Paul K. Moser, THE DIVINE GOODNESS OF JESUS: IMPACT AND RESPONSE

Beth A. Rath
Borromeo Seminary Institute at John Carroll University, brath@dioceseofcleveland.org

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BETH A. RATH, Borromeo Seminary Institute at John Carroll University

“Who do you say that I am?” is a question that Jesus asks His disciples, and it is a question that still requires a response from inquirers of Jesus today. In The Divine Goodness of Jesus, Paul Moser takes up this question from a historical and experiential perspective. Moser’s purpose in the book is to shed light on divine inquiry, the impact of God on inquirers, and their response.

The person of Jesus has attracted much inquiry. According to Moser, many inquirers are interested in Jesus because they are interested in God, since Jesus, at the very least, represents God (2). Any inquiry into Jesus today relies on the impact He had on His first inquirers, some of whom wrote about Him in the Gospels. This inquiry, however, must be broader than a look at the historical facts of His life and teaching; it also includes what St. Paul calls “the more excellent way” of knowing, which, for Moser, is cooperative, interpersonal, and self-referential (26). It is a knowing by love. One’s inquiry is defective if it remains one-sided: “Who is this Jesus?” Rather, just as we inquire of Him, He also inquires of us in an “I-Thou confrontation” (27) when He asks of each inquirer of Him: “Who do you say that I am?” When faced with Jesus’s question, one can no longer approach the inquiry in a detached manner. One has to face oneself, as Moser argues, “particularly regarding how . . . [one] stand[s], morally and otherwise, in relation to Jesus and God.” One must ask whether one is attracted to Jesus and God’s moral character and purpose (25). This type of inquiry is what Moser calls the “impact-response model.”

Knowledge of Jesus and God requires that one understand their purposes. God’s aim is to lead people toward moral righteousness and, ultimately, eternal life with Him on the basis of their experience of divine goodness (47); God wants to lead by moral attraction, not coercion. Jesus’s purpose, as revealed by the Scriptures, is to please God through whole-hearted love of God, and, in so doing, carry out God’s aforementioned aim for the redemption of human beings (34).

What motivated and empowered Jesus to take on this mission for God even unto the point of His own suffering and death? According to Moser, Jesus had a real experience of Himself as God’s beloved son. Moser notes that this “theme of being loved, or cared for, by God is not abstract or speculative in the perspective of Jesus” (67). Because of this experience
of a loving Abba and His understanding of His identity, Jesus is willing to take on this mission. His willingness to carry out the Father’s mission is most clearly on display in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here, Moser suggests that Jesus was not merely being obedient to God but, rather, was “relating interpersonally and cooperatively to God as His Father” (71). He offers a prayer of submission to God, thus making Himself volitionally available to God and God’s will (73). Jesus’s radical submission was not a matter of blind trust and obedience but, instead, followed from His direct experience with, and attraction to, divine goodness and love (79); God’s love is first, and Jesus’s cooperation is a response to God’s initiative.

In the divine-human relationship, God likewise takes the initiative. God eagerly desires a relationship with humans and for us to conform to His goodness and will (82). He loves humans first, and their love is a response.

Of course, it would be next to impossible for humans to offer their own cooperative filial response to God if not for Jesus, who reveals God to be good and worthy of obedience. Jesus comes to bring the good news (the “gospel”) about God to humans. In order to understand what the good news is, and just how good it is, it is important to understand the situation in which human beings find themselves. Although Moser does not elaborate much on the “bad news,” he cites Scripture passages in which Jesus highlights our “anti-God wills and ways” (120), which create a distance between human beings and God. Jesus is the antidote to human alienation from God. He is both the bearer of the good news and the good news itself.

Jesus came to bring the good news about the “kingdom of God.” Moser contends that Jesus understood this kingdom to unfold in two phases. The first phase of God’s kingdom begins in the time of Jesus. He ushers in this kingdom, but it is still hidden, mysterious, and not yet fully realized (197). This first phase requires human cooperation with Jesus and is marked by shared kingship under Jesus’s authority (201). According to Moser, Jesus confers moral kingship, that is, a special moral authority and responsibility, on His followers. During this phase, humans have an opportunity for moral formation and can come to be found worthy of God’s kingdom (204). The beginning of moral formation for humans is an acceptance of God’s offer of forgiveness, which then extends to humans reconciling with each other. Many, however, opt out of God’s forgiveness and reject Him and His followers. For these reasons, this kingdom is incomplete. The second phase of the kingdom is the completion of God’s desired kingdom (193), for which Jesus teaches His followers to pray: “Thy kingdom come.” This kingdom will be fully visible but is now postponed so that the weeds can grow with the wheat, so to speak, and more people can be attracted to God and accept His offer of forgiveness (199).

Jesus not only brings the good news, but He is the good news. As Jonah was a sign of God’s merciful love that calls for human repentance in his age, so, too, is Jesus a “living sign of divine love that seeks human repentance for the sake of a reconciled relationship with God” (111).
reveals divine love and goodness in many specific ways throughout His ministry, but two are worth mentioning here: His kingship and His suffering and death.

