

*AFFIRMATION & CRITIQUE*

*MONOGRAPHS*

“...THAT WE MIGHT  
BE MADE GOD”

Kerry S. Robichaux



Anaheim, California

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Athanasius’s aphorism<sup>1</sup> from the fourth century has caused no small stir among his readers throughout the centuries. Reactions to it have ranged from elation to chagrin. Compared with the various standards of orthodoxy held by Christians throughout the ages, Athanasius’s striking statement has been viewed as the epitome of Christian faith by some and as an exemplar of Christian heresy by others. Many see the statement as consistent with the other thoughts and writings of the champion of Nicene orthodoxy; others squirm in embarrassment that such words came from the same pen that helped to establish our common views on the Triune God and the person of Christ, the very matters that make us Christians in faith.

To be fair, there are also others who wiggle around the stumbling block by offering a mitigating translation of Athanasius: “He became human that we might become divine.” Fears are certainly allayed by

#### 4 Affirmation & Critique

this device, until we further read the writings of Athanasius and his contemporaries and find that the device does not work in many cases.<sup>2</sup> Taken on their own merit, these early declarations concerning *theosis* or deification, as it is called in theology, indeed mean what they seem to mean, and we discover that many in the early church viewed God's salvation as His work to make human beings God. Jaroslav Pelikan confirms this: "For the Greek patristic tradition, especially in its mystical forms, the final goal and result of this saving knowledge, this forgiveness, and this rescue from death was 'deification'" (155). Elsewhere, regarding the relationship between salvation and the Holy Spirit as discussed in the fourth and fifth centuries, Pelikan comments simply: "Yet salvation was not merely vivification but deification" (216). It is also interesting to note that in Pelikan's index to the same volume, under the heading "Deification," he directs: "*See Salvation*" (384).

A great number of Protestant theological writers seem to find it easier to dismiss deification in the early church as a holdover of Hellenism than to take it as serious biblical truth. Harnack's characterizations of deification as pagan and Hellenic are well known, and it is not uncommon for biblical scholars to summarily discount the notion of human beings becoming God as unscriptural. G. W. Butterworth, for example, writing on deification in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, remarks: "There is nothing in either the Old or the New Testament which by itself could even faintly suggest that man might practise being a god in this world and actually become one in the next" (163). But from the way the writers of the early church so harshly criticized pagan religion and yet so easily spoke of deification it is difficult to imagine that they were blindly pagan and Hellenic and completely out of touch with the biblical message. Rather, it seems that the early church saw their notions of deification as distinctly unique from pagan deification and particularly biblical and Christian.

Deification is perhaps the best example of how selective we are in our acceptance and appreciation of what is in our Christian heritage. When we modern believers consider the teachings of the early church, particularly those of the second through fifth centuries, we pick and choose what we feel is worthy of our attention and

suitable to a proper understanding of the divine truth in the Bible. This is, of course, altogether proper, since the church has indeed made progress in its understanding of the truth, a fact which allows us to avoid former inadequacies. We mostly recognize that the second through fifth centuries provide us with the great truths concerning the Divine Trinity and the person and work of Christ. Very little major truth has been added to the great treasures discovered by the believers during those centuries. No doubt, subsequent teachers have refined some of the notions concerning the Trinity and Christology, yet their refinements have always been within the framework of the teachings from the second through fifth centuries. It appears from the steadfastness of these truths that the Spirit Himself was guiding the fathers into a fuller understanding. This was prophesied by our Lord in John 16:13: "But when He, the Spirit of reality, comes, He will guide you into all the reality; for He will not speak from Himself, but what He hears He will speak; and He will declare to you the things that are coming."

While the major concern of the church fathers during the second through fifth centuries was the preservation of the church from heresies concerning God in His Trinity and Christ in His person and work, this was far from the full extent of what they believed and taught. A great portion of their writings is devoted to less doctrinally controversial matters that deal with the Christian life in its spirituality and practices. For the most part, these matters are ignored, and even somewhat scorned, by Protestant Christianity of recent centuries. Again, some of this neglect is not without proper reason since certain matters of the early church tend more toward superstition than necessary belief. An example of this is the early practice of "signing oneself" (consecrating oneself with a hand gesture that represents Christ's cross). This practice is still observed by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox today. Most modern believers of the Protestant persuasion find such a practice altogether superstitious and unnecessary; and hence, when reading the church fathers, they readily dismiss the value placed on it by the fathers.

Thus, in the writings of the church we find a spectrum of notions ranging from the necessary teachings concerning the Trinity and the

## 6 *Affirmation & Critique*

person and work of Christ to the sentiments and superstitions of men from an earlier age. The question is: Where do we modern believers draw the line of acceptability? The answer to this, of course, depends on our own understanding of the truth. Protestant Christians place their line of acceptability very close to the end that defines the proper doctrines on the Trinity and Christology. The line for Roman Catholicism admits more of the broad spectrum, while for Eastern Orthodoxy it encompasses almost the entire range. What this means practically is that Protestant Christians find, for the most part, only the great teachings concerning the Trinity and Christology acceptable in the writings of the fathers and reject most other matters.

