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# KATEKŌMEN

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*Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without  
wavering. — Hebrews 10:4*

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**The Doctrine of Angels**

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BY  
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Amid today's scientific, naturalistic, and anti-supernaturalistic climate, the spiritual world is often ignored or at the very least relegated to the category of non-essential doctrines. Some even dismiss the spiritual world and the existence of spiritual beings (angels) as mere superstition, a relic of primitive religion. Still, a December 2011 AP-GfK poll showed that nearly 80% of Americans believe in angels.<sup>1</sup> While modern science and academia may dismiss angels, the statistics clearly show that the idea of angels holds at least some value for modern man. Additionally, every major world religion in history has endorsed and promoted the existence of spiritual beings, in one form or another.<sup>2</sup>

What, then, should Christians believe about angels? Most Christians acknowledge God as the Creator of all things visible and invisible (cf. Col. 1:16), yet few give heed to God's revelation regarding the *invisible* creation. In Scripture God declares the existence of a spiritual realm populated with spiritual beings and speaks very plainly on the subject.<sup>3</sup> Despite the many conflicting opinions and ideas about angels, believers should seek to understand God's revealed truth regarding angels without adding to or subtracting from the Word of God. A proper understanding of angels will be firmly rooted in the Bible. This discussion will address the doctrine of angels under the following headings: (1) nature of angels; (2) number, types, and orders of the angels; (3) good, holy, or elect angels; (4) guardian angels; (5) fallen angels or demons; and (6) the significance of angels in the Christian life.

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<sup>1</sup> "Poll: Nearly 8 in 10 Americans Believe in Angels," *CBS News*, accessed May 6, 2013, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-201\\_162-57347634/poll-nearly-8-in-10-americans-believe-in-angels/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-201_162-57347634/poll-nearly-8-in-10-americans-believe-in-angels/).

<sup>2</sup> For an historical treatment of how various religions and theologians have viewed angels, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 2, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2004), 443-447.

<sup>3</sup> "Angels are found in thirty-four books of the Bible in over three hundred references." Gary Gilley, "Angelology: The Doctrine of Angels," accessed May 6, 2013, <http://www.svchapel.org/downloads/TheologyLessons/angelology.pdf>.

## *Nature of Angels*

The term angel is derived from the Greek word *angelos* (ἄγγελος), meaning messenger; the parallel Hebrew term is *malak* (מַלְאָךְ). According to Augustine, “‘Angel’ is the name of their office. If you seek the name of their nature, it is ‘spirit.’”<sup>4</sup> Other Scriptural uses of *angel* include the following: “ordinary messengers” (Job 1:14; Luke 7:24; 9:52); “prophets” (Isa. 13:19; Mal. 3:1); “priests” (Mal. 2:7); “ministers of the New Testament” (Rev. 1:20); “impersonal agents, as [the] pillar of cloud” (Ex. 14:19), “pestilence” (2 Sam. 24:16-17), “winds” (Ps. 104:4), “plagues, called ‘evil angels’” (Ps. 78:49); “Paul’s thorn in the flesh, ‘angel of Satan’” (2 Cor. 12:7); “the second person of the Trinity, ‘Angel of his presence;’ ‘Angel of the Covenant’” (Isa. 63:9; Mal. 3:1).<sup>5</sup> Scripture also uses several terms other than *angelos* to refer to angels (spiritual beings): “spirits” (Heb. 1:14); “thrones, dominions, principalities, powers, might” (Eph. 1:21; Col. 1:16); “sons of God” (Luke 20:36; Job 1:6); “mighty angels” and “powerful in strength” (2 Thess. 1:7; Ps. 103:20); “holy angels” and “elect angels” (Luke 9:26; 1 Tim. 5:21); “and as to the offices they sustain in relation to God and man... ‘angels or messengers,’ and as ‘ministering spirits’” (Heb. 1:13-14).<sup>6</sup> The context will obviously help the reader determine which usage is most fitting, but for the sake of this discussion, the term *angel* will collectively refer to all good and holy created spiritual beings.

