blessed vision of God. The overwhelming majority of Christians throughout the ages have said with Paul, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12).<sup>2</sup> What makes heaven, heaven is that there we shall see the face of God. That blessed vision is the culmination of all our godly enjoyments in this life and the satiation of all our desire. That blessed vision is the Promised Land we march on toward, and the

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<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), xiii-xiv. We will concern ourselves with the distinct contributions of various Christian traditions in chap. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture citations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

consolation that sustains us on our pilgrimage. We shall see God. While Christians have many desires and aspirations, the central point of every single one of them is the same as David's: "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple" (Ps 27:4).

In this sense, the book you hold in your hand is a (small "c") catholic book. My prayer is that the majority of what I write here will elicit a hearty "amen" from all Christians. In another sense, however, it has a narrower focus. I write as a Reformed evangelical, and it is other Reformed evangelicals I particularly address.<sup>3</sup> This is fitting, in part, because the widespread Christian consensus on the beatific vision I describe here is only true if we use the wide-angled lens of two millennia. If our focus is on the past couple hundred years of evangelicalism, and indeed, the status quo over the past couple of decades, we will find a conspicuous absence of discussion on beatific vision. There are many reasons for this, and we shall address them in due course (particularly in chap. 5), but here we must simply acknowledge that the beatific vision is bound to be a new doctrine for many an evangelical. So, while this book is broad in the sense that I hope to retrieve a catholic doctrine that has enjoyed far-reaching consensus for the majority of the church's history, it is narrow in the sense that I hope to apply it in the particular context of Protestant and Reformed evangelicalism. This will simultaneously allow for us evangelicals to remember our catholic heritage,

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<sup>3</sup>To give some specific examples of what I mean by this designation, I subscribe to the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession of faith, which puts me squarely within the confessional Reformed tradition. As to what I mean by *evangelical*, I served for nearly five years at a Southern Baptist Church, graduated from a Southern Baptist seminary, and now serve as a theology professor at a seminary who has ties to several Southern Baptist seminaries as well as non-denominational free church seminaries. In other words, I see myself in the descriptions of David W. Bebbington's *The Evangelical Quadrilateral: The Denominational Mosaic of the British Gospel Movement* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021) and Thomas S. Kidd's *Who Is an Evangelical?: The History of a Movement in Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

while also contributing to that catholic tradition by connecting the beatific vision with our theological distinctives (particularly, our soteriological distinctives).

In this present chapter, I will develop the theological foundations that support the beatific vision, as well as lay out the broad contours of the doctrine itself. As a final word of preface, it is worth mentioning that while evangelicals (particularly of the Reformed variety like myself) may be unfamiliar with the doctrine of the beatific vision consciously speaking, they are probably already primed and ready to embrace it. In fact, they may even believe it without knowing as much. “Christian hedonists” who have learned from John Piper that “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him”—those who have come to agree with Piper that the chief delight of the soul is “seeing and savoring Christ”—are ready to embrace the beatific vision.<sup>4</sup> If one has learned from C. S. Lewis to ache for “the stab of joy,”<sup>5</sup> to reject playing with mud-pies in the slums for the sake of a holiday at sea,<sup>6</sup> and to go joyfully “further up and further in” to Aslan’s country forever,<sup>7</sup> one is ready to embrace the beatific vision. If one has learned from Jonathan Edwards that heaven is “a world of love,” one is ready to embrace the beatific vision.<sup>8</sup> If one has learned to pray with Augustine, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee,”<sup>9</sup> one is ready for the beatific vision. All of these lessons that so many Reformed evangelicals have learned traffic in the

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<sup>4</sup>See John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2011).

<sup>5</sup>See C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Orlando, FL: Harvest, 1958).

<sup>6</sup>See C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

<sup>7</sup>This reference is, of course, referring to Lewis’s name for “heaven” in his fantasy children’s novels, the Chronicles of Narnia. Since the talking lion, Aslan, is the Christ figure of these novels, it is fitting to call heaven *his* country. See C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

<sup>8</sup>See Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, 72 vols. (New Haven: Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 2009), 8:367-97.

<sup>9</sup>Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* 1.1.5. Unless otherwise specified, all citations of the church fathers are taken from the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First and Second Series*, 28 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956).

blessed hope of the beatific vision. They may therefore proceed in confidence.

