

BOOK REVIEW

THE GOD WHO BELIEVES: FAITH, DOUBT, AND THE VICARIOUS HUMANITY OF CHRIST

and

THE GOD WHO REJOICES: JOY, DESPAIR, AND THE VICARIOUS HUMANITY OF CHRIST

Kettler, Christian D. 2005

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The history of invention encompasses countless Aha! moments, those unpredictable and uncanny heuristic experiences in which the familiar comes to life in a fresh way or the inscrutable is unscrambled. Previously unimagined implications and possibilities emerge. Consider water, for example. Over the centuries the uses for this simple chemical compound have evolved from floating and transporting objects to conducting electricity to the creation of ice sculptures. In every case, someone identified a new use that was based on properties inherent in water all along.

In analogous fashion, God's revelation includes features that have long lay underexplored, or at least not fully articulated, until some combination of need and gifting converges to bring them to light. Some will resist this notion, suspecting mere theological novelty. However, under closer scrutiny and testing we find that a theological resource we desperately need was there all along. This occurred in the first few centuries of the church's life as various teachers brought forth theological proposals (e.g., Arius, Apollinaris) that forced the church to reach further into God's revelation, find what was really there, and put it in a form that would secure the church against threats that had previously not been encountered.



Though of course not at the same level of theological magnitude as the early councils, Christian Kettler practices this type of exploratory process as he probes a theme embedded both in early Christian thought, most notably that of St. Athanasius, in the fourth century, and much later, in the twentieth century, by Karl Barth, T. F. Torrance, and Ray S. Anderson. In *The God Who Believes* (2005) and *The God Who Rejoices* (2010), Kettler takes up this theme — namely, the “vicarious humanity of Christ” (included in the subtitle of each book) — and wrestles with its implications for human existence, particularly the complex phenomena of faith and doubt, then joy and despair, respectively. His contributions in these two books find their place among other works in which he pursues that same motif, for example, in *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation* (Cascade, 2011). All along the way Kettler reflects the profound impact this theme has had on his own life and thought, particularly through the writings of Barth, Torrance, and Anderson.

As Kettler is quick to admit, the combination of “vicarious” and “Christ” is not foreign to Christians (at least in the Western theological tradition). What some may find puzzling, however, is the use of “humanity” instead of “death” to link “vicarious” and “Christ.” In *The God Who Believes* (hereafter *GWB*), he draws on T. F. Torrance to explain this move.

In an older theology, it was common to speak of the vicarious *death* of Christ, in the sense that Christ died in our place, was our substitute, on the cross. While not meaning to dilute the importance of the death of Christ, Torrance urges that the vicarious death must be seen in terms of the wider context of both the entire humanity of Christ and our entire humanity. His humanity involves a vicarious act. The nature of Christ’s vicarious work is not simply one moment on the cross, but his entire life, so that the entirety of our lives might be affected (5-6).

Thus the substitution of “humanity” for “death” does not negate or ignore the affirmation that Christ’s death is vicarious for us. Rather, it broadens the concept of vicariousness by recognizing that the effects of sin include, but extend beyond, guilt, resulting in the need for Christ to take upon himself the full extent of our broken human experience in order to fully redeem us.

Though Torrance gave extensive attention to this theme, Kettler takes up the question afresh with courage and insight, vividly presenting aspects of human brokenness that are often difficult to articulate, yet resonate deeply with all. For

example, he opens *GWB* with a clear summary of how this theme applies to the complex relationship of doubt and faith.

Here is what this book is about: the relationship of the humanity of Christ to our doubt and how that humanity includes a genuine faith that should be the basis for our faith. Can we say that *Jesus believes*, not just as an example of a believer, but *believes for me and in my place, vicariously*, so that I can be helped in my unbelief (Mark 9:24)? Can we say, “*Jesus believes . . . help me with my unbelief*”? Does Jesus believe even when it is difficult, if not impossible, for me to believe (*GWB*, xii)?

