

Deified into the Same Image

“2 Corinthians 3:18 and Its Implications for *Theosis*,”
by M. David Litwa, *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2.1 (Spring 2008): 117-133.

In a short but significant article, “2 Corinthians 3:18 and Its Implications for *Theosis*” (hereafter “Implications”), M. David Litwa contributes to the ongoing theological debate related to theosis, which he describes as humans sharing in the divine reality (117), through his consideration of the phrase *we...are being transformed into the same image*. Although the title of the article suggests that all of 2 Corinthians 3:18 will be considered, in fact it focuses on this phrase and, even more narrowly, on two words within the phrase, the words *same image*. This tight focus has both positive and negative consequences. Positively, it draws attention to the fact that this verse speaks of theosis as a divine reality within the context of experience rather than as a formal, explicit teaching. “Implications” acknowledges this point at the very beginning, stating,

The debate is not whether Paul had a “doctrine” or “theology” or “idea” of deification. Rather, the question is whether an aspect of Paul’s soteriology can be called “deification,” by which I mean “sharing in God’s reality through Christ.” (117)

This statement underscores the fact that most of the teaching in the New Testament is presented by the apostles within the context of the church’s experience of the crucified and resurrected Christ, an experience which, according to 2 Corinthians 3:18, has real transformative consequences. Negatively, the narrow focus on the words *same image* in 2 Corinthians 3:18 results in a failure to adequately present the broader biblical revelation concerning the type of expression that is produced through the process of deification. After showing that deification in 2 Corinthians 3:18 implies a sharing in the divine reality through Christ, “Implications” can only suggest that the expression of this reality is a “life of joyful obedience to God’s commands” (128), a life in which our “divine humanity...expresses itself, through the Spirit, in joyful obedience to God’s commands” (131). This suggestion, however, falls short because it fails to adequately consider other New Testament uses of the word *image* in relation to the corporate expression of the Triune God through the church. The positive and negative aspects of

“Implications” can be seen, respectively, in the two main sections of its analysis of 2 Corinthians 3:18.

Positive Aspects

In the first section of “Implications,” “‘Image’ as ‘Anthropological’ and ‘Theological,’” there is a detailed examination of the words *same image* as they relate to a concept of theosis. This examination is in line with the orthodox understanding of the union of the human and divine natures in the person of Christ, who is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). “Implications” begins with the assertion that the image to which the believers are being transformed is Christ Himself:

Believers are being transformed into the “same” image, an image later designated as Christ, the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4). Thus the adjective “the same,” in addition to whatever other function it has, serves to underscore that the image in 3:18 is not different from the image *which Christ himself is*. (118)

“Implications” acknowledges that accepting this interpretation as the essence of Paul’s meaning can be seen as advancing “the idea that believers are spiritually (or even ontologically) unified with Christ” (118). This concern looms at the core of the theological debate of theosis, whether it is articulated or not, and “Implications” truthfully acknowledges that a host of interpreters are ill at ease with the teaching of theosis because of this concern. Consequently, they argue in contradistinction that

there must be a difference between redeemed humanity (or the “church”) as the unfinished “image of God” [referring to the church in the age prior to the eschaton] and Christ as the image of God (what I will call the “Christological image”). This is readily agreed by most. But some interpreters go on to imply (or affirm outright) that there must also be a difference between the church as the *finished* “image of God” (what I will call the church’s “eschatological image,” or simply the “eschatological image” for short) and the Christological image. (119-120)

Consequently, they seek not only to draw a *distinction* between the eschatological and Christological images, but to view them as truly *separate* realities in one important respect—namely, in respect to Christ’s divinity. There may be, these interpreters admit, eschatologically “no difference” between the perfect *humanity* of Christ and

believers, but believers certainly never share Christ's divinity. (120)

Since Paul asserts that *we* all will be transformed into the *same* image, "Implications" separates itself from these interpreters, stating that

the Christological image will in fact be "the same" reality as the church's eschatological image. Thus, although there will no doubt be a distinction between the eschatological and Christological images (i.e., they will not be identical), they will be "the same." (120)

Following this statement, "Implications" focuses on the argument of those who are uncomfortable with theosis out of concern that it suggests an ontological union between the believers and God in Christ by addressing the representative argument of S. Hafemann, as presented in his book *Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel*.