This article examines one of the matters rejected by modern Protestant Christianity yet embraced by the ancient church throughout her first five centuries. It is not, however, a matter of trivial spiritual practice but concerns the early church's basic understanding of what our Christian salvation is. The matter has been so soundly rejected by modern Protestantism that no one can even speak about it without carefully qualifying what he or she means. And even then, a great risk is taken of being misunderstood or, even worse, blatantly misrepresented. (The risk is taken here!) Yet, in the ancient church, deification, as they themselves termed it,<sup>3</sup> was seen as the ultimate goal of man's salvation.

Of course, in attempting to demonstrate that the early church viewed salvation as deification, we are at the same time suggesting that the prevailing modern opinion concerning salvation falls far short of the truth in the divine revelation of the Bible. We maintain that we have lost something in our modern times: When we should be more progressed in the truth by virtue of our later station in history, we are instead more primitive in our understanding, at least in what regards the content and goal of our salvation. While exhibiting a fearful reverence for God, which prevents us from ever admitting that human beings could be deified, we may be resisting God's own design and we may fall short of His salvation in its fullest extent. We hope that a careful look at the early church's teaching concerning deification will, by implication at least, prove this latter statement.

## Qualification of the Term *Deification*

As mentioned above, one can scarcely use the term *deification* without some qualification of meaning. Unfortunately, *deification* brings with it meanings that generally repel the traditional Protestant Christian. Some of these meanings are unfortunate associations that a proper understanding of deification does not include. Some, however, are perfectly acceptable meanings, which derive from the Bible and were held by the early church, but repel because of misconceptions held by modern Protestantism. Thus, some qualification of meaning is in order, both to exclude any false notions and to adjust any misconceptions.

### *Pagan Meanings*

Perhaps what comes to mind most commonly when people hear the term *deification* is the prac-

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tice among the ancient pagan religions of elevating mere men to the status of gods. Historically, this became most prominent in the Roman Empire, where reverence for the Caesars as gods united the multi-national and multi-religious empire. Such reverence was adamantly resisted by two groups alone, the Jews and the Christians, no doubt because of their absolute insistence on a belief in the one true God. But reactions to deification also reflected particular views on what deity was. It was so much easier for the pagan religions to admit deification into their religious systems because for them the gods were little more than mere humans. Pagan gods were made in the image and likeness of man, so to speak, somewhat fallen and given to the same vices we humans suffer. The ancient world was filled with the intrigue and drama of fleshly tales about the pagan gods. Tertullian (died ca. AD 220) listed some of the shameful escapades of the false gods and then commented: “Things like these should not be made public if they are true; and if false, they should not be fabricated among people professing a great

respect for religion” (30). To become god, at the standard of these gods, was hardly an improvement over being mere human and hardly a great leap for humanity. On the other hand, the God of Jews and Christians is eternal, perfect, above nature, and certainly above the multitude of flaws of humanity. The most virtuous human could easily qualify as a god in the pagan mind, but for Jews and even more so for Christians “our righteousnesses are like a soiled garment” (Isa. 64:6). Thus the chasm between God and man, and particularly unsaved man, could not be as easily bridged as the emperor cult of Rome suggested.

Furthermore, in the ancient pagan religions men became gods by mere declaration. The process was called *apotheosis* in Greek and *consecratio* in Latin and generally occurred after the death of the emperor. Yet no one believed that the deified ruler had changed in any way except in how he was regarded. Formerly, he was respected as an emperor; now he was worshipped as a god; but essentially he was still a man. There was no change in life and nature. It was much the same as the inauguration of a modern president: Formerly he is without the office and is not accorded the dignity and respect of the office, but in a moment, at his inauguration, he is declared president. The man himself does not change at all, but his status is uplifted, and by this he gains the respect of the citizenry. This, we will see below, contrasts with what the Bible says about God’s redeemed, regenerated, and transformed people, who not only gain the status of being the sons of God but, more importantly, experience a change in their life and nature that gives an essential reality to their being the sons of God.

### ***Traditional Misconception concerning God Himself***

In the early church Christians opposed the deification of man in the widely held pagan sense, but they did not oppose a proper understanding of deification. We then are left with a dilemma: How could the early church believe in a God who is far above man in His being and essence and still hope in a salvation so complete that man is ultimately deified? In other words, how could the early church believe that the great chasm between God and man could



be bridged through our salvation? Our dilemma, however, is actually a false one, being the product of our traditional concepts about God. We perceive the dilemma because we approach the matter of man’s deification with one overriding assumption: God is God and man is man, and there exists an insuperable distance between the two. The overwhelming concept among ancient Jews and modern Christians alike is that God is transcendent above all creation and that His transcendence prevents man from ever sharing in what God is. In theological terms, God is said to be incommunicable; that is, He does not share His being and essence with anything but Himself. This is certainly true, for Paul says that God “alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen nor can see, to whom be honor and eternal might. Amen” (1 Tim. 6:16). But

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communicable. The greatest evidence of this is the incarnation, by which God became man. Hence, in God there are these two aspects: one which refers to His transcendence above all and His absolute inaccessibility and incommunicability, and another which refers to the demonstration of His great love in coming to man and joining Himself to our race. In the understanding of the early church fathers, it is by virtue of God’s communicability that man may become God.