Scripture does not provide a comprehensive or exhaustive description of the nature of angels but does provide enough information to formulate an adequate definition: “Angels are

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<sup>4</sup> Libreria Editrice Vaticana, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Pub., 1994), 85, with reference to St. Augustine, *En. in Ps.* 103, 1, 15: PL 37, 1348.

<sup>5</sup> A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949), 249, with reference to Kitto, John and William Lindsey, *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

created, spiritual beings with moral judgment and high intelligence, but without physical bodies.”<sup>7</sup> That angels are created is self-evident. If they were not created beings, it would imply that they are eternal, an attribute inherent to God alone; likewise they are in all aspects finite beings. Despite the Scholastic proclivity for verbose answers, Aquinas, the great Scholastic theologian, provides the most succinct argument: “God alone, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, is from eternity. Catholic Faith holds this without doubt and everything to the contrary must be rejected as heretical. For God so produced creatures that He made them ‘from nothing’; that is, after they had not been.”<sup>8</sup> The exact time of the angels’ creation is not revealed in Scripture and has been the source of much speculation. Scripture does, however, provide enough information to place the creation of angels during the creation week, based on passages such as Genesis 1:1; 2:1; and Exodus 20:11.<sup>9</sup>

The essence or corporeity of angels has also been a great source of debate. Jewish theology ascribed to them airy or fiery bodies, a view held by many of the early church fathers; the Second Council of Nicaea allowed for them to be depicted as possessing “delicate, refined bodies”; the Fourth Lateran Council declared their nature to be spiritual, though still leaving room for scholastic debate; and some Roman Catholic and Reformed theologians have

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<sup>7</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England ; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 397. An alternate definition: “As purely *spiritual* creatures angels have intelligence and will: they are personal and immortal creatures, surpassing in perfection all visible creatures, as the splendor of their glory bears witness.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 86, cf. Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, DS 3891.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Prima Pars*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd and Revised ed., 1920, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1061.htm>, Question 61, Article 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 401-402, and Morton H. Smith, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena, Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 1994), 198. For a more complete treatment, see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1, 4 vols. (Phillipsburg, N.J: P&R Publishing, 1992), 540-541, and Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 454-455.

referenced the appearances of angels as evidence of their corporeity.<sup>10</sup> Despite such speculation, the testimony of Scripture is clear: angels are non-corporeal spirits (*pneumata*, πνεύματα). This fact may be drawn from verses such as Matt. 8:16; 12:45; Luke 7:21; 8:2; 11:26; Acts 19:12; Eph. 6:12; Heb. 1:14. “They have no flesh and bone, Luke 24:39, do not marry, Matt. 22:30, can be present in great numbers in a very limited space, Luke 8:30, and are invisible, Col. 1:16.”<sup>11</sup> Though Scripture does speak of angels appearing to men at various times in physical bodies, it does not provide a detailed explanation of how God chose to perform this special providence. According to Turretin, “Now the bodies in which they appeared were neither empty specters and phantasms (with which they might deceive men), nor proper bodies hypostatically united to them, but economical and borrowed (according to the prescription of God). By free will, they were assumed for a time in order to perform the ministry demanded of them.”<sup>12</sup> To conjecture anything beyond this is to speculate beyond what God has revealed. Dabney wisely warned, “Where God has not seen fit to inform us, I think it best to have no opinion on this mysterious subject. The Scriptures plainly show us, that this incorporation is temporary.”<sup>13</sup>

Finally, God created angels as highly intelligent (rational) creatures with moral judgment (a will). Scripture plainly teaches the intelligence of angels in 2 Sam. 14:20; Matt. 24:36; Eph. 3:10; 1 Pet. 2:12; and 2 Pet. 2:11.<sup>14</sup> Though all theologians agree that angels are not omniscient (again a characteristic only attributable to God), most do agree that angels likely possess a

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<sup>10</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 455-456. See also Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 541-543, and for Scholastic arguments, Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Prima Pars*, Questions 50-52.

<sup>11</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology: Containing the Full Text of Systematic Theology and the Original Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*, New ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 144.

<sup>12</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 549.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena, Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, 199, with reference to R.L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 266.

