A Spiritual Sight of Love: 
Constructing a Doctrine of the Beatific Vision

Few doctrines are as 'standard' in the history of theology, and ignored in contemporary theology, as the beatific vision. While there are signs of a reversal in this trend, it is clear that contemporary dogmatics has little time for such a doctrine. This is particularly true in Protestant theology. The irony in this is that, among Protestants, the beatific vision is often regarded as a specific locus of Roman Catholic theology, whereas it can be argued that the Reformed tradition utilized this doctrine most broadly and creatively. It is not unusual to hear sentiments such as this one, found in a dictionary of theology: Protestant theologians 'largely neglected the notion [of the beatific vision]; but in doing so they neglected an important element in the eschatological hope of the New Testament and lost some of the valuable insights of medieval theology and spirituality.' Whereas the comment about Protestant theologians is historically misguided, it is certainly true concerning our own contemporary theologians.

The goal of this article is to provide an introduction to the doctrine of the beatific vision. To do so, we start with some general reflections on the biblical material, and move from that into a broad overview of some of the key theological trajectories in the tradition, with particular focus on the Reformed tradition. Pausing to reflect on key emphases in this material, we build on this foundation to suggest some ways to understand the beatific vision for theology and the church today. Because this doctrine is so neglected in our own context, it is helpful to begin with a brief definition: The beatific vision is the sight of God given over to creatures in eternity. Scripture hints toward a future vision of God in glory, and therefore it is called 'beatific' because it is a sight that brings happiness and perfection. Importantly, as we will see more fully below, the beatific vision is not simply a piece of eschatology, as central as it is for that, but comes into play in several key doctrines.

Biblical Material

A doctrine of the beatific vision is not the result of an overly speculative theology, but is first and
foremost the fruit of exegesis. There are many passages used to develop a doctrine of the beatific vision that point ahead to an unknown and indescribable reality, such as Psalm 17:15: ‘As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.’ To ‘behold your face in righteousness’ is a depiction, however limited, of what it will mean to stand before God in eternity. Building upon that, we might turn to Revelation 22:3-4 to further narrate the psalmist’s satisfaction: ‘No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads’ (NIV – my emphasis). Throughout Scripture we find passages like these pointing ahead to a time when God’s people will ‘see his face.’ Exegetically, we have to make decisions about this language. What is it seeking to depict? What is the point of such imagery? If nothing else, it is clear that the idea of seeing God is used to talk about satisfaction (happiness), and, as will be filled out below, this sight is what ‘happifies’ the creature (Jonathan Edwards referred to the beatific vision at times as a ‘happifying sight’). We might borrow Irenaeus’ often quoted line, that ‘the glory of God is man fully alive,’ and say that the sight of God is a sight of God’s glory that brings his people to life in its fullness. In this sense, the beatific vision is a way to talk about the completion of God’s work of reconciliation – the culmination of what began when Jesus declared, ‘It is finished’ (John 19:30).

But these passages simply point forward to what other verses spell out in much more detail. [iii] For instance, closing out his beautiful depiction of love, Paul states, 'For now we see in a mirror dimly [or, ‘glass darkly’], but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Cor 13:12). First, in this depiction of the heavenly vision we see an important link to our present circumstances. We currently see by faith, which is through darkness (in some sense), whereas in eternity we will see ‘face to face.’ Our knowledge of God in regeneration is somehow connected to the knowledge of God in glory. Second, a point not often attended to, is that our knowledge of God is connected to our being known by God. [iv] This is the thrust of the latter half of that verse. ‘Face to face’ knowledge, therefore, is not simply a depiction of proximity, but of relationality. Relational knowledge entails knowing as you are known, and this is the kind of knowledge we are presented with here. Knowledge of God is not knowledge of an object, but is personal knowledge – knowledge available within a relationship of love. This knowledge begets happiness. In other words, knowing God, as Paul describes here, is always relational. ‘Seeing God’ entails deep relational knowledge that exists in a relationship of love – a relationship available to us only through Christ, the image of the invisible God. Last, it is noteworthy that this description comes on the heels of Paul’s exposition of love. The beatific vision is the vision of love, and as such, it is both knowing and being known in love. The fruit of this is that the believer will know himself or herself as the one who is beloved of God. We already catch a glimpse of this in the Gospels, where the apostle John refers to himself as, ‘The disciple whom Jesus loved’ (John 13:23). John had come to taste the knowledge of God through the dark glass of faith, and therefore he came to know himself as the one beloved of God.