Throughout the book, Kettler insists that this does not negate the call or need for our own faith. Rather, it liberates our faith from bearing the ultimate burden of believing acceptably (a subtle and insidious form of legalism!). We are called to believe and are free to believe, even with our weak and halting and vacillating faith, by participating in the faith of the One who has believed for us.

In both books, Kettler seeks to locate a deeper and broader layer to the bedrock premise of the incarnation. The deeper layer to that premise is that in Jesus Christ, God has personally stepped into all the places of desolation and brokenness that constitute human life on this side of the fall; that the extent of God’s experiential solidarity with us is bounded only by the extent of sin’s impact. For some, the theological implication may seem strange — that is, through the incarnation God has entered our struggles of faith and the mysteries of our joy and despair. Yet therein lies the potency of Kettler’s claim, that as fully human and fully God, Jesus has reconciled *all* our failings, inadequacies, and ambivalence *vicariously*. In keeping with Torrance’s own theological paradigm, we find here the soteriological significance of the *hypostatic union*, the purpose of the incarnation being far more than utilitarian and actually constituting a material aspect of God’s saving act.

Kettler argues that christocentric theology must not be limited to particular metaphysical concerns about Christ’s nature but must move further.

A christocentric theology demands that we take existential issues in humanity seriously. Too often the concern of theology has been about the precise relationship between the deity and the humanity of Christ without delving deeply into the radical implications of the Word that became flesh for the world of despair, guilt, shame, weakness, loneliness, anxiety, and doubt (*GWB*, 9).

While he is clear that Christ's hypostatic union constitutes the essential ground of efficacy for Christ's vicarious humanity, Kettler insists that we draw on the vast implications of that divine-human nature. Those implications stretch far beyond comfortable and conventional affirmations, offering rich resources for life *coram Deo* and for ministry to others.

In *GWB* Kettler develops this case in relationship to the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of faith. Scripture in general and Jesus in particular clearly call for faith and even make faith a determinative adjudicating factor for our lives. Yet faith is often subject to forces seemingly outside the control of the one who believes. Human living involves countless experiences in which faith is abused or distorted; even one's capacities for reliable, healthy believing can be crippled. Despite the fact that for some people faith seems simple, the reality of the journey for others is that faith mysteriously vacillates despite their own desires or efforts. Kettler draws on the vicarious nature of Christ's humanity to argue that Christ's exercise of faith on our behalf constitutes a first-order act in which our stumbling attempts at faith find acceptance with God as acts of a second order.

In order for Christ's faith to be genuinely vicarious, he must not only trust God perfectly, as God is to be trusted, but he also must take upon himself our doubts. Thus, through the hypostatic union our doubts find a reconciled place in the heart of the Father. Kettler observes regarding Christ's cry of dereliction in Mark 15:34 that "if one views this cry in a *vicarious* sense, it is a cry not just of Jesus but also on behalf of and in place of all humanity. . . . In a vicarious sense . . . Jesus is crying out for all of us, making our questions his own" (*GWB*, 50). The practical, personal result is that "there is certainty in the faith of Jesus in that we can lean on his faith, not our own, for that certainty. We can have a 'paradoxical certainty' because of the certainty of the faith of the Crucified One. The foundation of that faith is the love of the Son for the Father through the Spirit" (53). God actually becomes our advocate rather than our adversary (54) in matters of faith!

The significance of Christ's vicarious humanity for our faith extends beyond the act of believing to the conditions and content of belief. Not only does he believe acceptably on our behalf, but he also knows the Father truly and provides for our knowledge of God to be substantive and genuine, even though partial and flawed. Kettler illustrates this point by contrasting it with a familiar paradigm

of knowing God: according to this paradigm, knowledge of God is the result of a biblical calculus in which the propositions of Scripture are validated through various efforts at reconciling and harmonizing the technicalities of the text. This understanding reduces the knowledge of God to abstraction. However, Kettler contends, in the actual knowledge of God provided vicariously by Christ, "revelation is not just information about God, provided by the instrumentation of Jesus, but Jesus himself in his own knowledge, worship, and faith in the Father is the substance of revelation" (*GWB*, 74). Such knowledge, as the content of our faith, is relational knowledge, encompassing the ambiguities and mysteries that characterize any genuine relationship that involves contingent beings.