### WHY A BOOK ON THE BEATIFIC VISION?

There are reasons why this doctrine, and indeed, this *way* of talking about heaven, feels so foreign for us who live in the twenty-first century. The radical individualism produced by the Enlightenment has yielded strange fruit that may lead us to think that any examination of the beatific vision is irrelevant today. In his brief and infamous essay, “What Is Enlightenment?,” Immanuel Kant (1772–1804) answers his own question in this way:

Enlightenment is man’s leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one’s intelligence without the guidance of another. Such immaturity is self-caused if it is not caused by lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination and courage to use one’s intelligence without being guided by another. *Sapere aude!* [“Dare to know!”] “Have the courage to use your own intelligence” is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.<sup>10</sup>

Tradition, according to the spirit of Enlightenment, is a straight jacket, confining the would-be liberated intellect to immaturity. Growing into intellectual adulthood, for Kant, is one and the same with waking from one’s dogmatic slumber and voyaging out on an open-ended quest for independent thought.

One of the surprising fruits of this “motto,” so aptly summarized by Kant, is the fundamentalist-biblicist misrepresentation of *sola Scriptura*. I say “misrepresentation” because the Reformers never intended for the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* to sever Christians from their heritage. “Far from undergirding an individualistic or biblicistic portrayal of Christianity,” note Michael Allen and Scott Swain, “*sola Scriptura* operated within a catholic context that shaped the confessional, catechetical, and liturgical life of the early Reformed

<sup>10</sup>Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question, What Is Enlightenment?” in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 16-17.

churches.”<sup>11</sup> No, the contemporary antipathy for tradition that often accompanies fundamentalism and a biblicist approach to theology did not come from *sola Scriptura*; modernity and the Enlightenment are to blame for this aberration from historic Christianity. This means that the problem with fundamentalism is not that it is too conservative but rather that it is not nearly conservative enough; it is willing to conserve premodern *concepts* like the Reformation’s *solas* or Nicene Trinitarian categories of consubstantiality but not the premodern *hermeneutic* or *philosophical commitments* that went into the original articulation of such convictions. But we cannot expect to retain Reformational or Nicene *fruit* with an Enlightenment *root*.

This consideration of the Enlightenment is relevant for justifying a book like this in a time like the one in which it is written. In an age as unpredictable and unsettled as ours, it might seem inappropriate for Christian theologians to devote concentrated attention on anything other than the pressing social issues of our day. Gavin Ortlund summarizes the starkness of our situation well: “Athanasius stood *contra mundum*; Aquinas synthesized Aristotle; Luther strove with his conscience; Zwingli wielded an axe; but probably none of them ever dreamed of a world in which people could choose their gender. Secularizing late modernity is a strange, new animal.”<sup>12</sup> Late modernity is a “strange, new animal” for other reasons as well. For example, Joseph Minich has recently demonstrated that in light of the insights gained by thinkers like Charles Taylor’s reflections on “the immanent frame,”<sup>13</sup> late modernity is marked by a particular existential sense of divine absence.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 70.

<sup>12</sup>Gavin Ortlund, *Theological Retrieval for Evangelicals: Why We Need Our Past to Have a Future* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 60.

<sup>13</sup>See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>14</sup>See Joseph Minich, *Bulwarks of Unbelief: Atheism and Divine Absence in a Secular Age* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2023).



In the face of such a “strange, new animal,” should not the theologians of Christ’s church devote all their attention to answering questions surrounding personhood, gender, sexuality, and human nature? If (in *incredibly* broad and crude strokes) the fourth century was when the church was forced to articulate its convictions on the Trinity, the fifth century was when the church was forced to articulate its convictions on Christology, the medieval period was when the church was forced to articulate its metaphysics, and the sixteenth century was when the church was forced to articulate its convictions on revelation, Scripture, and soteriology, perhaps the twenty-first century is when the church will be forced to articulate its convictions on anthropology and sexuality. So, why write a book on retrieving the doctrine of the beatific vision when books on, say, anthropology and sexuality, for example, are sorely needed?

