5-20-2022

Straining Forward to What Lies Ahead: Models of Patristic Contemplation

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STRAINING FORWARD TO WHAT LIES AHEAD: MODELS OF PATRISTIC CONTEMPLATION

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Historical Theology
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Sacred Theology

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May 2022

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For Virginia and our children

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was supervised by Joel Elowsky, to whom I am grateful for introducing me to the writings of the Church Fathers and mentoring me throughout my studies. He encouraged me to pursue my interest in patristic contemplation and patiently supported me along the way. I would like to thank my readers Paul Robinson and David Maxwell for their time and expertise. Concordia Seminary's graduate school deserves mention, especially Beth Hoeltke for her guidance through the program and the entire faculty for its kindness and acumen. We fondly remember our time there.

I would also like to thank the people of Faith Lutheran Church in Carbondale, Colorado, from whom I have learned so much. My brothers Daniel and Benjamin have provided special support throughout this process with genuine interest and frequent conversations. My parents deserve continual thanks for raising me in the faith. Finally, I am grateful to my wife Virginia for her generous self-sacrifice which afforded the time to complete this project and for her friendship and faith in Christ which continue to delight and encourage me.

ABBREVIATIONS

An. et res.	Gregory of Nyssa, *De anima et resurrection*
Beat.	Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus*
BDAG	Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
Cant.	Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum*
C. Gent.	Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*
Civ.	Augustine, *De civitate Dei*
Conf.	Augustine, *Confessiones*
Doctr. chr.	Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*
Ep. fest.	Athanasius, *Epistulae festales*
Ep. Marcell.	Athanasius, *Epistula ad Marcellinum de interpretatione Psalmorum*
Inc.	Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*
LC	Large Catechism
LW	Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*, American Edition. Vols. 1–30, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76. Vols. 31–55. Edited by Helmut Lehmann. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957–86.
NPNF^{2}	Schaff, Philip and Henry Wace, eds. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, 14 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
Or. cat.	Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio catechetica magna*
Trin.	Augustine, *De Trinitate*
Vit. Ant.	Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*
Vit. Moys.	Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Moysis*

ABSTRACT

Vanderhyde, Joshua S. “Straining Forward to What Lies Ahead: Models of Patristic Contemplation.” Thesis, Concordia Seminary, 2022. 111 pp.

As secularization sharpens the contrast between Christian belief and western culture, many Christians are looking for ways to take a more active and intentional approach to the struggle to be conformed to Christ. The Church Fathers offer a unified theory of Christian spirituality, grounded and structured by the concept of contemplation—a theory of perception widely held in the ancient world and integral to diverse systems of thought, including Neoplatonism. In this thesis, the concept of contemplation is elucidated as a theory of human perception and its role explained in the theology and spirituality of the Fathers. Patristic contemplation is then illustrated by presenting three models: Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine. Finally, an examination of Luther’s writings demonstrates that patristic contemplation underlies much of the theology and spirituality of the Lutheran Reformation, absent its classical terminology.

CHAPTER ONE

PATRISTIC CONTEMPLATION

Introduction

Contemplation, as a term, functions variously and in diverse contexts. It might suggest modern forms of contemplative prayer or more ancient forms of monastic meditation such as *lectio divina*. In these cases, contemplation designates a practice which disposes the practitioner to receive spiritual insight. In addition, contemplation can refer to the fruit of such practices. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, in one place, defines contemplation as mystical experience of the Divine presence (such as visions, revelations, and mystical union).[1] Elsewhere, it defines contemplation as an "act" which disposes the practitioner to receive such mystical experience: "the complacent, loving gaze of the soul on Divine truth."[2] Beyond the Christian tradition, contemplation finds a place in such religious and philosophical contexts as Hindu *yoga* and Neoplatonic union with the One (universal divine principle). These multifarious uses of contemplation derive from a single, ancient concept, a theory of how we perceive the world around us, and how that perception shapes us. I will refer to this as the concept of contemplation.

In this thesis, I explicate and illustrate the patristic use of the concept of contemplation. Such a study is needed in part because the meaning that contemplation embodies in other theological systems easily bleeds into patristic interpretation. For example, the association of contemplation with Neoplatonism has led some to view it as a Hellenistic intrusion on the

[1] Aug Poulain, "Contemplation," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles Herbermann, Edward Pace, Condé Pallen, Thomas Shahan, and John Wynne (New York: Robert Appleton, 1908), 4:324–28.

[2] Edmund Gurdon, "Contemplative Life," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 4:329–30.

teaching of Scripture.[3] Phillip Cary recently pitted Luther against Augustine over this issue, arguing that Luther's reforms provided a necessary corrective of Augustine's "Platonist intellectual vision,"[4] or contemplation. While a defense (or critique) of patristic contemplation is beyond the scope of this project, the following account will, I hope, suffice to demonstrate at least three things about patristic contemplation: first, it is integral to the structure of patristic theology and spirituality; second, it facilitates fruitful theological and spiritual reflection; and finally, its conceptual content underlies much of the theology and spirituality of the Lutheran Reformation, absent its classical terminology.

The structure of the thesis supports these three points. Chapters one and two clarify the place of contemplation in the structure of patristic theology and spirituality. In chapter one, I first elucidate the concept of contemplation as a theory of human perception that was widely accepted in the ancient world, then explain its role in patristic theology and spirituality. Chapter two provides further context for understanding patristic contemplation by providing a brief outline of the concept's role in Greek philosophy.

The next three chapters illustrate contemplation's capacity to facilitate fruitful theological and spiritual reflection by presenting models of Christian contemplation from three Church Fathers: Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine. I have chosen these three for three main reasons. First, each played a prominent role in solving major theological controversies. Second, they together represent both East and West—Augustine being from the West and the others from the East—and yet, the influence of each helped shape later Christianity in both East and West.

[3] According to Phillip Cary, Martin Luther's reforms departed from "Augustine's Platonist spirituality" characterized by "intellectual vision," or contemplation. Phillip Cary, *The Meaning of Protestant Theology: Luther, Augustine, and the Gospel that Gives Us Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 5.

[4] Cary, *Meaning of Protestant Theology*, 5–6.

Finally, they are known for their spirituality and therefore provide excellent examples of the patristic use of contemplation.

The final chapter focuses on the presence of the concept of contemplation in the theology of Luther. I draw connections between the patristic concept of contemplation and Luther's concept of faith, then examine Luther's writings using the structure of patristic contemplation as a framework.

My own interest in this topic originally sprang from a desire to understand what then seemed like a foreign concept. I now believe patristic contemplation has much to offer the Church today, especially in the realm of Christian spirituality. As secularization sharpens the contrast between Christian belief and western culture, many Christians are looking for ways to take a more active and intentional approach to the struggle to be conformed to Christ. Some are turning to early Christianity for guidance.[5] It seems fitting, indeed, that the early Christians to whom we look for doctrinal clarity regarding Christ and the Spirit would also offer fruitful insight into the struggle to be conformed to Christ in the Spirit. As we shall see, patristic contemplation clarifies the role of both Christ and the believer in the Christian struggle and thereby offers the sort of guide to spirituality I believe many Christians are seeking.

This is, perhaps, especially helpful for Lutherans, to which group I belong. Lutherans have long dealt with the accusation that Luther's proclamation of evangelical freedom discourages

[5] Alan Kreider directs us to the period before Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The early Church thrived despite persecution and disrepute, he argues, because Christians intentionally cultivated a counter-cultural habitus—the patient self-sacrifice of Christ—that proved attractive to disenchanted pagans. *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016). Rod Dreher looks to the collapse of the Roman Empire and the centuries-long preservation of Christian teaching and practice within monastic communities as a model for Christians in a post-Christian context. *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017). Leopoldo Sanchez identifies in the writings of the Church Fathers various modes of Christian life in the Spirit in order to paint "vivid pictures of what holiness looks like [and to foster] spiritual practices." Leopoldo A. Sanchez M., *Sculptor Spirit: Models of Sanctification from Spirit Christology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 4.

active Christian obedience.[6] If I'm saved by grace, why does it matter how I live? We know Luther unashamedly taught active obedience to Christ (he frequently addressed the same accusation himself), but in our systematizing of Luther's theology it has proved difficult to define and uphold the importance of human activity while simultaneously preserving human passivity with respect to the reception of divine grace. Contemplation offers a conceptual framework to explain the activity and passivity of faith that looks to Christ and receives from him all good things. Conversely, contemplation clarifies the dangers of complacency in the struggle to be conformed to Christ. If I am right, a deeper understanding of patristic contemplation can sharpen our understanding of the way Luther conceived of faith and the life of faith.

This first chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for the entire thesis. We will first explicate contemplation as a theory of human perception, then introduce the basic framework with which the Fathers incorporated the concept of contemplation into their theology and spirituality.

Contemplation as a Theory of Human Perception

Contemplation, as a concept, is a theory of how we perceive the world around us and how that perception shapes us. Fundamental to this theory is the distinction between sense perception and the perception of the mind or spirit (νοῦς). A lupine presents itself to our senses of smell, touch, sight, and even taste, but the observer perceives more than may be detected by the body; its symmetry of shape and boldness of color are judged by the mind, not the senses. Scientists

[6] Carter Lindberg, "Do Lutherans Shout Justification But Whisper Sanctification?" *Lutheran Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1999): 1–20. See also David S. Yeago, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology: Reflections on the Costs of a Construal," *Pro Ecclesia* 2, no. 1 (1993): 37–49.

have further observed how the flower provides an ideal environment for nearby plants by fixing nitrogen in the soil and stabilizing it with its roots. These observations, while discovered using sense perception, are nevertheless imperceptible to the senses. We likewise encounter other human beings through our bodily senses but perceive with our mind that they are like us—that there is more going on "under the hood." We perceive in a person's body language when he is angry or delighted, and we judge his words to be true or false. We can even abstract spiritual realities such as truth and delight from the circumstances in which we encountered them and turn them over in our mind. Everything in the cosmos follows this pattern: the sensible embodies and displays the spiritual. Contemplation aims to perceive the latter.

To describe spiritual perception the ancients[7] employed the metaphor of physical vision still in use today, as when we say, "I *see* what you mean." Yet, while the metaphor remains, the prevailing theory of physical vision has changed, Margaret Miles argues, so that a basic understanding of the ancient theory of physical vision can help to clarify what the Fathers meant by spiritual vision. Whereas the modern conception of physical vision emphasizes the passivity of the eye as light enters it from an object, the ancients emphasized the active searching inherent in vision.[8] We scan a room looking for an object, and when we find it, we focus in on each of its features in turn. To illustrate this activity of vision the ancients envisioned a ray of light proceeding from the eye to interact with objects:

[7] Dale C. Allison shows that the "extramission" theory of vision, in which the eye sends out a ray of light was widely held in the ancient world, not only in philosophy, but among common people. He also finds it in passages of the Old Testament (for example in Ps. 37:10; Job 17:7; Ezra 9:8) and in Jesus' saying that the "eye is the lamp of the body" (Matt. 6:22–23). "The Eye Is the Lamp of the Body (Matthew 6:22–23 = Luke 11:34–36)," *New Testament Studies* 33, no. 1 (1987): 61–83.

[8] Margaret Miles believes this point is crucial for understanding Augustine's view of the role of human activity in "training the eye of the mind." I would extend her insight to Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and even Luther. "Vision: The Eye of the Body and the Eye of the Mind in Saint Augustine's '*De Trinitate*' and '*Confessions*,'" *The Journal of Religion* 63, no. 2 (1983): 126.

> a ray of light, energized and projected by the mind toward an object, actually touches its object, thereby connecting viewer and object. By the vehicle of the visual ray, the object is not only "touched" by the viewer, but also the object is "printed" on the soul of the viewer.[9]

Vision is thus active and passive. We actively fix our attention on the object we wish to perceive, and the object impresses itself on us as a memory. Spiritual vision follows the same pattern: in directing the attention of the νοῦς, we actively reach beyond ourselves for the object we desire to understand, and when our gaze meets the object, we passively receive insight (θεωρία).[10] We carry this insight with us because it has impressed our memory; it has imposed itself on our way of thinking and thereby assimilated our inner life to itself. We are assimilated to what we contemplate.[11]

The metaphor of physical vision helps to highlight three components of spiritual vision: (1) the energy of the will by which the mind chooses its spiritual object, (2) the activity of the mind as it "observes" the spiritual object, and (3) the transformation of the mind by reception of the insight. We will refer to these as desire, contemplation, and understanding. These three influence one another in circular fashion. Desire stimulates contemplation; contemplation leads to understanding; understanding fosters more desire, leading to further contemplation (unless boredom, disgust, or distraction intervene). Since contemplation entails transformation, the circle is more akin to a spiral. Contemplation is a process that involves movement and growth; it is the process by which our inner life continually takes shape.

A brief illustration will help to root contemplation in ordinary human experience. As a child, I watched my parents work to cultivate food in our garden, and over the years, observed

[9] Miles, "Vision," 127.

[10] G.W.H. Lampe, ed., *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 648.

[11] "[T]he soul forms images of sensible things 'out of its own substance' (*substantiae suae*), but the result is that the mind itself is formed by the very images it formulates and carries." Miles, "Vision," 128.

their enjoyment of fresh food and wholesome work. Having observed and understood their appreciation of gardening, I now desire to understand better how to cultivate my own garden. To become a better gardener, I must grow in understanding. This growth comes through observation, whether by experimentation or by imitation of another gardener. As my understanding increases, so does my desire to understand. Unless I tire of it, I will continue to put my mind to gardening and so continue to grow as a gardener.

The ancients recognized that the growth of our inner life takes place through interaction with the world around us. As we observe, reflect, investigate, and imitate, we are in some way transformed by the object of our contemplation. So, the student of gardening becomes a gardener, and the lover of wisdom becomes wise. In both cases, the observer is assimilated to what he observes, or in Plato's terms, the observer participates in the reality he observes. Since contemplation is the process by which our inner life continually takes shape, and since our inner life is embodied by our outer life, the kind and quality of our contemplation directly affect our well-being.

Well-being was pursued by all the ancient philosophers. They believed human beings lost in confusion and ignorance could be happy, if only they knew the truth. Ignorance must be overcome by growth in understanding; therefore, contemplation must mark the road to well-being. The Fathers could agree. But what is the truth, and where is it found? These issues distinguished the schools of philosophy from one another, as we shall see briefly in the next chapter. The Fathers, for their part, believed human ignorance is overcome only by contemplating Christ, the Incarnate Word of God.

The Role of Contemplation in Patristic Theology and Spirituality

Contemplation is, for the Fathers, a central concept in the drama of humanity's corruption

and restoration, because both corruption and restoration are characterized by inner transformation. Since we are assimilated to the object of our contemplation, according to the ancient theory of perception, the object of contemplation determines whether a person undergoes a corrosive or constructive transformation. The Fathers place all possible objects of contemplation in two categories: God and everything else. The direction of our contemplation thus constitutes either proper faith or idolatry, and these carry transformative consequences. Contemplation of God results in participation in his nature (2 Pet. 1:4); contemplation of creatures catalyzes the corruption of our spiritual nature.[12]

In Scripture, this directional contemplation is often pictured vertically. Christ offers two possible directions to be oriented spiritually: toward heaven or earth: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth… but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven…. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:19–21). He then illustrates the transformative consequence of such spiritual orientation—for better or worse—using the metaphor of physical vision: "The eye is the lamp of the body" (Matt. 6:22).[13] Paul, likewise, describes directional contemplation in vertical terms: "Set your minds on things that are above (ἄνω), not on things

[12] Athanasius states this variously. Here is one example: "For [Adam] also, as long as he kept his mind to God, and the contemplation of God, turned away from the contemplation of the body. But when, by counsel of the serpent, he departed from the consideration of God, and began to regard himself, then they not only fell to bodily lust, but knew that they were naked, and knowing, were ashamed." Athanasius, *C. Gent.* 3.3 (*NPNF*^{2} 4:5). Gregory of Nyssa says man's mind should have occupied itself with the Good, but instead "turned aside" to pleasure and thereby swallowed the hook that had been baited by the devil with the "mere appearance of good." As a result, he was enslaved to the devil. Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 21.4–5; Ignatius Green, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Catechetical Discourse; A Handbook for Catechists* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2019), 109–10. Augustine, in one place, expresses it thusly: "For man's true honor is God's image and likeness in him, but it can only be preserved *when facing him* from whom its impression is received. And so the less love he has for what is his very own the more closely can he cling to God. But out of greed to experience his own power he tumbled down *at a nod from himself into himself* as though down to the middle level. And then, while he wants to be like God under nobody, he is thrust down as a punishment from his own half-way level to the bottom, to the things in which the beasts find their pleasure." Augustine, *Trin.* 12.16; Edmund Hill, trans., *The Trinity: De Trinitate*, 2nd ed. (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2015), 334. Emphasis added.

[13] See Allison, "Eye Is the Lamp," 61–83.

that are on earth" (Col. 3:2). Similarly, those who "walk as enemies of the cross of Christ" have "minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven." (Phil. 3:18–20) So, we "press on toward the goal of the prize of the upward (ἄνω) call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). The Fathers use this same vertical pattern to describe the corruption and restoration of humanity. Human beings began a corrosive transformation when they shifted their spiritual desire and attention away from God toward earthly things. Christ descended to arrest our fall and lift our gaze to the Father in his own person.[14] Contemplating Godward in Jesus Christ, "we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18).

To complete the structure of patristic contemplation, we must now install the spiral of desire, contemplation, and understanding in the vertical framework just described. Prelapsarian humanity was meant to contemplate Godward and thereby continually grow, loving the Good, contemplating the Good, and being transformed by the Good. The upward spiral was reversed when the object of contemplation changed. Postlapsarian humanity loves earthly things, contemplates earthly things, and understands reality in an earthly way, which fosters more desire for earthly things. To break the cycle and reverse the spiral, the Word descended and became an earthly thing, that in him we might contemplate Godward. Christ draws us to himself in order to

[14] Athanasius frequently describes proper and idolatrous contemplation in vertical terms. In the following passage, he portrays the purpose of the incarnation as the manifestation of God to those whose eyes are held *downwards*: "For since human beings, having rejected the contemplation of God and as though sunk in an abyss with their eyes held downwards, seeking God in creation [*genesis*] and things perceptible, setting up for themselves mortal humans and demons as gods, for this reason the lover of human beings and the common Savior of all, takes to himself a body and dwells as human among humans and draws to himself the perceptible senses of all human beings…." Athanasius, *Inc.* 15; John Behr, trans., *St. Athanasius the Great: On the Incarnation: Greek Original and English Translation* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 83. In similar fashion, Martin Luther says the Word descended to our field of vision so we might not make futile attempts to ascend to a vision of the Father through speculation: "For this purpose He came down, was born, lived among men, suffered, was crucified, and died, so that in every possible way He might present Himself to our sight. He wanted us *to fix the gaze of our hearts upon Himself* and thus to prevent us from clambering into heaven and speculating about the Divine Majesty." *LW* 26:29. Emphasis added.

purify our desire, reorient our contemplation, and renew our understanding. Following him, the spiral is reversed. We ascend with Christ as he transforms us "into the same image from one degree of glory to another."

This is the basic structure of patristic contemplation. We will now briefly examine each of its components in more detail.

Prelapsarian Contemplation

For the Fathers, desire, contemplation, and growth in understanding lie at the heart of what it means to be created in God's image. We have the freedom to direct our own life according to wisdom or folly, according to nature or against nature. The Fathers point out that our self-governing nature mirrors God's own governance of the cosmos. God governs wisely and benevolently because he is wisdom and love. The human soul becomes wise and loving by contemplating wisdom and love. Such a soul wisely and benevolently governs its own outward life, so that in her words and actions an observer may perceive wisdom and love, just as one may perceive the wisdom and love of God in his governance of the cosmos. By our self-governing nature we therefore present a mirror image of God, who governs the cosmos.[15] The resemblance does not blur the sharp line that separates the Creator from his creatures, the distinction between what Is by nature and what has come into existence from nothing. We contemplate and embody wisdom, truth, and love; he *is* wisdom, truth, love, and is the object of our contemplation. We thus resemble God not by identity of substance but as paint on a canvas resembles the subject of

[15] Athanasius, especially, places the self-governing nature of the soul at the center of his account of the "in the image." In doing so, he appropriates the Stoic concept of Λόγος for his own Christian use. For Athanasius, the Λόγος is the Word who became flesh (John 1:14), while the Stoics posit an impersonal and corporeal life force that pervades and is the cosmos of living things. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1978), 285.

the painting.[16] Human nature presents a mirror image in which to see "in a created mode what God is in an uncreated mode."[17]

In our prelapsarian perfection the mirror image was intact. Our first parents, operating according to nature, desired the Good, perceived it, were assimilated to the Good, and joyfully governed their outward life accordingly. In their own goodness received through contemplation, and in their benevolent governance of the body, they therefore had an idea of God who is Good and the Giver of all good things. Moreover, since they perceived God, they also understood his works—what they are, what they are for, and how they fit together in his good order. With a perfect understanding of the spiritual nature of created things, including their own nature, they conducted their lives in accord with God's good order until the Fall.

Idolatrous Contemplation and the Tailspin

The Fathers describe the fall into sin as a shift of the attention of the soul away from God, toward creatures.[18] No longer oriented toward him, we struck out on our own, seeking to replace true blessedness with absorption in earthly things. Since we are assimilated to the object of our contemplation, we became earthly and so desired earthly things all the more. The tailspin of contemplation, understanding, and desire was set in motion, and humanity could not reverse its own course.

The Word Descends

Since we were plummeting earthward and could not shift our gaze to heavenly things, the

[16] Athanasius, *Inc.* 14.

[17] Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 92.

[18] See, for example, Athanasius, *C. Gent.* 3–4; Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 21.4–5; Augustine, *Trin.* 12.16.