<sup>14</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 145.

knowledge and understanding superior to that of humans because they live and serve in the very presence of God and because “the unfallen angels have not suffered the noetic effects of sin that men now live under.”<sup>15</sup> However, there has been much disagreement over the nature of the angels’ intelligence. Speculations regarding the extent, means, and modes of angelic knowledge have been set forth by various theologians. “Augustine distinguished two types of knowledge in angels: one knowledge...at the dawn of creation, a priori, via the vision of God; and another...in the evening of creation, a posteriori from their contemplation of creatures.”<sup>16</sup> In the Middle Ages, Aquinas and the Scholastics greatly expanded upon Augustine’s hypothesis,<sup>17</sup> and during the post-Reformation era, men such as Turretin and Dabney also addressed the topic.<sup>18</sup> Angels can perceive, to some degree, the thoughts and desires of men through men’s actions, and the demons will tempt men according to those perceptions. Nonetheless, it must be clearly stated that angels are wholly incapable of reading and knowing the heart and thoughts of man because “God reserves this for himself (Jer. 17:9; 2 Ch. 6:30).”<sup>19</sup> Likewise they cannot know the innermost thoughts of each other “so that among themselves they need a language for communicating their thoughts (1 Cor. 13:1) and in general to be able, in their own way and in accordance with their own nature, to glorify God in speech and song.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Smith, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena, Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, 199.

<sup>16</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 458.

<sup>17</sup> Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Prima Pars*, Questions 53-58.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena, Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, 199-200, with reference to Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 266. For Turretin’s lengthy discussion regarding the knowledge of angels, see Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 543-546.

<sup>19</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 545.

<sup>20</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 145, with reference to D. Petavius, "De Angelis," in *Theol. dogm.*, I, h. 12.

Angels are also moral creatures, created under moral obligation with a moral will, making them morally responsible for their actions. Scripture indirectly states this truth by distinguishing between the good or “holy” angels who chose to obey God (Matt. 25:31; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; Acts 10:22; and Rev. 4:10) and the evil or “fallen” angels who chose to disobey God (John 8:44 and 1 John 3:8-10).<sup>21</sup> That all the angels were initially created good is presupposed by Gen. 2:1; John 8:44; 2 Pet. 2:4; and Jude 6.<sup>22</sup> Both the holy angels and evil angels will receive fuller treatment in later sections; the reason for distinguishing between both groups at this point is to show that angels are indeed moral creatures.

Several other short points must also be noted regarding the nature of angels. All angels were created immortal; after the division among the angels, the holy angels were confirmed in life, and the evil angels, “though cast into hell, and suffering death, will not cease to exist, but will continue in that suffering forever.”<sup>23</sup> This division between the good angels and evil angels is fixed for eternity. As finite beings angels are also incapable of omnipresence; thus their location must be defined at any particular time and a change in location defined by some type of motion. On this subject Bavinck offered the most complete answer:

If, then, angels are to be conceived as spirits, they relate differently – more freely – to time and space than humans...Theirs is not a space that is completely filled (*ubi repletivum*)...Nor do they occupy a circumscribed space (*ubi circumscriptivum*) like our bodies, for the angels are spirits and therefore have no dimensions of length and breadth, hence no extension or diffusion through space. It was usually said, therefore, that theirs was a defined or definite space (*ubi definitivum*). That is...they are always somewhere... [and] cannot be in two places at once. Their presence is not extensive but punctual...spatially so free that they can move at lightning speed and cannot be obstructed by material objects; their translocation is immediate.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 145.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena, Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, 198.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 200.

<sup>24</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 457-458.



Lastly, angels do not marry and cannot reproduce (cf. Matt. 22:30 and Luke 20:34-36). Of the power(s), function(s), and service(s) of angels, more will be said later.

