

REVIEWS

Michael Allen. *Grounded in Heaven: Recentering Christian Hope and Life on God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018. (176 pp.) ISBN: 9780802874535

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Michael Allen, John Dyer Trimble Professor of Systematic Theology and academic dean at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, in *Grounded in Heaven*, provides a helpful and needed challenge to prevailing ideas of the Christian's hope of life after death. Allen's work is one of recovering and retrieval of eschatological and ethical theologies found throughout the Christian tradition. Yet, Allen's work is not a mere description of voices past and present. Rather, Allen models a way of doing theology as he moves on from simply retrieving and recovering to reforming and renewing our understanding of Christian hope.

Retrieval and recovery is important because modern eschatological theologies tend toward an anthropocentric and naturalistic view of hope that lead to "the eclipse of heaven" (the title of Allen's introduction). This eclipse is found in the works of the Neo-Calvinist theologians and in those scholars such as N. T. Wright and J. Richard Middleton greatly influenced by this movement. Neo-Calvinist eschatology rightly wants to present a view of the Christian life that is not segmented or gnostic—one that takes both body and soul seriously. Allen appreciates many of the emphasis of those who promote a renewed earth (the New Heaven and Earth) that Jesus brings down from heaven to earth, but believes that an "eschatological naturalism" has turned toward the earth, but away from God. And this eschatological turn influences ethics as well because "hope for what God has promised tomorrow shapes life today" (p. 12).

Allen takes us back into the past of the tradition, but also to beginning of creation. Much modern theology says that eschatology precedes protology, but Allen cautions us to slow down and notices that the culmination of creation is not "production" or progress, but God's "presence" with his people (p. 34). Theology must begin with God before it moves on to consider what is not God. This is what so much modern theology misses. The vision of the New Heaven and Earth at the end of Scripture also focuses on God's presence with his people. The world is renewed, but not without God himself at the centre. This should inform how we formulate our eschatological hope. Eschatology must be theocentric rather than anthropocentric or geocentric. Allen is not suggesting the creation is not important or that Christians should not care for God's good world. Nor is Allen promoting a gnostic version of eschatology by which we escape the evil world and float off to heaven when we die. His argument is much more nuanced. Rather, Allen wants to counter the subtle eschatological shift that makes God a means to an end (i.e. a new world) instead of the end itself.

To counter this shift, Allen retrieves beatific vision, but he also reforms it in a Reformed, Christ-centred way. The eschatological turn in theology leads to the beatific vision dropping out of most modern

Protestant theologies (p. 63). In response, Allen retrieves and constructs an enriching and hopeful understanding of the beatific vision building upon G. C. Berkouwer, one of the few Protestant theologians who thoroughly covers the beatific vision in his own work, though Berkouwer sees the roots of the doctrine more in Greek philosophy than Christian theology. In this important section, Allen discusses theological issues related to the beatific vision such as God's presence, God's invisibility, the Trinitarian shape of the beatific vision, and, finally, Allen's own understanding of a Christ-centred beatific vision. Working through the tradition and Scripture, Allen argues that the invisible God is made visible in Christ. This Christ-centred way of understanding the beatific vision is not saying that Christians will see the essence of God and, therefore, experience some kind of *theosis* or divinization. Rather, the focus is on the person of Christ who makes God known. This is the same person who is presented at the centre of the New Heavens and Earth as the Christian vision and hope.

This retrieval and reforming of eschatology is the basis for a reformed ethic. Allen here puts his finger on something that is very common in certain parts of the Reformed tradition (especially in the USA). Often, when the Neo-Calvinist eschatology is the dominant position, the Christian life becomes one of enjoying God's good creation. While this is indeed a biblical understanding, something is missing. And what is missing is the call that the Christian disciple is to take up their cross and follow Christ. In the second part of the book, Allen shows the connection between eschatology and ethics arguing that to be heavenly minded is to be the most earthly good. Allen here interacts with the Puritan John Owen who has much to say about heavenly mindedness. Again, Allen in no way argues for any kind of escapism. Rather, he shows from Scripture that, just as focusing on earth before God, if we focus on our present life and not the hope of life eternal with God, then we get this life wrong too. The beatific vision reorients the way we view and love the world in which we live. Allen finishes the book with a chapter in which he reforms asceticism.

Grounded in Heaven is challenging to those of us schooled in Neo-Calvinism. Allen here gives us an intellectually stimulating and well researched book that is as persuasive as it is challenging. In addition, *Grounded in Heaven* is a model of how to do theology. Retrieval is not simply descriptive historical theology. Rather, retrieval is going back to let the Christian tradition help us do theology today. And yet, the true value of the book is its pastoral wisdom and help. Eschatological naturalism too often leads to a piety focused on enjoying and celebrating God's gifts and our comfortable lives, but often God is left out. Pastorally speaking, such an eschatological will work only until genuine trials come. When life gets hard, we need an understanding of the hope that lies beyond this world. And it is that hope that allows us to make sense of this life. All too often the hope of eschatological naturalism is a hope that is simply for this world but somewhat improved. Allen's retrieval and reformation of the beatific vision gives us a hope that leads through the trials of life. It reminds us that just as Christ was humbled and suffered before his exaltation, the Christian life too is one of cross bearing before glory. The glory awaits is not upper middleclass life minus sin. The hope that awaits is God himself revealed in the person of his Son. We will live with him forever in the New Jerusalem.