For Hafemann, the Christ-image in which believers share cannot be the image that Hafemann takes to be equal to YHWH himself (the "theological image"), for this would mean that Paul taught that believers shared the divinity of Christ. But believers, according to Hafemann, do not become divine like Christ; they are, rather, changed into the image of the merely *human* Christ.

Thus, in Hafemann's interpretation, Christians are indeed being transformed into the image of God which Christ is. However this image of God in Christ is not theological (the image of Christ's divinity) but anthropological (the image of Christ as the Second Adam). (123)

"Implications" response to Hafemann follows the orthodox understanding of the union of divinity and humanity in the person of Christ. Thus, it argues that "Paul assumes no separation between Christ as a theological image and anthropological image in 2 Cor. 3:18 or elsewhere in his undisputed letters" (123). For Paul and for all believers, Christ is both God and man, possessing both divinity and humanity. This truth rests upon the understanding that Christ's two natures exist in union without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation.

"Implications" then rebuts Hafemann's central argument by pointing out that separating the image of Christ into a divine component (a Christological or theological image) and a human component, even an uplifted human

component (an anthropological image), would require a separation of natures within the person of Christ as experienced by the believers. Clearly, this is a troubling notion because it implicitly embraces the heretical teachings denounced by the council of Chalcedon. In a footnote "Implications" states, "Pauline theosis is not fusion, but union *in distinction*. Christ and the church are one body, but Christ remains distinguished from the church as her Head—although never separate from her" (125). "Implications" astutely points out that Hafemann's desire to avoid what he regards as a potentially troubling aspect of an overbroad understanding of theosis introduces a more fundamental deviation from the faith. "Implications," to its credit, acknowledges that there is a biblical distinction between Christ and the church, but nevertheless a distinction without separation. And even though "Implications," consequently, states that "insofar as Christ can be called 'divine' as God's image, humanity, fully transformed into the 'same image' which Christ is (2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Cor. 11:7), can also be called 'divine'" (125), it properly contextualizes this distinction within the biblical revelation of the relationship between Christ and the church.

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This does not mean that the human in 1 Cor. 11:7 is, eschatologically speaking, ontologically identical with Christ. Christ is still the "head" of redeemed humanity (1 Cor. 11:3), and the redeemed human will ever remain a "member" of Christ's body. This is the way that Paul distinguishes

between the eschatological image and the Christological image. But note that the "head" and the "members" for Paul make up the same "body," the same "self" as it were. Christ and the church, who eschatologically cleave to each other, eschatologically become "one flesh" in the deuteropauline interpretation (Eph. 5:31-32), which means "one spirit" in the language of 1 Cor. 6:17. The meaning of "one flesh" and "one spirit" I hold to be basically equivalent to Paul's "same image" language in 2 Cor. 3:18. Christ and the church, eschatologically, are one image. (125)

In its rebuttal of Hafemann's understanding of the believers' participation in the image of Christ, "Implications" identifies a helpful construct that can be applied to the larger debate concerning theosis, namely that the church's participation in the divine reality, which is the essential element of theosis, should conform to the intrinsic axiom that is operative within the immanent being of the Triune God and in the person of Christ, namely that there is distinction but not separation. There is distinction but not separation in the immanent reality of

the three persons of the Trinity, there is distinction but not separation in the incarnate expression of divinity and humanity in the person of Christ, and there is distinction but not separation in the resurrected expression of divinity and humanity in the church, the Body of Christ. Just as the three of the Trinity are eternally distinct but not separate and just as the divine and human natures in the person of Christ are distinct but not separate, it is quite safe to characterize the believers' participation in the same image within the context of distinction but not separation.¹ In fact, this is the way that the Bible characterizes the expression of the soteriological experience which is variously termed theosis and deification.