**W**hile many modern Christian teachers deny this distinction in God, the early church recognized and taught it. Vladimir Lossky observes that the distinction is found “in most of the Greek Fathers—even amongst those of the first centuries of the Church” (71). Among the fathers whom Lossky quotes in support of his claim are Athenagoras, Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, John Chrysostom, and Pseudo-Dyonisius (71-72). The early church did not view our salvation under the assumption that God is incommunicable

only. Hence, for them there was never a problem with us attaining to God or taking part in God, as, for example, Ignatius<sup>4</sup> (died ca. AD 107) spoke of this. Such language was frequently employed to describe the goal of our salvation. To the early church God could be at the same time both aloof from His creation and joined to it. By virtue of His incommunicability He preserves His distinctness as the unique and inaccessible God, and by virtue of His communicability He manifests His economy<sup>5</sup> to join Himself to man and to join man to Himself. The incarnation became the first step in this economy, and man's deification becomes its consummation.

Such a distinction concerning God becomes necessary when we begin to understand that God intends more for us than salvation from perdition. If salvation amounts to no more than justification by faith, God can be incommunicable and inaccessible to man. (Although in the final analysis, even such a limited view of salvation requires God's coming to man and joining our race—something of His communicability.) The early church's evaluation of salvation was far more than justification by faith; it is a salvation that brings us into union with God and raises us to the eternal plane with Him. Such a view of salvation is entirely proper as long as we, echoing the ancient church, believe and confess that God is at the same time unique in His Godhead and alone the object of our worship, that God is God by virtue of His own being and existence, and that we are God by virtue of our union with and participation in Him who is uniquely God.

Unfortunately, many modern Christians are satisfied with far less than what the church taught in its first five centuries concerning our salvation. Lamentably, some modern Christians deride and even oppose a deeper view of salvation that includes man's deification. When pressed for a rationale for such opposition, they ultimately appeal to the view that God is incommunicable only and not to be violated by man's deification. They ignore, however, God's first great step in this direction, the incarnation, whereby He demonstrated His vast communicability and indicated that He has no intention of only being aloof from man. It appears that many Christians wish to protect God's integrity; yet, in a sense, the

greater risk to God’s integrity was taken in His becoming a man. The New Testament speaks of the incarnation as an emptying (Phil. 2:7) and of Christ’s death in the flesh as His humiliation (Acts 8:33). That man may become God is not merely the elevation of man to the eternal plane but the glorification of God Himself in man; it serves to magnify God, not to minify Him. Hence, the deification of man, insofar as God’s communicable aspect will allow and with proper respect for the uniqueness of His Godhead, is a less serious “violation” of God. If we respect the incommunicability of His Godhead and render Him the worship that He deserves as the unique God, we need not fear offending Him. But on the other hand, if we ignore the full provisions of His salvation and fail to enjoy the full extent of His communicability, we risk insulting Him in His grace and His economy.

**Our  
Understanding  
and Use**

If we may entertain the possibility that God’s salvation consum-

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mates in man’s deification, we must immediately ask, “In what way do we become God?” Again, the answer to this question must respect the distinction we have observed in God between His incommunicable aspect and His communicable aspect. Because of God’s incommunicability, man will never take part in the Godhead; he will never be a fourth person in the Trinity; he will never be worshipped as God. Because man will never lose his attributes as a creature, he will never be the Creator. Man will forever possess the human form and the human nature; thus, he will never be omnipresent. Man will forever be endowed with the limited mental faculties he was given by creation; hence, he will never be omniscient. God is God both outside of creation and within creation; man can at best be joined to God and thereby become God within the confines of creation. Unfortunately, many modern teachers who accept the notion of deification fail to respect these caveats.

***“In Our Image, according to Our Likeness”***

In every way, man’s becoming God will be tempered by and limited to his status as a creature; and actually, what man is by creation gives the greatest credence to the notion that man may become God. In the account of creation in Genesis 1, all living things were created “according to their kind” (vv. 11, 12, 21, 24, 25) except man. Hence, in God’s creation there are species of living things, each bearing its own characteristics that distinguish it from other species. But when the creation of man is recounted, he is not said to be created “according to his kind.” Instead, the Scriptures say, “Let Us [God] make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). We understand this sentence to correspond to the phrase *according to their kind* in the other sections of the creation account; we see it as a finer, more detailed utterance of the same notion.<sup>6</sup> Hence, we understand by this sentence that man was created after God’s kind. The apostle Paul made the similar declaration to the Areopagus in Athens: “Being then the race (Gk. *genos*, ‘species; kind’) of God” (Acts 17:29).

