

Enjoying God Through Creation: An Examination of Idolatry and the Christian's
Relationship to the Physical World

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Introduction

Saint Isaac of Nineveh was an ascetic monk from the 7th century. He studied so much that he became blind, and in his First Discourse *On Ascetical Life* he writes, “No one is able to draw near to God without leaving the world far behind. By leaving the world I do not mean departing from the body but rather *leaving bodily affairs behind.*” He continues, “For when the heart serves the senses it is *distracted* from the sweetness which is in God.”¹ Some Christians throughout the ages, like Saint Isaac, have viewed God and his creation as rivals. If I am to love God more, I must love creation less. However, I think this is a harmful view of God’s world and instead of growing us will end up leaving us spiritually impoverished. In this paper, I will argue that the Christian should not relate to creation fundamentally as a potential idol, but rather enjoy God through creation. Love for God will cause us to embrace creation rather than distance ourselves from it. To speak of creation can conjure up images of towering trees, rolling green hills, and waterfalls—but this is much too narrow of a definition. Creation is more than nature. By creation I mean everything that is made, all of the physical world, including our own bodies. In this paper, I will use the words creation, the physical world, and the material world interchangeably.

In the first section, I will give a brief overview of historical asceticism. From there I will explain a subtler kind of asceticism: the idea that I must distance myself from creation, if not physically then at least emotionally, in order to love God. In the second section, I will draw on a variety of sources, primarily Scripture, to show the true nature of idolatry. In the third section, I will show the problem of mainly relating to creation in comparative terms. If we continually put love for God and love for creation at odds with each other, we have forgotten God is the Creator.

¹ St. Isaac of Nineveh, *On Ascetical Life*, trans. by Mary Hansbury (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1989), 26-27. Emphasis mine.

In the fourth section, I will show a different way to relate to creation—not relating fundamentally as a potential idol, but instead as a good gift from God.

Asceticism

Historical Asceticism

Like most things, asceticism is neither all good nor all bad. In an essay called “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?”, Kallistos Ware tells the story of St. Antony of Egypt (231-356). Antony withdrew from society and did not speak or meet with anyone for twenty years. Afterward, he returned to civilization and became a spiritual leader to those around him. Ware argues that this kind of withdrawal is helpful in the long run: “It is precisely because they first withdrew into solitude that these ascetics were afterwards able to act as spiritual guides.”² What was the purpose of his seclusion? Prayer. Ware continues, “He helps others not through active works of charity, not through writings and scholarly research, nor yet primarily through giving spiritual counsel, but simply through his continual prayer.”³ Ware concludes that St. Antony’s retreat to the desert is “not world-denying but world-affirming” because although he begins with complete isolation, he ends up ministering to many after and out of his time alone with God.⁴

Some of asceticism’s admirable qualities are the value ascetics place on solitude, silence, and prayer. It is easy to look at asceticism and see its stark contrast to our frantic, hyper-connected, and busy culture. Many of us would do well to be alone with God in prayer more often. We would benefit from turning off our distracting devices and simply sitting in silence.

² Kallistos Ware, “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?” in *Asceticism* ed. Richard Valantasis and Vincent L. Wimbush (Oxford University Press, 2002), 6.

³ It is also important to mention that though this is a “redeeming” quality of Antony, not all ascetics returned from their retreat. Ware, “The Way of the Ascetics,” 6.

⁴ Ware, “The Way of Ascetics,” 5.

There is no doubt about this. However, more is not always better, and even Antony took this to an extreme. While he did not neglect bodily upkeep in his twenty-year withdrawal, there are other ways he functionally denied the doctrine of creation.⁵ His complete retreat from humanity ignores Genesis 2:18, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” Admittedly, no one would say that a person should *always* be with others. Interpretations may vary on what exactly “alone” means. At the least we can conclude that time in solitude should not contradict Hebrews 10:24-25, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, *not neglecting to meet together*, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Regular fellowship with other believers is necessary in both a bodily sense and a spiritual sense.⁶ Christian fellowship is a bodily necessity because, as humans made in the image of a Triune God, we are hard-wired for relationships. To live independently of other humans is to rebel against our very nature. Fellowship is a spiritual necessity because union with Christ includes union with his church. Christian isolation contradicts the unified nature of the church throughout Scripture (Eph 4:3).⁷ Similarly, the Great Commandment calls us to love our neighbor. While prayer is one way we are to love our neighbor, and possibly even the main way, it is not the only way. We are given many commands that assume bodily presence in the context of relationship. We are to “forgive one another,” “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep,” “confess our sins to one another,” and “outdo one another in showing honor”

⁵ Ware, “The Way of Ascetics,” 11.

⁶ I do not think bodily necessities and spiritual necessities are mutually exclusive—I just separated them to distinguish between what all humans need (believer or unbeliever) and what the church is particularly called to.

⁷ All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version®. An ascetic may argue that they are unified to the church through their prayers, however, this is insufficient. Even though Paul was apart from the church when imprisoned, it was not voluntary. Paul often “longed to see” members of the church though he was prevented at times (Rom 1:11; Phil 1:8; 2 Tim 1:4). True fellowship with the church includes bodily presence.

(Eph 4:32; Rom 12:15; Jas 5:16; Rom 12:10).⁸ All of these commands are impossible to fulfill in long-term seclusion.

A Subtler Kind of Asceticism in Today's Context

There is a subtler kind of asceticism, a less obvious way of rejecting God's creation that many Christians adopt unknowingly in their pursuit of holiness. It is the idea that I must distance myself from creation, if not physically then at least emotionally, in order to love God. What follows is a sense of guilt from enjoying any created pleasure "too much." This subtle asceticism constantly compares God and his creation with little room to enjoy creation as a way of enjoying God. While St. Isaac and St. Antony's version is more extreme, both levels of asceticism function from a warped definition of idolatry and a deficient view of creation.

