Becoming God: This is an astounding subject, is it not? To many it is astonishing to suggest, and to actually believe and teach, that, according to the Bible, the redeemed, justified, regenerated believers in Christ will eventually become God in the sense of being the same as God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead, that is, not in rank or position, and not as an object of worship. This will take place without any essential change in the Godhead, in the eternal, immutable, triune being of the one true and unique God. We are mindful of the fact, however, that many will react in dismay, perhaps in horror, to find themselves confronted with the assertion that in Christ and through God's complete salvation we who believe in Christ and are in Christ will become God in the limited sense posited here. Some may immediately judge this to be a pagan notion that blasphemes the transcendence and majesty of God. Others may insist that "Scripture forbids this as idolatry and blasphemy" (Martin 101). Perhaps some, without due consideration, will choose to agree with R. C. Sproul in repudiating "the crass view that salvation imparts some measure of deity to us" (43). Yet others may follow Sproul in misunderstanding the biblical truth concerning deification as "the heresy of Apotheosis ('becoming God')" and then set out to warn believers that this "ghastly heresy" of "Apotheosis threatens the very essence of Christianity" (45)[1]. Without proceeding beyond this opening paragraph, certain readers may accuse us of heresy or blasphemy or of yielding to and then perpetuating the word of the serpent in Genesis 3: "You will become like God" (v. 5). Of course, as the open, objective, and fair-minded reader will see, we do not harbor or promulgate heresy; we would never utter blasphemy against the unique true and living God, whose name is blessed forever; and we repudiate both the satanic impulse in Isaiah 14 and the satanic lie in Genesis 3. In the face of certain opposition, some of which may be rash, unreasonable, and unprincipled,[2] we intend to present as clearly as possible a complete and balanced testimony to the divinely revealed truth in the Scriptures that in Christ, through God's salvation, and according to God's economy, we, the believers in Christ, can and will become God in life, in nature, in constitution, and in expression but not in the Godhead and never as an object of worship. We therefore wish to devote this edition of *Affirmation & Critique* to the marvelous matter of deification in Christ.

This article is intended to serve a dual purpose. As the first essay in an issue of *Affirmation & Critique* devoted to the theme of deification, it serves as an introduction to our subject—the deification of the believers in Christ according to God's economy, based on God's judicial redemption, in the organic union with Christ, through God's organic salvation, and for the eternal, consummate, corporate expression of the Triune God in His redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified tripartite elect. This article is intended to establish the boundaries and set the tone for our discourse on a matter of utmost importance to God and to the people of God. This essay, however, may be regarded as standing on its own in an attempt to provide an informed, judicious, and biblical overview of the amazing truth, revealed in the Scriptures, that in Christ we, the believers in Christ, may become God in life, in nature, in constitution, in appearance, and in expression but not in the Godhead and not as an object of worship.

Any endeavor to present an overview of the truth concerning deification should appeal first for an open mind, like that of the Bereans, and then both exhibit and call for an irenic spirit in considering a topic of this nature and magnitude. A proper survey should then discuss the criterion of truth, declare the governing and controlling scriptural revelation regarding the one, unique, true, and living God, expose and denounce the satanic counterfeit of deification, examine and reject spurious notions of deification, pay respect to views of deification similar to the one propounded, and then set forth, as clearly and

concisely as possible, the truth of deification as unveiled in the Word of God. This is what will be attempted here.

An Appeal for an Open Mind

Many years ago we were encouraged by certain of our critics to be like the noble Bereans in Acts 17:11. According to them, to be a Berean is to do nothing more than continually test teachings by the Scriptures. We agree that all Christians should emulate the Bereans but not in the narrow, critical way advocated by some. Rather, we should be today's Bereans in the twofold sense of receiving the word with all eagerness and examining the Scriptures daily. Since the matter of an open, unbiased mind is vital in knowing the truth, it is worthwhile to ponder the case of the Bereans.

Acts 17:11 does not say that the Bereans searched the Scriptures in order to disprove Paul or to find ground to accuse him of heresy. They turned to the Word as the means of determining the truth.

According to Acts 17:1-9 Paul and Silas went into a synagogue, and Paul reasoned with those assembled from the Scriptures, "opening and setting before them that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, and saying, This is the Christ, the Jesus whom I announce to you" (v. 3). A number believed and joined themselves to Paul and Silas. Moved with envy, the unbelieving religionists stirred up opposition and "set the city in an uproar" (v. 5). Immediately, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. Upon their arrival, the two apostles again entered into a synagogue of the Jews. "Now these people were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so" (v. 11). The Greek word rendered noble denotes a quality of mind and heart. They were more *noble* in the twofold sense of receiving the word with eagerness and examining the Scriptures.

The Bereans, being neither biased nor bigoted, had an open mind and a receptive heart. Although the word proclaimed by Paul and Silas was something utterly new, the Bereans were willing to give it a fair hearing and honest consideration. They gave Paul a sincere and interested hearing. Their first thought was not to conform to accepted beliefs but to the written Word of God. They were very different from religious people who would rather be orthodox than scriptural. In fact, the Bereans did not simply receive the word—they received it with eagerness and willingness and with a proper attitude and disposition. What a tremendous contrast to the religionists in Thessalonica!

Such openness of mind and receptivity need to be balanced, however, by the second aspect of Berean nobility: They were noted for "examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." Several matters require attention here.

First, the Bereans themselves searched the Scriptures. Instead of relying on others to do the research for them, they exercised their right of personal judgment by directly examining the written Word of God, thereby avoiding two extremes of undiscerningly believing the word of the apostles and of uncritically accepting the conclusions of others (such as the Thessalonian religionists). Assuming their own responsibility for arriving at the knowledge of the truth, they themselves examined the Scriptures.

The fact that the Bereans examined *the Scriptures* indicates that the object of their research was the Word of God, not the opinions of the rabbis or the traditions of the religionists.

These Bereans *examined* the Scriptures; they pored over them and studied them thoroughly and in detail. The Greek word rendered *examined* is *anakrino,* which means to investigate, to make inquiry. This word is used as a legal term with the meaning of conducting an examination or investigating (Luke 23:14; Acts 12:19). The word denotes an official or judicial inquisition and suggests that the Bereans were unbiased judges.

Furthermore, the Bereans searched the Scriptures *daily.* This suggests that they studied the Word not only at set times in the synagogue but continually in their daily life. They were not characterized by rash acceptance or rash rejection; on the contrary, daily they studied the Word, thoroughly and comprehensively, before finally deciding to believe in Christ as preached by Paul and Silas. They were willing to spend whatever time was required to consider what they heard honestly and fairly in the light of the Scriptures.

This brings us to a crucial point: The Bereans examined the Scriptures "to see whether these things were so." The goal, the objective, of their daily examination of the Scriptures was to find out whether or not the word taught by the apostles was true according to the Word of God. In studying the Scriptures, they had a pure motive, for their aim was to ascertain the truth of God's Word and cleave to it. It is significant that Acts 17:11 does not say that the Bereans searched the Scriptures in order to disprove Paul or to find ground to accuse him of heresy. They turned to the Word as the means of determining the

truth, not as a source of ammunition to use in defending themselves against a teaching that threatened the religious status quo.

Every student of the Bible and every seeker of the divine truth should appreciate the balance of these Bereans. On the one hand, their mind was open to receive the word spoken by the apostles; on the other hand, they examined the Scriptures. We ask that our readers be like the Bereans, neither rashly accepting nor rashly rejecting our testimony regarding deification. We appeal for an open mind, for Berean nobility.

An Appeal for an Irenic Spirit

In addition to having an open mind to receive the word and to examine the Scriptures, we need an irenic spirit. *Irenic* is a good word; it means "promoting peace, conciliatory." Although it may be necessary, as we discourse or even debate over the truth, to speak forthrightly, our tone should always be pleasant and respectful, especially toward those with whom we disagree. We are writing as believers in Christ to fellow believers, and surely we all need to hold to truth in love, as Paul admonishes us in Ephesians 4:15. Thus, there is no room for pride or arrogance, disdain or sarcasm, coarseness or rudeness. It is our sincere conviction that we are essentially correct in our understanding of the deification of the believers in Christ, and it is our desire to present the truth in purity and faithfulness with a holy and humble spirit. If we need to be corrected, we wish to receive adjustment with humility. To this end, we once again extend an invitation to publish without editorial revision worthy rebuttals (limited to 3000 words) of the positions we advance. In this matter, we choose to "walk as children of light," as those who, through the marvelous divine birth, have become "light in the Lord" (5:8). It is our intention, therefore, to discourse concerning deification with an irenic spirit and in a way that is worthy of God the Father, whose name must be sanctified on earth.

We ask that our readers be like the Bereans, neither rashly accepting nor rashly rejecting our testimony regarding deification. We appeal for an open mind, for Berean nobility.

We appeal to our readers to respond in kind, agreeing if they can and disagreeing, if they must, in a manner fitting people of God. Regrettably, this has not always been the case, for some have thought, erroneously, that our writings can be dismissed by uttering a few caustic comments or by using words such as *cult* or *heresy* as pejorative expressions or by distorting our position and then attacking it.

Perhaps an illustration would be helpful. A few years ago, we received a particularly strident response to Kerry S. Robichaux's article "…that we might be made God" in the July 1996 issue of *Affirmation & Critique.* Writing with an uncomely spirit, the respondent accuses us of admitting that the Bible does not teach that man becomes God, of bringing what he calls an ad hoc approach to new heights, of regarding the writings of the church fathers as being on the same level as Scripture, of combing through such writings "in a desperate attempt to find legitimization," of not honoring "canonical Scripture as the standard authoritative measuring rod and only legitimate starting point of reference," of "frantically" scrambling to find a few passages of Scripture to support our teaching, of being those who "simply resort to non-canonical writings," of using fallible tradition as our authoritative basis for presenting "your pet doctrine of man becoming God," of engaging in a "rabid insistence on introducing this extrascriptural man becoming God 'doctrine' into Christian circles and actually insinuating it is a crucial item of the faith," of "using tradition and not Scripture" as our "authoritative basis," of setting forth a notion that "reeks of eastern mysticism," of advocating a "perversion of the gospel," of "gleefully and with apparent abandonment join[ing] the recklessness of the church fathers by dogmatically promoting this non-canonical, extrascriptural tradition based teaching," of being involved with "the commodization of God and subsequent dissection of God into various parts," of making an application that is "especially insidious, as it provides the foundation for all manner of deviant teachings and practices to proliferate," of teaching a doctrine that "some would reasonably argue is grossly heretical," of displaying "the temerity to shamelessly disseminate this 'man becomes God' concept dressed up in a Christian cloak of apparent respectability," and of crossing the "imaginary line into the realm of blatant idolatrous man worship." Notice the use of the following: *pet doctrine, frantically scramble, desperate attempt, rabid insistence, insinuating, grossly heretical, commodization, dissection, insidious, deviant, perversion, reeks of eastern mysticism, temerity, shamelessly disseminate, gleefully, recklessness, blatant idolatrous man worship.* This kind of writing, laced with malice and uttered in contempt, is altogether alien to proper, respectful, loving Christian discourse. Such a response to a thoughtful, well-reasoned article on deification bears striking similarities to the hostilities of the Thessalonian religionists who opposed the apostles; it is diametrically opposed to the nobility of the Bereans. We invite our readers to study Kerry Robichaux's article for themselves and see if they find it rabid, deviant, and

insidious. And of course we invite our readers to read this entire issue of *Affirmation & Critique* with care, giving it the mature consideration it merits and requires.

We emphasize this matter, even at some length, because we realize that propounding the truth concerning deification is challenging for both writer and reader alike. Whatever conclusions the readers may draw after pondering all the articles presented here, we hope that they will not react as biased religionists, who are unable to receive anything new, but as noble Bereans, who have an open mind and who diligently examine the Scriptures motivated by the love of the truth and the willingness to pay the price to gain it.

To show that we welcome critical responses if offered in a proper spirit, we repeat here the invitation offered in our maiden January 1996 issue:

> We recognize that some of our readers may wish to engage in a constructive dialogue in response of our affirmation and critique. We invite, therefore, reasonable, article-length responses to our presentations (3000 words or less). We welcome, and will provide space for, articles that present alternative scholarly view on the issues we have addressed. These will appear in an occasional department called "Counterpoint." While we reserve our editorial privilege to accept or reject submissions, the submissions we print will bear their original content. Submissions to "Counterpoint" will be accepted if they are thoughtful and delivered in a proper spirit. Only signed contributions will be accepted. Needless to say, we will offer our further comments on the points raised by these guest authors. On matters of great important we welcome an ongoing exchange in print. (5)

We teach the deification of the believers in Christ not because it was proclaimed by the ancient church but because it is unveiled in the Word of God.

