

## Affirming Theosis in Romans

“Romans: The First Christian Treatise on Theosis,” by Michael J. Gorman, *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 5.1 (Spring 2011): 13-34.

Michael J. Gorman, Dean of the Ecumenical Institute of Theology at St. Mary’s Seminary and University in Baltimore, has contributed a significant article to the *Journal of Theological Interpretation* that advances the current scholarly discussion of theosis, or deification.<sup>1</sup> “Romans: The First Christian Treatise on Theosis” (hereafter “First”) offers “a rereading of Romans from the perspective of theosis” and posits that “reading Paul with the question of theosis in mind will transcend, and perhaps even break down, certain categories” of interpretation common to the study of Romans (20). While much of the terminology that “First” employs to describe the process of divinization will be familiar to students of theosis, there is a freshness of insight in Gorman’s exposition that is worthy of affirmation. Moreover, “First” makes significant gains by locating the goal of theosis in the restoration of righteousness and glory in the living of a corporate deified people and by not limiting its focus only to the divinization of the individual believer. By highlighting this corporate aspect of deification in Romans, “First” signals progress in a conversation that is sure to enjoy continued interest among theologians in the West.

Nonetheless, some crucial issues in Romans that bear directly on the theme of theosis, both as it relates to the individual and the community, are notably absent from “First.” Thus, while there is much to affirm in the article, these additional issues in Romans must be considered for the understanding of Pauline theosis to advance further.

### “First”: an Overview

Following a short abstract, “First” situates itself in the conversation on theosis by establishing a kinship between notable ancient and modern voices on the subject.

“Christ became what we are—’*adam*—in order that we might share in what he is—namely the true image of God.” Christ “became like human beings, so that we would be like him.” “Christ becomes what we are, that we through his death may become what he is.” These three quotations do not come from the Church Fathers Irenaeus or Athanasius, nor are they modern statements of the

Eastern Christian doctrine of salvation. Rather, each one is a summary of Paul’s soteriology from three great interpreters of Paul: Morna Hooker, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Wilhelm Wrede, respectively. The quotation from Morna Hooker is specifically her summary of Rom 5—8. The heart of Romans, in other words, is about what the Eastern church (especially) calls theosis. Additionally, in *The Deliverance of God*, largely a study of Romans, Douglas Campbell implies on two occasions that “theosis” may well describe Paul’s soteriology. (13-14)

By tapping into these authoritative sources, “First” positions itself to present its own thesis, with the assertion that its argument “extends the work of Wrede, Bonhoeffer, Hooker, and Campbell...plus that of Ann Jervis,” and to treat Romans itself as a further development of theotic themes in 2 Corinthians (15).

In this essay, I will argue that Romans is the first Christian treatise on theosis, a theological extension of the embryonic theotic, or transformational, themes of justification and glorification found in 2 Corinthians. The subject of Romans is *sōtēria*: God’s restoration of righteousness and glory to unrighteous and glory-less humanity. Paul’s soteriology of human *dikaiosynē* and *doxa* means participation in the divine *dikaiosynē* and *doxa* by participation in the death and resurrection of the Messiah Jesus, God’s righteous and now glorified Son. Paul offers this interpretation of *sōtēria* explicitly as the fulfillment of Israel’s hope for *sōtēria*, *dikaiosynē*, and *doxa*, extended now to the Gentiles, and, at least implicitly, as the true gospel of God in contrast to the pseudo-gospel of Rome’s *sōtēria*, *dikaiosynē*, and *doxa*. (15)

The main section of the article offers a sequential rereading of Romans as a treatise on theosis. The presentation is arranged under general headings: “The Human Condition: Lacking Righteousness and Glory (Romans 1:18—3:20),” “The Divine Solution: The Gifts of Righteousness and Glory (Romans 3:21—8:39),” “Faith and Participation (3:21—4:25),” “The Present and Future of Theosis (5:1—8:39),” “Righteousness and Glory for Israel (Romans 9—11),” and “Communities of Righteousness and Glory: Spirit-Enabled Christlike Godlikeness (Romans 12—15).”

### Theosis as Participation and Process: an Affirmation and a Word of Balance

“First” defines theosis as “becoming like God by participating

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in the life of God,' with the caveat that the term and the reality it describes always maintain the creature-Creator distinction, even when a phrase like 'becoming gods' is used to describe theosis" (17). The distinction is crucial because it preserves the uniqueness and inviolability of the Godhead while yet recognizing that creatures can by some means participate in the life of God the Creator. Further, "First" rightly recognizes that through the process of theosis, human beings take on certain divine attributes, including righteousness, holiness, and immortality (18, 22). These are generally considered communicable attributes of God, and the article's identification of these attributes as applying to humanity through the process of theosis is worthy of affirmation.

A particularly strong suit of "First" is its scripturally founded presentation of participation from various angles, which can be regarded as the crux of the article's exploration of theosis in Romans. In the process of deification, believers participate in the divine righteousness and glory (15), the death and resurrection of Christ (15, 25), Christ (23), the divine glory (25), the life of the Spirit (26), and the life of the Triune God (30). Participation, therefore, involves the entire Divine Trinity. But equally striking is the proposition that justification itself is in fact participatory.

Early in its rereading of Romans, "First" makes a thinly veiled reference to the insufficiency of Reformed theology's insistence on a purely forensic view of justification and suggests a more experiential, participatory understanding in which the believer becomes the righteousness of God in Christ (2 Cor. 5:21).

In such a situation [as that described in Romans 1:18—3:20], humans do not need merely a word of forgiveness with the chance for a new start, much less a legal fiction; they need a means of undoing the exchange, a means of becoming the righteousness of God that God intended, a means of attaining the glory they lack. Paul, of course, believes that this happens in Christ. The West's fixation on sin and guilt has sometimes hampered us from seeing how central to Paul's anthropology and soteriology are the themes of glory, life, and immortality—both their absence in Adam and their restored presence in Christ. (22)

Particularly compelling is the article's brief commentary on Paul's inclusion of Abraham as the example of justification. The relationship between justification by faith as participation in Christ's death and resurrection and its inseparability from eternal life and glory is remarkable.

Abraham serves as an exemplum of Paul's unique participatory understanding of justification by faith as co-crucifixion and co-resurrection with Christ...That he was *justified* by faith means not that he was fictitiously considered just or righteous but that he was granted the

gracious gift of new life out of death, which was concretely fulfilled in the birth of a descendant...In retrospect, from Paul's own position of having died and been resurrected in Christ, Abraham's experience is prospectively analogous to what Paul says about all baptized believers in Rom 6: their justification by faith means a participatory experience of resurrection out of death. Thus, Abraham's righteousness and his eternal life—his glory, so to speak—are inseparable. (23-24)

Justification, then, is experiential for the believer because it is through an actual participation in the death and resurrection of Christ that the believer is made righteous and not merely declared righteous. It is with admirable clarity and conviction that "First" enunciates this fact.

The heart of the rereading of Romans appropriately concentrates on the heart of Romans itself, that is, chapters 5 through 8. The theme of theosis as participation and process is most pronounced in the exposition of these chapters. Citing Campbell's *The Deliverance of God* with approval, "First" states that "the material content of Rom 5—8 is transformation or sanctification or 'ontological reconstitution' and that it is not supplemental to the gospel or to justification but constitutive of them" (24). In other words, "First" rightly suggests that the process of theosis effects change in the believers at an ontological level. Thus, a richer gospel, which embodies Paul's understanding of justification as participation, is affirmed.

"First" astutely defines the "continuous process" of theosis as having both temporal and eschatological dimensions (18), "the present and future dimensions of salvation" (26). For "First" it is now, in time, that believers in Christ begin to share in the righteousness of God "and even begin the process of sharing in God's glory" (23).