Even more descriptive are two passages found in 2 Corinthians. The first is where Paul
culminates his discussion of the glory of the ‘ministry of death,’ which caused Moses’ face to shine: ‘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. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit’ (3:18). Likewise, Paul continues in verse 4:6, ‘For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’ Just prior to this, Paul claims that unbelievers are blinded to the gospel, and states, ‘In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.’ Instead of a focus on the kind of knowledge available, as in the 1 Corinthians passage, here the focus is oncreaturely transformation. The object is now God’s glory, which is clearly tied to an immediate vision of God himself (immediately mediated, we might say, through the humanity of Christ).[vi] This sight is transformative, it is beatifying, because it is a knowledge of God, and, furthermore, a knowledge of God for me. Several important realities are highlighted here that are worth paying attention to: God is known in Christ, his image, and his image proclaims the glory of God. Likewise, in Christ we have the true mediator who sees and is seen, and who unveils and reveals. Throughout Scripture we learn that no one has seen God (e.g. John 1:18). It is easy to miss how bold Christ’s claim is when he says, ‘Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me – not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father’ (John 6:45b-46 – my emphasis). Jesus, clearly talking about himself, claims that he is the one who has seen the Father. It is hard to conceive how one might make a more provocative claim, but Jesus does, going on to assert, ‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14:9b). More than the messiah, Christ is the one who beholds God the Father in the love of the Spirit for eternity.[vii] It is in Christ that we share in this vision, through the dark glass of faith now, and in clarity for eternity.

As we can see, the bulk of biblical passages used to talk about the beatific vision speak to the knowledge of God – that by faith we taste the preliminary fruit of Christ’s redemptive work, and as we do so we are transformed into his image. Perhaps most explicitly, John declares, ‘Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is’ (1 John 3:2). In a real sense, seeing God is to become like God. Truly seeing God is having your eyes opened, no longer like Adam and Eve, who had their eyes open to evil, but now to God, taking in the reality of who he is.[vii] It is receiving the love of God in full, and having God as the object of your own love. As Henry Scougal notes, ‘The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love. [viii] The Christian is the one who, in Christ, has seen and been captivated by the Father. They are those who have caught a glimpse of the eternal one who is ‘the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature’ (Heb. 1:3a). But, nonetheless, the Christian is the one who sees through a glass darkly – their sight is faith. Faith and hope both dissolve into the sight of eternity, but it is in faith and hope that this eternal vision orients the heart of the Christian. The Christian puts her hope here, on Jesus’ promise: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’ (Matt. 5:8).
Beatific Vision in the Tradition

Reflection on the beatific vision began early in the Christian tradition, with a focus on contemplation and union, which then developed into a focused discussion of a theology of enjoyment in medieval theology through the enduring legacy of Augustine. Severin Kitanov narrates this well:

‘Based on New Testament allusions to the indescribable experience of heavenly bliss in the presence of God, the concept of beatific enjoyment became a staple of Christian systematic theology thanks to Church Father and Saint Aurelius Augustine. St Augustine developed the concept both as a way of giving a teleological orientation to Christian learning and as a way of distinguishing the Christian ideal of heavenly beatitude from rival philosophical – Neo-Platonic and Stoic – conceptions of human flourishing. St Augustine’s concept and treatment of enjoyment were passed on to medieval scholastic theologians as a result of the systematizing effort of Peter Lombard.

The Reformed High Orthodox theologians adopted the legacy of the medieval scholastics, engaging directly (and, at times, indirectly) with figures like Aquinas and Duns Scotus, who wrote commentaries on Lombard’s sentences and engaged in detailed reflection on the nature of beatific enjoyment. Turretin’s discussion highlights this fact, where he claims that Aquinas holds to a vision of Christ located in the intellect in comparison with Scotus who holds to love through the will, and suggests that these are not mutually exclusive and must be understood as united in the beatific vision. Specifically, what is united in the vision of God is: sight, love and joy. Turretin explains: ‘Sight contemplates God as the supreme good; love is carried out towards him, and is most closely united with him; and joy enjoys and acquiesces in him. Sight perfects the intellect, love the will, joy the conscience.’ Turretin ends up picking up on the emphases of the scholastic debates, and does little to furthering those discussions. With this approach, the emphasis became anthropology. Enjoyment, and its proper seat among the faculties (i.e. understanding and will), dominated medieval discussion of the beatific, and, we would argue, overly-reduced the biblical emphases. Turretin’s focus in his account of the beatific vision is anthropology and ethics. Both of these issues are important, but, in our opinion, not primary. It could be that the notion of seeing God is so unimaginable that he chooses to speak about the anthropological affects rather than the vision itself. This would make sense since Thomas understands the beatific vision to be of the divine essence, and the Reformed take an apophatic approach to the divine essence. In contrast, we could turn to figures like John Owen and Jonathan Edwards to find more theologically driven accounts. Of the biblical material, Owen is particularly captivated by the notion that if we have seen Christ we have seen the Father. Owen assumes that this is not simply a remark concerning the economic presentation of God in creation, but continues on to eternity as well. Owen states, in his work on
Christ’s glory, ‘That which at present I design to demonstrate is, that the beholding of the glory of Christ is one of the greatest privileges and advancements that believers are capable of in this world, or that which is to come.’ Owen defines this ‘beatifical’ vision, as ‘such an intellectual present view, apprehension, and sight of God and his glory, especially as manifested in Christ, as will make us blessed unto eternity.’ Linking the vision of eternity with regenerate existence, Owen delineates two ways or degrees of beholding Christ’s glory: first, by faith, which is the ‘sight’ given in this world; and second, by sight, which is the immediate vision in eternity. The beatific vision, Owen states, is christologically focused: as ‘it is the Lord Christ and his glory which are the immediate object both of this faith and sight.’ Therefore, the sight that saints behold in heaven is the result of their beholding Christ by faith during life on earth. This connection is important: just as seeing Christ in heaven is the perfection of faith on earth, so seeing Christ immediately in heaven is the perfection of seeing through a glass darkly in this world. As Owen describes it,