Word descended to us in order to lead us out of carnal obsession. The Fathers see the incarnation of the Word as serving a dual purpose.[19] By assuming a body, dying, and rising from the dead, he secured the resurrection of the dead for all people. He also overcame our spiritual blindness by becoming something we could see and listen to. He taught us as a human being in order to lead the soul out of carnal obsession and back to its spiritual nature.

Arresting the Tailspin

If Christ is to lead us out of our tailspin of misguided desire, self-indulgent contemplation, and ignorance, we must let go of what we formerly held dear. Human beings, though victims of the Devil's deceit, are willing victims. We are presumptuous in our delusions and ardent in pursuit of our imagined good, and this has been strengthened by the force of habit. Part of our transformation, then, is a kind of unlearning. The Fathers call it purification. Christ arrests our downward momentum through the practice of disciplines, both bodily and spiritual, commanded in Scripture. Bodily disciplines such as fasting weaken the bodily desires to which we have become habituated, and thereby help to slow the tailspin.[20] Spiritual disciplines such as constant prayer, the study of Scripture, and the imitation of the saints train the mind to fix its attention on Christ. The goal is continually to contemplate Christ with undivided attention in order to be conformed to his image.

[19] The Fathers each articulate these dual reasons differently. See "The Word Descends" in chapters three through six.

[20] I have chosen to describe purification as the deceleration of our downward momentum, although the Fathers do not state it explicitly so, because Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine, in addition to the vertical structure, use the concept of momentum. Desire energizes contemplation, and since Godward contemplation is in direct competition with idolatrous contemplation, we experience a kind of tug-of-war between the two, desire for the one pulling us up and desire for the other pulling us down. As Christ purifies us of improper love, we are freed for Godward contemplation and thus gain momentum on the upward journey (Phil. 3:14). See, for example, Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 7; Gregory of Nyssa, *Cant.* 460–61; Augustine, *Conf.* 13.8; Luther, "Lectures on Galatians 1531–35" in *LW* 26:216.

Contemplation in Action

To contemplate Christ is a constant struggle for the Christian.[21] Godward orientation was a gift both in the original creation and in its restoration in Christ. Nevertheless, we remain self-governing and may yet choose to turn away from God and resume an *unholy* transformation, being "conformed to the passions of [our] former ignorance" (1 Pet. 1:14). The Devil and his demons, eager to distract and dissuade us from contemplating Christ, waste no opportunity to exploit the improper fears and desires to which we have become habituated. Our only hope to resist the Devil and remain in Christ is Christ himself, who as a human being put the Devil to shame and remained faithful to God. Christ works his own victory in us through faith. Paul therefore calls the Philippian Christians to reverent cooperation: "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for good purpose (εὐδοκίας)" (Phil. 2:12–13). Both the will and the work belong to God, and yet human cooperation stands. Attending to the Word, we are transformed by Christ: "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31–32).

Ascending with Christ

The Fathers describe transformation into Christ's image in terms of ascent. The soul ascends as it contemplates Christ. This does not imply escape from the body. Recall the vertical structure of patristic contemplation. We are by nature spiritually mobile[22] since we cannot help

[21] The Fathers portray the Christian struggle variously, but for each it is a struggle to contemplate Christ. See "Contemplation in Action" in chapters three through six.

[22] This is Athanasius' way of describing the soul's inherent propensity for transformation. We are constantly in motion, being transformed one way or the other. Athanasius, *C. Gent.* 4. Gregory of Nyssa illustrates the same concept with the metaphor of running a race: "stopping in the race of virtue marks the beginning of the race of evil." Gregory of Nyssa, *Vit. Moys.* 1.6; Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, trans., *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 30.

but be transformed by the object of our contemplation. If we set our minds on things on earth, the soul is assimilated to earthly things—it becomes carnal. If we set our minds on things that are above, the soul is assimilated to things above—it becomes good. Contemplating Godward, then, the soul ascends as it grows in goodness. Such a soul benevolently governs the outward life of the body according to God's will. Thus, the ascent of the soul benefits the body and serves the neighbor, since the outward life of the body expresses the inner life of the soul.

Conclusion

Contemplation is a process by which our inner life continually takes shape. Three components interact to effect and perpetuate the process: (1) contemplation, whose object shapes understanding; (2) understanding, which engenders desire; and (3) desire, which orients contemplation. The transformation of the soul for better or worse lies at the heart of each movement of the drama of human corruption and restoration. We were created to be assimilated to God through contemplation but became assimilated to the world instead. The Word became flesh to draw us out of fallen carnality and back to true spirituality.

CHAPTER TWO

CONTEMPLATION IN PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

When the Post-Nicene Church Fathers arrived on the scene, the doctrines of Plato and Aristotle had already been guiding philosophers, politicians, and regular people to pursue knowledge and virtue; they had parsed human experience and our relationship to the surrounding cosmos and charted a course to true happiness (εὐδαιμονία) as they understood it, diagnosing the human condition and prescribing bodily and intellectual disciplines as remedies. Yet, in the view of the Fathers, Greek philosophy suffered a fatal flaw. The philosopher who strains his inner eye for insight into the nature of things and of their creator, and yet fails to perceive Wisdom-come-near in the Incarnate Word, may only glimpse the truth from afar.[1] Apart from Christ, pagan philosophy is "always in labor but never gives birth"[2]; it cannot capitalize on its own insights. The Fathers, nevertheless, harnessed pagan learning to serve Christ and his ends: "…such things as moral and natural philosophy, geometry, astronomy, dialectic, and whatever else is sought by those outside the church,"[3] when submitted to Christ, become useful to Christians for growing in knowledge and virtue.

The philosophical landscape of the patristic age was dominated by an eclectic composition of the teachings of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and others—what we now call Neoplatonism. In what follows, we will briefly outline the philosophical systems of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Philo, and Plotinus in order to construct a philosophical backdrop against which to recognize

[1] This is how Augustine characterizes the "Platonists" in *Civ.* 11.5. See John C. Cavadini, "God's Eternal Knowledge according to Augustine" in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, edited by David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 41.

[2] Gregory of Nyssa, *Vit. Moys.* 2.11; Malherbe and Ferguson, trans., *Gregory of Nyssa*, 57.

[3] Gregory of Nyssa, *Vit. Moys.* 2.115, Malherbe and Ferguson, trans., *Gregory of Nyssa*, 81.

how each of the patristic models of contemplation interacts with Greek philosophical concepts to articulate a Christian understanding of Scripture and the Christian faith.

Plato

Plato's most fundamental insight was the distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, which he placed in an ontological hierarchy. The intelligible realm of the Forms is immutable and eternal and harmoniously comprises Ultimate Reality, while the world of ordinary sense perception is subject to change and decay and imperfectly derives from the realm of the Forms.

The human soul is a stranger to the sensible world and properly belongs to the realm of the Forms, where it contemplates—and thereby participates in—true Reality. At birth, however, the soul was subjected to the physical world by attachment to its body. Since everything here constantly changes and tends toward decay, there can be no certainty of knowledge, no perfect participation in an eternal principle. The soul is prisoner to a false reality. Moreover, the pain of the process of embodiment caused the soul to forget its home in the realm of the Forms. It unknowingly lives shackled to the physical world, able to see only shadows of Truth and Beauty. The proper goal for the human soul, according to Plato, is to return to the homeland to enjoy true knowledge and participation in Reality through contemplation of the Forms.

In order to return home, the soul must first put off the body that shackles it to the world of change and decay. Only death, therefore, can complete the homecoming. In the meantime, however, one can make progress. Once the soul becomes aware of its estrangement from True Reality, it begins to transcend the body and senses through moral and intellectual purification. The soul is purified morally by acquiring such virtues as justice, prudence, temperance, and courage. These quell the irrational impulses of the body by subjecting them to Reason, which

belongs to the realm of the Forms. The soul, no longer dragged about by the impulses of the body, is free to contemplate intelligible Reality. Intellectual purification refers to the process of identifying and eliminating false notions about Reality. This is accomplished primarily through the art of dialectic, exemplified by Plato's dialogues, in which beliefs are tested for contradictions through questioning with the help of an interlocutor. Other intellectual disciplines such as music, mathematics, and philosophy, tend toward abstraction and thereby further help the soul to shed the illusions of sense perception and uncover the truth of the Forms.

The journey of the soul, for Plato, is a return home, a process of remembering what was hidden by the distractions of bodily impulses and the accretions of illusory sense perception. Purification leads the soul to receive knowledge not by careful study of the sensible world but by intuition. The soul, as it is purified of the sensible world, returns to enjoy natural union with the Ultimate Reality through ecstatic moments of contemplation.[4]

Aristotle

Aristotle built on Plato's distinction between the sensible and the intelligible but rejected his dualistic ontology. We are already home, a composite of soul and body in a world that is a composite of intelligible and sensible, form and matter. Matter receives its form from the intelligible, and the intelligible is embodied in matter. Sensible reality is therefore necessary for knowledge, not an impediment. True happiness is achieved not by escaping the body and sense perception but rather by exercising the proper function of the rational soul: to discern what is rational for human beings and to govern our outward life accordingly. To live according to reason is to live well, and to live well is the proper goal of human life.

[4] For more information, see Norman Melchert, *The Great Conversation: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 7th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 119–28.

In order to live well, then, we need some criteria for discerning what is good or rational for human beings. Rather than contemplate the abstract Form of the Good, Aristotle contemplates particular goods such as food, wealth, and honor in order to discern how to approach them rationally. First, one must determine the function of the good, then discern how to respond rationally in each situation. To approach food rationally, one must consider its proper function: to nourish the body. One who practices the virtue of temperance therefore eats enough to nourish his body, neither desiring too little nor too much. The amount of food he ought to eat varies according to the situation (when he ate last and whether he is physically active, for example). Finding the mean between excess and deficiency is the key to determining the rational response in all ethical considerations.

The human response to situations is experienced as passions (πάθη), such as desire, anger, and fear. As the Greek term suggests, these happen *to* us; we suffer them. Nevertheless, the state of the soul determines with which passion and with what intensity we are disposed to respond in each situation. One who is courageous does not shrink from a dangerous task, nor does she rashly pursue danger; her soul is disposed to feel the proper amount of fear. Anger and desire follow the same pattern. To pursue the good life entails training the soul rationally to exhibit the proper passion, with the proper intensity, in every situation.

In a dramatic departure from the idealism of his teacher, Aristotle thus focuses his contemplative gaze on this world, in all its complexity. Both philosophers chart the course to human happiness through virtue, but Aristotle locates happiness in this world of form and matter. For him, the goal of contemplation is not to escape embodiment, but to give proper form to the outward life of the body through the exercise of reason.[5]

[5] Aristotle emphasizes habituating virtue. Melchert, *Great Conversation*, 193.

The Stoics

The Stoics were corporealists; they believed only those things exist that can act or be acted upon. This requires a body; therefore, only corporeal things exist. There are two kinds of existents: πνεύμα (breath) and matter, which are akin to Aristotle's form and matter since πνεύμα gives form and coherence and life to all things. Yet, the Stoics conceived of πνεύμα as a divine and corporeal life-force, immanent in the cosmos and concerned with its minute details. It is an eternal λόγος (reason or pattern) that contains the λόγοι σπερματικοὶ or seminal principles of all things, and it actively organizes and holds together the entire cosmos by a tensile force, physically moving in and through all things. The πνεύμα or λόγος is the world-soul of the cosmic body, and as such, defines and realizes the nature of each part and the structure by which it universally holds together.[6]

Human beings contain a high concentration of πνεύμα or λόγος and therefore have a soul capable of rational (λογικός) thought. The human soul begins a clean slate and gradually grows in knowledge as it receives impressions from surrounding objects through sense perception. These impressions are linguistic in nature. They may be true or false, and the soul may accept or reject them. The Stoic philosopher seeks to accept only those impressions that are true, to reserve judgment if uncertain, and to purify the soul of those that are false.[7] False impressions are those

[6] Athanasius appropriates the Stoic λόγος, in Johannine fashion, to describe the Word who created and immanently governs the universe. The Stoic λόγος is too immanent, however, since it is physically in all things. Thus, Athanasius uses the Platonic notion of participation, which presupposes a distinction between Being and becoming. Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 1998), 50.

[7] Ultimate reality is in this way, for the Stoics, within the grasp of the human intellect. A true impression yields direct and certain knowledge. Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine both work against this notion. God is ineffable, beyond human understanding. Just as words, as signs, indirectly signify a reality beyond themselves, so corporeal and temporal things can only point toward God, whom they signify. For both Gregory and Augustine, this forces Christians in this life to rely on faith, which does not clearly perceive the truth as in the light of day, but rather struggles along in the dark, trusting in what it cannot see. Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 91–92. Paul R. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2010), 113.

that do not accord with nature since all things are governed and defined by reason (λόγος). The soul thus realizes its rational potential by operating in harmony with nature.

The skilled Stoic therefore recognizes the plan of the λόγος, from which nature springs, and governs his own life accordingly. He perceives, for example, that health is naturally good for the body and thus selects a diet conducive to health. Yet, although this is generally true for human beings, πνεύμα is concerned with the good of the whole in addition to its parts. Health tends to be natural for human beings, but πνεύμα may require one to risk health in war for the benefit of his fellow human beings. The cosmos is a living organism, and at times its parts must undergo something unnatural for the sake of other parts or for the good of the whole.[8] When something occurs that seems to conflict with nature, the Stoic philosopher simply accepts it as fate—part of the plan of πνεύμα.

To distinguish between what is natural and unnatural, or good and evil, therefore requires nuanced understanding. Health, which seems good, is not always so. Power and wealth likewise can help or harm. The Stoics designate these outward goods indifferent, neither good nor evil. If we accept the false impression that wealth is good and subsequently lose a fortune, we experience anger, fear, and desire, among other passions. It is when we fail to discern the truth about things that the passions assail us. Stoic contemplation thus aims to perceive all things rationally, or according to the plan of πνεύμα. With a proper understanding of good and evil, natural and unnatural, the Stoic remains unaffected or apathetic. Απάθεια (apathy or passionlessness) is therefore the mark of Stoic virtue, by which the philosopher perceives all things rationally and thus acts in accordance with nature.

[8] Dirk Baltzly, s.v. “Stoicism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2019 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/stoicism/.

Philo

Philo of Alexandria is one representative of a somewhat diverse class of philosophers that we designate Middle Platonists, ranging from the first century BC to the third century AD. Among their unifying characteristics are a return to Platonic transcendence in contrast to the Stoics and the Skeptics, and an eclectic use of the systems of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. The Middle Platonists laid the foundation for later Neoplatonic philosophers such as Plotinus, who further developed a coherent system that drew widely from the wealth of prior Greek philosophy.

Philo holds special significance for the Fathers because he is Jewish and uses the concepts of Greek philosophy to articulate his understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. Philo, like Plato, addresses the puzzle of God's relationship with the cosmos: how can God be both utterly transcendent and the cause of all things? Plato preserves the "otherness" of God by positing an intermediary Demiurge or Craftsman who contemplated the eternal, intelligible model and created an image of it, the cosmos. Philo combined the intermediary role of Plato's Craftsman with the immanence of the Stoic λόγος in order simultaneously to articulate both the transcendence and immanence of God in relation to his creation. God created all things through his λόγος, who is the mind of God in whom are contained the intelligible forms that comprise the blueprint of the created world. The λόγος is both creator and sower of the λόγοι σπερματικοὶ or seminal patterns that define the nature of particular creatures. Divine and distinct from the cosmos, he directly creates and governs the cosmos by his powers (δυνάμεις). In his creative and governing power human beings may thus perceive the λόγος, who is the mind and thus an image of the otherwise imperceptible God.

Human beings, in turn, present an image of God (Gen. 1:26) by virtue of their ineffable soul, which is known only by its activity in governing the body. God intended them to govern themselves in accord with nature through contemplation of the governing power of the λόγος,

but human beings preferred pleasure; they shifted their attention from God to themselves and followed their passions. The body, once good and beautiful along with the soul, thus became an instrument of disorder. The proper goal of human life is to make progress toward renewed likeness to God by contemplating the Torah. There we see what it means to follow God in the examples of such individuals as Abraham and Moses, as well as in the community of Israel led by the Torah. By submitting to God in repentance and hope we are freed from the passions to be led by God.[9]

Plotinus

Plotinus, who lived and wrote in the third century AD, is credited as the founder of Neoplatonism. He posited three levels of reality, which are related in a successive hierarchy: Soul, Intellect, and the One. Soul, the natural world of sense perception, presents an image of Intellect, Plato's realm of the forms. Intellect, in turn, presents an image by which to conceive of the One, from whom the forms derive.

The hierarchy moves from outer expression to inner reality, and therefore from multiplicity to simplicity. All sensible things in the natural world are united as particular instantiations of common intelligible forms. Likewise, the harmonious unity of the intelligible forms indicates a single, simple Source: the One. Moving down the hierarchy, all things spring from the One successively, inner activity producing outward expression through a process of productive contemplation. Through the pure activity of thinking, the One produces thoughts—the Forms. The Forms, contemplating the One, produce instantiations of those thoughts in the sensible world. This is the last true level of reality because matter, by itself, is devoid of form and

[9] Carlos Lévy, "Philo of Alexandria," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/philo/.

therefore deprived of participation in the Good. Matter is ontologically evil because it is deprived of the good.

Human beings participate in evil by desiring material things without regard for the Realities that inform them. Since we are the only entities belonging to the sensible world that can contemplate the Forms, human beings ought to produce a bodily life that reflects the Forms. We disregard the Forms by submitting to sensible desires and emotions rather than Reason. To do so is to identify with the level of Soul rather than Intellect. Since we can recognize the activity of both Soul and Intellect in our own inner life we must, at our core, belong beyond both in the One. The goal of Plotinian contemplation is therefore to swim upstream, separating from the multiplicity of bodily desire and emotion to rest in intellectual thoughts, and finally, leaving behind the multiplicity of thoughts, to realize ontological identity with the One.

Early Christian Theology: Clement, Origen, and Nicaea

Early Christians are often cast as apologists mounting a defense of Christianity against the theological and philosophical attacks of the pagans. While attacks certainly abounded, Andrew Hofer argues the early Christian response was as much offensive as defensive. They actively sought to persuade the pagans to turn to Christ.[10] Clement of Alexandria exemplifies this in a writing meant for a pagan audience, the *Protreptikos*, which means persuasion. Clement argues that what we desire we contemplate, and what we contemplate we become.[11] The pagans become like their gods by imitating their gross immorality displayed in legend, song, and art. In contrast, the Λόγος of God became flesh to persuade human beings—as a human being—to worship God.

[10] Andrew Hofer, "Clement of Alexandria's *Logos Protreptikos*: The Protreptics of Love," *Pro Ecclesia* 24 (2015): 498–516.

[11] Hofer, "Clement of Alexandria's *Logos Protreptikos*," 507.

His method of persuasion was the perfect display of God's love for humanity. Once persuaded, Christians follow Christ as their pedagogue, transforming them through contemplation. Clement wanted his audience to be drawn by desire to contemplate the Λόγος, and being assimilated to him, become like God.

Origen, a contemporary of Plotinus, also made use of the concept of Christ as pedagogue but placed it in a Greek cosmology. Rational human souls originally belonged to the realm of the Forms, contemplating the Λόγος in whom the Forms are contained. When all but the soul of Christ lapsed in contemplation, they fell into bodies.[12] Christ became flesh to lead humanity back to its primordial bodiless bliss by renewed contemplation of the Word. For Origen, the goal of contemplation is to escape the multiplicity of embodied existence and return to the homeland of pure intellect.

The serious difficulties posed by Origen's cosmology came to the fore with the Arian controversy. Arius classified Christ as an intermediate entity between God and human beings. Bishop Alexander and the Nicene Council defended the full divinity of the Word by positing an impassible ontological gulf between creator and created, with the Word on the creator side and the rational soul therefore ontologically distinct. Whereas Origen viewed the restoration of humanity as a return to the divine realm of the Forms, Nicene theology kept the human soul squarely on the creature side of the ontological line. Christ leads those who contemplate him to present an image of God as paint on a canvas reflects the subject of the painting.[13]

Conclusion

Contemplation was a common component of philosophy and religion long before the

[12] He was condemned for this at the 5th ecumenical council in Constantinople, 553.

[13] Athanasius, *Inc.* 14.

Church Fathers made use of it. As we saw in chapter one, it is even native to Scripture and central to Jesus' teaching (Matt. 6:19–22). As a theory of how our inner life continually takes shape, it can be used for very diverse purposes. Clement and Origen introduced contemplation in its full philosophical form by emphasizing its transformative power—"you are what you contemplate." Origen combined it with a Greek cosmology, a misstep that was corrected at the Council of Nicaea in 325.

CHAPTER THREE

ATHANASIUS

Athanasius is well known for his stalwart defense of Nicene orthodox belief throughout the heart of the fourth century. Having attended the Council of Nicaea in 325 as a deacon, he championed its defense throughout his intermittent tenure as bishop of Alexandria from 328–373. But to think of Athanasius merely as a theoretician with a penchant for precise Christological formulas would miss the mark. His theological concern was pastoral in nature; he knew from experience that only the divine power of Christ can defeat our enemies and fortify us in time of affliction and temptation.

Despite Christianity's new place of privilege in Roman society afforded by Constantine's edict of Milan in 313, strife and persecution continued to ravage the church. The Arian controversy and the Meletian Schism caused persistent division long after they were addressed by the Council of Nicaea, so that Athanasius was forced to leave Alexandria five times, amounting to seventeen years in exile during his forty-five years as bishop. The role of spiritual overseer, which he had assumed reluctantly, earned him false accusations and put his life in danger.[1] Charles Kannengiesser likens him to Martin Luther—not a theologian in an ivory tower but "a believer launched into the improvised adventure of the church in his century."[2]

The spiritual writings of Athanasius match the excitement that characterized his own life. He relays the drama of human corruption and restoration in terms of demonic warfare. Demons

[1] He was accused of rigging his own election as bishop and of arranging the murder of a bishop who was later found alive. His third exile began when he narrowly escaped a midnight military arrest while celebrating at the altar with his congregation. Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (London: Routledge, 2004), 12–13, 26–27.