This is because God's righteousness and glory are found in Christ, and those who are in Christ are being transformed (12:1-2) and conformed into the image of Christ (8:29; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18), who is the true image of God (2 Cor. 4:4), both as divine Son and as last and true Adam. (23)

By identifying in Romans the stages of man's deification, "First" points to a development in the believer that has as its base an actual and dynamic participation in Christ Himself.

### *A Word of Balance*

While "First" rightly sees theosis as a process that has both a temporal inception and an eschatological consummation, it is nonetheless regrettable that the article appears to equate mere acts of obedience, faithfulness, and righteousness with participation in Christ's death and resurrection. Consequently, transformation and conformation are

treated as stages in what seems to amount to an ethical metamorphosis rather than an actual renewing and uplifting of the human nature by the addition of the divine life with the holy nature of God. Interestingly, “First” also treats “present newness of life” as distinct from “future eternal life,” even though they are affirmed to be “two dimensions of one participatory soteriological reality, theosis” (25). It seems, then, that “First” regards eternal<sup>2</sup> life as the issue of having lived in a present state of newness of life, or a life of ethical normality. Such a living is purported to be according to “the narrative pattern of Christ” so that “Christlikeness now—faithful obedience even to the point of suffering and death—becomes Christlikeness later—glory” (27). In one sense, the principle is not wrong, because the believers are indeed following in Christ’s footsteps to be made like Him in all things. However, the believers cannot be made such by mere ethical living, even Spirit-assisted living, but by another life, that is, the divine, eternal, uncreated, indwelling life of the Triune God that has the power to transform fallen sinners into deified sons of God. This life is none other than Christ Himself (John 1:4; Col. 3:4; 1 John 5:11-12), and the living out of this life is the living of Christ in redeemed humanity. The propositions in “First” could have been strengthened by more developed definitions of the divine life and its operation in regenerate man, for a fuller understanding of these matters brings the process of theosis into sharper focus.

### The Communal Goal of Theosis: an Affirmation and a Critique

“First” broadens the discussion of theosis by speaking of the corporate aspect of deification in Romans 12—15. Rightly stating that “Paul will not allow us to interpret the experience of this divine life individualistically” (32), “First” touches on an underappreciated aspect of the goal of the apostle’s soteriology.

But that term [*Christosis*], though accurate, is insufficient. Paul avers that God’s eternal plan is to create a family of siblings who resemble the firstborn and definitive Son, namely, Jesus. What Paul does not state explicitly is the obvious: that the Son is like the Father and that the siblings will ultimately be like the Father because they are like the Son. Christosis, therefore, is ultimately theosis. (27)

Of particular note is the article’s genuine insight that for Paul theosis “is corporate, or communal, because it is by common incorporation into Christ” (19). Thus, it is by inclusion in Christ that believers are deified to become what Christ is and to glorify God by living in self-giving harmony in communities of restored righteousness and glory.

But in its treatment of the corporate aspect of deification, “First” evinces a disappointing neglect of Paul’s emphasis

on the organic relatedness of the Body of Christ and instead stresses right ethical relations between the believers, God, and creation. It is these harmonious relationships that “First” sees as “the purpose God intended” (20). “That purpose can be described, implicitly, as harmony and proper relations between humanity and God, within humanity itself, and between humanity and the rest of creation” (20). While the notion of right relationships is not wrong, those relationships have as their basis the divine life by which the members of the Body of Christ are organically united to one another and to Christ, the Head of the Body (Rom. 12:4-5; Eph. 1:22-23). The issue of this organic relatedness is not merely to “practice humility in the service of unity” (31) but even more for the believers to live in the essential oneness of the Divine Trinity and to manifest in their living the very Christ who indwells them.

The purpose of God’s salvation is to have Christ reproduced in millions of saints that they may become the members of His Body, not separate and complete individual

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units but parts of a living, functioning, coordinated, corporate whole. Although these parts have different functions, they are not detached from one another. Rather, they are “individually members one of another.” Each member is organically joined to all the others, and each needs the function of all the others. All the members must be coordinated together to practice the Body life that is revealed in this chapter. (Recovery Version, Rom. 12:5, note 2)

The communal aspect of theosis is for redeemed, regenerated human beings to become the enlargement of Christ as the corporate expression of God. This expression is organic by nature and, therefore, depends on the operation and growth of the divine life in the members of Christ’s indivisible Body. To identify proper relationships as the goal of deification is to risk emphasizing mere human ethics over the living out of the indwelling Christ.

### *“Roman House Churches” or the Local Church in Rome?*

As the expression of the one God, the church as the Body

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of Christ is one and cannot be divided. In order to preserve the oneness of the Body of Christ in its expression on earth, the New Testament indicates that there is to be one church in one city, as it was with the church in Rome. “First,” however, assumes that the gatherings of believers referred to in Romans were different “Roman house churches” within the city of Rome (30). Therefore, “First” mishandles the New Testament principle concerning the practical expression of the church and handicaps its progress by unintentionally making room for division.

While “First” nicely points out that Paul wanted “the Roman communities in Christ to become the antithesis of Adamic humanity depicted in chs. 1–3” (30), it fails to recognize that those “communities” were not individual churches but constituents of the one church in the city of Rome. Interestingly, chapter 16 of Romans is not addressed in “First,” but evidence of the one church in Rome versus different “house churches” can be found there. In verse 5 Paul refers to the church in the house of Prisca and Aquila, but the “communities” in the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus are not referred to as churches (vv. 10-11). In other words, while the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus believed in the Lord, there was only one church in Rome, which practically met in the home of Prisca and Aquila and of which all the believers in Rome, including those in the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus, were members. Similarly, there was only one church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), although the saints met in different houses, or homes, in Jerusalem (2:46). As there is one Head, so there is one Body, one church. To preserve the unique oneness of the church in its manifestation on earth, God has ordained that there be one church in one city and that all the churches meeting in oneness on the ground of locality would be in fellowship with one another, apart from division. To sanction the presence of many “house churches” in one locality, as opposed to having meetings of the church in various homes, is to invite division. Despite its admirable application of theosis to the living of the believers as a corporate entity, “First” regrettably misses these crucial points.<sup>3</sup>

### Theosis in Romans: Further Considerations

In the limited space of a journal article, “First” accomplishes much in its exploration of theosis in Romans, but key elements that shed greater light on theosis in Paul’s Epistle are also worthy of further consideration.

Romans 1:3-4 indicates that Jesus Christ was the first human being to pass through the process of theosis, and through that process He was made the prototype (“the Firstborn”—8:29), according to which His “many brothers” are His mass reproduction. There was no need for Christ to pass through the process of deification in His divinity, in which He is God eternally, but His humanity

needed to be deified and uplifted into the divine sonship. It was through the deification of His humanity that Christ “was designated the Son of God” (1:4), and the believers in Christ are led through the same process to be made mature sons of God, reproductions of Christ the Firstborn. By virtue of His eternal deity, Christ retains His unique status as Son of God in the Godhead without compromise (the creature-Creator distinction remains eternally), but as a glorified God-man He has brought humanity into divinity and has led the way for His believers to follow Him into glory through their deification (Heb. 2:10-11).

Romans also gives witness to the tripartite nature of man and the work of the Divine Trinity to saturate man’s tripartite being with Christ as the divine life. Chapter 8 speaks of man’s human spirit being life (v. 10); the mind, the leading part of man’s soul, being life (v. 6); and man’s body being given life by the indwelling Spirit (v. 11).