The first problem is that asceticism equates a rejection of sin with a rejection of the material world. There is an implicit belief that anything I can idolize is inherently bad. The issue is that sin did not make matter bad, but enabled matter to be used for wayward ends. The second is that asceticism views the Creator and creation predominantly in comparative terms. It is always God vs. my family, God vs. a sunset, God vs. tacos. God and creation are rivals for my affection and I cannot love both. I must choose.

The True Nature of Idolatry

Paul's Definitions of *sarx*

Paul uses the word *sarx*, or flesh, to mean different things in the New Testament. Sometimes he uses this word to refer to the body, as in Philippians 1:22, "If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell." Here Paul is

⁸ There are many other means of grace that are neglected in isolation, such as communion and the preaching of the Word. To ignore these is, in some sense, to ignore the doctrine of Creation. Similarly, God speaks through his church to convict and rebuke (Gal 2:11) and call members to his service (Acts 13:2).

vacillating between staying on earth to continue in ministry or dying to go and be with Christ. Based on the context, it is clear that “the flesh” means his earthly body. In this case, to remain in the flesh leads to fruitful labor. The positive connotation means he is not referring to the Christian’s sinful nature or equating the sinful nature with the physical body.

Most often, Paul uses *sarx* to mean something other than the body. He often contrasts life in the flesh with life in the Spirit. We must be careful to understand what Paul means by this kind of life in the flesh or we will misunderstand its opposite, life in the Spirit. Romans 8:7-8 says, “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. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” In this passage, the flesh is completely opposed to God. This meaning of “the flesh” does not lead to fruitful ministry, but to hostility towards God. Again, in Galatians, Paul writes,

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do... Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. (Gal 5:17, 19-21a)

“The flesh” in this passage cannot have the same connotation as the Philippians passage does. The former is positive while the latter is negative; the first is aligned with the Spirit’s work while the second is opposed to it. As Hannah Hunt puts it, in this sense of the word, “Flesh does not indicate body as opposed to soul, but what the whole person becomes when deprived of the ‘spirit’ which is God’s.”⁹

Jonathan Wilson defines this use of *sarx* as “a power that stands over against God’s work for the flourishing of creation to which we mistakenly submit our bodies and other aspects of our

⁹ Hannah Hunt, *Clothed in the Body: Asceticism, The Body and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era* (New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 42.

humanity.”¹⁰ The flesh, then, refers to our sinful nature or a posture of rebellion against God. The flesh in this case cannot refer to the body, and neither is the body sin’s location. In fact, if sin is a posture of rebellion against God, sin does not have a location, per se, but is instead a spiritual state. Jonathan Wilson clarifies, “It is proper to say that we are saved from sin and death and Satan. It is also proper to say that we are saved from *sarx*. But it is a grave theological error to equate any of these with creation or our bodies.”¹¹

Earthly is Not Material but Immoral

Colossians 3:1-5 is sometimes interpreted incorrectly. Paul tells the Colossians in verse 5, “Put to death therefore what is *earthly* in you,” but what follows is not material but immoral, “...sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” What first comes to mind when we hear “earthly” is material or corporeal. In Paul’s mind, the meaning was more along the lines of wickedness or depravity. These were moral rather than ontological categories.¹² According to this definition of “earthly,” we do not kill our creatureliness or finitude, we kill our vices. We kill the corrupt desires that dishonor God and enslave us—including our body—to sin.

Regulations that Appear Wise, but Have No Ability to Restrain the Flesh

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive to the world, do you submit to regulations—“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? *These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism¹³ and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.* (Col 2:20-23)

¹⁰ Jonathan R. Wilson, *God’s Good World: Reclaiming the Doctrine of Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 7.

¹¹ Wilson, *God’s Good World*, 7.

¹² Thanks to Dr. Dryden for explaining this idea more in New Testament Ethics.

¹³ Emphasis mine. The ESV is quoted here. The NIV translates this word (*tapeinophrosynē*) as “false humility.” Douglas Moo argues that based on the context—“questions of food and drink,” “severity to the body,” etc.—asceticism is a better translation. Similarly, the HCSB translates this word as “ascetic practices.” Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 226, 241.

It is important to recognize that these teachings have the appearance of wisdom. They do not immediately appear harmful, and at first glance, are likely to appear helpful. In some sense, cutting ourselves off from a potential temptation will keep us from sin. If I am tempted to idolize my family and then I move across the country, the physical distance may keep me from idolizing them. If we stop there, however, we are only modifying behavior and thus fail to address the root of sin. Douglas Moo writes, “It is especially attractive to think that the problem of temptation...could be solved if only the body could be subdued through harsh treatment.”¹⁴ Like a game of Whack-a-Mole, we push sin underground only to have it pop up somewhere else.

Joe Rigney, in his book, *The Things of Earth*, writes,

To pursue holiness by stiff-arming created pleasures appears wise. Ascetic religion and severity to the body may impress lots of people. But their value in promoting godliness is null. The reason should be obvious: *sin is not in the stuff*. Sin resides in human hearts, and thinning out creation just makes us thin idolaters. We exchange indulgent sins for ascetic ones, but rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic doesn't alter the ship's path. The flesh is still steering the boat, and a true course correction will require something more fundamental than a rejection of God's gifts.¹⁵

When we get the nature of sin wrong, we prescribe incorrect methods for how to fight it. The ultimate problem with any form of asceticism is not self-denial or self-discipline, but its inability to actually do what it intends: kill sin. “The old taboos put the wild animals of lust and hatred into cages: there they remain, alive and dangerous, a constant threat to their captor. Paul's solution is more drastic: the animals are to be killed.”¹⁶ While the focus of asceticism is to stop fleshly indulgence, ascetic practices have a fleshly indulgence of their own. Asceticism indulges the flesh in a more sinister and covert way—it appears wise but is actually demonic (1 Tim 4:1-3). To look down on others who enjoy what we deny is not self-discipline but pride.

