

The Critical Line throughout the Scriptures—Life as Annotated in the Recovery Version of the Bible

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Abstract

Using Witness Lee's Recovery Version of the Bible, I will show how the invisible God manifests Himself in the natural world--such as sun, light, water, air, rocks, etc.—and as human attributes--such as patience, kindness, humility, happiness, etc.. The underlying message of the Recovery Bible is the reification of the deity in the heart and mind of believers and thus a dispensation of the Divine Spirit (grace) **into** human beings. The dissemination of the Divine Life coincides with the birth of “cooperative man” as God's representative on earth and ally in the eschatological battle with the Devil. This is the end in sight. A single, hermeneutical thread runs the entire length of the Recovery Version, that being, “life.” Beginning as the “Tree of life” in the Book of Genesis, the Divine Life as rooted in Nature and expounded in the Recovery Version of the Bible might be said to reach upwards to heaven with each of the books of the Bible, appearing in full bloom in the New Testament, but the “Divine Man” or “Corporate Church” not ripe for harvest until the end of the Book of Revelation.

Introduction

In the first two chapters of the Bible, life is the center of God's creation. The two chapters reveal that God created the heavens and the earth among other numerous things (Genesis 1:1). Genesis chapter 1 is the complete record of the creation by God. On the sixth day, it says that He created man in His own image and then entrusted man with His authority (Genesis 1:26). In the Lord's Recovery and Recovery Bible, the mankind is a manifestation of God on earth and in heaven. The Creator God is hidden, invisible, and yet He is manifest in and through mankind. Moreover, He created one man, not thousands, humanity the offspring of one man, Adam.

In addition to the creation of man, and then woman, God cultivated a garden on earth, Eden, planting a tree at its very center; synonymous with life, it occupies the center of the very universe (Genesis 2: 9). God put the man in sight of the Tree of Life, facing it and hence at the center of creation. Location, both geographical and cosmological, was the first step in God's eternal purpose to create man as his vessel, indeed as the abode of the divine life: God as life itself, and in man as God's manifestation on earth (Genesis 2:7 footnote). In the Lord's Recovery, this also signifies the Triune God and embodiment of Christ, that is, the sustenance of human existence. Several passages in the New Testament confirm this, the divine, eternal, uncreated life essence of God none other than Christ (John John 1:1,4; 11:25; 14:6; Col. 3:4) and the embodiment of God (Col. 2:9). Importantly, the Tree of Life in the Book of Revelation grows along both sides "a pure river of water of life" (Rev. 22: 1-2). As Witness Lee explains in his commentary of the Bible, it is a "vine" in fact "that spreads and proceeds along the flow of the water of life for God's people to receive and enjoy" (Recovery Bible, p. 967). Moreover, the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ are said to be requisite to mankind enjoying life as celebrated in the ritual meal of the Lord's table where believers eat and drink in remembrance of Him (Recovery Bible, p. 13).

In sum, the divine/human life and Triune God is the leitmotif of the Bible taken as a

whole, its alpha and omega—including the New Jerusalem or millennial kingdom—which the Recovery Version and commentary of Witness Lee make clear (Revelation 22: 1-2).

I. God's Original Plan for Creation

The first point is that God has purpose, intention, and a plan. What was God's purpose in creating man? The answer, according to Witness Lee is found in Genesis 1: 26 and 27:

Let us make man in Our *image*, according to Our *likeness*, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of heaven and over the cattle and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.

In this case, God is said to create the inner man in His image and the outer man in His likeness. For Witness Lee, it is self evident that mankind's position in creation is a unique one, for human beings alone are stamped with the divine image and completely different from the rest of creation.

The creation of the world in the Bible begins with the inanimate--light, sky, earth, and various planetary reflections of light. Gradually, life per se is introduced in stages, beginning with plant life and void of consciousness and followed by creatures of instinct and semi-conscious--fish, birds, cattle, beasts, and creeping things. Human beings occupy the highest level or degree of consciousness, coming at the end and a manifestation of God. The message here, again according to Witness Lee, is the dispensation of the divine life on earth, mankind created in the image of God and thus His authority or representative on earth.