Of course, we all know the sad history of mankind’s fall, by which human beings lost a great bit of their likeness to God. Because of the fall, humans are difficult to classify; it is hard to know what “kind” they are. They are obviously superior to all other living things and yet appear to be so similar to many of them. On the other hand, humans are certainly Godlike to some extent and yet obviously fall far short of God. Nevertheless, humans were created in such a way that through God’s economy they may become God. Before the fall Adam was not a deified man; he was not created with God’s life and nature but only with the capacity to receive these. The fall delayed the realization of what we humans were created for and brought in negative elements that required our redemption.

***God’s Economy for Man’s Deification***

A majority of Christians, it would seem, understand redemption as the primary content of God’s salvation. To them, God saves men from the fall and from the wrath of God that the fall provokes. If God’s salvation is seen in this light, the purpose of Christ’s incarnation was to provide a perfect man for a perfect sacrifice in order

to accomplish a perfect redemption. This is certainly correct, but this is not the full content of God’s salvation. The Protestant Reformation did much to open the eyes of Christianity to the necessity of Christ’s work of redemption. Unfortunately, however, in many ways the Reformation has made Christianity myopic and has left it with so narrow a view of God’s salvation that little more than its redemptive aspect is appreciated. The early church would hardly recognize this narrow definition, since they saw in God’s salvation man’s deification. Athanasius certainly saw the deification of man as the very purpose of the incarnation when he declared that God became man so that man might become God. Of course, he never discounted the value of the redemptive aspect of salvation, but for him, as for the Greek fathers generally, redemption was not the goal of salvation, only a step toward the fuller end.

Therefore,  
when we speak  
of God’s salvation,  
we ought to view  
it more broadly than

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modern Protestant Christianity does. While Protestantism typically sees salvation and redemption as virtually identical and therefore focuses on the suffering and death of Christ as the primary means of securing that salvation, we are compelled to consider God’s salvation as something much fuller, as that which consummates in man’s sharing of God’s life, nature, and expression to become His genuine sons and to be, in kind, like Him. Such a view of salvation certainly does not diminish the importance of Christ’s redemptive work on the cross, but it does focus more on two other steps in Christ’s process through time, His incarnation and resurrection. The suffering and death of Christ are important in their effect upon our sins, the devil, the world, the old man, the old creation, and the self—the negative elements which issued from the fall—but the positive aspects of God’s salvation are secured by His incarnation and resurrection: through incarnation Christ became us that through resurrection we may be regenerated with His

life, possess His nature, and become Him for His eternal expression. Through incarnation and resurrection Christ underwent the two great processes: by the former He brought divinity into humanity and, while yet existing as God, became man (John 1:1, 14); and by the latter He brought humanity into divinity and, while yet being man and as to His humanity, was declared God (Rom. 1:3-4). God's moving forth in His Trinity to save man fully and be expressed eternally was, in the language of the early church, God's economy.

### ***Incarnation—Divinity Brought into Humanity***

By incarnation divinity was brought into humanity, and God became communicable to man. Now God and man were joined to produce a unique person in which both the divine and the human coexisted simultaneously without diminution of either. Our Lord Jesus Christ is at the same time both the complete God and the perfect man. The reasons for the incarnation are manifold. During His human living He was to manifest the grace and reality of God (John 1:14). He was to learn obedience (Heb. 5:8), a lesson that man had not learned and could not learn. He was to become a pattern for the living of His believers (1 Pet. 2:21; John 13:15; Matt. 11:29). He was to pass the test of human temptations without succumbing to sin (Heb. 4:15). By these He became qualified to die for man. In His coming as a man, Christ was to seek and save that which is lost (Luke 19:10), and this salvation certainly includes our redemption. He was to be the perfect sacrifice for sin (John 1:29; Heb. 9:26; 1 Pet. 1:19) and thereby accomplish an eternal redemption for us (Heb. 9:12). Thus, Christ in incarnation was to taste death on behalf of all things (2:9) and through death was to destroy death (2:14; 2 Tim. 1:10; 1 Cor. 15:54-56, 26). All these required that divinity be brought into humanity. They depended primarily on the humanity of Jesus, but His divinity charged them all with the eternal effectiveness that they bear.

But merely dealing with our problem of sin would not have fully restored us from our lost condition. What man lost at the fall was access to the tree of life (Gen. 2:9; 3:24), which we may say symbolizes God as life to man for the fulfillment of man's purpose in

creation. There is a deeper reason for the incarnation. In Hebrews 2:10-11 we read:

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and through whom are all things, in leading many sons into glory, to make the Author of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of One, for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brothers.

Here Christ's incarnation is viewed on the much higher plane of man's being sanctified and entering into glory. In order to sanctify man, Christ certainly must first be divine. This was a major argument of Athanasius and others against the Arians in the fourth century. But if He is to impart His holy nature into us, Christ must also be human. By incarnation Christ brought divinity as the sanctifying source into humanity as the object of sanctification.