¹⁴ Moo, *Colossians*, 242.

¹⁵ Joe Rigney, *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 107. Emphasis mine.

¹⁶ N.T. Wright, *Tyndale New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 133.

The issue, as I will explain later on, is not a matter of “too much”—too much food, drink, sex, etc.—the issue is whether these practices are motivated by the desires of the flesh or desires of the Spirit. The ascetic approach to sin does not get at the root of the problem. And while some may argue that ascetics have godly motives, they are still misplaced, and ultimately they undermine the doctrines of the fall, the incarnation, and the resurrection. Hannah Hunt writes, “Seeing flesh [the body] as automatically sinful would limit the Incarnation to a docetic gesture.”¹⁷ The ascetic attitude toward sin has further ramifications than just the doctrine of creation.

A Time to Abstain

Even after this explanation, some may ask: But isn't it sometimes necessary to cut ourselves off from temptation? Our minds immediately go to the alcoholic who cannot drink without losing control. In cases like this, the answer is yes, it is wiser to abstain. However, we do not abstain for its own sake, or despise alcohol in itself. On this issue, C.S. Lewis says, “The whole point is that he is abstaining, for a good reason, from something which he does not condemn and which he likes to see other people enjoying.”¹⁸ Determining whether or not to abstain is not a one-size-fits-all application. Some who once abused alcohol are later able to enjoy a drink or two. Whether we abstain from something should be informed by the nature of sin, the goodness of creation, wisdom from our community, and our individual conscience and preferences.

A helpful question to ask ourselves is, Can I exercise self-control? If a Christian attempts to enjoy alcohol but it always results in getting black-out drunk, tries to enjoy their smartphone but quickly finds themselves indulging pornography, or attempts to use social media but day

¹⁷ Hunt, *Clothed in the Body*, 45.

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 78-79.

after day finds themselves wasting several hours scrolling, it may be wiser to abstain. An ongoing pattern of poor self-control may indicate a need to abstain from something good in creation.¹⁹ All the while it is important to realize that abstaining is not what kills sin—it just prevents this particular manifestation of it. Even when the alcohol, smartphone, or app is removed, the misplaced desire that drives a person to drunkenness, pornography, or excessive social media use will still be present in the heart. So if we wisely abstain, it is vital that we simultaneously draw near to God in the means of grace. This is the primary way the Spirit reorders our desires.

The Fall's Effect on the Christian's Relationship with Creation

Some may argue that God made creation good, but the fall made creation a danger. How *exactly* did the fall affect our relationship with creation? The question is whether the fall made creation intrinsically dangerous. If creation is now inherently dangerous, then the ascetic suspicion or even rejection of creation makes sense. To flee sin would be equivalent to fleeing created goods. However, this is not the witness of Scripture. Instead we see a spiritual blindness in mankind that ruins them morally. Post-fall men and women, being creatures in creation, use all they can see, hear, feel, taste, and touch for the purpose of sinful indulgence. Adam and Eve once perfectly directed their senses, their bodies, and their surroundings for the purpose of communion with God. The fall misdirected their desires, and in doing so, warped the way they related to everything else. God's declaration of "good" over all he made was not changed, but once sinful creatures began interacting with a good world, that good world started to be used for wayward ends.

¹⁹ It is important to note that there are many sins which we cannot just cut ourselves off from. Take gluttony—an inordinate desire for food—for example. Someone who wrongly desires food must continue to eat to survive. And even if the person fasts, this can only be for a short period of time. The glutton must remain near to the object of temptation while continually seeking the Lord for strength to overcome temptation.

Ron Highfield explains this in philosophical terms. There is a difference between *moral goodness* and *metaphysical goodness*. Human beings were made in God’s image and pronounced “good” at creation. This is metaphysical goodness and it does not change. Before the fall, Adam and Eve were also morally good, meaning they perfectly directed their desires toward a good end, ultimately God. Similarly, the rest of creation is metaphysically good—inherently good. But the way humans, after the fall, use creation can be for either a morally good or morally corrupt end.²⁰

Then What is Idolatry?

In his book *Counterfeit Gods*, Timothy Keller reveals the emptiness of making money, sex, or power into an idol. He writes, “What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.”²¹ To diagnose idolatry, we do not analyze the amount of affection, or the time spent thinking of a particular thing, but instead the *order* in which we love something. Some may argue against this with Matthew 10:37 in mind: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” I would argue that this verse is calling Christians to make Christ their primary affection that informs—but does not cancel out—all other affections. When God is the primary love, the primary object of our affection, only then can we love people, possessions, and hobbies properly.

Idolatry is not an issue of loving something too much vs. too little but whether we love something rightly vs. wrongly. You cannot love anything too much. As Kelly Kapic says, “God

²⁰ Ron Highfield, *The Faithful Creator: Affirming Creation and Providence in an Age of Anxiety* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015), 304.

