

A THEOLOGY OF SEEING, EXPERIENCING, AND VISION. AN EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

RYAN A. BRANDT *and* JOSHUA R. FARRIS*

Grand Canyon University | Houston Baptist University

ABSTRACT. What may seem astonishing is the near dismissal of the beatific vision doctrine in the last 50+ years of biblical and theological scholarship in contrast to the emphasis given to it throughout church history. The state of theological scholarship is changing. In what follows, we set forth a short survey of a theology of the beatific vision, while also introducing the rest of the volume on the beatific vision and *theosis*, of which we take to have an intimate and overlapping relationship. The editorial article has four parts: it begins by (1) introducing some of the relevant biblical material on the vision, proceeding to (2) develop a theological interpretation of those passages, and then (3) offer a short historical survey of the doctrine, focusing on the relevant medieval and Reformed developments. It finally (4) introduces the articles of the issue.

KEY WORDS: Beatific vision, *theosis*, deification, divinization, Reformed, biblical theology, evangelical

What may seem astonishing is the near dismissal of the beatific vision doctrine in the last 50+ years of biblical and theological scholarship in contrast to the emphasis given to it throughout church history. The state of theological scholarship is changing. In recent years, there is a growing, and we think healthy, reflection on the beatific vision as a significant aspect of human eschatology. Couple that with another underappreciated doctrine in the relatively recent theological scholarship: *theosis* (i.e., becoming gods) or, as it is called in the West, deification. In what follows, we set forth a short survey of a theology of the beatific vision, while also introducing the two special issue volumes on the beatific vision and *theosis*, of which we take to have an intimate and overlapping relationship. It is true that we have schol-

* RYAN A. BRANDT (PhD 2015, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is Assistant Professor of Christian History and Theology at Grand Canyon University and Grand Canyon Theological Seminary and Managing Editor of the *Journal of Biblical and Theological Studies*, United States of America. Email: ryan.brandt@gu.edu. JOSHUA R. FARRIS (PhD 2015, University of Bristol) is Assistant Professor of Theology at Houston Baptist University, United States of America. Email: jfarris@hbu.edu.

ars across the spectrum, however, the issues are primarily aimed at Reformed, baptistic, and evangelical Christians. The editorial article has four parts: it begins by (1) introducing some of the relevant biblical material on the vision, proceeding to (2) develop a theological interpretation of those passages, and then (3) offer a short historical survey of the doctrine, focusing on the relevant medieval and Reformed developments. It finally (4) introduces the articles of the two special issues.

In order to orient the readers towards the beatific vision, the Catholic Encyclopedia gives us a helpful starting description of it: the vision is ...

The immediate knowledge of God which the angelic spirits and the souls of the just enjoy in Heaven. It is called 'vision' to distinguish it from the mediate knowledge of God which the human mind may attain in the present life. And since in beholding God face to face the created intelligence finds perfect happiness, the vision is termed 'beatific' (Pace 2016).

Richard Bauckham unpacks a bit more detail in the following as a summation of the beatific experience:

The vision of God... offers a symbol of human destiny that highlights its theocentricity. It combines a sense of being in the immediate presence of God with the idea of knowing God in his true identity, as it were 'face to face'. It has sometimes been understood in a rather intellectualized and individualized way, but need not be. It is the whole person that is engaged in immediate relationship with God (Bauckham 2007: 320).

Surely, more can be stated about the vision. The remaining article will survey various biblical and historical aspects of the vision and afterwards introduces the reader to the special issue articles.

A Biblical-Theology of Vision

To get us started, any theology of vision should begin with Scripture at least as it has been appropriated by the wider Christian tradition. While not clearly offering a theology of vision, the letters of Paul provide the theologian with the clearest prompts for our reflection. Read in the context of Paul's eschatology, the vision serves as the final outcome for the believing saints. Guided by the tradition, we will suggest below that Paul's thinking on the vision, at least minimally, is the seeing and gazing of God through the face of Christ. How it is that the vision is intellectual and/or ocular (physical and/or non-physical), and how these work together are open questions. Paul writes, 'For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I only know in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12, NRSV). In what follows, our reading of

Paul in 1 Corinthians is Thomist-inspired, which is common to the Reformed tradition.