This chapter unveils to us how the Triune God—the Father (v. 15), the Son (vv. 3, 29, 32), and the Spirit (vv. 9, 11, 13-14, 16, 23, 26)—dispenses Himself as life (vv. 2, 6, 10, 11) into us, the tripartite men—spirit, soul, and body—to make us His sons (vv. 14-15, 19, 23, 29, 17) for the constituting of the Body of Christ (12:4-5). (Recovery Version, 8:9, note 1)

When theosis is understood in the context of the dispensing of the divine life into the believers, the emphasis on the tripartite nature of humanity in Romans comes into focus. Finally, Romans testifies that the experience of Christ’s death and resurrection can be applied only by the Spirit, not by self-effort, because the elements of Christ’s death and resurrection have been compounded into the Spirit, thus making Christ’s experiences effective in the believers. It is “by the Spirit” that the believers “put to death the practices of the body” (v. 13), and it is by “the Spirit of the One who raised Christ Jesus from the dead” that the believers experience the resurrection life and, thus, the reality of resurrection (v. 11). It is through regeneration that the Spirit has enlivened man and enables him to live again the life that Jesus lived on the earth in His divinely enriched humanity. A consideration of theosis in Romans, therefore, should account for the role of the Spirit to impart the divine life to the believers to transform and conform them to the image of Christ, the Firstborn, in order to produce the Body as the increase and enlargement of Christ expressed practically on earth in local churches.

### Conclusion

Despite its neglect of key issues in Romans, “First” has much valuable insight that contributes to the current discussion of theosis as a viable topic of theological inquiry



and serious contemplation. That “First” recognizes theosis as the predominant theme in Romans, both at the individual and corporate levels, is encouraging and bodes well for future examinations of theosis in Romans and in the entire New Testament. May the discussion of theosis continue to advance until we meet our Lord in glory.

by Tony Espinosa

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In this review the terms *theosis*, *deification*, and *divinization* are used interchangeably, as they are in “First.” Gorman writes in footnote 14,

I am not here distinguishing, as some do, between theosis and divinization or deification. Nor am I suggesting that we need to define these terms in precisely the same way that particular theologians and spiritual writers, past or present, have done. Instead, I am starting with a rather generic understanding of theosis and will then demonstrate its specifically Pauline formulation. (17)

<sup>2</sup>“Eternal life” in “First” seems to be synonymous with everlasting life. However, the quality of being everlasting is more properly an attribute of the eternal life. Eternal life is the life of God, even the God of life, and its attributes include indissolubility, immutability, eternal newness, etc. Through regeneration the believers receive the eternal life of God and, therefore, the attributes of that life. Therefore, the distinction between “newness of life” and “eternal life” as present and future realities, albeit a part of one process, seems overstated.

<sup>3</sup>For a thorough discussion of the difference between “house churches” and the God-ordained pattern of one church in one city, see chapter 2, “The Church in the City and the Church in the House,” in Watchman Nee’s *Further Talks on the Church Life*, published by Living Stream Ministry, 1997.

## Works Cited

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## A Less Than Vivid Understanding of Deification

“Deification in Jesus’ Teaching,” by Stephen Finlan. *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, Vol. 2. Ed. Vladimir Kharlamov. Eugene: Pickwick, 2011. 21-41.

In “Deification in Jesus’ Teaching” (hereafter “Deification”), Stephen Finlan, a teacher at Salve Regina University, examines the theme of deification in “the traditions of the sayings of Jesus” (21). Identifying three

portions of the Gospels as “particularly vivid deification passages” (21)—Luke 17:21, Matthew 5:48, and John 10:34-36—“Deification” analyzes each portion, pointing out that the “Luke text indicates an indwelling divine potential; the Matthew text suggests continuous transformation into God-likeness; the John text seems to intend the divinization of believers” (21). However, the article does not present a clear definition of deification. Instead, it leaves the task of unraveling its understanding of deification to the reader. Although “Deification” has a notable goal, its analysis of two of the selected portions of Scripture presents a concept of deification—natural human perfection—that is only cloaked in deification vocabulary. Its selection of “vivid” deification passages also overlooks crucial texts in the Gospels regarding deification.

## The Kingdom of God—Jesus Christ

After a brief introduction, “Deification” analyzes the first passage, Luke 17:21, which says, “The kingdom of God is

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within you” (NIV, KJV, ASV, TEV, NRSV margin). “Deification” suggests that—when ἐντός is properly translated as “within”—the verse shows that “people have the inward or spiritual capacity to experience God’s kingdom” (24). What is “stunning” about Luke 17:21 is that “Jesus says the kingdom is *already resident* within people. It may not yet be *realized*, but it is ‘within’ you” (24). “Deification” supports this thought with an appeal to the Old Testament, saying,

The notion of an indwelling divinity, or at least a capacity for individual perception of divinity, is not alien to the OT, either. “The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord, searching every inmost part” (Prov 20:27). “Truly it is the spirit in a mortal, the breath of the Almighty, that makes for understanding” (Job 32:8)...These theological points suggest an anthropological one: “There is something divine in man, or he could know nothing of God.” The notion that people have God-receptive capacities or spiritual faculties, often called “natural theology,” is a time-honored thread in Christian thought, though often attacked. (26-27)

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Even if a reader accepts the interpretation of “within” in Luke 17:21 that is presented in “Deification,” the most that can be said is that this verse points to the potential for deification within humanity, a potential that is better reflected in the truth of humanity’s creation in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). But even as understood by “Deification,” Luke 17:21 is silent as to how deification is actualized in the life of redeemed believers, and thus, its status as a deification passage is limited at best. The limited applicability of this verse to the truth of deification, perhaps, is best illustrated by the fact that “Deification” is unable to draw a clear connection between the potential for deification within God-created humanity and the actualization of deification in God-redeemed humanity. The closest it comes is to suggest that inward realization of the kingdom “would logically mean that people should look for evidence of God’s activity within their minds, their values, and their religious experience” (25). If deification is associated with a divine potential within humanity, and deification is equated only with “God’s activity,” then “Deification” adds precious little substance to a deeper understanding of the teaching of theosis.

Regarding the point that the kingdom is “already resident” (24) within people but not yet realized, “Deification” forces an understanding of Luke 17:21 that is outside the scriptural revelation. According to John 3:3 and 6, the unique entrance into the kingdom of God is the regeneration of the human spirit by the divine Spirit, that is, to be born again. While humanity does possess the potential for deification, based on God’s creation of humanity in His image and likeness, only redeemed humanity can experience the actualization of this potential, based on Christ’s redemption and the Spirit’s indwelling. There is no “resident” kingdom in an unregenerated person.

An alternative rendition of Luke 17:21 is, “The kingdom of God is in the midst of you.” “Deification” criticizes this translation because it deems the translation as an attempt to socialize the kingdom. This criticism may also be attributed to the fact that “Deification” considers that the kingdom has only two aspects: spiritual and material. However, in addition to these two aspects of the kingdom, the Bible reveals that the kingdom also has a personal aspect; that is, the kingdom of God is a person—Jesus Christ. This fact is strongly indicated in Luke 17:21-24, which says,

Nor will they say, Behold, here it is! or, There! For behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you. And He said to the disciples, the days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, Behold, there! Behold, here! Do not go away, nor run after them. For just as lightning flashing from one end of heaven shines to the other end of heaven, so will the Son of Man be in His day.