There are two more expressions used in the creation story vis-à-vis plants and creatures. The latter are said to be created after "their own kind," whereas human beings are created "in His own image." The idea here is that animals are one species, plants another, but mankind a divine "species" or "race." In the Recovery Bible, Acts 17:28 is one proof for this, and reads:

“for we also are His race” (Recovery Version, p. 393). It stands to reason, of course, that mankind’s proximity to the divine rules out any connection to nature or the animal kingdom, the Recovery Version militating against Darwinian evolution which blurs the line between humans and the monkey, elephant, and parrot, for example, seeming as if to possess certain characteristics—form, memory, speech—but neither individually or collectively an image of the Triune God. For Witness Lee, moreover, after the Fall mankind’s likeness to God is not diminished.

At this point, Witness Lee and the Recovery Version provide the following answers to the twin questions of life in the universe without plants, animals, or human beings--a cosmology without meaning—and the more vexing question of the image of an invisible God. As the Gospel of John makes clear: “No one has ever seen God; the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (John 1:18). The same idea is repeated throughout the New Testament, Christ as “the image of God” (2 Corinthians: 4: 4), indeed “the image of the invisible God, first born of all creation” (Colo. 1:15). As Witness Lee explains, mankind is joined inexorably to Christ as a consequence:

Christ is the image of the invisible God. God is invisible; yet He has an image. The invisible God has a visible image. No one has ever seen God, but Christ has declared Him. Hebrews 1:3 says that Christ is the express image of God’s substance. Since man was created in the image of God and the image of God is Christ, man was created in the image of Christ. In Genesis 1:26 God said, “Let us make man in our image....” But verse 27 says, “God created man in His image.” Here “His image” means the image of Christ. So, man was made in the image of Christ.

One may consider, too, what Watchman Nee is quoted as saying:

There are three in the Godhead—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, yet only one has the image in the Godhead—the Son. When the Godhead was designing man’s creation, the Bible indicates that man would be made in “Our” image (since They are one, “Our

image” was mentioned); but when the Godhead was in the actual process of making man, the Bible says that man was made in “His” image. “His” denotes the Son. From this we ascertain that Adam was made in the image of the Lord Jesus. Adam did not precede the Lord Jesus; the Lord Jesus preceded him. When God created Adam, He created him in the image of the Lord Jesus. It is this reason that it says, “in His image” rather than “in Their image” (Nee, 1993).

Moreover, as the Local Church scholar E. Marks argues:

Genesis 1:26 reveals that the one God has a plural aspect. In Isaiah 6:8 God said, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” In this verse *I* is *us*, and *us* is *I*. These verses show us that God is not merely singular or mere plural. The God revealed in the Bible is “uni-plural” (Marks, 1996).

God created mankind with a purpose in mind, the Tree of Life the means to fulfill that purpose. In the Garden of Eden, God’s purpose for mankind could not be fulfilled so long as Adam and Eve were in His presence. The commandment to eat suggests that eating of the Tree of Life was essential to God’s plan (Gen. 2:9, 16; 3:22). The Tree of Life, according to Witness Lee, “signifies the Triune God embodied in Christ as life to man in the form of food” (Recovery Version, p. 13 n. 2). Importantly, when God breathed life into his nostrils, Adam did not come to life in the divine sense or take on the nature of God. In order from him to distinguish himself as God intended, it was necessary to partake of the fruit of the Tree of Life. Only by eating the fruit of the Tree of Life could mankind receive God and become his very essence. The divine presence, protection, and material joys the Garden of Eden offered mankind as a participant in the divine work did not provide the necessary sustenance mankind required to fulfill his mission without the Tree of Life and embodiment of God. As one Local Church encyclical points out, only by eating the fruit of this tree would mankind partake of God (Batten, 2006).

Related to this is the Local Church doctrine of mankind as a divine plurality or many

sons of God. Romans 8:29 is cited in support of this, which in the Recovery Version reads: “Because whom He foreknew, He also predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He should be the Firstborn among many brothers” (Recovery Version, p. 456). God desires many sons, all His sons the image and likeness of his firstborn son. Contrary to the orthodox Christian understanding, the Son is not the only Begotten of the Father but the Firstborn or elder brother. And so, the divine plan is for a community of Christ-like human beings. God is said to value mankind to such an extent that he becomes a human being in order to claim mankind as His own.

In sum, God has two ordained purposes: (i) the creation and collection of a community of persons in His image through which He can and will manifest Himself and (ii) to use them to conquer, that is, to “have dominion over” as it says in Genesis, but over His arch-enemy, Satan.