Throughout 1 Corinthians 13, Paul spends time highlighting ‘the eschatological permanence of love alone’ (Thiselton 2000: 1071). Read in light of the wider redemptive context Paul’s understanding of the vision should be seen as one’s growing in the capacity to know, experience, and appreciate God revealed in Christ. As such, image bearers (i.e., humans) are in the process of sanctification (i.e., growth in holiness as God intends for agents) whereby God is growing them in virtue, otherwise called the fruit of the Spirit. It is here that love plays a central role in the process of becoming agents who have a vision of God. Unlike the spiritual gifts, love never ends as it characterizes both the present and future ages. He thus contrasts the permanence of love with the temporal nature of other spiritual gifts, such as prophecy, tongues, and knowledge (v. 8). Importantly, Paul also highlights that the final experience of vision will be characterized by love. His infamous definition of love (vv. 4-7) seems to include what ‘never ends’ (v. 8). Paul thus anthropocentrically describes our experience of the Trinitarian love, a love that surely will characterize our final vision: ‘It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things’ (v. 7). One might summarize Paul here to say that the vision is the final step of experiences of being united to Christ so that we receive and partake of some of the qualities of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), including most concretely in this context, love. Naturally, then, (or supernaturally) the final state of redemption is not a mere intellectual achievement or an achievement of the will, as one might find in Platonism, but it is borne in faith and hope, yet ultimately characterized by love for the God revealed in Christ.

Paul also highlights the nature of knowledge in the final vision. It is striking that his discussion focuses on the vision in terms of intellectual ends, or so the Reformed tradition (hereafter, tradition for short) suggests. He contrasts the present way of knowing with the future (eschatological) way of knowing: ‘Love never ends... as for knowledge, it will come to an end’ (v. 8). Paul then continues to highlight a future way of knowing through a present/future contrast. In the present state, we know ‘in part’, ‘reason like a child’, and ‘see in a mirror dimly’. In the future state, we ‘gave up childish ways’, see ‘face to face’, and ‘shall know fully, even as I have been fully known’ (1 Corinthians 13:8-12). Paul avers that while our present knowledge (propositional and acquaintance) is true, and in some sense it is partial nonetheless until we undergo a different mode of existence in our glorified bodily state: our ‘full’ and direct (‘face to face’) knowledge—‘even as I have been fully known’. The vision, then, prioritizes the experience of love wherein the believing saints are united to God but also consists of a perfected way of knowing. (The nature of this partial/complete knowledge,

while ambiguous in Paul, will be unpacked throughout this introductory article as well as other articles in this special issue.)

While Gordon Fee has rightly noted that the ‘exact nuance’ of ‘the nature of that final knowing’ (‘even as I am fully known’) is not quite clear (Fee 1987: 648-49), surely some points can be extrapolated from Paul’s provision of several key binary analogies that will help clarify the nature of the beatific vision of which the tradition has received and developed in more detail. It is here that the present issue will help the reader unpack the finer aspects of this doctrine.

First, Paul contrasts a child and adult to suggest that our present knowledge is an inferior type of knowledge to the final vision. Paul characterizes being ‘like a child’ (v. 11) in terms of speaking, thinking, and reasoning. No doubt common to the tradition’s appropriation and development of Irenaeus, the believing saints are described throughout the redemptive process as children that need to grow up. A child often knows something without a concept of that thing in mind. It is in this way that we believe the tradition has taken allowances in their understanding of knowledge such that it is not limited solely to propositional knowledge, but it is expanded to include something contemporary philosophers have called knowledge by acquaintance—and by extension practical knowledge that becomes useful in everyday life. Once again, then, the kind of knowledge the believing saints are growing in seems to us to be borne in an acquaintance with God in Christ. Going back to this distinction between propositional knowledge and knowledge more broadly construed, children might be personally acquainted with, say, a zebra without having the concept of zebra in their mind. They might consider the zebra a dog or horse. While adults would recognize the child’s knowledge by acquaintance, they would perceive their lack of propositional knowledge to explain their acquaintance.

Paul seems to be saying that our speaking, thinking, and reasoning will be qualitatively different in the vision. This entails at least the following. First, we will recognize concepts then that we cannot now know; by extension, we will be able to think and reason then in a way that surpasses now. While we are presently acquainted with God, in other words, in the future we will have the conceptual lingo to make sense of it in a deeper manner, assuming there is language that adequately describes such realities. Second, our manner of knowing now will be put to an end in the vision. An adult no longer thinks like a child: ‘when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways’ (v. 11). The present way of knowing is inferior in two ways. First, it is arguably inferior in its present created state. Our capacities for seeing and knowing God are limited, but will one day move beyond creational capacities (i.e., faculties) or the extent to which those capacities are used in this life, that is, partaking in qualities only existent in the glorified state of the

new heavens and new earth. Second, our capacities are diminished in virtue of the noetic effects of sin and thus will be given up in the end. It is in this process of redemption that the saints are growing to understand, or better perceive, the ways of God.