‘The enjoyment of God by sight is commonly called the BEATIFICAL VISION; and it is the sole fountain of all the actings of our souls in the state of blessedness . . . Howbeit, this we know, that God in his immense essence is invisible unto our corporeal eyes, and will be so to eternity; as also incomprehensible unto our minds. For nothing can perfectly comprehend that which is infinite, but what is itself infinite. Wherefore the blessed and blessing sight which we shall have of God will be always ‘in the face of Jesus Christ’.

God in his essence remains invisible, but the sight of God that is both blessed and blessing, is a sight of Christ. The difference between regeneration and glory is that a new kind of sight is provided in each, but in glory it is given a clarity and immediacy unknown to believers now. But what remains the same in regeneration and glorification is the object. It is still Christ, even in glory, who is the image of the invisible God. What is so important about this move, in comparison with Turretin, is that Owen is invoking his theologically robust Christology to do work for his understanding of eternity. In seeing Christ we see the Father, and as such, eternity is an act of gazing upon Christ and knowing God ‘in the face of Jesus Christ.’

What we see in Edwards is something different. Edwards turns to his doctrine of God, where the ultimate vision of God is the gazing of Father and Son within the Holy Spirit. Edwards notes that the ‘place’ of this vision, so to speak, is within the love of God:

‘This very manifestation that God will make of himself that will cause the beatifical vision will be an act of love in God. It will be from the exceeding love of God to them that he will give them this vision which will add an immense sweetness to it . . . They shall see that he
Within the love of God the saints come to know that they are loved by God and know him as Father and themselves as his children. Here is the inclination Paul depicts in 1 Cor 13:12. This emphasis follows the biblical focus on adoption as the overarching image of soteriology. Adoption, in the biblical narrative, is known in Christ, the Son of God. Therefore, believers come to see God the Father through the Son as they are bound together with him and share the relationship he has with the Father. In Edwards’s words, ‘The saints shall enjoy God as partaking with Christ of his enjoyment of God, for they are united to him and are glorified and made happy in the enjoyment of God as his members.’ The saints’ access to God is through the person of Christ alone: ‘They being in Christ shall partake of the love God the Father [has] to Christ, and as the Son knows the Father so they shall partake with him in his sight of God, as being as it were parts of him as he is in the bosom of the Father.’[xxiv] The saints come to participate, according to their capacity, in God’s own self-joy and delight.