II. God’s Eternal Will

“God’s Will” in Local Church theology is understood as something of a mystery notwithstanding and awaits “a dispensation of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ” (See Recovery Version, p. 611, Eph. 1:9-10). Although everything in the universe is a manifestation of the divine plan, the so-called “mystery of God” has been just that, a mystery, from time immemorial (See Recovery Version, p. 477, Rom. 16:25). In the Recovery Version, the Epistle to the Colossians, the mystery of God is Christ, the center *of* all things and first *in* all things (Colo. 1:18; 2:2). Christ will also bring all things under His feet (Eph. 1:22). Related to this--the Christ as the first *of* and *in* everything—is the filling of mankind with the divine life as manifest in Christ.

In the Lord’s Recovery, this is referred to as God’s economy, or His universal administration and dispensation of Himself as the Triune God into His chosen, redeemed, and regenerated people, the corporate expression of the Body of Christ and essence of the New

Jerusalem. As Local Church scholar R. Kangas points out, God's economy is based, in part, on the translation of Ephesian 3:9 in the Recovery Version, "the economy of the mystery," which in the Authorized Version reads "fellowship of the mystery" (Recovery Version, p. 623). Here the Recovery Version looks to the original Greek to justify its translation, but in this case the Greek noun κοινωνία meaning "fellowship" from οικονομία or "economy" and from two Greek words, οίκος and νόμος, meaning "house" and "law" respectively. In Local Church theology, God's economy refers to a household and governmental arrangement wherein the wealth of His being is disseminated into His children, making them the House and Church of the living God (Kangas, 2007, Recovery Version, p. 708, 1 Tim. 3:15). The Greek noun οικονομία appears in Ephesians 1:10, but can be understood as "stewardship" and in reference to a "household arrangement." In the Recovery Version, and according to Witness Lee, God's economy is an administrative, domestic arrangement, and divine stewardship, the universe coming under a single dispensational administration. Indeed, both a literal and imaginative translation from the Greek of the New Testament is the source for much of this (Lee, 1985).

III. Satan's Destruction

Satan's plot to usurp power from mankind whom God had made, causing Adam and Eve to rebel is another part of God's economy. Tempting mankind to look to another source for meaning and divine fellowship, this infusion of sin brought death into the world. Because of the Fall, mankind became subject to vanity and corruption (Romans 8:20-21). Satan threatened to undermine God's economy and render the divine purpose for mankind null and void. Satan required the assistance of a degree of craftiness to induce man to forsake the divine economy.

Satan's plan revolved around the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This tree, like the other trees in the garden, was a source of food and delightful to the eyes (Genesis 3:6).

The knowledge of good and evil belonged to God (3:22). The knowledge of good and evil made one like God and, as such, the highest and noblest aspiration of mankind (vv. 5, 22; cf. 1:26; 1 John 3:2). Satan employed a divine idea to alienate mankind from God, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil becoming the embodiment of Satan and a source of death, the Tree of Life closed to mankind and, with it, the means to fulfill God's purpose. The main point of difference separating Satan and mankind was, and is, life.

Importantly, Local Church theology holds that Satan brought death into the world through Adam. Adam, tempted by Satan, ate the fruit. The support for this is 1 Corinthians 15:21, where it says: "For since by man came death." The culprit is Adam. Adam did not die physically, but spiritually at first—an important corollary to this. Mankind chose to do evil, but not because of sin. Instead, death is said to be the first cause of sin entering the world. Adam brought death and sin into the world—and in that order. However, death here refers to the death of the spirit rather than the body. Death and sin are Satan's coworkers. One who spreads death is Satan's coworker. Death is characteristic of Satan. In God's eyes nothing is worse than death and nothing is better than life. And because death monopolized mankind's inner being, the Tree of Life was closed or a life of spiritual death might never end (Gen. 3:22). This, too, was part of God's economy.