Second, Paul contrasts seeing through a mirror and ‘face to face’ to highlight the increased directedness of our future knowledge. When a person gazes an object through a mirror, they inevitably see an image of the object. This is only exacerbated by a poor quality mirror. Using this analogy, Paul suggests that in our present states we know God only through the mirror of his works—whether Scripture or creation. In our final states, however, we shall know God ‘face to face’ (v. 12). ‘Face to face’ in this context must be understood analogically. As we understand it, Paul refers to this vision in the context of the disembodied state. While humans—in the disembodied state—and God do not possess physical faces, Paul uses analogical language to make clear that the final vision will be characterized by a direct gazing of God’s essence. Of what this consists seems impossible to say, but we can gain glimpses into this mystery as we become more like God. Hence the traditional dual emphasis upon seeing and purity together (cf. Gregory of Nyssa 2012: 4.106-6.180), ‘since it is through growth in purity that we come to participate in the purity of God himself’ (Boersma 2015: 150). It is only through purity that we can participate and thus see the beauty of God in Christ. Just as we are in the process of sanctification through prayer and other spiritual disciplines, at times we gain insight into God’s ways and his plans for our life. Moreover, it should be recognized that Paul uses seeing as an analogy for knowing. Because God is spirit, containing no matter in which to gaze him, we ‘see’ him in the sense that we know him. The vision, at least in the intermediate state, is not ocular but intellectual.

The preceding raises the interesting question about what is the object of vision. Boersma, commenting on Gregory of Nyssa, explains the ‘obvious paradox’ between the biblical notion that God can be seen (e.g., Matthew 5:8) and God cannot be seen (e.g., 1 Timothy 6:16). Gregory’s resolution notes that we ‘observe only his operations—not his nature—in creation (with the physical eyes), and we see merely a reflection of God’s nature in the mirror of our lives (with the ‘eye of the soul’)’ (Boersma 2015: 137; cf. Gregory of Nyssa 2000: 70). In this sense, the vision is an occurrence that happens even now, though in uncompleted and indirect form, reminding the reader once again of Paul’s metaphor—‘face to face’.

In other words, this metaphor—‘face to face’—signals the knowledge of God ‘as he is’: namely, ‘when [God] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is’ (1 John 3:2). According to John Calvin, here ‘he intimates a new and an ineffable manner of seeing him, which we enjoy not now’; namely, ‘when the veil of this mortal and corruptible nature’ is re-

moved, 'the majesty of God... will then only be in itself seen' (Calvin 2009: 206). In some mysterious or ineffable way, instead of knowing God through his works, we will know God in his essence. Thus, Paul explains that, in the end, 'I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12). The final knowledge is likened to God's knowledge of us; that is, we will know in a similar (but not equal) way that God knows us. Thomas Aquinas comments, 'Just as God knows my essence, so I shall know God through his essence, so that the 'as' does not imply equality of knowledge but only similarity' (Aquinas 2012: First Letter, c. 13, l. 4, 804). This is 'face to face' knowledge, suggests our knowledge will be unmediated knowledge of God.

Paul's point here is further confirmed by his contrast between partial knowledge in the present and complete knowledge in the future: 'Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (v. 12). Paul's point here seems to be that the present and future knowledge is distinguished in terms of the manner of knowing. In the future state, we shall know God 'even as I have been fully known', that is, in a manner similar to God's knowledge of us. The soul shall know God more clearly.

Paul's final summary explicating the permanence of love is telling of a couple additional characteristics of the final vision: 'And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love' (v. 13). On the one hand, as mentioned previously, the final vision is characterized as perfect love. This love refers to the gracious bond of the Triune God and our participation in it through Christ. The final vision is therefore partaking in perfect communion; it is an ecstasy of experience wherein we are brought into God's fellowship. It involves living fully human as we were meant to be within the plan of God. The vision experiences God fully and perfectly, allowing us to 'taste and see that the Lord is good' (Ps 34:8).

On the other, Paul's point by extension seems to indicate that the vision is not characterized by hope and faith. Both of the latter have found their completions in the vision. Hope involves expectations about the future; faith is a confidence in someone or something. The vision of course brings about a propositional and acquaintance knowledge that fulfils these two virtues. Faith becomes sight; hope becomes reality. In this sense, the vision can be characterized as a completion of the not-yet.