[2] "Sa démarche spontanée n'était pas celle d'un théoricien en chambre, mais celle d'un croyant lancé dans l'aventure improvisée de l'Eglise en son siècle." Charles Kannengiesser, *Le Verbe de Dieu selon Athanase d'Alexandrie* (Paris: Desclée, 1999), 154.

have drawn the contemplation of human beings downward toward perceptible things, so that they now worship "images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things" (Rom. 1:23) instead of the invisible God (Rom. 1:19; Col. 1:15).[3] The turn away from God led to the debasement of the mind, embodied by increasingly chaotic and destructive behaviors (Rom. 1:28–32). The Word and Image of the invisible God became a human being in order to expose the weakness of the demons and restore contemplation of God in himself. In the visible works of Christ, we perceive that he has power over all counterfeit gods, and perceiving him, we perceive the Father (John 14:9). The Christian life is a battle waged daily in the soul.[4] The Devil and his comrades constantly seek to distract and dissuade us from following Christ by exploiting our passions—improper desires and fears that threaten to tear our gaze from Christ. When we contemplate Christ, however, He works in us his own victory, so that the demons are put to shame. The soul that contemplates Christ thus freely ascends to perceive God and conducts its outward life according to God's will.

Prelapsarian Contemplation

According to Athanasius, humanity originally enjoyed a λογικός soul because it contemplated the Λόγος. In English, λόγος can mean word, reason, or even pattern, while λογικός is often translated rational or spiritual. To perceive what Athanasius means, we must recall the Stoic use of the term. In Stoicism, the Λόγος is the divine force that defines and unites all things. It is the world-soul of the cosmic body. Athanasius appropriates this concept to articulate his Scriptural understanding of Christ as the Incarnate Λόγος (John 1:1–3, 14) in whom

[3] Athanasius uses both Rom. 1:18–32 and Col. 1:15–20 to relay the drama of human corruption and restoration. See, for example, Athanasius, *C. Gent.* 19, 41.

[4] For Athanasius, the spiritual battle takes place in ordinary experience. Kannengiesser, *Verbe de Dieu*, 181.

all things were created and hold together (Col. 1:16–17).[5] As the Λόγος, Christ governs the cosmos so that its constituent parts work together in perfect harmony. Moreover, since "he is the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), God may be perceived in the governing work of the Λόγος. The cosmos embodies—in perceptible harmony—the governing activity of the Λόγος, which in turn enables perception of God.[6]

Human beings are members of the cosmic choir that evidences the work of the Director.[7] Nevertheless, we have a special part to play. Other creatures unconsciously fulfill their part according to the plan of the Λόγος. We, on the other hand, are self-governing. The words and actions of the body manifest the invisible inner life of the soul that governs it. Our self-governing nature thus presents a microcosm that mirrors both the receptivity of the cosmos and the governing activity of the Λόγος. The likeness only functions properly, however, if the soul governs according to Reason (Λόγος). The human soul is λογικός by participation in the Λόγος. Human beings were given a rational soul so that they could look (θεωρεῖν) beyond themselves,[8] and perceiving the Λόγος, be assimilated to him. Through contemplation of Reason, the soul becomes rational and orders the activities of the body according to Reason. God desired that humanity remain oriented toward God, "that knowing the Creator they might live the happy (ευδαίμονα) and truly blessed life."[9]

Idolatrous Contemplation and the Tailspin

Athanasius characterizes the corruption of humanity as a shift in the orientation of the soul:

[5] Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 285.

[6] Athanasius, *C. Gent.* 34.

[7] Athanasius, *C. Gent.* 43.

[8] Athanasius, *Inc.* 17.

[9] Athanasius, *Inc.* 11; Behr, trans., *St. Athanasius the Great*, 75.

human beings ceased to look beyond the perception of the senses for a vision of God and his good order and instead became infatuated with sensible things for their own sake.[10] Seeing "that pleasure is good for her," the soul formed new desires according to the body and senses and employed the activities of the body to pursue pleasure, thinking "pleasure was the very essence of good."[11] By contemplating inferior goods as if they were the essence of good, the soul became entrapped in a circular prison of its own making: (1) contemplating the *imagined* good, human beings conceived a false conception of what is good; (2) the false conception of what is good engendered in them a desire for more of what they imagined to be good; (3) this desire fixed the attention of the soul on what it imagined to be good, which perpetuated the cycle. Misguided desire, self-indulgent contemplation, and deluded understanding thus formed an inescapable loop, a tailspin toward non-existence, since the soul substituted its own imagination of what exists for knowledge of God and the nature of things that exist in him.[12]

The corruption of our inner life also entailed the corruption of our outer life since the latter embodies the former. Now humanity's outward life embodied the confused state of the soul with destructive results. Athanasius likens the soul in pursuit of pleasure to "a man out of his mind and asking for a sword" with which to strike at anyone in his path, thinking it sanity.[13] "You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel" (Jas. 4:2). Desire, and the fear of losing what was desired, drove human beings to work against

[10] This shift in the orientation of the soul from invisible to sensible contemplation is characterized differently by each of the Fathers featured in this thesis, as we shall see in the chapters that follow. For Athanasius, it is a shift inward to what is closer; for Gregory, a shift downward from setting the mind on things above to fixing it on earthly things (Col. 3:2); for Augustine, a shift from viewing creatures in reference to God to viewing them as ends in themselves.

[11] Athanasius, *C. Gent.* 4 (*NPNF*^{2} 4:5–6).

[12] Athanasius, *Inc.* 4.

[13] Athanasius, *Inc.* 4 (*NPNF*^{2} 4:6).

God's good order as agents of division, disorder, and death, actively accelerating the divine punishment of corruption and death incurred by transgression of the commandment.[14]

Fallen (or falling) humanity, then, faces a double existential threat that corresponds to its compound nature as soul and body, spiritual and sensible. The body is subject to the punishment of dissolution and separation from the soul. The soul festers in a delusion, devoid of the knowledge of God and of created things and actively driving the whole person toward death, and yet remains presumptuously convinced of its own integrity. Humanity requires a cure tailored to both ailments, and with the precision of a skilled physician God accomplished it through the Incarnate Word.

The Word Descends

To elucidate and defend the precise cure administered to humanity through the Incarnate Word, Athanasius narrates a divine dilemma posed by humanity's fallen state. It would be unfitting for God graciously to bring creatures into existence from nothing only to see them return to nothing. Yet, if he were to remove the law of corruption arbitrarily, he would be inconsistent.[15] Therefore, the Word of God took on a human body capable of death in order that "with all dying in him the law concerning corruption in human beings might be undone (its power being fully expended in the lordly body, and no longer having any ground against similar human beings)."[16] In his own death Christ swallowed up death, and he opened the way to life through his risen body, a "trophy" of immortality for all who believe in him.[17] God thus removed

[14] Athanasius, *Inc.* 5.

[15] Athanasius, *Inc.* 6–7.

[16] Athanasius, *Inc.* 8; Behr, trans., *St. Athanasius the Great*, 67.

[17] Athanasius, *Inc.* 19; Behr, trans., *St. Athanasius the Great*, 91.

the physical punishment of dissolution and separation from the soul which he had imposed on humanity.

The cure of the soul is more complicated because its corruption was not imposed on humanity but freely chosen. If God were to force a cure on human beings, he would destroy their self-governing nature and consequently the mirror image.[18] Yet it would be unfitting for him to make human beings according to his own image and grant knowledge of himself only to see them obscure the likeness and worship irrational (ἀλογικός) creatures.[19] The human likeness to God was received by assimilation through contemplation, but human beings now suffered from truncated contemplation with spiritual eyes "stuck" on things of the body and senses which Athanasius calls "things nearer to themselves."[20] They had become near-sighted, impervious to the transcendent function of sensible things, unable to look beyond the perception of the senses for a vision of God and his good order. To accommodate their fixation on sensible things, the Word planted himself in their field of vision.

> For as a good teacher who cares for his students always condescends to teach by simpler means those who are not able to benefit from more advanced things, so also does the Word of God, just as Paul says, "*For since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of preaching to save those who believe*" (1 Cor. 1:21). For since human beings, having rejected the contemplation of God and as though sunk in an abyss with their eyes held downwards, seeking God in creation [*genesis*] and things perceptible, setting up for themselves mortal humans and demons as gods, for this reason the lover of human beings and the common Savior of all, takes to himself a body and dwells as human among humans and draws to himself the perceptible senses of all human beings.[21]

Through his sensible body, Christ drew to himself the sense perception of all human beings, and

[18] See, for example, Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 31.

[19] Athanasius, *Inc.* 6.

[20] Athanasius, *C. Gent.* 3 (*NPNF*^{2} 4:5). For a discussion of the body as "nearer to themselves" and its connection to the Incarnation, see Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*, 73–74.

[21] Athanasius, *Inc.* 15; Behr, trans., *St. Athanasius the Great*, 83.

by teaching audibly and working visibly he drew them beyond sense-perception to perceive his superiority to all other objects of human worship—to perceive that he is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31) and contemplating him, to perceive the Father (John 14:9).[22] By his descent, Christ thus restores our ability to contemplate God.

Arresting the Tailspin

Now that Christ has exposed the enemy and shown him to be powerless, He purifies us and equips us for battle against the demons. Athanasius calls this ἄσκησις (training).[23] By reversing the tailspin of improper desire, misguided attention, and deluded understanding, Christ secures our attention in order continually to work his victory in us. We become spiritual athletes by the power of Christ who lives in us, able to stand against the Devil's schemes.

Athanasius elaborately illustrates the training of the Christian athlete in his *Life of Antony*.[24] Although written for monks, his depiction of the struggle to be conformed to Christ can serve as a spiritual guide for all Christians. The training regimen includes two kinds of disciplines: those that weaken bodily desires and thereby blunt the weapons of the Devil, and those that train the mind continually to contemplate Christ. Both kinds derive from contemplation—Christ transforming Antony through contemplation.[25]

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[22] Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*, 178.

[23] BDAG, s.v. "Ἄσκησις" suggest that this is an athletic term meaning "practice." Athanasius prescribed some level of ascetic practice for all Christians in his festal letters. David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 144.

[24] The spring of 356 found Athanasius hiding with monks in the Egyptian desert after narrowly escaping a midnight arrest at the altar while celebrating with his congregation (See Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 26–27). Around this time, according to Khaled Anatolios, he wrote the *Life of Antony*, his hagiography of the famous monk who pioneered the eremitic monastic movement that began in the third century. Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 30.

[25] Athanasius tells us he was born to Christian parents and attended the village church, where he paid attention to the reading of Scripture. Turned toward Christ, he was governed by Reason (ὃ Λόγος). His outward life embodied his inward life: he did not pester his affluent parents for fine things, for example, demonstrating moderation and contentedness, which suggest a rational or spiritual (λογικός) life—one guided by Reason. As a

Since the demons make use of bodily desires to allure the will away from contemplating God-ward, mortification, by reserving desire for Christ and his kingdom, blunts the weapons of the Devil. Athanasius grounds this strategy in Jesus' exhortation not to "be anxious about your life," but rather to seek the Kingdom (Luke 12:22, 31). Zeal for the Kingdom corresponds with an appropriate disregard for earthly things. "[Antony] urged us to concede a little time to the body, out of necessity, but to be intent, for the most part, on the soul and to seek its benefit, so that it would not be dragged down by bodily pleasures, but rather that the body might be subservient to the soul."[26] Mortification of the body subjects it to the soul, which, orienting the νοῦς toward Christ, guides the whole person according to Reason. Antony's practices included vigils, fasting, eating only bread and salt and drinking only water, sleeping on the ground, and habituating the body to labors, since, "*When I am weak, then I am strong* [2 Cor. 12:10]. For he said the soul's intensity is strong when the pleasures of the body are weakened."[27]

Other disciplines trained Antony to "contemplate the things that have to do with the Lord."[28] Athanasius emphasizes two forms of contemplation in particular: attention to Scripture and imitation of other Christians. The first undergirded Antony's entire ascetic program. He was prompted to renounce his inheritance by the example of the Apostles (Acts 4:34–35) and the words of Jesus to the rich young man (Matt. 6:34; 19:21), and his decision was reinforced by the

common Christian, Antony was thus already being conformed to the image of Christ through contemplation of Scripture; by becoming a monk, he set out to take a more aggressive and intentional approach. This, too, was prompted by contemplation. He renounced his considerable inheritance prompted by the example of the Apostles and the teaching of Jesus (Acts 4:34–35; Matt. 6:34; 19:21) and took up an ascetic way of life outside of the village in order to apply himself with undivided attention to the Christian struggle to be conformed to Christ: "All the desire and all the energy he possessed concerned the exertion of the discipline." Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 3; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 32.

[26] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 45; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 65.

[27] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 7; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 36.

[28] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 42; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 63.

command not to be anxious about tomorrow (Matt. 6:34). Throughout the account of his discipline, Athanasius persistently links Antony's actions with passages from Scripture, portraying him as one led and sustained by Christ through the words of Scripture.[29] Indeed, immersion in the Word was his single most important training exercise: "He paid such close attention to what was read that nothing from Scripture did he fail to take in—rather he grasped everything, and in him the memory took the place of books."[30] The most crucial role of Scripture comes to bear in combat with the Devil, when Antony uses it to refute his lies and cling to God's promises. By recalling passages to mind in real time, he receives the power of Christ since "the Lord is in the words of the Scriptures."[31]

Antony also trained himself through imitation, a practice reminiscent of Paul's exhortation in Phil. 3:17. Contemplating the faith and life of other "men of zeal," he strove "to manifest in himself what was best from all."

> He was sincerely obedient to those men of zeal he visited, and he *considered carefully* the advantage in zeal and in ascetic living that each held in relation to him. He *observed* the graciousness of one, the eagerness for prayers in another; he *took careful note* of one's freedom from anger, and the human concern of another. And he *paid attention* to one while he lived a watchful life, or one who pursued studies, as also he *admired* one for patience, and another for fastings and sleeping on the ground. The gentleness of one and the long-suffering of yet another he *watched closely*. He *marked*, likewise, the piety toward Christ and the mutual love of them all.[32]

[29] He worked for his bread, for example, because "he who is idle, *let him not eat* [2 Thess. 3:10]." Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 3; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 32.

[30] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 3; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 32.

[31] Athanasius, *Ep. Marcell.* 33; Joel C. Elowsky, trans., *Letter to Marcellinus on the Psalms: Spiritual Wisdom for Today* (New Haven, CT: ICCS, 2021), 38.

[32] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 4; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 33.

Antony can contemplate in other Christians the things that have to do with the Lord because the Lord is at work in them through faith.[33] In their lives Antony sees the governance of Christ, and orienting his νοῦς in a posture of receptivity, receives the same in himself.

After Antony's initial training, Athanasius recounts a series of skirmishes with the Devil. Each encounter leads Antony to intensify rather than diminish his discipline, lest he become complacent. Christians never grow strong enough to stand on their own because victory over the Devil is received from Christ through contemplation. Indeed, the strength of the soul cannot be measured in progress over time, but only from moment to moment, because the key to success is always to be oriented toward Christ.[34] The energy required to contemplate Christ is desire, and desire may be sapped by bodily pleasures and worldly pursuits. Christians must therefore daily mortify the pleasures of the body and actively "contemplate the things that have to do with the Lord." Athanasius grounds this moment-to-moment view of the Christian struggle in Paul's statement, "I die every day" (1 Cor. 15:31),[35] and especially in his admonition to the Philippians (3:12–14):

> Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and *straining forward* to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.[36]

Paul is referring to the orientation of his mind or spirit; to rely on past performance would mean to look back and away from Christ and thereby fall into idolatry. A Christian is never more than a turn away from swerving from the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

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[33] In his *On the Incarnation* (48–53), Athanasius points to Christ's immanent and active transformation of his people as evidence that He is the divine Word of God and not merely human. In the *Life of Antony*, Christ is Antony's co-worker. For a discussion of both themes, see Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*, 180, 182.

[34] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 7.

[35] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 19; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 45.

[36] See, for example, Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 7.

This brings a sense of urgency to the Christian life. Athanasius illustrates the dangers on the upward journey with a vision in which Antony sees souls ascending past a gigantic devil that reaches to the sky ("the prince of the power of the air"[37]—Eph. 2:2). The devil

> seizes and prevents the passing of those who are under his authority, but he is incapable of seizing, as they pass upwards, those who did not submit to him. Having seen this, then, and being prompted to recollection, [Antony] was striving more each day to advance *to what lies ahead* [Phil. 3:13].[38]

Antony's bodily and spiritual training prepares him to resist the distractions and temptations of the Devil and to see through his schemes in order to persevere on the path toward the goal. We see this struggle play out in Antony's ascetic (or athletic) contest with the demons.

Contemplation in Action

The Life of Antony

In his account of Antony's struggle with the Devil, Athanasius manages to assert the simultaneous agency of Antony and Christ, though their roles differ vastly. Christ is the conqueror, who won the victory in the flesh and made a mockery of the demons, especially by his death and resurrection,[39] and he works his own victory in Antony through contemplation. This dynamic between the active receptivity of Antony and the immanent work of Christ plays out in the account of the first contest between Antony and his opponent and is worth quoting at length.

> First [the devil] attempted to lead him away from the discipline, suggesting memories of his possessions, the guardianship of his sister, the bonds of kinship, love of money and of glory, the manifold pleasure of food, the relaxations of life, and, finally, the rigor of virtue, and how great the labor is that earns it, suggesting also the bodily

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[37] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 65; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 79. The upward journey depicted by Athanasius is not Origen's climb out of bodily existence, but rather an evasion of the demonic powers that rule the air (Eph. 2:2). Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism*, 146.

[38] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 66; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 80.

[39] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 5.

> weakness and the length of time involved. So he raised in his mind a great dust cloud of considerations, since he wished to cordon him off from his righteous intention. But the enemy saw his own weakness in the face of Antony's resolve, and saw that he instead was being thrown for a fall by the sturdiness of this contestant and being overturned by his great faith and falling over Antony's constant prayers. Then he placed his confidence in the weapons *in the navel of his belly* [Job 40:16], and boasting in these (for they constitute his first ambush against the young), he advanced against the youth, noisily disturbing him by night, and so troubling him in the daytime that even those who watched were aware of the bout that occupied them both. The one hurled foul thoughts and the other overturned them through his prayers; the former resorted to titillation, but the latter, seeming to blush, fortified the body with faith and with prayers and fasting. And the beleaguered devil undertook one night to assume the form of a woman and to imitate her every gesture, solely in order that he might beguile Antony. But in thinking about the Christ and considering the excellence won through him, and the intellectual part of the soul, Antony extinguished the fire of his opponent's deception. Once again the enemy cast before him the softness of pleasure, but he, angered and saddened (as we might expect), pondered the threat of the fire of judgment and the worm's work, and setting these in opposition, he passed through these testings unharmed. All these were things that took place to the enemy's shame. For he who considered himself to be like God was now made a buffoon by a mere youth, and he who vaunted himself against flesh and blood was turned back by a flesh-bearing man. Working with Antony was the Lord, who bore flesh for us, and gave to the body the victory over the devil, so that each of those who truly struggle can say, It is *not I, but the grace of God which is in me* [1 Cor. 15:10].[40]

At every turn, Antony prevailed by looking to Christ. He cut through the cloud of considerations with his laser focus on Christ, maintained through faith and constant prayers. When the Devil stimulated bodily pleasure (titillation), he fortified the body with faith and prayers and weakened its pleasures with fasting. With the alluring woman the Devil tempted Antony to contemplate, and therefore pursue, his bodily desires apart from the rule of Reason, but Antony remembered the function of his rational soul to contemplate Christ and be led in the virtue displayed by the Lord himself in the flesh. Finally, confronted with the softness of pleasure, the Christ-led Antony experienced the passions of anger and sadness functioning properly to help him "abhor what is evil" (Rom. 12:9). He "pondered the threat of the fire of judgment and the worm's work" in

[40] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 5; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 33–34.

order not to pursue pleasure as if it were "the very essence of good."[41] The astonishment of the Devil at being overthrown by a flesh-bearing man emphasizes the all-important role of Christ in the struggle: Antony received in himself the immanent and victorious activity of Christ as he focused his attention on the Lord in order to be led by him. "This was in Antony the success of the Savior, who *condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit* [Rom. 8:3–4]."[42] Antony remained λογικός by the power of the Incarnate Λόγος working in him through contemplation.

Antony commonly prays the words of Scripture. Responding to the intimidation tactics of the demons, for example, he cries out, "I do not run from your blows, for even if you give me more, nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ," (Rom. 8:35) and then sings Psalm 26:3: "Though an army should set itself in array against me, my heart shall not be afraid."[43] Scripture provides Antony with the antidote to whatever poison the Tempter tries, so that Antony's soul maintains its equilibrium, rejoicing in hope.

The Letter to Marcellinus on the Psalms

The Psalms are particularly well suited to calm storms in the soul because they contain the entire range of human emotion in prayers composed by the Spirit.[44] In other books we are told to

[41] Athanasius, *C. Gent.* 4 (*NPNF*[2] 4:5–6).

[42] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 7; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 35. Paul then explains that the orientation of contemplation determines whether one walks according to the flesh or spirit: "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot" (Rom. 8:5–8).

[43] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 9; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 38.