The Holy Scriptures—Our Criterion of Truth

Our sole criterion of truth is the Bible, the written Word of God. Although we respect the creeds and the decisions of the councils, we cannot and will not be limited by them, as they, due perhaps to the circumstances at the time, do not embody or declare the complete divine revelation in the Scriptures. With respect to deification in particular, while familiar with the doctrine concerning this in the ancient church, we do not derive our teaching on deification from that source. The accusations of the critic cited above notwithstanding, we, to use his words, "recognize canonical Scripture as the standard authoritative measuring rod and only legitimate starting point of reference." We teach the deification of the believers in Christ not because it was proclaimed by the ancient church but because it is unveiled in the Word of God. Scripture, not tradition, is our unique, authoritative basis. Witness Lee's testimony regarding this is also our own: "I have not been influenced by any teaching about deification, but I have learned from my study of the Bible that God does intend to make the believers God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead" (*Samuel* 166). We hold the Bible as the complete and only divine revelation. No matter what certain critics may wrongly assert, our teaching concerning deification rests entirely and absolutely on the Word of God. Since this is our confession and our practice, perhaps the time is coming, and now is, for all believers and for the church as a whole to reread and restudy the Scriptures to see if this thing—the believers becoming God—is so.

The One True and Living God

Any discussion of the deification of the believers in Christ must be governed, directed, and limited by a controlling thought: There is only one true and living God. The one, true God is self-existing, ever-existing, eternal, infinite, personal, immaterial, transcendent, omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. There never has been and there never will be a God other than, or in addition to, the one, unique God. This is the most basic revelation in the Scriptures. In many instances and ways, the Bible says that God is uniquely one: "There is no God but one" (1 Cor. 8:4). "God is one" (Rom. 3:30). "There is one God" (1 Tim. 2:5). "You were shown these things that you might know that it is Jehovah who is God; there is no other besides Him" (Deut. 4:35). "Know therefore today and bring it to heart that Jehovah is God in heaven above and upon the earth below; there is no other" (v. 39). "For You are great, and You do wondrous deeds; / You alone are God" (Psa. 86:10). "You are My witnesses, declares Jehovah.... / Before Me there was no God formed, / Neither will there be any after Me" (Isa. 43:10). "Thus says Jehovah the King of Israel, / And his Redeemer, Jehovah of hosts, / I am the First and I am the Last, / And apart from Me there is no God" (44:6). "Who related this long ago; / Who declared it from that time? / Was is not I, Jehovah? / And there is no other God besides Me; / A righteous God and Savior, / And there is no one except Me" (45:21). It is an incontrovertible fact that there is one God and besides Him there cannot be another, not here or anywhere, not now or ever.

The only true God is Jehovah Elohim, the great uncreated, eternal I Am. He, and He alone, has the ground to declare, "I Am." He is self-existing, having no cause outside of Himself; thus, He is unique in that He is a non-contingent Being, depending for His existence only on Himself. In his study of Exodus Witness Lee says, "He is the only One who *is,* the only One who has the reality of being. The verb 'to be' should not be applied absolutely to anyone or anything except to Him. He is the only self-existing being" (57). God *is.* "He who comes forward to God must believe that He is" (Heb. 11:6). As the I Am, He is. He alone has independent existence; we, by contrast, are totally and eternally dependent beings. This means that even in eternity, when we have been glorified to become God in expression as well as in life and in nature, we will continue to be God's creatures, ever relying on Him. Although we will become God in Christ, we will not exist apart from our organic union with Him. We will not exist as independent gods ruling over a world of our own making, as heretically posited in Mormonism.

That God is and that we are nothing apart from Him is a lesson believers need to learn as soon as possible. For us to have the faith to confess that He is, that He alone is I Am, is to glorify Him. For one to have the temerity to assert of oneself "I Am" is to insult Him. Only He is self-existing; only He is ever-existing. Witness Lee's remarks are instructive:

> God requires you only to believe that He is. The verb *to be* is actually the divine title of our Triune God. In Exodus 3 Moses asked God what His name was. God answered that His name is I Am That I Am (vv. 13-14). Our God's name is the verb *to be.* He is "I Am That I Am."…This is the very essence of the short word *believe that God is.* To believe that God is implies that you are not. He must be the only One, the unique One, in everything, and we must be nothing in everything. (*Romans* 73, 75)

Although we will become God in Christ, we will not exist apart from our organic union with Him. We will not exist as independent gods ruling over a world of our own making.

On the one hand, we are becoming God in Christ; on the other hand, only He is—only He is I Am—and we are not. The more we become Him, the more we realize that we are nothing without Him or apart from Him. As the I Am, He is the eternal, self-existing, ever-existing God.[3]

This unique God, the I Am, is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe and everything in it: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). "How many are Your works, O Jehovah! / In wisdom You have made all of them" (Psa. 104:24). "O Jehovah of hosts, God of Israel, who dwells between the cherubim, You, You alone are God of all the kingdoms of the earth; You made the heavens and the earth" (Isa. 37:16). "Neither is He served by human hands as though He needed anything in addition, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things" (Acts 17:25). "Because out from Him and through Him and to Him are all things" (Rom. 11:36). "By faith we understand that the universe has been framed by the word of God, so that what is seen has not come into being out of things which appear" (Heb. 11:3). "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive the glory and the honor and the power, for You have created all things, and because of Your will they were, and were created" (Rev. 4:11).

The unique, creating God is immutable and eternal: "For I, Jehovah, do not change" (Mal. 3:6). "All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variation or shadow cast by turning" (James 1:17). "Before the mountains were brought forth, / And before You gave birth to the earth and the world, / Indeed from eternity to eternity, You are God" (Psa. 90:2). "Do you not know, / Or have you not heard, / That the eternal God, Jehovah, / The Creator of the ends of earth, / Does not faint and does not become weary?" (Isa. 40:28). "For thus says the high and exalted One, / Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy" (57:15). "For the invisible things of Him, both His eternal power and divine characteristics, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being perceived by the things made, so that they would be without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). "Now to the King of the ages, incorruptible, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim. 1:17).

The only God—the unique, self-existing, ever-existing God—is our unique source; we depend on Him for our existence, and we trust in His revelation for all truth regarding Himself. James R. White gives an admirable summary of the essential truth concerning the one true God:

> There is only one God. God has eternally been God; that is, God did not "become" God at some point in the past, but has eternally been God. God is the Creator of all things. There is nothing that exists in nature that is not the direct creation of the one true God. God is not growing, evolving, or changing. He is independent of all other things, owing His existence to no one or anything else. God has all power and is not limited by anything outside of His own nature. (45-46)

The truth concerning God is foundational for and determinative of our presentation of deification, for this truth sets the necessary limits. The believers in Christ cannot be deified in the sense of sharing the Godhead or of becoming an object of worship or of participating in God's incommunicable attributes (e.g., self-existence and infinity). As the believers in Christ become God in Christ and through God's organic salvation, the existence and attributes of God are in no way threatened. Another God can never and will never come into being. There are permanent boundaries to our deification: In Christ we become God in life and in nature for God's expression, but we do not become God in the Godhead or as an object of worship. God is not affected in His eternal being by the believers' becoming the same as He is in life and in nature, just as a human father is not changed in his person and fatherhood as the result of begetting children who are the same as he is in life and in nature. We do not become the person of God; thus, contrary to the specious accusations of certain critics, in our view of deification nothing happens to God in His eternal Godhead once we become God in the limited sense of being constituted with His life, nature, and communicable attributes. God remains the one, unique, true God, self-existing, eternal, infinite, immutable, and transcendent. Respecting this fact as much as all other genuine Christians do, we nevertheless assert that in God's economy the believers in Christ will be made God in a manner that maintains His unique Godhead while allowing His children, for His good pleasure, to became the same as He is in every way that He wishes to make possible.

As the believers in Christ become God in Christ and through God's organic salvation, the existence and attributes of God are in no way threatened. Another God can never and will never come into being.

We can simultaneously uphold the truth concerning God and the truth concerning deification because

> 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. (Robichaux 23)

God's operation in His economy by which, in Christ, He shares with us His life, nature, and communicable attributes makes our deification possible. God's transcendence, inaccessibility, and incommunicability maintain His unique, eternal Godhead and set the boundaries of our deification. From eternity to eternity, He is God alone, yet in eternity we shall be God in Him. He alone will be worshipped, and we, His deified elect, will take the lead to worship Him.

The Satanic Impulse and the Satanic Lie

Some critics of any and every teaching about deification are quick to argue that to claim that believers can become God in God's salvation is either to follow Satan in his self-exaltation described in Isaiah 14 or to yield to Satan's temptation recorded in Genesis 3. Anyone who has read through the Bible even once has at least some familiarity with these two chapters. It is totally without merit to insist that to speak of the believers' deification is to be driven by the satanic impulse or inveigled by the satanic life. The fact that a devilish counterfeit of a particular divine truth may exist is no basis for denying the reality of the divine truth itself.

Exposing the satanic impulse toward self-exaltation and self-deification, Isaiah 14:13-14 says,

> But you, you said in your heart: / I will ascend to heaven; / Above the stars of God / I will exalt my throne. / And I will sit upon the mount of assembly / In the uttermost parts of the north. / I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; / I will make myself like the Most High.

Again and again the enemy declares, " I will," expressing his perverse ambition to occupy the status of deity and to be like God in His Godhead. This is not an aspiration to be made God in life and in nature; it is the overreaching intention to be equal with God in His unique, incommunicable status and Godhead. We should note that verse 14 says, "I will make myself like the Most High," a clear and evident case of attempted self-deification. To equate the satanic impulse toward self-deification and equality with God in status and Godhead with the teaching that in Christ and through God's salvation the believers become God not in the Godhead but in the divine life and in the divine nature is to misunderstand Isaiah 14:13-14 and to be oblivious to the New Testament revelation related to the scope and consummation of the salvation of God in the economy of God. It is an extreme error to use Isaiah 14:13-14 with its exposure of self-deification in the attempt to negate the truth, based on the Scriptures, that in Christ the believers become God in the limited sense enunciated in this article and elsewhere in our writings. We can surely assert the truth of deification in Christ without being controlled by the satanic impulse toward equality with God in the Godhead. Therefore, we reject as wholly

without merit the accusation that to teach New Testament deification is to reenact the sin of Satan.

The satanic impulse in Isaiah 14 is hidden within the satanic lie in Genesis 3:5: "You will become like God, knowing good and evil" was the serpent's seductive promise to the woman. Through his rebellion against God and the derangement that ensued, the devil has become an evil father, reproducing himself in his children and making them serpents as his duplication and expression (John 8:44). The human beings created by God in His image and according to His likeness for His duplication through regeneration for His expression have been usurped by Satan for his counterfeit of the divine economy, his counterplot with its intention to mock God and glorify himself. We confess that in ourselves as fallen human beings, we are serpents, children of the devil, but God gave His only begotten Son for us, sending Him in the likeness of the flesh of sin and concerning sin. On the cross, the Son of God who had become the Son of Man died not only as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world but also as the fulfillment of the type of the bronze serpent (3:14) to destroy the devil (Heb. 2:14) and to condemn sin in the flesh (Rom. 8:3). Now by believing into Christ we can be born of God to have eternal life and thereby become children of God possessing the life and nature of God. Through the Lord's mercy and grace, we reject the "bait" of becoming like God in the sense of knowing good and evil. This replication of satanic self-deification we abhor and condemn without reservation. However, we do not agree that the lie should deprive us of the truth or that the false should rob us of the genuine. This means that we reject the notion that avoiding the satanic impulse and the satanic lie requires denying the ultimate goal of the divine economy—that the believers become the same as God not in the Godhead (Isa. 14) and not in the sense of knowing good and evil (Gen. 3) but in the sense of becoming God in life and in nature for His expression. May God's people learn to discern between the counterfeit (Satan's imitation) and the real (God's revelation) and thus avoid the pitiful error of denying the latter out of loathing the former. We understand the satanic impulse and the satanic lie as much as, if not more, than other Christians. We will not permit the pervasiveness of the lie to hinder us from proclaiming the preciousness of the true. We simultaneously renounce the satanic counterfeit and announce the divine reality. We request, therefore, that no one harbor the puerile idea that one can disprove the teaching regarding deification by simply mouthing the words found in Isaiah 14 and Genesis 3. Such a stratagem, if it is even worthy of this appellation, is of no avail against the truth.

According to the Word of God, the only way the divine element can enter into a fallen person is for that person to believe into Christ, to be justified by faith, and to be born of God to become a child of God.

Spurious Notions of Deification

Since the devil is a liar and a deceiver who desires nothing more than to perpetuate the satanic impulse and the satanic lie, it should come as no surprise that there are spurious notions of deification that must be examined, exposed, and expunged.

