The Truth between Two Extremes

Since the time of the early church fathers, Christian teachers have attempted to explain the nature of the believers' relationship with God—and the related, much-debated issue of deification. Through the centuries, this dialogue has featured a broad spectrum of notions. Some have taught that believers are subjectively deified by partaking of the divine nature. Others, however, reject such a notion, focusing instead on the believers' judicial relationship with God. According to the latter view, the believers primarily imitate God's divine attributes rather than partake of them. Also represented in this dialogue are apostates who have ventured into the realm of heresy by claiming absolute equality with God, failing to make a scriptural distinction between their organic union with God in the divine life and nature and the unique status of Godhead possessed by the Trinity alone.

Today's dialogue is much the same. At one extreme there are televangelists and promoters of the Word-Faith movement who misapply Scripture and erroneously portray the believers as "little gods" co-equal with God, seemingly even assuming His divine headship and authority. In their extreme interpretation of the truth of deification, the safeguard of the scriptural demarcation between Creator and creature is blurred.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are some who have risen up to counter the Word-Faith movement. In their rebuttals to these confused Word-Faith teachings, they deny or dismiss any organic relationship between the Triune God and His redeemed. In their teaching, the relationship of believers with the Father has been minimized to the status of legal adoption, in which the children, at most, can imitate their adoptive parent's behavior. However, the biblical truth lies between these two extremes, embracing the judicial aspect of God's complete salvation together with the inward organic aspect, while unequivocally excluding the heretical notion that the believers assume a status equal to the Godhead. What follows is a brief description and commentary on both extremes as well as a discussion of the biblical revelation of the believers' organic union with the Triune God.

The First Extreme—the Word-Faith Error

Sadly, some Word-Faith teachers lack a clear understanding of the Scripture's revelation of the believers' organic identification with Christ. Their overreaching, imprecise statements imply that the vital life union with God enjoyed by His redeemed people suggests equality with God, an absolute parity with God, and thus, some manner of participation in the Godhead and in those attributes of God which are incommunicable. For example, Kenneth Hagin states that "man was never made to be a slave. He was made to reign as a king under God" (36). But in the very next sentence, he says that man "was created on terms of equality with God, and he could stand in God's presence without any consciousness of inferiority.…Man lived in the realm of God" (36, 38). This confused juxtaposition gives ground to the thought that man is equal to God. In fact, the Bible never elevates man to a status of equality with God. Even prior to the fall Adam was under God's authority and direction. The Triune God is man's Creator, and the Potter has non-negotiable power over the clay (Rom. 9:20-21). The Godhead is reserved for the Creator alone, and to elevate the creature to equal status with God is patently heretical.

Similar confusion is evident in the teachings of some Word-Faith proponents concerning Adam's sinless created state before the fall.

> Adam was not a little like God. He was not almost like God. He was not, uh, subordinate to God even.…Adam is as much like God as you could get. Adam, in the garden of Eden, was God manifested in the flesh. He was God's very image, the very likeness. (Copeland, *Following*)

As previously mentioned, Adam was completely subordinate to God, even suffering the dire consequences of his single act of insubordination. This fact seemingly is confirmed by Copeland later in the same tape, in which he states, "But the human man [referring to Adam] came from a position just under God Himself, the very likeness of God" (*Following*). The close proximity of these two statements in Copeland's speaking underlies the confusion that results from exaggeration and flamboyance, coupled with a less than clear understanding of God's plan and purpose for man. In this purpose and plan, even redeemed man is never elevated to a position in the Godhead. Though, as believers, we are

indwelt by the Triune God (Eph. 4:6; Col. 1:27; Rom. 8:9), our organic union with Him never promotes us to the Godhead. The Triune God alone is the sovereign Lord, and in the New Jerusalem only He is enthroned (Rev. 22:3).

This notion of equality with God is at times tempered or qualified by the use of the phrase *little gods.* Earl Paulk writes, "Until we comprehend that we are little gods and we begin to act like little gods, we cannot manifest the Kingdom of God" (97). Paulk includes this comment without further elaboration or qualification, leaving a reader uncertain as to whether there is any limitation in his teaching about "little gods." Of created man, Kenneth Copeland writes, "Man had total authority to rule as a god over every living creature on earth, and he was to rule by speaking words. His words would carry the power and anointing of God that was in him from the time he was first created" (*Power* 9-10). Word-Faith teachers often misuse the Lord's speaking in John 10:34 ("You are gods") to convey the impression that believers share in the Godhead in some way. This in turn leads to the teaching that believers can obtain whatever they want by exercising their authority as little gods.[1] Catch phrases have been coined such as "Name it and claim it" or "Blab it and grab it." While believers united in prayer can bind and loose with the divine authority on earth, this only pertains to matters which have already been bound and loosed by God (Matt. 18:16-18), and these matters are often not necessarily according to *their* preferences. Word-Faith teachers have exaggerated elements of biblical truth to extra-scriptural proportions, extrapolating from them claims which should be rejected as erroneous.

