

The Error of Denying That “the Lord Is the Spirit” in 2 Corinthians 3:17 Refers to Christ¹

*A Response to Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes’ Defense of the “Open Letter”
and Critique of the Christian Research Journal’s Reassessment of the Local
Churches*

2 Corinthians 3:17 - And the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

1 Corinthians 15:45 - So also it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living soul”; the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit.

Rom. 8:9-11 - [9] But you are not in the flesh, but in the spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Yet if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not of Him. [10] But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is life because of righteousness. [11] And if the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you.

Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes condemn Witness Lee’s affirmation of the Apostle Paul’s word in 2 Corinthians 3:17 as heresy. In this verse Paul plainly says, “The Lord is the Spirit.”¹ This word tells us clearly that today Jesus Christ is not only the resurrected and ascended Lord in bodily form seated at the right hand of God in the third heavens (Acts 2:33, 36; 5:31; Heb. 12:2), but He is also the Spirit who can be received by and thereafter indwell the believers (Gal. 3:2; Rom. 8:9-11; cf. 2 Cor. 13:5). Sadly, the insistence by Geisler and Rhodes on an erroneous systematized theological construct has veiled them to the pure revelation contained in the Bible. Thus, in their article criticizing the reassessment of the teaching of Witness Lee and the local churches performed by the Christian Research Institute (CRI), Geisler and Rhodes say:

Nor is there any real support for saying the Son (the Second Person of the Trinity) is also the Spirit (the Third Person of the Trinity) from 2 Corinthians 3:17 (“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom”). Many expositors view this verse as saying that the Holy Spirit is “Lord” not in the sense of being Jesus but in the sense of being Yahweh (the Lord God) (cf. v. 16, which cites Exod. 34:34).

Their analysis is flawed on several points:

1. It ignores the meaning of “Lord” in the immediate context of 2 Corinthians 3 and 4.
2. It ignores the identification of the Lord Jesus in the New Testament with Yahweh in the Old Testament, an identification which both Geisler and Rhodes acknowledge.
3. It completely avoids the plain language of 1 Corinthians 15:45.
4. It summarily dismisses the many credible expositors who have strongly identified Christ and the Spirit based on these verses.

“Lord” in 2 Corinthians 3:17 in Context

Every faithful expositor of the Bible knows that words must be interpreted in their proper context. Read in context, it is clear that the “Lord” in 2 Corinthians 3:17 refers to Christ, not just

to the Old Testament Yahweh. In 3:3-6 Paul tells the Corinthians that they are a letter of Christ (the Lord) ministered by him with the Spirit of the living God, which Spirit gives life. He then compares the New and Old Testament ministries, showing the superiority of the ministry of the New Testament as a ministry of righteousness and of glory (vv. 7-11). Following this he speaks of the new covenant ministers through whom the gospel of the glory of Christ shines forth (4:4) by their beholding and reflecting the glory of the Lord (3:18).

Verses 14 through 16 make it very clear that the Lord to whom the heart must turn is Christ. In 3:15 Paul says that a veil lies over the heart of the unbelieving Jews. This veil is “done away with in Christ” (v. 14) “whenever their heart turns to the Lord” (v. 16). According to the truth of the gospel, this is not when the Jews turn their heart to the Old Testament Yahweh, but, as verse 14 says, when man turns his heart to the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, “Lord” in verse 16 refers back to “Christ” in verse 14. It is, therefore, contrary to the immediate context to say that “Lord” in verse 17 refers to someone else.²

The ensuing text makes this connection even stronger. Verse 18 says that “we all with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory.” Chapter 4 continues with these same elements introduced in chapter 3—Christ, the Lord, the image of God, the veil over the hearts of unbelievers, and the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ—as follows:

- In verse 3 the gospel is veiled to the unbelievers who have been blinded by the god of this age (v. 4a); this veil is a reference back to 3:14-15.
- According to 4:4 Christ is the image of God; this refers back to the image into which we are being transformed in 3:18.
- The gospel preached by the apostles was “the gospel of the glory of Christ” (4:4); this glory is the glory of the Lord in 3:18, which 4:6 identifies as “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”
- Finally, verse 5 contains the direct statement: “For we do not preach ourselves but **Christ Jesus as Lord**” [emphasis added].