One answer—apart from simply granting that such treatments *are* necessary and should be commended as some theologians produce them—is that this is easier said than done. Christians in the twenty-first century, facing the perplexing concerns surrounding anthropology, differ in a serious way from Christians of earlier time periods who faced the doctrinal concerns of their respective eras. Prior theological commitments were hammered out in a context of self-conscious ecclesial and theological *heritage*. The fifth-century church fathers were able to work out their Christology precisely because they had not forgotten what the fourth century church fathers taught them about the Trinity. They were *building* on a foundation already laid. The same is true all the way down through the Reformation: the Reformers worked out their convictions on Scripture and justification within the inherited context of convictions about metaphysics, the Trinity, Christology, divine attributes, humanity, the relationship between the body and soul, and the like. What separates our crisis surrounding anthropology from the Reformers’ crisis surrounding justification, in a way that is altogether unlike what separated their crisis surrounding justification from the



fifth-century church fathers' crisis surrounding Christology, is a massive intellectual fissure we call the *Enlightenment*.

We cannot simply build on what we have inherited because what we have inherited has already been disregarded. In fact, we were *incentivized* to disregard this inheritance in the name of intellectual maturity. To grow up, we were told, we had to move out and start a name for ourselves. Our prodigal departure promised self-fulfillment and freedom. But now we find ourselves eating out of the pods with the pigs and wondering where we went wrong (cf. Lk 15:11-32). In other words, both fundamentalist biblicism *and* self-expressive individualism are the fruit of the Enlightenment,<sup>15</sup> and the best way to solve the problem of either is to subvert the chronological snobbery endemic to both. This is, in part, why retrieving a historic embrace of the beatific vision is not a waste of time in a radically confused age: the blessed hope is ever relevant. It touches a nerve within the soul; a nerve for which the post-Enlightenment imagination does not even have a category. The way we escape from the malaise of modernity is not by embracing individualistic biblicism, for individualistic biblicism is stuck in that very same malaise. The way forward is first the way backward. We must correct our course, and theological retrieval is the way to do this.

In this book, I develop a broad, historical account of the beatific vision. For readers who are altogether unfamiliar with the doctrine, I have tried to write in such a way that this book can function as something of a primer. Not only do I develop the biblical rationale for the doctrine, I also (1) establish its theological and philosophical foundations, (2) trace its reception in the thought of key theological voices throughout the centuries, (3) introduce and adjudicate some of the more contemporary articulations of the doctrine, and (4) elaborate on the beatific vision's bearing on the Christian life.

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<sup>15</sup>For a helpful summary and description of the latter, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

As such, a major portion of the book, in terms of sheer size, is dedicated to historical considerations (chaps. 3 and 4). This is intentional. Some of the most important questions we may have when considering the doctrine biblically have been asked and answered in a number of ways by some of the great minds that Christ has given to his church down the ages—if we desire to have something useful to say about the doctrine today, we must become acquainted with the historical conversation, which began long before we arrived on the scene.<sup>16</sup>

### THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS: DIVINE BLESSEDNESS

We cannot rightly understand the beatific vision until we reckon with God's own independent *beatitudo*. In the beatific vision, we are beglaced participants in a happiness that in no way depends on—or is even enriched by—us. We are, of course, referring to that glorious doctrine of *aseity*.<sup>17</sup> God is *a se*, or *of himself*. This doctrine can be stated both negatively and positively. Negatively, we get at this doctrine by stressing God's independence—he *needs* nothing. He depends on nothing. God plainly announces this independence in poetic fashion when he speaks through the psalmist:

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<sup>16</sup>For readers who are somewhat familiar with the doctrine already, it may be useful for me to articulate, at the front end, what unique contributions I hope to make. The two most recent, and most adjacent works to this one are Michael Allen's *Grounded in Heaven* and Hans Boersma's *Seeing God*. See Michael Allen, *Grounded in Heaven: Recentering Christian Hope and Life on God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018); Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018). While I am indebted to both of these significant works, this present volume can be distinguished from theirs in a number of ways. In terms of focus, my project is broader than both of theirs. Whereas Boersma's book is largely historical, with brief theologically constructive portions, my book includes sections interacting with the biblical text (chap. 2) and developments of the philosophical and theological foundations of the doctrine (this chapter). I also include a dogmatic account of the doctrine in which I propose a positive constructive account from a Protestant and Reformed perspective (chap. 5), and a chapter on the doctrine's impact on various dimensions of the Christian life (chap. 6). Additionally, whereas Allen's book is concerned with retrieving the doctrine of the beatific vision and its ascetic implications for the Dutch Reformed tradition, mine is written with the more broadly evangelical world in mind. It also differs in other ways that will become apparent in future chapters.