As a synonym for deification, sanctification focuses on the change in nature that the believers undergo in their transformation from sinners into the sons of God. Holiness, an attribute of God's nature, is by definition what separates God from everything else. God alone is holy (Rev. 15:4), and in so saying, we declare that He is unique among all things and separated from all things. Thus, when we are sanctified, that is, when we are made holy (Eph. 1:4; Col. 1:22), we participate in that which sets God apart from everything else—His holiness. This participation is our deification.

Hebrews 2:10-11 also identifies sanctification with the sonship of the believers. The sons being led into glory (v. 10) are the ones who are being sanctified (v. 11). This identification also points to deification. As we shall see below, one aspect of our becoming God relies on our being the sons of God in life and nature. As His sons, we are not personally (or more technically, hypostatically) God, but we are certainly God by kind. The offspring of all living beings are not in person the same as their fathers, but they are in kind the same. According to Hebrews 2 we are being led into the glory of the sons of God through the process of sanctification, and for this

Christ was incarnated; that is, divinity was brought into humanity. The higher purpose of Christ's incarnation is this sanctification, this deification.

### ***Resurrection—Humanity Brought into Divinity***

The reasons for Christ's resurrection are manifold as well. Unfortunately, like the incarnation, the resurrection is viewed quite narrowly by modern Protestant Christianity. For the most part, Christ's resurrection is seen as a vindication of the effectiveness of His sacrifice for our sins and as the basis of our being justified before God. Christ "was delivered for our offenses and was raised for our justification" according to Romans 4:25. There is certainly this judicial purpose for Christ's resurrection, but the judicial aspect is not at all the full purpose. Justification, although by definition a judicial process, is called a "justification of life" in Romans 5:18, or, as Henry Alford explains, a "justification of (conferring, leading to) life" (2: 364). Hence, to see Christ's resurrection as merely the evidence of our acceptance before God is certainly too narrow. Christ's resurrection is primarily an organic matter, a matter fully in the realm of God's divine life. This regards the nature of His resurrection. And as to its effect, Christ's resurrection is also an organic matter which accomplishes man's deification. By His resurrection, Christ brought humanity into divinity. This higher view of resurrection deserves our careful attention.

**W**e should consider the effect of Christ's resurrection from two perspectives: how it affected Christ Himself and how it affects us, His believers. Christ, as we have said, is a unique person in the universe in that He is both completely God and perfectly man. As to His deity, He is called the only begotten Son of God (John 1:18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). This is an eternal designation which distinguishes Him in the Godhead from the Father and the Spirit and is something He has never shared and will never share with anyone. No one can take part in Christ's status as the only begotten Son. As to His humanity, He is called the Son of Man (Matt. 12:8; Mark 10:45; Luke 9:22; John 3:13; Acts 7:56; Rev. 14:14), being a genuine man and the perfect representative of our race. Once He became the Son of Man, Christ committed Himself



forever to humanity. He died as a man, He rose as a man (Matt. 17:9), He ascended as a man (John 6:62), He sits enthroned as a man (Matt. 26:64), He will return in glory as a man (25:31), and He will reign forever as a man (Luke 1:31-33). Christ will never abandon His humanity, and because of this, we humans, at least those who believe and receive Him, have a part in God through the union of the divine and human in Christ.

**B**ut the revelation of the New Testament goes further than this in describing who Christ is. Christ is not only the only begotten Son of God and the Son of Man but also the firstborn Son of God among many brothers (Rom. 8:29). Here we encounter a problem and, with its solution, a great revelation in the Bible. In His deity Christ is the only begotten Son of God, and as such, He can have no brothers. *Only begotten* means that no others are begotten, that there are no other sons. Yet the Bible also designates Christ as the firstborn Son of God among many brothers. On the morning of His resurrection Christ declared that His disciples were now His brothers and that His Father was now their Father (John 20:17). By this He made clear that we who believe in Him are now the sons of God (Gal. 3:26; John 1:12; Rom. 8:14). The question arises: How can the only begotten Son, who can have no brothers and can share sonship with no others, be the firstborn Son, who has many brothers and shares sonship with the many sons? The answer lies in Christ's being the Son of Man who was finally resurrected. Before His resurrection only what was divine in Christ could be called the Son of God; His humanity was not the Son of God in the strictest sense. In theology we speak of the *communicatio idiomatum*, whereby the characteristics of His divinity can be ascribed to Him as a man and the characteristics of His humanity can be ascribed to Him as God. But these ascriptions are at the level of description. We do not say that the Son of God, as to His divinity, actually died, for in His divinity He is intrinsically immortal; yet we can, as the Bible does, speak of God undergoing the process of death (Acts 20:28) by virtue of the humanity He took on in incarnation. Through resurrection, however, His humanity was “sonized.” The notion that Christ's humanity was deified through His resurrection is prominent in the work of Athanasius.<sup>7</sup> This is what Paul speaks of in Romans 1:3-4: “Concerning His Son, who