A note in the Recovery Version on the word *kingdom* in Luke 17:21 says:

Verses 22-24 prove that the kingdom of God is the Savior Himself, who was among the Pharisees when He was questioned by them. Wherever the Savior is, there the kingdom of God is. The kingdom of God is with Him, and He brings it to His disciples (v. 22). He is the seed of the kingdom of God to be sown into God’s chosen people to develop into God’s ruling realm...Since His resurrection He has been within His believers (John 14:20; Rom. 8:10). Hence, the kingdom of God is within the church today (Rom. 14:17). (Note 1)

“Deification” recognizes that “the kingdom is not separable from Christ” (27), predicated on Christ being the Revealer and the Bringer of the kingdom, yet it never makes the connection that the kingdom of God is Christ Himself. This thought exists not only in Luke 17 but also in Mark 9:1-13 (cf. Matt. 16:28). In its argument related to “inwardness” (25), while “Deification” sees a vague connection between the human spirit in Proverbs 20:27 and the “notion of an indwelling divinity” (26), it does not offer a clear picture as to the purpose of the human spirit, sometimes equating it with “indwelling divinity” and sometimes as merely a capacity for the perception of divinity (26). The regenerated human spirit—the divine Spirit mingled with the human spirit—is the key to deification (1 Cor. 6:17; Rom. 8:9-10, 16, 6, 14, 11, 17). However, the unregenerated human spirit should never be equated with “indwelling divinity.”

### The Divine Life Being the Basis of Deification

In its consideration of Matthew 5:48, “Deification” relies upon a translation that reads, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (NRSV). “Deification” states that “‘be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matt. 5:48) is a command to take on the divine character,” and it considers that this command “may be a goal that is never fully reached, a goal that perennially draws us on—in which case, ‘be perfect’ would signify ‘be ever-perfecting’” (27). This view of perfection, however, does not match the Lord’s speaking in the New Testament.

“Deification” states that the Lord’s command for perfection indicates the necessity of “human transformation, a profound correcting of that which is imperfect” (27), which hints at deification. In order to reinforce this view, “Deification” considers the context of Matthew 5:48 and the tense of the Greek verb *ἕσθθθ*. Regarding the context, it says,

If we look at the *larger* context, perfection seems to refer to *these* values of trust in God and kindness toward all,

while the *immediate* context narrows this down to the ethics of nonviolence and love, even of enemies. Both of these are consistent with the emphasis on honesty and good works that one finds throughout the Gospel of Matthew. (29)

Regarding the tense of ἔσεσθε, “Deification” explains that ἔσεσθε, a future indicative, is intended to function as a present imperative in 5:48 like all the main verbs in verses 39 through 42. It compares 5:48 to the commandments in Leviticus 11:44-45 and 19:2, stating that perfection according to the context in Matthew suggests the ethical implications of maturity (29), that Matthew 5 implies “the perfecting of behavior, character, and faithfulness” (31), and that “Matthew is the exception in saying sonship with God is achievable through selfless love (Matt. 5:41-45)” (33).

In its analysis of the Lord’s declaration in Matthew 5:48, “Deification” describes a perfection that is obtained through works by the natural human life rather than the perfection that issues from the development and maturity of the divine life that has been imparted into the believers through the Spirit. This position forces “Deification” to suggest that “be perfect” signifies “be ever-perfecting” since perfection “may be a goal that is never fully reached” (27). Admittedly, if a person were to seek perfection in and of himself in the natural life, he would never be able to attain it; even if he could, such perfection would not satisfy God. Prior to the fall, Adam was a perfect man, yet God intended that he would eat of the tree of life—signifying God embodied to become life to man. God’s intention clearly is beyond the concept of natural human perfection presented by “Deification.”

The Lord’s speaking in verse 48 points to a source beyond the natural human life—the divine life—and a perfection beyond what natural human life can achieve. The fact that the Father in verse 48 is referred to as “your heavenly Father” indicates that those who are to be perfect possess the divine life and nature of the Father. Hence, the perfection that the Lord speaks of is the issue of the divine life.

### Levels of Divinity

The third deification passage examined is John 10:34-36, which says, “Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, You are gods’? If He said they were gods, to whom the word of God came, and the Scripture cannot be broken, do you say of Him whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world, You are blaspheming, because I said, I am the Son of God?” “Deification” points out that in response to the disbelieving Jews, the Lord was making “a lesser-to-greater argument” (32); that is, if those to whom the word of God came could be called

gods, how much more could He who was sanctified and sent by God be called the Son of God? Since the One sent to be the Revealer is divine, it argues that those who receive revelation can also be called divine. According to “Deification,” this distinction points to “different levels of divinity” (32). There is insufficient elaboration on this concept, other than to say that “the people who listen to the Son may also be called *elohim*” (33). In other words, “The Revealer is already divine, while the people receiving revelation are *divinized*, transformed” (33).

In the next portion of the article, entitled “Divinization and the Sonship of Believers,” “Deification” states that even though most New Testament authors speak of sonship as a new status, “in John, sonship is not just a status, but a ‘power,’” quoting John 1:12, and declares, “Faith has transformed believers into children of God, and this was God’s doing (John 1:13). The same teaching is probably implicit in John 10:34” (33). This statement reveals, at the least, a lack of understanding regarding the divine sonship.

*“Deification” is unable to draw a clear connection between the potential for deification within God-created humanity and the actualization of deification in God-redeemed humanity.*

Faith makes unbelievers children of God by the impartation of the divine life; then these children can grow to become mature sons of God who may then be glorified with Christ as heirs to rule and reign with Him in the coming kingdom age (Gal. 3:11; Rom. 1:17; 8:14-17). In this sense, deification can be rightly understood as a process of life that begins with regeneration and concludes with the believers becoming the same as Christ in life, nature, expression, and function, but not in the Godhead (1 John 5:11-12; 2 Pet. 1:4; 1 John 3:2; John 14:12).

“Deification” cursorily examines the Gospel of Mark, pointing out that “there is no single theosis passage in Mark that compares with the three from the other Gospels, but there are many passages in Mark that support the possibility of a theosis-teaching” (36), such as the stories of healing where contact with Jesus brought about a change in people’s lives. “Deification” lastly examines portions of Gnostic texts that speak regarding the kingdom within, but concludes that the Gnostic texts have less inwardness than Luke 17. It concludes that the Lord’s teachings are central to the concept of deification, which

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other New Testament writers then followed. While this latter statement is certainly true, the article's analysis of these three "vivid" passages is quite dim and not particularly supportive of the important truth. As such, "Deification" presents a weak defense of the truth of theosis, making it easy for detractors of this teaching to reject its analysis. "Deification" is only partially successful in making an argument for the divinization of the believers in John 10. However, its misinterpretation of Luke 17:21, superficial view of Matthew 5:48, and lack of understanding related to the divine sonship not only diminish the significance of its argument but also show that its concept of deification falls short of the biblical revelation.

### Some Missing "Vivid Deification Passages in the Gospels"

In its selection of "vivid deification passages," "Deification" ultimately misses or overlooks several crucial portions in the Gospels that speak of the matter of deification, portions that are not easy to ignore as deification passages.

Luke 1:31-32 and 6:35 reveal the matter of deification. In Luke 1 an angel speaking to Mary concerning the Lord's conception says, "You shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High" (vv. 31-32). Then the Lord in chapter 6, when teaching His disciples the highest standard of morality, says, "You will be sons of the Most High" (v. 35). These verses speak of the divinization of the humanity of Jesus and also of the divinization of the humanity of the redeemed sons of God.

Regarding the Gospel of John, "Deification" says that "no single passage in John affirms divinization to the same degree as 10:34-36, but a series of later passages can be seen to suggest, or at least *allow*, divinization" (34), as summarized in the following manner: "those who received revelation in the past could be called *elohim*" (10:34-36); "those who receive revelation from [the Lord] will do greater works than [He]" (14:3, 12); "they will have the Spirit of Truth and will be guided into all truth" (v. 17; 16:13); "they will receive spiritual things for which they ask, will receive God's and Jesus' glory, and will have spiritual unity" (v. 23; 17:21-22). Thus, the analysis of John 10:34-36 in "Deification" involves only a superficial examination of the Gospel of John.

