

Jerome van Kuiken, "Up, Up and Away: Christian Kettler's Corpus and the Rise of 'Affective Barthianism': A Review Essay," *Participatio* 11: "The Priority of Grace in the Theology of T. F. Torrance" (2023), 213-228; #2023-EJVK-2. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike.

**UP, UP AND AWAY: CHRISTIAN KETTLER'S CORPUS
AND THE RISE OF "AFFECTIVE BARTHIANISM"
A REVIEW ESSAY**

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Thirty plus years is no short time to devote to a single research question. From the days of his doctoral studies up to his recent retirement from teaching at Friends University in Kansas, longstanding Torrance Fellowship member Christian Kettler has explored the implications of the vicarious humanity of Christ (hereafter VHC). This is the doctrine that the incarnate Christ substitutes himself for us not only in his death but in the whole of his life, thereby to enable our right response to God through participation in Christ. In this essay, I review the half-dozen books Kettler has published on the subject.¹ My aim is to trace their signal contribution to Barthian and Torrancean theology through the development of an "affective Barthianism." A pair of forewarnings to the reader: first, in the service of clarity, my exposition does not always follow Kettler's order of publication. Second, in imitation

¹ Christian D. Kettler, *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010); *The God Who Believes: Faith, Doubt, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2005); *The God Who Rejoices: Joy, Despair, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010); *Reading Ray S. Anderson: Theology as Ministry—Ministry as Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010); *The Breadth and Depth of the Atonement: The Vicarious Humanity of Christ in the Church, the World, and the Self: Essays, 1990–2015* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017); *The God Who Loves and is Loved: The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Response of Love* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020).

of his penchant for using popular culture to make theological points and in homage to our shared interest in superheroes, I illustrate the major movements of this essay using a character whose alter ego's initials are the same as Chris Kettler's: Superman (aka Clark Kent).²

Origin Story

After an upbringing in Kansas, young Clark Kent journeys far from his childhood home and discovers his life's purpose under the tutelage of the extraterrestrial Jor-El. So too Kettler grew up a Kansan and went away to Fuller Seminary in California, there to be mentored by Ray Anderson in the theology of Karl Barth and the Torrances. When T. F. Torrance himself visited Fuller in 1981, Kettler served as his teaching assistant and fell under the spell of his VHC doctrine. It became the subject of his doctoral dissertation (with J. B. Torrance as its external reader) and of a lifetime of further study.³

Just as Jor-El provides his pupil with the cosmic framework that he needs in order to fulfill his destiny of serving humankind, so Anderson gave Kettler a theological framework within which to pursue his calling of reflection on VHC. Kettler introduces us to that framework in *Reading Ray S. Anderson: Theology as Ministry, Ministry as Theology*. The subtitle underlines Anderson's determination to think together his Barth- and Torrance-influenced beliefs and his pastoral experience. Each of the book's six chapters ends with a practical case study and accompanying reflection questions to further the synthesis of theology and ministry.

The chapters themselves work through Anderson's teachings in roughly creedal order. *Chapter One* discusses his theological method and doctrine of God: the proper motive for studying theology is for the sake of ministering to human need; as revelation is inseparable from reconciliation, so our theology (grounded in God's self-revelation in Christ) should be integrated with our ministry (based on

² Superman appears in Kettler, *God Who Rejoices*, 27, 33, 107, 282–283; *Breadth and Depth*, 44. On his lifelong love of superheroes in general, see *God Who Rejoices*, xxiii, 105, 283. The theological first fruit of my own interest in superheroes is Jerome Van Kuiken, "Sin and Sam Raimi's Spider-Man: A Spider-Hamartiology," in George Tsakiridis, ed., *Theology and Spider-Man* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022), ch. 1.

³ Kettler, *Vicarious Humanity*, v; *God Who Believes*, ix–xi.

God's own ministry of reconciliation in Christ). Anderson's concretely-oriented doctrine of God ignores "perfect being" attributes in the name of a loving, grieving divine Father who is present in *this* crisis, *this* Christ, and *this* church.

Chapter Two treats theological anthropology. Again, Anderson accents the concreteness of human persons as we encounter them in their fallenness, finitude, complexity, and communal relations. It is these to whom God is present and whom God calls to wholeness in the incarnate Christ.