[44] Athanasius, *Ep. Marcell.* 12.

repent, to abstain from wickedness, to rejoice in God, or to praise him, but the Psalms give us faithful prayers with which to do it.[45] They likewise function to realign the passions of the soul when disordered.

> [T]hese words often act like a mirror for the one who sings them. They allow him to see himself and the inner movements of his own soul in them. And when one recites them they produce that very effect. Indeed, for when someone hears what is read he receives the song as if it were speaking directly about him. He either repents, convicted by his conscience which is sorely pricked, or after hearing about the hope in God and the help that awaits those who believe, he rejoices and begins to give thanks to God that such a gift is available to him.[46]

Athanasius even suggests that the melody of the Psalms reflects a "well-trained and tranquil state of mind" as the Spirit plays the soul like a harp through the praying of the Psalms, bringing the movements of body and soul into sanctified harmony. "For when the melody is joined to the words you forget what you are suffering and find yourself rejoicing instead, seeing things with the mind of Christ and dwelling on what is best."[47]

In his annual Festal Letter of the year 347, writing to the people of his patriarchate to announce the date of Easter, Athanasius uses a nautical analogy to exhort Christians to contemplate Christ. "The world is like the sea to us," and we are a ship; the energy of the will propels us like the wind, and the object of our contemplation steers us like a pilot since the soul is transformed through contemplation. If we look to Christ, we are piloted by him through whatever storms and waves we encounter and safely reach the eternal rest. If, however, we turn to contemplate the passions, they seize the tiller and we suffer shipwreck. "For as in the ocean there are storms and waves, so in the world there are many afflictions and trials."[48] Athanasius

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[45] Athanasius, *Ep. Marcell.* 10.

[46] Athanasius, *Ep. Marcell.* 12; Elowsky, trans., *Letter to Marcellinus*, 19.

[47] Athanasius, *Ep. Marcell.* 29; Elowsky, trans., *Letter to Marcellinus*, 35.

[48] Athanasius, *Ep. fest.* 19.7 (*NPNF*^{2} 4:547).

therefore appeals to his people to follow the example of such saints as Abraham, Job, Joseph, and Paul, who continued faithful amid trials and temptations because "they awoke the Word, Who was sailing with them, and immediately the sea became smooth at the command of its Lord, and they were saved."[49] Athanasius calls his people actively to turn from wickedness and contemplate Christ as they fast through Lent and celebrate the Feast of Easter, "rejoicing at all times, praying incessantly, and in everything giving thanks to the Lord."[50] Through contemplation, Christ brings the soul from a state of chaos to faithful equilibrium and thus fortifies it against the distractions and temptations of the Devil.

Ascending with Christ

Contemplating Christ in the words and actions of his people, in the phrases of Scripture, and in praying the Psalms, we receive the power of the Incarnate Λόγος working in us, making us λογικός once more. We are assimilated to Christ through contemplation. According to Athanasius, the soul conformed to Christ uses the mind of Christ "as a guide" in order to "struggle to conquer what is ruling over the members of the body to bring those members into obedience to reason."[51] Rationally composed, it is fortified against demonic attacks, impervious to storms and waves since it is piloted by the Savior. Antony embodies the sanctified composure of the λογικός soul when he emerges from an abandoned desert fortress after almost two decades of solitary ἄσκησις and battle with the demons.

> The state of his soul was one of purity, for it was not constricted by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor affected by either laughter or dejection. Moreover, when he saw the crowd, he was not annoyed any more than he was elated at being embraced by so

[49] Athanasius, *Ep. fest.* 19.6 (*NPNF*^{2} 4:547).

[50] Athanasius, *Ep. fest.* 19.8 (*NPNF*^{2} 4:547).

[51] Athanasius, *Ep.Marcell.* 28; Elowsky, trans., *Letter to Marcellinus*, 33.

> many people. He maintained utter equilibrium, like one guided by reason and steadfast in that which accords with nature.[52]

Athanasius does not mean to say Antony is entirely passionless, as if emotions are the problem. Rather, Antony exhibits the emotions proper for the situation, having bridled them with the mind of Christ.

The λογικὸς Antony also receives the wisdom necessary to see through the αλογικός (irrational) schemes of the Devil. He is not fooled, for example, when the Devil puts a silver dish in his path as if a traveler had left it by accident in the middle of the Egyptian desert.[53] He likewise recognizes that the antics of the demons which mean to intimidate actually demonstrate their weakness since in the absence of real power they take the shapes of irrational animals and make a show of large numbers.[54] When a horde of hyenas surrounds him as if to attack, he sends them off saying, "If you have received authority over me, I am prepared to be devoured by you. But if you were sent by demons, waste no time in retreating, for I am a servant of Christ."[55] Antony is confident in the face of demonic attacks because Christ demonstrated power over the demons and defeated them by his cross and resurrection. He sees reality in accordance with the mind of Christ. He knows nothing can separate him from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35) and God alone is to be feared. By the continual practice of bodily and spiritual disciplines, by fasting, faith, and constant prayers, Antony remains piloted by Christ, does not submit to the Devil, and therefore continues unimpeded on his upward journey (Phil. 3:14).

Athanasius points out that virtue is not as complicated as "the Greeks" make it out to be. One need not "traverse the sea in order to gain an education…. For the Lord has told us before,

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[52] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 14; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 42.

[53] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 11.

[54] Athanasius *Vit. Ant.* 28.

[55] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 52; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 70.

the Kingdom of God is within you. … For virtue exists when the soul maintains its intellectual part according to nature."[56] The soul that contemplates Christ is governed by Him and leads the entire person in virtue. "So if we wish to despise the enemy, let us always contemplate the things that have to do with the Lord, and let the soul always rejoice in hope."[57]

Conclusion

According to Athanasius, God created us to be rationally composed by assimilation to the Λόγος through contemplation. When we turned away from God in favor of pleasure, however, we became subject to the passions. Blinded by disordered desire and fears, we plunged headlong into chaos. The Word became flesh to present himself to our senses so that we might contemplate him again. Contemplating Christ is a struggle because the devil exploits our passions, attempting to throw the soul into chaos. By looking to Christ in the midst of demonic distraction and temptation, we are governed by Reason and therefore rationally composed. Through contemplation we ascend beyond the passions and enjoy equilibrium, piloted by the Savior.

[56] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 20; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 46.

[57] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 42; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 63.

CHAPTER FOUR

GREGORY OF NYSSA

Gregory of Nyssa emerged as a pivotal defender of Nicene orthodox belief when his older brother Basil of Caesarea died in 379. Basil, who had upheld the divinity of the Holy Spirit against the Pneumatomachians, or "spirit-fighters," now left this task to his younger brother and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus.[1] Gregory of Nyssa, especially, played a decisive role at the First Council of Constantinople in 381, which produced most of the third article of the Nicene Creed.

Beyond his crucial role resolving doctrinal controversies regarding the Spirit, Gregory thought and wrote deeply on human spirituality. Gerhart Ladner articulates the Gregorian conundrum thus: "Why, if man was created according to the image and likeness of God and at the same time was made a spiritual-corporeal compound, should his God-given bodily condition be an occasion for so much suffering and evil?"[2] Indeed, our bodily condition includes many traits that appear incongruous with the image of God: irrational impulses to anger and desire; the endless cycle of desiring food, eating, expelling, and desiring again; and change and decay that mark our journey from birth to death.[3] Death, especially, underscores our unlikeness to God,[4] and Gregory experienced his fair share. His younger brother Naucratius, who lived an ascetic life, died in a fishing accident, entangled in his own net.[5] Years later, after the death of Basil, Gregory

[1] Green, *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 16–17.

[2] Gerhart B. Ladner, "The Philosophical Anthropology of Saint Gregory of Nyssa," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958): 62.

[3] Ladner, "Philosophical Anthropology of Saint Gregory," 91.

[4] Ladner, "Philosophical Anthropology of Saint Gregory," 79.

[5] Green, *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 15.

went to commiserate with his sister Macrina and found that she, too, was dying.[6] In the dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection* it is Macrina who, on her deathbed, teaches Gregory how to think about the problem of suffering. From a worldly perspective, pain appears evil and is to be avoided at all costs, while earthly pleasure appears good and is to be sought above all else. Christ, however, leads the soul beyond appearances to perceive and pursue the true Good. From this spiritual perspective, suffering takes a curative function—to quell our obsession with worldly things and thereby free us to pursue the "upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14).

Prelapsarian Contemplation

Gregory places humanity at the intersection of two spheres: earth and heaven. While all earthly creatures receive the creative and governing activity of the Λόγος and thereby participate in the goodness and wisdom of God, human beings were made to know God and enjoy him.[7] For divine knowledge God gave us reason (λόγος), so that looking beyond sense perception we might perceive the governing activity of the Λόγος, and perceiving the Λόγος, know God. If such were the limit of knowledge it might have been attained by the Greeks, but God also built into our nature the ability to enjoy him through self-governance (αὐτεξούσια).[8] He made our soul a kind of container for his goodness,[9] so that we could be, in a created mode, what he is—good, wise, loving, immortal, and free—and thereby know and enjoy him from our own nature.[10] This

[6] Gregory of Nyssa, *An. et res.*; Catherine P. Roth, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa: The Soul and the Resurrection* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 27.

[7] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 5.6.

[8] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 5.9. See also J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 22–23.

[9] Gregory of Nyssa, *An. et res.*; Roth, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 87.

[10] A.N. Williams summarizes Gregory's position: "We can discover what is proper to the soul by applying the

special participation in God's nature is continually received through contemplation. Fixing the attention of our soul Godward, we become what he is insofar as it is appropriate for a creature.

In the structure of the cosmos, humanity occupied a kind of mediating role between heaven and earth. In our nature all of creation was taken up into the life of God, since it was dust of the earth which God formed and in-breathed with his own Spirit. Conversely, as a representation of God on earth, commissioned to participate in its care and governance, we mediated in a created mode the presence of the invisible God.[11]

In our prelapsarian state, the earthly and the heavenly in our nature were seamlessly united. The human body displayed the immortality of the Creator and in no way hindered the perception and enjoyment of "divine good things."[12] We enjoyed the Good, for which we have an inbuilt love,[13] and fulfilled our God-given role to care for creation.

Idolatrous Contemplation and the Tailspin

The symbiotic structure of body and soul, earthly and heavenly, collapsed when human beings abandoned the contemplation and enjoyment of divine good things in favor of earthly pleasure. This was prompted by the deception of the Devil, who out of envy lured humanity to its own destruction[14] with the bait of carnal pleasure.[15] We took the bait, and contemplating

simple test of asking what is proper to divine nature—what belongs essentially to the first must also belong to the second." A.N. Williams, *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 92.

[11] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 6.3–5, 10.

[12] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 5.6; Green, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 74. See also Gregory of Nyssa, *An. et res.*; Roth, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 77.

[13] "[D]esire for the good naturally draws [the soul] into motion." Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 21.3; Green, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 109. For Gregory on love as desire for the Good, see also Gregory of Nyssa, *An. et res.*; Roth, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 80.

[14] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 6.10–11.

[15] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 21.5.

earthward, became assimilated to earthly things. The spiritual soul was folded into the earthly nature of the body, becoming carnal by obsession with material things.

Postlapsarian humanity thus discerns the good not spiritually, but carnally[16]—according to sense perception: pleasure is good, pain is evil.[17] In reality, according to Gregory, evil is located in the will. All sensible things are good because they were created by and participate in God, who is Good. Evil does not exist in material possessions, nor in sensation, nor in the human being *qua* creature of God, but in the dissident movement of the soul toward what is not proper for it.[18] Goodness, wisdom, and justice are proper to the soul, and the soul that abides in these leads the body in virtue. To experience pleasure or pain is therefore neither good nor evil, but indifferent. Virtue depends on the movement of the soul according to its God-given nature. The quest for pleasure violates nature by dragging the soul down from heaven to earth and making it carnal.

This carnality of the soul, we might say, locks humanity in a self-reinforcing loop, a tailspin toward earthly things. (1) A carnal understanding of the good breeds carnal desire, which (2) energizes and directs carnal contemplation, which (3) perpetuates carnal understanding of the good, which (1) breeds carnal desire. Gregory visualizes the collapse of the spiritual into the

[16] Gregory contrasts a carnal and a spiritual understanding of good and evil based on Saint Paul's distinction in 1 Cor. 2:15: St. Paul "distinguishes between the carnal and spiritual states of souls," Gregory says, to show "that it is not fitting to judge good or evil by sense perception, but, withdrawing the mind beyond bodily phenomena, [it is necessary] to distinguish the nature of the good and its opposite itself by itself. For 'the spiritual man,' he says, 'judges all things.'" He is referencing 1 Cor. 2:15. Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 7.2; Green, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 82.

[17] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 8.15–16. Gregory views sense perception as generally unreliable, and yet utterly necessary. It is unreliable because it often does not signify reality. A jar appears to be empty, for example, until it is submerged and we reason based on the bubbles and gurgling noise that it was actually full of air. Gregory of Nyssa, *An. et res.*; Roth, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 41–42. For a discussion of the senses as "mediator" between body and soul, and the role of sense perception in acquiring knowledge, see Williams, *Divine Sense*, 100–102.

[18] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 7.3–4.

earthly with the image of a boulder crashing down a steep slope.[19] The soul was plunged violently down to earth by misguided desire for pleasure as by a gravitational force. Having become partially materialized, the soul is no longer free to ascend and contemplate its proper objects but rather enslaved to worldly passions.[20] Carnal humanity neither knows nor enjoys God, but rather ignorantly pursues pleasure and avoids pain.

The Word Descends

The restoration of humanity began, counterintuitively, with God's bestowal of mortality. He clothed humanity with mortality (Gen. 3:21) in order to clothe it with immortality (1 Cor. 15:54). Gregory calls this the economy (οἰκονομίαν) of death.[21] Since the soul and body had inappropriately grown together, the soul having become assimilated to earthly things, God provided a way for soul and body to be separated temporarily, "so that, by vice flowing out in the dissolution of the body and soul, man might be recreated again by the resurrection sound, and impassible, and uncontaminated, and alien to any admixture of vice."[22] Christ fulfilled the economy of death by his own death and resurrection. In him, body and soul have been reunited so that the resurrection from the dead and the reconstitution of human nature as a spiritual-corporeal compound is secured for all humanity.[23]

Nevertheless, human salvation is not accomplished by divine fiat alone, lest he destroy the

[19] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 6.9. For more on the gravitational effect of carnal attraction, see also Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 2; Hilda C. Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa: The Lord's Prayer; The Beatitudes* (New York: Newman, 1954), 101–2.

[20] Gregory of Nyssa, *An. et res.*; Roth, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 76.

[21] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 35.7; 8.4–5.

[22] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 35.7; Green, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 141.

[23] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 16.7–9.

freedom of humanity and thereby destroy the image.[24] We freely chose to take the Devil's bait and contemplate carnal pleasure as the ultimate good. God therefore moved to expose the lie of the Devil and show us the true Good by means of the Incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Word, that contemplating Godward through Christ we might be drawn by innate desire to the Good as by a gravitational force.

God exposed the Devil and drew humanity back to himself in brilliant and dramatic fashion. Since human beings had sold themselves to the Devil willingly, God set out to buy them back. He could have taken them by force, but then he would seem unjust.[25] By offering Christ as a ransom, God demonstrated his superlative goodness, power, justice, and wisdom while simultaneously exposing the deception of the Devil.[26] That the Word of God would condescend to assume our entire passible nature from birth to death for our salvation demonstrates God's love for humanity and therefore his goodness.[27] It also perfectly demonstrates his power; a grand display would seem natural for God, condescension supernatural.[28] God's justice was displayed when the Devil reaped exactly what he had sown. Just as the Devil had lured humanity with carnal bait, God baited the Devil with the human nature of Christ, that he might swallow the hook of the divine Word.[29] The Devil had prevailed against human nature previously, pursuing its destruction because he envied its creation in God's image. Here, in Christ, was a man of even greater power, seemingly within the Devil's grasp.[30] By killing the Incarnate Word, the Devil

[24] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 31.1.

[25] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 22.2.

[26] Gregory summarizes this point in *Or. cat.* 24.6.

[27] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 26.2.

[28] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 24.2.

[29] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 24.4.

[30] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 23.2–3.

inadvertently released humanity like the dog in Aesop's fable that, looking at a reflection in water, drops its food in exchange for the image of the food.[31] The Devil lost all credibility when Christ rose from the dead on the third day. In Christ we therefore see through the schemes of the Devil and perceive true goodness, power, justice, and wisdom. Contemplating him, we put off the carnal man and put on Christ.

Arresting the Tailspin

The carnality of the soul locks humanity in the downward spiral of corrosive transformation. If the soul is to reverse course, it must be purified of its obsession with carnal pleasure.[32] Since the obsession has become ingrained in us by the assimilation of the soul to the body, our nature needs to be purified by dissolution, then reunited. Christ renewed our spiritual-corporeal nature in his own death and resurrection so that corrupt human nature will be renewed in the resurrection. The renewal of nature will nevertheless remain ineffective if the soul persists in evil.[33] Evil is a choice of the will, the movement of the soul toward what is not proper for it. Our restoration thus requires, in addition to bodily death and resurrection, a 180° change of mind: repentance (μεταμελεία).[34] A complete reversal of spiritual momentum is impossible in this life, since carnal desire inheres in our corrupt nature. We are finally released from the gravitational pull of carnal desire through death. Yet, those who follow Christ begin to

[31] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 21.4.

[32] "[T]he soul advances in its understanding and enjoyment of God in proportion to its moral likeness to God." Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 154.

[33] As Gregory puts it, "not all who receive a return to existence again by the resurrection return to the same life, but there is a great interval between those who have been purified and those who are in need of purification." Those who have been purified by repentance and the washing of baptism will be restored in the image of the Creator. Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 35.14; Green, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 143.

[34] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 35.9.

participate in his purity by imitating his death through the "washing of regeneration"[35] (Tit. 3:5).

In baptism, we "rehearse" our own incorporation into Christ's burial and resurrection by submersing in water and rising from it again.[36] Imitation is a form of contemplation—attending to something in order to be assimilated to it. By imitating Christ's death and resurrection, our soul is assimilated to Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–4).[37] Our carnal will is mortified in anticipation of the completion of our transformation through natural death and bodily resurrection (Rom. 6:6). Christ thus begins in us the "destruction… of vice,"[38] "for one who has died has been set free from sin" (Rom. 6:7). Through the washing of baptism, Christ purifies "our faculty of decision,"[39] so that we "consider [ourselves] dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11).

Just as the soul is "mingled" with Christ in baptism by faith, so the mortal and corrupt bodies of those who believe in Christ are "mingled" with his immortal and incorruptible body through reception of the Eucharist. We are what we eat, as they say, and in the Eucharist we eat the risen body and blood of the Incarnate Word, who makes it such by the same power with which he became flesh. By eating and drinking of Christ, who says, "This is my body,"[40] we proleptically participate in his immortality.[41] "For just as 'a little leaven,' as the apostle says,

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[35] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 35.12; Green, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 142.

[36] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 35.12; Green, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 142. In calling the baptism a "rehearsal," Gregory does not mean it is inefficacious or a mere "teaching tool." He rather sees God performing a transformative act by his Word in the Spirit. The benefit is first spiritual, effecting a mortification of the will. This translates to moral action in outward life. For further discussion of how baptism fits into Gregory's spiritual schema, see Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 182–86.

[37] Paul's discussion of baptism in Rom. 6 underlies Gregory's discussion of baptism. Gregory makes this explicit by quoting Rom. 6:10. See Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 35.10.

[38] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 35.9; Green, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 141.

[39] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 40.3; Green, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 154.

[40] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 37.10; Green, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 148.

[41] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 37.12.

assimilates 'the whole lump' [Gal. 5:9] to itself, so the body that was made immortal by God, coming to be in us, remakes and transfers the whole to itself."[42]

Gregory thus views the death and resurrection of soul and body as the path to purification—freedom from the gravitational pull of earthly things—and this begins with the sacraments.[43] The Eucharist is a special means for the body, through its nutritive power, to put off the carnal man and put on Christ. In baptism, the soul puts off the carnal man and puts on Christ by imitation of his death and resurrection. These are the beginning and foundation of a lifelong journey for those who follow Christ through the "labyrinth of life," the "exitless prison of death, in which the wretched race of man was confined."[44]

Contemplation in Action

One who is baptized has become a proleptic participant in the death and resurrection of Christ by faith, but to consider oneself "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" is a struggle. The soul must choose its object: flesh or spirit. "To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the spirit is life and peace" (Rom. 8:6). The key to walking according to the Spirit and mortifying carnal passions is continually to contemplate Christ in order not to be deceived by carnal understanding and desire. Christ descended to reveal the true spiritual Good to those whose line of sight was blocked by the hills of carnal obsession,[45] who blindly sought pleasure and avoided pain. He took on flesh so that we could easily see and learn from him. But

[42] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 37.3; Green, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 145.

[43] "Gregory's spiritual doctrine … must be seen as an extension of His [*sic.*] sacramental theology." Jean Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 22.

[44] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 35.3–4; Green, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 140.

[45] Gregory uses this imagery (i.e. "hills of wickedness") at the beginning of his *Homilies on the Beatitudes* (1) to illustrate the insight that is gained by ascending with Christ. Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 1; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 85.

he does not leave us on earth to live a carnal existence, nor does he press a reset button lest he destroy the free will of the soul and with it the image.[46] Instead, he comes to us where we are and leads our soul back to where it belongs—in the heavenly sphere. Contemplating Christ, we follow him beyond the hills of carnal desire and understanding to perceive things clearly from the mountaintop—to know the true Good, interpret all things spiritually, and guide the outward life of the body in virtue.[47]

The journey of the soul back to the heavenly sphere is painful because the soul has become attached to earthly things.[48] To unlearn its carnal conception of the good and reorient desire away from its former loves requires voluntary death (Rom. 6:11)—putting off the carnal man and putting on Christ. But the benefit is worth the cost. Just as gold must endure the refiner's fire, and patients are sometimes "healed with cuttings and cautery,"[49] so the soul endures the loss of what once seemed ultimately important in order to gain Christ.