A central, profound, and certainly more vivid passage is John 17:21-23, which says, "That they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us...And the glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, even as We are one; I in them, and You in Me." Regarding these verses, "Deification" says only that those who receive revelation from God will receive God's and Jesus' glory and will have

spiritual unity, as though glory and "spiritual unity" are items apart from God Himself. However, the crucial point in these verses is not merely that the believers will have "spiritual unity" but that the believers will not only be one with the Triune God but will also be one with Him and with one another in the same way that He is one with Himself. There can be no oneness between the Triune God and the believers that does not reflect the oneness inherent in the Triune God Himself. This "even as" oneness presupposes and is predicated upon the deification of the believers. Deification means that redeemed humanity becomes God in life, nature, expression, and function but not in the Godhead. Deification is not mere human perfection; neither is it something that can be obtained by fallen humanity apart from receiving the divine life based on the redemption of Christ. Deification involves God in Christ as the Spirit of life saturating a believer's tripartite being so that he matches God in every way except for His Godhead.

by Joel Oladele

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### A Shallow Portrayal of a Most Glorious Inheritance

*Heaven Revealed: What Is It Like? What Will We Do?...and 11 Other Things You've Wondered About*, by Paul Enns. Chicago: Moody, 2011.

Recent years have witnessed a proliferation of popular material on the end times and heaven as the eternal destination of the believers. The more biblical considerations of writers like Erwin Lutzer and John MacArthur, the Christian fiction of Tim LaHaye, and the various first-hand accounts of heaven and hell have all served to reinforce popular notions of the life to come. Paul Enns, minister at Idlewild Baptist Church, professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and author of *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, lends his hand to the popularization of heaven in *Heaven Revealed: What Is It Like? What Will We Do?...and 11 Other Things You've Wondered About* (hereafter *Heaven*). His background in theology and Bible translation has produced a well referenced consideration of the future state of the believers. His involvement as a minister and the recent passing of his wife engender a pastoral tone that seeks to assuage the pain of present loss and reinforce the hopes of future bliss.



Nevertheless, certain methodological errors and major misunderstandings concerning the categories of peoples in the ages to come have produced a fanciful account that provides little genuine comfort to the believers and shallowly portrays God's eternal purpose in His relationship with His believing elect.

### Overview—Anthropocentric Bliss in the Presence of the Glory of God

*Heaven* presents a predominantly anthropocentric conception of the believers' future state. Enns quotes Tim LaHaye to affirm that "the new earth will be the Christian's heaven" (107). Enns's main thesis is that, though the divine record is seemingly silent on the details of eternity, much can be inferred because "there is a continuity of this present earth into the millennium, but beyond that, into the eternal state" (85).

*Heaven* establishes this continuity by using passages of millennial prophecy that employ language "like 'forever,' 'for all time,' and 'shall never end'" (12). "The millennial kingdom will be a part of Christ's promised kingdom, but Christ's kingdom will continue *eternally*, beyond the millennial kingdom" (62). *Heaven* further proposes that "parallel passages that seem to refer to the millennium in the Old Testament are seen to refer to the eternal state in the New Testament" (84). *Heaven* argues that the graphic description of the remaking of the heavens and the earth, typically attributed to the end of the millennium (2 Pet. 3:10; Heb. 1:11-12; Rev. 20:11) reflects "the judgments of the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments of Revelation 6—19, culminating with the final judgment at the triumphant return of Jesus Christ (Rev. 19:11-21)" (103-104), and *Heaven* interprets both as a single "surface cleansing of the earth" (97), which will take place at the inauguration of the millennial kingdom.

Having established this continuity, *Heaven* concludes that the multitude of millennial passages in the Old Testament is a sound source for a scriptural elucidation of the life to come. Based upon this premise, the majority of the book attempts to answer the questions and allay the concerns of the believers regarding what we will be like, what we will do, and, most importantly, what our relationships will be like in the future. *Heaven* assures the believers that their eternal destiny will be congruous with their present life. We will have the same bodies, though "eternally youthful" (131) and "incomparable in beauty" (79), we will continue in the same occupations, unless we were policemen, psychiatrists, or insurance salesmen, and "we will continue the relationships with the people we loved on this earth" (138), though without the difficulties or the bad memories. "It will be a time of restful fellowship in a perfect environment with friends and loved ones. Believers will enjoy 'the good life' in glory" (126).

According to *Heaven*, "God's original design in creation was to fellowship with mankind in a peerless, sinless world" (60). Although man fell, "God's original purpose in fellowship with humanity will be fulfilled in the eternal, earthly kingdom that Christ will inaugurate" (60). The newly renovated earth will be a restoration of the Edenic paradise in which "God's original purpose—fellowship with men and women in a perfect, sinless world—will be restored" (107). Mankind will enjoy the intensified beauty and perfection of God's restored creation, and we will "continuously be growing in our knowledge of God" (123), living "an eternity of bliss in the presence of the glory of God" (113).

### Methodological Objections— Human Concept or Divine Revelation?

While *Heaven* is filled with scriptural references, it is tainted by a human concept, which is thankfully made clear to the reader: "In addition to studying the pertinent Scriptures, an underlying understanding must be kept in

*The book makes assumptions regarding the future, based on human sentiment and longing, which in turn, can easily distort our interpretation of the divine revelation.*

mind. This is earth; our future lies in heaven. Heaven is *always better* than earth—in every dimension" (157). This makes assumptions regarding the future, based on human sentiment and longing, which in turn, can easily distort our interpretation of the divine revelation. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in *Heaven's* repeated claim that familial relationships will extend into eternity and in the primacy that *Heaven* assigns to this prospect. To be fair, *Heaven* does speak of our fellowship with God in the coming ages, but the order of fellowship, almost invariably, is "with family and friends and Christ" (71).

More than the names of the apostles, more than the names of the prophets, and more than the names of scholars and expositors, the name that dominates the pages of this book is Helen, Enns's wife of forty-five years, who passed away at the age of sixty-five. In the introduction he tells us of the effect of this great loss: "That singular event has changed my life and my thinking. My thoughts are constantly focused on heaven. I'm absorbed with the thought of heaven. The thought of reunion with my beloved Helen!" (11). He goes on to

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identify his primary concern in thinking about heaven: “The questions foremost in my mind—and in the minds of many people—are whether we will know one another in heaven and what our relationship will be” (13).

While suffering and pain due to human loss are understandable, this is not a proper starting point for a believer’s consideration of his eternal destiny; the starting point should be the Scriptures themselves. *Heaven* quotes Randy Alcorn to affirm that “Jesus...never hinted that deep relationships between married people would end” (140). *Heaven* and Alcorn confidently affirm this claim in spite of the Lord’s clear speaking that “in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Matt. 22:30). Further, Paul tells us that in Christ, “there cannot be male and female” (Gal. 3:28). Similarly, *Heaven* claims that “ethnicity will also continue into the new heaven and new earth” (169) and that “we will enjoy becoming connected with *our people*, who do things in a familiar way, who speak a familiar language” (31), ignoring the reality that in the new man, “there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian” (Col. 3:11). *Heaven*’s failure to acknowledge such verses is a clear indication that its discussion is overly influenced by the emotional ties of human relationship. Not only does *Heaven* acknowledge that its claims are based on other considerations “in addition to studying the pertinent Scriptures” (157); it does not adequately address the pertinent Scriptures themselves.

*Heaven* states, “The longing that God has placed in our hearts is for heaven,...where we will meet believing ancestors and converse and excitedly fellowship with them” (31). While the relationships that are built up in the fellowship of the divine life certainly will continue into eternity, the biblical record makes clear that earthly relationships of the old creation will not. Can we not believe that our relationship with God in Christ as our true Father, Husband, Brother, and Friend will far surpass the shadows of the relationships that we now enjoy? Our comfort should reside in the truth that in the new man “Christ is all and in all” (Col. 3:11). In fact, it is counterproductive to our spiritual growth in this age to seek solace in the thought that there is some continuance of relationships that “cannot be” in the new man.