Chapter Three covers Christology and soteriology. Here VHC is on full display: the fully divine Son has assumed a full, fallen human nature so as to renew it from the inside out. He therefore offers not only forgiveness but also healing for our emotional distress; not only saving grace but also the faith to receive it on our behalf even when our own faith falters; not only justifying grace that frees from legalism but sanctifying grace that draws toward maturity.

Chapters Four and Five both deal with pneumatology and ecclesiology as seen through the lens of Christology. The "real presence" of Christ manifests through *kenotically* being with others: just as Christ shared table fellowship with sinners, so Christians must embrace solidarity with the fallen world. But the "real presence" of Christ also includes *ek-statically* being with God, as expressed in liturgy, sacraments, the fruit of the Spirit, and charismatic gifts. Thus, the church follows the VHC pattern by both uniting with sinful humanity and lifting it up to God.

Chapter Six concludes with corporate and individual eschatology. Corporately, the church is called to live for the future, becoming all Christ intends his bride to be. Individually, Anderson responds to pastoral concerns about suicide, end-of-life care, and persons' eternal destinies by emphasizing the merciful Lordship of Christ. Since judgment belongs to him, our responsibility is simply to minister compassionately to concrete persons in concrete circumstances.

Kettler's survey of Anderson's teaching highlights both its Barthian Christocentrism (note how Christology serves as a touchstone for each doctrinal locus) and its pastoral posture (note as well how Anderson links each locus to

ministry). This double helix of theology and ministry becomes the DNA of Kettler's own writing, as we shall see. Like Jor-El, Ray Anderson mentors well.

A Fight for Truth, Justice and the Vicarious Way

Once Superman accepts his destiny, he battles a lineup of villains (such as Lex Luthor, Brainiac, and Doomsday) in the name of truth and justice.⁴ The same spirit hangs over Kettler's published doctoral dissertation, *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation*. His orienting concern is the cry in an unjust world, *Where is salvation made real?*, and a case study from Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* bookends his monograph. To this agonized question, he opposes seven contending replies: six classified as anthropocentric, the seventh Christocentric. John Cobb's process theology detects in cosmic evolution the emergence of salvation, while Leonardo Boff's liberation theology seeks to forge it in the fires of sociopolitical change (Chapter One). The theologians of hope date it to God's self-constitution on Good Friday (Jürgen Moltmann) or Easter Sunday (Wolfhart Pannenberg) and tether God too tightly to Western liberal values and world history, respectively (Chapter Two). John Hick's pluralism discerns salvation in universal religious experience (Chapter Three). Hans Küng's humanism uses felt needs as a guide (Chapter Four). All these six options reduce the reality of salvation to an immanent domain, whether in ourselves, our institutions, our history, or our universe.

Against them one and all stands not the Man of Steel but the Man of *Stellvertretung* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer's term for "vicarious representative action").⁵ Kettler deploys VHC to anchor the reality of salvation in the accessible transcendence of God incarnate. The dissertation examines VHC from a full range of angles. Its *source* is the "humanity of God" as advocated by Barth: God's eternal

⁴ For a brief history of the shifting mottos that have summarized Superman's ideals, including the now-dropped "the American Way," see Variety, "Superman changes motto to 'Truth, Justice and a Better Tomorrow,' says DC chief," *NBC News* (Oct. 17, 2021), www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture-news/superman-changes-motto-truth-justice-better-tomorrow-says-dc-chief-n1281716.

⁵ Although this term does not appear in Kettler's corpus until *God Who Rejoices*, xvii, the concept suffuses all his writings.

disposition toward communion with humankind (Chapter Five). Its *scope* encompasses theological epistemology and hermeneutics, Scripture, creation, justification, faith, the church, sacraments, and eschatology, as spelled out by T. F. Torrance and John McLeod Campbell (Chapters Six and Seven). Its *depth* condescends to the level of vicarious repentance: because of our sinful inability to be perfectly penitent, Christ stands in for us even here (Chapter Eight). Its *goal* is eschatological exaltation, as embodied in the ascended Christ (Chapter Nine). Its *locus* in the world is the church, but—lest the anthropocentrism that Kettler earlier challenged creep back in—only as Christ substitutes his faith and obedience for our own. The reality of salvation in both its objective and its subjective aspects ever remains enclosed in Christ himself (Chapter Ten). Inasmuch as the church is Christ's body, however, its union with Christ means that the reality of salvation has empirical correlates in the church. The Spirit of Christ produces faith and love in Christians to witness to Christ's own faith and love (Chapter Eleven). In his epilogue, Kettler sketches how the church lives out VHC by vicariously believing for an unbelieving world. Just as Christ's own vicarious faith enables rather than excludes Christians' faith, so Christians' vicarious faith enables rather than excludes unbelievers' coming to faith. Yet the parallel remains inexact: unlike Christ, the church has no power in itself to save or heal. The best it can do is lead the needy into the Savior's presence.