Thus, from the immediate context it is abundantly clear that Paul’s use of the word “Lord” in 3:17 (“Now the Lord is the Spirit”) is in reference to the Lord Jesus Christ. To say that in 2 Cor. 3:17 “the Holy Spirit is ‘Lord’ not in the sense of being Jesus but in the sense of being Yahweh” is to veil the gospel of Christ. The one to whom the heart must turn is not the Spirit in the sense of being the Old Testament Yahweh, but the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. The insistence of Geisler and Rhodes that these verses cannot be interpreted as referring to Christ is sheer artifice to avoid implications that contradict their overly simplistic formulation of the Divine Trinity.

Geisler and Rhodes: The Lord Jesus is Jehovah

We agree that 2 Corinthians 3 refers back to Exodus 34 where “the Lord” Moses beheld was revealed as “Yahweh.” But claiming that 2 Corinthians 3:17 refers to Yahweh and not the Lord Jesus Christ is still an absurd proposition from another perspective. The New Testament Jesus is the incarnation of the Old Testament Yahweh, as Geisler himself admits in his *Systematic Theology*. In a section headed “Jesus Claimed to Be Yahweh (Jehovah),” he cites numerous

passages that identify Jehovah of the Old Testament with Jesus in the New Testament. In his concluding paragraph he writes:

Perhaps the strongest claim Jesus made to be Jehovah is in John 8:58, where He says, “Before Abraham was born, I am!” This statement claims not only existence before Abraham, but equality with the “I AM” of Exodus 3:14. The Jews around Him clearly understood His meaning and picked up stones to kill Him for blaspheming (cf. John 10:31-33). The same claim is also made in Mark 14:62 and John 18:5-6.³

Rhodes also strongly asserts the Jesus is Yahweh. In his book *The Complete Book of Bible Answers: Answering the Tough Questions* he devotes two pages to answering the question: “What biblical evidences exist to prove that Jesus is Yahweh?”⁴ He includes numerous Scripture citations after which he concludes, “Clearly, then, Jesus is Yahweh.”

We agree with these expositions by Geisler and Rhodes showing that Jesus was Jehovah, and therefore cannot agree that “Lord” in 2 Corinthians 3:17 refers only to the Old Testament Jehovah and not the New Testament Lord Jesus. After all, the entire context of the passage is the superiority of the New Testament ministry of the apostles to the Old Testament ministry of Moses. Why then would Paul talk about turning to the Jehovah of the Old Testament rather than the Lord Jesus of the New Testament?

The Bible says, “The Lord [Christ] is the Spirit.” Geisler and Rhodes start from the presumption that this cannot be, so they endeavor to find an explanation that fits their concept. This is exegetically unsound and elevates their attempts at theological systematization above the authority of the Bible.

Logic Fallacies in Geisler’s Argument

Norman Geisler claims to believe in applying the rigors of formal logic to the study of the Bible.⁵ To that end he wrote a book with Ronald Brooks entitled *Come, Let Us Reason*. In this book he cites several examples of logical fallacies. Given his obvious familiarity with the principles of logic and rhetoric, it is distressing to see him criticize Witness Lee’s interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:17 by employing the very logic fallacies he castigates in his book. For example, Geisler and Rhodes say that there is no “real support for saying the Son ... is also the Spirit ... from 2 Corinthians 3:17” based on what “many expositors” say. This type of argumentation based on what “many say” is identified by Geisler and Brooks as *argumentum ad populum*, for which they give the following definition:

This is the fallacy of deciding truth by opinion polls. It says, “Accept this because it has popular appeal.” It is the kind of argument that plays to the galleries, not to the facts. It is an attempt to win by fashionable ideas, not by good arguments. These arguments have “snob appeal” because they agree with an elite or select group and demand that everybody jump on the bandwagon. Hey, it worked for Hitler!⁶

The same appeal to what “many expositors” say also smacks of an improper *argumentum ad verecundiam* (appeal to authority), which Geisler describes as follows:

“Accept this because some authority said it.” As we all know, “authorities” can be wrong, and often are. Furthermore, there are conflicting authorities. Which one should I accept? The mere appeal to authority should never be substituted for evidence or a good argument.⁷

It is telling that in their critique of CRI’s article Geisler and Rhodes give very little evidence for their claim that the risen Lord is not the Spirit according to 2 Corinthians 3:17. Rather, they seek to appeal to the implied authority in the expression “many expositors” to excuse themselves from having to provide any evidence of their own.