In summary, the beatific vision can be characterized by perfection, construed as a completion of human nature or creational capacity, as human beings participate in God. Love is perfected as it is experienced in God, and knowledge is perfected as it is strengthened and made direct or unmediated.

A Theological Interpretation of the Scripture's Seeing and Experiencing

In order to describe more plainly some of the contours of the beatific vision, we now turn to some of Scripture's rather thick descriptions of the beatific vision via several paradigmatic passages: Exodus 33:18-23; 2 Corinthians 5:6b, 7; and 2 Peter 1:4. These passages will be explored in order for the sake of explicating the vision. While there are several other passages we could use (e.g., Daniel; Matt 7:1-13; Ezekiel 1; Revelation 4-5), this article does not intend to be comprehensive.

Moses's Vision—Exodus 33:18

In discussions concerning the vision, Moses's request for a vision of the divine glory is often used as an entryway. The passage underscores the direct and, we suggest, holistic nature of the vision. It is direct because she sees God without mediation; it is holistic because it involves all of his humanity as a gazer of God—and not simply his soulish or bodily capacities. Moses begins by asking, 'Show me your glory, I pray' (Exodus 33:18). God responds by claiming that 'no one shall see me and live' (v. 20). Then, after the glory of the Lord passed by while Moses was in the cleft of a rock (v. 22), the Lord allowed him to gaze his back, though his face went unseen (v. 23). The passage highlights the present inability to gaze upon God directly and, correspondingly, the possibility of a more direct gaze later.

In some sense, Moses did see the face of God, though the mode of revelation was inferior. For even Jacob previously had claimed that he had 'seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved' (Gen 32:30); moreover, it was claimed that the 'Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend' (Exodus 33:11). Therefore, when Moses asks to see God's face here, he must be asking for something more, something greater; he is asking for the best possible vision available given the constraints of his (fallen) bodily intellect and the finitude of his gazing eyes. While it is clear that 'we will see him as he [God] is' in the end (1 John 3:2), in the present dispensation he only reveals to us as we can handle with our present capacities. This implies that the beatific vision is a vision that is superior to that vision of God we receive in the present. Presently, our knowledge is affected by our creaturely status and the noetic effects of the fall, but in the end our knowledge will be unaffected by the fall and perfected in glory.

God thus reveals a vision to Moses of his back. This is a partial revelation, akin to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13 of knowing in part. The analogy used here is of a person who, while turned away, can only be glimpsed partially and incompletely. A full recognition and appreciation of the essential features is veiled. Initially, the cleft in the rock and God's covering hand are introduced to highlight the dim nature of the appearance. Even after God removes his hand, however, Moses can only glimpse God's back, while

his face remains unseen. This important text sets the stage for the progression of revelation and the powerful witness that believers will one day see God ‘face to face’ (1 Corinthians 13:12). The text here highlights the partial and fragmentary nature of our present experience, while alluding proleptically to the future holistic and complete vision in the final revealing.

Bodily Death (or Body/Soul Separation)—2 Corinthians 5:6-7

Paul further highlights two more aspects of the vision in the second book to the Corinthians: it is complete and direct. Taking prompts from what is traditionally a Thomist-inspired reading of the passage, the present passage suggests that we will experience the vision during the intermediate state between bodily death and bodily resurrection. Without excluding the continuation of the vision in our glorified and resurrected states in some unique way, this means that the vision is somehow primarily intellectual and immaterial, as is common to the broader catholic tradition.

A little bit of context is in order. As with the 1 Corinthians 13 passage, the present passage ought to be read in light of its wider canonical context, which emphasizes God’s redemptive plan for the church. In 2 Corinthians, Paul is offering a defense of his ministry in the immediate context of discussing God’s redemptive hand in his own sanctification. Herein, we find that Paul is becoming more like Christ, but he is also gaining a clearer glimpse of Christ (see 2 Corinthians 4:4). In the context of 2 Corinthians 5, we find the object of hopeful expectation as the result of this sanctifying process. The immediate surrounding context suggests that Paul is looking at death with clear eyes. Where, in chapter 4, Paul highlights the reality that the external part, presumably the body, of himself will be siphoned off during somatic death, but the internal part, presumably the soul, will inherit the climax of God’s redemptive gift to his children—namely, a vision of himself.

