

Angels

When we entertain the idea of angels, we enter into territory that in some ways is very difficult, so difficult, in fact, that we might be tempted to omit it, to leave it alone. The fact is that many theologians have done just that. After all, the framework of Christian doctrine does not require the angelic realm. No other doctrines of Scripture are overly affected by the neglect of angelology, and angels are really little more than bit-players in the drama of redemption. But angels are worth our consideration for a number of reasons, and I would like to note three of them here.

First of all, their use in Western mythology actually obscures their character and calling. The Judeo-Christian tradition is full of a rich mythology of angels. When we think of angels, we do not tend to think of their biblical characterizations so much as we tend to think of their literary descriptions, whether those descriptions come to us from Dante's *Inferno*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, C.S. Lewis' use of pseudo-Dionysius in many of his books, or the religious novels of Frank Peretti.

A second reason why angels are worth spending some time with is the recent explosion of angels in New Age and postmodernist spirituality. The 1970's saw a popular cultural interest in satanic things and the occult. That was simply the beginning of a cultural shift away from the rationalistic worldview of the Enlightenment toward a new paganism driven by superstition and occult interest. In recent years, angels have been added to this kind of designer spirituality that we have today. You can go into any bookstore and find dozens of different books on angels. It used to be that for a couple of years, a month did not go by where you could not find a different TV show that portrayed angels in one way or another. And the vast majority of it, perhaps 99% would not be an understatement, was totally devoid of any factual basis whatsoever. The sources for the current angelology of our culture appear to be an eclectic mix of Romanticism and "vacuum cleaner" spirituality—what I mean by that is that everything just gets sucked up into it. Anything that has to do with a friendly supernaturalism has been projected onto angels today.

A third reason, which we will have to follow a bit more closely, that angels are worth our attention, and part of the reason we are coming back to them in our culture today, is because of the reduction of reality that has taken place in the Enlightenment West. We may overreact to the happy syncretism of New Age religion by merely dismissing the angelic. If we do so, we make a mistake, and I think it is a mistake that goes back to the Reformation, and we will see it there. There is a real cost in bypassing the angelic. There is a real cost to be paid when we ignore angels. In his book *The Eclipse of Heaven*, A.J. Conyers argues that the post-Enlightenment West has impoverished its worldview. We have reduced our vision to that which we can see, to that which we can measure, to that which we can calculate. And this reduction of reality has taken place in a number of ways. First, it has taken place by a scientific secularization. We are all familiar with this. The obvious reduction of reality in the secularization of anti-theistic scientific culture is there for all of us to see. The only things that are real are those things which can be known, those things which can be calculated, plugged into a taxonomy, and understood by a table or flow chart.

But the reduction of reality is also part of orthodox Christianity. Think here of Diemer's dualistic idea again. Even orthodox Christians have reduced Christianity, but in the opposite direction as scientific secularism. Scientific secularism has said that only those things we can touch are real, only those things we can measure are valid. We evangelicals have sometimes gone off the other end: Only those things we cannot touch are real; only those things we cannot measure are valid. While we affirm both heaven and earth, the angelic and the human, we place them into an antithetical tension. The dualism is that the heavenly or the angelic functions for us merely as a negation of the creational, a negation of what is worldly. And thus, for many of us, this world is less real and less good than the heavenly realm. Where

scientism secularizes heaven, popular Christianity has secularized creation, and whenever you secularize one side, you vulgarize the other.

A third reduction that is important to take note of is what we could call Reformed anti-dualism. Reformed anti-dualism often comes across as anti-heavenly. There is a dangerous reduction in the Reformed anti-dualistic approach to reality. In seeking to defame dualism, and I would, as a theologian, like to do that, we often come across as being anti-heavenly. Let me give you an example of that. For years, I used to teach in a Christian liberal arts college, and I would claim something like this: Heaven is not the ultimate destiny of the redeemed. Scripturally, it is a renewed creation. It is the restoration of all things that is our destiny. The Bible never says anywhere that people go to heaven. What we see in Revelation 21-22 is that the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, comes to earth. We should not think of heaven as a static otherness, which negates creation and receives the human soul. But what people would hear when I would say that is, "Dr. Williams does not believe in heaven." That is not what I said. But that is what is heard because what they hear is that I am dethroning the very thing that they hold to be the most real, the most true, the most important.