What is lost cannot be compared with what is gained, and Jesus uses this disparity for two complimentary purposes. First, by unmasking the illusory and fleeting nature of earthly goods, he dulls our carnal desire and thereby slows our downward momentum. Second, by highlighting the superlative goodness of the heavenly Good, he incites desire for it, propelling us upward. He thus guides the soul with right understanding and propels it by the force of desire toward its

[46] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 31.1.

[47] Gregory calls the movement from the material or carnal to the spiritual "anagogy" (ἀναγωγή). The Christian struggle to be conformed to Christ involves seeking to move beyond a carnal understanding of ourselves, the world around us, and God. It also means approaching the text of Scripture with anagogical intent, seeking to rise above sensible, finite, and temporal words and images to perceive God, who is the invisible, boundless, and timeless Good. Since we ourselves are bound by the same limitations as the text, the vision we achieve is the darkness of faith rather than the clarity of knowledge. Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 53–84.

[48] Gregory discusses this point at length with his sister Macrina. See Gregory of Nyssa, *An. et res.*; Roth, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 83–88.

[49] Gregory of Nyssa, *Or. cat.* 26.8; Green, trans., *Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, 120.

heavenly target like an arrow from a bow.[50] He points out to his disciples, for example, that earthly treasure is susceptible to moth, rust, and thieves, while heavenly treasure is not (Matt. 6:20). In doing so, he transfers the passionate attention of his disciples from what is carnal to what is spiritual. Gregory sees this pattern operating throughout the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus leads his hearers through the beatitudes as though they were rungs of a ladder[51] by which to ascend beyond mere sense perception to perceive good and evil truly. At each rung, Christ exposes the futility of apparent goods and reveals the superlative goodness of the hidden Good in order to lead his disciples out of the hills of wickedness to see clearly from the mountaintop.[52] In what follows, we will briefly summarize Gregory's teaching on the first five beatitudes, from his *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, which encapsulates his vision of the struggle to be conformed to Christ. Attending to Christ's teachings, we continually move beyond carnal understanding and desire to contemplate the true Good spiritually; we put off the carnal man and put on Christ, so that the soul is restored in the Spirit to its heavenly sphere.

"Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). The carnal man counts blessed those who are rich in earthly things, but these are fleeting. Those who enjoy the beauty of youth, or the honor of high office appear blessed until they are rotting in a graveyard.[53] He who emptied himself and took the form of a servant reveals that true blessedness is enjoyed by the humble, or poor in spirit.[54] They recognize the true spiritual poverty of humanity and the futility of earthly goods. To the carnal mind, those who do not lay up for

[50] Gregory of Nyssa, *Cant.* 127–29.

[51] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 2; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 97.

[52] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 1; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 85.

[53] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 1; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 93.

[54] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 1; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 91.

themselves treasures on earth appear pitiable, but they, for their part, would rather be poor in things that drag them down and rich in virtue, which tends upward, knowing that those who share in Christ's sufferings will also reign with him: "theirs is the kingdom of God."[55]

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the land"[56] (Matt. 5:5). Christ's humble assessment of human nature engenders meekness in the pursuit of earthly things, whereas a carnal assessment drives people passionately to pursue earthly goods, and the loss of such goods incites wrath and indignation.[57] Since Christians regard youth, high office, and other earthly goods as fleeting, they do not readily follow the impulses of carnal passions. For example, indignation need not follow dishonor because the Christian no longer regards honor as the ultimate good.[58] Meekness thus slows the downward momentum of the soul, freeing it to gain momentum in its upward pursuit of the Good. Thus, the meek will inherit the heavenly country.[59]

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). Those who mourn appear miserable in the eyes of the world, but Christ links godly sorrow with beatitude. Worldly sorrow mourns the loss of earthly goods despite their futility in the face of certain death. Godly sorrow recognizes their futility and instead mourns the poverty of human nature,[60] which once enjoyed beatitude—"a possession of all things held to be good,"[61]—but is now subject to death and a slave to tyrannical passions. Those who see through the illusion of earthly beatitude and mourn the loss of the true Good are comforted by the Holy Spirit with the hope of future freedom

[55] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 1; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 95–96.

[56] Gregory inverts the order of the second and third beatitudes in his sermons.

[57] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 2; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 103–4.

[58] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 2; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 104.

[59] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 2; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 105.

[60] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 3; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 107. Cf. 2 Cor. 7:10.

[61] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 1; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 87.

and immortality in Christ.[62]

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matt. 5:6). The carnal man seeks to fulfill his desire with carnal pleasure, but the satisfaction received is futile and fleeting; the pleasure quickly fades. One can only eat or drink so much before satiety or aversion sets in. To hunger and thirst for righteousness, in contrast, is to have one's will conformed to Christ's will.[63] Christ hungered for the salvation of humanity,[64] and he directs our desire toward our salvation, that is, toward Him who is our "justification, sanctification, and redemption."[65] Desire for Christ receives its object; God dwells in us by faith, and the Holy Spirit works in us the fruits of righteousness. Moreover, such participation in virtue leads not to aversion but intensification of desire. Unlike the body, which hungers, eats, expels, and hungers again, the soul loses nothing but grows continually in its capacity to participate in Christ's righteousness.[66]

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (Matt. 5:7). Gregory calls mercy the height of virtue.[67] Christ has brought his listeners beyond the appearance of earthly goods to perceive their futility. Their momentum toward earthly things has therefore been slowed. At the same time, he has taught them to mourn the freedom and immortality that human nature once enjoyed and to hunger and thirst for Christ who restores freedom and immortality. Having risen beyond sense perception to perceive and pursue the true Good, Christ's disciples do not withhold earthly possessions from those in need, nor insulate themselves from the concerns of those who

[62] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 3; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 116.

[63] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 4; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 127.

[64] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 4; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 124.

[65] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 4; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 128. Cf. 1 Cor. 1:30.

[66] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 4; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 129.

[67] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 5; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 130, 33.

are suffering, but rather seek to supply what is lacking in others and share in their misfortune.[68] In this way, the merciful participate in Christ's self-giving, intensified love.[69] They are conformed to Christ.

Although Gregory applies a sequential logic to the process of putting off the carnal man and putting on Christ, he does not view the Christian life as a series of stages culminating in complete purity. The beatitudes rather provide a theoretical pattern that informs and catalyzes the daily experience of baptismal death and resurrection as Christians actively put off the carnal man and put on Christ. Any listener to Gregory's sermons can be persuaded to abandon carnal understanding and desire for the sake of Christ, no matter what level of progress they have attained. Gregory does enumerate three levels of Christian progress in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, but they correspond "to the degree of each individual's inclination to the good and withdrawal from the worse": (1) newborns in the faith who "have just emerged from deep-set delusion," (2) those who have left childlike things behind but are motivated by fear, and (3) those who are mature and drawn to Christ by love.[70] All are being saved, but none have reached a static goal of perfection. Rather, as finite creatures growing in participation in the infinite Good, Christians follow Paul in "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead," never thinking to have attained the goal because "stopping in the race of virtue marks the beginning of the race of evil."[71] Gregory, like Athanasius, declines to measure progress in distance traveled, since the potential for growth in goodness is unlimited. Instead, he measures

[68] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 5; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 132–33.

[69] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 5; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 130–31. For a discussion of Christian participation in the love of God in the Spirit as the fulfillment of the image of God in man, see Von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, 163–69.

[70] Gregory of Nyssa, *Cant.* 460–61; Richard A. Norris Jr., trans., *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 489, 491.

[71] Gregory of Nyssa, *Vit. Moys.* 1.6; Malherbe and Ferguson, trans., *Gregory of Nyssa*, 30.

progress by momentum. "For the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness."[72]

Ascending with Christ

The goal of the Christian life is not therefore a destination, but rather the journey itself. To be growing in goodness is to be traveling in the right direction, to be aimed and driven by God toward the proper target.[73] The baptismal life of shedding the carnal man and putting on Christ heals the dissident movement of the will and therefore reorients the trajectory of the soul. Oriented toward Christ, the soul is purified of carnal obsession and obtains what it seeks: Christ, who is our "justification, sanctification, and redemption."[74] Contemplating Christ, we are assimilated to him and therefore participate in his purity, in his single-mindedness toward the Good.[75] Such purity brings with it participation in all divine good things, just as light replaces darkness as soon as the veil is removed.[76] The soul becomes what it was intended by God to be: a receptacle of God's goodness. Contemplating Christ, which Gregory equates with following Him,[77] we are filled by the Holy Spirit with the fruit of righteousness: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22–23). To participate in such

[72] Gregory of Nyssa, *Vit. Moys.* 1.10; Malherbe and Ferguson, trans., *Gregory of Nyssa*, 31.

[73] God is the archer who aims and shoots the arrow of the soul in the proper direction. Gregory of Nyssa, *Cant.* 127–29.

[74] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 4; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 128. Cf. 1 Cor. 1:30.

[75] To demonstrate that Christ purifies the soul by healing the will, Gregory points to the Sermon on the Mount, in which Christ digs down to the root of sin—evil choice, which occurs at the level of thoughts. Adultery, for example, begins with lustful desire in the heart, which orients the eyes toward the object of lust. Jesus thus uses the spiritual law to dig up the roots of evil, to rid the soul of evil choice. Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 6; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 152–53.

[76] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 6; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 150.

[77] "To follow God wherever he might lead is to behold God." Gregory interprets the back of God, which Moses saw in the theophany of Exod. 33:17–23, to be Christ, who says, "Come, follow me" (Matt. 4:19). Gregory of Nyssa, *Vit. Moys.* 2.251–52; Malherbe and Ferguson, trans., *Gregory of Nyssa*, 119.

things is to participate in God's own nature. The pure in heart thus see God (Matt. 5:8) not merely by analogy through the things he has made, but from their own purified human nature; the pure in heart know and enjoy God because he fills them with his own goodness in Christ, through contemplation.[78] The ascent of the soul, guided and propelled by Christ, restores human beings to their original beatitude of being in the image of God.

The purification of the soul also confers peace, since peace naturally reigns when ungodly anger, lust, greed, and fear no longer dominate the soul. Baptismal mortification of "the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24) pacifies the antagonism of spirit and flesh so that the Christian is single-minded toward the good.[79] Those who are contemplating Christ and consequently ascending with him therefore not only participate in his peace but make peace among others and within themselves. They imitate God by dispensing divine gifts.[80] "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9).

Peace between spirit and flesh anticipates the final unification of human nature as a seamless spiritual-corporeal compound, "so that what appears is the same as what is hidden, and what is hidden the same as what appears."[81] The body becomes subject to the rule of the soul, which is governed by the Spirit, so that body and soul "coalesce, because both are united to the good."[82]

Since the antagonism of flesh and spirit is overcome through mortification, Christians receive pain, suffering, and death as tools with which Christ purifies them of carnal passion and

[78] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 6; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 148–49.

[79] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 7; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 165.

[80] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 7; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 164–65.

[81] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 7; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 165.

[82] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 7; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 165.

even propels them on their upward journey.[83] The eighth beatitude is therefore the summit of Gregory's ascent of the soul. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:10). Natural man, Gregory says, drags around the "whole burden of a lifetime" like a snail bound to its shell. When persecution comes, he cannot bear to lose those earthly things to which he has become improperly attached. By faith, however, the persecuted have the Lord fighting for them:

> But when the living Word which, as the Apostle says, *is effectual and more piercing than any two-edged sword*, penetrates into a man who has truly received the faith, it cuts through the things that have badly grown together, and disrupts the fetters of habit. Then he will throw off the worldly pleasures bound to his soul, like a runner casts a burden from his shoulders, and will run light and nimble through the fighting ring, since he is guided in his course by the President of the contest Himself. For he looks not to the things he has left behind, but to those that come hereafter, and so he does not turn back his eyes to the pleasures that are past, but he goes forward to the Good that lies before him.[84]

The Christ-led soul can say with Paul, "this will work out for my deliverance," (Phil. 1:19) because suffering in faith builds upward momentum for the soul on its journey. "Let us not be sorrowful, then, if we are persecuted, but rather let us rejoice, because by being chased away from earthly honours, we are driven towards the heavenly good."[85]

Gregory's account of human restoration is heavenward focused, but not in a way that demeans corporeality as such. We began this chapter with Ladner's Gregorian conundrum: "Why, if man was created according to the image and likeness of God and at the same time was

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[83] Boersma seems almost to take offense at Gregory's emphasis on mortification of the flesh. He believes Gregory values the body only insofar as it cooperates in propelling us beyond corporeality toward the "intellectual creation of Paradise." *Embodiment and Virtue*, 245. Von Balthasar sees postlapsarian bodily existence in Gregory's thought as simultaneously punishment and consolation, carnal weight and purification. *Presence and Thought*, 78–79. If, for Gregory, the Christian life is more about mortification of the flesh than enjoyment or appreciation of the flesh, it is to purify the soul of carnal obsession. Gregory does look forward to a kind of corporeality in the life to come, though different than our current bodily experience. Gregory of Nyssa, *An. et res.*; Roth, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 88. Cf. 1 Cor. 15:44.

[84] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 8; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 171.

[85] Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 8; Graef, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 174–75.

made a spiritual-corporeal compound, should his God-given bodily condition be an occasion for so much suffering and evil?"[86] Gregory finds the solution in the disparity between our current bodily experience and the immortality or stability we originally enjoyed. Bodily existence was more spiritual, devoid of the characteristics that accompany mortal instability such as hunger and excrement, illness, and pain.[87] It is to this kind of body we will be raised:

> But if you have some fondness for this body, and you are sorry to be unyoked from what you love, do not be in despair about this either. For although this bodily covering is now dissolved by death, you will see it woven again from the same elements, not indeed with its present coarse and heavy texture, but with the thread respun into something subtler and lighter, so that the beloved body may be with you and be restored to you again in better and even more lovable beauty.[88]

In the resurrection, the body will again reflect the immortality and impassibility of God and will in no way hinder the contemplation of God and his creatures. Mourning will turn to joy, and desire will turn to love when we attain what we hoped for: freedom from evil passions, immortality, and all divine good things.

Conclusion

According to Gregory, we were made a spiritual-corporeal compound, with head in the clouds and feet on the ground, so to speak. Our spiritual nature was folded into the corporeal when we turned to contemplate carnal pleasure. We were locked into carnal contemplation because we conceived a carnal understanding and therefore pursued pleasure and avoided pain. The Word became flesh to assume and dissolve our compound nature in himself in order to restore it purified in the resurrection. He also showed us his goodness and exposed the devil as a fraud. Contemplating Christ, Christ grants us a voluntary baptismal death of the will through

[86] Ladner, "Philosophical Anthropology of Saint Gregory," 62.

[87] Ladner, "Philosophical Anthropology of Saint Gregory," 91.

[88] Gregory of Nyssa, *An. et res.*; Roth, trans., *St. Gregory of Nyssa*, 88.

contemplation in order to break the continuity of evil and arrest our fall. Following him, we learn to see beyond the appearance of good and evil. Ascending with him out of carnal obsession, we receive our spiritual nature back restored.

CHAPTER FIVE

AUGUSTINE

Augustine became one of the most influential figures in the history of Christianity only after giving up a promising career in rhetoric. He taught rhetoric first in Carthage, then in Rome, and was finally appointed professor of rhetoric for Milan, the city of the Imperial court. This position entailed speaking publicly for the emperor[1] and therefore opened the way to higher positions in public office.[2] Nevertheless, his political ambition dissolved when he converted to Christianity in 386.

> I believed it to be pleasing in your sight that I should withdraw the service of my tongue from the market of speechifying, so that young boys who were devoting their thoughts not to your law, not to your peace, but to lying follies and legal battles, should no longer buy from my mouth the weapons for their frenzy.[3]

Instead, Augustine applied the full force of his rhetorical skill to serve the truth. He became a popular preacher and prolific writer and helped steer the Church through the sack of Rome by Alaric the Visigoth in 410 as well as the Donatist and Pelagian controversies during his tenure as bishop of Hippo from 395–430.

Throughout his ecclesiastical career, the art of rhetoric lent the former professor not only eloquence but also a metaphor with which to teach the Christian faith. God is the rhetorician *par excellence*, who uses creation, Scripture, and especially the Word-made-flesh to persuade[4] human beings to contemplate him and thereby participate in his divine life. The Christian life is a

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[1] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 69.

[2] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 71.

[3] Augustine, *Conf.* 9.2; Maria Boulding, trans., *The Confessions* (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1997), 158–59.

[4] "Do not forsake me now when I call upon you, who before ever I called you forestalled me by your persistent, urgent entreaties, multiplying and varying your appeals that I might hear you from afar, and turn back, and begin to call upon you who were calling me." Augustine, *Conf.* 13.1; Boulding, trans., *Confessions*, 275.

struggle to move beyond fixation on temporal things as ends in themselves to be enjoyed privately apart from the Creator, and instead to recognize and comprehend the discourse of the Incarnate Word, Scripture, and all of creation as pointing beyond themselves to the divine Rhetorician. We can only begin to understand as God calls us to repentance, forgives us, and fills us with his love.

Prelapsarian Contemplation

According to Augustine, God orders the entire cosmos for our contemplation, that we might perceive him by his works. He uses the eloquent speech of the whole of creation as well as each of its syllables to display in their existence, order, and permanence his Eternity, Truth, and Love,[5] so that each changeable creature points beyond itself to the unchangeable Maker "from whom are all things, through whom all things, in whom all things"[6] (Rom. 11:36). In this way, creatures serve a rhetorical function. Like words, they are vehicles for meaning, signs that point to a reality beyond themselves: "We are not God…. He made us!"[7] All of human experience in the cosmos thus affords the opportunity to contemplate God.

Yet, just as signs are useless apart from prior understanding of what they signify,[8] so prior knowledge of God is necessary to interpret the rhetoric of creation. Human beings were given God's Spirit and therefore possessed as an "inner spring" the interpretive key with which to know God signified by the signs of his creation.[9] Human beings could contemplate creation *in*

[5] Augustine, *Civ.* 11.28.

[6] Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.5; Edmund Hill, trans., *Teaching Christianity* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), 111.

[7] Augustine, *Conf.* 10.9; Boulding, trans., *Confessions*, 186.

[8] Words, according to Augustine, do not give knowledge directly but rather direct the attention of the hearer toward the subject. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, 113.

[9] Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, 110.

the Creator and therefore direct their affectionate attention wholly toward God.

By clinging to God through contemplation, human beings were "shaped and conformed to" the divine Word, who is "in the form of God" (Phil. 2:6) so that we might enjoy the divine life of the Trinity.[10] Such participation is actualized in the Spirit. The Spirit rested on us in order that we might rest in him and thereby "live more and more fully on the fount of life, and in his light see light, and so be perfected, illumined, and beatified."[11] Conformed to the Word in the Spirit, we know and will in accordance with God's knowledge and will, and we see our own existence as he sees us. We exist, know, and will *in* him[12]; or rather, God is and knows and wills *in* us. Just as the Spirit speaks *through* a person who speaks *in* the Spirit, so the Spirit understands and loves *through* a person who understands and loves *in* the Spirit.[13] Contemplating the Word in the Spirit we thus receive divine wisdom with which to know ourselves, other creatures, and God, as well as divine love with which to think and act justly. We were created to cling to God unswervingly, to allow "no channel to be led off from [the love of God] that will diminish its own flow,"[14] in order that our whole life might be taken up into the life of the Trinity.

Idolatrous Contemplation and the Tailspin

Our first parents fell when they were persuaded by the devil's rhetoric[15] to forsake God and

[10] Augustine, *Conf.* 13.3; Boulding, trans., *Confessions*, 276.

[11] Augustine, *Conf.* 13.5; Boulding, trans., *Confessions*, 277.

[12] Augustine frequently uses this "triad" in human nature. See, for example, Augustine, *Conf.* 13.12.

[13] "It is different for people who see creation through your Spirit, for you are seeing it through their eyes. Thus when such people see that these things are good, you are seeing that they are good; whatever created things please them for your sake, it is you who are arousing their delight in these things; and anything that gives us joy through your Spirit gives you joy in us." Augustine, *Conf.* 13.46; Boulding, trans., *Confessions*, 303. See also John Peter Kenney, "Faith and Reason," in *Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, 289.

[14] Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.21; Hill, trans., *Teaching Christianity*, 119.

[15] For a discussion of Satan as deceptive rhetorician, see Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 67–68.

proudly chart a new course on the road "traveled by the affections"[16]—to "set [their] hearts" on godlessness.[17] Having presumptuously displaced the Creator as the sole object of love and therefore the goal of all contemplation, they began to attend to creation and to themselves without reference to God. Without the inner spring of wisdom, they could no longer interpret the language of creation, and their understanding became futile. They were trapped in a world of signs without access to their meaning. Still searching for happiness, they attended to signs as ends in themselves, as things to be contemplated and enjoyed as if possession of them constituted a life of bliss. Rather than enjoy the divine life of the Trinity by assimilation through contemplation, human beings became obsessed with temporal goods and consequently took on "the coloring of this world."[18]

The assimilation of the soul to the world reinforced humanity's pride and ignorance[19] and therefore perpetuated a corrosive tailspin. (1) Contemplation of temporal goods conceives the notion that these comprise the life of the soul[20]; (2) the soul therefore presumptuously longs to possess and enjoy temporal goods and, consequently, (3) contemplates them[21]; (1) contemplation of temporal goods perpetuates the false conception that they comprise the life of the soul, so that

[16] Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.17.16; Hill, trans., *Teaching Christianity*, 117.

