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God's Sabbath with Creation: Vocations Fulfilled, the Glory Unveiled (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

God's Sabbath with Creation: Vocations Fulfilled, the Glory Unveiled. James W. Skillen, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2019. 368pp. Reviewed by Dr. Justin Bailey, Assistant Professor of Theology, Dordt University.

A recent debate in Reformed circles centers on the nature of the human vocation and the new creation. Theologians such as N.T. Wright and J. Richard Middleton have sought to recover a more “holistic” eschatology. Rather than depicting believers as “escaping” to heaven, these writers argue that the Christian hope is that heaven will come to earth, renewing rather than replacing the current order. This gives incredible value to our cultural work, at least some of which will continue into the eschaton.

But other thinkers, like Todd Billings, have pushed back against this emphasis as “too small.”¹ By this he means it is too focused on human activity and not enough on divine glory and the human *telos* as found in the worship of God. Hans Boersma has similarly argued that we need to recover aspects of the Roman Catholic conception of the beatific vision, which Neo-Calvinist thinkers have suspected of a lurking body-soul dualism.²

Beneath the debate on the nature of the new creation is a more foundational question on the value, purpose, and ultimacy of what humans are doing now. Is the pursuit of aesthetic excellence and public justice merely provisional, the province of common grace? Is the goodness of our cultural work merely a foretaste of a greater reality that will displace it in glory? Or does the good we find and forge anticipate a coming reality that will exceed our current reality without eclipsing it?

James Skillen’s monograph, *God’s Sabbath with Creation*, breathes new life into these questions. In this volume, Skillen makes plain the theological vision that has funded both his professional work as a political theorist and his personal piety as a lifelong student of Scripture.³ It is common for academics to stand on the shoulders of giants—to quote Calvin, Bavinck, and Barth in support of their ethical prescriptions. But here Skillen offers some-

thing uncommon: a nuanced, novel, and erudite theological proposal. He is not interested in merely repeating the findings of theologians; he wants to push back, expose inconsistencies, and propose better ways forward. Although he is not a theologian in the technical sense, the sophistication of this volume has been hard-won over his lifetime study of theology, in dialogue with an impressive range of theological voices.

Skillen’s primary argument is that the coming new creation is the only fitting consummation of the creational order described in Genesis. Skillen writes under the conviction that the story that many of us have swallowed is too narrowly focused on personal sin and salvation. This turns the sweeping biblical narrative into little more than a gospel of sin management (to use Dallas Willard’s memorable phrase). It turns the incarnate son of God into little more than a solution to our sin problem. And it turns eschatology into a sort of bonus to the story rather than its fulfillment. It is not that Skillen wishes to deny the smaller “sin-and-salvation story”; rather, he wishes to show how this story only makes sense in the broader context of the biblical narrative, in which God is renewing all of creation through Christ so that all God’s creatures can participate together in God’s sabbath rest: the feast that *is* the kingdom of God.

Skillen’s argument proceeds, structured deliberately like the creation week, in seven parts, spread through thirty-two chapters. Part one expounds Genesis 1:1-2:3. Skillen joins the chorus of scholars who argue that many readings of Genesis, such as those that debate whether the days of creation are 24-hour days or creative eons, are short-sighted. Rather, the literary thrust of the text is to show that all God’s creatures belong to and are dependent on God and are commissioned for hospitable service in anticipation of sharing God’s rest. Light and

darkness, sky and sea, sun and moon, birds and fish, are all God's first-day, second-day, third-day, fourth-day, and fifth-day creatures, respectively; along with land animals, humans are God's sixth-day creatures. Skillen's special contribution is to argue that the opening pages of the Bible do not just *set up* the story but *sum up* the story. In other words, Genesis paints a picture of dependence on the creator and interdependence among creatures, anticipating the doxological harmony of the seventh day, the day without evening or morning. As Skillen writes, "The Bible's creation story is about God calling forth all creatures and all times into an interdependent marvel that culminates in God's sabbath rest with creation" (xviii). This anticipated rest—the climactic celebration of fulfilled vocation and final glory—is "the one and only seventh-day creation of God" (144).

In part two, Skillen lays a four-pillared foundation, showing how characteristic patterns of Genesis clarify the meaning of the rest of the biblical story. This section is theologically the most foundational in the book, and I will expound it more fully below. In part three, Skillen recounts the biblical story itself as a "multigenerational drama" that unfolds God's covenant with humanity. Sweeping through the story of Israel from the first testament into the story of Jesus, Skillen gives a fairly traditional reading of the covenantal shape of redemption, culminating in Jesus Christ. And yet, where Skillen excels is in showing the organic connections among our current labors, our creational vocation, and commendation in the life to come.