Here is my thesis: the heavenly, and the angelic which is its emblem, is not antithetical to phenomenal reality. Heaven is not antithetical to earth. Yes, there is oftentimes an important moral tension in Scripture between heaven and earth, but in the final analysis, affirming one is not to negate the other. Heaven is not antithetical to earth but is rather a declaration that reality is more than what merely appears before our eyes. The coming of heaven makes the earth more real rather than less real. Biblically, both heaven and earth are essential to creation. You do not have creation with one of them lopped off. You would only have half of God's intention. The angelic brings a heightened sense of reality, a depth of reality. But to make sense of this, I think we need to do a physical survey and a history of angelology.

Let us look at the biblical testimony concerning angels. The primary term for angels in the Old Testament is *mal'ak*, which is the Hebrew word. In the New Testament, it is *angelos*. And both terms mean "messenger." Now obviously, one does not have to be a spirit to be a messenger, so we should not be surprised that both Testaments will also use those words to refer to human beings occasionally. Sometimes the New Testament will help us out here by adding the little descriptive phrase "of heaven," if it is talking about an angel rather than someone just showing up with the mail. Context is the key here. Second, Scripture does not bother to treat angels as independent entities in any way. The Bible seems to have no interest whatsoever in an analytic knowledge of angels. There is no taxonomy of angels. There is no history of angels. There is no concentrated reflection of angels anywhere within the biblical materials. From off-hand comments about them, however, we may conclude a series of propositions about angels.

Here we go to the nature of angels. First of all, like us, they are created beings. Angels are not eternal, as you can see in Psalm 148 and Colossians 2. They had a beginning. Like us, they are absolutely dependent on God. There is no autonomous existence anywhere. Second, Hebrews 1:4 tells us that they are spirits. They do not naturally belong to that part of the created order that we call the earthly. Now we see here immediately one of the major problems, because calling angels spirits, as we have already said that God is a spirit, suggests that "spirit" is a genus, a class to which both God and angels belong. But the fact is that God is as different from angels as He is from us. Angels, like us, are created. Angels, like us, are dependent beings. The fact is the term "spirit," at least from our perspective, may be capable of definition only by negation. When we say an angel is a spirit, we mean an incorporeal person. We do not really mean spirit as a genus, as in God is made up of spirit and angels are made up of spirit, some kind of rarified substance. We might best think of angels as belonging to that part of creation that Colossians

1:16 calls the invisible, and that distinguishes angels from God as much as associating them. While both God and angels are invisible to us, angels are created and belong to the created order. Third, angels can, however, become visible. Lots of biblical examples can be found. Think of Gabriel appearing to Mary and to Joseph, the angels at the empty tomb in John 20, and the angels at the ascension in Acts 2. One interesting little side statement, or tidbit here, is that angels are always depicted in Scripture as males. Is this a cultural convention of the thought-world of Scripture? Well, possibly. But it does raise the interesting question of the way cultural conventions and expectations fill in that which is obscure, that which is nebulous. And the fact of the matter is, when it comes to angels, there is a lot, even from a biblical perspective, that remains obscure and ambiguous and nebulous.

Sometime after *The Screwtape Letters* was first published, C.S. Lewis wrote a new preface for the book. It is a funny thing to read. In that preface, he addressed some of the objections that people had concerning his depictions of the angelic and demonic realms. If you have read the book, you know he has set everything in a kind of competitive, corporate, managerial hierarchy of business, and he uses that as the metaphor for getting at the angelic, and especially the demonic. Lewis argued that his depiction had as much right to stand as the one we see in Renaissance art—the plump, infantile cherub, which was kind of a syncretistic acknowledgement of the classical Greek cupid. Lewis argued that his depiction had as much right to stand as those others. The winged, whispering, and effeminately wimpy creatures that floated around Victorian culture, indicate that they were a sexually repressed culture. In fact, Lewis' depiction, shocking as it is, may really be ever so much closer to the biblical reality than either the Renaissance or the Victorian depiction. You see, the biblical angel is less likely to come to us as a warm breeze, whispering words of comfort, like the New Age angel, than he is with the words, “Do not be frightened; I am not here to kill you.” That is exactly what he did with Mary. That is the biblical angel! When he shows up, he says, “I am not here to take your life.” So as shocking as Lewis is, it may be closer to the reality. But when we think of angels, what do we think of? We think through the literary conventions of our culture: demons have tails (that is from Milton) and angels have wings (that is also from Milton). The fact is that nowhere are we told that angels have wings. The cherubim have wings, but Scripture never says they are angels, which is interesting.