### ***Number, Types, and Order(s) of Angels***

Regarding the number of angels there is again no shortage of controversy among theologians. At one extreme, Aquinas and the Scholastics variously appealed to Plato, Aristotle, Rabbi Moses the Jew, and Dionysius the Areopagite, confidently declaring, “[F]or the entire sphere of things active and passive is something very small in comparison with the heavenly bodies. Hence it is reasonable to conclude that the immaterial substances as it were incomparably exceed material substances as to multitude.”<sup>25</sup> At the opposite extreme, Calvin nearly ignored the question altogether: “[I]n regard both to the ranks and numbers of angels, let us class them among those mysterious subjects, the full revelation of which is deferred to the last day, and accordingly refrain from inquiring too curiously, or talking presumptuously.”<sup>26</sup> A middle ground is perhaps most prudent, particularly because Scripture does provide some insight as to the number of angels, albeit a general accounting. Many passages affirm that the angelic host is extensive, a great host: Deut. 33:2 (“tens of thousands of holy ones”); Ps. 68:17 (“the chariots of God are tens of thousands and thousands of thousands”); Mark 5:9, 15 and Luke 8:30 (a “legion” of demons); Matt. 26:53 (“twelve legions of angels”); Heb. 12:22 (“innumerable angels”); and Rev. 5:11 (“voices of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands

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<sup>25</sup> Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Prima Pars*, Question 50, Article 3.

<sup>26</sup> Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2nd ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008), 95.

of thousands”).<sup>27</sup> The exact size of this seemingly innumerable host, however, God has chosen not to reveal.

Most theologians affirm that various types and orders of spiritual beings (angels) exist, but there is by no means a consensus opinion on the subject. Several names which refer uniquely to spiritual beings are the sources of controversy: “cherubim,” “seraphim,” “living creatures,” “principalities, powers, thrones, and dominions,” and “archangels.” Again, the opinions and interpretations of theologians vary widely, so a separate treatment of each term is necessary.

First, cherubim “guard the entrance of paradise, Gen. 3:24, gaze upon the mercy-seat, Ex. 25:18; Ps. 80:1; 99:1; Isa. 37:16; Heb. 9:5, and constitute the chariot on which God descends to the earth, II Sam. 22:11; Ps. 18:10.”<sup>28</sup> In line with the mainstream Reformed tradition, Berkhof, Bavinck, and Smith associate the cherubim with the living creatures of Ezek. 1 and Rev. 4.<sup>29</sup> Alternately, Strong viewed the cherubim, seraphim, and living creatures “not as actual beings of higher rank than man, but as symbolic appearances, intended to represent redeemed humanity, endowed with all the creature perfections lost by the Fall, and made to be the dwelling-place of God.”<sup>30</sup> Grudem’s position mostly concurred with that of the Reformed tradition, though he did label the living creatures as distinct from the cherubim.<sup>31</sup> Despite the conflicting opinions, the Reformed interpretation of Berkhof, Bavinck, Hodge, and Smith seems most fitting.

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<sup>27</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 399, and Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 145. For a brief historical overview of how various men calculated the number of angels, see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 453-454.

<sup>28</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 146.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 451-452; and Smith, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena, Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, 201. For further support of this concept, Smith referenced Patrick Faibairn, *The Typology of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), Part II, Chapter 1, Section 3.

<sup>30</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Outlines of Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: The Griffith and Rowland Press, 1908), 119.

<sup>31</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 398.

The seraphim are the second distinct title or class of spiritual beings mentioned in Scripture. Only mentioned in Isa. 6:2-7, “they continually worship the Lord and call to one another, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’ (Isa. 6:3).”<sup>32</sup> “In distinction from the cherubim, they stand as servants around the king, who is seated on his throne... Among the angels seraphim are the noble ones, cherubim the powerful. The former guard the holiness of God; the latter serve at the altar and effect atonement.”<sup>33</sup> On both of these accounts, Berkhof and Smith concur, though A.A. Hodge views the seraphim as alternate representation of the cherubim.<sup>34</sup> Again, the traditional Reformed understanding is preferable. Cherubim are in no way the pudgy, infantile figures commonly portrayed in popular art. Instead they appear as mighty warriors, guarding the entrance to the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3) and sitting atop the Ark of the Covenant, with their faces turned inward and outstretched over the mercy seat (Ex. 25:18-20). The description of the seraphim is just as striking. Isaiah’s vision describes them as ceaselessly singing, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory,” and they have six wings: two covering their faces, two covering their feet, and two with which they hover (Is. 6:2-3).