Paul describes this vision as direct. He writes, ‘even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight’ (2 Corinthians 5:6b, 7). In the first clause Paul establishes the nature of our present states in relation to our future states. In our present states, we are joined with our fallen bodies and thus outside our native land, which is God’ (Aquinas 2012: Second Letter, c. 5, l. 2, 163). Our present states are thus incomplete and, in virtue of their fallen, Adamic state, even unnatural. There is something about our future state—presence with the Lord—that is more complete and holistic. We are already present with God in the sense that ‘in him we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28); but we are not yet present with him in the sense that we have not attained the vision, still exiled here on this side of heaven. This means

that we presently live incompletely and imperfectly, which Paul explains in the next clause.

Paul then grounds the first clause with the second: ‘for we walk by faith, not by sight’ (2 Corinthians 5:7). Here he answers the reason why we are absent from the Lord in present existence; namely, we are absent from the Lord in the sense that we walk by faith. We live by faith, an inferior and indirect knowledge; we do not live by sight—that perfected knowledge in glory. In the words of Calvin, faith ‘reaches forth to future things, which do not as yet appear’ (Calvin 2009: 221). We cannot gaze the ‘face’ of God and live (Exod 33:20); we ‘see in a mirror, dimly’ and not yet ‘face to face’ (1 Corinthians 13:12). In other words, we do not yet know God directly and immediately. Faith concerns things not seen but hoped (cf. Hebrews 11:1). In our future state, through the overturning of the noetic effects of the fall, we are able to gaze upon God directly. As suggested heretofore, gaze in this context ought to be understood analogically, for Paul is referring primarily to a redeemed understanding in his contrast between faith and sight. Paul thus highlights that the future vision is more direct and complete than our former faith.

Beatific Vision—2 Peter 1:4

Peter’s statement in 2 Peter 1:4 is classically a passage in support of the doctrine of deification (otherwise known as *theosis*). Deification, crudely stated, is the process of becoming gods; more precisely in a Christian context, it is the process of being united to the Trinitarian God through Christ by the power of the Spirit and thus morally perfected. In the words of Carl Mosser, deification is ‘for believers to become by grace what the Son of God is by nature and to receive the blessings that are his by right as undeserved gifts’, including ‘adoption to divine sonship, participation in God, sharing of divine life, impartation of immortality, restoration of the *imago dei*, glorification, and consummation of the marriage between Christ and the Church’ (Mosser 2003: 36). While deification is not directly our concern here, it is a topic of relevance throughout this volume. And, in fact, there is some justification for this given the intimate relationship between deification and beatific vision. On our view, deification is the consequent of the beatific vision, that is, it is the result of seeing God, which is the object or purpose of humans.

Peter highlights at least one further aspect of the beatific vision, namely, the reality that the vision ends in our perfection, or, if you like, our deification or *theosis*. In other words, the vision is a final appearing of God that leads to a renewal of the moral nature of the person. As Peter reflects, you ‘may become participants of the divine nature’ so that ‘you may escape from the corruption that is in the world’ (2 Peter 1:4). Through communion with

Christ, believers will be ‘given’ everything needed for ‘life and godliness’ (v. 3). Peter is thus suggesting that Christians partake in the divine nature (not *ousia*) as they are granted divine characteristics or qualities such as immortality, holiness, and love. In other words, participating in the ‘divine nature’ refers not to participating in God’s essence but rather to his qualities or virtues (Green 2008: 186-87). These qualities are strictly speaking God’s. They are owned by God and, in some sense, these qualities are not owned by us. Nonetheless, we are participants in these qualities that do not find their natural home in our created natures. Rather, they are given to us as a gift (see v. 3) through Christ, and are only ours accidentally, secondarily, via our union with Christ by the Spirit.

Peter here speaks of the vision as the final experience of moral transformation unto God. Unlike previous passages, which focus on the change in cognitive capacities, Peter thus explains that moral transformation is an important aspect of the final vision. As Calvin infamously states, the beatific vision is even ‘the end of the gospel’ as it renders ‘us eventually conformable to God, and, if we may so speak, to deify us (Calvin 2009: 371). The Spirit bonds, transforms, and beautifies us in Christ, giving us God’s communicable virtues.

Historical Survey

Using the resources from Scripture, Christian philosophers and theologians have summarized the data of the beatific vision in various ways. In general, these theologians tend to locate the vision in the intermediate state—after bodily death and before the glorified bodily resurrection (see Farris and Brandt 2017).