Finally, the argument of Geisler and Rhodes fits the definition of “special pleading”:

This is yet another way to make certain the opposing view doesn’t get a fair shake. Here only the evidence that supports one view is cited, and the rest is left out. This is the fallacy of saying, “Accept this because this select evidence supports it (even though other evidence is neglected).”⁸

For one thing, the “analysis” put forth by Geisler and Rhodes completely ignores 1 Corinthians 15:45b: “The last Adam became a life-giving Spirit.” The last Adam is universally recognized as a reference to Christ, including by Geisler.⁹ The word translated “became” is the same word in Greek as is used in John 1:14: “And the Word became flesh.” John 1:14 speaks of the incarnation of the Son of God into humanity. First Corinthians 15:45 speaks of the glorification of Christ in resurrection (cf. John 7:39; Luke 24:26). In that resurrection Christ became a life-giving Spirit.¹⁰ Although Elliot Miller included this in his discussion of CRI’s reassessment of the teaching of Witness Lee and the local churches, Geisler and Rhodes ignore it entirely. Thus, their review of the available evidence is highly selective, and they construct their argument accordingly.

What Others Say

Geisler and Rhodes say there is not “any real support” for the idea that 2 Corinthians 3:17 refers to Christ and reference “many [unnamed] expositors” who take their view that the Lord refers to Yahweh. These two statements create a false impression that Witness Lee was alone in identifying the Lord as Christ in this verse. While the testimony of Scripture should be sufficient for us to believe that “the Lord is the Spirit” and “the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit,” there are also many significant scholars and Bible teachers who affirm the identification of Christ and the Spirit in the New Testament teaching of the apostles. If such an affirmation is to be condemned as modalistic, then Geisler and Rhodes must similarly condemn:

- Athanasius
- Marius Victorinus
- John Albert Bengel
- Charles Hodge
- Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown
- Joseph Cook
- Marvin Vincent
- Andrew Murray
- Hermann Gunkel
- A. B. Simpson
- James Denney
- Alexander Balmain Bruce
- David Somerville
- John Peter Lange
- Henry Barclay Swete
- Adolf Deissmann
- W. H. Griffith Thomas
- Thomas Rees
- Robert C. Moberly

- Alan H. McNeile
- Terrot R. Glover
- R. Birch Hoyle
- H. Wheeler Robinson
- W. F. Lofthouse
- R. H. Strachan
- C. H. Dodd
- William R. Newell
- Lucien Cerfaux
- William Barclay
- Prosper Grech
- Neill Q. Hamilton
- Karl Barth
- Eduard Schweizer
- C. A. A. Scott
- S. H. Hooke
- Hendrikus Berkhof
- David Hill
- F. F. Bruce
- G. R. Beasley-Murray
- James D. G. Dunn
- Walter Kasper
- G. W. H. Lampe
- Walter C. Wright, Jr.
- Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.
- Ernst Käsemann
- Carl F. H. Henry
- Lewis B. Smedes
- Bruce Demarest
- Gordon Lewis
- Mehrdad Fatehi
- John S. Feinberg

All of these expositors have identified Christ with the Spirit based on the verses at issue from 1 and/or 2 Corinthians. A sampling of their statements is included in “Scholars and Bible Teachers Who Affirm the Lord Jesus Christ Is the Spirit.”

Conclusion

The contention put forth by Geisler and Rhodes that there is no real support for Witness Lee’s interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:17 is itself insupportable. The correct interpretation of Paul’s words cannot be dictated by fiat. Witness Lee’s interpretation is supported by the immediate context of 2 Corinthians 3 and 4, by the identification of the Old Testament Jehovah with the New Testament Lord Jesus, and by the writings of many respected teachers. Geisler and Rhodes dismiss the clear meaning and import of Paul’s words in this verse and ignore 1 Corinthians 15:45 because these verses do not fit neatly into their extra-biblical theological construct. They then employ a variety of logic fallacies to support their position. The Word of God deserves better treatment.

¹ This article examines one aspect of the truth concerning the Trinity which has been neglected by most theologians and by Christians generally, that is, the identification of Christ with the Spirit in 2 Corinthians 3:17, 1 Corinthians 15:45, and elsewhere in the New Testament. The reader should not presume that this represents the full teaching of Witness Lee or of the local churches concerning the relationship between the Son and the Spirit in the Divine Trinity. While we do affirm the clear word of the Bible concerning the identification of Christ with the Spirit, particularly in relation to the believers’ experience, we also affirm the eternal distinction between Them. As Witness Lee wrote:

Among the three of the Divine Trinity, there is distinction but no separation. The Father is distinct from the Son, the Son is distinct from the Spirit, and the Spirit is distinct from the Son and the Father. The three of the Godhead co-exist in Their coinherence, so They are distinct but not separate. In the Triune God there is no separation, only distinction. The Triune God exists in His coinherence. On the one hand, the three are coinhering; on the other hand, at the same time they are co-existing. Thus, They are one. They are not separate. (*The History of God in His Union with Man* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1993), p. 17)