The Concept of the Innate Divinity of Human Beings

One false notion of deification is the assertion that at the core of the self, human beings are essentially divine and need only to realize this and then activate the so-called God-self, the self which, allegedly, is one with God and even is God. In describing for the sake of criticizing this notion, Pelphrey states, "A key point is the assumption that human beings have a divine nature hidden within" (13). This idea is common among mystics, Gnostics (both ancient and modern), and adherents of New Age philosophy. The underlying thought is that buried in human nature is a spark of divinity that needs to be released. Deification in this view consists not in becoming God but in being enlightened to see that one already is God. "The fundamental idea is that whatever is called 'God' is really what lies deep within ourselves. We are ourselves divine. We are gods on earth" (3). "God (or the divine spirit) is hidden within ourselves and is the only true reality. This inner Self must be discovered carefully through personal development. Therefore, we ourselves are God" (13).

This notion is alien to the Scriptures and contrary to the nature of humanity in God's creation. The Bible nowhere suggests that human beings are gods by creation or that there is a divine spark, an imprisoned element of deity, in humankind. "God is not 'within' us in the sense that we ourselves are divine or take the place of God or are gods" (13). According to the Word of God, the only way the divine element can enter into a fallen person is for that person to believe into Christ, to be justified by faith, and to be born of God to become a child of God. In other words, the divine element enters a human being not through birth, human generation, but through rebirth, the divine regeneration.

This is in keeping with the nature of humankind in God's creation. Human beings are tripartite—spirit, soul, and body. The human spirit, though similar to the life of God

and the Spirit of God, is neither the divine life nor the divine Spirit. The spirit of man is not something divine in man but something in man that is similar to God and is capable of contacting God, receiving God, containing God, and being one with God. For this reason, it is possible—and for believers a glorious fact!—that the human spirit created by God can be regenerated by God to be joined to God, mingled with God, and one with God. We reject the concept of the innate divinity of human beings; we affirm the innate ability of human beings, as creatures of God, to be born of God to become God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead.

The Concept of Evolution into God

Another spurious notion of deification is the concept of evolution into God. According to this school of thought, a human person is not God but has the potential, given sufficient time, to evolve into God. "God wants us to become Himself (or Herself or Itself). We are growing toward godhood. God is the goal of evolution" (Peck 270). What an abhorrent idea! Humankind cannot bridge the gap between God and human beings through evolution. This concept is a subtle variation of the satanic impulse to become God in the Godhead. Whereas in Isaiah a rebellious being sought to become God by a sudden, drastic revolution, here we see rebellious beings expecting to become God through gradual, incremental evolution. We repudiate both the concept of seizing the Godhead by revolution and the concept of becoming the Godhead by evolution. Unfortunately, some of today's religionists, devoid of discernment, continue to confound evolution into God with becoming God in God's economy and persist in accusing those who advocate the latter of teaching the former. Let us, therefore, be unequivocally clear: We reject any thought that human beings can evolve into God. As always, we have treated this pernicious idea with contempt as something unworthy of the true and living God.

Another spurious notion of deification is the concept of evolution into God. According to this school of thought, a human person is not God but has the potential, given sufficient time, to evolve into God.

It is unfortunate that some Christian researchers cannot discern between evolution into God and the believers becoming God in the divine economy through the divine dispensing. As a result of their own lack of clarity and their failure to distinguish things that differ, they falsely accuse those who teach the biblical truths of God's economy, especially the crucial matter of God's working Himself into His redeemed people, of advocating heresy. For instance, to accuse us of teaching that human beings are evolving into God is utterly false and without foundation. According to the Bible, we believe and teach that the Triune God in Christ as the Spirit is dispensing Himself into the believers, infusing His element into them and causing them to be permeated and saturated with His life and nature to be His expression. The fact that, as children of God, we partake, in Christ, of the life and nature of God in Christ does not mean that we become God Himself in His Godhood or Godhead. Yes, the Triune God is being wrought into us, and we are partaking of His life, nature, and communicable attributes, but we are definitely not evolving into the Godhead. The notion of evolution into God is utterly incompatible with becoming God in life and in nature according to God's economy. "Since our Father is God, what are we, the sons? The sons must be the same as their Father in life and nature.…However, none of us are or can be God in His Godhead as an object of worship" (Lee, *Christian Life* 133). "Because our life is ourself and because Christ is our life, we may say that Christ has become us. However, to say this is neither to deify ourselves[4] nor to teach 'evolution into God'" (Lee, *Colossians* 529).

The Charismatic Concept of "Little Gods"

It is alarming that certain television evangelists hold the concept of "little Gods"—the idea that human beings, either by creation or through regeneration, are "God's kind of being." This notion, which is far from coherent, is often combined with the idea that believers can exercise "the force of faith" to claim miracles and prosperity, calling things into being as if they were God Himself. Consider the teaching of Kenneth Copeland, who claims that Adam "was not subordinate to God.… Adam was walking as a god" (Side 1). It is not surprising, therefore, that Copeland would respond to Paul Crouch's exclamation, "I am a little god!" by saying, "You are anything that He is" ("Kenneth Copeland Continued"), thereby obliterating the distinction between humanity, including redeemed and regenerated humanity, and the unique Godhead. A web page called "These Men Think That They're Gods!" offers more examples:

> God draws no distinction between Himself and us. God opens up the union of the very godhead (Trinity), and brings us into it. (Paul Crouch)

> Man is a spirit who possesses a soul and lives in a body.…He is in the same class with God. (Kenneth Hagin)

> You are everything He was and everything He is and ever He shall be….Don't say, "I have." Say, "I am, I am, I am, I am, I am." (Benny Hinn)

> If you say, I am, you're saying you're a part of him, right? Is he God? Are you his offspring? Are you his children? Then you're not human! (Benny Hinn)

Understandably, this kind of speaking has received criticism. Some regard it as the original sin in the garden, while Neil Rivalland terms it "the ultimate heresy in the history of the Christian Church" (1). Bob DeWaay remarks, "To teach that God intended us to be 'gods' over the earth is a horrible perversion of the truth. It is the very doctrine of Satan" (2). Toward the end of his article, DeWaay concludes, "We neither were created to be gods nor commissioned to become gods" (4). Walter Martin warns, "It is dangerous, in the presence of God, to affirm oneself as a deity—even with a small 'g'" (104). Such an affirmation is dangerous, Martin argues, because

> the teaching that man is a 'god' or can become 'like God' in relation to the divine essence originates not with God, but with Satan, who brought about the fall of man by deceiving Eve and then Adam into believing that they would be like 'gods.'" (97)

Martin goes on to articulate his conviction that "those who maintain the 'little gods' doctrine are affirming a type of pagan polytheism over against classic monotheism. This constitutes, by any assessment, heretical doctrine" (101).[5]

Hank Hanegraaff takes a somewhat different approach. After providing "little gods" quotations similar to those included above, he says, "Faith teachers take the Scripture's depiction of man made in the image of God and twist it into a monstrosity" (110). Nevertheless, he admits that "the phrase 'little gods' may be unfortunate, but it is not necessarily heretical in and of itself, as long as it is not intended to convey that man is equal with, or a part of, God" (110). For Hanegraaff, the "real issue is the meaning that is poured into the words 'little gods.' The Faith teachers make it clear that by 'little gods they mean a direct departure from orthodox Christianity" (111). He then proceeds to offer a needed, but unfortunately one-sided, critique in which he advances his opinion that the "Faith teachers" should be classified as henotheistic. He then attempts to expound various biblical portions that are used by some to buttress "little gods" theology (e.g., Psa. 82:6; John 10:31-39). He concludes, rightly of course, that

> although we were created in the image of God, we possess none of God's nontransferable or incommunicable attributes—such as self-existence, immutability, eternality, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and absolute sovereignty. (117)[6]

We do not wish to align ourselves with the devotees of "little gods" doctrine, even though certain elements of the truth regarding deification are scattered among, or mixed in with, their teachings. The spokespersons are often audacious and reckless in their public pronouncements and inaccurate, or even confused, in their theology, confounding, for instance, the nature of humanity in God's creation with humanity in God's regeneration. They often fail to observe the mandated boundaries between the Godhead and the believers' becoming God in the sense of being born of Him to possess His life and nature. Furthermore, the "little gods" concept of deification is proclaimed apart from the scriptural revelation concerning the divine economy with its goal—the corporate expression of God. To ignore the divine economy and to speak carelessly of the relationship between God and man is, to say the least, unwise, and it can lead to error and self-exaltation, self-glorification, and self-promotion.

The Concept of Deification in Mormonism

The Mormon doctrine of deification is an outgrowth, or concomitant, of the Mormon doctrine of deity. Mormons are neither Christians nor monotheists but polytheists. Mormon theology propounds the existence of innumerable gods, eventually numbering in the billions. Instead of asserting according to the perspicuous revelation of the Bible that there is, for eternity and in all time and space, only one true, self-existing, ever-existing God, Mormon doctrine teaches an endless succession of gods, each one ruling over its own earth. God the Father is an exalted man from another planet similar to earth, having been "begotten of the species of gods, who existed before him in an infinite series of gods who were once men" (Van Gorden 31). Hence, the god of the Mormons was once a man, a creature created by a god who, in turn, had been a created human being. According to Mormon theology, there is no unique, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, self-existing, ever-existing God. Rather, every "god" began as a contingent, created entity who eventually progressed to the point of becoming a god. The deification of human

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beings (limited to the Mormon faithful, of course) is simply the continuation of the unending progression of humans into gods. The present god (to the world in which the Mormon lives) was once a man on another planet who progressed to godhood. As a physical creature with a wife to match him, he has begotten millions of spirit children in a state called "the preexistence" (31). Having become human beings of flesh and blood, the children of this god have the opportunity, it is alleged, to marry, die, and ultimately be exalted into the status of godhood and, elsewhere in the universe, become a god producing and presiding over still other spirit children. From this we can see that the Mormon doctrines of deity and deification are inextricably bound together, existing in a symbiotic relationship.

The God of the Mormons' world was once a man, just as we are; this is their doctrine of deity. As God, an exalted man, is now, man may become; this is their doctrine of deification.

Mormons, if they are forthcoming and know their own theology, will not deny this. Joseph Smith boldly proclaimed that God was merely an exalted man and that human beings could become gods. "I am going to tell you," he boasted, "how God came to be God….You have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves" (*Times and Seasons* 614). Mormon Apostle Orson Pratt said,

> We were begotten by our Father in Heaven; the person of our Father in Heaven was begotten on a previous heavenly world by His Father; and again, He was begotten by a still more ancient Father; and so on, from generation to generation, from one heavenly world to another still more ancient, until our minds are wearied and lost in the multiplicity of generations and successive worlds. (*The Seer* 132)

This supposed development had no beginning, and it will have no ending.

> Then they shall be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject to them. (*Doctrine and the Covenants* 132:20)

It is evident, therefore, that "the 'deification' of Mormon theology presupposes an infinite number of 'gods,' each begetting subordinate gods, of which the human race represents just another link in the endless chain of gods" ("Deification, Mormonism, and the Early Church").

In an online citation of an entry from the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* one Mormon apologist attempts to explain the connection between deification and happiness. We are led to believe that, according to the Book of Mormon, God's plan of salvation is "the great plan of happiness," an enterprise in which the happy God begets spirit children with the intention that they will advance to the ecstatic state of happy godhood (Carter).

> Logically and naturally, the ultimate desire of a loving Supreme Being is to help his children enjoy all that he enjoys. For Latter-day Saints, the term "godhood" denotes the attainment of such a state.…God has the greatest capacity for happiness. Thus, to maximize joy in others, God desires them to be as much like Him as possible.…Latter-day Saints believe that God achieved his exalted rank by progressing much as man must progress and that God is a perfected and exalted man: "God himself [in the words of Joseph Smith] was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens. This is the great secret." (Carter)

The Mormons desire to propagate this secret, informing their converts of this doctrine: "All of God's spirit children have within them a divine nature with the potential to become like him" (Carter).