Medieval Tradition

Because the Reformers were working within the context of the medieval construction, it is helpful to draw attention to some of the main features found in the medieval tradition. Note that there is a propensity towards the immaterial and intellectual elements in both Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas. It is arguable that these features touch at the heart of what it means to be human. It is also debatable that Lombard and Aquinas had in mind a holistic view of the beatific vision as encompassing the whole being of the human, including both body and soul. However, their emphasis on the intellectual and immaterial aspects of the vision prompt some important reflection on how to understand the relation of bodily factors in the vision. Our goal here is not to solve all these problems because authors in the present issue will address these and other facets of the doctrine.

It is important to note, however, and clearly establish some of the main contours of the doctrine, as primarily or centrally an intellectual event.

First, while Peter places his discussion of the beatific vision after his discussion of the resurrection and judgment, it is not entirely clear what state he imagines the vision taking place because he offers no rationale for thinking that the logical ordering dictates that beatific vision comes after the intermediate state. As he examines the distinctions, however, it is clear that he conceives of the vision primarily in immaterial terms, especially through the assumption that the vision is chiefly intellectual (see Rosemann 2004). He concludes, ‘to have life is to see life, that is, to know God face to face’ (Lombard 2010: 266). Indeed, to ‘have life is to know you [God]’ (Lombard 2010: 266). Peter prioritizes the immaterial and intellectual in the beatific vision. Engaging with Lombard makes clear that some discussion on the body’s place in the vision is needed.

Like his predecessor, Thomas Aquinas also prioritizes the immaterial and intellectual as he focuses on the vision in terms of the intellect (Aquinas 2012: Suppl. IIIae. 93, a. 1-3). While he discusses the glorified body’s role in the vision (Aquinas 2012: Suppl. IIIae. 93, a. 2), he does not grant the body particular weight in the discussion: ‘The intellect can perceive spiritual things, whereas the eyes of the body cannot: wherefore the intellect will be able to know the Divine essence united to it, but the eyes of the body will not’ (Aquinas 2012: Suppl. IIIae. 93, a. 2, ad. 7). The bodily senses are thus limited in capacity compared to the immaterial intellect in the vision. Thomas also suggests that we actually gaze God in his essence: ‘God will be seen in His essence by the saints in heaven’ (Aquinas 2012: Suppl. IIIae. 93, a. 1, s. c., see also Smith 2003: 34, 50-52). Thomas prioritizes the immaterial in the beatific vision.

It is clear that Thomas understands the vision as primarily intellectual and immaterial in that he affirms the state of beatific vision occurring during the disembodied interim state of human existence. In this way, Thomas does raise distinct questions that deserve the attention of constructive theologians. Why is it the case that he gives no weight to the body in his discussion of the beatific vision? Are there good philosophical and theological reasons for doing so? Another set of important questions upon retrieving Thomas in our contemporary times: How does the Trinity fit into the vision? How does the bodily resurrection factor into what appears to be the final conclusion of the redemptive story in the Bible? Where is Christ in Thomas’s account of the vision? We suggest that some of these questions begin to be answered in Reformation theology.

Reformation Teaching on Beatific Vision

Given that the present set of issues is focused primarily on the Reformation and Baptist understandings of the beatific vision and deification, it is important that we offer a brief survey of the Reformation teaching on these

topics and some of its highlights. Elsewhere we have demonstrated that the Reformed tradition, following Peter and Thomas, has prioritized the immaterial and intellectual aspects of the beatific vision (Farris and Brandt 2017). Because we take this Reformation emphasis as sufficiently clear and straightforward, our discussion will be succinct on this point. It is important to note that there are important influences shaping the particulars of the Reformation views on the beatific vision. In some cases, some of the Reformation theologians reflect Thomas Aquinas almost verbatim (e.g., Turretin), but in others there is an emphasis on the external, covenantal, elective role of God bring about the vision in his covenantal representative—Christ. There is also a development within Reformation theology that suggests that the beatific vision is a vision of Christ, the Son of God, in our glorified states; moreover, the physical humanity of Christ is the instrumental means by which believers may see, not only the humanity of Christ, but the essence of God himself (Allen 2015: 260-66). In this way, we believe that there are some significant developments in the Reformation to articulate and construct the doctrine of beatific vision in a Christological direction. John Calvin is an appropriate place to start as he sets the agenda for many of the Reformation theologians to follow.