Although cherubim and seraphim represent different types of spiritual beings, the question as to whether or not a hierarchy exists among spiritual beings remains debatable. Both Judaism and Christianity have traditionally held to some form of hierarchy, and Scripture seems to support such an idea, though it is never directly stated. “Principalities and powers” (Eph. 3:10), “thrones” (Col. 2:10), “dominions” (Col. 1:16), and “powers” (Eph. 1:21; Col. 3:16) all seem to indicate some type of hierarchical structure among angels. Furthermore, the term

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 452.

<sup>34</sup> Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 250.

“archangel” (Rev. 12:7-8; 1 Thess. 4:16) is applied to Michael (Jude 9), “a title that indicates rule or authority over other angels.”<sup>35</sup> The other angel mentioned by name in Scripture is Gabriel, “who stands in the presence of God” (Luke 1:19).<sup>36</sup> According to Turretin,

[W]e do not deny that there is an order among the good angels, since there is no disorder (*ataxia*) in heaven...the names [previously mentioned] seem with sufficient clearness to indicate some such thing, whether they depend on the diversity of offices assigned to them or on the mere will of God. With respect however to the evil angels, the thing is also undoubted because there is often mention of the prince of demons in Scripture... This is the opinion of Augustine: “I most firmly believe that there are seats, dominions, principalities, power in the heavenly arrangements, and I hold with firm faith that there is a difference between them. But although you may despise me whom you think to be a great teacher, I know not what they are, and what is the difference between them.”<sup>37</sup>

Augustine’s reticence to address the spiritual hierarchy, however, was not altogether shared by others. The Jews, early church fathers (including Origen), the Scholastics (primarily influenced by Dionysius), and even the Renaissance author Dante Alighieri developed their own unique, intricate hierarchies. However, none of these hierarchies were reliable or profitable. God has chosen to reveal that a hierarchy exists in the spiritual world; to speculate further is both unwise and sinful.

### ***Good, Holy, or Elect Angels***

Initially all angels were created good and holy, but sometime between the completion of creation (Gen. 1:31) and the serpent’s temptation of Eve (Gen. 3:1), a number of the angels rebelled against God and were cast out of heaven. Those angels who remained loyal to God were confirmed in holiness and righteousness. Both Berkhof and Bavinck made a distinction

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<sup>35</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 398.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 399.

<sup>37</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 551, with reference to Augustine, *Ad Orosium contra Priscillianistas* 11 [PL 42.678].

between the ordinary and extraordinary services of angels, and such a distinction will be helpful for this discussion.

The ordinary service of angels could be described as their “daily tasks.” Turretin distinguished their offices as follows: “(1) with respect to God; (2) among themselves; (3) with respect to the world; (4) with respect to men.”<sup>38</sup> In each of these areas, angels have tasks which are part of their ordinary service. First, with respect to God, they live and stand in His presence, praising Him day and night (Job 38:7; Isa. 6; Ps. 103:20; 148:2; Rev. 5:11): “Scripture gives the impression that they do this audibly, as at the birth of Christ, though we can form no conception of this speaking and singing of the angels.”<sup>39</sup> Writing in regards to their names and functions, Calvin stated:

They are called hosts because they surround their prince as his court – adorn and display his majesty – like soldiers, have their eyes always turned to their leader’s standard, and are so ready and prompt to execute his order that the moment he gives the nod, they prepare for , or rather are actually at work. In declaring the magnificence of the divine throne, similar representations are given by the prophets, and especially by Daniel, when he says, that when God stood up to judgment, “thousands thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times then thousand stood before him” (Dan. 7:10).<sup>40</sup>

They also serve God by executing His commands “[i]n holy obedience, prompt and full... (Ps. 103:20)”.<sup>41</sup> Second, in relation to each other, they serve each other according to the offices which God has assigned to them: “...they undoubtedly perform various mutual duties to each other, by a mutual communication of things to be either known or done (although we cannot tell what and of what nature of the mode of that communication. Hence they are said ‘to cry unto one another’ (Is. 6:3) as if stirring each other up to celebrate the praises of God. Elsewhere they

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 556.

<sup>39</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 147.

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 93.