Regarding this, we should pause to consider the most famous of Mormon aphorisms, attributed to Lorenzo Snow: "As man is, God once was; as God now is, man may become." This conjoins the doctrines of deity and deification. The God of the Mormons' world was once a man, just as we are; this is their doctrine of deity. As God, an exalted man, is now, man may become; this is their doctrine of deification. The two stand or fall together:

> This concept cannot be split in two. That is, you cannot have the second half without the first. You cannot have men becoming gods without first recognizing the fact that God was once a man who also went through the process of exaltation to godhood. The two ideas go hand in hand, and neither exists on its own. The idea that men can become "gods" is based upon the idea that God and men are of the same "species." This is the heart and soul of the LDS concept. (White 209)

That we may become as the god of this planet is because he was once, on another planet, a man just as we are: this surely is the core concept of Mormonism. This concept and the doctrines related to it have been subject to the penetrating exposure by many able critics. The following are representative samples:

The biblical Christian's doctrine of God says He is eternal, the only God in the universe, the supreme creator of everything out of nothing. He has always been and always will be. The Mormon doctrine of God says He is "progressive," having attained His exalted state by advancing along a path that His children (Mormons) are permitted to follow….Briefly stated, the historic Mormon view of God includes the following: God—the heavenly Father—is really an exalted man. He is one of a "species" that Mormons call "gods." These gods existed before the heavenly Father who rules Earth today. In Mormon thinking, God is not the eternal creator, the first cause of everything. He was created or begotten Himself by another god who had been created and begotten by another god who had been created and begotten by someone else, ad infinitum. (Ridenour 138)

Christianity has taught monotheism from its foundation, the belief in the existence of one God. Mormonism believes in the existence of a plurality of gods. According to Mormonism, there are an infinite number of planets like earth in the universe, each with their god or gods who were once men who have evolved into godhood. Mormon theologian and Apostle Bruce McConkie states, "[A] plurality of gods exist…there is an infinite number of holy personages, drawn from worlds without number, who have passed on to exaltation and are thus gods."…Although they believe that numerous gods exist, Mormons consider themselves to be monotheists because they focus their worship exclusively on the Godhead of this earth. With this being the case, a more accurate description of Mormon practice is *henotheism*, a form of polytheism that stresses a central deity. (Zukeran 1)

Classical theism teaches that God never changes in His essential nature. God has always been God…. Mormonism, on the other hand, teaches that God is a being who has not always been God. God was once a man on another planet who, by the laws of eternal progression and through obedience to the precepts of his God, eventually attained Godhood himself….In the most radical break with classical theism, the Mormons return to polytheism….Mormonism teaches that there exists more than one God. In fact, according to Mormon theology, an individual can progress to Godhood if he or she obeys the appropriate precepts of Mormonism. (Beckwith and Parrish 43, 45, 113)

Most people, including some Mormons, are unaware of how radically the Mormon view of God differs from the picture of God that one finds in the Bible and traditional Christian theology….Current LDS doctrine teaches that God is, in effect, 1) a contingent being, who was at one time not God; 2) finite in *knowledge* (not truly omniscient), *power* (not omnipotent), and *being* (not omnipresent or immutable); 3) one of many gods; 4) a corporeal (bodily) being, who physically dwells at a particular spatiotemporal location and is therefore not omnipresent (as in the classical God); 5) a being who is subject to the laws and principles of a beginningless universe with an infinite number of entities in it…. Mormonism teaches that God the Father is a resurrected, "exalted" human being named Elohim who was at one time *not* God. He was once a mortal man on another planet who, through obedience to the precepts of *his* God, eventually attained exaltation, or godhood, himself through "eternal progression." (Beckwith 51, 69-70)

The Mormon doctrines of deity and deification are grossly heretical; they are neither Christian nor even monotheistic. No reader should attribute these nefarious teachings to the biblical truth of deification.

The Mormon doctrines of deity and deification are grossly heretical; they are neither Christian nor even monotheistic. No reader should attribute these nefarious teachings to the biblical truth of deification, and Mormons should not appeal to proper Christian views of deification as support for their own. We reject the Mormon doctrines of deity and deification as being contrary to the truth, an insult to the true God, and a snare for unsuspecting and spiritually hungry persons.

Similar and Acceptable Views of Deification

There are two views of deification that are similar to our own and that, given certain caveats or qualifications, may be considered acceptable. The first of these views is presented by Paul Billheimer in the first edition of *Destined for the Throne*[7]; the other acceptable view is the doctrine of divinization (theosis) in Eastern Orthodox theology.

Deification in Destined for the Throne

The original, unexpurgated edition of Billheimer's volume contains startling and amazing insights into God's glorious plan and expectation for the church as the bride of Christ. The thesis of the book is that "the *one* purpose of the universe from all eternity is the production and preparation of an Eternal Companion for the Son, called the Bride, the Lamb's Wife" (15). The bride consists of redeemed and regenerated humanity, and *"redeemed humanity* outranks all other orders of created beings in the universe," for "through the new birth a redeemed human being becomes a bona fide member of the original

cosmic family, 'next of kin' to the Trinity" (15-16). Although redeemed human beings do not become members of a family of Gods, it is nonetheless true that "God has exalted redeemed humanity to such a sublime height that it is impossible for Him to elevate them further without breaching the Godhead" (16). The Godhead, we may be assured, cannot and will not be breached, since there is a limit, determined by God according to His Godhood and set by God in His economy. Thus, there is no need to be alarmed at Billheimer's statements.

The central theological portion of *Destined for the Throne* is chapter two, "God's Purpose for the Church: Supreme Rank." In order to grasp the basic concept unfolded here, it is necessary, and profitable, to quote from this chapter at length:

> Created originally in the image of God, redeemed humanity has been elevated by means of a *divinely conceived genetic process* known as the new birth to the highest rank of created beings. (33)
>
> No angel can ever become a congenital member of the family of God. They are created, not generated, beings; therefore, no angel can become a blood-born son of God. Angels can never have the heritage, the "genes" of God. They can never be partakers of the divine nature. (34)
>
> "He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit" [1 Cor. 6:17]. This union goes beyond a mere formal, functional, or idealistic harmony or rapport. It is an organic unity, an "organic relationship of personalities" (Sauer). Through the new birth we become bona fide members of the original cosmic family (Eph. 3:15), actual generated sons of God (1 John 3:2), "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4), begotten by Him, impregnated with His "genes", called the seed or "sperma" of God (1 John 5:1, 18 and 1 Peter 1:3, 23), and bearing His heredity. Thus, through the new birth—and I speak reverently—we become "next of kin" to the Trinity, a kind of "extension" of the Godhead. (35)
>
> Nothing can ever dim the fact that infinity separates the Creator from the created. Christ is the eternally unique and only begotten Son, "the brightness of [God's] glory," and "the express image of his person" (Heb. 1:3). But from all eternity God purposed to have a family circle of His *very own,* not only created but *also generated* by His own life, incorporating His own seed, "sperma," "genes," or heredity. (36)
>
> Christ is the Prototype after which all other sons are being fashioned….This is God's purpose in the plan of redemption—to produce, by means of the new birth, an entirely new and unique species, exact replicas of His Son with whom He will share His glory and His dominion, and who will constitute a royal progeny. (36-37)
>
> While we recognize the infinite distinction between the Eternal Son and the "many sons" born into the family, yet such is their heredity as the result of the new birth that He recognizes them as bona fide blood-brothers. And according to 1 John 3:2 that is just what they are, true genetic sons of God and therefore blood-brothers of the Son. Christ is the divine Prototype after which this new species is being made. They are to be exact copies of Him, true genotypes, *as utterly like Him as it is possible for the finite to be like the Infinite.* As sons of God, begotten by Him, incorporating into their fundamental being and nature the very genes of God, they rank above all other created beings and are elevated to the most sublime height possible short of becoming members of the Trinity itself. (37)

The Godhead, we may be assured, cannot and will not be breached, since there is a limit, determined by God according to His Godhood and set by God in His economy.

How should we respond to these startling yet altogether Scripture-based statements? The author himself confesses that the theses advanced and expounded in the book "were, at first, so startlingly unconventional and sometimes so overwhelmingly astounding to the writer as to stagger his imagination and boggle his mind" (7). This is often what happens when students of the Word drop their opinions and presuppositions and, emerging from under the veils of traditional (as opposed to biblical) theology, have the openness and the boldness to acknowledge what the Bible is actually saying when it speaks of the believers being begotten of God to be children of God. Since Billheimer had to cope with the mind-boggling significance and implications of the divine revelation concerning our status as sons of God, he says that it would "not be surprising if others find the viewpoints equally astonishing" (7).

Walter Martin, at one time alleged by some to be an expert on cults, was not astonished—he was stumbled. At least this is my inference after a careful reading of "Ye Shall Be As Gods" (hereafter cited as "Gods"). Employing the tactic of guilt by association, "Gods" closely associates Billheimer with Herbert W. Armstrong, identifying the views of the former with the concept of the latter—that it is "possible for redeemed men and women to be members of the 'god family,' and, in effect, members of the god

class" (95). Failing to give *Destined for the Throne* the respect it is due (as exemplified by Billy Graham's foreword), "Gods" hastily and without proper objective analysis renders the judgment that the teaching in *Destined for the Throne* "puts man on the throne and makes him an extension of the Trinity!" (95). Insisting that Billheimer's terminology is imprecise and virtually ignoring his guarded and careful mode of expression and the strong declaration regarding the infinite distinction between the Creator and the creature and between the eternal Son and the many sons, "Gods" presses on with its accusations and assertions: "The finite (man) cannot be an extension of the infinite (the Trinity), since any extension of the Trinity's nature would be by definition deity. And yet, Billheimer proposes just that" (94). In fact, the contrary is the case as Billheimer, on the one hand, takes seriously the divine revelation concerning the children of God and, on the other hand, exercises care in maintaining the Creator-creature distinction and disparity.

The crucial issue, I wish to suggest, is that whereas "Gods" denies the spiritual reality of the believers' regeneration, *Destined for the Throne* faithfully upholds it. "Gods" insists, contrary to Scripture, that the believers are nothing more than God's adopted children whereas *Destined for the Throne* testifies, according to Scripture, that we have actually been born of God and truly are regenerated, begotten, children of God. Billheimer believes what the Bible reveals regarding regeneration and is exercised to present, as much as possible, the full significance of terms such as *born of God, children of God, sons of God,* and *partakers of the divine nature.* In other words, he takes the biblical vocabulary seriously:

> Although the inspired words of the Biblical vocabulary are so pregnant with unequivocal meaning, the natural mind is overwhelmed by their implications and is tempted to qualify them by treating them as fantasy, purely as symbols, or as figures of speech. This is the way unbelief frequently emasculates the Word of God. (39)

This touches a key point: Regarding regeneration, what we meet in "Gods" is unbelief, and what we meet in *Destined for the Throne* is belief—genuine belief in God and in His inspired, infallible words.

> Doubtless the reality behind the Biblical terms is far beyond the capacity of human imagination, *yet these terms are valid as far as the mind can comprehend.* To accept them as less than a faithful representation of heavenly reality is to rob them of their content. (39)

The open, fair-minded reader of *Destined for the Throne* will not be robbed but will be enriched by the author's attempt to proclaim to God's people the reality and practicality of their regeneration by which they become children of God and brothers of Christ—members of the household of God.

Divinization in Eastern Orthodox Theology

Central to Eastern Orthodox theology is its doctrine of divinization, or theosis. "Theosis, (also called divinization or deification) was one of the most important of early Christian doctrines….It means *participating in,* and *partaking of, God's Divinity"* ("Our True, Final Hope"). A web page devoted to theosis explains,

> The Holy Scriptures and the saints teach us that the goal of life is to become god—to participate in His divinity through His energies. This process of becoming is nothing less than the realization of God's plan for our salvation and the attainment of our full potential as humans….This process of becoming god, of constant conversion, of participation in His divine energies, is theosis. (Theosis)

Robert G. Stephanopoulos confirms,

> The Orthodox Christian doctrine of *theosis* emphasizes that the work of Christ has established the objective conditions for the believer's participation in the divine life. This path of ethical and spiritual transformation and illumination is seen as a gradual, dynamic process of growth and elevation to God by faith under grace. (159)

Central to Eastern Orthodox theology is its doctrine of theosis. Theosis denotes an ongoing process of sanctification and transformation through which the believer in Christ becomes God.

From this we can see that by definition theosis, divinization, denotes an ongoing process of sanctification and transformation through which the believer in Christ becomes God. Timothy Ware observes,

> Such, according to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, is the final goal at which every Christian must aim: to become god, to attain *theosis,* "deification" or "divinization". For Orthodoxy our salvation and redemption mean our deification. (231)

It is encouraging to see that various non-Orthodox Christians find this notion agreeable. Gretchen Passantino speaks of "the nonheretical Eastern Orthodox theology of 'theosis'" (4). Hank Hanegraaff says, "The Eastern

Orthodox church…teaches that Christians are deified in the sense that they are adopted as sons of God, indwelt by the Spirit of God, and brought into communion with God which ultimately leads to glorification" (110-111). Contrasting this view of deification with the "little gods" doctrine, Hanegraaff goes on to say, "They [the Orthodox] do not teach that mere humans are reproductions or exact duplicates of God. Thus their doctrine of deification is consistent with Scripture and in keeping with a monotheistic world view" (111). It is evident that in Hanegraaff's estimation one may hold to and promulgate a doctrine of deification that comports with the Bible and that is in harmony with monotheism. Robert M. Bowman, Jr. is somewhat more cautious but still positive. He informs his readers that "a monotheistic doctrine of deification was taught by many of the early church fathers, and is believed by many Christians today, including the entire Eastern Orthodox church" (1). It is worthwhile to cite Bowman in more detail:

> In keeping with monotheism, the Eastern Orthodox does not teach that men will literally become "gods" (which would be polytheism). Rather, as did many of the church fathers, they teach that men are "deified" in the sense that the Holy Spirit dwells within Christian believers and transforms them into the image of God in Christ….The substance of what the Eastern Orthodox are seeking to express when they speak of deification is actually faithful to the monotheistic world view….The doctrine intended by this language in the context of the teachings of the fathers and of Eastern Orthodoxy is quite biblical. (1)

Although he identifies what he thinks are weaknesses in theosis theology, Robert V. Rakestraw nevertheless admits that its strengths are considerable and concludes,

> The doctrine of divinization merits the ongoing attention of Scripture scholars, theologians, and pastors who desire to provide significant resources to Christians in their quest to become like God. For this is indeed why we were created. (269)

Finally, Gary Evans, while properly decrying certain suggested means of theosis, bears witness to its truthfulness, especially as it is embodied in Eastern Orthodox theology:

> In its theology concerning deification, Eastern Orthodoxy points the believer to the apex of Christian purpose and destiny. It not only faithfully maintains the notion of deification contained in Scripture, but it also articulates theosis thoughtfully and carefully. It ascends to the peak in revelation and insight. (56)

Evidence of the carefulness, thoughtfulness, and faithfulness in Orthodox theology with respect to theosis is provided by Ware in his treatment of the subject:

> The idea of deification must always be understood in the light of the distinction between God's essence and His energies. Union with God means union with the divine energies, not the divine essence: the Orthodox Church, while speaking of deification and union, rejects all forms of pantheism.[8]
>
> Closely related to this is another point of equal importance. The mystical union between God and humans is a true union, yet in this union Creator and creature do not become fused into a single being. Unlike the eastern religions which teach that humans are swallowed up in the deity, Orthodox mystical theology has always insisted that we humans, however closely linked to God, retain our full personal integrity. The human person, when deified, remains distinct (though not separate) from God….Nor does the human person, when it "becomes god", cease to be human: "We remain creatures while becoming god by grace, as Christ remained God when becoming man by the Incarnation." The human being does not become God *by nature,* but is merely a 'created god', a god *by grace* or *by status.* (232)

Christians should open to the Lord and to the Scriptures to consider the truth that believers in Christ can and will become God without ceasing to be human and without encroaching upon the Godhead.