Jesus claims in Luke 22 that God conferred a kingdom on Him. His kingship is atypical in that it is humble, oriented toward service, and aims not at expanding territory or some worldly gain but, rather, at reconciling people with God and making them obedient children of God. How does He reconcile? Through moral kingship, or, in other words, attraction to divine goodness.

Jesus reveals God’s moral character throughout His ministry through miracles, healings, and especially storytelling. Moser dedicates a whole chapter to Jesus’s storytelling and the purpose behind the stories. In the parable of the prodigal son, for example, Jesus reveals His Father to be compassionate and merciful, even running to restore people to a reconciled relationship with God (146). The parable also shows that people must receive and accept the Father’s offer of forgiveness; reconciliation is cooperative, not coercive. Many refuse to cooperate; they hear Jesus’s parables but do not listen, for true listening implies volitional obedience, not mere intellectual understanding (158). As Moser puts it, “[t]he parables of Jesus invited, and invite, people to face a decision on where they stand regarding God and God’s message, for or against, and the responsibility for the decision is their own” (152). Jesus had an impact, and that impact demanded a response from His followers and also from us today.

Jesus’s suffering for the good is another way that He reveals divine love and goodness and attracts people to God. The synoptic Gospels make clear Jesus’s self-understanding as God’s representative who will be persecuted and rejected. In this way, the king will share in the redemptive destiny of His followers. He is with us in suffering during this first phase of the kingdom, which is preparatory for full blessedness, i.e., the second phase of the kingdom (181). Jesus was attracted by His Father’s goodness and God’s love for Him, and this attraction moved Him to accept His redemptive mission from God. Suffering for the good, according to Moser, tends to attract people (188). Jesus’s suffering for the sake of His good and loving Father’s mission attracted many followers both then and now.

So far, The Divine Goodness of Jesus might seem to be squarely theological in nature or even a work in the phenomenology of religion. Indeed, Moser gets into the weeds of biblical scholarship at times, and the book sometimes reads as an experiential account of religious belief. The last chapter, however, perhaps gives the reader an interpretive context for the philosophical contribution of the work: the problem of evil and the value of human suffering.

God desires divine-human reconciliation, but there is a problem. Perfect reconciliation is impossible between a perfectly good God and humans with inferior moral character (220). Moser says that one strategy God might use for non-coercively reconciling humans with Himself is
duress for both God and humans (221). God sends His only son, Jesus, on a mission to reveal God’s goodness to the world, a goodness that Jesus, Himself, experienced first-hand. Jesus trusted in God’s goodness and will for Him, despite being abused and killed by humans. In this way, tragedy is transformed into a manifestation of divine goodness. For many people, the impact of Jesus’s life, Passion, and death is attraction; beginning with Jesus’s first followers and continuing for two millennia, people are attracted to the divine goodness He manifested. Jesus’s suffering and its impact, according to Moser, can be a model for how God can use human suffering for the sake of redemption, as well (222). Although God does not directly inflict evil upon humans, He permits it. Human obedience to and trustful reliance on God, i.e., their growth in goodness, in the midst of duress can restore the divine-human relationship.

God’s strategy, or “gambit,” for making possible this perfect reconciliation involves God taking a risk (221). God doesn’t coerce human beings into a relationship with Him. Rather, since He seeks a cooperative, interpersonal relationship of love and trust with us, people can either accept or reject God, just as they can either accept or reject Jesus.

What Moser shows in this last chapter is that human beings can have well-grounded beliefs in a perfectly good God in a world in which there is moral evil and suffering, even if they are not in an epistemic position to offer a comprehensive theodicy about this or that particular instance of suffering. The earlier chapters of the book on divine inquiry outline the basis for these well-grounded beliefs.

In sum, Moser’s book is an insightful look at the interpersonal nature of inquiry into Jesus. As we inquire of Him, He inquires of us. His inquiry invites us to look not only at the historical facts of His life but also at Jesus’s experiential impact on His followers and on us. That said, Moser’s argument is unnecessarily complex, winding, and repetitive at times. This makes the text somewhat burdensome to read. While I cannot confidently say that the central ideas in the book were novel to me as a Christian believer or that I clearly see a gap in the literature that this book fills, I still appreciate The Divine Impact of Jesus. The book might invite non-Christians to respond to Jesus’s question (“Who do you say that I am?”), offer them a method for interpersonal inquiry, and provide historical and experiential evidence for the divine goodness of Jesus. Christians, too, might be surprised to find some passages of the book spiritually rewarding, as I did. Moser’s reflections on the parable of the prodigal son, for example, were exceedingly rich. I was also deeply moved by Moser’s vision for what it is to be a Christian believer; Christians must be “Gethsemane cooperators” as Jesus was—to receive, affirm, and share in God’s life, “come what may,” so as to bring the fullness of God’s kingdom to earth (140).