came out of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was designated the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness out of the resurrection of the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.” As the eternal only begotten Son, Christ never needed to be designated the Son of God; He is eternally the Son. But there was a designation made by God through Christ’s resurrection, and this designation concerned the humanity of Christ. In Acts 13:33 Paul declares that the resurrection was a birth for Christ as the Son of God: “God has fully fulfilled this promise to us their children in raising up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘You are My Son; this day have I begotten You.’” As the only begotten Son of God, Christ is eternally the Son. This refers to an eternal relationship between the Father and the Son, not to an event before which the Father had not begotten the Son. The Father is said to be eternally begetting the Son and thus eternally defining the distinction between the Father and the Son. But the resurrection is a point in time, a “today,” at which God is said to have begotten Christ as His Son. It can only be that the begetting here relates to Christ’s humanity. The divine life and nature of God, in the divinity of the only begotten Son of God, pervaded Christ’s humanity and deified it, making it now the Son of God as well. Hence, today Christ, the only begotten Son in His divinity and the glorified and deified Son of Man in His humanity, is the firstborn Son of God.

Perhaps the clearest passages of Scripture about man becoming God in the person of Christ are those that speak directly of Christ’s resurrection. First Corinthians 15, Paul’s vindication of the believers’ resurrection, offers the clearest, most succinct utterance on the matter: “The last Adam became a life-giving Spirit” (v. 45b). The last Adam is, without doubt, Christ as the ending of mankind; hence, He is man in the perfect sense. The life-giving Spirit can only be understood as God Himself, since only God gives life (John 5:21; 6:33, 63; Rom. 4:17; 2 Cor. 3:6) and there are not two Spirits in the Godhead.<sup>8</sup> Hence, Paul in this verse gives even finer utterance to the notion that man becomes God.

The apostle John speaks similarly in John 7, where Jesus and the Spirit are identified: “But this He said concerning the Spirit, whom those who believed into Him were about to receive; for the Spirit

was not yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified” (v. 39). Certainly, the Spirit of God, as the third of the Trinity, has existed eternally, and there has never been a time when the Spirit was “not yet.” This verse, then, must speak of an aspect of the Spirit that came into being through the glorification of the man Jesus, that is, through His resurrection. We see this as the deification of the man Jesus, by which His humanity became God and was, with His divinity, invested in and communicated through the life-giving Spirit. John 6 also contains this thought, though less obviously. In verses 53 and 54, the Lord said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life within yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up in the last day.” This refers to His humanity as the source of life to the believers. Of course, this was a difficult word for many of Christ’s disciples, but the Lord clarified by saying, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words which I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (v. 63). By this, He indicated that His vivifying humanity would be available to the believers through the Spirit. Again, in this we see the deification of Christ’s humanity.

**H**aving seen the deification of Christ’s humanity as an effect of His resurrection on Him, we should now consider the deification of the believers as the effect of His resurrection on them. Because Christ’s humanity has been deified, making Him the Son of God in His humanity as well as in His divinity, we who believe in Him can become the many sons of God and be deified also. Peter speaks of Christ’s resurrection from the point of view of its effect on the believers: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has regenerated us unto a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3). We were regenerated through Christ’s resurrection. We certainly have proof of our justification before God through Christ’s resurrection, but more importantly through His resurrection we were begotten as sons of God. Many Christians see our sonship as a mere adoption, but the Bible speaks of it as a birth (John 1:13; 1 John 5:1). We who believe in Christ have not merely been declared sons of God, as though only an adoption has taken place, but we possess God’s life and nature (1 John 5:12;

2 Pet. 1:4) and hence are truly and genuinely sons of God. By becoming sons of God, we are brought into the category of the divine and in this sense are made God, are deified. Of course, we are not sons of God in the sense that Christ is the only begotten Son of God, that is, in His incommunicable deity; but we are certainly sons of God in the same sense that Christ's humanity has been declared the firstborn Son of God, that is, through glorification and deification. He is the Firstborn among those who have been glorified and deified as the sons of God, and we are the many brothers, the many sons being led into that glory (Heb. 2:10).

**T**hough Christ was eternally God as to His divinity, Christ's humanity was designated God at His resurrection. However, both as to what He is in His divinity and as to what He is in His deified and uplifted humanity, Christ is hypostatically God; that is, He alone bears the identity of God by virtue of being God in Himself. He is self-identifiable as God and relies on nothing else for that designation. When we speak of the believers being made God, however, we are speaking of a different matter. The believers can be said to become God only in kind, in species, not personally. Whereas Christ exists as God by virtue of His own self-identity as God, the believers are made God only by virtue of their union with Christ, only through their dependence on Christ, who is God. Thus, the language of the New Testament concerning the deification of the believers is indirect, as only it should be. Although in the New Testament the believers are never said to be God explicitly, the fact of their deification is clearly expressed by a number of statuses that the believers hold.