It is the church, the corporate and enlarged expression of the resurrected Christ, that is being transformed into the same image, and the expression of this transformation is characterized by biblical references to Christ as the Head and to the church as the Body (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15-16; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:19). Nevertheless, the Bible also identifies this Body as the Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). As such, while there is distinction in relation to Christ as the Head and to the church as the Body, there is not a separation from the Head or from the other members of the Body (vv. 13, 27). The Bible does not provide in-depth theological explanations of its references to Christ as the Head and the church as His Body; it simply declares, by means of an organic illustration, that we are one with Him in His divine life and nature, yet distinct from Him in His authoritative position and function: He is the Head and the church is His Body, but everything comes out from the Head; consequently, the Body can only be an expression of the Head because we are, in fact, "out from" Him (Col. 2:19). If we begin with the biblical references to the church as the Body of Christ as the basis of our being in the same image, we should be able to acknowledge our identification with Christ in His divine life and nature and, at the same time, reject the thought that this identification also connotes the abolition of all distinctions between God and redeemed humanity. When we view the church from the perspective of the Body of Christ, we can reject the latter thought while marveling at and accepting the former thought.

We are being transformed into the same image, a divine-human image that will make us similarly divine and human. We become divinely human by partaking of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4) that, following the incarnation of Christ, in which God became man (Matt. 1:23; John 1:14), and the resurrection of Christ, in which Christ's humanity was made divine (1 Cor. 15:45; Rom. 1:4), is now a mingling of divinity and divinized humanity. The pattern of Christ in His resurrection is the pattern of the image to which we are being conformed. "Implications" advances this point by showing first that, as a resurrected being, Christ is

a divinely human being, or a humanly divine being...The resurrected Christ as model...for human beings remains divinely human and humanly divine throughout. Although Paul implicitly distinguishes between Christ's human and divine image, he never separates them. (127)

Since there is no separation of the human and divine in the image of Christ, "Implications" asserts that there should be no separation of divinity and humanity in the transformed image of the church.

Resurrected humans will not simply be human (as we understand that term in reference to this life). They will, like Christ, be divinely human, or humanly divine. True humanity, in this view, is divine humanity. Although Paul does not state this conclusion *expressis verbis*, the implications of his theology are clear. If the existence of resurrected humanity is both heavenly and glorified (as well as "incorruptible" and "immortal," 1 Cor. 15:53-54) like Christ, it is also "divine." (128)

Negative Aspects

In the second section, "The Divine Life," "Implications" attempts to define a living that manifests the divine and human image to which we are being transformed. In simple terms, it is an attempt to define "what it means for believers, as the church, to share in God's reality" (129). If, in fact, deification is an experience made possible through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, it is important to ask how this reality manifests itself in the experience of the church. It is a worthy question, but the answer provided by "Implications" falls short of the divine revelation and thus forfeits almost all of the gains made in the first section. If, as "Implications" notes, quoting Karl Prümm in "Reflexiones Theologicae et Historicae ad Usum Paulinum Termini 'Eikon,'" that the "hypostatic union between the humanity of Christ and the preexistent Son of God, the image of the Father, enables the human race to participate in that divine dignity which belongs to the preexistent Son by virtue of his consubstantiality with the Father" (129), then our participation should surely involve more than a "life of joyful obedience to God's commands" (128), and it should involve more than "a mode of being that is manifested in concrete ethical acts" (129). This, however, is the limit of "Implications'" understanding.

The disconcerting element in this section is the total abandonment of the biblical referent that was used in the first section to distance the experience of deification from the common perception that it is predicated on a heretical notion that deification involves redeemed humanity becoming God in the Godhead. This biblical referent is the Body of Christ, and in the first section "Implications" shows that even though the Body of Christ

has the element of divinity, it does not share in the divine preeminence of the Head, Christ. The *same image* in 2 Corinthians 3:18 refers to the Body of Christ, which is a corporate, organic entity produced and sustained by the divine life and nature, but in the second section, the expression of this corporate image is portrayed as being profoundly individualistic, which is antithetical to the reality of the Body of Christ. According to “Implications,” the expression of the divine life involves an

entirely new ethical existence, a new creation, a new and true humanity, even a divine humanity. How does this divine humanity express itself in the world? It expresses itself, through the Spirit, in joyful obedience to God’s commands. (131)

When the expression of deification is limited to the realm of ethics and obedience, even joyful obedience, accountability is evidenced through individual actions, and submission is manifested through individual actions. This description strips the image of Christ, which the church is, of all its mystery, even though Christ and the church are the great mystery, that is, the mysterious manifestation of the divine intention to deify redeemed humanity. Consequently, the experience of deification is denuded of all of its divine mystery, a point which “Implications” openly asserts:

The church’s divinity, for Paul, is not an ontological state—let alone a mystical one—but consists (at least in this life) in a mode of being that is manifested in concrete ethical acts. This is why in Rom. 12:2 Paul’s exhortation to be transformed (*metamorphousthe*, the only other Pauline use of the verb *metamorphoō* outside of 2 Cor. 3:18) is definitely a moral transformation: “so that you may discern what is the will of God.” (129-130)

Having persuasively argued that we are being transformed into the divine image of Christ, “Implications” can only equate the transformation in 2 Corinthians 3 and Romans 12 with a moral transformation that enables an individual believer to discern and follow the will of God as a matter of joyful obedience. “At the very least, Christian transformation into God’s righteousness means that believers act righteously. Christians act righteously through Spirit-empowered obedience. Thus through Spirit-empowered obedience, Christian deification is actualized” (132). The experience of deification, which is reflected in transformation, is thus reduced to the ability to respond to many situations according to the righteousness of God, but this in turn reduces the will of God to a succession of concrete ethical acts in this life. The will of God that is spoken of in Romans 12, however, refers to a much broader reality than the mere discernment of God’s ethical requirements and our subsequent situational submission. The will of God in Romans 12 is not something that needs to be

discerned but something that needs to be proved. The will of God in Romans 12 is related to the enlarged expression of His image, the same image referenced in 2 Corinthians 3; the eternal will is proved when there is glory in the church and in Christ Jesus through the manifestation of the Body of Christ. The meaning and expression of deification is actualized through the manifestation of the Body of Christ in this age and in the next.

There is much to be grateful for in “Implications.” It is forthright in its willingness to address the reservations of many who shy away from a discussion of deification out of fear and shortsightedness. It is accurate in its assessment that the phrase *we...are being transformed into the same image* is a reference to an aspect of Paul’s soteriology that can be aptly called deification. It is innovative in its presentation of the limitations of the believers’ participation in the divine reality, defining these limitations with reference to the orthodox understanding of the union of the human and divine natures in the person of Christ. And it is helpful in pointing to the Body of Christ as the illustration of our union with Christ. It does, however, fall short of describing the expression of deification, which can be seen only in and through the Body of Christ. In this regard there needs to be a further unveiling to see that the image that we are being transformed into is expressed through the church as the one new man, which is being renewed in the image of Christ. Thus, *image* implies much more than simply the expression of acts of righteousness by an individual; it implies the expression of the Triune God Himself through the church as the corporate one new man, which was created according to God in righteousness and holiness of His reality (Eph. 4:24).

by John Pester

Notes

¹The axiom of distinction but not separation is implicitly interwoven into the statement that “God became man in order to make man God in life and nature but not in the Godhead and not as an object of worship.” This expression was initially advanced by Witness Lee, and in the final years of his ministry further developed and discussed within the context of the believers’ deification through their experience of the economy of God. The church’s union and identification with the Triune God, that is, our inseparability from the Triune God, is emphasized by the phrase *God in life and nature*, and the church’s subordinate position in relation to the Triune God, that is, our distinction from the Triune God, is reinforced by the phrase *not in the Godhead and not as an object of worship*. The latter phrase maintains the relationship between Creator and creature, but the former phrase affirms that it is possible for redeemed and regenerated humanity to partake of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4).

Misunderstanding Pauline Theosis

“Can We Speak of *Theosis* in Paul?” by Stephen Finlan.
Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions.
Eds. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung.
Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008. 68-80.

In May 2004, a conference was held at Drew University to “explore the history and development of the concept [of theosis] within the broadly Christian traditions” (Christensen 9). Key contributions to that conference were subsequently edited and published as *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*. In “Can We Speak of *Theosis* in Paul?” (hereafter “Theosis”), Stephen Finlan, adjunct professor of religious studies at Seton Hall University, focuses on Paul’s writings to find evidence that the apostle did in fact assume the divinization of the believers as the goal of God’s salvation. While he finds such evidence, the understanding of theosis that is subsequently presented in this article falls short of the revelation given to Paul and recorded in his Epistles. Whereas “Theosis” understands deification in the Pauline Epistles to be indicative of a process by which redeemed believers become “Christlike in substance and character” through Spirit-assisted imitation¹ (79), Paul presents deification as an economical process by which redeemed, regenerated believers become the reproduction of Christ through the operation of the life-giving, transforming, deifying Spirit.