When the dust of battle settles, VHC emerges victorious. Still, the treatment of Christians' own faith and love in the final chapter and epilogue tantalizes by its brevity. And if the transcendent reality of salvation may *correlate with* (though never *collapse into*) Christian experience, might there be a way to leverage VHC similarly vis-à-vis cosmic and historical processes, sociopolitical structures, human felt needs and non-Christian religious experiences? In short, to what degree may the concerns of the "anthropocentric" opponents from the start of Kettler's dissertation be rehabilitated within a "Christocentric" (Barthian) system? His remaining publications have explored some of these possibilities.

Pathos, Ethos, Cosmos

To be compelling to readers and viewers, a superhero must have extraordinary abilities and adventures. Superman's powers are legendary and his exploits take him from his city of Metropolis across the world and the universe. But a truly compelling hero also shares human emotions, aspirations, moral dilemmas, and weaknesses. Superman is a sympathetic character because he experiences love for Lois Lane, loss of his parents and home world of Krypton, temptation to abuse his powers, weakness from kryptonite, and even death at the hands of Doomsday. As Batman once confessed, "In many ways, Clark is the most human of us all."⁶

Having championed VHC in his dissertation, Kettler has spent his career making the doctrine compelling by relating it to human emotions, aspirations, moral dilemmas, and weaknesses—including his own. He also has taken VHC beyond its home locus in the church out into the world and even the cosmos. Throughout these writings, he walks in Anderson's footsteps by bringing theology to bear on human need.

Kettler ended his dissertation with a discussion of Christians' faith. He picks up this thread of thought in *The God Who Believes*. Throughout this book, he uses the novel *Jayber Crow* as a literary case study of his points. He also offers himself as a case study in his own pilgrimage from teenage naïve faith to college-age attempts to resolve doubt via rationalistic apologetics to his Barthian breakthrough into rest of soul on VHC.

The vicarious faith of Jesus lays the foundation for Kettler's consideration of the problem of doubt as an intellectual and emotional phenomenon and as both a virtue (against gullibility) and a vice. Doubts arise about how well we know God and God's will for our lives, how evil and suffering in the world square with God's existence and character, how reliable the Bible is, and how we can know truth at all in a postmodern, pluralistic culture. In each case, Kettler refers us to Christ. He knows and believes in God as trustworthy Father. He models our vocation of loving

⁶ Jeph Loeb, *Superman/Batman: Public Enemies*, quoted in Mark Cormier, "Top 25 Superman Graphic Novels: #14-10" (May 28, 2013), <https://simplysupermanbatman.wordpress.com/2013/05/28/top-25-superman-graphic-novels-14-10/>.

obedience to God.⁷ He has shouldered the world's evil, suffering, and doubt ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") to bear them away and bring life and healing. He interprets Scripture for us in such a way that its reliability relies on his. He is the only one fit to decide what is true, yet he is also the one whose atonement affects all people, whatever their culture or religion, even in ways we do not perceive. And because he has done all these things, we can find grace in him to help us overcome our unbelief and live by faith—not faith in our own faith but in his.

The second installment of the *The God Who ...* series delves into the dyad of joy and despair. In *The God Who Rejoices*, the author again speaks of his own joys (including the joy of comic books) and lingering despair (in the sense of melancholy, sorrow, or sense of loss, not clinical depression or abject hopelessness). He also uses material from Dostoyevsky, *Jayber Crow*, Bob Dylan, science-fiction writers, and others to illustrate his claims. The first half of the book examines the phenomenon of despair in terms of its possible sources (biochemistry? self-love? God?), objects (ourselves, earthly things, eternal things), manifestations (boredom, tragedy, Kierkegaardian "unconscious despair"), and suggested antidotes (self-awareness? contrition?). His own prescription is VHC: the Redeemer has "borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (Isa 53:4 KJV) so that we need no longer bear them alone.