In parts four through six, Skillen weighs in on contested issues of continuity and discontinuity between the testaments. Part four deals with the relationship of Adam and Christ as the first and last Adam. Part five details the eschatological tension of *already* and *not yet*. Part six seeks a solution to the question of supercessionism, putting together God's covenantal relationship with Israel and the Church. In part seven, Skillen moves from eschatological vision to ethical prescription. If God has called us to participate in a drama of such cosmic proportions, then how does this direct our discipleship? Skillen's answer is that we must "live faithfully as the creatures God made us to be—the sixth-day image of God commissioned to exercise the responsibilities

of royal stewardship in the service of the Lord of all creation" (295).

This answer will sound familiar, especially for Kuyperians. But if we follow the four patterns that Skillen sets forth earlier in the book, this familiar answer redounds with richer meaning. Skillen's first pattern is "honor and hospitality," and it refers to the intrinsic dignity and interdependence of all of God's creatures. Light and darkness host the waters above and beneath, the waters host the dry land, and the dry land hosts living things. It is this interdependent whole, in which "these creatures have the honor of being hospitable servants of their creator," that God pronounces "very good" (43-44). Human hospitality, modeled on divine hospitality, becomes the paradigmatic posture in the human vocation to unfold the potentialities of creation. And through Jesus Christ, the honor and hospitality of creation will be "recovered, cleansed, and made whole" (48).

Skillen's second pattern is "commission towards commendation," in which every creature is given a unique vocation, a priestly commission that will at some point be complete: "The creation reaches its climax not with the process of work, as honorable as that is, but with its completion and reward through Christ Jesus as part of the fulfillment of the entire creation in God's day of rest" (56).

The third pattern is "revelation in anticipation," and by this, Skillen means that "what is revelatory of God in this age is constitutive of what will be the creation's fulfillment in the final revelation of God's glory" (70). In other words, what we find in the age to come will be the fulfillment rather than the replacement of what has come before, in the same way that the laying of a foundation anticipates the completion of the house.

The fourth pattern is "covenant for community," and here Skillen seeks to show that the very fact of being God's creature entails covenantal and communal responsibility: "Men and women do not start in a neutral position from which they decide to enter or not enter into relationship with God. By their very identity they are already bound to God whom they image... [and] constituted from the start with responsibility both for one another and for other creatures as part of their relationship to God" (74-75). Skillen's aim is to show that ev-

everything we do in God's world *matters*, but that it matters because of where the story is heading.

Skillen's particular emphasis is on our earthly political life, which is not just a necessary duty in a fallen world, but a fundamental commission. The pursuit of public justice is a creational responsibility that anticipates the consummation of all things in Christ. Here he is worth quoting at length:

Therefore, the creation's climax in God's day of rest has everything to do with the responsibilities of God's sixth-day servants throughout their generations. The climactic celebration of the glory of the Lord in the New Jerusalem, where Christ is enthroned, will include thank offerings lifted up by all the saints from their faithful labors in every arena of responsibility in this age. The feast will celebrate, among other things the fulfillment of just governance in Christ, in which king and people are joined together in one worldwide kingdom of righteousness to the praise of God.... The banquet hall will pulse with joy in hearing God's commendatory blessing of the faithful for all their labors in this age, offering up to God in and through their faithful brother and Lord of all, Jesus Christ. (144)

I found Skillen's book to be frequently provocative, occasionally stunning, and largely convincing. Skillen does well to remind us that the larger story of cosmic redemption is both more beautiful and more biblical than the smaller story of individual salvation. His repeated theme of "fulfillment, not replacement," struck me as incredibly helpful for understanding the unity of God's covenantal action. And his reading of the creation account as summing up rather than just setting up the rest of Scripture struck me as quite brilliant.

Skillen is also to be commended for his account of God's active presence in creation. Reformational accounts of the creation order sometimes read as if cultural disciples only ever discover God's past action (God's "law-structure") in ordering creation, rather than encountering God himself.⁴ But Skillen shows how God does not simply set up the pattern but remains present and active in fulfilling it: "the Spirit's hovering over and guiding creation through blessing and judgment emphasizes God's intimate involvement with creation from beginning to end" (100).

Skillen's work is also suggestive for the way we imagine the eschaton. His favorite picture of sabbath rest is the biblical image of the wedding feast. This is an image of fullness, of lavish provision, enacted hospitality, of celebration, community, and consummation. It is an image in which our enjoyment of food and wine, friends and music, are not in competition with our enjoyment of the host or the marriage itself. In other words, the beatific vision and enjoyment of cultural goods that have been carried into the New Jerusalem are not at odds. Rather all of these smaller elements have their place in the consummation of our joy. And yet the image is also limited, especially when it comes to imagining ourselves as sixth-day creatures in full seventh-day rest.