First, while John Calvin does not address the beatific vision systematically, the idea appears occasionally throughout his *Institutes* (Calvin 1960: 1.484-86 and 1.569-71) and commentaries (e.g., 1 John 3:2; 2 Peter 1:4). We have argued elsewhere that the immaterial emphasis is perhaps most clearly seen in his Platonic supposition that the soul or the mind is more fundamental than the body: ‘Now I understand by the term ‘soul’ an immortal yet created essence, which is his nobler part’ (Calvin 1960: 1.184; cf. Farris and Brandt 2017). For Calvin, it is the soul or the mind (henceforth ‘soul’) and its powers that provides the appropriate connectedness to God in Christ, for the soul has primacy with respect to the *image* (see Helm 2004: 218-19 and Helm 2010: 218-19). His discussion of the vision itself is even more telling. Commenting on 2 Peter 1:4, he mentions that the final vision is ‘the end of the gospel’ as it renders ‘us eventually conformable to God, and, if we may so speak, to deify us’ (Calvin 2009: 371). Here and elsewhere he speaks of the vision in terms of a Christocentric emphasis: namely, that we experience the vision as we are united to Christ and thus partakers or inheritors of who he is through the bonding work of the Spirit. His comments on 1 John 3:2 are particularly apt. Calvin notes that at the vision, the fact that we shall be like him does not mean that ‘we shall be equal to him’, but rather that ‘the final end of our adoption’ will be ‘completed in us’ (Calvin 2009: 205). Through this gaze, Calvin continues, ‘God begins to renew in us his own image’ so that we will one day ‘be able to behold God face to face’ (Calvin 2009: 206). Calvin’s comments here thus help to connect the

vision and *theosis*, that is, the effect of the vision in the renewal of our natures and the perfect of what it means to be human in Christ. Calvin, at least arguably, thus applies the vision in a more explicitly Christological direction than either Thomas or Peter beforehand. He also (at least implicitly) suggests a way forward to conceiving of *theosis* as the proper result of the vision.

It is important to point out the covenantal framework from which the Reformed theological tradition develops a conception of beatific vision, and, by logical extension, *theosis*. One of the central defining features of Reformation theology is the covenantal framework in which God is the primary agent acting of bringing about life and blessing to his creation, which is most acutely expressed in the new covenant of redeemed saints. Grounded in the creational covenant first found in Genesis 1 and 2, the doctrine of *theosis* is founded on the fact that God creates humankind in his image and likeness and progressively reveals his nature so that humans can see and experience him. The latter notion is commonly understood to be the doctrine of beatific vision, but this vision occurs progressively in the covenant community for which God is revealing himself. The nature of *theosis* begins occurring definitively when humans enter into union with Christ, but the quality of that experience is degreed.

Several questions emerge when exploring the Reformed theological tradition on beatific vision and *theosis*. For example, is the vision (and *theosis*) a one-time occurrence, or is it an ever progressive and growing reality (see Boersma 2015)? How do the body and the soul relate together in the vision and *theosis*? If the soul is the primary actor in this, how is the body beatified? How is our sanctification or spiritual formation now in Christ related to the final act of vision and *theosis* or glorification?

A final particular question that presents itself, and has often been perceived as excluding any doctrine of *theosis*, is the doctrine of justification and its relationship to *theosis*. How it is that the doctrine of justification relates to both beatific vision and *theosis* deserves additional development, and the articles that follow are good places to begin this reflection.

Survey of Articles

The final task of this editorial introduction is briefly to introduce the reader to the articles contained in this issue. We have arranged the articles according to historical time period.

After this editorial introduction, the second article, by Robert Llizo, starts the conversation off with an important figure in the history of Christian Thought more generally. While this figure is not representing Reformed or Baptist treatments of beatific vision or deification, he is a figure from many Reformed theologians begin their reflections. That figure is

Thomas Aquinas. Beloved in the Roman Catholic tradition, but, also, important to the Reformed theological tradition of reflection. In this article, Llizo explores Thomas's doctrine of beatific vision particularly in relation to the body, an important contemporary topic.

The third article, by Brian Arnold, aims to provide a high-level overview of Irenaeus's conception of the beatific vision. In so doing Arnold provides an important contribution in at least two respects: as a fine summary of Irenaeus's understanding of the vision as well as a suggestive interpretation of the vision for Christians today, one that prioritizes both the trinitarian framework of the vision and the bodily or physical aspects of the final vision, one that gazes upon God 'face to face'. Arnold argues that, for Irenaeus, the beatific vision has a temporal dimension (now and future) and a dimension of degree (lesser now, greater in the future). He begins by discussing the beatific vision in the present. This vision is trinitarian in its working, and it is made visible in the Son; indeed, the Son makes God visible to humans and humans to God. Because humans are finite and immature, God slowly but gradually prepares individuals to experience the vision through his Spirit, who vivifies and completes human nature from within. Thus, there is a difference of degree (but not nature) between the present and future experience of the vision: the present one is a spiritual experience of seeing God in Christ by the Spirit, but the future and final one, the vision after the millennial reign itself, is a greater, physical experience of gazing God directly.