In Local Church theology, the Fall of Man was the handiwork of a deceiving serpent in the main (2 Cor. 11:3), the literal embodiment of Satan (Matt. 13:39; Rev. 12:9) and the great tempter (Matt. 4:3; 1 Thes. 3:5). In Genesis, Satan enters the Garden of Eden; in the Book of Revelation he will be cast out of the divine/human presence (Rev. 20:9). In the meantime, he does all he can to corrupt humanity and thus stop God from carrying out His eternal plan (Gen. 3:1 footnote). Importantly, all those who follow Satan are said to be the spawn of that old serpent (Rev. 12:9; 20:2), the form of sin and the flesh of mankind (Rom. 7:18). After the Fall, Adam and Eve and their posterity are serpents in the eyes of God (Gen. 3:15 footnote; Matt. 23:33). As Local Church scholar J. Campbell points out, when Adam ate the fruit of the Tree

of Knowledge of Good and Evil he became flesh, that is, infected by sin, and thus the progeny of Satan. Prior to this, Adam's body was a creation of God; after the Fall, Adam became a creation of Satan. However, this is not entirely negative since "fallen man" is simply flesh (Campbell, A & C, 4).

III. Bridging Genesis and Revelation: The Gospel of John in Local Church Theology

A wide gap separates Genesis and Revelation, the Gospel of John joining the two, beginning with "In the beginning." And yet, John has no end, reaching back to eternity and looking forward to an indefinite future (LSM John, message 1.) Life is also central to the Fourth Gospel, Jesus Christ both God and savior of mankind and propagating a gospel of life and life eternal. As Witness Lee explains in his commentary on John 1:4 in the Recovery Version:

Since v. 3 refers to the creation in Gen. 1, life here should refer to the life signified by the tree of life in Gen. 2. This is confirmed by the fact that in Rev. 22 John mentions the tree of life. Since life is in Him, He is life (11:25; 14:6), and He came that man might have life (10:10b). The introduction to this Gospel is composed of this entire chapter; it begins with life (v. 4) and ends with building (vv. 42, 51), that is, with the house of God. Hence, it is an introduction to life and building (Recovery Version, p. 261, Gospel of John, n. John 1:4).

Because of Satan's plot to destroy God's original plan to impart the divine life to the first man Adam, the Word became flesh (John 1:14). God takes human form and/or human nature to heal the sin that Adam brought into the world. This is the essence of the "Recovery," God becoming flesh (Rom. 8:3) but without sin. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). A sinful mankind, as we saw, cannot eat from the Tree of Life, but Jesus, the God-Man, can and will, imparting the divine life back into mankind. And so God becomes flesh outwardly without sinning inwardly (Heb. 4:15). John 3:14 is cited as proof:

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” And so, Jesus as the bronze serpent is a cursed creature on the outside only and without venom unlike Satan, the old serpent. Those bitten by the latter have only to look upon the former to be delivered from death and sin. What God lost in the first Adam will be recovered in the last Adam, Jesus, who is God incarnate. What the first Adam did not accomplish God’s will have it accomplished in the last Adam and the very essence of life (John 10:10)--bread (John 6:35) and water (John 4:10)—and the giver of life (John 5:21). Mankind is alive because of the Word made flesh or living Christ (John 14:19; cf. LSM, John 1).

In the Gospel of John, the coming of the Lord is the underlying theme of the first thirteen chapters. The Word becoming flesh entails the bringing of God into mankind and thus another manifestation of the divine essence in the world and recovery of the original plan for mankind. In the concluding eight chapters, death and resurrection are the focus. In the Lord’s Recovery, the Word made flesh returns God to mankind; and then the death and resurrection of Christ returns mankind to God (LSM, John 1, p 17-18). The principle of life is thus one of metamorphosis from death to life (LSM, p. 77ff; John 6). Nine examples of life being restored or recovered in all its forms underscore this.

The first example appears in chapter three and concerns moral recovery: Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, is instructed by Jesus: “Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). The kingdom of God is a divine realm that one enters and requisite upon a divine infusion of grace or divinity. Only a divine life can abide divine things, that is, regeneration (John 3:3 footnote).

The second is the encounter with a thirsty Samaritan woman who desires refreshment at a well in chapter four. Her physical thirst is satisfied but Jesus will encourage her to drink from the well of everlasting life: “Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him,” he explains, “shall by no means thirst forever; but the water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water gushing up into eternal life” (John 4:14). A third example appears in the

same four and concerns the needs of a dying man whom Jesus heals (John 4:50).

The fourth is in chapter five where recovery from physical infirmity is the promise. Here a sick man paralyzed for 38 years will be told by Jesus: “Rise, take up your mat and walk” (John 5:8).

In chapter six, hunger as another threat to life and recovery from the same is addressed and the miraculous feeding of the five thousand from only five loaves and two fishes is recounted. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus proclaims, “he who comes to me shall by no means hunger, and he who believes into me shall by no means ever thirst” (John 6:35).