<sup>17</sup>Much of this section is indebted to Steven J. Duby, *God in Himself: Scripture, Metaphysics, and the Task of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

“Hear, O my people, and I will speak;  
     O Israel, I will testify against you.  
     I am God, your God.  
 Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you;  
     your burnt offerings are continually before me.  
 I will not accept a bull from your house  
     or goats from your folds.  
 For every beast of the forest is mine,  
     the cattle on a thousand hills.  
 I know all the birds of the hills,  
     and all that moves in the field is mine.  
 “If I were hungry, I would not tell you,  
     for the world and its fullness are mine.” (Ps 50:7-12)

“God is absolute being,” says Herman Bavinck, “the fullness of being, and therefore also eternally and absolutely independent in his existence, in his perfections, in all his works, the first and the last, the sole cause and final goal of all things.”<sup>18</sup> This point of independence is incredibly important, since it is crucial for establishing a related doctrine, *divine simplicity*.<sup>19</sup> If God is independent, he *must* be simple; that is, he must not be a composite of any kind but rather *one*. At the most basic level, every Christian, regardless of his or her affinity with theology, affirms this doctrine. Every Christian knows that God is spirit and not body (cf. Jn 4:24) and therefore knows that God is not a composite of body and soul like humans are. But this doctrine implies much more.

If God is independent, he must not be a composite of *any* kind—not merely a composite of body and soul. This negation would include the composite of essence and accident (i.e., attributes that are essential to God’s nature and those that are not), and even potentiality and actuality (i.e., God as he is and God as he might become). God

<sup>18</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 2:152.

<sup>19</sup>Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., ed. James T Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 1:191-94.

is not composed in any of those ways, otherwise he would not be *perfect*, nor would he be *independent*. If God could acquire accidental attributes and was therefore a composite of essential and accidental attributes, these accidental attributes would either enhance or deteriorate him. This would rule out his perfection, for if he could deteriorate, he would not be perfect (his perfection lacking both in the ability to deteriorate, and in the final state of deterioration), and if he could benefit, he would not be *essentially* perfect (perfection being that state only made possible after the accidental attribute is acquired). This kind of composition would *also* rule out God's independence, for if God could acquire accidental attributes, and if those attributes benefited him in any way, his final state of beatitude would *depend* on the accidental attribute acquired (and whatever "composer" joined his essential being to the accidental attribute in question).

As Herman Bavinck reasons, "If God is composed of parts, like a body, or composed of *genus* (class) and *differentiae* (attributes of differing species belonging to the same *genus*), substance and accidents, matter and form, potentiality and actuality, essence and existence, then his perfection, oneness, independence, and immutability cannot be maintained."<sup>20</sup> God's simplicity therefore demands that he is one. Nothing in God is accidental and nothing in God is potential. His essence is his existence, and his attributes are one.<sup>21</sup> He is *pure act*.<sup>22</sup> Richard Muller describes this affirmation of *actus purus* when he says that God is "the fully actualized being, the only being not in potency," and is therefore "absolutely perfect and the eternally perfect fulfillment of himself" and is "never *in potential*, in the state

<sup>20</sup>Bavinck, *RD*, 2:176.

<sup>21</sup>Obviously, there is much more we could say about the doctrine of divine simplicity. For more extended treatments on this doctrine, James E. Dolezal, *God Without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011); *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2017); and Steven J. Duby, *Divine Simplicity: A Dogmatic Account* (New York: T&T Clark, 2015).

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, translated by The Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, UK: Christian Classics, 1983), I.3.3-8.

of potency, or incomplete realization.”<sup>23</sup> Here, Muller reminds us that God’s *aseity* need not be expressed exclusively in negative terms—that is, we need not only conceptualize God’s being of himself in terms of contrasting his independence from all creaturely contingency. We can take a step forward and define divine aseity positively as well. God needs nothing *because he is infinite fullness of life and blessedness*. God is plenitude, fullness, profusion. As Webster so powerfully puts it, “Aseity is not only the quality of being (in contrast to contingent reality) underived; it is the eternal lively plenitude of the Father who begets, the Son who is begotten, and the Spirit who proceeds from both.”<sup>24</sup> Within the immanent life of God, there is no lack precisely because there is instead an infinite burning of abundance in the Father who communicates the divine essence eternally to the Son (Jn 5:26), and the Father and Son whose eternal life and love eternally proceed as the Spirit. This is precisely because these eternal modes of subsistence are, in fact, *eternal*. The notion that a divine person should exist in any way (volitionally, relationally, emotionally, etc.) independent from another is inconceivable.<sup>25</sup> The divine existence is a plenteous holy fire that ever burns as paternity, filiation, and procession. “Filiation is not a lack but a mode of God’s eternal perfection, intrinsic to the wholly realized self-movement of God. Begetting—and likewise spiration—are the *form* of God’s aseity, not its result or term, still less its contradiction.”<sup>26</sup>

Tying the above themes together, we might say that the doctrine of aseity *negatively* stated accentuates our doctrine of divine simplicity, and aseity *positively* stated accentuates our doctrine of the Trinity. God is blessed. God eternally enjoys and delights in God.