[17] Augustine, *Trin.* 4.15; Hill, trans., *Trinity*, 168.

[18] Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.12; Hill, trans., *Teaching Christianity*, 115. "[The soul] dies by forsaking the fountain of life, and thus is welcomed by this passing world and shaped to it." Augustine, *Conf.* 13.31; Boulding, trans., *Confessions*, 293. For a discussion of the assimilation of the soul to the object of its affectionate attention, see Miles, "Vision," 128.

[19] What I am calling pride and ignorance Dodaro designates ignorance (*ignorantia*) and weakness (*difficultas*). The weakness of the soul is its false sense of strength that allows it to forsake God and persist in ignorance. Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society*, 27.

[20] "[T]he soul forms images of sensible things 'our of its own substance' (*substantiae suae*), but the result is that the mind itself is formed by the very images it formulates and carries." Miles, "Vision," 128.

[21] The "soul's selection of objects becomes habitual so that the soul does not recognize itself without a constant supply of its objects." Miles, "Vision," 128.

it continues arrogantly to conceive of itself and other creatures without reference to the Creator.[22]

In this state, human beings are altogether miserable because they seek ultimate happiness in things subject to change and dissolution. They foolishly believe earthly goods can satisfy their longing, and yet they cannot secure even these. Death looms large, threatening to take all earthly goods[23] and even the body, for which they have developed inordinate love.[24] The inevitability of death incites them to seek distraction by means of extravagance and sensual indulgence and to achieve an illusory immortality through human glory.[25] The soul can only truly be happy, Augustine believes, if it rests in God, but obsession with temporal goods has caused it to lose sight of the goal.

> Supposing then we were exiles in a foreign land, and could only live happily in our own country, and that being unhappy in exile we longed to put an end to our unhappiness and to return to our own country, we would of course need land vehicles or sea-going vessels, which we would have to make use of in order to be able to reach our own country, where we could find true enjoyment. And then suppose we were delighted with the pleasures of the journey, and with the very experience of being conveyed in carriages or ships, and that we were converted to enjoying what we ought to have been using, and were unwilling to finish the journey quickly, and that by being perversely captivated by such agreeable experiences we lost interest in our own country, where alone we could find real happiness in its agreeable familiarity. Well that's how it is in this mortal life in which we are exiles *away from the Lord* (2 Cor. 5:6).[26]

In Augustine's thought, as for Athanasius and Gregory, the soul is constantly in motion, and the goal is not mere movement but rather movement in the proper direction. By fixating on creatures as objects of ultimate enjoyment, the soul loses sight of the goal and becomes trapped on a

[22] Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society*, 29.

[23] Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society*, 33–34.

[24] Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.23.

[25] Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society*, 41.

[26] Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.4; Hill, trans., *Teaching Christianity*, 111

restless and futile journey away from the Lord. "Our heart is unquiet until it rests in you."[27] If the soul is to find the true harbor of rest and lay anchor in the divine life of the Trinity, it's pride and ignorance must be overcome. God healed both infirmities by the incarnation of the Word.

The Word Descends

Since the vision of humanity was trapped in a world of creaturely signs, unable to perceive the Word whom they signify, the Signified became a Sign and dwelt among us.[28] "Since [Wisdom] herself is our home, she also made herself for us into the way home" so that we, who could not return to God by perceiving him invisibly through creation, might contemplate him through his audible and visible words and works done as a human being. He made himself an example of true justice and love by his sinless life and sacrificial death, thereby presenting to our minds, through our physical senses, the divine Image of God according to which we were fashioned in the beginning, in order that contemplating the divine Word through his humanity, we might be conformed to his image and be taken up into the divine life of the Trinity.[29] The incarnation of the Word thus served a rhetorical purpose by providing an optimal medium through which to teach creature-obsessed human beings and thereby overcome ignorance.

Teaching can only be effective, however, if the students wish to be taught. Our pride predisposes us arrogantly to presume our own integrity and ability to know God and act

[27] Augustine, *Conf.* 1.1; Boulding, trans., *Confessions*, 14.

[28] "How did [Wisdom] come, if not by the Word becoming flesh and dwelling amongst us? It is something like when we talk; in order for what we have in mind to reach the minds of our hearers through their ears of flesh, the word which we have in our thoughts becomes a sound, and is called speech. And yet this does not mean that our thought is turned into that sound, but while remaining undiminished in itself, it takes on the form of a spoken utterance by which to insert itself into their ears, without bearing the stigma of any change in itself. That is how the Word of God was not changed in the least, and yet became flesh, in order to dwell amongst us." Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.13; Hill, trans., *Teaching Christianity*, 115.

[29] Augustine, *Trin.* 13.17, 24.

virtuously by our own power.[30] Our perceived strength masks our profound weakness and prevents us from looking humbly to God for strength. If we are to benefit from God's self-disclosure in Christ, our will must be converted from pride to humility.

God therefore chose to hide his glory in humility, his strength in weakness, his wisdom in foolishness.[31] The incarnation, suffering, and death of Christ undermine our desire to achieve knowledge and virtue by our own intellectual strength and on our own terms by forcing us to approach God through Christ's revolting execution on the cross. The philosophers succeeded in perceiving God's nature from afar, Augustine maintains, but such insight does not compare with what is received through humble faith in Christ.

> But what good does it do a man who is so proud that he is ashamed to climb aboard the wood, what good does it do him to gaze from afar on the home country across the sea? And what harm does it do a humble man if he cannot see it from such a distance, but is coming to it nonetheless on the wood the other disdains to be carried by?[32]

Those who humbly submit to Christ in faith are carried by the cross, and in the ark of the Church, to the true knowledge and love of God.

Still, humanity needs a catalyst to convert its willful pride to humble submission, and for this God applied love. The humble and self-giving love of Christ by which he forgives our sins disarms our arrogant obstinacy and replaces it with his love.[33] This Love is the Spirit, and in the Spirit, we are united to Christ by faith and thereby ascend with him to participate in the life of the Trinity.[34]

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[30] Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society*, 28.

[31] See Augustine, *Trin.* 8.11.

[32] Augustine, *Trin.* 4.20; Hill, trans., *Trinity*, 172.

[33] "So we needed to be persuaded how much God loves us, and what sort of people he loves; how much in case we despaired, what sort in case we grew proud." Augustine, *Trin.* 4.2; Hill, trans., *Trinity*, 154. See also Augustine, *Trin.* 13.13.

[34] Augustine, *Conf.* 13.8.

Finally, Christ's resurrection offers freedom from fear of death by securing permanent beatitude for those who believe in him. Faith in Christ thus prefers permanent to temporal goods, while humility allows the soul to receive from God the strength—which is his love—to seek permanent goods. "Death is truly defeated only when the soul desires God over all other goods, thereby accepting the first death in order to avoid the second."[35] Nevertheless, the fear of death and the inclination toward temporal goods always remain with us in this life since we are not yet perfectly renewed. We make progress, however, as Christ purifies our soul and conforms us to himself.

Arresting the Tailspin

Purification is necessary for the Christian because her soul is pulled in two directions on the road "traveled by the affections." Augustine calls these opposing forces "two loves":

> They are movements of the heart, they are two loves. One is the uncleanness of our own spirit, which like a flood-tide sweeps us down, in love with restless cares; the other is the holiness of your Spirit, which bears us upward in a love for peace beyond all care, that our hearts may be lifted up to you.[36]

As Christ leads the soul in the Spirit toward the harbor of rest, its momentum is slowed by concupiscence, which Kelly defines as "every inclination making man turn from God to find satisfaction in material things."[37] The impure soul is inclined toward temporal things because it has been conformed to them through contemplation. While this habituated love for the temporal remains, it is at war with the Spirit. "So people are beaten back from their home country, as it were, by the contrary winds of crooked habits, going in pursuit of things that are inferior and

[35] Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society*, 35.

[36] Augustine, *Conf.* 13.8; Boulding, trans., *Confessions*, 245.

[37] Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 364–65.

secondary to what they admit is better and more worthwhile."[38] Habituated loves must therefore be unlearned, and new habits acquired, in order to concentrate and facilitate the soul's ascent to God.[39]

Bodily discipline is essential for unraveling sinful habits, not because the body is to blame, but to extinguish "the lusts [of the soul] that make bad use of the body."[40] Practices such as fasting and abstinence, for example, reduce the influence of food and sensual pleasure on a soul enslaved to gluttony and sexual indulgence. Before his conversion, Augustine could not imagine a celibate life[41]; yet, Augustine the bishop confessed to struggling more with food and drink than with sexual indulgence because he could not entirely abstain from the former as he had the latter.[42] Abstinence deprived the soul of its habitual objects, and since the soul is assimilated to the object of its contemplation, it allowed Augustine to begin to "rewrite" the contents of his soul and thereby dismantle sinful habits.[43]

Constructively, bodily discipline aims to restore the beneficent hierarchy of the inner and outer man. Augustine assigns to the inner man higher and lower powers of reasoning. The higher power, which he calls wisdom (*sapientia*), contemplates eternal things and governs the lower rational faculty, which he calls knowledge (*scientia*).[44] This is occupied with temporal

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[38] Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.9; Hill, trans., *Teaching Christianity*, 114.

[39] The various forms of idolatrous love divide the soul's attention and diminish its ability to contemplate God. "In the most intimate depths of my soul my thoughts are torn to fragments by tempestuous changes until that time when I flow into you, purged and rendered molten by the fire of your love." Augustine, *Conf.* 11.39; Boulding, trans., *Confessions*, 246. See also Miles, "Vision," 133.

[40] Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.24; Hill, trans., *Teaching Christianity*, 120.

[41] Augustine, *Conf.* 6.22.

[42] Augustine, *Conf.* 10.47.

[43] Separation from objects of idolatrous contemplation allows a restructuring of the soul because "the soul does not recognize itself without a constant supply of its objects" and "is formed by the very images it formulates and carries." Miles, "Vision," 128.

[44] Augustine makes a division between wisdom and knowledge on the basis of 1 Cor. 12:8. See Augustine,

considerations and works closely with sense perception and the inclination to sensual pleasure, both of which belong to the outer man. Operating properly, wisdom guides knowledge, which governs the senses. Insofar as pride replaces wisdom, however, knowledge becomes idle curiosity, which engenders sensual obsession.[45] Augustine illustrates the dynamic relationship between pride, curiosity, and sensuality in an account of his friend Alypius, who was brought to a gladiatorial contest by friends against his will.

> When they arrived and settled themselves in what seats they could find, the whole place was heaving with thoroughly brutal pleasure. He kept the gateways of his eyes closed, forbidding his mind to go out that way to such evils. If only he could have stopped his ears too! At a certain tense moment in the fight a huge roar from the entire crowd beat upon him. He was overwhelmed by curiosity, and on the excuse that he would be prepared to condemn and rise above whatever was happening even if he saw it, he opened his eyes, and suffered a more grievous wound in his soul than the gladiator he wished to see had received in the body. He fell more dreadfully than the other man whose fall had evoked the shouting; for by entering his ears and persuading his eyes to open the noise effected a breach through which his mind—a mind rash rather than strong, and all the weaker for presuming to trust in itself rather than in you, as it should have done—was struck and brought down. As he saw the blood he gulped the brutality along with it; he did not turn away but fixed his gaze there and drank in the frenzy, not aware of what he was doing, reveling in the wicked contest and intoxicated on sanguinary pleasure.[46]

The sensual experience had a lasting effect on Alypius' mind. Afterward he developed a new habit of attending gladiatorial contests. Augustine attributes his fall primarily to a false sense of security. He did not have the strength of mind to control his curious desire for sensual pleasure because his true weakness was masked by pride.[47] He also would have done better had he been able to avoid the sensual experience altogether.

Trin. 12.22–25. For a discussion of Augustine's conception of wisdom and knowledge see Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society*, 165–171.

[45] See Augustine, *Trin.* 12.14–18. See also Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society*, 124.

[46] Augustine, *Conf.* 6.13; Boulding, trans., *Confessions*, 104–5.

[47] Augustine uses this pattern elsewhere. His friend Alypius, for example, was intrigued by hearing of Augustine's slavery to sexual indulgence. Augustine, *Conf.* 6.22. Likewise, the devil uses "sacrilegiously sacred

Augustine identifies pride, curiosity, and sensual pleasure with the three forms of aberrant love found in 1 John 2:15–16[48]:

> Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the [1] desires of the flesh and the [2] desires of the eyes and [3] pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.

Concupiscence of the flesh is desire for sensual pleasure experienced through any of the five senses.[49] The rugged beauty of a mountainous landscape may rightly induce reflection on the goodness of the Creator, but it must not itself become the source of delight and enjoyment and therefore the end of contemplation. Concupiscence of the eyes Augustine identifies with idle curiosity, which masquerades as a love for learning.[50] Augustine does not want to lend his attention even to the "lizard catching flies" in his home without intending to refer what he sees to the Creator.[51] Finally, pride of life is the corruption of the "higher" activity of the mind, which governs the lower. It ought to be characterized by divine wisdom (*sapientia*) received through the love of God but becomes corrupt through self-love, declaring independence from God.[52] Each form of aberrant love impedes the love of God because it makes its creaturely object an end in itself.

Augustine seeks to control sensual desire and curiosity by consciously sending his love through creaturely objects to the Creator.[53] He can only succeed in this, however, by despairing

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rites… first to deceive and make fools of the prouder souls who are too curious about magical tricks and then to ruin them." Augustine, *Trin.* 4.13; Hill, trans., *Trinity*, 166.

[48] Augustine, *Conf.* 10.41.

[49] Augustine, *Conf.* 10.41–53.

[50] Augustine, *Conf.* 10.54–57.

[51] Augustine, *Conf.* 10.57; Boulding, trans., *Confessions*, 214.

[52] Augustine, *Conf.* 10.58–64; Boulding, trans., *Confessions*, 214–18.

[53] See Augustine, *Trin.* 12.21.

of his own strength, repenting, and looking to God for forgiveness on account of Christ. This is the tone of the entire *Confessions*—not a triumphal account of his progress from godless youth to famous bishop, but rather a humble account of his own weakness and God's grace. Humble submission to God in faith empowers Christians to struggle against their rebellious inclinations[54] "because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5), and His love "bears us upward in a love for peace beyond all care, that our hearts may be lifted up to you."[55]

Contemplation in Action

The love of God, received in the humility of faith, energizes and directs our contemplation toward Christ. Through contemplation, Christ assimilates the soul to himself, thereby restoring it according to the Image of God. Such contemplation is a challenge for Christians, however, because the Image of God which is contemplated is seen only indirectly, through the flesh of Christ.[56] The external and temporal events of Christ's birth, teaching, death, and resurrection were observed with the senses, but there is more to Christ than meets the eye. His divine nature is mysteriously hidden in his visible humanity, so that not all who perceive his temporal and

[54] Concupiscence always remains in this life because by our mortal nature we are closely attached to temporal things. We must eat to sustain our bodily life and finding the boundary between using food and enjoying it as an end itself is difficult, if not impossible. This impediment to proper contemplation was absent in our prelapsarian immortality and will be abolished in the life to come. The same applies to all the animalistic traits we inherited from Adam and Eve, which are symbolized by the "garments of skin," namely, "dispossession from a naturally perfect environment, the loss of natural immortality, and the acquisition of susceptibility to physical pain, fatigue, disease, aging, and rebellious bodily disorders, especially sexual lust." William E. Mann, "Augustine on Evil and Original Sin" in *Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, 106.

[55] Augustine, *Conf.* 13.8; Boulding, trans., *Confessions*, 245.

[56] Augustine correlates the face and back of God in the theophany of Exod. 33:17–23 with the divine and human natures of Christ, represented by the "form of God" and the "form of a servant" in Phil. 2:6–7. Augustine, *Trin.* 2.28–31. For a discussion of this, see Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society*, 141–42. For an in-depth discussion of the indirect nature of God's self-revelation in Christ, see Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 159–70.

material flesh also perceive his eternal and invisible nature as the Word and Wisdom of God. Augustine correlates the visible humanity and invisible divinity of Christ with knowledge (*scientia*) and wisdom (*sapientia*) in the human soul. Anyone can have knowledge of the temporal events of Christ's life, whether a believer or unbeliever; the goal of Christian contemplation is to follow Christ through the carnal to the spiritual, through knowledge to wisdom.

> Our knowledge therefore is Christ, and our wisdom is the same Christ. It is he who plants faith in us about temporal things, he who presents us with the truth about eternal things. Through him we go straight toward him, through knowledge toward wisdom, without ever turning aside from one and the same Christ, *in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* (Col. 2:3).[57]

Christ's sensible human nature serves a rhetorical purpose for human beings obsessed with temporal and material signs. As Ayres puts it, "Christ teaches in such a way that the body becomes the means of directing our attention away from itself."[58] The Christian life is thus characterized by faith seeking understanding, seeking to see through the temporal signs to the eternal Signified.[59]

Nevertheless, "the vision of the unchanging truth" will come only after the resurrection and renewal of our bodies.[60] In this life, "we walk by faith and not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). By faith the soul believes the words and works of Christ and submits to the signs and symbols of Scripture, even though it cannot peer beyond the temporal and material for a direct vision of the eternal and

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[57] Augustine, *Trin.* 13.24; Hill, trans., *Trinity*, 367.

[58] Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 153.

[59] "[W]e must believe before we can understand." Augustine, *Trin.* 8.8; Hill, trans., *Trinity*, 249. Augustine goes to great intellectual lengths to reach out toward understanding of the Trinity, but he does not leave temporal signs, to which we are bound in this life. "Augustine's vision of advance and ascent toward God is complex, in part, precisely because it does not involve leaving behind the language of faith in favour of some higher knowledge." Lewis Ayres, "Augustine on the Triune Life of God," in *Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, 75.

[60] Augustine, *Civ.* 10.23; Henry Bettenson, trans., *St. Augustine: Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (London: Penguin, 1972), 403.

invisible. Instead, it waits in hope for the reality signified, "forgetting the past and stretching undistracted not to the future things doomed to pass away, but to my eternal goal"[61] (Cf. Phil. 3:13). Christians believe, for example, that Christ rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, and they hope they too will rise with spiritual bodies and ascend bodily into heaven as Christ did, though they can only begin to imagine what this will be like.[62] "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

The struggle to interpret the mysteries of the faith highlights our own unlikeness to Christ. It is our likeness to fellow human beings that allows us to perceive their inner life, which is hidden from our senses.[63] We can, to some extent, infer their thoughts and desires from our own experience. God made us in his image so we could participate in his divine life, and by assimilation, know him. Now that we are mortal and obsessed with material things, however, we can only perceive the truth "in a mirror, dimly," as we wait for faith to become sight (1 Cor. 13:12).[64]

God artfully accommodated his scriptural rhetoric to our temporal and material obsession by embedding the truth in sensible signs and images. Scripture is simultaneously clear enough to nourish the reader and obscure enough to prevent boredom.[65] God draws us in this way from the sensible toward the invisible, from knowledge toward wisdom, but without reaching a static point of rest. We do not leave "behind the language of faith in favour of some higher

[61] Augustine, *Conf.* 11.39; Boulding, trans., *Confessions*, 245.

[62] Augustine, *Trin.* 4.24.

[63] Augustine, *Trin.* 8.9.

[64] For a discussion of the obfuscating effect of possessive love, see Miles, "Vision," 140.

[65] Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 2.8; Hill, trans., *Teaching Christianity*, 136.

knowledge."[66] Rather, in the very process of seeking to understand eternal realities through temporal signs, we are confronted with our own proud obsession with temporal signs as ends in themselves, which impedes our progress. This, too, has a purpose. As Rowan Williams writes, "The recognition that revelation is not obvious to the fallen mind is humbling, and humility is the indispensable soil for *caritas* to grow upon."[67] The growth in understanding that we experience is therefore a heightened perception of our own unlikeness to God, which leads us humbly to repent and look to God for forgiveness and strength.

God thus grants insight into the "language of faith"[68] by purging our improper love for this world through repentance and faith, "because we see, to the extent that we do die to this world, while to the extent that we live for this world, we do not see."[69] We come to believe and hope in God's eternal truth through temporal things as he purges our proud inclination to enjoy temporal things for their own sake, "for the more we are cured of the tumor of pride, the fuller we are of love. And if a man is full of love, what is he full of but God?"[70]

Ascending with Christ

The love with which we are filled is God's love, and this, Augustine argues, is the only true kind of love. False love clings to temporal goods, seeking power without regard for justice. True love clings to God and therefore obeys his commandments. Love of God thus renders a man willing to forsake all temporal goods for the good of his neighbor, and the good of his neighbor

[66] Ayres, "Augustine on the Triune Life," 75.

[67] Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 48.

[68] Ayres, "Augustine on the Triune Life," 75.

[69] Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 2.11; Hill, trans., *Teaching Christianity*, 138. See also Augustine, *Trin.* 14.23.

[70] Augustine, *Trin.* 8.12; Hill, trans., *Trinity*, 255.

is to know and love God.[71] This is precisely the kind of love Christ embodied when out of love for the Father (John 14:31)[72] he demonstrated God's love for us "while we were still sinners," on the cross (Rom. 5:8).[73] God's love for us is therefore the same as the love with which he fills us by his Spirit (Rom. 5:5).[74] "God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God" (1 John 4:6).[75]

For Augustine, the ascent of the soul toward God does not conflict with love for the neighbor. Rather, love for God makes it possible for a Christian to understand what his neighbor truly needs, and empowers him to give up all temporal goods, if necessary, in his service. The soul, in its ascent, does not leave earth or the body as if traveling from one place to another, but rather rests in the Spirit, who is always present to those who repent and seek his aid.[76]

Repentance and trust in God's strength remain the proper mode of progress in this life because concupiscence remains embedded in our fallen nature: "even that poor little virtue which we call ours has itself been granted to us by his bounty. Yet we [would become proud] were it not that, right up to the time of our departure, we live under pardon."[77] Indeed, Augustine measures progress in the Christian life not in terms of distance traveled on the road to understanding and virtue, but rather in terms of momentum, the love of God, which is given in proportion to recognition and repentance of sin. Christians receive a good will from God as he

[71] "Only if it is true love does it deserve to be called love, otherwise it is covetousness; and thus covetous people are said improperly to love, and those who love are said improperly to covet. True love then is that we should live justly by cleaving to the truth, and so for the love of men by which we wish them to live justly we should despise all mortal things." Augustine, *Trin.* 8.10; Hill, trans., *Trinity*, 253.