The book's second half then pivots to joy. Kettler catalogues its varieties, from earthly joys (again, comic books) to perverse pleasure in others' pain (*Schadenfreude*) to the pangs of longing (*Sehnsucht*) and ultimately to God's own delight as incarnate in Christ. For the Christian, joy arrives as a gift of grace that sparks thanksgiving. Such joy lives in ongoing dialectic with sorrow as God's people

⁷ Here and elsewhere Kettler sides with Barth over Torrance in ascribing obedience to God the Son in his deity, not merely his humanity. See *Vicarious Humanity*, 95–97; *God Who Believes*, 113; *God Who Rejoices*, 233–234; *God Who Loves*, 12, 52, 107. For a recent critique of Barth's view by an analytic theologian, see Thomas H. McCall, *Analytic Christology and the Theological Interpretation of the New Testament*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), ch. 4. Analytic theology has its detractors—one wag has quipped about "theology done by and for Vulcans"—but here is a prime case in which careful logic like Spock's can benefit the Kirk's dogmatics (even the *Kirchliche Dogmatik!*).

penitently despair of their sins and rejoice in their forgiveness. This binary of joy and despair marks even the life of God: against theologians who see only impassible bliss and beauty in the Infinite, Kettler asserts that God freely opens his heart to share the world's pathos. Likewise, present joy and despair foreshadow the eschatological revelry of God's Kingdom and misery of outer darkness. All these duos of sorrow and rejoicing lead us back to VHC, to the Lamb slain yet standing at God's throne.

Kettler's trilogy culminates with the greatest virtue, love. *The God Who Loves and is Loved* once more links its topic to Bob Dylan, *Jayber Crow*, and others, as well as Kettler's life experience with the love of family and pets. Love's ultimate foundation, though, lies not in our experience but in the inner dynamics of the Trinity. Love in God is without need, yet he freely, unconditionally, and passionately shares his love with the world he created, permitting it to affect him. Through VHC, we become participants in that love as Christ both loves us and loves for us so that we may love aright in union with him.

Kettler reflects on the relationship among the various loves. Love of God is preeminent and exclusive. Love of neighbor is distinct from love of God (contra Karl Rahner) and closely allied with justice (contra Reinhold Niebuhr and in qualified agreement with Nicholas Wolterstorff). Together, these two loves rein in self-love, *eros*, and friendship. But such lesser loves do not fall outside the scope of God's redemptive concern. Kettler reserves a chapter to apply VHC to "[Romantic] Flames, Friends, and Families" (Chapter Four). Christ's assumption of our fallen humanity puts the lie to our fantasies of an "ideal," unfallen partner or family, while his resurrection means the renewing of all things, including our close relationships. Kettler ends his volume by underscoring love as both *being* and *act*. Love is essential to humanity and embraces the entirety of who we are; and love must express itself in concrete action, including in community. These final points circle us back to the beginning of the book: love is likewise essential to God (the Trinity) and is expressed in the Son's action of embracing the entirety of our brokenness to restore us to communion with God (VHC).

The last book in Kettler's corpus is a collection of eight essays spanning a quarter century, *The Breadth and Depth of the Atonement*. The first chapter

rehearses themes from Kettler's dissertation and *Reading Ray S. Anderson* on the integration of theology and ministry, VHC, and the church as the locus of atonement's actualization. This and the sixth chapter include case studies.

From the "Metropolis" of the church, Kettler next ventures forth into the world—indeed, the universe—to apply VHC to an intriguing array of issues: cross-cultural interactions amid globalization (Chapter Two); aesthetics (Chapter Three); the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (Chapter Four); ecological disaster (Chapter Five); and genetic engineering (Chapter Seven). The remaining chapters return close to home by using VHC to diagnose our weaknesses (Chapter Six) and illusions about an "ideal" self and community (Chapter Eight). Repeatedly in these essays, VHC brings solidarity with the created order and its need, judgment on distortions of God's good design, and new life and healing through the risen Christ.