My primary concerns about Skillen's volume relate less to content and more to method. Although Skillen is in dialogue with dizzying number of voices and perspectives, his primary partners are three: Abraham Kuyper (the polymath giant of Skillen's Dutch-Calvinist tradition), N.T. Wright (arguably the most prolific living New Testament scholar), and Jürgen Moltmann (arguably the most influential living Protestant theologian). In drawing these thinkers together, Skillen has attempted an incredibly challenging task. And though he is clearly gifted for the task, the results of this multivalent conversation are mixed. His interlocutors have common concerns, but not always common concepts, and this means that it is easy to get lost in the weeds of the debates and to wonder if Skillen is always being fair in his assessment of what Kuyper, Wright, and Moltmann miss. The sweeping scope means that although this is a volume that will repay the sustained attention of specialists, it may exceed the capacity of most undergraduate readers.

Nevertheless, there are moments in which Skillen's theological vision astounds and his prose positively sings. I will offer a final example by way of conclusion. He writes, "From beginning to end, God holds the creation in an embrace so strong it will never be broken. That bond is more than simply a commitment by the creator to the goodness and the fruitfulness of the creatures. It is a bond of love originating with God and drawing all things to himself" (103). This is the Calvinist perspective at its best: funded by hope for the created order,

rooted not in the ingenuity of creaturely action but the sovereign love of God for the work of his hands. We may thank Skillen for situating our hopes in terms of this beautiful story in which everything matters, and for reminding us that our labor in the Lord—for justice, for integrity, and for peace—is never in vain.

Endnotes

1. J. Todd Billings, “The New View of Heaven Is Too Small,” *ChristianityToday.com*, Accessed December 21, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/february-web-only/new-view-of-heaven-too-small-resurrection-hope.html>.
2. Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

3. Skillen’s work in his field of political theory is truly prolific. See Bruce Wearne’s 142-page bibliography of Skillen’s work: *Public Justice for All: An Annotated Bibliography of the Works of James W. Skillen, 1967-2008*. Available at <http://www.allofliferedeemed.co.uk/Wearne/JWSBibliogFull2008.pdf>. Accessed December 20, 2020.
4. I am indebted to Richard Mouw for this way of framing things. Mouw in turn credits Henk Geertsema. Richard J. Mouw, “Neo-Calvinism and “The Catholic Imagination,”” in *Rerum Novarum: Neo-Calvinism and Roman Catholicism* (Third European Conference on Neo-Calvinism, Rome, Italy, 2014).

Agape, Justice, and Law: How Might Christian Love Shape Law. Robert F. Cochran and Zachary R. Calo, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 334 pp. ISBN 978-1-316-62690. Review by Ben Gibson, Stanford Law School student.

“What would law be like if we organized it around the value of Christian love, and if we thought about and criticized law in terms of that value?” This question animates Robert Cochran and Zachary Calo’s edited volume of essays. It is the question that serves as the touchpoint for featured topics within the book, topics as diverse as personal injury law, immigration, Aquinas, and Augustine. It is also a question that cuts across disciplinary bounds and forces the reader to seek the answer as a student, a legal professional, and a citizen. And it is a particularly worthwhile question today, in light of the somewhat sorry state of current legal and political discourse.

The contemporary language around law and politics is defined more by power and rights than by love. As you scroll through your chosen news source, the following message is clear: law is made and shaped by those in power. The reason why there is so much concern over which justices compose a majority of the Supreme Court, what party controls each house, and who serves as the president, is a concern over power. The popular narrative is that law is not created through coalitions but through victorious tribes.

Alongside talk of power is an exaltation of rights. When you and yours are not in power, rights serve as the necessary counterbalance. The other side may be in power, but at least I have my rights: to keep and bear arms, to choice, to privacy, to equality. The list goes on. When we are worried about the powers that are over us and what they might do, our gut reaction right now is to invoke rights. But we often do so without thinking about the source of those rights and what purpose those rights should be serving.

Cochran and Calo’s edited volume cuts through these prevailing narratives about law and politics. It suggests a different animating foundation for law: self-giving love, or agape. The editors have brought together essayists from different professional backgrounds and academic subspecialties. The resulting essays aim to answer three questions: First, why should Christians even think about organizing law around agape?¹ Second, should law be organized around agape or not?² Finally, the question to which the largest section of essays is dedicated: what might it look like to use agape as a lens for reflecting areas of substantive law?³

The collection displays a breadth of perspec-