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<sup>23</sup>Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 11.

<sup>24</sup>Webster, “Life in and of Himself,” in *God Without Measure*, 1:20.

<sup>25</sup>Turretin, in *Institutes*, 1:193, says, “Simplicity and triplicity are so mutually opposed that they cannot subsist at the same time (but not simplicity and Trinity because they are said in different respects): simplicity in respect to essence, but Trinity in respect to persons. In this sense, nothing hinders God (who is one essence) from being three persons.”

<sup>26</sup>Webster, “Life in and of Himself,” 1:21.

The triune God is the fullness of life and love and happiness in and of himself. Without this eternal divine beatitude—which in no way depends on or is answerable to another, and which is in no way enhanced or enriched by another—we would have no beatific vision for which to long. In the beatific vision we are entering into a happiness already occurring—a happiness that is not contributed to by our own enjoyment, not because our enjoyment does not matter, but because that divine happiness is already maximally actual. Though this does little for our petty conceits, it is *good news* for us. While this truth does not cater to our delusional sense of over-importance, it ought to be a great comfort to know that God is not indebted to or enriched by us, because this means that our blessed hope is one of utter and complete *generosity*.<sup>27</sup> The beatific vision is our enjoyment of a blessedness *gratuitously shared*.

The way we come to share in this blessedness concerns the topic of soteriology, which we will consider in due time. But before we can get there, we need to consider what kind of metaphysical vision is required for this kind of gratuitous enjoyment of God affirmed in the beatific vision to make sense. What vision of reality is necessary for us to properly conceptualize the beatific vision? The answer is what Hans Boersma calls a “sacramental ontology,”<sup>28</sup> what others have called a “participatory metaphysic,”<sup>29</sup> what some prefer to call “Christian Platonism,”<sup>30</sup> and what I will primarily refer to as “classical realism.”

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<sup>27</sup>This is the very foundation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. See Webster, “‘Love Is Also a Lover of Life’: *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Creaturely Goodness,” in *God Without Measure*; “Trinity and Creation,” in *God Without Measure*; and Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation: Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

<sup>28</sup>See especially Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

<sup>29</sup>See especially Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study of Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>30</sup>See especially Craig Carter, *Interpreting the Scriptures with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018); Craig A. Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition: Recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021); Louis Markos, *From Plato to Christ* (Downers Grove, IL:

### SETTING THE METAPHYSICAL STAGE<sup>31</sup>

In one of his lesser-known works, *The Discarded Image*,<sup>32</sup> C. S. Lewis paints a vivid picture of the medieval imagination. He does this, in part, by contrasting the medieval imagination with the modern one. Embodying these two radically different outlooks are two characters Lewis describes throughout the work: the medieval man and the nineteenth-century man. He imagines both men walking outside and looking up at a clear night sky. Their situation in this moment is, externally, identical in every way. They are standing on the same ground, feeling the same breeze, captivated by the same display of stars—like flecks of white paint on a black canvas. But where the nineteenth-century man imagines he is looking up at outer space, the medieval man imagines he is looking up into deep heaven. Nineteenth-century man views his world as full, and the sky as mostly empty. It is, essentially, nothing; its primary characteristic is absence. It is an unfathomable expanse of void. But where the nineteenth-century man conceptualizes his stargazing as looking out, medieval man imagines he is looking in. The blackness of the stars' backdrop, for him, does not bespeak a fundamental emptiness but rather instructs him on his own limitations. He does not assume that what he cannot see is not there; for him, the heavens are the province of a higher reality. They are not empty; they are full, teeming with life and activity that transcend his comprehension.

This description from Lewis helps us to illustrate the difference between the premodern enchanted cosmology and the modern disenchanting cosmology. Behind these two cosmological views are two opposing views of reality. This is what we mean when we talk about

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InterVarsity Press, 2021); Paul Tyson, *Return to Reality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014); and Alexander J. B. Hapton and John Peter Kenny, eds., *Christian Platonism: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>31</sup>The following section contains reworked and expanded material for a column I wrote for *Credo Magazine* titled, "Further Up and Further In: Appreciating the Platonic Tradition and the Reformed Conception of Union with Christ," vol. 12, Issue 1 (March 2022).