<sup>41</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 556.

are introduced speaking to each other (in Zechariah and in the Apocalypse).”<sup>42</sup> Third, in relation to the world, angels perform various tasks, including the execution of God’s will in nature and “guiding the affairs of nations.”<sup>43</sup> Daniel 10 offers a particularly striking example of how angels are actively involved with the affairs of nations and kingdoms. The final aspect of the ordinary ministry of angels is their ministry with relation to men. “Since the entrance of sin in to the world they are sent forth to minister to them that are heirs of salvation, Heb. 1:14...rejoice at the conversion of a sinner, Luke 15:10, watch over believers, Ps. 34:7; 91:11, protect the little ones, Matt. 18:10, are present in the Church, I Cor. 11:10; I Tim. 5:21, learning from her the manifold riches of the grace of God, Eph. 3:10; I Pet. 1:12, and convey believers into the bosom of Abraham, Luke 16:22.”<sup>44</sup> Angels teach believers by their example of faithful, joyful service to God, console believers through spiritual ministry and encouragement, and guard believers in all situations, whether chastising them (2 Sam. 24:16) or “dispensing the blessings of God to promote their salvation (Heb. 1:14).”<sup>45</sup> Thus Scripture clearly testifies to the fact that angels directly minister to believers each day in various ways.

The extraordinary service of angels was necessitated by man’s fall from grace and “forms an important element in the special revelation of God.”<sup>46</sup> Bavinck set forth the traditional Reformed understanding of the extraordinary ministry of angels by linking it with the cessation of the spiritual gifts:

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 557.

<sup>43</sup> Strong, *Outlines of Systematic Theology*, 120.

<sup>44</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 147.

<sup>45</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 558.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 148.

As if to prove that they are not remnants of polytheism and do not belong to a prehistoric age, their extraordinary ministry even broadens in the days of the New Testament...

Accordingly, the extraordinary ministry of the angels consists in accompanying the history of redemption at its cardinal points. They themselves do not bring about salvation, but they do participate in its history. They transmit revelations, protect God's people, oppose his enemies, and perform an array of services in the kingdom of God. Always, in this connection, they are active in the area of the church... Consequently, this extraordinary ministry automatically ceased with the completion of revelation... As long as special revelation was not yet completed, heaven approached the earth and God's Son descended to us. Now Christ has appeared and the Word of God has been fully revealed to us. Consequently, the angels now look to the earth to learn from the church the manifold wisdom of God. What could the angels still give us now that God himself gave us his own Son?<sup>47</sup>

In one sense, one must concede that the extraordinary ministry of angels has ceased because God's revelation to mankind was completed in Jesus Christ; in another sense, the appearance of angels is still *possible* (because God will act as He wills) though extremely *improbable*. There is certainly no longer any *need* for God to employ the extraordinary service of angels.

### ***Guardian Angels***

A direct corollary to the service of angels is the question of guardian angels, a question that has a long, rich, and diverse tradition. Because Scripture is silent on this particular issue, there has been no shortage of speculation among theologians. "The early Christian fathers held to the idea of a particular angel assigned to each individual as a guardian angel. They also held to the idea of two angels, one good, and one evil either prompting good or evil. The Jews, other than the Sadducees, held to this idea, as do the Moslems. The Greek and Romans had similar ideas."<sup>48</sup> Other debates about guardian angels among the church fathers included: (1) whether guardian angels were assigned only to believers or if they were also assigned to non-believers;

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<sup>47</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 463-464.

<sup>48</sup> Smith, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena, Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, 203.

(2) when angels were assigned to individuals – birth or baptism; (3) when a guardian angel’s protection was removed – “on attaining perfection or only at death...”; and (4) “[a]ll were convinced that there were guardian angels not only for humans but also for countries, peoples, churches, dioceses, provinces, and so on.”<sup>49</sup> Such debates regarding the reality and role of guardian angels continue to this day.