There is much to ponder here. It would be particularly beneficial for those who call themselves evangelical or fundamental Christians to open to the Lord and to the Scriptures to consider, or reconsider, the truth revealed in the Word that the believers in Christ can and will become God without ceasing to be human and without encroaching upon the Godhead.

Becoming God according to the Economy of God

I hope that the foregoing discussion will help to preserve us from any and all extremes related to deification and prepare the way for a presentation, offered as a brief sketch or overview, of the scriptural revelation concerning the believers in Christ becoming God according to the economy of God.

A Definition of Deification

God's economy is God's plan and arrangement to dispense Himself into tripartite human beings as their life,

their life supply, and their everything to make them His eternal, corporate expression, the Body of Christ, consummating in the New Jerusalem. The outworking of such an economy implies that in Christ God must become man so that in Christ man might become God in life, in nature, in constitution, in appearance, and in expression but not in the Godhead and not as an object of worship. We become God in the sense of being born of God through regeneration and then being saturated and permeated with God until we are wholly sanctified, transformed, and conformed to the image of Christ, the firstborn Son of God. This process of deification, of becoming God, neither effaces our humanity nor alters our status as creatures. We shall remain creatures and humans forever. Furthermore, deification certainly does not mean that we shall be exalted to become part of the Godhead or that we shall share God's incommunicable attributes. After we have been deified in full, we shall not be able to create out of nothing, and we shall never be omnipotent, omniscient, or omnipresent. Likewise, we shall not advance to the point of self-existence, a condition unique to God. No matter how much we may be like God, for eternity we shall be dependent on Him for our being, perpetually eating of the tree of life and drinking of the river of water of life—signs, unveiled for the last time in Revelation 22, of constantly receiving the Triune God as our life supply. Although we shall be wholly one with God, we shall never be worshipped as God. Rather, we shall take the lead to worship Him who lives for ever and ever. We shall not be God by nature but only by grace. God is God in Himself; we are God not in ourselves but only in Him, by Him, with Him, and through Him.

There will never be more than the one true God over the entire universe. Our deification will never exalt us to the position of Godhood nor will it diminish the Godhead.

This understanding of the believers' becoming God in the economy of God is balanced, for it sets forth the full extent of our participation in God's divinity and also limits the degree of that participation even as it maintains the eternal distinction between the Triune God and His redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified people. We shall become God in life and nature, yet we shall not become God in His Godhood or Godhead. Thus, there will never be more than the one true God over the entire universe. Our deification will neither exalt us to the position of Godhood nor will it diminish the Godhead.

We were created to become God (as defined above), but we were not created as God. Genesis 2:7 does not mean that God infused His substance into humanity at the time of creation. In creation human beings do not possess the eternal divine Spirit but only the created human spirit. There is no divine spark or innate divine nature in man by creation. This does not detract from the fact that human beings were created in the image of God to express God and as vessels to contain God; however, having the image of God and being a vessel to contain God does not make us God. We become God not by creation but by regeneration and transformation, and this was God's intention in creation. He created us that He might regenerate us and thereby make us His children. Therefore, creation is for deification via regeneration. Once again we see that we are not God by nature or by any kind of natural process. We who were created to contain God and express God become God in Christ, through God's salvation, and according to God's economy. In Christ God became man that in Christ man might become God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead for the producing and building up of the Body of Christ to consummate the New Jerusalem. This, in essence, is the truth concerning deification.

The Testimony of the Scriptures

To this truth the Scriptures give abundant testimony. Some may immediately ask, "Does the Bible teach that we can become God?" The answer depends on what is meant in saying that the Bible teaches something. Perhaps the Scriptures do not explicitly say that we shall become God. Neither does the Word explicitly declare that God is triune; nevertheless, the Bible reveals that God is eternally triune, coexisting and coinhering as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Just as the Bible reveals that God is triune, the Word reveals that the believers in Christ are becoming God by the grace of God for the fulfillment of the economy of God.

The believers in Christ are children of God. "Behold what manner of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and we are….Beloved, now we are children of God" (1 John 3:1-2). According to the Scriptures, how did we become children of God? The only faithful and accurate answer is that we have been born, begotten, of God. It is a serious and grievous departure from the truth to deny this fact. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the authority to become children of God, to those who believe into His name, who were begotten not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). Children of God are begotten of God, not adopted by God. To understand *begotten* here to mean *adopted* is to avoid the plain meaning of the text.

This is not an isolated witness to the believers' having

been begotten of God. "Everyone who practices righteousness also has been begotten of Him" (1 John 2:29). "Everyone who loves has been begotten of God and knows God" (4:7). "Everyone who loves Him who has begotten loves him also who has been begotten of Him" (5:1). "He brought us forth by the word of truth, purposing that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures" (James 1:18). "This refers to the divine birth, our regeneration (John 3:5, 6), which is carried out according to God's eternal purpose" (Recovery Version, James 1:18, note 1). This divine birth took place in our spirit, which was created by God for this very purpose. "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6), and now "the Spirit Himself witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:16).

Let the truth be trumpeted: We have not been adopted by God—we have been born of God! When our spirit was born of the Spirit through the word of God (1 Pet. 1:23), we were born, begotten, of God to become children of God. As the Father's children, we have the Father's life, which is eternal, and we have the Father's nature, which is divine. However, we do not have His Fatherhood. Because we are children of God, we are the same as the begetting God in life and in nature. Human children have the life and nature of their parents, and the children of God have the life and nature of their Father. The only way to avoid this obvious truth is to deny the reality of regeneration. To believe that we have been born of God to be children of God is to believe that, in a certain restricted sense, we are God.

When our spirit was born of the Spirit, we were born of God to become children of God. As the Father's children, we have the Father's life, which is eternal, and the Father's nature, which is divine.

The believers in Christ are the brothers of Christ. This is another result of regeneration, the divine birth. Consider the Lord's word in John 20:17: "Go to My brothers and say to them, I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God." From God's point of view, we were regenerated through the resurrection of Christ (1 Pet. 1:3), a point that is relevant here because we are attending to the speaking of Christ on the day of His resurrection. In resurrection He could for the first time call the disciples *brothers* and refer to His Father as their Father:

> Previously, the most intimate term the Lord had used in reference to His disciples was "friends" (John 15:14-15). But after His resurrection He began to call them "brothers," for through His resurrection His disciples were regenerated (1 Pet. 1:3) with the divine life, which had been released by His life-imparting death, as indicated in 12:24. He was the one grain of wheat that fell into the ground and died and grew up to bring forth many grains for the producing of the one bread, which is His Body (1 Cor. 10:17). He was the Father's only Son, the Father's individual expression. Through His death and resurrection the Father's only begotten became the Firstborn among many brothers (Rom. 8:29). His many brothers are the many sons of God and are the church (Heb. 2:10-12), a corporate expression of God the Father in the Son. This is God's ultimate intention. The many brothers are the propagation of the Father's life and the multiplication of the Son in the divine life. Hence, in the Lord's resurrection God's eternal purpose is fulfilled. (Recovery Version, John 20:17, note 2)

The many brothers of the Firstborn are the same as the Firstborn (not as the only Begotten) in life and nature; through incarnation He, who was divine, became human, and through resurrection they, who were human, became divine. This truth, which implies deification, is the clear revelation in Hebrews 2:11: "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." The Firstborn among many brothers was born of God in His humanity in His resurrection (Rom. 1:3-4; Acts 13:33), and the many sons, His many brothers, were also born in His resurrection. This is the basis for the expression *are all of One.* Christ and His many brothers are of the same source. "Both the firstborn Son and the many sons of God are born of the same Father God in resurrection (Acts 13:33; 1 Pet. 1:3) and have the same divine life and nature. Hence, He is not ashamed to call them brothers" (Recovery Version, Heb. 2:11, note 1). This indicates deification—the process of becoming God in life and in nature which begins with regeneration through resurrection. We are actual brothers of Christ, the firstborn Son of God, having the same Father ("My Father and your Father") and the same life and nature. He is divine and human; we are human and divine.

The believers in Christ are the household of God. "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19). *Members of the household of God* points to the house of God, the church. "But if I delay, I write that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth. And confessedly, great is the mystery of godliness" (1 Tim. 3:15-16). As

God's dwelling place, the church is both God's house and His household; God's family is His dwelling place, and God's dwelling place is His family. Thus, the house and the household are one thing—the believers. This house of God is a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5), the reality of which is in our spirit (Eph. 2:22).

This house, or household, consisting of the Father with His many children, is the continuation and enlargement of the manifestation of God in the flesh which began with the incarnation of Christ. God's manifestation was first in Christ as an individual expression in the flesh. The relative pronoun *who* in 1 Timothy 3:16 implies that Christ as the manifestation of God in the flesh is the mystery of godliness. First Timothy 3:15-16 indicates that not only Christ Himself as the Head is the manifestation of God in the flesh but also that the church as the Body is the manifestation of God in the flesh; this manifestation, both in Christ and in the church, is the mystery of godliness. From this we may infer that God is manifested in His household, the church, as His enlarged, corporate expression in the flesh. The manifestation of God in the flesh which began with Christ continues with the church, which is the enlargement of the manifestation of God in the flesh. This is the great mystery of godliness, a mystery that implies and indicates deification, because the house of God, His corporate manifestation in the flesh, is composed of His regenerated children, who have His life and nature for His expression. In this household, the Father is God with the Godhead, and the members of the household of God are God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead. The church's being the corporate manifestation of God in the flesh requires that God have a family, regenerated by Him and possessing His life and nature. The members of the household of God are therefore the deified (and being deified) children of God.

The manifestation of God in the flesh which began with Christ continues with the church, which is the enlargement of the manifestation of God in the flesh. This is the great mystery of godliness.

The believers in Christ are the many grains. "Truly, truly, I say to you, Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Through His incarnation, Christ became a grain of wheat, with the shell of His humanity concealing His divinity. The Gospel of John reveals that Christ died not only as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world and the fulfillment of the type of the bronze serpent to judge the ruler of this age and to destroy the devil, but also as the grain of wheat that fell into the ground and died to release the divine life. This is Christ in His life-releasing death. Who was this grain of wheat in 12:24? It was the Word that became flesh in 1:14, that is, God incarnate, the God-man. This God-man, as a grain of wheat, died on the cross to release the divine life, signified by the water that flowed out from His pierced side (19:34), in order to have a reproduction of Himself in the "much fruit," the many grains who, after they have been broken, blended, and baked in fulfillment of the type of the meal offering, form the one loaf which signifies the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17).

The crucial point here is that the many grains are the reproduction, increase, and multiplication of the one grain, the God-man. The many grains in John 12:24 are the brothers in 20:17, both of which were brought forth in resurrection. This is nothing less than the reproduction of God, the increase, multiplication, and enlargement of God not in His Godhead (which is impossible) for His economy. It cannot reasonably be denied that the many grains are the same in life and in nature as the one grain? The one grain is the Son of God; the many grains are the sons of God. We hasten to add, however, that this reproduction of the one grain by no means imperils the Godhead of the one grain, for this cannot be communicated to the many grains.