<sup>32</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).



metaphysics. Metaphysics is concerned not merely with determining whether stars are burning balls of gas or angels (though, as Lewis points out, with the right metaphysic, even these two descriptions of “stars” are not mutually exclusive),<sup>33</sup> but rather with how to conceptualize reality as a whole. One metaphysic describes reality as a message; the other views it as an accident. The former produces thinkers like Jonathan Edwards, who doesn’t simply observe roses or spiders or water or silkworms; he reads them. Roses mean more than they are; they mean “that true happiness, the crown of glory, is to be come at in no other way than by bearing Christ’s cross by a life of mortification, self-denial and labor, and bearing all things for Christ. The rose, the chief of all flowers, is the last thing that comes out. The briery prickly bush grows before, but the end and crown of all is the beautiful and fragrant rose.”<sup>34</sup> The latter metaphysic, the disenchanted one, produces thinkers like Richard Dawkins, who says, “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.”<sup>35</sup>

As difficult as it is to imagine, the modern view of the universe is no forgone conclusion to Western thought. It was an accident. A mere decision to go left at a fork in a philosophical road where many great thinkers of the past went right. The proverbial fork is the choice between nominalism and realism. Nominalism is a very earthy outlook. It denies the existence of universals. For a nominalist, we are not saying anything definite or concrete or real when we talk about humanness or humanity. There is no such thing as humanness, since any expression of so-called humanity is necessarily individual and distinct from all other expressions. *Humanity* is simply the shorthand

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<sup>33</sup>Recall the conversation between the Narnian star, Ramandu, and Eustace: “‘In our world,’ said Eustace, ‘a star is a huge ball of flaming gas.’ ‘Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is but only what it is made of.’” C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 115.

<sup>34</sup>Edwards, *WJEO*, 11:3.

<sup>35</sup>Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

conventional term we use to group all these individual creatures together—it is an imaginary concept that is useful for intellectual sorting, but it has no metaphysical substance. So says the nominalist. How does this lead to the present state of disenchantment? Eventually, working out its own logical conclusion, it strips the natural world of transcendental meaning. Any transcendental meaning we intuit in the natural world is not really there but is rather an imposition of our own thought-life—it is our naming. While nominalism may not require something like Hume’s skepticism and its subsequent fruit, the latter is not possible without the former.

The realist, on the other hand, insists on the reality of universals. The most significant realist in the ancient philosophical tradition is Plato (427–347 BC). He is so significant, in fact, that it is not uncommon to use *realism* and *Platonism* as interchangeable terms. For Plato, the individual expressions of reality in this world—the particulars—are individual participants in their true, transcendental “forms.” These “forms” or “ideas” exist in an ethereal realm apart from the material world in which you and I inhabit, but the world you and I inhabit, according to Plato, participates derivatively in this world of “forms” or “ideas.”<sup>36</sup> The essence of an individual human is humanness—and that essence is real, and is not exhausted by the individual human. I am truly human, but I do not exhaust the essence of humanity. Rather, I participate in the essence of humanity, which is real and would exist regardless of whether I was ever born. This insistence on the reality of universals—and the denial of nominalism—is an essential feature of the Platonic tradition. I intend to position myself within this intellectual tradition when I call myself a “classical realist.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>For a very helpful and accessible introduction to this aspect of Plato’s metaphysics, Markos, *From Plato to Christ*, chap. 2.

<sup>37</sup>There is obviously so much more we can say on this topic, but for the purpose of appropriate brevity, I content myself to commend the following resources to the interested reader: Tyson, *Return to Reality*; Lloyd P. Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Lloyd P. Gerson, *Platonism and Naturalism: The Possibility of Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020); Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary*