Turretin, Owen, and Edwards each provides us with a differing glimpse into how we might come to understand the beatific vision theologically. Turretin utilizes the anthropological notions of the medieval debates, staying within those contours to try and show how the beatific vision actualizes the full potentialities of the glorified human person. Owen turns to Christology to focus on the object of the vision, keeping tight constraints on speculation by restricting the vision of God to Christ. Edwards links together his Trinitarian theology with his soteriology, arguing that salvation is partaking in the ‘Sonship of the Son.’ Adoption (or marriage), in other words, is the structure of his account, and he wields this to argue that we will see the Father through Christ.[xxv] It is in our union with Christ that we come to share in the gaze of the Father upon the Son, and, within the Son, we look upon God as Father.[xxvi] Along with these various approaches to focusing a doctrine of the beatific vision, the Reformed expanded the doctrine beyond eschatology. Traditionally, of course, the beatific vision is most fully developed in an account of eschatology or glorification. This is clear enough. The Reformed would also have an account of the beatific vision in their theological prolegomena, as they delineated the various types of knowledge of God available – the archetypal knowledge God has of himself, and the ectypal knowledge creatures have of God. In this section, the beatific would be addressed as the knowledge had in glory, and would be contrasted with pilgrim knowledge, which is the knowledge by faith. The distinction between archetypal and ectypal knowledge is a helpful way to delineate the knowledge God has of himself compared to how creatures can have knowledge of God. God’s own knowledge provides the archetype, and Jesus’s ectypal knowledge of the Father by union mediates all human knowledge of God. The knowledge of regeneration is by faith, whereas the knowledge of glorification is beatific; knowledge by faith is clouded, knowledge
by beatific is clear. But even beyond this, various Reformed theologians recovered the notion of God’s *blessedness* (*beatitudo Dei*). By recovering God’s blessedness in this manner, these Reformed figures, Edwards among them, were able to orient their understanding of the beatific vision as a participation in the eternal blessedness of God. Even more robustly, Edwards develops his doctrine of the Trinity based on an account of God’s own inner-beatific-gazing. God’s life simply is the Father and Son gazing upon one another within the Holy Spirit of love. In Edwards’s theology, it is this vision that is broken open to creatures in sending the *image* of the invisible God and the Spirit of love and illumination. God’s own inner-belovedness is given over in the Son, such that his creatures come to know God as *their* God, and the Father of the Son as *their* Father.

### Key Emphases

Before turning to some directions for a constructive account of the beatific vision, it is helpful to pause and reflect on the various features of the doctrine from what we have discussed thus far. From the above discussion, several key features of a doctrine of the beatific vision come to the fore. First, in the biblical material, the emphasis is on a transformative, relational vision of God. The language of ‘vision’ denotes the proximity and relationality available in God’s self-presentation in Christ by the Holy Spirit (the imagery of ‘light’ does this in Scripture as well). Whereas Owen wants to say that this relationship is always known ‘in the face of Jesus Christ,’ 1 John 3 seems to push the focus to the Father. This passage is on the love of the Father to his children, and it is in this context that John claims, ‘but we know that when *he appears* we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is’ (1 John 3:2). It is certainly possible, with Owen, to rest on Christ’s claim that if you have seen him you have seen the Father, but John seems to allow for us to push this further. In the passage in John, the focus seems to be on the Father appearing, and not Christ (but, of course, Owen might simply argue that Christ *simply is* the Father appearing). But ultimately, this is not where the focus is. The focus of this passage is on communion with God, in Christ, by his Spirit (these are the broad contours of Edwards’s analysis). Paul links the vision of eternity with faith here and now in 1 Corinthians 13:12, giving weight to the archetypal/ectypal distinction the reformed recovered. This distinction was meant to link all creaturely knowledge with God’s own self-knowing, but it also gives all knowledge of God a distinctively relational orientation.

Second, the ‘beatific’ aspect of the vision, in the tradition, denotes the fulfillment of the creature according to the fullness of one’s capacity. This is often discussed under the idea of enjoyment. Enjoyment is not simply pleasure, but the reality of holiness and communion with God. This might seem like a pointless proclamation, in that eternity with God is bound to be a blessed experience. While this is true, if we affirm that the beatific vision of eternity grounds and guides faith here and now, then we are given a broader depiction of the life of faith by understanding the nature of its perfection. It is here where we could analyze the emphasis on affections found in ...
the tradition, not the least of which in the Puritan tradition. Religious affections matter because the life of faith is on a journey to an eternity of affection; the spark of affections within the pilgrim witness to the fire of eternity, where we will be like him because we will see him as he is.

Third, the focus on the ‘vision’ of the beatific vision, in the tradition, turned into a debate concerning anthropology. The ‘seat’ of a believer’s knowledge of God, either the intellect or the will, became the primary place of debate. One of the great values of this emphasis is that virtues and vices were addressed in relation to this sight. Ethics, therefore, must be intimately related to an account of our vision of God. A proper description of theological ethics will need to account, in some fashion, for the beatific vision as a transformative reality of the creature before God. Edwards’s analysis, again, is ripe with insight. The vision of God is not some abstract gazing upon a perfect deity, but is a vision given over by God within love. As such, this is not a vision of deity, but of God as he is for me. Edwards states, ‘They shall see that he is their Father and that they are his children . . . therefore they shall see God as their own God, when they behold this transcendent glory.’ [xxix]

In light of these key features, we turn now to directions for a constructive account of the beatific vision. The focus of traditional accounts, as we have seen, has been broad. Medieval accounts tended to focus on anthropology, making arguments for which faculty was primary and addressing issues such as the contingency of the beatific vision and enjoyment. Reformed accounts tended to focus more on the sanctification of creaturely knowledge by focusing on the link between faith and sight. Blessedness, therefore, was oriented by the eternally blessed God who has revealed himself to his creatures in Christ. The discussion tended to gravitate, as we have seen, to the object and means of this vision. With this as our backdrop, it is helpful now to turn to several key points of orientation for constructing a doctrine of the beatific vision today.