### **The Believers’ Inheritance— Everlasting Bliss or Eternal Life?**

A more fundamental mistake that *Heaven* makes is its failure to recognize a basic distinction between the peoples who will inhabit the millennial kingdom. *Heaven* recognizes that certain portions of the Bible speak of the inheritance of the believers, others of the priesthood of Israel, and still others of the restoration of the nations. Yet it often confuses the three and wrongly applies to the

believers passages regarding the nations and the Jews. It rightly acknowledges that the believers’ reward is to reign with Christ for a thousand years. Yet it often applies the descriptions of the nations over which the believers will reign to the believers themselves. Similarly, it recognizes that the nation of Israel will be restored yet at times attributes that restoration to the hope of the believers. In *The Basic Revelation in the Holy Scriptures*, Witness Lee makes clear a basic distinction that is crucial to cutting straight the word of the truth:

The millennium has an earthly part and a heavenly part. The earthly part is the kingdom of the Messiah (2 Sam. 7:13), the tabernacle of David (Acts 15:16), the kingdom of the Son of Man (Matt. 13:41; Rev. 11:15). The kingdom of the Father is the heavenly part of the millennium. The kingdom of the Son of Man is the earthly part of the millennium. In the millennium the overcomers in the heavenly part reign with Christ over the earthly part. In the earthly part is the restored kingdom of David, where Christ as the Son of Man, David’s royal descendant, will be the King over the children of Israel.

During this time the children of Israel will be priests (Zech. 8:20-23; Isa. 2:2-3). The overcoming saints will be kings in the heavenly part, and the restored nation of Israel will be priests in the earthly part, teaching the nations how to know God and how to serve Him. The nations will be the people in the earthly part of the millennium (Matt. 25:32-34). The sheep in Matthew 25 will be the nations, and the nations will be the people.

In the millennium, then, there will be three kinds of people: the overcoming saints as kings in the heavenly part, the restored Jews as the priests in the earthly part, and the sheep, the nations, as the people. The overcoming saints will have the nations to rule over, and the Jews will have the nations to teach. The nations will be the people ruled by us and taught by the Jews. (96-97)

It is clear from the Scriptures that men will inhabit a restored earth and will live sinless human lives enjoying God’s creation in its original state and worshipping the God who tabernacles among them. This is, in part, a fulfillment of God’s intention. According to Matthew 25:34, the King will declare, “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” This, however, is not a declaration to believers but to the unregenerate nations who showed kindness to the people of God in their time of need (vv. 35-40).

Because the Old Testament is primarily concerned with the Jews and the nations, it follows that its various millennial prophecies describe only the earthly part of the coming kingdom. In short, *Heaven* has confused the

Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament with the inheritance of the New Testament believers. To ascribe to the regenerate believers the same destiny as the unregenerate nations is a misrepresentation and a trivialization of the eternal purpose of God.

What then does the divine revelation say concerning the inheritance of the believers? *Heaven* takes as its initial point of departure that the divine revelation, particularly the New Testament, is relatively mute. To alleviate the uncertainty of this presumed silence, it turns to the millennial descriptions in the Old Testament. Such a turn not only leads to errors, but it is also unnecessary. The New Testament has much to say about our inheritance, at times in plain words but primarily in signs and symbols, which better capture the spiritual nature of the New Testament believers' inheritance.<sup>1</sup> In *The Conclusion of the New Testament*, Witness Lee makes a clear distinction between the blessings in eternity in Revelation 21:3-7 by employing the symbolic language that is critical to unlocking the divine mystery of the concluding chapters of the Bible:

The restored nations will enjoy the common blessings in the new heaven and new earth. These blessings are described in Revelation 21:4. "He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; nor sorrow, nor crying, nor pain—they shall be no more; for the former things have passed away." In the new heaven and new earth there shall be no tears, no death, no sorrow, no crying, and no pain. Instead, in the new heaven and new earth there will be full satisfaction and rest; there will be no more cause of tears.

Revelation 21:3 and 4 speak of the nations, who are the descendants of the sheep in Matthew 25:31-46, whereas verses 5 through 7 refer to the sons of God, all the saints, the divinely saved ones through all the generations. When the sons of God are in the New Jerusalem, they will not have tears and therefore will not experience the wiping away of tears. Instead, the sons of God will have the full enjoyment of eternal life. The restored nations, who will not have the full enjoyment of eternal life, will have their tears wiped away by God. This will be God's blessing to them. We may think that this is an intimate blessing and desire it for ourselves. If this is our desire, we may not be clear about the difference between the blessing of eternal life in the New Jerusalem and the blessing to the peoples on the new earth. We have received eternal life through believing in Christ, but we may not have the proper understanding of what the blessing of this life is and what the real blessing of eternal life will be in the New Jerusalem in eternity. God will not wipe away our tears but will supply us with the water of life. (2624-2625)

This is the basic distinction between the nations and the believers in eternity—the nations will enjoy God merely

as His people (Rev. 21:3); the believers will enjoy God as His many sons (v. 7). The nations will enjoy the beauty of the restored creation; the sons will enjoy the riches of the divine life.

### The Divine-human Fellowship— Restoration or Consummation?

While *Heaven* does speak of our fellowship with God, it does so primarily in an objective sense, as a restoration of what Adam and Eve possessed in the garden and what the disciples experienced during Christ's earthly ministry. However, the fellowship ascribed to the ages to come is not a mere restoration but a consummation. It is the consummation of an inward, subjective fellowship that has been enriched, increased, and enlarged through the successive ages of God's operation within and among His chosen elect.

*Heaven* at times uses verses that are crucial to God's present inward operation in the believers to imply the hope of

*The creation is waiting not merely  
for a restoration but for a revelation—  
not merely of a future environment  
but of the consummation  
of God's present work  
in His regenerated sons.*

a merely outward environment. Its curious explication of Romans 8:19 serves as a good example:

"For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom. 8:19). The language is strong; creation is watching eagerly, as with outstretched hand, constantly and expectantly waiting until He comes who will restore all of creation. (99)

In contradistinction to *Heaven's* conclusion, this verse makes clear that creation is waiting not merely for a restoration but for a revelation—not merely of a future environment but of the consummation of God's present work in His regenerated sons. *Heaven* portrays God's work on the believers as an instantaneous and miraculous restoration at His return and obscures several verses that point to God's work by His divine life to sanctify, transform, and conform the believers in their present life and service. *Heaven* interprets Romans 8:29 by stating that "Christ was 'the firstborn among many brethren,' meaning many would receive glorified bodies as well" (75), and portrays God's work of transformation and glorification as

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follows: “When we receive our resurrection bodies, we receive not only glorified bodies, we also receive transformed and glorified minds. Our entire person—body, soul, and spirit—is transformed” (137).

Actually, the vast majority of biblical references to sanctification, transformation, and conformation are to present realities (Heb. 2:11; 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 12:2; Phil. 3:10) in the ongoing process of preparation for the Lord’s return (Eph. 5:26-27; Heb. 12:14). We are not waiting for a future day in which God will again tabernacle among us and dwell in intimate fellowship with us; He already lives within us, and we in Him (John 15:4; Gal. 2:20). In this fellowship we are growing in the divine life as sons of God unto maturity (Col. 1:28; Eph. 4:13). Corporately, this growth is the building up of the Body in this age (vv. 15-16; Col. 2:19) and the preparation of the bride for whom the Lord will return (Eph. 5:25-27). For eternity this corporate entity will be on radiant display as the masterpiece of God (2:10), telling forth His wisdom and prudence in carrying out His eternal economy (1:8; 3:10-11). The hope for which the believers wait is not the restoration of objective fellowship with God; it is the enrichment and consummation of our present subjective fellowship that we enjoy with Him day by day.