The books of Kettler's canvassed in this section have more than made good on his dissertation's closing foray into relating Christian virtues to VHC. Usually without naming his old nemeses, his writings also have rehabilitated Küng's concern with felt needs, Moltmann's advocacy of divine passibility, Cobb's cosmic outlook, and Hick's interest in religious pluralism, all within Kettler's own transcendental Christocentric framework. Pannenberg's historicism and Boff's liberationism remain unaddressed and so unhealed ... as of yet. (More on this later.) Meanwhile we turn to take the true measure of Kettler's achievement.

Hero vs. Hero

One standard trope of superhero stories is that of dueling heroes. Two (or more) heroes with competing agendas or perceptions cross paths and end up clashing. These conflicts prompt fans to assess how evenly matched the contestants are and what unique strengths each possesses. Not even Superman is immune to this trope. Most notoriously, multiple times plot writers have pitted him against Batman.⁸

⁸ Tim Beedle, "Batman v Superman: Five Breathtaking Comic Book Battles" (Mar. 17, 2016), www.dccomics.com/blog/2016/03/17/batman-v-superman-five-breathtaking-comic-book-battles.

Theologians employ this same trope. A recent release by Simeon Zahl features a three-way matchup of Augustinianism vs. Thomism vs. Barthianism (under which Zahl brackets T. F. Torrance) on the role of experience in the Christian life.⁹ Repeatedly Zahl pummels Torrance for the absence of concrete experiential content from his theological writings, a dearth allegedly driven by his Barth-inspired dread of subjectivism. Instead, Torrance evinces a “*complacency with theological abstractions,*” going on ad infinitum about the ontology of salvation but offering no practical particulars.¹⁰ Thomism, by contrast, has a well-developed account of Christian experience but harbors unrealistic expectations about infused grace and habituation as mechanisms for producing saintliness.¹¹ Zahl himself champions an “affective Augustinianism” that takes with full seriousness the role of embodied emotional experience in theology—not as its *source* (contra Schleiermacher) but its *constant context* and *proper correlate*. That is, doctrines are developed by human beings whose bodily feelings and doings both influence and are influenced by their theologizing. Good theology recognizes this reciprocity and so actively addresses the practical implications of doctrine.¹²

Zahl flags up several advantages of affective Augustinianism: 1. A *via media* between making experience foundational and ignoring it.¹³ 2. Support for the church’s evangelistic mission by demonstrating how doctrine impacts practical experience.¹⁴ 3. Interpretation of both negative affects (e.g., a sense of unworthiness, a fear of death) and positive ones (like love and joy) using the Reformers’ templates of condemnation by law vs. justification by grace through faith and *simil iustus et peccator*.¹⁵ 4. Basis for rapport with Pentecostals and

⁹ Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 6–8, 26–33, 70–72, 81, 95–101, 184–85 (quotation from p. 70; italics his).

¹¹ Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 81–82, 108–116, 186–88.

¹² See especially the introduction and first chapter of Zahl, *Holy Spirit*.

¹³ Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 17, 26–33.

¹⁴ Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 4, 78–79, 117–118.

¹⁵ Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 4–5, 234, and chs. 3–5 as a whole.

Charismatics regarding Christian experience of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ 5. Recognition that Christian experience is diverse and cannot be predicted or prescribed completely (as by a standard pietist conversion narrative). 6. Preservation of a place for habituation in Christian sanctification without expectations of total personal transformation. 7. Discernment of social and political structures as shapers of godly and ungodly affects.¹⁷ 8. Basis for rapport between theology and other disciplines, specifically the hard and social sciences.¹⁸

Now that we have surveyed Zahl, we are in a position to appreciate Kettler's accomplishment: Working independently of Zahl, he has developed an "affective Barthianism" that resolves much of Zahl's critique of Barth and Torrance. Compare the advantages of affective Augustinianism touted above with Kettler's corpus: 1. In his Anderson-trained hands, experience is neither the stone that the builders rejected nor the cornerstone. As he puts it, experience ought not serve as "the criterion of theology," but "Jesus Christ still *meets* our experience because he took upon [himself] our 'flesh.' Therefore, its effect is seen in our concrete, real-life experiences."¹⁹ 2. Again reflecting Anderson's influence, Kettler's works not only speak at length of practical experience but also provide case studies from his own life, others' lives, literature, music, and film. 3. He digs a deeper foundation for Reformation soteriology than Zahl by interpreting both negative and positive affects in light of VHC. Doctrines of justification by grace through faith and *simil iustus et peccator* find surer footing ontologically and experientially in Christ himself—his faith, his assumption of sinful human nature, his justification and exaltation.²⁰ 4. In addition to introducing the rapport with Pentecostal and Charismatic theology that Anderson sought to build, Kettler builds a bridge of his own by outlining a VHC-

¹⁶ Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 5–6, 236, 241.