To apply this theological paradigm specifically to faith and doubt, Kettler devotes a chapter of *GWB* to the nature of doubt. He argues that doubt is intrinsically problematic when it constitutes a questioning of God akin to that which took place in the garden of Eden. Yet, "doubt springs forth when faith ties itself to outside criteria, making itself liable to be criticized by reason, tradition, etc." (*GWB*, 48). Thus he argues for the possibility of certainty of faith, but only as faith is "grounded on the external Word of God" (*GWB*, 48). By this he means faith in Jesus' faith in God, Jesus having taken upon himself our doubting condition without himself being unfaithful. So, doubt is drained of its potency as an unavoidable intellectual struggle, not as various lines of evidence are accumulated and marshaled against the corrosive forces of doubt, but as faith rests on the One who believes on our behalf. In this circumvention of conventional apologetic approaches to doubt, Kettler recognizes and accepts the paradoxical character of both doubt and faith. Faith, Kettler indicates (appealing to both Kierkegaard and Barth), may coexist as angst and certainty. The certainty derives from "the faith of the Crucified One" and "the love of the Son for the Father through the Spirit" (*GWB*, 53). Certainty of faith, then, is not to be defined or sought as a particular state of mind (a subtle but deadly form of anthropocentrism) but as constant reference to and reliance on the faith of Jesus.

From consideration of the nature of doubt, Kettler moves into deeper consideration of the nature of Jesus' vicarious work as it relates to our faith. He asks, "How does the atonement of Christ affect our doubting selves? How does the atonement affect our very knowledge of God?" (*GWB*, 59). In framing the question thus, Kettler relocates the theological resource for faith. Whereas

theologians often appeal to the ministry of the Holy Spirit rather discretely as our resource for faith and against doubt (cf. Calvin), for Kettler, the atonement provides for our faith — our genuine personal knowledge of God — thus *partially* establishing a more fully trinitarian solution to doubt and resource for faith. Kettler insists that “the knowledge of the Son reminds us of a knowledge from within God, within the triune relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (*GWB*, 67). However, this is only *partially* more trinitarian, in the sense that Kettler acknowledges but does not develop or fully integrate the role of the Holy Spirit in Christ’s atoning work for our faith. If other approaches risk treating God’s saving acts as a “tag-team” effort with the Spirit picking up where Jesus leaves off, Kettler’s exposition may risk treating the vicarious work of Christ in isolation, recognizing the Spirit on the roster but without making it clear when and how the Spirit ever actually leaves the bench and enters the game.

Kettler leaves no doubt, however, that through this “sweet exchange’ . . . between our limited minds of reason and the mind of Christ, a mind of faith in God the Father” (*GWB*, 67), we are provided a place of rest for our faith. While we must risk ourselves on Jesus to find this rest, “as a divine burden, not ours, it [this exchange] is meant to bring an end to doubt” (*GWB*, 76). Faith, then, is no longer contingent on our ability to resolve the torturous questions or reconcile the conundrums that impede faith. Those questions and conundrums are reconciled in Jesus’ vicarious humanity, and we can rest in him. We are relieved of the burden of knowing God directly on our own, which is a crushingly unattainable responsibility in light of the inescapable irregularities and limitations of our epistemological capacities. Rather, we can rest our feeble faith on Jesus’ knowledge of God; to know him is to know God.

In Kettler’s subsequent, companion volume, *The God Who Rejoices* (*GWR*), he extends this line of argument into the realms of joy and despair, noted in the subtitle, probing the significance of Christ’s vicarious humanity for those potent and elusive existential themes. Early in his presentation he acknowledges the vital role of the Holy Spirit in “bringing us into the relationship between the Father and the Son” (*GWR*, xviii). That work of the Spirit is to be recognized in its effect: “The result of the work of the Spirit . . . is a new humanity” (*GWR*, xviii). “There is not,” Kettler insists, “a causal or mechanical relation between our humanity and the Spirit but always a mystery (John 3:8)” (*GWR*, xviii).