### Conclusion

While the Bible certainly charges us to weep with those who weep, mere human sentiment should not replace or vitiate our faithfulness to the purity of the divine revelation. To pander to human longings and to strengthen unfounded assumptions concerning the continuance of human relationships may be comforting to us as human beings, but this will never satisfy the deep longing in a God-seeking believer. The true need of a suffering believer is the comfort that abounds through Christ from the Father of compassions and God of all comfort, who causes all things to work together for our conformation to the image of the Firstborn (2 Cor. 1:3, 5; Rom. 8:28-29). *Heaven’s* neglect of God’s inward operation in the believers in this age does little to encourage the believers in their present enjoyment and responsibility to grow and mature in the divine life as the sons of God for His expression and His glory (Heb. 2:10; Rom. 8:29-30). The mistaken concepts propounded by *Heaven* misrepresent the divine revelation and do not serve the believers.

by Mitchell Kennard

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a symbolic reading of Revelation 21—22, see the April 2000 issue of *Affirmation & Critique*, entitled “The Ultimate Consummation of God’s Economy: Heaven or the New Jerusalem?”

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## Concerning the Universal Church

*From Eternity to Here: Rediscovering the Ageless Purpose of God*, by Frank Viola. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009.

Frank Viola, a prolific writer and speaker on the ills of institutional Christianity and a promoter of house churches, presents a “flagship book and a primer for all of [his] previous works” in *From Eternity to Here: Rediscovering the Ageless Purpose of God* (hereafter *Eternity*), which concerns the church as the goal of God’s eternal purpose (14). *Eternity* discusses the church as the bride of Christ, the house of God, the family of God, and the Body of Christ. In its portrayal of the church from God’s perspective, *Eternity* attempts to correct a prevalent “man-centered” view of the church, individualistic Christianity, wrong motivations for Christian service, and an overemphasis on gospel preaching (14-15). *Eternity* introduces central aspects of the universal church, but it leaves the door open to inadequate and even erroneous teachings and practices because it fails to identify and sufficiently develop several key truths concerning the church revealed in the Scriptures.

### Romance, Dwelling Place, and New Species

Part One of *Eternity* presents the divine romance between God and His longed-for counterpart, the church, and highlights the parallels between Eve and the church: their both coming out of, sharing the same life as, and being the enlargement of their respective counterparts—Adam and Christ (34-35). Part One presents a twofold theme that the church, as the reproduction of Christ and the unique object of His “torrential passion,” is flawless in God’s eyes, and that we need to view ourselves in the same light, as opposed to being self-loathing, anxiety-ridden, and fearful of a judgmental God (38, 49, 59). The divine view of the church as the spotless bride of Christ stands in stark contrast to the earthly view of the church with its many evident problems. Although the language of *Eternity* is melodramatic at times, its aim is laudable.

Part Two speaks of the church in relation to God’s longing



for a home in which to dwell and to express Himself. *Eternity* traces God's "eternal quest" for His house from the building materials present in the garden of Eden to the Old Testament tabernacle and its New Testament fulfillment in Christ and in His expansion, the church, including the church's consummation, the New Jerusalem. After a quick trip from Genesis to Revelation, *Eternity* asks, "How did the garden become transformed into a city and a temple?" and then narrowly answers, "Groups of Christians throughout the ages made the choice to partake of the Lord and be built together" (167). Part Two also emphasizes the requirement, according to the type of the children of Israel, for God's people to come out of the world, typified by Egypt, and out of organized religion, typified by Babylon, in order to return to and partake of Christ, typified by the good land, for the building up of God's house.

Part Three, which concerns God's family and Christ's Body, is entitled "A New Species," and it plays on the idea of an alien invasion from space in order to highlight the significance of Christians' receiving the divine life and the coming of God's kingdom. The chapters in Part Three survey selected New Testament books for portions pertaining to the "new species." The Gospel of John, for example, is included in this survey because it "closes with a gripping scene that portrays what God's ageless purpose is all about...a new family" (238). The referenced scene is of the Lord committing John and Mary to one another as mother and son. Concerning the Body of Christ, *Eternity* says, "In the eyes of God, the church is nothing more and nothing less than Jesus Christ on earth" (245).

Part Three concludes with a chapter entitled "What Does It Look Like Today?" which presents principles that it regards as indicative of an authentic manifestation of the church. These include communion (daily and weekly spiritual activities of local assemblies and small groups energized by love from and for Christ), corporate display ("open-participatory meetings where every member... functions"), community life ("a colony from heaven that has descended on earth to display the life of God's kingdom [by] its way of life, its values, and its interpersonal relationships" as the "countercultural" family of God), and commission ("alleviating human suffering and showing forth what the future kingdom of God looks like") (282-287). *Eternity* observes, "God's ultimate purpose begins in Genesis 1 before the fall," and it concludes, "A local church carr[ies] out the ageless purpose of God" by conducting itself as Christ's bride and Body, living as God's house and family, and "expressing God's image and exercising His authority in the earth" (288-289).

### A Need for Broader Scriptural Consideration

In the preface *Eternity* laments, "Few [Christian books]

seek to unveil the ageless purpose of our God. And the few that do are rarely page-turners" (13-14). This complaint underscores *Eternity's* attempt not to present something original but to popularize the light that others have seen and published concerning the church as the goal of God's eternal purpose. Given the nature of a popularizer's task, it is not surprising that *Eternity* fails to convey the broader revelation that can be found in some of its source materials, which are enumerated in its "Acknowledgments" and substantial bibliography. Given its earnest desire to present a higher view of the church, *Eternity* is strangely silent and potentially misleading in regard to certain key points of the truth.

### *The Oneness of the Body of Christ and Its Local Expressions*

*Eternity* rightly condemns divisions among Christians (13, 277) and exalts Christ as the church's unique foundation, but it neglects to explicitly recognize oneness as the central attribute of the church. Oneness is an essen-

*The book introduces central aspects of the universal church, but it leaves the door open to inadequate and even erroneous teachings and practices because it fails to identify and sufficiently develop several key truths concerning the church.*

tial attribute of God, and as God's expansion, expression, Body, bride, and house, the church should be one not only universally but also locally. For example, when *Eternity* describes key aspects of the New Jerusalem, it does not speak of the defining characteristics of the city, exemplified by one throne, one river, one street, and one tree of life. *Eternity's* lack of emphasis on the oneness of the church may stem in part from the book's focus on God in His trinity more than in His attribute of oneness. At the end of the book, *Eternity* declares that God's grand mission is to "expand the life and love that's in the Trinitarian Community" (289). This statement overlooks the Lord's prayer in John 17, which speaks of His desire to expand the oneness that exists among the three of the Trinity (vv. 11, 21-23).

Oneness is also the central characteristic of the Body of Christ. *Eternity*, however, fails to highlight the oneness of the Body of Christ. The book's structure lessens the significance of the Body by including it in the section on God's family. Although *family* and *body* both relate to life, receiving God's life to be

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His children is quite distinct from becoming Christ's members and being headed up by Him in His one Body. In a book on the church, especially one by an author who tirelessly promotes the organic nature of the church, the Body of Christ merits treatment in its own section. Although *Eternity* speaks of the Body of Christ as a reality rather than a mere metaphor (244), the book does not develop how this reality translates into church practice. Although *Eternity* issues vehement warnings against taking any human head in place of Christ (170), it misses the chance to affirm that Christ as the Head would never agree that His Body be divided, especially in its practical expression. There is but a single anemic paragraph on receiving all believers according to the oneness of Christ's Body (257). The strongest chapter on the Body, "The New Species in Corinthians," highlights the church as the corporate Christ in spite of messy situations, such as those in the church in Corinth. The chapter concludes by speaking of "a local body of believers" (268), without indicating any correlation between the oneness of the universal church as the unique Body of Christ and the necessity for oneness in its local expression.