²¹ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), xvii.

is not exalted by lessening your loves. The Christian path is not loving less. It's about loving more, and rightly."²² The Christian life is not about suppression of desire, but redirection of it. We should ask the question, Is my affection on the right thing in the right way? There are two ways our affections become disordered or idolatrous: 1) *To love the wrong thing*. An example of this could be pornography. It is always wrong to indulge in pornography—there is no *right* way to love pornography. 2) *To love the right thing in the wrong way*. An example of this might be a husband's love for his wife. A husband may love his wife because he finds identity in her and wants to please her primarily to feel secure in himself. In this case, the problem is not the object of his affection, his wife, but the *kind* of affection he has for his wife. In both instances, God is no longer the primary love that directs all other loves. When love for God is not the controlling love, or the *telos*, something else takes its place and distorts love for everything else. So the question is not: *Should* I interact with creation? As embodied people in a physical world, we are unable to opt out. The question is better phrased: Am I interacting with creation rightly?

The Problem of Only Viewing God and Creation Comparatively

We Are Part of Creation

Imagine yourself in a room without light and sound, and imagine that torturers have somehow also removed all aromas and tastes. Imagine too that you have lost all sense of touch, so that you can't feel the walls of your prison. It's a terrifying picture, because it's very close to death. Experience as such, experience as we know it, is experience of being in the world. If we eliminate all the inputs from the world, we wouldn't merely cease to experience the world. We'd stop experiencing.²³

The problem of perpetually comparing God and creation is that we *are* part of God's creation. As creatures made in God's image, we are the pinnacle of his creation—but we are part of creation

²² Kelly Kapic, "Why Covenant College? The Urgent Need for Christian Liberal Arts Education," <http://www.youtube.com/>, Accessed March 21, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAIQK8ctGLk>.

²³ Peter J. Leithart, *Traces of the Trinity: Signs of God in Creation and Human Experience* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), 10.

nevertheless. When we begin to split the world into physical vs. spiritual, it is not long before we make the same rupture within ourselves. However, our experience of the world, as Leithart says, is actually the only experience we have. There is no “purely spiritual” experience. Even “spiritual experiences” likely involve the Bible and our bodies, which are two created entities. Furthermore, we should not want to or try to be purely spiritual. C.S. Lewis writes,

There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why He uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it.²⁴

In the new heavens and new earth, we will not be body-less souls, but restored body-soul unities. The solution to our broken bodies is not a disposal of the body, but a restoration of it. Lewis again reminds us, “What the soul cries out for is the resurrection of the senses.”²⁵

Ignorance of the Body

Since we are part of creation, what we believe about materiality will inevitably affect how we think of our bodies. Matthew Anderson in his book *Earthen Vessels* believes the evangelical doctrine of the body is impoverished—but it mainly comes from a place of ignorance about the body than hatred of it. He writes,

The evangelical legacy with respect to the body seems to be more one of *inattention* than outright rejection or even a conscious ambivalence. If we are uncomfortable with the body, we are so tacitly. When we go on the record about the body, we do so in an orthodox fashion: God created the body as good, it is currently tainted by the presence of sin (but it is not the source of sin per se), and God is going to raise it up again on the last day. In our understanding of heaven and our theological anthropology, we have emphasized the presence of God, which is the right thing to emphasize. *But too often we do not spell out the relationship between that presence and our earthen vessels, except when the brokenness of the body pushes it into our consciousness in unavoidable ways.*²⁶

²⁴ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 64.

²⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcom: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), 121.

²⁶ Matthew Lee Anderson, *Earthen Vessels: Why Our Bodies Matter to Our Faith* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2011), 41. Emphasis mine.

At the least, this inattention of our bodies shows a lack of integration of our spiritual life and our physical life. We operate in two different spheres, placing half of ourselves in the spiritual sphere and half in the physical. Besides avoiding sexual immorality or hard drugs, it is difficult to see how our spirituality has anything to do with our body.²⁷ This is not to say we never think about our body. Instead, we just think of it in a way that is reductionistic and divorced from the lordship of Christ. But if we are to enjoy God through creation, this must include our bodies.

God is Creator

The truth that God is the Creator sounds obvious, but as elementary as this truth seems, it is one we cannot forget without drastic effects on our relationship with God and creation. Our spoken theology and practical theology do not always align. While we may acknowledge God is Creator in an abstract sense, the implications of this truth affect how we interact with creation on a daily basis.

Karl Barth argues that God as Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer cannot be compartmentalized. This means we cannot think of God as Creator apart from his role as Redeemer and Reconciler, but we also cannot think of him as Redeemer and Reconciler apart from his role as Creator. He is all three simultaneously. The God who redeemed us in Christ from the pit of destruction is the same one who created this world and all that inhabits it.²⁸ If our practical theology divorces God as Redeemer and Reconciler from God as Creator, we end up with a redemption and reconciliation that has nothing to do with the material world. Similarly, the only way we can interact with creation rightly is through our relationship with the Triune God, who redeems us, reconciles us to himself, and opens our eyes to his beauty in all he has

²⁷ Anderson, *Earthen Vessels*, 41. “Evangelical attempts at understanding the body’s role in our spiritual lives seem to have been dominantly reactive rather than proactive.”

²⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation III.4*, trans. and ed. G.W. Bromiley (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), 32-35.

made. All three titles are dependent on one another, so we cannot ignore one without doing violence to the others.

God as Creator means he is both the one who originally made creation and the one who currently sustains it. In creation, God called into existence what did not exist; he sustains creation by “causing to continue what already has a being.”²⁹ While creation and preservation differ, God is active, not passive, in both. Barth writes, “In the same way that He willed and gave it to the creature to become and to be, so He wills and gives to the creature to be again and again, and continue to be.”³⁰

Immanence of God

The immanence of God is the reality that God is not only “above” creation but is also “in” or “near” creation. God’s immanence is not in contradiction to his transcendence, but I will not discuss transcendence much here. As C.S. Lewis writes, when among Pantheists, we should emphasize God’s distinction from creation, but among Deists we “must emphasize the divine presence in my neighbor, my dog, my cabbage-patch.”³¹ For this reason, I will emphasize the immanence of God.