I ask my readers not to dismiss 12:24 as mere metaphor. It is incumbent upon us to ponder the reality of the Lord's word. Was not the one grain the God-man? Did He not reproduce Himself in the many grains? Are these many grains not the same in life and in nature as the one grain? The answer to all these questions is yes. We, the many grains, are the same as the one grain in life and in nature, yet the one grain has attributes of deity that cannot be shared. This is deification both in its essence and in its limitation.

The believers are the branches of Christ as the true vine. The many grains in 12:24 are the branches in 15:5. In verse 1 the Lord Jesus unequivocally declares, "I am the true vine." "This true vine (the Son) with its branches (the believers in the Son) is the organism of the Triune God in God's economy. This organism grows with His riches and expresses His divine life" (Recovery Version, John 15:1, note 1). Christ with the believers, the vine with the branches, is a single organism in God's economy. Consider the implications of this. Contrary to the opinions of some theologians, the vine in John 15 is not merely a metaphor—it is a profound reality and a sign, or symbol, of God's entire economy. Actually, the true vine is the divine economy.

The vine signifies the spreading of Christ, the extension of God in Christ not in the Godhead but in the economy of God. As the vine, Christ is growing. In Himself as the eternal, infinite God, Christ does not need to grow, cannot grow, and does not in fact grow. But in God's economy this vine must grow. The thought here is similar to Colossians 2:19, which speaks of the Body of Christ growing with the growth of God. God grows not in Himself but in the Body, causing the growth of the Body. In like manner, Christ does not grow, spread, and increase in Himself, but He does grow, spread, and increase in the vine, in the organism in the divine economy. In particular, the vine grows in and through the branches, which are indisputably the extensions of the vine and thus must be the same as the vine in life and in nature.

If we know the significance of being branches in the vine, we shall see that the vine with the branches in John 15 implies deification. To be a branch signifies that Christ is our life. The branch has no life in itself; rather, the life of the vine is the life in the branch. This life—the life that has made us branches—is the divine, eternal, uncreated life received through regeneration. To be a branch also signifies that we are parts of Christ in an organic union with Him. Since Christ is the vine, the branches, as parts of the vine, are parts of Christ. We not only have Christ in us as our life, but we are in Him and thus are parts of Him. Moreover, to be a branch signifies that Christ is being wrought into us (Gal. 4:19; Eph. 3:17). Having Christ as our life, being parts of Christ, and having Christ wrought into us—all these imply deification. Apart from being born of God to have His life and nature, we cannot have Christ as our life or be parts of Christ or have Christ wrought into us. The branches of the vine, therefore, are the deified believers in Christ. To be a branch is to be God—not in His deity but in His life and nature. Once again, this is a matter of regeneration and the tremendous difference it makes in the lives of believers. Because we have been born of God, we have the life and nature of God, and in this sense we are God.

To be a branch signifies that we are parts of Christ in an organic union with Him. Since Christ is the vine, the branches, as parts of the vine, are parts of Christ. We are in Him and thus are parts of Him.

The believers in Christ, being children of God, have the divine seed in them. Scripture is not silent on this matter of the seed of God. The seed in Matthew 13:4 and Mark 4:26 is Christ as the word sown into our inner being for the growth and development of the kingdom of God. The seed in 1 Peter 1:23 is a container of life.

> The word of God, as the incorruptible seed, contains God's life. Hence, it is living and abiding. Through this word we were regenerated. It is God's living and abiding word of life that conveys God's life into our spirit for our regeneration. (Recovery Version, 1 Pet. 1:23, note 2)

In 1 John 3:9 the seed is the divine life itself: "Everyone who has been begotten of God does not practice sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been begotten of God." This mysterious seed denotes "God's life, which we received of God when we were begotten of Him. This life, as the divine seed, abides in every regenerated believer" (Recovery Version, 1 John 3:9, note 3). Speaking reverently, we may say that in this seed is not only the law of God's life (Rom. 8:2) but the "gene" and the "DNA" of God in His economy. This seed, this gene, should grow and develop within us until we are mature in the divine life and are conformed to the image of the firstborn Son. Our Christian life began with our receiving the divine seed; this was the beginning of our deification. Now the seed must develop according to the law of its life and cause Christ to be formed within us to such an extent that in every possible way we are the same as He for God's corporate expression; this is the advancement and consummation of our deification.

The believers in Christ will be the bride of Christ. If we read John 3 carefully, we shall realize that regeneration is for the bride of Christ. We have been born of the Spirit in our spirit, receiving eternal life, so that we may enter into the kingdom of God and become the bride of Christ, His increase. "He who has the bride is the bridegroom….He must increase" (vv. 29-30). The bride of Christ in verse 29 is the increase of Christ in verse 30. This indicates that if Christ is to have a bride prepared for His eternal marriage, He must increase by dispensing Himself into His chosen and redeemed people, regenerating them to become parts of His bride as His increase in life and nature. The bride is a living composition of regenerated persons, of those who have been born of God to receive the life of God. This too implies deification.

The type of Eve in Genesis 2 reveals that Christ, typified by Adam, cannot join Himself to someone who is not bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh. His wife must be the same as He is in every possible way short of the Godhead. This is reasonable and logical; it is also necessary. If Christ were to join Himself to one dissimilar to Himself, that would be an improper and strange union. Adam could not be joined to anything other than his counterpart. In like manner, Christ cannot be joined to those who are simply human and do not have the divine life and nature. Christ is divine and human, and His wife must also be divine and human; then the two, Christ and

His counterpart, being the same in life and in nature, can be joined and enjoy a blissful married life for eternity. This requires that His wife, a composition of believers, becomes God in life and in nature. Christ is God becoming man to be our Husband, and we are men becoming God to be His wife. This is a story of a loving, personal, and intimate process through which we, the believers, become God for the bride of Christ.

The believers are in the local churches which are signified by the golden lampstands. The churches, not the believers individually, are the golden lampstands in Revelation 1, but the believers are the components of the churches and thus are parts of the lampstands. The golden lampstand signifies the Triune God. The pure gold substance signifies God the Father in His divine nature (Exo. 25:31); the stand signifies Christ the Son as the embodiment of the Father (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; 2:9); and the lamps signify God the Spirit as the seven Spirits of God for the expression of the Father in the Son (Exo. 25:37; Rev. 4:5). The golden lampstands in Revelation 1 signify the local churches as the reproduction of Christ and the reprint of the Spirit. The lampstand in Exodus 25 signifies Christ as the embodiment of God; the lampstand in Zechariah 4 signifies the sevenfold intensified, life-giving Spirit as the reality of Christ (Rev. 5:6); and the lampstands are the reprint, the reproduction, of the pneumatic Christ, the Christ who is the life-giving Spirit. Since the church is what the Triune God is in His nature, form, and expression, to be the lampstand in reality and practicality requires that we become God in His life and nature for His expression. We do not become the Triune God; instead, we are constituted with the Triune God in His economy to become His expression signified by the seven golden lampstands.

For the overcomers to be pillars in the temple means that they will be pillars in God. This involves being mingled with God, constituted with God, and built into God.

The overcoming believers will be pillars in the temple of God. "He who overcomes, him I will make a pillar in the temple of My God" (Rev. 3:12). We should understand this in light of Revelation 21:22: "I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple." "The temple of My God" is "the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb," and the overcomers are made pillars in, and thus become a part of, the temple which is God Himself. For the overcomers to be pillars in the temple means that they will be pillars in God. This involves being mingled with God, constituted with God, and built into God. In brief, to be a pillar in the temple of God is to be made God in life and nature.

The believers will be the New Jerusalem. The New Jerusalem is not a material city, it is not heaven, and it is not a place; the New Jerusalem is a corporate person, the processed and consummated Triune God and His redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified tripartite elect becoming one entity. In God's economy, both God and the believers must become the New Jerusalem. God becoming the New Jerusalem is a matter of God becoming man to be the temple in which the redeemed will dwell. Man becoming the New Jerusalem is a matter of man becoming God to be a tabernacle in which the redeeming God will dwell. If God did not become man, and if the believers do not become God, then God's economy will not have a consummation. God's ultimate goal is the New Jerusalem, and for this He became man. Our ultimate goal is also the New Jerusalem, and for this we must become God. As we become the New Jerusalem, we shall become jasper—the appearance of God (Rev. 21:11; 4:3). In order to have the appearance of God, we must become God; otherwise, our appearance will be a counterfeit. Thus, we are being deified for the New Jerusalem, God's eternal, consummate corporate expression.

The Process of Becoming God

In at least a preliminary way, we have offered a definition, or a description, of what it means for us to become God, and we have also considered, admittedly in an introductory way, some aspects of the scriptural testimony to the truth of our deification, of our becoming the same as God not in the Godhead but in life, in nature, and in expression. Now we proceed to the process of becoming God.

The believers in Christ become God in and through their organic union with Christ. The phrase *in Christ* (2 Cor. 5:17; 1 Cor. 1:30; Gal. 3:28) indicates an organic union with Christ. We have believed into Christ (Phil. 1:29), and now we are one with Him. "The believer has an organic union with Christ through believing into Him. To believe into Christ is to have our being merged into His that we two may be one organically" (Recovery Version, note 1). Not only have we believed into Christ—we also have been baptized into Christ (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27). Through faith and baptism we are in Him and may now live in the organic union with Him. We are one spirit with Him (1 Cor. 6:17).

We are in Christ because we have been grafted into Him (Rom. 11:17, 24). We were created by God in such a way that He and we could be grafted together through faith and baptism:

> Grafting produces an organic union....It [grafting] is the uniting of two lives as one so that they may share one mingled life and one living. Such a mingling of life takes place when two similar yet different lives [in our case, the divine and the human] pass through death (cutting) and resurrection (growth). This depicts our union with Christ. (Recovery Version, Rom. 11:17, note 1)

> [Growing together with Him] denotes an organic union in which growth takes place, so that one partakes of the life and characteristics of the other. In the organic union with Christ, whatever Christ passed through has become our history. His death and resurrection are now ours because we are in Him and are organically joined to Him. This is grafting (11:24). Such a grafting (1) discharges all our negative elements, (2) resurrects our God-created faculties, (3) uplifts our faculties, (4) enriches our faculties, and (5) saturates our entire being to transform us. (6:5, note 1)

To see this is to understand the organic process in the divine life by which we become God. We have been cut out of Adam and the old creation and have been grafted into Christ to become a new creation. Everything we have, we have in Him; apart from Him we are nothing, we have nothing, and we can do nothing. But as we remain, abide, in Him, the converse is true; all that He is and has is ours, and we are enriched, made full, in Him in every way possible. We remain human, for our God-created humanity has been redeemed and is being uplifted. The more we live in Christ, experiencing and enjoying our organic union with Him, the more the riches that are in Him as the vine flow into us as the branches. On the one hand, the cross, the effectiveness of which is an element of the all-inclusive Spirit, discharges all our negative elements. On the other hand, the flowing divine life resurrects, uplifts, and enriches our God-created faculties, bringing God into them and them into God. Furthermore, our redeemed tripartite being is gradually permeated and saturated with God. Eventually, in the organic union with Christ, we become God. We are God in life and in nature *only in Him;* we will never be independent "gods," exercising divine powers and prerogatives. Outside of Christ, apart from Christ, and without Christ, we are not and never will be God in life and in nature. He alone is God in Himself—we are God in Him. We become God only by participation, not by nature. "Through union with Christ, we become by grace what God is by nature" (Orthodox Study Bible 561). It is our union with Christ that enables us to pass through the process of becoming God, and it is our union with Christ that preserves and maintains what we are and what we shall become in Him.

We are God in life and in nature *only in Him;* we will never be independent "gods," exercising divine powers and prerogatives. Apart from Christ, we are not and never will be God in life and in nature.

The believers in Christ become God through regeneration. The analogy with human birth is both illustrative and instructive. How did we become human beings? The answer, of course, is by birth. We were generated by our human parents to become the same as our parents—human—in their life and nature but not in their person or parenthood. We were born, generated, to be human in life and in nature. The principle is the same with our becoming God through regeneration. We were born, regenerated, to be divine in life and in nature. By our first birth we became man; by our second birth we became God. We were regenerated of our Father to be the same as He is—divine—in life and in nature but not in His person or Fatherhood.

The Bible clearly, repeatedly, and emphatically speaks of the believers' being born of God. (Many verses are referenced above related to the children of God.) We have "become children of God…begotten…of God" (John 1:12-13). Does this not refer to an actual becoming by means of an actual begetting? If not, then to what does this refer? It certainly does not refer to adoption. Just as we were begotten of our human father to be human children with a human life and nature, so we were begotten of our divine Father to be divine children with a divine life and nature (in addition to our human life and nature, which we retain after regeneration). The point here—and it cannot be overemphasized—is that we have truly been begotten of God to be His real, actual, genuine children possessing His life and nature. We are called children of God because we are children of God.