**Developing a Constructive Account**

The purpose of the following four points is to provide contours for developing a doctrine of the beatific vision. The goal is not to develop each of these four points, but simply to gesture toward what this development might look like. We will conclude with some notes concerning how a retrieval of this doctrine could be fruitful for contemporary theology and ministry. Ultimately, we want to push back on the tradition a bit to relocate the doctrine of the beatific vision within the specific register of God’s presence. The beatific vision is about God presenting himself to his creatures, and therefore this doctrine must focus its attention on God, and only then turn to the anthropological response.

To construct a doctrine of the beatific vision, it seems clear that, first and foremost, one must maintain a continual emphasis on God as he is in himself. It will always be tempting to allow a doctrine of the beatific vision to slip into anthropology, but at its heart, its focus is about
creatures coming to stand before the Lord of Glory. This Lord of Glory is the God of fullness and freedom, an eternal fountain of love who overflows within his own life. This is the God of infinite enjoyment, who, as such, can pour forth that enjoyment to his creatures. Therefore, the emphasis is on the self-giving of God in Christ and the Spirit, and, following thinkers like Edwards, the vision of God is God’s self-giving in full. Whereas grace is God’s self-giving, initially received in regeneration, glorification is the fulfillment of this initial down-payment. This ushers in a healthy pneumatology, strangely absent from Owen’s account, and links the down-payment of the Spirit in regeneration and sanctification with glorification (an ever-increasing union with God, in Christ, by the Spirit). In the incarnation, we see God’s hiddenness and revelation. The beatific vision is the revelation of God without God’s hiddenness, but only according to the capacity of the creature. The beatific vision is grace, fully given, and as such, it naturally leads us to talk about our reception of this grace (just like soteriology, in general, should be focused on what God has done, which leads us to talk about the implications of that, so too in glorification).

Second, it is important to follow the biblical link between knowledge by faith (in a mirror dimly) and the clear knowledge of the beatific vision. There is a kind of spiritual sight available in Christ by the Spirit, and presently this sight is shrouded in darkness. Furthermore, following the Reformed recovery of the scholastic archetypal / ectypal distinction, we must maintain the connection between creaturely knowledge of God and God’s own self-knowledge. Human knowledge of God is always by grace – by God’s self-giving – and as such, God is known as he gives over his self-knowledge. God’s knowledge of himself is had within the fullness of his own life, a fullness that is wrapped up in his self-enjoyment and love. This is how God has revealed himself: by sending his beloved Son who loves and calls his people to love. There is a reciprocal relation in Scripture between the Father’s relationship to the Son and the Son with his people (e.g., John 14:20-21, 23; 15:9-10; 17:10-11, 21-26). In Christ, believers come to know God within the love of the Father upon the Son. As such, creaturely knowledge of God is familial knowledge; to know God is to know him as Father, in the Son by the Spirit, and to know oneself as his child.

Third, and building on the first two points, a proper doctrine of the beatific vision should, in our opinion, hold the language of ‘vision’ loosely, and reconnect this with other biblical imagery like light, harmony, and communion/fellowship. To understand this, it is relevant to note the biblical depiction of the New Jerusalem. The New Jerusalem descends from heaven, signifying that this is God’s creation and not humankind’s achievement. We do not create the new creation, God hands it over. Furthermore, the cube shape represents the Holy of Holies from the temple (Rev. 21:16), signifying that this city is the perfect presence of God, no longer cut off from his people, but now saturating their lives. This is why John tells us, ‘I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb’ (Rev. 21:22-23). Once again we see that the glory of God is directly connected to God himself, not abstracted deity, but the Lamb of salvation. This is God for us as he has redeemed the world and shines forth in his
radiance. It is important that while God is the centrepiece to this reality, creatures don’t fall into endless contemplation and singing (the singing in Revelation is important, but it does not denote an eternal choir session). Instead, God’s glory is the light that bathes this creation, such that we do not stare blankly into it, blinded by its luminosity, but have life itself illumined. As with all light, we see because of it, and do not merely focus on it. In this sense, the New Jerusalem is the perfection of the psalmists declaration, ‘In your light do we see light’ (Ps. 36:9). In the light of God we are illuminated and illumined, seeing the God of light, and therefore seeing both him and by him. C. S. Lewis makes the important distinction between seeing light and seeing by it, saying, ‘Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.’ In God’s self-giving, we receive both.