God’s immanence is the same as his omnipresence, but I will use immanence because it better conveys *how* God is present in creation. First, it is important to understand what it means for God to be present. God’s presence is inherently revelatory—wherever he is, he makes himself known. So if God is immanent in creation, this means creation shows us God. He makes himself known in the movie theater, Mojo Burrito, and even in hell, though in different ways. Psalm 19 says creation reveals the glory of God. He is not present in an abstract sense, but he is

²⁹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1940), 578.

³⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation III.3*, trans. and ed. G.W. Bromiley (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), 61.

³¹ Lewis, *Letters to Malcom*, 74.

present in particular *things*.³² Romans 1:20 says, “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, *in the things that have been made*.”³³ Along these lines, Rigney calls creation a vehicle or vessel for divine glory.³⁴ Though not exhaustively, creation does contain the glory of God. As C.S. Lewis says, “The heavenly fruit is instantly redolent of the orchard where it grew.”³⁵ In other words, the sweet taste of fruit teaches us something about God. How? Because in some sense, God is *in* the fruit. Creation makes visible that which is invisible; the physical world enables us to experience the uncreated God.³⁶

Vincent Bacote uses the word “indwelling.”³⁷ By this, he is referring to the Holy Spirit, who indwells all things, not in a spatial sense, as if inside each tree there is a little bit of the Holy Spirit, but in a spiritual sense.³⁸ Bacote references Arnold Van Ruler on this point: “In the spring, no meadow or tree becomes green without the Spirit. All reality, created and upheld as it is, cannot exist apart from the Spirit.”³⁹ Van Ruler called the Spirit “the principle of divine immanence in the created world.”⁴⁰ In other words, God himself is present in the things of this world through the Holy Spirit.

³² This differs from God’s presence in the sacraments because the sacraments are specific things which he is more potently present in.

³³ Emphasis mine.

³⁴ Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 68.

³⁵ Lewis, *Letters to Malcom*, 90.

³⁶ Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 62. See also Christopher West, who specifically says the body makes invisible realities visible in *Theology of the Body for Beginners: A Basic Introduction to St. John Paul II’s Sexual Revolution* (West Chester: Ascension Press, 2004), 92.

³⁷ Vincent E. Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 129.

³⁸ Different from Pantheism that says God *is* creation and Panentheism that says God is creation while also extending beyond creation.

³⁹ Arnold A. Van Ruler, *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics: Essays toward a Public Theology*, trans. John Bolt (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1989), 84.

⁴⁰ Van Ruler, *Calvinist*, 84.

The Need for Discernment

As we aim to enjoy God through creation, we must ask a crucial question: How am I to know *what* I can enjoy? Since Genesis 3, fallen people have taken creation and made God's good intent almost unrecognizable. Some create distorted products that we ought not to enjoy. The waters are muddied, and it can become hard to distinguish whether our enjoyment of something is admirable or corrupt. Even more difficult is when a cultural product has good and bad aspects intertwined. Do we love the good parts and hate the bad? Do we reject anything completely?

Discernment is the practice of recognizing good and evil in order to love good and hate evil. Discernment and wisdom come from dependence on the Spirit, who is the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Christ (Eph 1:17). What are the criteria by which we discern whether something is good or evil? Amos Yong argues, "The extent to which something radically departs from its purpose and function and has destructive effects in its relationships reveal whether something may be characterized as demonic."⁴¹ First, we must look to the Word to see if enjoyment of the thing is consistent with Scripture. Is its end the fruit of the Spirit or the fruit of the flesh? To even answer that question, we need a right interpretation of Scripture. Which leads to the second point: the necessity of community. We need other believers with different viewpoints to challenge our interpretation of Scripture. Through God's Word and God's people, we can grow in the skill of discernment.

How to Relate to Creation

In this section, I will draw heavily from Joe Rigney on how to practically relate to creation. I will use his two ways of relating to creation: the comparative approach and the

⁴¹ Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 151.

integrative approach. I will also use his two ways of relating to God: direct godwardness and indirect godwardness.

The Comparative Approach

In Mark 10:17-27, a rich man approaches Jesus and asks what he must do to gain eternal life, listing all of the commands he has kept. He expects a pat on the back, but instead Jesus tells him to sell all he has and give to the poor. Jesus is calling this man to choose: it is either him or his possessions. This is the essence of the comparative approach. When faced with the choice between the Creator or a created thing, which will we choose?

We do not often have moments where Jesus directly comes to us and tells us to choose. So how will we know if we are on the right track, if we would choose the Giver over the gift? This is where the comparative approach comes in as a sort of self-examination, where we compare our love for God to our love for created things.⁴² Just as it is necessary to check our heart to see if we are truly in the faith, it is necessary to check if we value God above all else. However, just as self-examination should be occasional, so should our evaluation of our love for God compared to creation. We should not be in a constant state of evaluating ourselves. As Joe Rigney puts it, “The problem comes when we become permanent test takers, refusing to receive all that God richly provides out of fear of committing idolatry.”⁴³ To relentlessly evaluate ourselves shows a lack of trust in the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin and lead us to Christ. Though it is important to discern our motives, it becomes harmful when fear of sin keeps us from pursuing righteousness. The reality is, the more we look to Christ in the means of grace, the more the Holy Spirit will sharpen our powers of discernment, convict us of sin, and lead us in righteousness.

⁴² Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 251.

⁴³ Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 99.