Roman Catholic tradition posits both the existence and active role of guardian angels. The doctrine is stated clearly in the Roman Catholic catechism: “From infancy to death human life is surrounded by their watchful care and intercession. ‘Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life.’ Already here on earth the Christian life shares by faith in the blessed company of angels and men united in God.”<sup>50</sup>

Reformed tradition, mainly in reaction against Romanist doctrine, has tended to deny the existence of guardian angels. Although Luther accepted the Roman Catholic teaching, later Lutheran scholars “were usually more cautious,” and later Reformers, in line with Calvin, rejected the notion of guardian angels.<sup>51</sup> Turretin defended the position of the Reformers with three primary arguments: (1) guardian angels are nowhere explicitly mentioned (or implied) in Scripture; (2) “[o]ne angel is often sent to guard many believers and many [angels] are appointed over one [believer]” (Is. 37:46; Ps. 34:7; Ps. 91:11; 2 Kin. 6:17; Gen. 32:1-2); and (3) the idea of guardian angels is of pagan origin.<sup>52</sup> In response to those that claim Matt. 18:10 implies the existence of guardian angels, Grudem offered an excellent analogy: “[O]ur Lord may simply be saying that angels who are assigned the task of protecting little children have ready access to

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<sup>49</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 465.

<sup>50</sup> Vaticana, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 87, with references to Matt. 18:10; Luke 16:22; Ps. 34:7; 91:10-13; Job 33:23-34; Zech. 1:12; Tob. 12:12 and St. Basil, *Adv. Eunomium* III, 1: PG 29, 656B.

<sup>51</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 465.

<sup>52</sup> Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 558-559.



God's presence. (To use an athletic analogy, the angels may be playing 'zone' rather than 'man-on-man' defense).<sup>53</sup> Perhaps the most fitting answer to the questions regarding the existence of guardian angels was offered by Calvin.

If any one does not think it enough to know that all the orders of the heavenly host are perpetually watching for his safety, I do not see what he could gain by knowing that he has one angel as a special guardian. Those, again, who limit the care which God takes of each of us to a single angel, do great injury to themselves and to all the members of the church, as if there were no value in those promises of auxiliary troops, who on every side encircling and defending us, embolden us to fight more manfully.<sup>54</sup>

### *Fallen Angels or Demons*

As previously mentioned, all angels were created as good and holy. However, some of the angels fell from their first estate by sinning against God (cf. 2 Pet. 2:4 and Jude 6). Those angels are now known as fallen angels or demons and stand in complete contrast to the good angels. "Like angels, they are also created, spiritual beings with moral judgment and high intelligence but without physical bodies. We may define demons as follows: *Demons are evil angels who sinned against God and who now continually work evil in the world.*"<sup>55</sup> While the good angels have been confirmed in holiness and righteousness, the demons have been confirmed as enemies of God. Scripture does not give a precise account of when and how the demons fell from their original estate, but by analogy to man's probation in Eden, it is clear that the demons failed during a probationary period.<sup>56</sup>

Scripture does make it clear that the father of all evil, the originator of sin, is Satan, the chief or "prince" of the demons. "Satan" (הַשָּׂטָן) is represented as a person (Job 1:6) and his

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<sup>53</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 400.

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 94.

<sup>55</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 412.

<sup>56</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this probation, see Smith, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena, Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, 204-205.

name literally means “adversary.” Other names for Satan include: “the devil” (only in the New Testament: Matt. 4:1; 13:39; 25:41; Rev. 12:9; 20:2, et al.), ‘the serpent’ (Gen. 3:1, 14; 2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 12:9; 20:2), ‘Beelzebul’ (Matt. 10:25; 12:24, 27; Luke 11:15), ‘the ruler of this world’ (John 12:31; 14:30, 16:11), ‘the prince of the power of the air’ (Eph. 2:2), or ‘the evil one’ (Matt 13:19; 1 John 2:13).<sup>57</sup> Scripture describes Satan as “murderer from the beginning,” “a liar and the father of lies” and even the father of all unbelievers (cf. John 8:44 and Matt. 4:1-11).

Truth he assails with lies, light he obscures with darkness. The minds of men he involves in error; he stirs up hatred, inflames strife and war, and all in order that he may overthrow the kingdom of God, and drown men in eternal perdition with himself. Hence it is evident that his whole nature is depraved, mischievous, and malignant. There must be extreme depravity in a mind bent on assailing the glory of God and the salvation of man. This is intimated by John in his Epistle, when he says that he ‘sinneth from the beginning’ (1 John 3:8), implying that he is the author, leader, and contriver of all malice and wickedness.<sup>58</sup>

To summarize, Satan is the epitome of all evil, and he constantly seeks to pervert, destroy, and oppose God’s work.