Last, it is important that we maintain the anthropological insights of the tradition, but focus those around the ecclesial community and love. Love is the ultimate virtue, with every other virtue simply refracting the radiance of love. Love is a uniting virtue, and therefore God’s self-giving of love always ties union with God together with union with others. As Paul claims, ‘above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body’ (Col. 3:14-15a). Likewise, ‘perfect love casts out fear’ (1 John 4:18), and as such, perfect love is a harmonizing reality brought to the soul. Note the connection between love, harmony, and peace. This vision of love is what brings peace to the soul, which it does through the harmonizing of the whole soul to God in Christ by his Spirit. To enact the refracted virtues of love one must receive them such that Paul’s list in 1 Corinthians 13 (love is patient, love is kind, it does not boast, etc.) is a description of how we are loved by God before it is a plumb line for our own loving. A true vision of God, as a vision of God for me, is something that quiets the soul by God’s love (Zeph. 3:17), and orients the creature to love.

Whereas many descriptions of the beatific vision digress into an event of individual ravishment, we need to recall the kind of sight God provides: the sight of God does not take our eyes off of everything else, but the sight of God allows us to finally see. God’s self-giving presence leads to community – a city in fact – where the light of God’s love illumines all reality. Love of God and love of neighbor are interconnected realities because love of God entails partaking in vision (dark through faith) of the God who is love. This is what leads John to say,

‘Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might love though him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one
another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.’ (1 John 4:7-12)

The focus in the tradition on anthropology (which got stuck in the mire of faculty psychology) and enjoyment, need to be retooled in this fashion. Anthropologically, the human person is fully alive in the sight of God, knowing and being known in love, and is therefore able to rest in the fullness of God’s life such that he or she is able to embrace life itself. This life is known now through the cross, and does not merely look beyond it to glory (or, we might say, the form of glory is the cross). The light of the new creation is the light of the lamb, a lamb that never ceases to be the one who gave his life for many. Furthermore, the notion of enjoyment has to be read through this lens as well, such that peace and love guide and govern the ethical life of the Christian. Jesus’ depiction of loving God and loving neighbor as the centerpiece of following Christ must maintain prominence here as well.

**Conclusion**

It could be that the doctrine of the beatific vision fell out of favour because it became an esoteric guessing-game concerning eternity and a highly detailed delineation of anthropological issues. Rather, what we see in Scripture is a depiction of God’s self-giving in love that allows creatures to live in a society of love. Love of God and love of neighbor is the reality of creatures that have been captivated by God. This does lead to contemplation, setting our minds on Christ who is seated at God’s right hand (Col. 3:2a), but the goal is not contemplation as such. The ancient divide between action and contemplation is annihilated in the vision of God, because God is love, and as such, when we see him we shall be like him. To be people of love is the destination of this journey, therefore the journey itself is formed by it. It is no wonder that Paul’s description of the beatific vision in 1 Corinthians 13:12 is only possible after narrating the reality of love. In Paul’s description, all else fades but love. Love is the economy of eternity, and therefore trading in love is trading in wisdom. This kind of development of the beatific vision would, we believe, reorient everything the church does, and, maybe particularly, what the theologian does. The call of theology is to witness to this light that descended into darkness, and the prophetic declaration of the theologian must be one of love. Our orientation as pilgrims, therefore, must be captured by this city, this society, of God. It is nothing short of the kingdom inaugurated by Christ. Richard Bauckham notes,

‘The vision of God... offers a symbol of human destiny that highlights its theocentricity. It combines a sense of being in the immediate presence of God with the idea of knowing God in his true identity, as it were ‘face to face’. It has sometimes been understood in a rather intellectualized and individualized way, but need not be. It is the whole person that is engaged in immediate relationship with God. [xxxvii]"
To give a theological account of the beatific vision, therefore, we must follow these four major emphases laid out above, but we must not rest there. There are further ecclesial features to this doctrine, because Christ is calling a people to himself, and because our end is not isolated contemplation, but a city of love. A people oriented by this reality must consider carefully the role of praise, in all of its various facets, as we 'learn a new song we will sing for eternity.' The harmonizing of a people in love is at the heart of the practices of the church, and a doctrine of the beatific vision, properly construed, should help orient the hearts of the people around the fountain of light and life.

Endnotes

[i] I am particularly thankful for the feedback from Jamin Goggin and Ty Kieser on this article.


[iii] Of these passages, perhaps the most utilized are, Matthew 5:8; 1 Corinthians 13:12; 2 Corinthians 3:18, 2 Corinthians 4:6; and 1 John 3:2.