The Integrative Approach

The integrative approach seeks to integrate joy in created things with joy in Christ. If the comparative approach is like self-examination, the integrative approach is similar to self-forgetfulness.⁴⁴ This is where we should live the majority of our lives—enjoying friends, thunderstorms, mountains, brownies, and novels as a way of enjoying God. The God who told Adam and Eve, “You may surely eat of every tree in the garden” is the same God who tells us, today, to enjoy creation to the full, for when we enjoy creation as a gift from his fatherly hand, we are enjoying God himself (Gen 2:16; Jas 1:17). Eugene H. Peterson writes, “Nothing [in creation] is a stumbling block introduced by the devil to trip the feet of those whose eyes are piously lifted in praise to God. Creation is our place for meeting God and conversing with him.”⁴⁵ God’s world is meant to enhance our love for God, not detract from it.

When we integrate our joy in creation with joy in God, we discard the idea that we must love God “infinitely more” than we love his gifts. Rigney calls this the Principle of Proportionate Regard. He writes,

When we experience deep joy in an evening out with our spouse or a fun day at the park with the kids, and we compare it to the joy that we have in direct communion with God, then a subtle sense of guilt arises because we know that our joy in Christ (however great it may be) is not *infinitely* greater than our joy in our family. We’re not even sure what infinite joy would feel like, but we know we fall short. The result is that we may seek to distance ourselves from our family and minimize our enjoyment of creation *all in the name of holiness*.⁴⁶

With the comparative approach, we should love God significantly more than everything else (though not infinitely, because we are finite). We should love God as God and we should love others out of love for God. What we should not do is compare our joy in reading Scripture with

⁴⁴ Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 251.

⁴⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989),

71.

⁴⁶ Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 89-90.

joy in a conversation with a friend as if we can experience God in one but not the other. This is the practical way of treating love for God and love for everything else as mutually exclusive.

Instead, as we incorporate the integrative approach, we begin to recognize that love for the gift *is* what love for God looks like when it meets his good gifts.⁴⁷ Perhaps contrary to our instincts, love for God *increases* our love for everything good in the world. Rigney writes, “The enjoyment of one doesn’t cancel out the other; instead they overlap and mutually indwell one another.”⁴⁸ In *The Spirit of Life*, Jürgen Moltmann says,

When I love God I love the beauty of bodies, the rhythm of movements, the shining of eyes, the embraces, the feelings, the scents, the sounds of all this protean creation. When I love you, my God, I want to embrace it all, for I love you with all my senses in the creations of your love... The experience of God deepens the experiences of life. It does not reduce them, for it awakens the unconditional Yes to life. The more I love God the more gladly I exist.⁴⁹

We love people and places and possessions because we love the Giver who provides them.

Without the Integrative Approach, the Comparative Approach Goes Wrong

Thinking back to the story of the rich man, we should have room to affirm Jesus’ call to sell all he has and give it to the poor. The problem is when we treat this story as prescriptive for all Christians. Surely, our attitude toward God should be one of willingness to give up everything for him, should he call us to. But in the meantime, we need to learn how to live in the world, with the gifts he has graciously given us, without a sense of guilt for owning or enjoying things. There is nothing wrong with deeply loving the gifts God has given us. In fact, there is a problem if we *don’t*. Enjoying God through creation does not mean feeling apathetic about the gifts he has given or even apathetic if they are taken away. It is a misconception to believe that if we really loved God, we would not care if he took away one of his gifts. This error gets corrected

⁴⁷ Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 92.

⁴⁸ Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 100.

⁴⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Christian Kaiser Verlag / Munich, 1991), 98.

when we look at Job. After Satan takes away everything he has, Job spends all of chapter three just lamenting his birth. The promise of greater joy amidst self-denial or loss does not imply losing one of God's gifts is not painful. Rather, he promises that the pain will not utterly ruin us.

We Need Both Approaches

It is not as if the comparative approach is bad and the integrative approach is good. Both are helpful, just as both self-examination and self-forgetfulness are. What is important is the *proportion* in which we use these approaches. In today's context, the mindset that God and his creation are rivals is not usually explicit but implicit in the way we think and teach on the topic of idolatry. Well-meaning hymns like "Take the World but Give Me Jesus" and "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus" can unconsciously instill a dichotomy in our hearts that should not be there. Though there are other songs like "This is My Father's World," it seems that the overwhelming amount of theological input we receive pits God against his world. John Piper also writes,

So the question must be faced: How do we use the created world around us, including our own bodies, to help us fight for joy in God? In God, I say! Not in nature. Not in music. Not in health. Not in food or drink. Not in natural beauty... We are surrounded by innocent things that are ready to become idols. Innocent sensations are one second away from becoming substitutes for the sweetness of God.⁵⁰

Piper does not necessarily have a wrong doctrine of creation, but he does place a strong emphasis on joy in God at the expense of joy in creation. He often speaks in comparative terms, stressing the choice we must make between God and creation. Likewise, if we often speak and think comparatively, we may need to pay better attention to the integrative approach.

Direct Godwardness

Direct godwardness comprises the spiritual disciplines: the Word, prayer, fellowship with believers, and so on. "The mark of direct godwardness is that our thoughts and intentions are

⁵⁰ John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 178.

focused particularly and directly on God himself as we address him and commune with him.”⁵¹ These practices orient our hearts toward God and ultimately shape how we interact with creation. Without a regular grounding in the spiritual disciplines, we cannot interact with creation adequately—our heart will not be centered on God and our enjoyment of creation will be disordered. “If the heart is like a compass, an erotic homing device, then we need to (regularly) calibrate our hearts, tuning them to be directed to the Creator, our magnetic north.”⁵² There are many ways this recalibration occurs, but I will mention three: regular prayer, reading of Scripture, and generosity.