Despair, Kettler observes, “is the personality of doubt” (*GWR*, 14), awakened by the very nature of existing as persons who are built for love in community. The capacity for genuine relatedness as those made in God’s image inevitably involves the vulnerability to despair when and if the character of that relatedness is violated. And it has been violated! Kettler deftly points out that while despair is sometimes viewed as a spiritual deficit, it actually indicates the richly textured and finely nuanced nature of our humanness. Two implications follow. First, “the solution is not” (as some spiritual formation movements emphasize) “to empty ourselves of our humanity, but to seek an intentionality of community that is a participation in the intentionality of community sought by the Son with the Father” (*GWR*, 15). Second, “the relationship of the Son to the Father is very instructive . . . and perhaps helpful in understanding how the Son can suffer, and despair, and still trust the Father, even still have joy. . . . The despair he feels in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross is because of a relationship of trust and dependence” (*GWR*, 15). Thus the vicarious humanity of Christ declaws despair as a spiritual vice, recognizes its roots in the dignity and nature of our humanity, and points us to the source of relationship in which it can find a healing context.

Returning to the role of the Holy Spirit (to which he devotes more attention in *GWR*), Kettler challenges the popular notion that the Spirit’s ministry eliminates despair. Rather, through the incarnation God identifies as closely as possible with the brokenness of our human experience (in this case, the experience of despair) so that God meets us there through the Spirit. This meeting is what allows the Spirit to “groan’ on our behalf (Rom 8:23)” and “be ‘grieved’ in Eph 4:30” (*GWR*, 52). The implications are gripping. He states, “When it comes down to it, only Christ and faith can dare accept despair from God — the despair of a Holocaust, or other innocent and needless suffering . . . if we really believe in a God of love” (*GWR*, 54–55). The vicarious humanity of Christ, meeting us in the most unimaginable depths of human despair through the Holy Spirit, constitutes a potent and largely untapped theodicy.

But what of joy? Is joy a phenomenon that needs any reconciliation? In his chapter titled “The Problem of Joy,” Kettler points out that joy is not as simple as it seems. Joy takes many forms, sometimes overlapping with the concept we call “happiness” but also deriving a profound and complex character from God’s grace in the gift of creation. That is to say, we are made for joy and made with

capacities for joy such that we intrinsically long for it. Yet we sense and long for more than we can grasp. The paradox of joy is that the more heightened our sensitivities for joy, the more painful is our awareness of the gap between what we sense and what we experience. Thus joy and despair are siblings; one cannot be authentically considered, understood, or experienced without the other. So joy also stands in need of reconciliation and healing.

The arts, Kettler points out, provide vivid windows into this paradoxical phenomenon called joy. Through the realm of the aesthetic we find expressions of joy and despair poignantly intensified. Scripture captures this with references to how the full range of human emotions is expressed to God in the emotive language of the arts. Joy and despair, for Kettler, constitute much more than a thin layer of "experience" that Christians can easily trivialize and dismiss in favor of supposedly more substantive realms. Nor should these be treated with suspicion, as if they were epistemologically unreliable. We cannot understand our humanness apart from joy and despair. And if our humanness is fundamentally alienated, the need for Christ's reconciling, atoning work is nowhere more poignant than in these realms.

What then is the incarnational answer to joy? Kettler asks rhetorically whether exhortations to joy such as the apostle Paul offers in 1 Thessalonians 5:16 are artificial and self-defeating in light of life's disappointments and losses. The answer is no, he contends, highlighting "Christ's vicarious joy" as "the foundation of all such rejoicing" (*GWR*, 126). Only joy as Christ experienced it on our behalf can adequately account for what is lacking and broken in our lives and still allow us to find authentic joy. So joy and despair always go together, and "living with both joy and despair does not mean trying for a 'synthesis' that does not take joy or despair seriously enough" (*GWR*, 144). Rather, "the problem of joy is not how to get rid of despair in order to be joyful but how to accept the sorrow and the joy together (without sorrow demanding equal billing with joy). We need Christ's vicarious sorrow and joy for this" (*GWR*, 144).