To summarize, Christ's resurrection has more than just a judicial effect; rather, because it is a resurrection, it is primarily a matter of life. Its first effect was on Christ Himself in that by resurrection Christ's humanity was pervaded by His divine life and nature and was deified and designated the Son of God. After resurrection, Christ is the firstborn Son of God. As such, He becomes the prototype and source of our salvation (Heb. 2:10), making us also sons of God in life and nature by regenerating us through His resurrection. Just as His humanity was deified to be the Son of God, so also we are deified to be the many sons of God.

### *The Way We Are God*

In the preceding sections we have indicated that the statuses the believers enjoy imply that they become God at least in life and nature. Now we should draw these together in order to define in what way we will be God. We have noted that the New Testament is not direct in referring to man's deification. But the implication is clear if only casual consideration is given to the statuses we enjoy as believers in Christ. (In fact, this most mystical of phrases, *in Christ*, alludes to our being brought into God to enjoy an identification with Him so that He becomes us and we become Him.)

First and foremost,  
we are the sons of  
God, and this not  
by a mere decla-  
ration of adop-  
tion but by a  
divine birth. Be-  
cause we have re-  
ceived the life of God,  
we possess the essential

Whereas Christ exists  
as God by virtue of His  
own self-identity as God, the  
believers are made God only  
by virtue of their union with  
Christ, only through their  
dependence on Christ,  
who is God.

means to become God. Within the divine life that we receive at regeneration is the transforming power to make us God. This is the principle of life. All things begotten of a father grow to be like the father. We believe that the same holds true with us who have been begotten of God. First John 3:2 says as much: “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet been manifested what we will be. We know that if He is manifested, we will be like Him because we will see Him even as He is.” Notice that in John's thought the evidence of being like God is the ability to see God. This is a notion that figures prominently in the writings of the church fathers. We are what we can behold. Of course, just as physical sons do not become the same person as their fathers, so we will not become personally God; nevertheless, in kind we will be God, just as physical sons are in kind the same as their fathers. Furthermore, within the divine life is the divine nature, and by possessing the divine nature we become God in nature. Peter affirms that we

genuinely have the divine nature when he says that the believers “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). Some may argue that simply because we partake of the divine nature does not mean that we become God. But if we possess the life of God and enjoy the nature of God, are we not at least God in kind? If we deny this, we disregard what is certainly obvious, and there is no pious reason to do so if we at the same time respect the uniqueness of God. We are not personally God, but in life and nature we are God in kind.

Second, we are the Body of Christ. Unfortunately, much modern Christian usage has all but drained the term *the Body of Christ* of its force. Today to many Christians the word *body* means little more than it does in expressions like *governing body* or *body politic*. For them *the Body of Christ* is a metaphor for the collection of all believers. But there is certainly more depth to it than this. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that our physical bodies are the metaphor, not Christ’s mystical Body. What our bodies are on the physical level is what the Body of Christ is on a mystical level. In practical terms, our bodies are we and we are our bodies. Again, there is the distinction between the person and the bodily expression of the person, and this distinction is well preserved in the New Testament in that Christ is called the Head and the believers are called the Body. But there is without doubt an identification of the Body with the person of Christ in the New Testament. First Corinthians 12:12 says, “For even as the body is one and has many members, yet all the members of the body, being many, are one body, so also is the Christ,” calling the entire Body Christ. Because we are the Body of Christ, we are Christ, not personally but certainly as His fullness. He is uniquely the Head, uniquely the Christ to be worshipped, but we are His Body, the Christ expressed and manifested on the earth today.

Third, we will bear the glory of God; that is, we will be God not only in life and nature but also in expression. All Christians understand that ultimately we will be in glory. What is not clear to many, however, is that that glory will be the glory of God, not our own glory. In John 17 the Lord prayed: “And the glory which You have given Me I have given to them” (v. 22), indicating that the glory that Christ received in His resurrection and ascension

becomes the glory of the believers ultimately. In verse 24 the Lord continues: “I desire that they also may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory, which You have given Me.” Henry Alford points out that *behold* here means to “*behold and partake*—the very case supposes it. No *mere spectator could behold* this glory” (1: 882). This echoes the notion we have noted above that what we behold we become by partaking of it. In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul speaks of the ongoing process of beholding the glory of God and thereby being transformed into this glory: “But we all with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord Spirit.” In eternity the New Jerusalem, the aggregate of all God’s redeemed people, will descend “having the glory of God” (Rev. 21:11). God’s transformed people “will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads” (22:4). Again, the apostle John appeals to the notion that seeing God indicates a transformation to that which is seen; we will see His face because we will be like Him. Further, His name will be on our foreheads. This does not merely mean that we are His possession and that His name demonstrates His ownership; rather, His name becomes a label upon us, indicating what we have become. Just as the Lamb of God will appear at the end of the age bearing the divine title of the second of the Trinity, the Logos of God (19:13), so we will dwell eternally with God, bearing the name of our God.