Regular Prayer

We do not need to choose between regular prayer in solitude and spontaneous prayer throughout our day. A healthy Christian should make a practice of both. If we pray in solitude but ignore God the rest of the time, we may subtly believe he is indifferent about the ordinary moments in our day. If we pray spontaneously but neglect time alone with God, our prayers are likely to be shallow and the true state of our hearts will remain unaddressed.

The most important aspect of prayer in our relationship to creation is thanksgiving. In Romans 1:21 Paul explains one of the reasons God gave humanity over to sin: “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” In the opposite way, Paul continually calls believers to give thanks to God for everything (Eph 5:20), instead of being anxious (Phil 4:6), in all circumstances (1 Thess 5:18), and for all people (1 Tim 2:1).

⁵¹ Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 121.

⁵² James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 21.

Paul even more explicitly references creation in 1 Timothy 4:4, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.” An easy way to practice this is to make a habit of thanking God for his gifts every day. The more specific the better. Thank him for the birds chirping, the stillness of the morning, hot coffee, and bright spring flowers. The more this habit is cultivated, the easier it becomes, and the more things we find to be grateful for.⁵³

When we acknowledge the Father’s providence in the gifts we take for granted, we more easily trust him to provide for our needs. He intentionally provides countless blessings every day. He “clothes the lilies of the field” and “feeds the birds of the air” (Mt 6:25-34). We are not Deists—we do not believe in a passive God, far removed from the workings of the world. As our Father, he is intimately involved in the details.

Metaphor is a primary way we relate to God in prayer, and it emphasizes the goodness of creation. Eugene H. Peterson spells this out in his book *Answering God*. The metaphors of God as our rock, shepherd, and fortress only make sense because we live in a world where these things exist. The things of this world point us to the greater Reality. The reverse is also true: calling God our Rock changes the way we look at rocks and calling Jesus the Living Water changes how we think of water. “When we use the same words in prayer that we use when working, traveling, fighting, eating, and drinking, the words become luminous and wondrous in prayer, and respect for these common actions is engendered in us.”⁵⁴ God’s world shapes our prayers and prayer shapes our view of the world.

⁵³ See Joe Rigney, “The Whole Earth is Full of His Glory Q & A,” <http://www.bcsmn.edu/>, Accessed March 25, 2019, <http://2uxt2berb3uz5oi1iq6uzjv0-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/rigneyFullGloryQA.mp3>.

⁵⁴ Peterson, *Answering God*, 76-77.

Reading Scripture

One aim of this paper is to show how we do not need to choose between general revelation and special revelation. Without special revelation, we cannot rightly understand the world; without general revelation, we cannot rightly understand the Bible. (After all, the Bible is a possession, a physical book). To enjoy God through creation, we need a firm foundation in Scripture. God's Word is what defines reality and it is the lens through which we rightly interpret and enjoy his world. In Scripture, we discover the goodness of creation, the nature of sin, the purpose of our bodies, and most of all, the character of God.

Generosity

We also do not need to choose between enjoying God's gifts and showing generosity. We do not take an all-or-nothing approach as if our only options are hoarding God's gifts or giving everything away. 1 Timothy 6:17-19 says,

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, *who richly provides us with everything to enjoy*. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be *generous and ready to share*, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold on that which is truly life.⁵⁵

When Paul exhorts the rich, he emphasizes both enjoyment and generosity. It is striking that Paul would tell the rich that God's gifts are to be enjoyed when they already live prosperously. Won't this lead to the prosperity gospel? Not quite. True enjoyment of creation leads to lavish generosity: "Open-handed generosity flows from glad-hearted reception."⁵⁶ In the opposite way, "Guilty receiving produces grudging giving."⁵⁷ Why would we be happy to bless someone with what we currently despise?

⁵⁵ Emphasis mine.

⁵⁶ Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 192.

⁵⁷ Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 196.

We must keep in mind that “the opposite of greed is not asceticism.”⁵⁸ So while we guard against an inordinate desire for money, we should also be cautious of a heart that despises it—they are two sides of the same coin. Richard Baxter writes,

We need to guard our lives against the love of riches and worldly cares. All love for earthly goods, however, is not a sin. Their sweetness is a drop of his love and they have his goodness imprinted on them. They kindle our love for him as love tokens from our dearest friend. Loving them is a duty, not a sin.⁵⁹

Again, this is an issue of discernment and wisdom.

Discerning how much to enjoy and how much to give will vary from person to person.⁶⁰ Different life circumstances may call for different amounts of giving, but we should continually come back to this verse: “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7). We also should not condemn others if they come to different conclusions than us. Just because owning a yacht (assuming I could afford one) would go against my own convictions, does not make it wrong for someone else to. If we take our cues from Paul, we will conclude, “Each of them should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom 14:5). That is not to say we should not challenge the convictions of others, but rather our focus should not be on the possession itself, but on the motivations behind a purchase or enjoyment of a particular thing.

⁵⁸ David Mathis, “Greed,” in *Killjoys: The Seven Deadly Sins*, ed. Marshall Segal, (Minneapolis: Desiring God, 2015), 59-72, here 66.

⁵⁹ Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter, vol. 1: The Christian Directory* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), 214-218.

⁶⁰ Mathis, “Greed,” 62. Also see Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 185, “Some people lean on the ascetic side and are highly attuned to the danger of worldliness, consumerism, and materialism. They are sensitive to the threat of Mammon worship to the point that they must be reminded that God’s gifts are good and ought to be received gladly. Others treat the danger of greed and idolatry lightly and are far too comfortable with the worldliness around them. Luxuries and comforts easily become necessities of life, and they need to be reminded that Jesus calls us to follow him on the road *to the cross*.”