In like manner, the demons under Satan’s leadership use all evil means to oppose and destroy the work of God. “They hinder man’s temporal and eternal welfare – sometimes by exercising a certain control over natural phenomena, but more commonly by subjecting man’s soul to temptation... Satan’s temptations are represented as both negative and positive – he takes away the seed sown, and he sows tares.”<sup>59</sup> “They are in constant revolt against God, seek to blind mislead even the elect, and encourage sinners in their evil.”<sup>60</sup> Demons are utterly confirmed in their depravity with no hope of salvation; thus they are wholly and completely evil,

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<sup>57</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 414-415.

<sup>58</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 98.

<sup>59</sup> Strong, *Outlines of Systematic Theology*.

<sup>60</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 149.

with no good, righteous, or holy thought ever entering their minds.<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, the power of Satan and the demons, though great, is limited by and subject to God's will. Neither can perform any act apart from the permissive will of God. Despite all their efforts to the contrary, both Satan and the demons work in accord with the Divine will and purposes, ultimately bringing glory, honor, and praise to God.

### *The Significance of Angels in the Christian Life*

The doctrine of angels holds manifold usefulness in the Christian life. Most importantly, the doctrine declares the glory and power of God. That God created another realm entirely beyond the comprehension of man should serve as another reminder of the limited, finite nature of man and the infinite power of God. “[The doctrine of angels] gives us a new sense of the greatness of the divine resources, and of God's grace in our creation, to think of the multitude of unfallen intelligences who executed the divine purposes before man appeared.”<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, man should keep his eyes focused on spiritual things, rather than the things of this world. The doctrine of angels serves as a constant reminder that there is another reality beyond man's immediate senses but one which surrounds him and with which he constantly comes into contact.

The existence of good angels should serve as a constant source of encouragement to believers in many ways. Strong offered examples: “It strengthens our faith in God's providential care...teaches us humility...helps us in the struggle against sin...[and] enlarges our conceptions

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<sup>61</sup> For the most complete discussion of Satan and demons, including a perspective on demonic possession, see Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 412-433.

<sup>62</sup> Strong, *Outlines of Systematic Theology*, 123.

of the dignity of our own being.”<sup>63</sup> Grudem echoed each of these sentiments, but gave particular attention to the contrasts between angels and humans. When considering the nature and offices of angels, man should be particularly grateful that he alone has been created in the image of God. No other creatures, not even the glorious angels, share this unique blessing.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, man’s ability to bear children and the dominion God gave him over creation are unique blessings which angels do not share.

The existence of fallen angels also serves as a reminder to believers. According to Strong, “It illustrates the real nature of sin, and the depth of the ruin to which it may bring the soul...inspires a salutary fear and hatred of the first subtle approaches of evil from within or from without...shuts us up to Christ, as the only Being who is able to deliver us or others from the enemy of all good...[and] teaches us that our salvation is wholly of grace.”<sup>65</sup> The last two points in particular highlight a reality often forgotten by many Christians. God, in his infinite grace and mercy, has provided a means whereby men may be saved from their sins but did not provide the same for angels. Rather than producing wild speculation as to why God chose to do this, this reality should produce the sincerest gratitude and thankfulness in each man. The reality of fallen angels or demons should also remind Christians that they are daily engaged in spiritual warfare and should constantly be on guard against the attacks of the devil and his minions.

The reality of the spiritual world, particularly the reality of angels and demons, is a doctrine that is crucial to the life of any Christian. Rather than speculating about those things which God has not revealed, each Christian should strive to know those things which God has revealed. The knowledge of God’s sovereignty, mercy, grace, and love is shown in the doctrine

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 402.

<sup>65</sup> Strong, *Outlines of Systematic Theology*, 123.

of angels just as clearly as it is shown in all other doctrines. This doctrine should bring every Christians to a deeper knowledge of and love for God. May God continue to use this doctrine to build and strengthen His kingdom.

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