Deification begins with and, in our spiritual experience, is based upon regeneration. We have been born of God, and therefore, we are God in life and nature. We affirm deification through regeneration and deification based upon regeneration. Those who deny deification must also deny regeneration. Whereas some deny both, we declare both. We, the regenerated children of God, are God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead. Through regenerating us God does not forfeit His unique Godhead; by being regenerated we do not attain the Godhead. Through regeneration we are God without the Godhead and without the attributes that forever belong to Him alone.

The believers in Christ become God through organic salvation. By *organic salvation* we mean salvation in the divine life, as revealed in Romans 5:10: "For if we, being enemies,

were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more we will be saved in His life, having been reconciled." This word indicates that the complete salvation of God has two aspects—the judicial aspect and the organic aspect.[9] The judicial aspect, which is according to the righteousness of God and which fulfills the righteous requirements of His law for sinners, is for sinners to be forgiven (Luke 24:47), washed (Heb. 1:3), justified (Rom. 3:24-25), reconciled to God (5:10), and sanctified positionally (1 Cor. 1:2; Heb. 13:12). The judicial aspect is focused on redemption. The organic aspect is through the life of God and accomplishes God's purpose in the believers according to His eternal intention and heart's desire. The organic aspect is focused on life. Concerning both aspects Romans 5:10 is pivotal:

> Verse 10 of this chapter points out that God's full salvation revealed in this book consists of two sections: one section is the redemption accomplished for us by Christ's death, and the other section is the saving afforded us by Christ's life. The first four chapters of this book discourse comprehensively regarding the redemption accomplished by Christ's death, whereas the last twelve chapters speak in detail concerning the saving afforded by Christ's life. Before 5:11, Paul shows us that we are saved because we have been redeemed, justified, and reconciled to God. However, we have not yet been saved to the extent of being sanctified, transformed, and conformed to the image of God's Son. Redemption, justification, and reconciliation, which are accomplished outside of us by the death of Christ, redeem us objectively; sanctification, transformation, and conformation, which are accomplished within us by the working of Christ's life, save us subjectively. Objective redemption redeems us positionally from condemnation and eternal punishment; subjective salvation saves us dispositionally from our old man, our self, and our natural life. (Recovery Version, Rom. 5:10, note 2)

Regeneration is the beginning, the initial step, in God's organic salvation, to be followed, if we are normal in our spiritual experience, by sanctification, renewing, transformation, conformation, and glorification. To be sanctified is to be saturated with the holy nature of God until we are holy in our constitution and disposition. Since God alone is holy, to become holy is to become God. To be renewed is to have the old element discharged from our soul and replaced by a new element—the element of the divine newness (Rev. 21:5). Since God Himself is newness, to become renewed, or to be renewed, is to become God. Renewing is accompanied by transformation. To be transformed is to be changed into the likeness of Christ, that is, to have the image of the glorified and resurrected Christ formed within us. According to 2 Corinthians 3:18, we are transformed into the Lord's image from glory to glory by beholding the glory of the Lord with an unveiled face. As the Lord's glorious element is infused into us, we undergo a divine metabolism and are transformed into the reality of the Lord's image. Conformation saves us from our natural self-expression. To be conformed to the image of the firstborn Son of God, the divine-human Christ in His resurrection, is to be the mass reproduction of Christ, the first God-man, as the prototype for our becoming His many brothers fully like Him not only in life and nature but also in expression. To be glorified has both an objective and a subjective dimension. Objectively, to be glorified is to be brought into the realm of glory; subjectively, to be glorified is to be permeated with Christ as the indwelling glory (Col. 1:27) to such an extent that He bursts forth from within us in glorious manifestation, comparable to the blossoming of a carnation seed.

The process of becoming God through God's organic salvation is a process by which we advance from regeneration to glorification via sanctification, renewing, transformation, and conformation.

The process of becoming God through God's organic salvation is a process by which we advance from regeneration to glorification via sanctification, renewing, transformation, and conformation. All six steps involve the addition of God into our being, the divine dispensing of the Divine Trinity into our spirit, our soul, and, eventually, our body. This is a subjective and experiential matter in which God actually increases within us as we grow with the growth of God (Col. 2:19). Those who discard deification as a heresy or dismiss it as a dangerous, heterodox notion will in all likelihood deny the organic aspect of salvation and find their solace in only one aspect, the objective aspect, of the complete salvation of God. Theologians and preachers who are unbalanced in this way hinder both themselves and others from progressing in the experience of God's salvation. By contrast, those believers who treasure equally both aspects of salvation stand firmly on the solid rock of justification by grace through faith in Christ and His redemptive work and simultaneously and continuously experience and enjoy the "much more" of Romans 5:10—the subjective salvation in the divine life. By this subjective salvation, which is established upon objective redemption, the believers are made God in life and nature.

The believers in Christ become God by eating God. The Lord Jesus, the Son of God, wants us to eat Him. "I am the bread of life….I am the living bread which came

down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever" (John 6:48, 51). "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" (v. 53). "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life.…For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink" (vv. 54-55). "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me and I in him" (v. 56). "He who eats Me, he also shall live because of Me" (v. 57).

Eating is a crucial matter in the Scriptures; the Bible is actually a book of eating (Gen. 2:16-17; Rev. 2:7; 22:14). God's placing man in front of the tree of life indicates that God wanted man to receive Him as life by eating Him organically and assimilating Him metabolically, that God might become the constituent of man's being. The Passover reveals that God delivers us by feeding us; He saves us by giving us the Lamb, Christ as our Redeemer, to eat (Exo. 12:1-11). Whereas the Lamb delivers us and energizes us, the manna nourishes us and constitutes us with a heavenly element (16:14-15). Deuteronomy 8:7-10 reveals that God wants us to eat the produce of the good land, which produce typifies the riches of the all-inclusive Christ. Because the believers in general have neglected the eating of the Lord, the Lord wants to recover the church back to the beginning—to eating the tree of life (Rev. 2:7). For the sake of His economy, the Lord intends to recover our eating of Christ as the food ordained by God and typified by the tree of life, the Passover lamb, the manna, and the produce of the good land.

To eat is to contact something that is outside of us and take it into us in such a way that it becomes our constitution. When we eat our food, we take it into us that it may be assimilated organically into our body. For this reason, dietitians tell that we are what we eat. This is true not only physically but also spiritually. To eat God in Christ is to receive Him into us that He may be assimilated by the regenerated spirit in the way of life. This has a marvelous result: If we eat God, we shall be God. By eating, digesting, and assimilating God in Christ as our food, we shall be constituted with God and in this way become God.

The oneness that God desires to have with His redeemed and regenerated people is illustrated by what takes place when we eat, digest, and assimilate food. The food is first dispensed into us, and then it is mingled with us. The food eaten, digested, and assimilated by us actually becomes us; this is a matter of mingling. The principle is the same with eating God. The more we eat Him, the more He dispenses Himself into us and mingles Himself with us, constituting Himself into us for His expression. Therefore, God desires that we eat Him, digest Him, and assimilate Him. God wants to be eaten, digested, and assimilated by us so that He can become the constituent of our inward being. If we eat God, then, in keeping with the saying that we are what we eat, we shall be one with God, we shall be constituted with God, and we shall even become God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead. We eat God by taking Him in as the word of God, which words are spirit and life.

The believers become God by loving God. This thought is conveyed in some remarkable lines in an ancient hymn: "What e'er thou lovest, man, / That too become thou must; / God, if thou lovest God, / Dust, if thou lovest dust" (*Hymns,* #477). That becoming God by loving God is a reality in the experience and history of those who love the Lord and pursue Him is depicted in Song of Songs, a book of sublime poetry portraying the stages in the spiritual life: drawn to pursue Christ for satisfaction (1:2—2:7), called to be delivered from the self through the oneness with cross (2:8—3:5), called to live in ascension as the new creation in resurrection (3:6—5:1), called more strongly to live within the veil through the cross after resurrection (5:2—6:13), sharing in the work of the Lord (7:1-13), and hoping to be raptured (8:1-14).[10] The more we love Him in response to His love for us and by His love within us, the more we grow in His life and are transformed into His image, until we are the same as He is in life, nature, constitution, and expression but not in the Godhead. Hence, it is love that motivates the seeker to pursue the Lord until she eventually becomes the Shulammite—the reproduction of Christ in female form as His spouse. Those who know the depths of the divine romance between God and His redeemed people revealed in the Scriptures and who spend the course of their Christian life seeking Him and loving Him with their whole being learn the wonderful lesson that loving God eventually causes us to become God. In love, by love, with love, and through love we become absolutely open to Him, one with Him, and constituted with Him. We become what we love; we love Him.[11] The following is an elegant statement concerning the necessity and efficacy of love in a believer's experience of Christ:

The more we love Him in response to His love for us and by His love within us, the more we are transformed into His image, until we are the same as He is in life, nature, constitution, and expression.

> To realize and participate in the deep and hidden things God has ordained and prepared for us [1 Cor. 2:9] requires us not only to believe in Him but also to love

> Him. To fear God, to worship God, and to believe in God (that is, to receive God) are all inadequate; to love Him is the indispensable requirement. To love God means to set our entire being—spirit, soul, and body, with the heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30)—absolutely on Him, that is, to let our entire being be occupied by Him and lost in Him, so that He becomes everything to us and we are one with Him practically in our daily life. In this way we have the closest and most intimate fellowship with God, and we are able to enter into His heart and apprehend all its secrets (Psa. 73:25; 25:14). Thus, we not only realize but also experience, enjoy, and fully participate in these deep and hidden things of God. (Recovery Version, 1 Cor. 2:9, note 3)

The believers become God through the function of the law of life. We use the word *law* to denote not a decree or a legislative enactment but a natural power with certain inclinations and activities. In the physical universe there are various natural laws; the law of gravity is an obvious example. Our interest here, as was Paul's in Romans 8, is not with physical laws but with laws relating to life.

Every kind of life has its own law, its innate capacity and spontaneous function. For instance, an apple tree bears apples according to the life of the apple tree. The producing of apples is not a deliberate, willful activity or a response to external prodding or exhortation. An apple tree has an apple-tree life, and with (or in) the apple-tree life is the apple-tree law of life, the law of life that, according to its inherent power and inclination, governs, directs, and shapes the development of the apple tree. The same principle obtains with every kind of plant and animal life; human life, too, functions according to its own laws. The higher a particular life is, the higher is its law. Hence, the law of the dog life is higher than the law of the worm life. Since the human life is the highest form of created life, the law of the human life is higher than the law of any other kind of natural life.

The life of God—the eternal life—is the highest life, and with this life is the highest law called "the law of the Spirit of life" (Rom. 8:2). Eternal life is a life on the highest plane, for it is the divine life, the life of God, uncreated, incorruptible, and indestructible (Eph. 4:18; John 5:26; Rom. 8:2; Heb. 7:16). In fact, the life of God, the eternal life, is the Triune God. The Father has life in Himself; the Son, as the embodiment of the Father, has life in Himself (1 John 5:11-12); and the Spirit, being the life-giving Spirit, the Spirit who gives life, is the Spirit of life. With this marvelous eternal life, we, the believers in Christ, have been regenerated to become children of God and members of Christ (John 1:12-13; Eph. 5:30). This life, God in Christ as the life-giving Spirit in our spirit, is now our life (Col. 3:4). The law of this life, the law of the Spirit of life, is the automatic and spontaneous capacity and function of the Triune God as life in the believers.

What does the law of the life of God do in the believers, in the children of God? In its essential function, the law of the life of God is making us God. Consider the development of a human being from gestation to maturity, a development directed organically in every stage by the law of human life. The law of human life produces a human being, and this human person is the same in life and nature as his or her parents without becoming the parents in person or status. The God who created human life with its law functions within the believers according to the law of His own life, making them His reproduction.[12] This reproduction is the same as the source, the Father, in life and in nature but not in His Fatherhood or Godhead:

> The function of the inner law [the law of the divine life] refers to the divine capacity. In this law there is the divine capacity, and the divine capacity is almighty. This divine capacity can do everything in us for the fulfillment of God's purpose….The divine capacity of the inner law of life can live God. This capacity can also cause the believers in Christ to be constituted with God. Because the believers are constituted with God, they as a corporate people are God's expression. Although the believers are constituted with God, there is still a distinction between them and God. God remains God with the Godhead, and we, the believers, are made the same as God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead. This means that except for the Godhead, we are exactly the same as God. Since we are the same as God in life and in nature, we become His increase, His enlargement, as His fullness to express Him. This is the highest aspect of the capacity of the inner law of life. (Lee, *Jeremiah* 184)

The law of the life of God is making us God. The God who created human life with its law functions within the believers according to the law of His own life, making them His reproduction.