The fourth truth about angels is that there is a whole lot of them. I do not remember if they travel in packs or whatever, but there are a lot of biblical texts that talk about the hosts of heaven. Furthermore, there may even be classes of angels, maybe even some form of organization. 1 Thessalonians 4 and Jude 9 both speak of Michael as an archangel. While it is not clear what relationship the cherubim and seraphim have to angels, they are spoken of as well. Cherubim are very common in the Old Testament. They minister below the heavenly throne. And if you recall, it was cherubim that guarded Eden after Adam was thrown out. Seraphim are only mentioned in Isaiah 6. They do not appear anywhere else in Scripture.

What about angelic activity? First, angels seem to be in the business of continually praising and worshiping God. Many texts say that, including Psalm 103, Psalm 108, Revelation 5,7, and 8, and Luke 2. Second, angels minister to believers. Hebrews 1:14 calls angels “ministering spirits.” If you start looking up texts on angels, you find out that one of the activities they seem to enjoy particularly is breaking the disciples out of prison. In Acts 5 and 12, they were important in jailbreaks. What do we know about guardian angels? Guardian angels appear for the first time to be an issue in the inter-testamental thought of Jewish theology. That may, in fact, stand behind the statement in Acts 12:15 in which the maid confused Peter with his angel. But in Matthew 18:10 we do have the statement that “Their angels always behold the face of God.” I like the idea of guardian angels. Fourth, angels execute judgment upon the enemies of God. That is seen in 2 Kings 19 and Exodus 14. Fifth, they reveal and communicate God's message to man. Hebrews 2:2 speaks of the angels revealing the law to us. Far and

away, the most significant and recurrent activity ascribed to angels in Scripture is their role as agents of revelation. An angel does just what the name says: he is a messenger. See Genesis 22, Judges 13, and 1 Kings 19.

The relationship of angels to Jesus is an interesting one. They are active at His birth. They are there at the tomb. They are there at the resurrection and the ascension. But the fact, outside of making appearances at some of these crucial events in His life, angels play almost no part whatsoever in Jesus' earthly ministry. He does make the statement to Nathaniel in John 1 that, "You are going to see the gates of heaven open and angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man." But we really do not see a lot of angels here. In fact, the most extended biblical text dealing with the angels is Hebrews 1:5-2:9. But it is a text that makes the particular point that one greater than the angels is here. In all of Scripture, the text that spends the most time talking about angels relativizes them and says they are not very important. As a matter of fact, if there is a text you want to point out to people who seem to be caught up in this issue of angels today, it would be that one. Actually, it would be an interesting evangelistic opportunity to get into a discussion about angels and say, "You know, if you are interested in angels, you ought to be paying attention to the one who is greater than angels." The revelatory role of angels is supplanted by Jesus, the one who is their natural superior.

Let us discuss briefly a history on angelology. The first character we want to talk about is Philo of Alexandria of the first century. Philo really participated in the inter-testamental speculation about angels that was so common within Jewish circles. Philo's view of reality was shaped somewhat like Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28, the dream the Jacob had at Bethel. God stands at the top and angels fill in the ranks between heaven and earth. Remember that we talked about the analogy of being. It is the same thing we are talking about here. We might call it the chain or the ladder; we will call it the ladder of being for our purposes. Between God and us, there are different rungs, and Philo suggests that this space is full. There are no empty spaces here. The angels fill in the ranks, and they are part of the larger genus of souls. At the top of this ladder, just like the analogy of being, we have spirits or souls or minds, as Thomas Aquinas will come to call it, and of course at the bottom we have matter. Some souls become embodied in human flesh, become embodied in matter, while some remain ethereal. The pure souls, those souls that do not get trapped in matter, according to Philo, God calls angels and they are free to serve as His ministers.

Pseudo-Dionysius, a writer from about A.D. 500 in Syria, picks up on this idea of the chain of being, or the ladder of being, in a book called *The Celestial Hierarchy*, and he wants to fill all of this in. These descriptions are interesting, because they are not thinking of angels functionally. They are not thinking of them in terms of being messengers. Rather, they are trying to define them. They are trying to give them a kind of metaphysical definition and figure out where they fit on the huge map of metaphysics. Pseudo-Dionysius says that right underneath God we have seraphim, then cherubim, then thrones, dominions, powers, authorities, principalities, archangels, angels, and then us, the earth.