The Lord's first words concerning the church in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17 reveal that there is a universal aspect and a local aspect to the church. However, *Eternity* fails to point out this distinction. The author cannot be unaware of this distinction because he acknowledges the writings of both Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, both of whom repeatedly stress this distinction. The oneness of the church in each locality is a requisite reflection of the universal church, and it is the clear pattern established in the New Testament among the first churches (Acts 8:1; 13:1; 14:23; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 8:1; Gal. 1:2; Rev. 1:4, 11). The New Testament pattern also demonstrates that although genuine local churches are administrated locally and do not belong to any extra-local organization, they fellowship freely with one another as parts and expressions of the same universal Body for their mutual benefit (Col. 4:16; Rev. 2:7).

The church's ground of oneness is evident not only in the New Testament pattern but also in Old Testament typology, which *Eternity* discusses at length without recognizing the essential aspect of oneness. *Eternity* is right that God's people had to return to the good land in order to build God's house, but *Eternity* is not nearly as specific as the biblical record, which indicates that Jerusalem was the unique site chosen by God for the temple. God's repeated charge to the Israelites to worship only in the place of God's choosing was intended to keep them in oneness (Deut. 12:5, 11, 13-14, 18). *Eternity* celebrates the "pandemonium" in David's tabernacle and the presence of the Ark but does not acknowledge the significance of Jerusalem in relation to the ground of oneness (150). According to *Eternity*, the "models and forms of church"

must reflect the "indwelling of Christ in a local community of believers by the Holy Spirit" (292), but the book ignores the preminent model or pattern of oneness by giving primacy to the spiritual condition of a group of believers. When spiritual condition is the criteria for determining the genuineness of a local church, a door is opened to subjective and personal assessments of spirituality, which only serve to engender endless divisions. The standard of oneness, however, shuts the door to division because it does not allow for any other basis for acknowledging a believer's status in the church other than the Lord's own receiving. The Lord does not receive the believers based on spiritual condition but rather on whether they have been joined to Him through faith.

### *The Preparation of the Warrior-bride*

Another aspect of the church overlooked in *Eternity* is that of the corporate warrior who fights with and for God. This aspect occupies a significant place in the revelation of the New Testament. Ephesians 6 specifically speaks of the church putting on the whole armor of God, and this point is expounded in Watchman Nee's *The Glorious Church* (61-66), a source that *Eternity* approvingly cites (309). Although this aspect does not fit neatly into the Hollywood stereotype of a leading lady to which *Eternity* often alludes, Revelation 19 shows that the marriage of the Lamb is followed immediately by His going into battle with an army composed of His bride (vv. 7-9, 14).

Another matter that is inadequately explained in relation to the church as the bride of Christ is her preparation. Chapter 9, entitled "The Preparation of the Bride" regards this preparation as being a matter mainly related to God's calling of the church to be Christ's bride. This interpretation may reflect the emphatic teaching in *Eternity* that the church is already perfect in God's eyes, but Revelation 19:7 clearly speaks of an action on the part of the bride, the action of making herself ready. This making ready and the preparation mentioned in 21:2 no doubt relate to the righteous acts of the saints (19:8).

Christ loves us in spite of our imperfections, but He is not blind to them. Rather, He uses them to draw us to Himself not only for cleansing us of our sins but also to transform us, sanctify us, and transfuse us with His divine element (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Thes. 5:23). The book speaks concerning the believers' transformation, but it misses the opportunity to present this important truth in relation to the bride. *Eternity* is correct in stating that "Christ...will not marry a woman who is unworthy of Himself" (63), but this means that we need to allow Him to do more in us in order to be prepared as His bride.

In *The Glorious Church* Watchman Nee speaks of the church as the bride coming out of Christ and being His

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reproduction, not to assert her perfection in God's eyes but to draw a necessary lesson for the practical living of the church life: "Only that which is out of Christ can be of any value and spiritual use in the church" (47). After speaking of Christ's presenting the church to Himself in Ephesians 5:25-27, Nee states, "The church today has not yet attained to this place. Christ is working step by step in the church until that day when He presents her to Himself" (50). *Eternity's* point concerning the church's flawlessness from the divine perspective and Christ's unconditional love for her is valuable, but its unqualified presentation and unbalanced framing of this truth dangerously obscure the need for matters such as confession of sins, transformation in the divine life, and being built up in the Body.

### *The Triune God Transforming the Tripartite Man to Produce His Bride*

While *Eternity* acknowledges that redemption is not sufficient to produce materials for God's building, it also presents transformation as a seemingly instantaneous enlivening brought about by an outward touch of the Spirit (143, 158). In reality, the Lord Spirit transforms us from glory to glory—gradually spreading in our inward parts until His divine life permeates and saturates our entire being (2 Cor. 3:18). *Eternity's* deficient account of transformation may result in part from an inaccurate or incomplete view of the makeup of man. For instance, *Eternity* conflates the heart and the spirit and speaks of Christ making His home in our spirit, despite citing Ephesians 3:17, which says that Christ is making His home in our heart (236). Our spirit, the deepest part of our being, is completely enlivened when Christ as the Spirit comes into it through regeneration (1 Cor. 6:17; Rom. 8:10). However, He desires to spread out from our spirit into all the parts of our heart, which include our mind, emotion, and will (v. 6; 12:2). Viola alludes to this truth when he speaks briefly of Christ becoming the Spirit in resurrection so that believers can partake of Him and thereby have "gold, pearl, and precious stone... deposited within them" (163), but *Eternity* lacks an adequate and clear development of this truth and related truths.

In spite of including the marvelous truth of Christ becoming the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45), *Eternity* fails to present the full role of the Spirit in relation to the church. After stating that the house and family correspond to God the Father and that the bride and Body correspond to the Son, *Eternity* feebly attempts to address the role of the Spirit by defining it as "the bond of love that flows like liquid passion within the communion of the triune God" (18). Not once does the author refer to the oneness of the Spirit spoken of in Ephesians 4:3, nor does the author make mention of the

Spirit as the essence of the Body, which regenerates and saturates the Body (v. 4).

### Conclusion

One paragraph in *Eternity* encapsulates the tone and substance of the entire book:

The church was created to be an active participant in the impenetrable mystery of the Trinity. It was created to be an echo of the unfailing love that circulates within the Godhead. You and I have been called into the eternal love affair between God the Father and God the Son through the Spirit. (232)

The first sentence touches a deep truth, but the book does not adequately explain or develop it. The second sentence, by speaking of the church as an "echo" (something removed and different in substance from its source), obscures the high truth of the church's oneness with God. The last sentence reverts to the melodramatic language that is used throughout the book to capture the modern reader's fanciful imaginations rather than to guide him into a fuller knowledge of the truth.

Despite its weaknesses, *Eternity* clearly comes from genuine experiences and a noble intention. It identifies and emphasizes the church as the desire of God's heart and the goal of His eternal purpose. This scriptural view of the church is much needed in a time of ongoing institutional warping of church practice. Regrettably, by omission and subtle bias, *Eternity* leaves its reader woefully short of the divine revelation concerning the church and leaves a door open to endless divisions based on subjective evaluations of the spiritual condition of a local church.

In the preface *Eternity* opines that a "revolution... fomenting in the practice of the church is of God," but warns that it will be superficial and short-lived if "a sighting of God's ageless purpose does not fuel it" (14). If a vision of God's eternal purpose truly does motivate and direct our practice of the church life, we will express the oneness of the Body of Christ, which is the oneness of the Triune God, in local churches standing on the divinely appointed ground of oneness until the bride is fully prepared to meet her Bridegroom, and until the house of God, built with transformed precious stones, is consummated as the New Jerusalem.

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### Works Cited

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