The Purpose of the Disciplines

The spiritual disciplines are avenues to know God better, to recalibrate our hearts. They are not an end in themselves. Direct godwardness grounds our love for God in order to propel us into the world.⁶¹ C.S. Lewis warns us,

It is well to have specifically holy places, and things, and days, for, without these focal points or reminders, the belief that all is holy and “big with God” will soon dwindle into mere sentiment. But if these holy places, things, and days cease to remind us, if they obliterate our awareness that all ground is holy and every bush (could we but perceive it) a Burning Bush, then the hallows begin to do harm... In order to find God it is perhaps not always necessary to leave the creatures behind. We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere *incognito*. And the *incognito* is not always hard to penetrate. The real labour is to remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake.⁶²

The holy place does harm if it does not eventually lead us to action. Eventually though, our time in the world will drive us to the disciplines once again. It is a never-ending circle. This does not entail that we should split up our time 50/50—half the time in spiritual disciplines and half in the world. It can look like that, but life is more likely to be 5/95. However, the point is not to prescribe a certain amount of time to spend with God, but rather to make sure it is often, consistent, and fruitful.⁶³

Indirect Godwardness

Indirect godwardness is the rest of our lives. “The mark of indirect godwardness is that our thoughts and intentions are focused primarily and fundamentally on God’s world and all that it contains.”⁶⁴ But I want to be clear: direct and indirect godwardness are not two completely separate sections of our lives. When our hearts are anchored by the spiritual disciplines, we will sporadically pray during work, a meal, or a good book. Practically though, our main focus will

⁶¹ Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 251.

⁶² Lewis, *Letters to Malcom*, 75.

⁶³ See Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 135, “The test of whether we are reading and praying enough is the quality of our lives.”

⁶⁴ Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 121.

be on the task at hand, even while we sense God's presence is never far from us in these moments.

Once Again on the Body

The blueprint for enjoying God through creation is no different when we come to our bodies, a subset of creation. However, I want to give specific attention to the body, because it is easy to assume that bodily pleasure and spiritual pleasure are at odds. How do we think rightly about the body's place in the overarching goal of enjoying God through creation?

First, we live as faithful stewards of our bodies. We are not our own, but our bodies belong to God. The purpose of the body is to honor and glorify God (1 Cor 6:19-20). Even more, we are to enjoy our bodies as a way of enjoying God, given that it is consistent with Scripture. Physical exercise, sex, bodily health, and safety are a few of the many gifts we can inherently enjoy in a way that God is pleased with. This does not mean we must pray every moment of exercise for it to please God.⁶⁵ Wholehearted enjoyment is worship in itself.

Mixed Motivations

It is important to guard against perfectionism when enjoying creation. We should not refrain from enjoying something out of fear that our motivations will be mixed. This side of glory, our motivations will always be mixed. We need to keep in mind that *God* is the one who changes our hearts. We ground ourselves in the spiritual disciplines, enjoy his creation, and trust him to convict us of wrong desires along the way. We do not refrain from prayer if we suspect our prayers come from mixed motives (which they do), so why should enjoying creation be any different?

⁶⁵ Rigney, *The Things of Earth*, 132, this is true because of our finitude. "Eric Liddell was aware of God's pleasure as he ran, even as his thoughts were occupied with his breathing, posture, and the finish line."

Eyes to See

Cultivating delight in creation means “remaining awake” to God’s presence in the world, as Lewis said. N. D. Wilson is a good example of this. In his book *Notes from the Tilt-a-Whirl*, he draws readers into his astounding awe of creation. He writes, “Caterpillars really turn into butterflies—it’s not just a lie for children. Coal squishes into diamonds. Apple trees turn flowers into apples using sunlight and air.”⁶⁶ Think about that for a second. The Spirit of God is actively working in the world to transform beautiful things into even more stunning things. More often than not, our spiritual eyes are simply not attuned to reality. The truth is, “A neutral observer would not find this world to be believable.”⁶⁷ The first chapters of Genesis might become mundane to us, but if we dwell on their implications we will be moved to wonder.

As I said earlier, we are not Deists. *God* beckons the sun to come up every morning and set every night. *God* purposefully provides every meal we eat—even the boring, easily forgotten ones.⁶⁸ *God* knits each baby together in their mother’s womb, working in and through the biological processes. He created the people who invented the chocolate chip cookie, the lightbulb, and the guitar. His infinitely creative mind thought up fireflies, coral reefs, and volcanoes. He does all of these things and more for his glory and our enjoyment.

Conclusion

The value ascetics placed on solitude, prayer, and self-denial was admirable. However, it created problems with their doctrine of creation by, perhaps unintentionally, denying the goodness of creation. This is not just a historical problem, but there are subtler ways asceticism is still present in the church today.

⁶⁶ N. D. Wilson, *Notes from the Tilt-a-Whirl* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 4.

⁶⁷ Wilson, *Notes*, 5.

⁶⁸ Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016), 62.

A faulty definition of idolatry can lead us to blame sin on the material world. When this happens, our defective doctrine of sin ultimately prohibits us from killing sin. The problem is not materiality, but our sinful nature that drives us to use creation for wayward ends. The solution is not abandoning creation, either physically or emotionally, but asking God to re-order our desires that he may be the *telos*, the controlling love of our love for creation.

The other issue stems from an overemphasis on the comparative approach. If we constantly compare God and creation, we will be unequipped to enjoy God *through* creation, and thus fail to worship him rightly. It is necessary to compare our love for God and other good gifts, but we should spend most of our time integrating the two. The practical way this plays out is by grounding ourselves in the spiritual disciplines, especially the practice of gratitude, in order to remain awake to God's presence in the world. As our immanent Creator, he is not far removed, but he is present in all he has made.

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