In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas took this one step further than Philo and Pseudo-Dionysius. In his *Summa Theologica*, with questions 50-64 and then 106-114, he takes up and develops these issues. "Everything you always wanted to know about angels but were afraid to ask" is right there in Thomas' work. Thomas uses angels in order to demonstrate to his satisfaction that a mind does not need a body and that minds are superior to bodies. Why? Angels do not have bodies. So on the upper part of the ladder is mind and down on the lower part is matter. And angels make the case that materialism is wrong, which said you cannot have minds without bodies. Also, interestingly for Thomas, angels for him and for a large part of his discussion have nothing to do with biblical revelation. Angels are the object of a kind of natural knowledge. And again, he is not thinking of them functionally—what they do

in the Bible—but he is thinking, “What are angels made up of? Where do they live?” It is in this context in medieval theology that discussions like, “How many angels can sit on the head of a pin?” were considered. I am not sure that question was ever really considered by the way, though Erasmus jokes that it was. But those kinds of questions were part of the issues of the day.

We should not be surprised, then, when we come to the Reformation and find a very different attitude toward angels. We find that the concern was on function now, rather than on metaphysical speculation. The medieval project of reconciling angels with the speculative and overly metaphysical ideas of the day would come up against the Protestant objection. Karth Barth said, “To look in two directions [that is to say, in the direction of theology/Scripture, and philosophy/the natural world] is to see straight in neither. If we try to find angels both in the Bible and elsewhere, we shall only see hazy pictures. Our philosophy will spoil our theology, and our theology will spoil our philosophy.” Again, Thomas Aquinas held that angels are pure spirits, and this was a burning issue for him and the medieval world, to understand where they fit in the nature of things. The Reformers will accept the existence of angels but they will focus not on these metaphysical questions, but on functional questions. Indeed, from the very beginning the Reformation exhibits almost a certain reticence to speak about angels, to think about them at all. They seem to be part of the medieval Roman Catholic tradition, more than anything else. Calvin is a good example; see his *Institutes*, book 1, chapter 14 for his primary discussion of angels. In fundamental agreement with the classical tradition, Calvin said, “Angels exist. They are creatures [all the things we have said already...]. They are spirits. Some fell, out of their own evil will; others did not, and they are God’s messengers.”

For Calvin there are three principles that control his thinking about angels. The first is the principle of *sola scriptura*—the Bible alone. The Bible must set the tone, must set the form for talk about angels. He does not want to be speculative. He asks the question, “What point is there then, in anxiously investigating on what day, apart from the stars and planets, the other heavenly hosts began to exist?” He is talking about the angels here. Calvin said that all these questions that we have about the nature of angels, when they began to exist, and where they are, are irrelevant to us. Angels in Scripture are purely public messengers of salvation and the goal of Scripture is edification, not mystical or intellectual enlightenment. What good would having a speculative knowledge of angels do us?

Second for Calvin is his pastoral principle. The Bible is a means by which men and women achieve godliness, and godliness is manifested more in moral terms than in purely intellectual virtue. Calvin pointedly contrasted the speculation of Dionysius, who talked as if he had been to heaven—at least that is the way Calvin put it—with Paul who had been to the third heaven, but considered talking about it illegal.

Third for Calvin, and probably most importantly, is the absolute sovereignty of God. Praise is to be given only to God. He said there is spiritual danger in dwelling on angels. It divides us in our loyalty. The time we spend thinking about, considering, or ruminating on angels is time we should be actually meditating on Jesus Christ. The end of both Scripture and the Christian life is to glorify God. Angels exist to reflect that glory as in a mirror. Calvin insists that to spend time on an angel is to abuse the angel because the angel’s job is to glorify God: “The whole praise of salvation rests with God alone, for the angels do not bring help to whomever they wish to help, nor do they move by their own will. They only obey the will of God.” In other words, angels are not ends but means. And what is idolatry? It is taking a means as an end.

Let us look quickly at the post-Reformation period. John Milton, the 17th-century writer of *Paradise Lost*, seems to be somewhat aberrational of Protestant angelology. He seems to bring angels down to our

level, because he makes them thoroughly embodied. He presents a materialistic hierarchy. Angels walked the earth. Frank Peretti does much the same thing. On the whole, however, Protestant orthodoxy tends toward a kind of minimalism over the centuries after the Reformation, almost to the point of secularism. It is what Barth would later call 'the angelology of the weary shrug of the shoulders.' By that, he meant that though we confess angels exist, we do not admit that they do anything. We have no real purpose for them. And that attitude will continue on into the Enlightenment. So by the time you get to Descartes, he would simply say these are fictitious or mythological creatures, and spending any time on such nonsense takes away from real thinking about how the world works.

Finally, we come to Karl Barth. Barth certainly wrote far more about angels than any modern. Though he has been dead for 30 years, Barth still has contributed far more about angels than anyone in this century or the last. He gave some 250 pages of one volume of his *Church Dogmatics* to the issue of angels. Barth suggested, first of all, that angels are essentially marginal creatures and this is their glory. It is a wonderful statement, and again it makes the point that spending too much time thinking about angels is not pointing you to Christ (and this is the angels' own point).