The next article, by E. D. Burns and Michael A. G. Haykin, is about the theological side of the beatific vision according to Andrew Fuller, who is regarded as one of the foremost Baptist theologians in history. The authors use a particular funeral sermon for his friend and deacon, Beeby Wallis, in order to understand Fuller's views on heaven and the vision. They argue that the vision, according to Fuller, consists of a liberation from striving from sin and the curse (which Fuller calls labour) and reward for grace-empowered work. They also suggested that Fuller did not regard this rest as only a futuristic event but also possible in the here and now in light of Christ's atoning work. They continue to discuss the importance of good works now as a reflection of heaven, and concluded that, for Andrew Fuller, the reward of the vision of heaven is God himself.

Dongsun Cho surveys baptistic literature on deification and suggests that Baptists already had understandings of deification before the twentieth century, which he suggests can better be termed 'Christification'. He defined Christification as the union of a believer's humanity with the glorified humanity of Christ through adopted and participatory sonship by grace. Cho gives the examples of Benjamin Keach, John Gill, Charles Spurgeon, and Alexander Maclaren to show that Baptists have traditionally thought in

terms of deification, though the language generally remains implicit. Using these theologians, he suggests that the means by which deification takes place is through the hypostatic union of humanity and deity in Christ. Therefore, while these Baptists deny the ontological equality between Christ and Christians (which they equate with the incommunicable and inaccessible essence or nature of God), they affirm that Christians participate in the real and communicable divine graces of God. In this sense, Cho argues that these baptists affirm the basic structure of the Eastern Orthodox ‘Palamite distinction’ (i.e., essences vs. energies). Cho finally concludes with four suggestions for future discussions of deification among Baptists. Cho’s article provides an interesting pathway into baptistic theology as well as a theology of the beatific vision itself.

The final article of the first issue, by Jonathan Arnold, looks at three seventeenth-century England Baptist divines—Vavasor Powell, Hanserd Knollys, and Benjamin Keach—and compares their understandings of the eschatological future and analyzes the charges of radicalism placed against them by their contemporaries. The article contributes an excellent analysis of early Baptist eschatological thought. His article begins with an insightful and detailed analysis of the eschatological context in which the three men lived. The article then describes the views of Keach, Knollys, and Powell, which Arnold suggests each have their own distinctive tendencies though they were similar enough to help shape the collective vision of their group of Baptists. Arnold then analyzes their biblical interpretation around the themes of eschatology, namely, in terms of their understanding of the eschatological nature of the entire canon, their related anti-Roman Catholic inclinations throughout, their chronology for their vision of the future chronological dates, and their eschatological hope in terms of the visible earthly reign of Christ and the eternal kingdom which would have no end. Arnold’s article ends with an analysis of the charges of radicalism placed against them by their contemporaries.

With a renewed interest in *theosis*, Reformation and evangelical theologians are taking up the task of thinking carefully about the doctrine and how it situates in the broader Reformation and evangelical traditions. The present issue offers the reader a set of historical readings that are relevant to Baptist, Reformed, and evangelical audiences. These articles serve as a basis for additional reflection and retrieval for future work in systematic and constructive theology.

Bibliography

Allen M (2015) The Visibility of the Invisible God. *Journal of Reformed Theology* 9(*): 249–269.

- Aquinas T (2012) *Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul to the Corinthians*. Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine.
- Bauckham R (2007) Eschatology. In Webster J, Tanner K, and Torrance I (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 320.
- Bavinck H (2006) *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 volumes. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Calvin J (2009) *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.
- Calvin J (2009) *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.
- Edward P (2016/1907) Beatific Vision. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, volume 2. New York, NY: Robert Appleton Company. Read online <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02364a.htm> [accessed on June 15, 2016].
- Farris J, Brandt R (2017) Ensouling the Beatific Vision: Motivating the Reformed Impulse. *Perichoresis* 15(1): 67-84.
- Fee GD (1987) *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT]. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Green GL (2008) *Jude and 2 Peter* [BECNT]. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Mosser C (2002) The Greatest Possible Blessing: Calvin and Deification. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55(*): n.p.
- Nyssa G (2000) On the Beatitudes. In Stuart George Hall (trans, ed) *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*. Leiden: Brill.
- Nyssa G (2012) *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Norris RA (ed and trans). Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Thiselton AC (2000) *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NIGTC]. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.