In reaction to the Word-Faith proponents' exaggeration, confusion, and error, some authors have also rejected a number of essential biblical truths concerning the believers' vital union and identification with God in life and nature.

A Second Extreme—Denying the Organic Union

A number of authors have come forward to critique the Word-Faith movement's "different gospel" (Gal. 1:6). However, some among these have gone too far, throwing out the proverbial baby with the bath water. In reaction to the Word-Faith proponents' exaggeration, confusion, and error, these authors have also rejected a number of essential biblical truths concerning the believers' vital union and identification with God in life and nature.

For example, under the subtitle "Move Over, God," Hank Hanegraaff rejects the notion that the church is the reproduction of Christ (109). In fact, the church is organically joined to and identified with Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). However, the Scriptures safeguard the believers by excluding even the slightest impression that the church is part of the Godhead. She is organically the Lord's reproduction and duplication and is described as His Body and bride but never as the Head or the Bridegroom. She is the "many grains," identical to the original grain in life and nature but never in status and position.

To curtail any organic interpretation of the Scriptures, for example, Walter Martin erroneously stresses outward imitation instead of organic transformation. He concludes, "We partake of the divine nature in the sense that we imitate, not duplicate, His character in our own lives" (99). He reduces the apostle Paul's teaching of conformation to Christ's image to a simple matter of human morality: "We are being conformed to Christ's moral *image* (likeness), not to His essential *deity.* We are called to *resemble* Him in our life-style, but we cannot *become* Him (deity) in any way, shape, or form" (99).

A similarly limited view of salvation allows Hanegraaff to argue that redeemed humanity can "reflect the moral attributes of God" but in no way "actually take on the essence or nature of God" (116). Concerning 2 Peter 1:4, which clearly states that the believers have "become partakers of the divine nature," Hanegraaff incorrectly concludes, "It is also clear in the broader context of Scripture that humans do not possess the *divine nature* of God" (117). He contends that "though we are 'sons' of the Most High, we are not sons by *nature* but by *adoption"* (115). Martin concurs: "We are partakers of the resurrected Christ's character—not partakers of His divinity but of His sanctifying grace" (99). These critics present our initial and ongoing relationship with God as legal, forensic, outward, and inorganic. But the Bible stresses that believers are regenerated or born again. We, therefore, possess the life of God and the communicable attributes of God's nature. Hanegraaff is correct in identifying certain divine attributes as incommunicable, such as God's self-existence, immutability, eternality, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and absolute sovereignty (117). Nevertheless, the Bible also reveals that God has chosen to communicate a number of His divine attributes in Christ to His believers, such as love, light, righteousness, and holiness. Thus, by receiving and enjoying Christ, Christians become partakers of the divine nature in these communicable attributes. Such a partaking is much more

than moral reflection or imitation of the divine attributes. The Bible clearly states that Christ—with His divine life and nature—is in the believer. The Lord Jesus declares to the Father in John 17:23, "I in them, and You in Me." To deny that believers possess the divine nature would mean that the Triune God abandons His divinity when He enters the hearts of those who receive Him. It is heretical to suggest that Christ indwells Christians detached from His divinity.

Furthermore, as 1 Corinthians 6:17 proclaims, "He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit." To Martin, this verse indicates a mere "union of fellowship with the Trinity" (105), not an organic life union which includes our partaking of the divine nature. It is scripturally accurate to assert that believers participate in the divine nature, as long as we also assert that the believers never become part of the Godhead and never evolve from creature to Creator. In fact, many ancient and modern Bible teachers have understood 2 Peter 1:4 to indicate much more than an assumption of God's moral characteristics or a mere union of fellowship.

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Many of the early church fathers' comments on 2 Peter 1:4 reveal an interpretation including actual organic union with and participation by the believers in the divine nature. Origen equated this fellowship of the Spirit with our partaking of the divine nature: "What is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit? Peter describes this by calling it 'sharing in the divine nature'" (Bray and Oden 132). Similarly, Ambrose equates this partaking of the divine nature with our relationship with God and our daily life in Him. He says,

> The fact is that God made humankind a partaker of the divine nature, as we read in the second epistle of Peter. He granted us a relationship with himself, and we have a rational nature which makes us able to seek what is divine, which is not far from each one of us, in whom we live and are and move. (132)