¹⁷ On these last three advantages, see Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 239, ch. 5 as a whole.

¹⁸ Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 234–235, 239–240.

¹⁹ Kettler, *God Who Believes*, 10 (emphasis his).

²⁰ In *God Who Loves*, 14, Kettler specifically urges (contra James K. A. Smith) that our fallen condition requires a more radical cure than simply the reconfiguration of our affections; the depths of our ontology must be healed by VHC.

centered mysticism.²¹ 5. He allows for a variety of experiences from melancholic to sanguine, from *Sehnsucht* to *Schadenfreude*, all beneath the banner of VHC. His commitment to the normativity of Christ's experience rather than our own militates against prescribing one-size-fits-all spiritual narratives; for instance, he opposes pressuring people into deathbed conversions.²² 6. While wary of the pitfall of perfectionism,²³ he has a real role for habituation in the Christian life.²⁴ 7. Positioning the church as the locus of atonement means it has a potent social influence in vicariously believing, rejoicing, and loving on behalf of those who struggle to do so for themselves. 8. Kettler puts theology in dialogue with such disciplines as social and biomedical sciences, aesthetics, and superhero studies.

The comparison above reveals that Zahl's affective Augustinianism and Kettler's affective Barthianism are largely evenly matched. Zahl's special strength is his sophisticated incorporation of "affect theory" from the social sciences into his theology. What sets Kettler apart is his integration of doctrines, disciplines, and experiences under VHC. It is not hard to conceive of a less collisional, more collaborative relationship between the two systems—one in which Kettler profits from Zahl's insights into the theological value of affect theory while Zahl adopts Kettler's Christocentrism. After all, despite occasional spats, Batman and Superman usually work well together.

Man of Tomorrow

Some superheroes hark back to a mythic past: Wonder Woman and Thor, for example. Unlike them, Superman embodies a futuristic vision. One of his monikers is "the Man of Tomorrow." We have reviewed Kettler's corpus and noted his achievement of an affective Barthianism. With his retirement comes opportunity for him to add to his corpus or, alternatively, for others to extend his VHC-centered

²¹ Kettler, *Reading Ray S. Anderson*, 138–143; *God Who Believes*, 74, 78–79.

²² Kettler, *God Who Believes*, 190.

²³ Kettler, *Reading Ray S. Anderson*, 32–33.

²⁴ Kettler, *God Who Believes*, 112–113; cf. *God Who Loves*, 14.

project. What follows are six fertile fields for future research. The first four draw on Zahl's suggestions for further study.²⁵

Pneumatology. Both Zahl and Kettler focus on the Holy Spirit's so-called ordinary effects as manifested in the affective fruit of the Spirit: faith, joy, and love. But both Zahl and Anderson acknowledge the research potential of the extraordinary effects of the Spirit, too: the charismata.²⁶ What are the implications of VHC for prophecy, exorcism, healing, and other miracles today (all of which Jesus did during his earthly ministry), as well as speaking in tongues—which Jesus is never recorded to have done while on earth?

Bioethics. Kettler already has devoted a chapter in *The Breadth and Depth of the Atonement* to an analysis of genetic engineering in view of VHC. This issue begs for revisiting in conversation with affect theory and Zahl's query concerning human genetic enhancement: "If both sin and righteousness are tethered to the body, does it follow that we might be able to enhance our way to holiness in the future?"²⁷

Christology: Descent. Although Zahl asks about the implications for hamartiology of the fact that "sin ... manifests in, and cannot be fully disentangled from, innate features of our biology and psychology,"²⁸ he never inquires about its fallout in Christ's own biology and psychology. That is, he does not raise an issue at the root of Kettler's VHC program: that of Christ's sinlessness in relation to his assumption of fallen human nature. While this issue has received a great deal of

²⁵ Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 240–241.

²⁶ Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 236; Kettler, *Reading Ray S. Anderson*, 138–143.