[72] Augustine, *Trin.* 13.18.

[73] Augustine, *Trin.* 4.2.

[74] Augustine, *Trin.* 8.10.

[75] Augustine, *Trin.* 8.11.

[76] Augustine, *Conf.* 13.5.

[77] Augustine, *Civ.* 10.22; Bettenson, trans., *St. Augustine*, 403.

replaces their pride with his love through assimilation to Christ's humility. To become like Christ means to share in his humility and suffering. We lay aside our pitiful power to receive Christ's love. To the world, therefore, God's people appear weak and pitiable. But God will not "forsake his inheritance, however bitter and humiliating the trials it suffers in its humility and weakness."[78] For now, these trials serve to heal our pride and fill us with his love.[79] After this life, God will add power to love by raising and renewing our bodies to be fit for the clear perception of eternal realities. Rescued from "this mortal life in which we are exiles away from the Lord,"[80] we will fully enjoy the divine life of the Trinity.

Conclusion

God communicated himself to human beings through the varied rhetoric of creatures and gave us his Spirit for an interpretive key. Rather than contemplate God, we pursued godlessness and forsook the Spirit. Without the Spirit, we found ourselves in a world of temporal goods without the Creator, in a world of signs without access to their meaning. The Signified became a Sign to restore us to divine contemplation. In order to crush the pride by which we chose godlessness, God hid his glory in weakness, forcing human beings to approach him in humble repentance and faith. The Christian struggle is lifelong and difficult contemplation of the language of faith, temporal signs that mysteriously convey the Eternal. This lifelong struggle continually drives us to humility and repentance, through which God purges our pride. Having removed our pride, he fills us with his love, which carries us to the contemplation of God in Christ and conforms us to his sacrificial love.

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[78] Augustine, *Trin.* 13.17; Hill, trans., *Trinity*, 359.

[79] See Augustine, *Trin.* 13.20.

[80] Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.4; Hill, trans., *Teaching Christianity*, 111.

CHAPTER SIX

PATRISTIC CONTEMPLATION AS FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING LUTHER'S SPIRITUALITY

In July 1505, young Martin Luther was almost struck by lightning. Terrified, he vowed to St. Anne that he would become a monk if only God would spare his life. God obliged, and five days later Luther joined St. Augustine's Monastery in Erfurt. There, the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience freed Luther from the cares of everyday life so he could focus his time and capacities on the spiritual life. Nevertheless, the God who's firebolt had demolished his worldly aspirations remained for him austere and unforgiving. No amount of confession and penance could rid Luther of the notion that he had not done enough to placate the almighty Judge.

In the crucible of Luther's spiritual anguish, the Lutheran Reformation was born, driven by the joy of a peaceful conscience. Righteousness before God, Luther rediscovered, is not *achieved* by human activity, whether monastic vows, confession, prayer, or works of love; it is *received* by faith. No amount of earthly endeavor can merit God's favor. Instead, faith secures a peaceful conscience by receiving Christ, "who has been made for us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption."[1]

In this chapter, I argue that Luther's foundational evangelical insight—that we are justified by faith, not by works—can be understood within the vertical structure of patristic contemplation. Indeed, examining his writings through this lens helps to elucidate some of his theological imagery such as the ascent of the Christian into a heavenly world and the darkness of faith in which the conscience clings to Christ. To demonstrate this, I will first show how the

[1] Luther, *LW* 26:8. Cf. 1 Cor. 1:30.

patristic concept of contemplation functions within Luther's concept of faith. Then, the rest of the chapter will follow the pattern of the foregoing "models" of contemplation, using as an outline the logical components of the vertical structure of patristic contemplation, which follow the movements of the drama of human corruption and restoration.

The Patristic Concept of Contemplation Operative in Luther's Concept of Faith

Everyone has a god, according to Luther, which means everyone lives in relation to something or someone else. The mode of this relatedness is faith. By faith, we are oriented toward something or someone—e. g. money, glory, or the true God—from which we expect to receive all good things.[2] Luther places all possible objects of faith in two categories: God and everything else. Properly oriented, human beings "fear, love, and trust in God above all things."[3] This orientation of the heart (conscience, inner life)[4] is equivalent to the patristic concept of contemplation as the orientation of the mind's attention.

The Visual Activity of Faith

Luther frequently uses the visual metaphor of spiritual perception to describe faith's orientation toward an object. The visual metaphor highlights the mind's capacity to choose its objects. Just as in physical vision the eye scans a room before focusing in on its object, so the mind selects its objects and either maintains or averts its gaze. The intentional selection of objects lies at the heart of Luther's spirituality: "With our gaze fastened firmly to [Christ] we

[2] Notger Slenczka says that for Luther the existence and identity of human beings is formed in relation to the object of faith to which they turn for all good things. "Luther's Anthropology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 216.

[3] Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 351.

[4] Spirit, heart, and conscience all refer to the inner person, which for Luther is "the location of the human being's relationship with God." Slenczka, "Luther's Anthropology," 216.

must declare with assurance that He is our Righteousness and Life and care nothing about the threats and terrors of the Law, sin, death, wrath, and the judgment of God." The same sense may be attained by the language of attention: "By paying attention to myself and considering what my condition is or should be, and what I am supposed to be doing, I lose sight of Christ, who alone is my Righteousness and Life.[5]

Objects of faith are selected by the will, the faculty of choice. Of course, Luther understands the will to be free only in matters that are below it, such as what clothes to wear and what food to eat.[6] In spiritual matters, the will is bound to serve its master, whether God or the devil.[7] Yet, the heart that looks to God because it is a slave of God nevertheless wills to orient itself toward God. The will directs the orientation of the heart.

Transformation Received through the Attention of Faith

The object of faith transforms the understanding of the beholder. This is why Luther is so concerned about the orientation of the heart. If the heart takes for its object any earthly thing, including oneself, it inevitably conceives an earthly understanding.

> But if Christ is put aside and I look only at myself, then I am done for. For then this thought immediately comes to my mind: "Christ is in heaven, and you are on earth. How are you now going to reach Him?" "I will live a holy life and do what the Law requires; and in this way I shall enter life …." Once [Christ] is lost, there is no aid or counsel; but certain despair and perdition must follow.[8]

[5] *LW* 26:166. The passage from which I drew these two examples is full of the language of contemplation.

[6] Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*; J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston, trans., *Martin Luther on* The Bondage of the Will: *A New Translation of* De Servo Arbitrio (1525): *Martin Luther's Reply to Erasmus of Rotterdam* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1957), 107.

[7] See Slenczka, "Luther's Anthropology," 230.

[8] *LW* 26:166.

Luther attributes these earthly conceptions to the devil, who "inserts into the heart a false opinion, one that is opposed to Christ."[9] The only way to resist this kind of false opinion is to reorient the heart toward Christ. Looking to Him, we perceive all things truly: "[Faith in Christ] kindles a light that shows me the true knowledge of God, of myself, of all creatures, and of all the wickedness of the kingdom of the devil."[10]

This transformation of understanding, in turn, reshapes the will. When the conscience has been disabused of the notion that the path to righteousness before God lies in its own activity and efforts, joy is "conceived in the heart," and it becomes "willing":

> When sin has been forgiven and the conscience has been liberated from the burden and the sting of sin, then a Christian can bear everything easily. Because everything within is sweet and pleasant, he *willingly* does and suffers everything. But when a man goes along in his own righteousness, then whatever he does and suffers is painful and tedious for him, because he is doing it *unwillingly*.[11]

Trust in oneself leads either to smug disdain or despairing contempt for God, while faith in Christ conceives joy, gratitude, and obedience. Gratitude and obedience describe a posture of the heart that is oriented toward God, the former in receiving and the latter in doing. We see, then, that faith, understanding, and will interact in a circular manner. (1) Faith transforms understanding; (2) understanding shapes will; (3) will orients faith.

The transformation received through faith is assimilation to the object of faith. Trust in things other than God surrenders one's understanding to the devil's lies and submits the will to the devil's will, conforming one inwardly and outwardly to the devil:

> Whatever the murderer and father of lies (John 8:44) does or speaks, that the world, as his most faithful and obedient son loyally *imitates* and carries out. Therefore it is

[9] *LW* 26:197.

[10] *LW* 26:39. See Carter Lindberg, "Piety, Prayer, and Worship in Luther's View of Daily Life," in *Oxford Handbook on Martin Luther's Theology*, 416.

[11] *LW* 26:133. Emphasis added.

> filled with ignorance, hatred, blasphemy, contempt for God, deceit, and error, as well as with overt sins like murder, adultery, fornication, theft, robbery, and the like.[12]

If Christ is the object of faith, on the other hand, understanding, will, and all of life is conformed to God, such that all the outward activities of daily life have God as their source, insofar as one lives by faith in Christ. Through faith, God directs all of life so that "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20):

> "Therefore," says Paul, "whatever this life is that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God [Gal. 2:20]." That is, the Word I speak physically is not the word of the flesh; it is the Word of the Holy Spirit and of Christ. The vision that enters or leaves my eyes does not come from the flesh; that is, my flesh does not direct it, but the Holy Spirit does. Thus hearing does not come from the flesh, even though it is in the flesh; but it is in and from the Holy Spirit. A Christian speaks nothing but chaste, sober, holy, and divine things—things that pertain to Christ, the glory of God, and the salvation of his neighbor…. Thus also I look at a woman with my eyes, yet with a chaste vision and not in desire for her. Such vision does not come from the flesh, even though it is in the flesh; the eyes are the physical instrument of the vision, but the chastity of the vision comes from heaven.[13]

The heart that looks to Christ receives Him and therefore conducts its mundane life in the world as a "little Christ" for the benefit of the neighbor.

Luther describes faith's reception of Christ in various ways. Faith grasps Christ "as the ring encloses the gem,"[14] as a bride is united to her husband,[15] and "as color or light adorns a wall."[16] He "is fixed and cemented to me";

> abiding and living in me, Christ removes and absorbs all the evils that torment and afflict me. This attachment to Him causes me to be liberated from the terror of the Law and of sin, pulled out of my own skin, and transferred into Christ and into His kingdom.[17]

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[12] *LW* 26:41. Emphasis added.

[13] *LW* 26:171.

[14] *LW* 26:132.

[15] *LW* 26:137.

[16] *LW* 26:167.

[17] *LW* 26:167.

The diversity of images underscores the impossibility of grasping the nature of such a relation by which Christ transforms our understanding and will and speaks and acts through us. The agency of God in the lives of the saints is a hidden reality, seen only by faith, which itself is a clouded vision: "[our righteousness] is faith itself, a cloud in our hearts, that is, trust in a thing we do not see, in Christ, who is present especially when He cannot be seen."[18] The union of Christ and the conscience[19] is real, but ineffable. We should be wary of conceiving of Christ's "presence" in terms of spatial proximity or physical presence since the mode of our relatedness to the risen and ascended Christ is beyond our comprehension. Each illustration of union with Christ is a physical image meant to convey a concept that defies conceptualization. We simply take it as a matter of faith that faith receives Christ, who transforms our inner and outer life.

Thus far, Luther's concept of faith appears to be equivalent to the patristic concept of contemplation. Faith is a "visual" activity of the heart by which it becomes a passive receptacle to be transformed by its object. The transformation of understanding shapes the will, which reinforces the orientation of the heart. We now place Luther's concept of faith into its vertical structure.

Luther through the Lens of the Vertical Structure of Patristic Contemplation

Luther's writings contain the same descending and ascending movements as we saw in Athanasius, Gregory, and Augustine. Christ came to arrest our fall into carnal obsession in order that we might ascend with him and thereby receive back our spiritual nature.

[18] *LW* 26:130.

[19] *LW* 26:167.

Prelapsarian Contemplation

According to Luther, human beings originally had wisdom as a gift from God, so that mind and will were perfectly suited for "acknowledging and glorifying God"[20] in all things.[21] Adam and Eve's children, had human nature not been corrupted, would have known God without instruction.[22] Likewise, Adam intuitively perceived the nature of the animals he was to name, so that he understood God's creatures better than a scientist could after a lifetime of research.[23] He willingly obeyed God with joy and a peaceful conscience, and "through reflection on the works of God he would have incited himself and others to expressions of thanks."[24]

The gift of wisdom that perfectly informed mind and will in our original righteousness was received passively through faith. We actively govern our own activities in outward, bodily life, having been given dominion over creation. With regard to what is above our nature, however, we are clay in the hand of the potter, "merely passive potentiality, not active potentiality."[25] Wisdom is received from God, not acquired independently through reason.

> Therefore let us learn that true wisdom is in Holy Scripture and in the Word of God. This gives information not only about the matter of the entire creation, not only about its form, but also about the efficient and final cause, about the beginning and about the end of all things, about who did the creating and for what purpose He created. Without the knowledge of these two causes our wisdom does not differ much from that of the beasts, which also make use of the eyes and ears but are utterly without knowledge about their beginning and their end.[26]

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[20] *LW* 1:80.

[21] See *LW* 1:113.

[22] *LW* 1:117.

[23] *LW* 1:119–20.

[24] *LW* 1:82.

[25] *LW* 1:85. See Slenczka, "Luther's Anthropology," 219.

[26] *LW* 1:125.

By faith in God we receive wisdom that cannot be discovered through sense perception, wisdom that informs our entire way of being in relation to God and his creatures.

To teach us that we have this wisdom by faith, God gave a command whose rationale was undiscernible. He forbade Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. By holding on to God's Word in the absence of understanding, they gave him worship and thereby remained oriented toward him in a posture of receptivity.[27] Luther believes Adam and Eve enjoyed this blessed state until around noon on the seventh day of creation.

Idolatrous Contemplation and the Tailspin

Luther conceives of the fall into sin as a shift in the attention of the heart from God and his Word to the devil and his lie.[28] Eve should have held on to God's Word with rapt attention, refusing to entertain the poisonous oratory of the devil.[29] But the devil seduced her attention by raising questions about the rationale behind God's command. As soon as she consented to consult reason independently from the Word, she was done for. "This is the beginning and the main part of every temptation, when reason tries to reach a decision about the Word of God on its own without the Word."[30] Now that the devil had her attention, he was able to convert her understanding to doubt and her will to rebellion.[31] She had given herself over as a willing student to a new teacher whose aim was her destruction.[32]

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[27] *LW* 1:158.

[28] See Lubomír Batka, "Luther's Teaching on Sin and Evil," in *Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, 236.

[29] *LW* 1:155.

[30] *LW* 1:154. See also *LW* 1:155–58.

[31] *LW* 1:147. "If she had adhered to this Word, she would have continued in the fear and faith of God. Where the opposite happens and the Word is lost, there is contempt of God and obedience to the devil." *LW* 1:158.

[32] *LW* 1:155.

Although Eve's sin incurred the punishment of death, she did not know it. She thought she was pursuing wisdom and righteousness.[33] Bewitched by the devil, humanity came to believe that wisdom and righteousness are to be sought actively rather than received passively from God.[34] They therefore began to run hard in the wrong direction, so to speak. The orientation toward human activity set in motion a causal chain of depraved understanding and misguided will that locked our gaze on our own activity. Luther's tailspin of idolatrous contemplation works in this way: (1) orientation toward human activity conceives an active conception of righteousness; (2) the active conception of righteousness engenders desire for active righteousness; (3) desire for active righteousness orients the heart toward human activity, which perpetuates the loop. Luther makes this causal chain explicit in *On the Bondage of the Will* in order to demonstrate that humanity cannot reverse its trajectory and turn back to the good: "what can the will pursue, when reason can propose to it nothing but the darkness of its own blindness and ignorance? Where reason is in error and the will turned away, what good can man attempt or perform?"[35] Fallen human beings are not free to turn to the good because faith, intellect, and will reinforce one another.

Faith in the power to secure righteousness and wisdom through human activity conceives a mindset that is hostile to God (Rom. 8:7). We make ourselves "the material and the worker," the "creature and the creator at the same time," and therefore usurp the role of the Potter.[36] In our

[33] "Through her unbelief she had fallen from the Word into a lie. Therefore before God's eyes she was already dead. Because Satan restrains her mind and eyes, however, she not only does not see death or become aware of it, but gradually she is also more inflamed by her desire for the fruit and delights in this idolatry and sin. If, then, she had not drawn away from the Word, looking at the fruit and desiring to eat of it would have been something horrible for her. Now she turns it over in her mind with pleasure." *LW* 1:159.

[34] *LW* 26:196–97.

[35] Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*; Packer and Johnston, trans., *Martin Luther*, 281.

[36] *LW* 26:259. Luther also notes it is philosophically untenable to suppose we can act on ourselves.

ignorance, however, we are utterly blind to the presumptuous foolishness of our futile endeavor and therefore continue confidently to presume the integrity of our mind and will.[37] "When God speaks, reason, therefore, regards His Word as heresy and as the word of the devil; for it seems so absurd."[38] If God is to free us from faith in human capacities divorced from God's Word, he must overcome our pride and ignorance. He accomplished this through the incarnation of the Word.

The Word Descends

Luther recognized the fallen human inclination to seek righteousness before God, on our own terms and by our own efforts, in the religiosity of his day. Monks look to please God by their vows, Turks by ritual obedience, Jews by obedience to the Law of Moses, and "the fanatics," who are "new monks" with "new works," by visions, miracles, and other manifestations of the Spirit. Each wants to climb into heaven and see the majesty of God, but this is both impossible and unsafe: "'Man shall not see Me and live,' says Scripture (Exod. 33:20)."[39] The "speculative spirit" that wants to reach God on its own terms and by its own efforts is a manifestation of the ignorant pride that dominates fallen humanity. God therefore chose to hide his wisdom in folly (1 Cor. 1:21), to force human beings to approach him through the humility of his Son.[40] There is no other way to a vision of the Father than through the humanity of Christ.[41]

> For this purpose He came down, was born, lived among men, suffered, was crucified, and died, so that in every possible way He might present Himself to our sight. He

[37] See Slenczka, "Luther's Anthropology," 218.

[38] *LW* 26:228.

[39] *LW* 26:28.

[40] *LW* 26:29.

[41] "[I]n his words and works we are to look, not at Him but at the Father. For Christ came into the world so that He might take hold of us and so that we, by gazing upon Christ, might be drawn and carried directly to the Father." *LW* 26:42.

> wanted us to fix the gaze of our hearts upon Himself and thus to prevent us from clambering into heaven and speculating about the Divine Majesty.[42]

Christ's descent condemned futile striving for active righteousness. He preached the law in such a way that no one can claim to keep it, and he proclaimed good news of forgiveness, wisdom, and righteousness by faith in him, apart from works. This "takes away all glory, wisdom, righteousness, etc., from men and gives it solely to the Creator, who makes all things out of nothing."[43] By coming down and becoming for us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30), Christ therefore transferred the attention of our hearts from our own works to his works, from creatures to God, from a state of active striving to a posture of passive receptivity.

The movement from active to passive righteousness changes everything. In active righteousness, reason was divorced from wisdom, left to interpret the Law, written on our hearts and in Scripture, without the light of grace. In passive righteousness, we receive an entirely different way of being in relation to God and his creatures as Christ transforms our understanding and will. "[Faith in Christ] kindles a light that shows me the true knowledge of God, of myself, of all creatures, and of all the wickedness of the kingdom of the devil."[44] It also turns our contempt for God into willing obedience, so that a Christian "willingly does and suffers everything."[45]

Luther describes this transformation in vertical terms: "'As, therefore, we have borne the image of the earthly Adam,' as Paul says, 'let us bear the image of the heavenly one' (1 Cor. 15:49), who is a new man in a new world…." Luther posits two worlds, "one of them earthly and

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[42] *LW* 26:29.

[43] *LW* 26:66.

[44] *LW* 26:39.

[45] *LW* 26:133.

the other heavenly."[46] On earth belongs the flesh—"the entire nature of man [divorced from faith in Christ], with reason and all his powers."[47] In this domain, rebellious human beings either attempt to perform the Law, written on their hearts or in Scripture, or invent their own laws as in the case of monastic vows and the like. Apart from faith, however, all this activity is futile. The Law does not actually offer a way of ascent, as the flesh believes, but rather serves to demolish the self-righteous fantasy of rebellious human beings, driving them to despair. Passive righteousness, on the other hand, offers a true way of ascent—not a spatial movement out of the world, but rather a shift of the heart from absorption in oneself to absorption in Christ, who thereby transforms the heart to be heavenly and spiritual and gives "perfect joy, righteousness, grace, peace, life, salvation, and glory."[48]

Arresting the Tailspin

Christ has begun to restore our hearts in the Spirit by faith, but the flesh and its idolatrous orientation remain in this life. The flesh wants nothing to do with Christ, preferring instead to concentrate on its own activity.[49] It therefore continues to generate downward momentum through absorption in the active righteousness of the law, even after Christ has begun to raise the heart to heaven through faith. "For human nature and reason does not hold Christ firmly in its embrace but is quickly drawn down into thoughts about the Law and sin."[50] Absorption in the earthly world of active righteousness directly corresponds to separation from Christ: "the Law,

[46] *LW* 26:8.

[47] *LW* 26:139. See Robert Kolb, "Luther's Hermeneutics of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage," in *Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, 181.

[48] *LW* 26:8.