Angels stand in the wings of the biblical drama. They are at the burning bush. They are at the annunciation of Mary. They are at the empty tomb. They are at the last trumpet. They are like the character in the Shakespearean play, the sword-bearer or the spear-bearer who often appears to be merely window-dressing. They are necessarily legendary figures standing with flaming swords at the boundary between history and revelation, between poetry and prose.

Barth's angelology focuses on two roles and we want to talk about those for a moment. First, they are representatives of heaven. Secondly, they are witnesses to the divine glory. First of all, we will look at their roles as representatives of heaven. Heaven is the mysterious counterpart to earth. It is the 'whence' (the 'from what place or source') of all God's words and works. Again, a fully functional view of creation needs both heaven and earth. Barth makes the point, I think quite rightly, that throughout the biblical narrative, heaven leans in upon us. One of the ways we evangelicals have vulgarized heaven is that we have turned the whole thing into this kind of an affair: Heaven is up there and we are down here and there is no connection. The only way there is any connection is we must die. As we are right now, heaven does not relate. But what we see in Scripture is that the powers of heaven are coming to earth. The norms of heaven are coming to earth. We are called to do the will of God on earth as it is in heaven, and in the final scenes of the biblical story, heaven itself comes to earth. Heaven seeks to be present, and the fact that heaven leans in upon us keeps us from secularizing the creational order. It keeps us from pushing God and His kingdom, God and His norms, out of our lives. And as inhabitants of heaven, who show up once in a while, standing in the corner holding the spear, angels are bearers of that message. They are heralds of the mystery of God. By their very presence they whisper to us, "What you see is not all there is." Barth suggested that a world without angels would be a world without wonder, and a theology without angels is a theology without awe. In the end, if our theology cannot accommodate the mystery, it will fail to communicate God to us. That is marvelous. That is absolutely marvelous. That is a good warning to us as Reformed, rationalistic theologians. Pascal once said that when human beings face a cosmos shorn of mystery, we can only say "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fill us with dread." But to entertain angels is to let that silence become again the tremendous mystery of creation that the medieval world thought that it was and that we have lost.

But we need to be careful. We need to remember that we are seeking to speak and seeking to think about inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell, as Paul put it in 2 Corinthians 12:4. We must beware of a presumptuous knowledge, which in the end tells more than it can know. This is often the case, I think. Last week I finished reading two different books on heaven and I came away convinced

that both authors must have had revelations, because both of them said more about heaven than the Bible does, and often when we talk about angels we do the same thing: we speak far beyond the biblical materials.

Angels are not simply representatives of heaven. They are also, as Barth pointed out, witnesses to divine activity. And I want to start by reading a fairly long quotation to you:

Their high advantage in relation to the human creation is also their disadvantage. They have no definable being in relation to it. They do not exist and act independently or autonomously. They have no history or aims or achievements of their own. They have no profile or character, no mind or will of their own. They have all these things, yet not of their own possession but wholly and exclusively as God is so rich in relation to them. They are themselves only a possession—His possession. The lowliest creature of earth has an advantage over even the highest of the angels to the extent that while it belongs to God it may also belong to itself. But conversely, even the least of the heavenly hosts is more than the most perfect of earthly creatures to the extent that it belongs fully to God and in no sense to itself.

Like Calvin, Barth takes an extremely functionalist approach toward angels. There is nothing one can say, as far as Barth is concerned, about angels ontologically. Sometimes, even in his work, angels appear to be nothing more than personifications of divine providence. Angels are known only in the context of their serving the communication of the Gospel.

Barth makes another statement about angels, saying, “There can be no question of any special, autonomous or abstract experience of angels in and of themselves. The subject of this kind of experience could not be the angels of God but only ideas or ghosts or figments of the imagination or even demons and therefore, the opposite of the genuine angels.” Again, he is making the point that I have made already, that angels do not draw attention to themselves. They bear messages. The biblical function of angels is one of divine agency. Undue concentration upon them distracts us from God. I will come back and state it again, however, that an important function of the angelic realm, and Barth says this too, is that it reminds us not to fall into the trap of thinking that our reality is all there is. There is a richness to reality that is beyond our vision.

In conclusion, C.S. Lewis said there are two equal and opposite errors that we fall into about angels and demons. One is to disbelieve in them altogether. The other is to believe and then to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.