**F**ourth, as individual believers we become God in life, nature, and expression. Primarily in the writings of Paul we find the expression of a union with Christ so thorough that we are identified with Him. The clearest example of this is in Philippians 1:21: “For to me, to live is Christ.” There have been numerous attempts to avoid the stark meaning of this verse, all of which have been motivated by preconceptions about what the believers can or cannot be. But taken simply, it appears that Paul meant that his living among the churches and serving them was Christ’s living and serving. Paul so thoroughly expressed Christ that in practicality he became Christ to all he encountered. In Galatians 2:20 he offers even finer detail: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” By outward appearance, Paul lived among the believers, but the inner reality was that Christ did the living within him

and through him, and to those around Paul Christ was practically manifested. Certainly Paul was there, but just as certainly Christ was too. This is the pattern for all the believers. The goal of God's salvation is that all His chosen people would become Christ in this way.

For us as believers to say, as Paul did, "For to me, to live is Christ," is not merely a declaration that we somehow represent Christ in our daily living. We can say with Paul that for us to live is Christ because in God's full salvation we are made God in life, nature, and expression. This happens through what the Bible calls transformation. Transformation, by definition, refers to a change from one state to another. The question is, At what level does Christian transformation operate? What is Paul referring to when he speaks of the believers being transformed? (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). It seems that many Christians believe that transformation is merely a change in behavior, from one lower ethical and moral level to a higher one. But transformation refers to something more intrinsic than mere outward conduct. Contrasting *transformation* with *transfiguration*, Richard Chenevix Trench makes clear the intrinsic character of transformation: "If a Dutch garden were changed into an Italian one, this would be *metaschēmatismos* ['transfiguration']; but if I were to transform a garden into something wholly different, such as a city, this would be *metamorphōsis* ['transformation']" (277, Trench's example is remarkable since the Bible begins with a garden and ends with a city.). Trench's understanding of transformation is based upon his careful analysis of the meaning of *morphē*, the root word in *metamorphōsis*. Of this base word, he says, "*Morphē* signifies the form as it expresses the inner life" (276), and "*Morphē* refers to something's essence" (278). Thus, *transformation* respects not only the outward manifestation of a change but more intrinsically the inner, essential nature of the change. New Testament transformation is nothing less than a metamorphosis, a change from what we are in our created but fallen state to what we are to be in our regenerated and uplifted state. Transformation makes the believers something intrinsically different from what they were before regeneration. Formerly, they were fallen human beings; now they are sons of God and members of Christ, having God's life and nature as the organic reality of their new being.



In this sense, they are no longer merely human but now divine, no longer merely man but now God. Certainly God is alone the true God by virtue of His own self-existence, but just as certainly His redeemed and regenerated believers become God by virtue of their organic union with Him and by virtue of their complete dependence on Him for their existence on the uplifted and divine plane.

**W**hile we may recoil at the thought of human beings being made God, thinking that such a notion blasphemously robs God of the glory that He rightfully deserves, in actuality the genuine deification alluded to in the Bible provides God a way to be glorified by humanity in the fullest way. The believers are being transformed from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18), from one degree of glory to another, until ultimately we will fully have the glory of God. At that time, what the believers will express is not themselves but God. As human beings, they will manifest God. Having, then, the life of God, the nature of God, and the glory of God, the believers can certainly be said to be God, and in being God, they glorify who God is. In the end, because man has become God, Paul’s declaration concerning the end of all things shall be made true: “...that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). **AC**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Athanasius, “The Incarnation of the Word,” 54:3. The full sentence, from which I take the title of this article, reads in Greek: Αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐνηνθρώπησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν (“For He became/was made human that we might become/be made God”).

<sup>2</sup>While some wrangling will allow a translator to render Athanasius’s θεοποιηθῶμεν as “become divine” despite the problems associated with such a rendering, it is hardly possible to render Basil’s θεὸν γενέσθαι (*On the Holy Spirit* 9:23) as anything but “being made God.” Other examples exist.

<sup>3</sup>The early fathers used a range of expressions to refer to deification, but the clearest were θεοποιῶ (*theopoiō*) “to make [someone] God; deify” and θέωσις (*theōsis*) “deification.”

<sup>4</sup>See his *Epistle to the Ephesians*, XII, and *Epistle to the Magnesians*, XIV, on the expression *attain to God*; and his *Epistle to Polycarp*, VI, on the expression *take part in God*.

<sup>5</sup>We are using this term in the sense that it was employed in the New Testament and the early church. In the New Testament the Greek word *oikonomia* refers to an arrangement, administration, or plan by God for the carrying out of His eternal purpose. In the fathers the term was frequently used to denote God's going forth in His Trinity to become one with man through incarnation and to accomplish our redemption—the more concrete manifestation of God's plan.

<sup>6</sup>I have drawn heavily from the ministry of Witness Lee in this section and am greatly indebted to him. His influence here is too pervasive for citation.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., see "Four Discourses against the Arians." I:42; III:48, 53.

<sup>8</sup>Hopefully, we have adequately argued this in a previous issue of *A&C*. See Robichaux 47-48.

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