[iv] To qualify this statement, I am focusing on the use of 1 Corinthians 13:12 to talk about relational knowledge, and not the broader point about our knowledge of God being connected to being known by God. This larger point is affirmed throughout the entirety of the Christian tradition, maybe most robustly by John Calvin, who starts The Institutes of the Christian Religion with this point. Calvin starts off his work, Institutes of the Christian Religion, saying, 'Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.' John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I, 1, 1. Much further back, in approximately AD 200, Clement of Alexandria stated, 'It is then, as appears, the greatest of all lessons to know one’s self.' Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 2, Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 271. From the beginning of the Christian faith, it has been a value to know oneself, and to know oneself truly. According to Martin Luther: 'A man should know himself, should know, feel, and experience that he is guilty of sin and subject to death; but he should also know the opposite, that God is the Justifier and Redeemer of a man who knows himself this way.' James M. Houston, 'The ‘Double Knowledge’ as the Way of Wisdom,' in The...

[v] Edwards makes this point throughout his corpus. The sight of God is immediate (not mediated) in that the Spirit gives a true perception of God in Christ through his work of illumination. The sight is mediated in that we currently have Scripture, the elements of the Lord’s Table, etc., that mediate this vision to us. For more on this, see Oliver Crisp and Kyle Strobel, Jonathan Edwards: An Introduction to His Thought (Eerdmans, forthcoming).


[vii] This is an important point in Jesus’ teaching, when he criticizes those who have eyes but cannot see, and ears but cannot hear (e.g. Mark 8:18 cf. Jeremiah 5:21). Importantly, those who cannot see or hear need not try harder, but must be illumined to the truth and beauty of God.


[x] This continues to be true all the way up until Bavinck: ‘In theology, theologians have disputed whether this blessedness in the hereafter formally had its seat in the intellect or in the will and hence consisted in knowledge or love. Thomas claimed the former, Duns Scotus the latter, but Bonaventure combined the two, observing that the enjoyment of God (fruitio Dei) was the fruit not only of the knowledge of God (cognitio Dei) but also of the love of God (amor Dei) and resulted from the union and cooperation of the two.’ Herman Bavinck (2003) Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation, ed. John Bolt and John Vriend, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, vol. 4, p. 722.


[xii] Ibid.

[xiii] It could be that Turretin’s ‘elenctic’ focus caused him to enter into the contours of a debate and accept those boundaries, rather than rethinking the boundaries themselves.
Admittedly, there is some debate concerning Aquinas’ use of ‘essence.’ See Smith, T. L. (2003) *Thomas Aquinas’ Trinitarian Theology: A Study in Theological Method*, Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, pp. 24, 50-52, 60. Joseph Wawrykow notes, ‘Yet while the vision provides a knowledge of God in God’s essence, Aquinas is insistent that the knowledge granted the human is not total, in the sense of utterly comprehensive. The light of glory is a created light, and the human remains human even in this rising to God; the finite is unable to totally grasp God as God is . . . beatific vision is but a sharing, a participation in the manner set by God for the creature in God’s own life’. Joseph P. Wawrykow, *The SCM Press A-Z of Thomas Aquinas* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 18.


 Ibid., p. 240.

 Ibid., p. 288.

 This distinction does not entirely separate the two for Owen. For Owen, there is a sense where sight is the perfection of faith, and therefore without faith, sight will never occur. He states (ibid.), ‘No man shall ever behold the glory of Christ by sight hereafter, who doth not in some measure behold it by faith here in this world. Grace is a necessary preparation for glory, and faith for sight’.

 Ibid., pp. 292-293; my emphasis.

 To ‘perfect the means,’ for Owen, entails two differing gifts of sight, one in regeneration and the other in glorification. For Edwards, in contrast, there is just one sight given over that is perfected. See my *Jonathan Edwards’s Theology*, 188-190 for more on this.

 Charles Hodge follows Owen when he states, ‘This vision of God is in the face of Jesus
Christ, in whom dwells the plenitude of the divine glory bodily. God is seen in fashion as a man; and it is this manifestation of God in the person of Christ that is inconceivably and intolerably ravishing.' Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 3 (London: James Clarke & Co., 1960), 860.

[xxiii] Jonathan Edwards, MS Sermon on Rom. 2:10 (1735), [L.44r-L.44v], transcript supplied by Jonathan Edwards Center, Yale University. All quotations from this sermon are edited for readability. The leaf number from the transcript appears in brackets.


[xxv] Edwards focuses more on the marriage image than the adoption image, but they both do the same kind of work. Both images are filial and oriented around union in the Son by the Spirit (to the Father). One can’t help but think of Ephesians 2:18-19 here. The focus is on opening the family (and life) of God to believers in the Son by the Spirit.