²⁷ Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 240 n. 13.

²⁸ Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 240.

coverage from a theological perspective,²⁹ it could benefit from interaction with the hard and social sciences.

Christology: Ascent. Zahl sees the Holy Spirit as spanning the distance between current Christian experience and “the historical particularity of Jesus of Nazareth.” He wishes to explore their interconnection in a future study.³⁰ This map of theological reality, though, appears to omit an important landmark: the Ascension. Here Kettler’s oeuvre may be of service for spelling out how the Spirit links believers not merely *backwards* to a figure who lived two millennia ago but *upwards* to one whose history is ongoing.

Church History. Speaking of the continuing history of the ascended Christ leads to the riddle of its relation to church history. To what degree may we infer what Jesus in heaven is “up to” on the basis of his body’s doings on earth? Kettler records Anderson’s provocative question, “Does Jesus Think About Things Today?” and his view that the movement to ordain women is a fresh work of Christ’s Spirit in the church.³¹ This opinion presumes that one may read divine intentions off of churchly events. Is Anderson correct? C. S. Lewis’s friend Charles Williams wrote *A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* that begins with Christ’s ascension and rehearses the unfolding of church history in terms of the doctrine of coinherent substitutionary love—not only between Christ and Christians but among Christians themselves in communion with Christ.³² Williams is a natural conversation partner to a project focused on VHC. More recently, historian Philip Jenkins has called for a

²⁹ See, e.g., Daniel J. Cameron, *Flesh and Blood: A Dogmatic Sketch Concerning the Fallen Nature View of Christ’s Human Nature* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016); E. Jerome Van Kuiken, *Christ’s Humanity in Current and Ancient Controversy: Fallen or Not?* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017); Oliver D. Crisp, “On the Vicarious Humanity of Christ,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 3 (2019): 235–250; Rafael Bello, *Sinless Flesh: A Critique of Karl Barth’s Fallen Christ* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020); Jerome Van Kuiken, “Sinless Savior in Fallen Flesh? Toward Clarifying and Closing the Debate,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 64.2 (2021): 327–340.

³⁰ Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 240–241 (quotation from latter).

³¹ Kettler, *Reading Ray S. Anderson*, 108–113. “Does Jesus Think About Things Today?” is the title of one of Anderson’s writings.

³² Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2001).

complementing a theology of church growth with a theology of church death in light of the dwindling of ancient Christian communities in Asia and North Africa over the course of centuries.³³ While he proffers some brief theological suggestions of his own, his reflections could be augmented significantly by grounding them in the doctrine of VHC. As previously Kettler has written about that doctrine's entailments for individual Christians' and local churches' experiences of faith and doubt, joy and despair, and love, so now he could apply it to global and regional churches' experiences of love (cf. Williams), faith, doubt, joy, and despair (cf. Jenkins). Doing so would begin to tie up a loose end left dangling since his dissertation: rehabilitating Pannenberg's tenet that history is revelatory.

Political and Economic Theology. The other loose end from Kettler's dissertation is the rehabilitation of Boff's liberation theology. Kettler has analyzed the cultural impact of globalization in *The Breadth and Depth of the Atonement*, but its political and economic impact also deserve scrutiny. What has VHC to do with Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos, with Brexit and Trumpism? Or, from a different angle, consider that *The God Who Believes* and *The God Who Rejoices* received glowing endorsement from Willie James Jennings,³⁴ who went on to author a bombshell book on Christian theology's historic complicity in racism.³⁵ Kettler's books often cite Dietrich Bonhoeffer and J. B. Torrance; how might their theologically-funded opposition to Nazism and apartheid, respectively, be combined with Kettler's prior work to produce a fresh reflection on how VHC judges and redeems the structural contributors to doubt and despair, faith and joy among communities of color?

Whether Kettler himself takes on any of these research suggestions or leaves them to others, his legacy rests secure. His investigative reporting on VHC for over three decades and across six books has fleshed out the human interest story in Barth's and Torrance's dogmatics. Unlike the Man of Steel, then, Kettler has

³³ Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

³⁴ On the back cover of *God Who Rejoices*, Jennings commends both books as "soon to be in the category of Christian classics."

³⁵ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

performed his heroic endeavors not as a caped superbeing from Krypton ... but as a mild-mannered writer from Kansas.