The publications of Living Stream Ministry contain many balanced presentations of the truths concerning the Triune God. Of these, the following date from the mid-1970s:

- Witness Lee, *The Revelation of the Triune God According to the Pure Word of the Bible* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1976)
- Witness Lee, *The Clear Scriptural Revelation Concerning the Triune God* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, n.d.)
- Ron Kangas, *Modalism, Tritheism, or the Pure Revelation of the Triune God according to the Bible* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1976)

The inaugural issue of *Affirmation & Critique* (I:1, January 1996) was devoted to the subject of “Knowing the Triune God.” It contains several excellent articles, including:

- Kerry S. Robichaux, “Axioms of the Trinity,” pp. 6-11.
- Ron Kangas, “Knowing the Triune God as Revealed in the Word of God,” pp. 12-22.
- Ed Marks, “A Biblical Overview of the Triune God,” pp. 23-31.
- Kerry S. Robichaux, “The Straight Cut: Some Biblical Trinitarian Conundrums,” pp. 46-49.

² The understanding that “the Lord” in 2 Corinthians 3 refers to Christ is confirmed by the following sources:

William Milligan, *The Resurrection of Our Lord* (London: Macmillan, 1890), p. 248:

Apart from the general usage of the Apostle, it will hardly be denied that the whole context and argument of the chapter compel us to understand by the words “the Lord” the Risen Lord. It is “the glory of the Lord” in His heavenly condition that we behold, as Moses beheld the glory of God upon the mount; and, as we behold it, gazing upon it with ever increasing love and fervour, we are enabled to reflect it better, until we are transformed into the same image from glory to glory.

Peter Yoon, *Our Triune God* (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1996), p. 189:

In context Paul is saying that when people turn to the Lord Jesus, as Moses turned to Yahweh at Mount Sinai (Ex. 34:34), a veil of spiritual blindness is lifted from their eyes.

The sources cited in “Scholars and Bible Teachers Who Affirm That the Lord Jesus Christ Is the Spirit” further affirm the biblical revelation that Jesus Christ the Lord is the Spirit.

³ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology, vol. 2: God, Creation* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2003), p. 280. Geisler repeats essentially the same exposition in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), pp. 129 and 731; and *When Skeptics Ask* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990, 1996), 105-106.

⁴ Ron Rhodes, *The Complete Books of Bible Answers: Answering the Tough Questions* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1997), pp. 115-117.

⁵ Actually, according to Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, this practice is contrary to the orthodox Protestant faith. He wrote:

THE ORTHODOX PROTESTANT FAITH. Certain well-defined articles of faith concerning the Scriptures have been and are held by the orthodox Protestants:

- a. The Bible is the infallible Word of God.
- b. The Bible is the only rule of faith and practice.
- c. **Human reason and knowledge should be wholly subject to the Scriptures.** [emphasis added]
- d. There is no inner light or added revelation ever given beyond what is contained in the Bible...
- e. No authority relative to the forming of truth has ever been committed to the church or to men beyond that given to the New Testament writers.

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: Prolegomena, Bibliology, Theology Proper* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1947), p. 15.

The point Chafer makes—that human reason should be subject to the revelation in the Bible and not its master—is true. Human reason is limited and fallible. However, the point made in this article is that Geisler is not even faithful to the principles he himself espouses but instead uses logical fallacies to support his agenda.

⁶ Norman Geisler and Ronald Brooks, *Come: Let Us Reason: An Introduction to Logical Thinking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), p. 97.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁸ Ibid., p. 102

⁹ Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), p. 487.

¹⁰ Some have tried to say that this Spirit is not the Holy Spirit, but it is important to note that the word “life-giving” has as one of its roots the Greek word *zoe*, which in the New Testament generally refers to the divine life of God (e.g., Eph. 4:18). It is this life that the Spirit gives (2 Cor. 3:6), and it is this life-giving Spirit that Christ, the last Adam, became. On page 663 of the *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Geisler gives a thoroughly unsatisfactory explanation of this verse. He says, “*Life-giving spirit* does not speak of the *nature* of the resurrection body, but of the divine *origin* of the resurrection.” We agree that the term *life-giving Spirit* does not refer to the nature of Christ’s body in resurrection, but Geisler’s interpretation is not faithful to the text of the verse, which does not talk about the origin of the resurrection but about what Christ, as the last Adam, became.