## PARTICIPATING IN GOD

Why do I make this appeal to classical realism? Simply this: such a metaphysic provides a rationale for what becomes incredibly an important point for our discussion on the beatific vision: creation's *participation* in God. To get at this topic, we seek the help of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas famously makes use of Aristotle's four causes, formal causation (i.e., that which a thing is made into), efficient causation (i.e., that which acts upon a thing to make it what it is), material causation (i.e., that which a thing is made out of), and final causation (i.e., that for which a thing is made—its telos or end). According to Aquinas, God *is* three of these four causes in relation to creation, notably excluding material causation.<sup>38</sup> This exclusion capitalizes the Creator-creature distinction; were God to be creation's *material* cause, pantheism would be all but inevitable. But since God is creation's formal, efficient, and final cause—and is the *cause* of creation's material cause—creation participates in the gratuitous being of God asymmetrically. “All beings apart from God are not their own being,” notes Aquinas, “but are beings by participation. Therefore it must be that all things which are diversified by the diverse participation of being, so as to be more or less perfect, are caused by one First Being, Who possess being most perfectly.”<sup>39</sup>

Andrew Davison notes, “When it comes to creatures, the core of the idea of participation is that things are what they are by participation in God: they are what they are because they receive it from God.”<sup>40</sup> This brings us necessarily into contact with the doctrine of *analogia entis*—the analogy of being, which is “the assumption of

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*Introduction* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014); Alexander J. B. Hapton and John Peter Kenny, eds., *Christian Platonism: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Craig A. Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition: Recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021); Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018); Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*; Sabastian Morello, *The World as God's Icon: Creator and Creation in the Platonic Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Anglico, 2020).

<sup>38</sup>Aquinas, *ST*, I.44.2-3.

<sup>39</sup>Aquinas, *ST*, I.44.1.

<sup>40</sup>Davison, *Participation in God*, 22.

an *analogia*, or likeness, between finite and infinite being, which lies at the basis of the a posteriori proofs for the existence of God.”<sup>41</sup> Crucially, this doctrine stresses both similarity and dissimilarity between finite being and infinite being. The needle the *analogia entis* helps us thread is the avoidance of the dual error of assuming, on the one hand, that God and creation share nothing in common (equivocal being) and, on the other hand, that God and creation share in being (univocity of being). But God does not belong to a genus or species. He does not *participate* in a category of being broader than himself. By virtue of his simplicity, we must deny that his existence and being are distinct. God alone is his own existence. He, therefore, possesses his being by nature, while all that is creaturely has being by *reception*. Davison stresses the significance of this feature:

A participatory approach to theology wishes to stress that God is prior to the world in every way. That underlines our problem when it comes to speaking about God, cautioning us to avoid idolatry. However, it also provides the key to understanding how human language, as used, for instance, in the Bible, can indeed apply to God after all. The legitimacy of that endeavor does not rest on God’s being like the world but rather—as the trace-like way that we have encountered throughout this book—on the world imitating God.<sup>42</sup>

This means that the chief characteristic of all creaturely being is its indebtedness to divine beatitude. To say this much is to say far more than the simple statement that God made creation. We rather take a step forward and say that God made creation to share in his goodness after his likeness. The resounding announcement “it was good” in the creation narrative of Genesis’s opening chapter can be fruitfully read in light of the *analogia entis*. Creation’s Creator is *good*, and creation is good because it participates in and imitates the Creator. Infinite being is good, and finite being is good because

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<sup>41</sup>Muller, *Dictionary*, 24.

<sup>42</sup>Davison, *Participation in God*, 172.

it participates in and imitates infinite being. This is how God is glorified in creation. He makes all that is creaturely to participate in and imitate that which is glorious. All things are from and through and to God (Rom 11:36; cf. Acts 17:24-27). And this means that God is also the *final* cause of everything that is creaturely. All that exists, exists *for God*.

Man is no exception to this creaturely rule, and indeed—as one who is made uniquely *in the image of God*—it is a punctuation thereof. And it is at this point that our metaphysical discussion above takes us directly into the fray of anthropological concerns and the beatific vision. God is the final cause of all creaturely being, including man. What does the final realization of that telos look like for man? *The beatific vision*. This is clear not only for Christians who fulfilled Plato’s philosophy with doctrine he lacked but also, in some measure, to *Plato himself*. In his *Symposium*, Plato explains how the true philosopher is one who leaves the cave of shadows (the world of becoming) behind to ascend the ladder of philosophical contemplation to approach the world of forms (the world of being). This process begins “rather mundanely, with the love of physical beauty as it is manifested in one particular person. But the initiate does not stop here. Love of a single beloved must expand, in time, to include love for all forms of physical beauty.”<sup>43</sup> “If he makes it this far up the runs of the ladder,” notes Markos, “Plato promises . . . he will see, not only the Forms, but the Form of the Forms. He will see Beauty as it is in itself, a beauty that does not change or grow dim or die. Seeing that Beauty will mark the end of his journey (his *telos*), but the Beauty itself will be revealed to him as the *archē*, the origin or final cause of all his yearning.”<sup>44</sup>

This journey of the philosopher that Plato envisions is the journey of the soul striving toward the beatific vision. What Plato saw as in a mirror dimly lit, God’s saints, with the aid of regenerative grace

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<sup>43</sup>Markos, *From Plato to Christ*, 73.