[49] "[H]uman reason cannot refrain from looking at active righteousness, that is, its own righteousness." *LW* 26:5.

[50] *LW* 26:120.

works, love, vows, etc., do not redeem; they only wrap one in the curse and make it even heavier. Therefore the more we have performed works, the less able we are to know and to grasp Christ."[51] A battle rages within the Christian between the flesh and the spirit over the proper object of faith, so that the flesh "holds the spirit captive (Rom. 7:23), to keep it from believing as firmly as it wants to (Gal. 5:17)."[52] Christians therefore need training to preserve and strengthen faith in Christ, and the Spirit accomplishes this through the Word.[53]

Luther admonishes pastors and all Christians:

> Exercise yourselves by study, by reading, by meditation, and by prayer, so that in temptation you will be able to instruct consciences, both your own and others, console them, and take them from the Law to grace, from active righteousness to passive righteousness, in short from Moses to Christ.[54]

In the midst of the fight, when the flesh is pulling downward toward the Law and active righteousness, a Christian must be prepared to reorient the heart from the Law to Christ, from active righteousness to passive righteousness. What makes this so difficult in experience is that we easily mistake the Law for the Gospel. This is natural because the old man, who reasons apart from Christ, wants to rest in its own righteousness, so that the Law is mistakenly received as good news—as though it were the Gospel. Unless one looks to Christ in faith, therefore, he will trust in his works, resulting in pride or despair.[55] Looking to Christ in faith, however, reason is enlightened by the Holy Spirit to see the Law for what it is—not a method by which to achieve

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[51] *LW* 26:287.

[52] *LW* 26:64.

[53] "This is why we continually teach that the knowledge of Christ and of faith is not a human work but utterly a divine gift; as God creates faith, so He preserves us in it. And just as He initially gives us faith through the Word, so later on He exercises, increases, strengthens, and perfects it in us by that Word. Therefore the supreme worship of God that a man can offer, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, is to practice true godliness, to hear and read the Word. On the other hand, nothing is more dangerous than to become tired of the Word." *LW* 26:64.

[54] *LW* 26:10.

[55] *LW* 26:9.

righteousness, but an image in which to see our depravity. "For the law was given to terrify and kill the stubborn and to exercise the old man."[56]

Luther connects the old man with the Law and places them in the earthly sphere of active righteousness. As long as the flesh lives in the delusion that it can fulfill the law and achieve its own righteousness, it must be oppressed by the Law, so that it may not rest in a false conception of its own integrity. The flesh is thereby saddened and killed so that the heart's downward momentum comes to a halt. The new man, in turn, Luther connects with the Gospel; he places these in the heavenly sphere of passive righteousness. Once a person is

> sufficiently contrite, oppressed by the Law, terrified by sin, and thirsting for comfort, then it is time for me to take the Law and active righteousness from his sight and to set forth before him, through the Gospel, the passive righteousness which excludes Moses and the Law and shows the promise of Christ, who came for the afflicted and for sinners. Here a man is raised up again and gains hope.[57]

The Law thus applies to the old man and has free rein in the earthly sphere, where it exposes ignorant pride. The Gospel applies to the new man, who has repented and put on Christ and ascends with Him into the heavenly sphere with a peaceful conscience. As *simul iustus et peccator* we reside in both spheres, but they must not be confused. The Gospel must not descend to excuse the ignorant pride of the flesh, and the Law must not ascend into the heavenly sphere to undermine passive righteousness.[58] "Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their limits."[59]

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[56] *LW* 26:7.

[57] *LW* 26:7.

[58] "But if it wants to ascend into the conscience and exert its rule there, see to it that you are a good dialectician and that you make the correct distinction. Give no more to the Law than it has coming, and say to it: Law, you want to ascend into the realm of conscience and rule there. You want to denounce its sin and take away the joy of my heart, which I have through faith in Christ. You want to plunge me into despair, in order that I may perish. You are exceeding your jurisdiction. Stay within your limits, and exercise your dominion over the flesh." *LW* 26:11.

[59] *LW* 26:7.

This is easier said than done. The flesh constantly imbues reason with an active mindset to pull the conscience down.[60] Moreover, the devil is a mighty ally of the flesh and his attacks are many and varied. Nevertheless, God is greater.[61] The Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith through the Word.[62] And, "as faith gradually increases, that opinion about the righteousness of the Law will decrease. But this cannot be done without a great conflict."[63]

Contemplation in Action

The Christian struggle to be conformed to Christ is, for Luther, a struggle to fix the gaze of the heart steadfastly on Christ amid demonic temptation. Temptation to look away from Christ and trust in active righteousness comes in many forms, but the devil is behind them all because the flesh is bound to serve its master. He finds all kinds of ways to sneak active righteousness into our line of sight; the task of the Christian is to reorient the heart from Moses to Christ and thereby see through the devil's schemes.

Reason is one of Satan's favorite tools. Just as the devil originally seduced Eve's attention with an appeal to her reason, so today he finds a hearing "with plausible opinions and ideas about doctrine" that corrupt the heart. We must be on guard, Luther says, against "common sense,"[64] because human reason is easily drawn into the orbit of the flesh. The devil "inserts into the heart a false opinion"[65] with which the Christian must then wrestle. It must be exposed as false by enlightened reason—reason enlightened by faith in Christ.

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[60] "As soon as reason and the Law are joined, faith immediately loses its virginity." *LW* 26:113.

[61] *LW* 26:65.

[62] *LW* 26:64.

[63] *LW* 26:216.

[64] *LW* 26:192.

[65] *LW* 26:197.

Luther sees the time of death, especially, as a time of struggle for which to prepare for spiritual battle, for the devil will "try to swamp you with piles, floods, and whole oceans of sins, in order to frighten you, draw you away from Christ, and plunge you into despair." In response to the devil, Luther distinguishes between the Law and the Gospel, applying the Law to his flesh so that his flesh finds no escape from the accusation of the law, and simultaneously letting the conscience rest out of reach in the heavenly passive righteousness. He therefore answers Satan from a place of security, passively depending on the righteousness of Christ, received through faith.

> Satan, you cantankerous saint, why do you try to make me feel holy and look for righteousness in myself, when in fact there is nothing in me but sins, and real and serious sins at that? These are not counterfeit or trivial sins; they are sins against the First Table, namely, infidelity, doubt, despair, contempt for God, hatred, ignorance, blasphemy, ingratitude, the abuse of the name of God, neglect, loathing, and contempt for the Word of God, and the like. In addition, there are sins of the flesh against the Second Table…. Of course, I have not been guilty of murder, adultery, theft, and other sins like those against the Second Table. Nevertheless, I have committed them in my heart; therefore I have broken every one of God's Commandments, and the number of my sins is so great that an ox's hide would not hold them; they are innumerable…. Because my sins are so grave, so real, so great, so infinite, so horrible, and so invincible that my righteousness does me no good but rather puts me at a disadvantage before God, therefore Christ, the Son of God, was given into death for my sins, to abolish them and thus to save all men who believe.[66]

By refusing to let the Law ascend into his conscience, Luther renders the devil's attack ineffective.

The devil also attempts to shift the attention of the soul away from Christ through fear. By keeping the gaze of the heart fixed on Christ, a Christian can shine the light of truth on the devil's illusion.

> The more the devil attacks him with all his force and tries to overwhelm him with all the terrors of the world, the more hope he acquires in the very midst of all these terrors and says: "Mr. Devil, do not rage so. Just take it easy! For there is One who is

[66] *LW* 26:35–36.

> called Christ. In Him I believe. He has abrogated the Law, damned sin, abolished death, and destroyed hell. And He is your devil, you devil, because He has captured and conquered you, so that you cannot harm me any longer or anyone else who believes in Him." The devil cannot overcome this faith, but he is overcome by it.

Faith overcomes the schemes of the devil because it receives from Christ wisdom that cannot be attained through sense perception. The devil wants to plunge us into despair over worldly things, but faith sees the otherwise undiscernible truth that Jesus of Nazareth has relativized every possible danger for those who believe in him.

One of the subtler ways that active righteousness can sneak into the conscience is by paying attention to oneself when considering one's passive righteousness.

> Therefore when it is necessary to discuss Christian righteousness, the person must be completely rejected. For if I pay attention to the person or speak of the person, then, whether intentionally or unintentionally on my part, the person becomes a doer of works who is subject to the Law.[67]

Luther rejects consideration of the person because we are naturally curved in on ourselves according to the flesh. If we are allowed to share the stage with Christ in any way, then we become the object of faith and Christ is lost. "But here Christ and my conscience must become one body, so that nothing remains in my sight but Christ, crucified and risen."[68]

Despite Luther's confident tone in these examples, he considers the struggle of the Christian faith to be difficult and dangerous. The devil is not a force to be reckoned with on our own strength.[69] We must not be found in a state of ignorant pride, but rather humble and turned toward Christ. Only by his power can we see through the devil's schemes and resist him in faith. Indeed, it is not ours but Christ's victory which he works in us. Moreover, the trials and temptations we experience are for our benefit because God uses them to exercise the flesh and

[67] *LW* 26:166.

[68] *LW* 26:166.

[69] *LW* 26:193.

strengthen faith, thereby freeing us to ascend with Christ.

Ascending with Christ

As we have seen, the goal of the Christian struggle, for Luther, is that "nothing remains in my sight but Christ, crucified and risen." It is by gazing upon Christ that we ascend with him. Our ascent is not a movement from one place to another, but rather the extraction of our heart from obsession with itself and its own powers. The Word became flesh to draw our attention heavenward in himself, so that we might become spiritual again. We become clay in the hand of the Potter, "merely passive potentiality."[70] In this passive righteousness "we work nothing, render nothing to God; we only receive and permit someone else to work in us, namely God."[71]

In this posture of receptivity, we are conformed to Christ in his divinity and humanity. By faith our conscience ascends into heaven with Christ to reign as a "free lord of all, subject to none," and by love we descend in imitation of his humility as a "perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."[72] These realities are simultaneous and take place in the ordinary life of the Christian. "When I have this righteousness within me, I descend from heaven like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is, I come forth into another kingdom, and I perform good works whenever the opportunity arises."

Our ascent through faith in Christ also enlightens our reason with wisdom, so that we receive a right understanding of God, ourselves, and other creatures and become God's willing servants. At the end of *On the Bondage of the Will*, Luther describes three levels of understanding, which he calls "three lights." The light of nature illumines reason apart from the

[70] *LW* 1:85.

[71] *LW* 26:5.

[72] *LW* 31:344.

gift of divine wisdom; the light of grace illuminates reason through Christ; the light of glory illuminates reason in the life to come.[73] It is in the light of grace that Luther teaches us to see through the schemes of the devil. In the light of nature, the devil can make things out to be fearful and dire, but in the light of grace there is nothing to fear because Christ rules and reigns and has promised us all good things. In the light of nature, it appears that my sins will count against me, and that the Law must bring me to despair, but in the light of grace I see that my sins are forgiven, and Christ is my righteousness. While the light of grace illumines much that was dark when we lived in the flesh, it is itself a veiled light. We do not yet see Christ in his glory, but only in his hiddenness. We do not see him in the form of God, but rather in the form of a servant.

> Ascend into the darkness, where neither the Law nor reason shines, but only the dimness of faith (1 Cor. 13:12), which assures us that we are saved by Christ alone, without any Law. Thus the Gospel leads us above and beyond the light of the Law and reason into the darkness of faith, where the Law and reason have no business.[74]

In the darkness of faith, we are enabled to interpret reality spiritually. Nevertheless, we wait in hope for faith to become sight.

Conclusion

According to Luther, we were meant to live passively before God, receiving wisdom and righteousness from him by faith. When we shifted our attention to our own activity and capacity, we became bent on active righteousness, reinforced by ignorant pride. The Word became flesh to expose our foolish pride by his superlative example and halt our incessant pursuit of active righteousness with the Gospel of passive righteousness. Those who look to Christ receive him as

[73] Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*; Packer and Johnston, trans., *Martin Luther*, 317.

[74] *LW* 26:113.

their wisdom, righteousness, and sanctification. Nevertheless, the flesh remains and seeks to drag the conscience down from passive righteousness back into active righteousness. Through contemplation of the Word in the Spirit, we learn to distinguish between the Law and the Gospel so that our gaze becomes more and more fixed on Christ, and less bothered by the flesh. For this purpose, God exercises our flesh through great conflict. Looking to Christ, we ascend with him beyond the law and works and active righteousness to enjoy Christ's passive righteousness. As Christ quiets the active striving of our flesh, we become clay in the hand of the Potter to be used in service to our neighbor.

If the vertical structure of patristic contemplation accommodates both patristic and Lutheran spirituality, then it also demonstrates a measure of continuity between Luther's thought and that of his ancient predecessors.[75] Phillip Cary finds the opposite to be true. He charts Lutheran and Augustinian spirituality on a vertical plane but moving in opposite directions. Augustine's "Platonist intellectual vision,"[76] he argues, seeks to ascend and see God as he is, while Luther's "faith" receives the flesh of Christ which has descended as a gift from heaven. He says,

> The problem with such [Platonist] spirituality … is that it moves in a different direction from the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, which is a descent into flesh rather than an ascent of the spirit. In the light of Christian faith, we should recognize that the fundamental relation between God and us is established not by human spirituality but by a kind of divine carnality.[77]

Cary rightly wants to guard against a spirituality that circumvents the Incarnate Word—a concern that Luther does indeed share. In this thesis, however, I have attempted to demonstrate

[75] My concern is neither to establish a theory of provenance nor infer the influence of particular theologians, but rather to demonstrate continuity, rather than discontinuity, in the thought of Luther and the Fathers featured in this thesis. Such common ground can potentially sharpen our understanding of both ancient and modern theology.

[76] Cary, *Meaning of Protestant Theology*, 5–6.

[77] Cary, *Meaning of Protestant Theology*, 37.

that patristic contemplation is not mere intellectual ascent to a bare vision of God, but rather the restoration of our spiritual nature. Our ascent is not an intellectual climb out of bodily existence, but rather the extrication of the soul from worldly obsession, and this only happens through faith in the person and work of the Incarnate Word.

For Luther, this worldly obsession was expressed in humanity's carnal inclination to find peace of conscience in such outward things as the performance of the divine Law, self-chosen works, and human glory. By faith in Christ, we no longer judge our standing before God carnally, but spiritually, believing that Christ is our righteousness. In experience, this changes everything. No longer can the devil torment us with the specter of an implacable God, nor steal us away from service to our neighbor for the sake of private personal piety. By ascending with Christ, Christians receive true knowledge of God, themselves, and other creatures and therefore love God and their neighbor. Luther's evangelical insight that we are justified by faith and not works thus restores true human spirituality.

Cary wants to define Luther's contribution as a recovery of God's divine carnality, so he quotes Luther writing against Karlstadt's spiritualization of the Lord's Supper: "I want to heed Martin Luther's warning against 'making spiritual what God has made bodily and outward.'"[78] As Luther wrote these words, however, the ink had not yet dried from his previous sentence, in which he summarized the central concern of the Lutheran Reformation: the pope's "spirit has rather busied itself in making spiritual things bodily, as he transforms a spiritual Christendom into an outward, bodily community."[79] The carnalization of Christianity had locked Luther and many others in a tailspin of trust in earthly things, resulting in either pride or despair. By God's

[78] Cary, *Meaning of Protestant Theology*, 20.

[79] *LW* 40:192.

grace, Christ drew him into a new heavenly world "where there is no Law, no sin, no conscience, no death, but perfect joy, righteousness, grace, peace, life, salvation, and glory."[80]

[80] *LW* 26:8.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

Upon examining the theology of Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Luther through the vertical structure of patristic contemplation, the contours emerge for a unified theory of Christian spirituality. We will briefly outline it here, then discuss some implications.

Our inner life is constantly taking shape, and the kind of transformation we receive is determined by the object of our attention. Objects of attention fit in two categories: God and anything else. Attending to God, our mind and will are assimilated to his mind and will; attending to anything else, we conceive an ignorant understanding and a rebellious will. This may be pictured vertically. If we attend to God above, we receive from him spiritual wisdom and altruistic love; if we attend to ourselves and earthly things, we receive carnal understanding and selfish love. Each orientation is self-reinforcing because (1) the object of attention conceives understanding, (2) understanding engenders desire, and (3) desire selects the object of attention. When our first parents shifted their attention from God to earthly things, their understanding and desire became carnal, which perpetuated carnal contemplation. With spiritual eyes held downward, we could not lift our eyes to God above. The Word of God therefore descended to our carnal field of vision by becoming flesh, so that attending to him we might receive his mind and will and thereby ascend with him to renewed spiritual life.

Attending to Christ in this life is a struggle because he does not immediately eradicate our carnal understanding and desire, which pull us downward toward carnal contemplation. He does, however, begin to conform our mind and will to himself. We consequently experience a kind of tug-of-war between the Spirit of God and our own rebellious spirit, each vying for control over the orientation of our attention, which determines the manner of our transformation, whether

progressing or digressing. We progress as we contemplate Christ because through contemplation, he converts our mind and will, quelling carnal obsession and reinforcing faith in him. This, then, is the dual aim of Christian spirituality: to arrest the tailspin of idolatrous contemplation and to propel the upward spiral of conversion to Christ. Both aims are attained through attention to Christ. Progress should not therefore be measured in terms of distance traveled in the race of the Christian life; this would constitute an idolatrous turn away from Christ toward what has been received from him. Progress is rather measured in terms of momentum toward the goal at any given moment, so that our sole aim is to be oriented toward Christ.

As we look to Christ, he draws us up in an ascent out of carnal understanding and obsession to perceive all things spiritually. This entails not a spatial withdrawal from the world, but rather the severance of selfish attachments, so that from thirty-thousand feet, so to speak, we perceive God, ourselves, and other creatures with dispassionate and enlightened understanding. Likewise, our ascent with Christ does not eliminate concern for the world but rather conforms us to Christ in the form of a servant, so that we love God and our neighbor.

Finally, while Christ, in the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7), frees us from ignorance and illuminates our understanding, in the form of God (Phil. 2:6) he remains hidden in darkness; "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). The need for faith serves to discipline our presumptuous inclination toward independence, thereby strengthening us for contemplation of Christ and reception of his gifts. For now, "we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12). When, in the resurrection, we are completely renewed, the tug-of-war will be over, and we will enjoy perfect wisdom and love as we attend to our Creator with undivided attention.

I believe patristic contemplation, with its vertical structure, offers an invaluable theoretical framework with which to approach the Christian life. In a Lutheran context, the emphasis on

"grace, not works" sometimes poses the question, "If I'm saved by grace, why does it matter how I live?" One typical Lutheran response points out the logical connection between faith and works: a good tree produces good fruit (Matt. 7:17). Thus, no fruits, no faith. This approach helps to emphasize faith as the source of transformation, as well as expose false faith, but it does not offer a robust conceptualization of the relationship between faith and its fruits. Another response insists both faith and works are important. Therefore, we should pursue both, but with the understanding that works are not for God but for our neighbor. This approach brings a twofold danger. First, it risks minimizing the significance of human activity by removing it from the sphere of our relationship with God. Conversely, it places human activity before our mind as an object of contemplation and therefore risks dividing our spiritual attention. Patristic contemplation, with its vertical structure, clarifies both the primacy of faith and the dangers of complacency. Our transformation is received by faith in Christ. To become complacent in faith is to begin a reverse transformation, to resume the tailspin of idolatrous contemplation.

Viewed through the lens of patristic contemplation, Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone thus gives human activity a vital role while simultaneously preserving passivity with respect to the reception of divine grace. Faith actively chooses its object and passively receives transformation from that object. Faith is never without works because we cannot help but be transformed by the object of our contemplation. Therefore, the "First Commandment… is of chief importance. For… where the heart is rightly set toward God (Deuteronomy 32:46) and this commandment is observed, all the other commandments follow."[1] Faith in Christ receives the fruit of good works because Christ conforms us to his image as we look to him.

[1] LC 1.48 in Paul McCain, Robert Baker, Gene Veith, Edward Engelbrecht, eds., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions: A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), 389.

Consequently, if we desire to take a more active and intentional approach to faith, we can begin by reclaiming our attention. We daily, continually, select objects for the mind, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Often these objects are creatures—scrambled eggs, a problem to be solved, or a family member, neighbor, or friend. The goal is not to avoid such creaturely thoughts altogether, but rather to consider them with reference to the Creator and not for their own sake, in order to remain oriented toward Christ from moment to moment.

This task is complicated by the cacophony of digital voices that continually compete for our attention. Digital platforms find ever more sophisticated ways of feeding us content likely to capture our attention so they can sell it to advertisers, who have long understood their power to transform both mind and behavior through attention. The process of algorithmic natural selection ensures that we receive the most sensational content—the content most likely to hold our attention by appealing to our fears, desires, and curiosity. By entering such auction houses of attention, we open the doors of our senses to objects we may not wish to contemplate, and these may transform us in ways we do not intend. More generally, if the goal is actively and intentionally to direct our attention so as to keep Christ in view, such digital platforms threaten to whisk away our attention in the current of our passions.

The struggle for attention predates the internet, as we see in Antony's hermitic effort. After simplifying his life and leaving all distractions to live alone in the desert, the Devil "raised in his mind a great dust cloud of considerations" and did everything in his power to captivate his attention with objects of fear, desire, and curiosity.[2] Antony's discipline did not isolate him from the struggle, but it did free him to focus with resolute intent on the moment-to-moment struggle to "contemplate the things that have to do with the Lord." In our age of overstimulation,

[2] Athanasius, *Vit. Ant.* 5; Gregg, trans., *Athanasius*, 33–34. See "Contemplation in Action" in chapter three.

disciplines such as fasting, digital fasting, and the study of Scripture can help recall and concentrate our attention so that “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [we may] press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13–14).

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