In chapter seven, again the quenching of thirst is addressed. Another mass gathering, this one during the feast of Tabernacles, Jesus cries out: “If anyone thirst, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes into Me, as the Scripture said, out of his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water” (John, 7:37,38). Here, too, as in chapter two already discussed, it is a recovery from death unto life; and as we saw in Genesis, death is synonymous with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and life with the Tree of Life—life and death standing in opposition to one another (John, 7:38, footnote).

In chapter eight, bondage to and recovery from sexual sin is the focus. Jesus says to the woman caught in adultery after asking any without sin to stone her to death for her crimes: “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more” (John 8:11). In chapter nine, the needs of the blind, both physical and spiritual, is added to the list. After healing a man born blind, Jesus will use the occasion of yet another miracle to exclaim: “I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind” (John, 9:39). And then to Jews in particular: “I have come that they may have life and may have it abundantly” (John, 10:10). Here, the original Greek in verse 10 uses ζῶν meaning “life” but in the verse that follows and where “life” is also the subject, it is the Greek ψυχὴν from which the English “psyche” comes. However, as Witness Lee explains in his commentary to the Recovery Version,

as a man the Lord has the psuche life, the human life, and as God, He has the zoe life, the divine life. He laid down His soul, His psuche life, His human life, to accomplish redemption for His sheep . . . that they may share His zoe life . . . His divine life, the eternal life, by which they can be formed into one flock under Himself as the one Shepherd (Recovery Version, n. p. 294).

The ninth and final example of recovery is found in chapter eleven and concerns the threat of death and need of resurrection. Here Jesus raises Lazarus from the death, declaring with a loud voice: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes into Me, even if he should die, shall live” (John 11:25, 43).

V. The Consummation of God’s Intention: The Book of Revelation

In the Revelation chapter 22, verses 1 and 2 refer to a river of water of life, bright as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb in the middle of its street. And on this side and on that side of the river was the tree of life, producing twelve fruits, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. The river here is the same as that in Gen 2:10-14 according to Witness Lee, signifying the abundance of life in its flow. It is one river, flowing to the four corners of the holy city. In John 7:38, the same river becomes many and symbolic of the different aspects and riches associated with God’s Spirit of life (See Recovery Version, n. p. 967).

The water of life is a symbol of God in Christ as of the Spirit of Himself flowing into His redeemed people, giving them life and sustenance and alluding to the water that came out of the rock in Horeb that Moses strikes (Exodus 17:6; Num. 20:11) as well as the water that flowed out of the pierced side of the Lord Jesus (John 19:34). By the time of the Book of Revelation it has become a river with its many tributaries, its font the throne of God which saturates the delta of the New Jerusalem. The millennial city is thus filled to overflowing with the divine life as an expression of the God of life.

As mentioned earlier, a single tree/vine grows along the banks of this river, which Witness Lee contends is none other than the Tree of Life and there for God's people and their express needs, nine in total, closed to mankind because of the Fall (Gen. 3:22-24), but open to believers through the redemption of Christ (Heb. 10:19-20).

VI. Conclusion: Coherence and Recovery

As Witness Lee ably demonstrates, the whole of God's revelation in the Bible is not only coherent but full of life, literally and metaphorically. What appears and disappears at the beginning reappears at the end—knowledge and life, and then life and knowledge. These two exegetical lines will find their logical conclusion in the Book of Revelation where the New Jerusalem and Lake of Fire stand in opposition one to the other.

God's eternal purpose to express Himself in a corporate way finds its clearest expression according to the Witness Lee and the Local Church in Revelation chapter 21 where the New Jerusalem is a manifestation the glory of God (Rev. 21:10-11) and thus corporate expression of God, the Lamb the lamp and God as the divine light shining in and through Him (Rev. 21:23, Gk.). This same light is said to pierce the walls of the city, walls of jasper and crystalline expression of the divine image. God's creation, a corporate as well as civil entity, contain Him, are filled with Him, live by Him and in Him expressly. And so, the message of the Lord's Recovery, the Recovery Version, and the exegetical insights of both Witness Lee and his spiritual mentor Watchman Nee, can be reduced in one respect to the "corporate man" as the essence of the New Jerusalem and manifestation of God as center, essence, substance, content, and life that shines from within and through corporate mankind and how God's original intentions will finally be accomplished.

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