Throughout both books Kettler makes illustrative use of Wendell Berry's fictional character Jayber Crow from Berry's novel by the same name. In Berry's tale, Crow is a never-married, small-town barber whose simple but deeply reflective life emerged from disillusionment and unanswered questions while in seminary. Crow's deeply spiritual life does not follow the contours of

the conventional churchly religion that marked his upbringing and seminary experience. He is in love with a married woman named Mattie, yet he chooses never to express that love, choosing instead to protect the integrity of all by living with his unexpressed and unrequited affections in the sanctity of his own heart. Crow's spiritual wrestlings and affections for Mattie provide for Kettler an image of the inextricable relationship of joy, despair, belief, and doubt as they unfold in human experience.

Jayber knows that his love for Mattie may never find expression, yet he also knows it has its own sacredness in both the joy and the despair. He suffers but demands no resolution of that angst. Kettler asks, "Is there a problem of joy because of the presence of despair? Yes, but in the presence of Jesus, the one who embodies the kingdom of God, is a presence that can say Yes for us, even if we are unable; Yes in affirming the goodness and mercy of God" (*GWR*, 177). Here Kettler offers eschatological perspective by pointing to a theodicy that qualitatively relativizes the conundrum rather than attempting a quantitative rationalization of those inequities. All attempts at rationalizing or making sense of our joy and despair come up short. However, God's decisive "Yes" to us through Jesus Christ circumvents the dilemma and permits us to traverse the inscrutability of joy and despair with integrity.

At the heart of Kettler's case is the virtue of gratitude. Gratitude to God becomes the wellspring of our ability to receive suffering, to live with our anxieties and misgivings without enslavement to them on the one hand or a superficial dismissal and denial of them on the other. Gratitude is response, response to the One whose vicarious person and work have relativized all our brokenness without the false expectation of immediate deliverance. Gratitude liberates us from the unbearable and unattainable burden of a wrinkle-free faith and liberates us for lives of rejoicing in the middle of all circumstances. Herein lies the possibility of responding to the numerous biblical commands to rejoice.

It might be a stretch to say that Kettler has broken new ground in these works. After all, he is plowing along contours identified long ago, then tended by luminaries such as Barth and Torrance. Yet, sadly, this fertile field is little known and certainly has not been developed to its potential. So, the fresh work he has done, rather, shows us what the soil in this undertended field is capable

of producing. And in the end, that's just about as good as truly breaking new ground.

Kettler develops his case courageously, with a pastor's heart, and from the vantage point of his own journey as a follower — a believer in — Jesus, with the detours, obstacles, and potholes that any thoughtful, serious believer can expect. This lends a refreshing dose of realism — earthy sanity — to his expositions. It's difficult not to be captivated and touched in some deep recesses of our lives, whether those be terrifying or merely puzzling.

If criticisms or questions are to be posed to Kettler regarding these works, they could begin with the particular way in which he appeals (or at some obvious points, does not appeal) to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Though it was not his primary purpose to deal with pneumatology, and he does repeatedly deal with the role of the Spirit, the actual efficacy of Christ's vicarious humanity seems rather underdeveloped. The emphasis on Christ's believing as the counterweight to our own believing sometimes seems to overlook the importance Scripture places on the Spirit's role in our believing.

Perhaps it would help if his statement of the problem was adjusted — for example, when citing J. B. Torrance, Kettler rightly pushes against the danger of emphasizing faith in a way that throws us back on the resources of our own believing. Yet, he may mislocate the problem, or at least he may identify only part of the problem. The problem is not only that too much emphasis or an improper emphasis is placed on the human act of faith but also that the human act of faith is so often treated apart from the Spirit's role (illumination and enablement) in that faith.

The solution is not to overdevelop the efficacy of Christ's vicarious humanity in standalone fashion but to place that comprehensive vicarious humanity in a more robustly pneumatological framework so that we have a better place to put the importance and act of human believing, rather than rest it all on Christ's faith. The role of the Spirit can be emphasized and the human act of believing still be recognized as relative to the defining work of Christ on our behalf. This would give more substance to the insistence that our faith is still important, a claim that Kettler makes but without ever offering a satisfactory answer for why or how that is the case. Our faith is possible because it is enabled by the Spirit, and to that end we should appeal to God for the Spirit.