<sup>44</sup>Markos, *From Plato to Christ*, 74.

and special revelation, saw with clarity: the telos of the human soul was to “dwell in the house of the Lord” and to “gaze upon the beauty of the Lord”—*this* is the *one thing* to ask of the Lord (Ps 27:4).

Despite the differences that would develop among Aquinas and the post-Reformation theologians regarding a *donum superadditum* (Aquinas’s view) vs. a *donum concreatum* (the post-Reformation view), both agreed with the conviction that the highest goal and final end of man was to *see God*.<sup>45</sup> For Aquinas, there is no stronger argument for this than the persistence of desire itself.<sup>46</sup> “There is pleasure in the intellect about knowing truth,” says Aquinas, “but sadness results in the will about the known thing inasmuch as the thing’s action causes harm, not inasmuch as it is known. But God is truth itself. Therefore, the intellect seeing God cannot fail to take pleasure in seeing him.”<sup>47</sup> Davison observes how “Aquinas sees this desire for God, which is intrinsically also desire for one’s own completion, as underlying all other desires. Anything we might worthily desire, for Aquinas, represents some step along the way to the attainment of God, just as the goodness of anything we might properly desire is there due to its participation in God.”<sup>48</sup> As we shall see in chapters three and four, what Davison says about Aquinas here we can say about many other figures throughout the history of the church.

Rightful desire, in man, is the soul striving toward its telos, which it ultimately realizes in the beatific vision. All our longings for happiness are reflections of divine beatitude, beckoning us back to the efficient, formal, and *final cause* of all—the holy Trinity. In that sense, there is a kind of continuity between our desire on this side of our blessed hope, and our desire on the other side. The discontinuity is real and pronounced, but it is the difference between a

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<sup>45</sup>These concerns will resurface in chaps. 4-5.

<sup>46</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology*, trans. Richard J. Regan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.163-65.

<sup>47</sup>Aquinas, *CT*, 1.165.

<sup>48</sup>Davison, *Participation in God*, 118.

seed and its flower, not the difference between two kinds of seeds. “Through the participation that founds creation,” notes Davison, “one apprehends God through creaturely things and concepts; in contrast, in the life of the world to come, the redeemed apprehend creaturely things in God, and through him.”<sup>49</sup>

This, however, does not mean that in the beatific vision God is comprehended in a comprehensive sense. As the infinite one, God is *incomprehensible* to finite creatures. The infinite cannot be circumscribed by the finite. Creatures do not cease to be creatures in glory. In whatever sense a creature *sees* the essence of God, he sees him in a creaturely mode of knowing, which “always falls short of the knowability of God.”<sup>50</sup> We ought not admit this fact reluctantly, as if it were a concession. It should not be a disappointment that a univocal vision of the essence of God is something we will never experience, as if we were missing out on something God would give us if he were more generous. All creaturely existence is a gift, *including* creaturely limitations. In that blessed vision, our comprehension and vision and delight, which are all *finite*, will be perpetually maximized. And as our capacity for comprehension and vision expands, so will our delight. In other words, the very limitations we are tempted to bemoan create the possibility of never-ending delight, where each level of enjoyment is topped by the next—forever. This upward spiral into deeper beatific communion with the Trinity will never be exhausted—because we are finite, and the object of our delight is infinite, our blessedness will increase forever. “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps 16:11).

All this means that the deeply human desire for transcendence does not occur in a vacuum. God did not make us with a desire that could not be satiated: he has “eternity” in our hearts (Eccles 3:11) so that our soulish thirst would be satisfied in this blessed hope, this

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<sup>49</sup>Davison, *Participation in God*, 298.

<sup>50</sup>Davison, *Participation in God*, 299.



telos, this absolute end. The hopeless conclusion of nominalism's secular offspring is incorrect—the transcendent is not simply a projection. The sense of divine estrangement that has come to mark our disenchanted age is so devastating *because* it is so profoundly unhuman. Lewis was right, therefore, when he observed that “if I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 136-37.

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