Although many of the conclusions presented in “Theosis” stand in need of rebuttal, its presentation should be commended for realizing that the consummation of God’s salvation extends far beyond initial justification. The nature of that salvation as presented, however, is neither satisfactory nor complete. In considering Paul’s declaration that the believers “might become the righteousness of God” in Christ (2 Cor. 5:21), which is declared to be “one of the most striking transformative statements of Paul” (78), “Theosis” states, “Describing Paul’s soteriology as ‘justification,’ therefore, is inadequate; mere acquittal would not empower people to *become the righteousness of God*” (75). By underscoring the fact that the transformation of the believer is possible only after “the soteriological transaction that took place at the cross” (78), “Theosis” points to the crucial distinction between the initial, judicial aspect of salvation and the further outworking of salvation through the transformation of the believers. Paul indicates the same distinction in Romans 5:10 when he writes, “If we, being enemies, were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more we will be saved in His life, having been reconciled.” But it is in its

treatment of salvation as involving more than objective justification accomplished through redemption that the article’s critical shortcoming becomes apparent. For Paul, the believers in Christ are saved “in His life,” following the reconciliation accomplished at the cross. The life in which they are saved—“His life”—is an indwelling life that is intrinsically constituted into them. This life never operates apart from the object which it animates. Thus, this life is Christ Himself as the indwelling Spirit of life (Col. 3:4; Rom. 8:2), and it is by the Lord Spirit that the many sons of God, following the lead of the firstborn Son, are transformed and led into glory to become what He is in resurrection (2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 12:2; Heb. 2:10-11). “Theosis,” however, misses the crucial Pauline revelation of the divine life with its transforming power and, in contrast, can only present a form of transformation that is based on mental assent, loyalty to Christ, and the ability to discern the will of God.

Concerning Romans 12:2, in which Paul exhorts the believers to “be transformed by the renewing of the mind that you may prove what the will of God is,” “Theosis” states,

Loyalty leads to transformation, which leads to discernment. It is more than just training the mind to think spiritually; it means an ability to actually discern the *qualities of God* and choose them, similar to the process described in 2 Corinthians 3:18: *beholding* the glory and being transformed into its image; here discernment precedes transformation. (73)

Citing Paul’s prayer that the love of the Philippian believers would “abound yet more and more in full knowledge and all discernment” that they “may be pure and without offense unto the day of Christ” (Phil. 1:9-10), “Theosis” further offers, “Here insight leads to discernment, which leads to transformation” (73). “Theosis” continues, “What must be noticed in Philippians is that the believer receives an ability to discern what is good, what is righteous, and what is conducive of love; and with this ability, the believer is able to stand pure and blameless ‘in the day of Christ’ (1:10)” (74). “Theosis” then connects discernment and transformation with “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16; Phil. 2:5): “‘Having the mind of Christ,’ then, can refer either to an ability to discern God’s will or a willingness to manifest God’s love. This echoes the affective and cognitive capabilities—love and knowledge—given in Philippians 1:9-10” (74). This understanding of Pauline theosis suggests that Paul supported a notion of deifying transformation that has its source in a human ability to choose the good. Paul’s thought is more divinely organic than this.

The shortage of understanding in “Theosis” in relation to transformation and theosis has a twofold source. First, the operation of the divine life is not evident in the construct of divinization presented in “Theosis,” and second,

there is an absence of understanding on the impact of the divine life on the tripartite being of man, which was created by God with a spirit, soul, and body. Without an adequate exposition of these two matters, any effort to unpack Paul's thought regarding deification will likely end where "Theosis" does—in a misunderstood view of "deified" man as mirroring the character of God through improved intellectual discernment rather than with a scriptural understanding of deified man as expressing God in Christ by virtue of receiving and partaking of the divine life and nature.

While a trichotomist view of created man has its detractors, it is difficult to circumvent the force and clarity with which Paul enunciates this cardinal truth and its bearing on the divinization of man. Paul unmistakably delineates the parts of man as "spirit and soul and body" and emphasizes the fact that spirit can be divided from soul by the word of God (1 Thes. 5:23; Heb. 4:12). Further, the human spirit for Paul is the dwelling place of God (Eph. 2:22; Rom. 8:10-11), Christ (2 Tim. 4:22; Gal. 6:18), and the Spirit (Rom. 8:16) and is, therefore, a spirit that is mingled with the Triune God. For Christ, the embodiment of the Triune God (Col. 2:9; 1:19), to be reproduced in man through the process of deification, the spirit of redeemed man must be indwelt by Him.