[xxvi] Under a major heading on the two natures of Christ in a single person, Calvin makes several comments about the beatific vision, stating that ‘Christ is said to be seated at the right hand of the Father [Mark 16:19, Rom. 8:34]. Yet this is but for a time, until we enjoy the direct vision of the Godhead.’ Calvin, like Edwards, seems to be focusing on a vision of the trinitarian God as such, rather than focusing solely on Christ as the image. He continues, ‘But when as partakers in heavenly glory we shall see God as he is, Christ, having then discharged the office of Mediator, will cease to be the ambassador of his Father, and will be satisfied with that glory which he enjoyed before the creation of the world.’ Therefore, in a sense, Christ’s office as mediator is ‘discharged’ with his office as ambassador. Furthermore, Calvin notes, ‘That is, to him [Christ] was lordship committed by the Father, until such a time as we should see his divine majesty face to face . . . Then, also, God shall cease to be the Head of Christ, for Christ’s own deity will shine of itself, although as yet it is covered by a veil’ (Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.14.3). Like Edwards’ depiction of the beatific vision, Christ’s divine nature is included in the consummate vision, and, it would seem, Christ’s role as mediator is perfected in some real sense, so that believers are no longer *veiled* by his humanity. Todd Billings offers an overview of Calvin’s understanding of the union with God in eternity, which follows remarkably similar contours as Edwards’: ‘In their union with Christ, believers are ‘participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself.’ Indeed, ‘day by day, he grows more and more into one body with us, until he becomes completely one with us . . . Yet this union with Christ is impossible without a participation in the Spirit, who unites the believer to Christ.’ J. Todd Billings *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 52.

understanding of the beattitude Dei, see Adriaan C. Neele, Petrus van Mastricht (1630-1706) Reformed Orthodoxy: Method and Piety Brill’s Series in Church History Vol. 35 (Boston: Brill, 2009), 174-180.


[xxix] Romans 2:10, [L.44r-L.44v].

[xxx] Richard Muller narrates the work the beattitude Dei does for the Reformed High Orthodox: ‘This traditional language of divine blessedness or felicity has a series of significant corollaries: it guarantees the freedom of God. Inasmuch as God is the ultimate source and goal of all good and as both necessary and sufficient in his being, God is in no need of his creatures or of particular acts on the part of his creatures to ensure his happiness. God is, therefore, utterly free in his dealings with the creation – and, above all, utterly free in his bestowing of grace and mercy. There also is an eschatological corollary that relates directly to the analogy of human happiness and to the necessary failure of the analogy. Although perfect happiness is not available on earth, the highest happiness given here is that which is given by God and had through communion with him: ‘according as he doth communicate himself to no more or less, so are we more or less happy.’ This conclusion, points toward the intensely practical aspect of the orthodox discussion of this attribute: God’s blessedness elicits response from the creature: ‘God is also to be blessed by us, which blessing adds nothing to his blessedness but is ... required of us that we may ... enjoy his blessedness.’ Richard A. Muller, Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725, The Divine Essence and Attributes Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 383. For contemporary attempts to retrieve the divine blessedness, see Fred Sanders, The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), and Michael Reeves, Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012).

[xxx] By ‘full’ here I mean something like ‘complete,’ as long as it is understood that this is only in relation to the creature. Only God’s own life is fullness itself, and so any communication of that life to the creature will be limited accordingly.

[xxxii] Space will not allow for the qualifications necessary concerning our claim that the vision of eternity is ‘without hiddenness.’ Needless to say, this needs to be a qualified claim.


I take the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 to be love, full stop. The following virtues listed are refractions or fruit of love (i.e., joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control).

Note Edwards’s description of holiness: ‘Holiness, as I then wrote down some of my contemplations on it appeared to me to be of a sweet, pleasant, charming, serene, calm nature. It seemed to me, it brought an inexpressible purity, brightness, peacefulness and ravishment to the soul: and that it made the soul like a field or garden of God, with all manner of pleasant flowers; that is all pleasant, delightful and undisturbed; enjoying a sweet calm, and the gently vivifying beams of the sun. The soul of a true Christian, as I then wrote my meditations, appeared like such a little white flower, as we see in the spring of the year; low and humble on the ground, opening its bosom, to receive the pleasant beams of the sun’s glory; rejoicing as it were, in a calm rapture; diffusing around a sweet fragrancy; standing peacefully and lovingly, in the midst of other flowers round about; all in like manner opening their bosoms, to drink in the light of the sun.’ Y16:796


The notion that the Christian life is singing a new song we will sing for eternity is taken from Jonathan Edwards. See Y22, ‘They Sing a New Song,’ 227-244.
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