Second, Kettler needs to deal more thoroughly with the nature and significance of Jesus' rebukes about doubt and lack of faith. It's puzzling that Kettler admits, "The dependence of the Son on the Father does not exclude the responses of the disciples. The disciples are exhorted to acknowledge Jesus and not deny him so that he will acknowledge and not deny them before 'my Father.'" (*GWB*, 31). But he does not address how this could be the case. Nor does he explain how this does not call his premise into question. If Kettler thinks we must live with tension here, it would be helpful for him to note that.

Third, there are times when Kettler seems to make novel or curious claims, such as, "If there is a vicarious humanity of Christ there is also a vicarious deity of Christ. Christ represents and stands in for us before the Father. So he also represents and stands in for the Father [citing Matt 11:27]" (*GWB*, 32). Likewise he states, "Jesus predicts that his disciples will be handed over to be tortured, put to death, and hated 'because of my name' (Matt 24:10 cf. v.22). The follower of Jesus will now act vicariously for Jesus ('because of my name')" (*GWB*, 34). Using the language of vicariousness in this manner may be a theological interpretation of (or inference from) the biblical texts that are cited, but is hardly substantiated by any notable commentary on those texts (either "conservative" or "liberal"). Theological musings such as these give the impression of trying to stretch the theological paradigm around biblical texts that do not easily support the point, serving only to obscure or even undermine the credibility of the case for a more comprehensive vicariousness. Overall, some of the biblical arguments Kettler makes are more convincing than others.

Fourth, Kettler's case rests heavily, though not exclusively, on the interpretation of $\epsilon\nu \pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\iota \zeta\omega \tau\eta \tau\omicron\upsilon \upsilon\iota\omicron\upsilon \tau\omicron\upsilon \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ in Galatians 2:20 as an objective rather than a subjective genitive. He highlights this as "a favorite verse of T. F. Torrance's" (*GWR*, xvi) and recognizes that there is scholarly debate about this point. While there is certainly substantial support (though by no means consensus) for the objective interpretive option among biblical scholars, it would have been helpful for Kettler to develop a bit further the case for the objective interpretation, since so much theological weight in this case rests on that grammatical point.

One final, personal note that may seem rather unconventional. My completion of this review was interrupted and delayed by the suicide of my younger brother. Prior to that time Chris Kettler's two fine books had found a nook in my heart as

he gave language, validation, and theological resources for vicissitudes of my own faith and life. His books were already on my list of recommendations for my students because he extended the voice and impact of a tradition (especially the Torrance/Anderson edition of it) that has been powerfully formative and sustaining in my life and ministry for years. I eagerly gobbled and promoted them as much-needed voices in evangelical circles where Christ's vicariousness is generally limited to his death and linked to a largely forensic atonement.

After the jarring impact of my brother's death and in the tangled web of questions that will linger unanswered for my family, Chris's case proved to be an even deeper well than I knew. When one faces crushing loss and unanswerable questions and unfixable damage, the central issue shifts from "What can I do about this?" (because there is nothing) to "Where do I put this?" While this shift may make us feel more helpless, I now believe that it is a good move. It's good because our helplessness is so often the case anyway, despite our illusions that we both can and must "do something" about the forces and factors that press in on our lives. Chris has done us an enormous service by taking this tragically underattended and underdeveloped, though theologically rich, theme of Christ's vicarious humanity and holding up in its light some of the most deeply broken, yet deeply human aspects of our lives before God: faith and doubt, joy and despair. Whatever the circumstances in which we might experience those phenomena, they constitute currents that run throughout every life. Whether for our own lives or those we serve in various ministry capacities, we need a much deeper theological well to draw from for the brutal, glorious, inscrutable realities of this journey. Chris Kettler has dug that well a little deeper, perhaps at a different angle, one where we did not even realize there was water. But he knew it was there all along and he got us to more of it. And his work makes us realize there's more where that came from.

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