While Christ dwells in the spirit of a regenerated believer, the spirit alone is not His final residence in man. As the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:6), Christ is operating to spread from man's spirit into his mind, emotion, and will—the faculties of his soul. A believer can have the mind of Christ because Christ's mind—a faculty of His divinely enriched and glorified humanity—has penetrated the mind of man through an organic process that is initiated in man's spirit through regeneration. In fact, in Paul's view the mingled spirit so saturates the mind of a believer in the process of renewal and transformation that the spirit is said to become the spirit of his mind (Eph. 4:23). The transformation of the mind is the springboard from which the Spirit renews and transforms man's soul in its entirety (Rom. 12:2). Thus, as the Spirit of Jesus Christ progressively pervades man's mind, emotion, and will, man spontaneously thinks, feels, and chooses according to Christ Himself. This is not imitation but a process that reproduces Christ in the believers so that they can become the enlarged expression of God in Christ through the dynamic operation and transforming power of His divine life. They are, as Christ Himself is, the mystery of godliness—God manifested in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16). Regrettably, "Theosis" does not reach the standard of the revelation given to Paul, in part because it suffers from a deficient view of the parts of man and the full salvation of God to make man the reproduction of Christ in spirit, in soul, and, ultimately, in body.

"Theosis" opens with a well-reasoned and convincing defense of Paul's conception of the resurrected body in

1 Corinthians 15. "Theosis" asserts that what "theologically constitutes divinization" is "Paul's articulation of a spiritual and glorious body" (68). Understanding divinization merely as a believer receiving a "spiritual and glorious body," however, understates the process of divinization. The glorification of man's body is but the consummation of a life-long process in which man's entire tripartite being has been saturated with the divine life and glory (Phil. 3:21). Christ was the first human being to pass through this process (Rom. 1:3-4), and as the firstborn Son of God, He leads His many brothers along the same path for their conformation to His image and their participation in His glory (8:29; Heb. 2:10-11; 2 Thes. 1:10). The believers become, therefore, the mass reproduction of Christ the prototype. Although "Theosis" rightly sees the glorification of the body as the end result of conformation, it does not accurately convey the process of conformation in its entirety.

"Theosis" describes conformation to the image of the Son of God as a "reorientation from fleshly living to spiritual living" that "involves a moral and spiritual reshaping, a strengthening of character...and a change of status before the Lord," all of which "is accomplished by the Spirit" (72). "Theosis" correctly cites death and resurrection as the means by which conformation is accomplished, but the conformation advocated here depends on human effort to "put to death the practices of the body" (Rom. 8:13) by "concrete ascetic practice" in anticipation of the coming resurrection of the dead (72). Regrettably, by turning toward asceticism and delaying the experience of resurrection to the day when the believers will be physically resurrected from the dead,² "Theosis" negates the Spirit's function to apply to the believers the effectiveness of Christ's death by the power of His resurrection today (Phil. 1:19; 3:10). Thus, the organic process of death and resurrection is experientially nullified (Rom. 6:5-6). Under this influence, conformation is reduced to self-improvement.

The consequence of not seeing man's tripartite nature and the operation of the life-giving Spirit to saturate man's spirit, soul, and body again comes to the fore in the article's treatment of conformation in Romans 8. "Theosis" states that there are twenty-one instances in which the Spirit as the third of the Trinity is mentioned in Romans 8 (72), but eight of those instances more accurately refer to the human spirit (vv. 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, two instances in v. 15, and v. 16). It is at times almost impossible to distinguish between the references to the divine Spirit and the regenerated human spirit in Romans 8 because the two are so thoroughly joined that they are "one spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17). Whereas "Theosis" sees a "severance from the life of the flesh" in Romans 8:6 and 10 and a putting to death of the practices of the body through ascetic exercise in verse 13 (72), Paul's vision is focused on the operation of the deifying Spirit, who saturates man's tripartite being with the divine life. The apostle writes that the human spirit of a

regenerated believer is life (v. 10), the mind set on the regenerated spirit is life (v. 6), and man's mortal body is given life through the indwelling Spirit (v. 11). This is the operation of the law of the Spirit of life (v. 2), which functions innately to shape man to the image of Christ unto glory (vv. 29-30). Through the process of deification man becomes the same as Christ in all three parts of his being, and as a consequence of man's deification, the creation will be "freed from the slavery of corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (v. 21).