Cyril of Jerusalem emphasized that believers are being reconstituted with the divine nature. He says, "When Christ's body and blood become the tissue of our members, we become Christ-bearers and 'partakers of the divine nature,' as the blessed Peter said" (132). Novatian points out that it is impossible for the believer to have immortality apart from possessing the divine nature. He says, "But immortality is the companion of divinity, because divinity is immortal, and so immortality is the result of partaking in the divine nature" (132). Leo the Great equates partaking of the divine nature with being made a member of Christ. He says, "Realize your dignity, O Christian! Once you have been made a partaker of the divine nature, do not return to your former baseness….Remember whose head it is and whose body of which you constitute a member!" (133). Hilary of Arles echoes Athanasius's famous axiom, "God became man that man may become God," saying, "Just as God stepped out of his nature to become a partaker of our humanity, so we are called to step out of our nature to become partakers of his divinity" (133). In other words, just as Christ had a genuine human nature, so the believers possess the divine nature. Bede likewise realized that partaking of the divine nature changes one's inner being. He says, "When God blesses us, he changes our very being so that whatever we were by nature is transformed by the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that we may truly become partakers of his nature" (133).

Many modern Bible scholars have reiterated in their writings the notion that partaking of the divine nature is something real and inward, in fact, a partaking of God Himself. For example, Wuest tells us that "the believer is made a partaker of the divine nature (II Peter 1:4). The life of God, surging through his being, causes him to hate sin and love holiness, and produces in him both the desire and the power to do God's will" (82-83). Bengel's study note confirms this: "Partakers of the Divine nature—The Divine nature is God himself" (762). Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown reinforce this view of the believer's organic relationship with God:

> "That ye MAY become partakers," now in part, hereafter perfectly (I John iii.2), of the divine nature…. Sanctification is the imparting of *God Himself* by the Holy Spirit in the soul. We by faith partake also of the material nature of Jesus (Eph. v. 30). (619)

A. T. Robertson also considers the inward rebirth, regeneration, as a partaking of the divine nature, as he says concerning 2 Peter 1:4, "Peter is referring to the new birth as I Pet. 1:23" (150). Alford goes so far as to say that the perfect divine nature abides in the believer. He writes that the believers are "partakers of the divine nature (i.e. of that holiness, and truth, and love, and, in a word, perfection, which dwells in God, and in you, by God

dwelling in you" (391). Although these scholars surely would refuse to agree that believers are equal with God, they have clearly affirmed that God dwells in the believers, bringing His divine nature into their being and organically joining them to God.

The Scriptural Revelation of the Believers' Deification

Believers are joined to the Lord (1 Cor. 6:17). They are indwelt by the Triune God (Eph. 4:6; Col. 1:27; Rom. 8:9). The Lord told the disciples to expect the Spirit of the Father to be in them (Matt. 10:20), and in His prayer in the garden, He declared that both He and the Father would be in His believers (John 17:21). Both the Lord and the apostles repeatedly confirm this inward, subjective life union which the believers share with the Trinity. It is both illogical and heretical to teach that the Father, Son, and Spirit indwell the believers apart from the divine life and nature; this would fragment the essence of God. God's life and nature are received by believers at the moment of rebirth, their regeneration. Then throughout their lifetime, in their daily life, God intends to transform the believers into His image by causing His indwelling life and nature to grow and mature within them (2 Cor. 3:17-18). Ultimately, at His return even the physical bodies of believers will be transfigured to the extent that they will bear His image: "We will be like Him because we will see Him even as He is" (1 John 3:2).

Christians truly have become partakers of the divine nature but not of the Godhead. We should reject the confused teaching of Word-Faith proponents who seem to assume divine authority as if they have become part of the Godhead. The Bible testifies resoundingly that only the Triune God is sovereign. Only Christ is Lord, Head, and Bridegroom; He is unique in many of His divine statuses. We should bow our knee in submission to Him and never presume to claim equality with Him.

Yet just as surely as He is the Head, we are His Body, His enlarged expression filled with His life and nature (Eph. 1:22-23). In addition, He is the unique grain of wheat who fell into the ground to accomplish redemption, and we are the many grains, the many brothers, who are His life duplication, life increase, and life reproduction. He is the vine, and we are the branches sharing the life and nature of the vine (John 15). We should therefore also reject the extreme teaching of those who would diminish our organic relationship, our union with God, to one of mere adoption and moral imitation. We believers are human but not merely human. We are indwelt by God and enjoy His divine life and partake of His divine nature, but we never become part of the Godhead.

by Gary Evans

Notes

[1]See Joyce Meyer's *Me and My Big Mouth: Your Answer Is Right under Your Nose.* Tulsa: Harrison House, 1997.

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Partaking of the Divine Nature

Through the precious and exceedingly great promises we, the believers in Christ, who is our God and Savior, have become partakers of His divine nature in an organic union with Him, into which we have entered through faith and baptism (John 3:15; Gal. 3:27; Matt. 28:19). The virtue (energy of life) of this divine nature carries us into His glory (godliness becoming the full expression of the Triune God). (Recovery Version, 2 Pet. 1:4, note 4)