"Theosis" concludes with a short paragraph that actually embodies the crux of the entire article. Finlan writes,

Note, however, that the believer does not *become* Christ. This is where Paul's viewpoint is to be distinguished from a Gnostic one such as that in *Corpus Hermeticum*, where the mystic blends identities with a god. Becoming Christified does not mean becoming Christ, but rather Christlike in substance and character. (79)

When considering what is a proper understanding of theosis, we should not fear any spurious, pagan notions of deification or even be overly concerned that they will be improperly associated with the truth of deification revealed in the Bible. There is no hint in the Bible that the believers in Christ become personally, or hypostatically, Christ. As His enlargement, the believers become Christ in kind, not in person, and are, therefore, "the race of God" (Paul as recorded by Luke, Acts 17:29). While He as God possesses attributes that can be and are communicated to man through the Spirit, the Godhead is unique and remains incommunicable. He is the Creator and alone is worthy of worship; we are ever His creatures and for eternity will worship Him. For man to become the reproduction of Christ does not pose a risk to the Godhead or to Christ's place in it; rather, Christ's position in the Godhead is preserved in His unique status as the only begotten Son, whereas as the Firstborn He is enlarged in His many brothers to give full, corporate expression to the Godhead, whom He embodies (Col. 2:9; 1:19). Even if we initially recoil at the thought that the believers become Christ in life and nature, we must remember that Paul himself gives the ground for this proclamation, for he designates the Body of Christ as "the Christ" and "the fullness of the One who fills all in all" (1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 1:23).

The premise of "Theosis"—to discover deification as the goal of salvation in Paul—is noble indeed, but the exposition offered fails to communicate the truth of deification as Paul understood it. At times "Theosis" presents what appears to be a proper conception of deification, and there is a temptation to afford it more credit than is due. It is certainly correct that "mere acquittal would not empower people to *become the righteousness of God*" (75), but being empowered to become the righteousness of God

is to become Christ, the righteousness of God (1 Cor. 1:30), by Christ, the power of God (v. 24). Without a doubt, we can speak of theosis in Paul, but it is a theosis by which man becomes the reproduction of Christ and not merely Christlike.

by Tony Espinosa

Notes

¹While Finlan does not use the word *imitation* in this article, he nonetheless advances the idea that deification equals imitation. The notion of imitation is more explicitly and succinctly stated in Finlan's introduction, co-written with Vladimir Kharlamov, to *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*:

In Christian theology, *theōsis* refers to the transformation of believers into the likeness of God. Of course, Christian monotheism goes against any literal "god making" of believers. Rather, the NT speaks of a transformation of mind, a metamorphosis of character, a redefinition of selfhood, and an imitation of God. (1)

²Coining the term "anastiform" from *anastasis*, the Greek word for resurrection, "Theosis" associates deification with an "anastiform" experience, both in this life and the next" (74). He continues,

It proves to be impossible, therefore, to discuss *theosis* in Paul...without spelling out the believer's necessary participation in the Savior's cruciform life so that one may also share in his *anastiform* living. Since the *anastiform* benefits begin already in this lifetime, an exclusive focus on sin and deliverance would suppress a crucial aspect of Paul's teaching: gaining an ability to discern the will of God, and being transformed into Christlikeness, which can truly be called *theosis*. Thus, *theosis* in Paul always involves both cruciform and *anastiform* living, but points to a thoroughly *anastiform* destiny, when the believer will "be with Christ" (Phil. 1:23). (78)

The "*anastiform* benefits" to which "Theosis" refers here are the ability to discern God's will and progression toward "Christlikeness" (78). These are treated as issues of the ascetic practice by which the believers purportedly experience death to their "sinful sensuality" (73). I consider, then, that Finlan delays the experience of resurrection to the time when the believers will be physically resurrected from the dead, since the "*anastiform* benefits" hoped for in this lifetime cannot be said to be the genuine experience of resurrection life in the believers' living today.

Works Cited

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