We may say that, in its essential function, the law of the life of God is making us God. Now we need to point out that in particular the law of the Spirit of life is operating within us to conform us to the image of Christ as the firstborn Son of God.[13] "Because those whom He foreknew, He also predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the Firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:29). In its function, the law of

life conforms us to the image of Christ as the firstborn Son by causing His glorious image to be fully formed within us. Instead of our trying to be "like Jesus" or asking the vain question "What would Jesus do?", we should simply allow the life of God to flow within us and the law of the life of God to work within us. Eventually, this law of life will cause every child of God and brother of Christ to be conformed to the image of Christ:

> Conformation is the end result of transformation. It includes the changing of our inward essence and nature, and it also includes the changing of our outward form, that we may match the glorified image of Christ, the God-man. He is the prototype and we are the mass production. Both the inward and the outward changes in us, the product, are the result of the operation of the law of the Spirit of life (v. 2) in our being. (Recovery Version, Rom. 8:29, note 3)

This is what it means to become God by the function of the law of the life of God.

In order for God to express Himself in man, He must become a man and yet remain God. In order for man to express God, man must become God and yet remain man.

The Goal of Becoming God

It may be that some, who are ready to admit that this presentation of the believers' becoming God in Christ according to God's economy is not heretical, have lingering questions. Some may wonder about the point of it all or ask whether such a matter as deification should be regarded as central to Christian experience. Perhaps someone may say, "The deification of the believers is not heretical, but why should it assume a place of importance? What difference does it make if we simply leave this matter alone and devote ourselves to other things?" Questions and objections such as these often arise because believers are self-centered rather than God-centered, even in relation to God's salvation. Many care only about their eternal happiness and thus cling to the notion of a heavenly mansion designed and built with their comfort and bliss in mind. They may care little, if at all, for God's good pleasure or eternal purpose. For them, God's intention and economy hold no interest.

If, by the Lord's mercy, we begin to care less for ourselves and more for God and His economy, we may be in a position to see the vital and intrinsic connection between deification and God's goal in His economy. God's goal is to have a corporate expression of Himself, first in and through the Body of Christ and ultimately, consummately, and eternally in and through the New Jerusalem. Furthermore, God desires that this corporate expression of Himself be through humanity as the vessel or channel.

However, mere humanity cannot express divinity; only God can express God. This is in keeping with the principle that we can express only what we are, not what we are not. A cat has a feline expression because it has a feline life and nature. The same is true of every living thing, including human beings. Because we are humans with a human life and nature, we express humanity. But it is God's intention to have a corporate expression of Himself in and through humanity. How is this possible, since only God can express God? The answer consists in this simple statement: God became man to make man God for the expression of God. In order for God to express Himself in man, He must become a man and yet remain God. In like manner, in order for man to express God, man must become God and yet remain man. By becoming God in life and in nature, we can become the expression of God, for we are constituted with God to become God in His expression, the expressed God. At the same time, since God intends to express Himself in man, we must remain human for God's expression of Himself in and through redeemed humanity.

The crucial point is this: The corporate expression of God requires that man become God in life, in nature, and in expression. We cannot be God in expression without first becoming God in life and in nature. As we have indicated, the terms that most fully define the corporate expression of God are *the Body of Christ* and *the New Jerusalem.* Unless we become God, we cannot be the Body of Christ, and unless we become God, we cannot be the New Jerusalem, for both the Body of Christ and the New Jerusalem are composed not only of the Triune God Himself but also of God's regenerated, transformed, glorified, deified sons. God's goal in His economy is to have an eternal, consummate, corporate expression of Himself. The corporate expression is God's goal, and deification is the organic process in Christ by which we reach and actually become God's goal. For the sake of the corporate expression of God, we must become God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead. Therefore, we become God for God. This is the desire of God's heart and the meaning of our existence. A&C

Notes

[1]Sproul categorically rejects any and all teachings regarding deification, which is first given the appellation *Apotheosis* and

then defined as a heresy of the most pernicious sort. That this is Sproul's attitude is proved by the following remark: "Evangelical Christianity affirms the Trinity and Chalcedonian Christology and eschews *all forms of Apotheosis"* (45-46). Admittedly, Sproul was writing with specific reference to the doctrine of "little gods" espoused in certain sectors of the Charismatic movement. However, instead of limiting his remarks to that particular form of so-called Apotheosis, Sproul maintains that "Evangelical Christianity" rejects "all forms of Apotheosis." Since Sproul defines Apotheosis as "becoming God," labels it a "ghastly heresy," and then asserts that all forms of this heresy must be repudiated, it is not likely that he would make an exception to the concept of becoming God that we shall set forth. It would be wonderful, however, if he and other advocates of Reformed theology reconsidered the absoluteness and inflexibility of their position and opened to the possibility that there might be more revelation in Scripture than dreamt of in their theology.

It would be wonderful if advocates of Reformed theology reconsidered the inflexibility of their position and opened to the possibility that there might be more revelation in Scripture than dreamt of in their theology.

[2]Consider this: "The ultimate evil is to call oneself God (big or small). This is the doctrine of the anti Christ [sic] and part of the mystery of iniquity now working in the earth" ("Return of the God/Men").

[3]The Lord's name is I Am. In other words, His name is simply the verb "to be." We are not qualified to say that we are. We are nothing; only He has being. Therefore, He calls Himself "I AM THAT I AM." The Chinese version [of the Bible] speaks of Him as the "self-existing One and ever-existing One." "I Am" denotes the One who is self-existing, the One whose being depends on nothing apart from Himself. This One is also the ever-existing One, that is, He exists eternally having neither beginning nor ending.…Only God qualifies to have this verb applied to His being, for only He is self-existent. You and I must realize that we are not self-existent.…God is the unique self-existing One. Everything else comes and goes, but God remains. We are not, but God, and God alone, always is. As we have seen, the name of God as revealed to Moses in Exodus 3 is simply the verb *to be.* This indicates that before anything else came into existence, God was. After so many things have passed out of existence, God will still be. God was, God is, and God will be.…It is necessary that we know God as the One who is. (Lee, *Exodus* 59, 113-114)

[4]To say that we do not deify ourselves does not deny the fact that we are being deified by God in Christ.

[5]Walter Martin makes a number of telling points in "Ye Shall Be As Gods" (hereafter, "Gods"), his contribution to the volume *The Agony of Deceit.* This we appreciate and affirm. However, Martin's theology as expressed in "Gods" is incomplete, unbalanced, and seriously deficient, and this we question and critique. The foundational theological truth in "Gods" is, of course, biblical monotheism; there is "only one God by nature, one God who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, one God who possesses characteristics and attributes that can be imitated but never duplicated in finite creations" (98). Here "Gods" presents what we may call "selective orthodoxy," a partial, one-sided teaching of the truth. To be sure, God's incommunicable attributes may be neither *imitated* nor *duplicated.* However, the communicable attributes, in particular the divine life and nature, are duplicated and not merely imitated in the believers. This duplication is what makes it possible for the one grain to become many grains (John 12:24), for the one vine to have many branches (15:1, 5), and for the one Son to have many brothers (Rom. 8:29). After stating, mistakenly, that "God has recorded to our account the righteousness of His Son" (we do not have the righteousness of Christ—we have Christ Himself as our righteousness), "Gods" goes on to claim, "The image of God in man, which was shattered, marred, and defaced by sin…is restored in the last Adam, the Lord from heaven" (99). To say this is to wrongly reduce the effect of God's complete salvation to a mere restoration of the human creature, a condition far short of God's goal in His economy to be expressed in sons of God who, in Christ, are the same as He is in life and nature.

For "Gods," to be a partaker of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4) is not, as the text plainly says, to be a partaker of the divine nature. Instead, "Gods" would have us believe that we "partake of the divine nature in the sense that we imitate, not duplicate" (99). Related to this, "Gods" employs an interesting illustration. "It could be pointed out that on my last birthday, I partook of my birthday cake, but I did not become *part* of the cake" (98). However, the cake, after it was consumed, did, in fact, become part of the person who consumed it, for that person did not imitate the cake but ate the cake, digested the cake, assimilated the cake, and, at least in measure, was constituted with the cake. He did not become the cake objectively; nevertheless, the cake became him subjectively, and in this sense he became cake. The principle is the same with partaking of the divine nature. We eat the Lord, as John 6 perspicuously reveals, and then we digest and assimilate Him and are constituted with Him to the point that Christ becomes our very life (Col. 3:4). Being permeated and saturated with God, we become God in the sense of being the same as He is in His life and nature, which are mingled but not confused with our human life and nature, resulting in the expression of divinity in humanity.

"Gods" continues to display a defective and deficient theology by denying that the believer in Christ is a "god-bearing person,"

sharing God's divinity. In place of the biblical truth concerning regeneration and concerning the believers being actual children of God possessing His life and nature, "Gods" incredibly asserts, "As believers, we are *adopted* children" (100). Here "Gods" flatly contradicts the Bible. Nowhere are we told in Scripture that we are adopted children; rather, the New Testament emphasizes the fact that we have been born, begotten, of God to be children of God (John 1:12-13; 3:3-8; Rom. 8:16; 1 John 2:29; 3:2, 9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18). First John 3:10 mentions "the children of the devil," who are "the sons of the evil one" (Matt. 13:38). Did the devil, who is a father (John 8:44), "adopt" his children, or did he, as the Word indicates, beget them by injecting his sinful life and nature into human kind to produce "offspring of vipers" (Matt. 3:7; 12:34; 23:33)? Certainly not! Sinners are born of the devilish father and actually have the life and nature of Satan within; they are not adopted satanic children. Likewise, the children of God are not adopted by God—they are born of God to have the life of God and the nature of God but not the Godhead of God. Because believers are children of God, they are the brothers of Christ (John 20:17; Heb. 2:10-12). In the eternal, unalterable Godhead, Christ, and only Christ, is the only begotten Son and as such has no brothers, but in the economy of God, Christ is the firstborn Son of God and as such has many brothers (Rom. 8:29). "Gods" ignores this, presenting only one side of the truth by saying, "Jesus Christ is the unique, one-of-a-kind incarnated Son of God and is, therefore, different from believers" (100). What "Gods" does not mention is that in resurrection Christ is the firstborn Son and is, therefore, the same as the believers in certain respects. "For both He who sanctifies [Christ as the firstborn Son of God] and those who are being sanctified [the believers as the many sons of God] are all of One, for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brothers" (Heb. 2:11). Both the Sanctifier and the sanctified are "all of One," that is, out of one source—the one Father. The Sanctifier is divine and human, and the sanctified are human and divine, but the Sanctifier is God in the Godhead and is the proper object of the believers' worship, whereas the sanctified are God only in life and in nature and worship Him who is God in the unique, incommunicable, non-enterable Godhead.

Avoidance or ignorance of the subjective aspect of the believers' relationship with Christ is characteristic of the theology of those who specialize in hunting heretics and exposing heresy.

Eventually, "Gods" concludes that the believers are in "a union of fellowship with the Trinity" (105). Whatever the expression "a union of fellowship" may mean, it falls far short of the divine revelation regarding the believers' relationship with God in Christ. We are one spirit with the Lord (1 Cor. 6:17). We are in Christ and Christ is in us, living in us, being formed in us, and making His home in us (Gal. 2:20; 4:19; Eph. 3:17). While "Gods" performs a service by refuting heretical teachings, both real and supposed, it also performs a disservice by presenting a deficient and defective, if not deformed, theology.

[6]Hanegraaff, however, does not succeed in proving that adherents and advocates of "little gods" theology believe that they will participate in God's incommunicable attributes. Moreover, although Hanegraaff is correct in insisting upon certain crucial revealed objective truths concerning God, his theology, as manifested in this section of his book, is unbalanced and biased in ways similar to Martin's. The great subjective, experiential truths of the New Testament—for example, the truth that we are children of God possessing His life and nature, that the Triune God dwells in us, that Christ is making His home in our hearts and being formed in us, and that we are one spirit with the Lord—are either ignored or not given proper attention. This avoidance or ignorance of the subjective aspect of the believers' relationship with Christ is characteristic of the theology of those who specialize in hunting heretics and exposing heresy.

[7]An emasculated edition of Billheimer's book was printed by Bethany House Publishers and Christian Literature Crusade in 1996, supposedly to remove statements in the original that could lead, according to the editor's preface, to misunderstanding. The second edition is, in many respects, a travesty of the original publication. Billheimer's careful and faithful testimony, based on the Scriptures, regarding the exalted place of God's redeemed in God's purpose, is eviscerated. For a penetrating review of the first edition and a critique of the second, see John Brooks, "Kinship with the Triune God" in *Affirmation & Critique,* October 1996, pp. 51-54.

[8]In his article "The Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis" from *The New Man: An Orthodox and Reformed Dialogue,* Robert G. Stephanopoulos writes,

> *Theosis* can in no sense be seen as a compromise or a reduction of God to the created order of being. Nor can it be understood as a consequence of some higher necessity in God to communicate with His creation. At best, deified man is still of the created order, not to be confused with the uncreated divine order. Deified man is man renewed, re-created and transfigured into the son of God by grace, whereas God remains inviolate, sovereign and inaccessible in His unknowable and unapproachable essence.
>
> This necessary distinction between the unknowable essence and the uncreated energies of God which is absolutely fundamental to the Orthodox Christian doctrine of *theosis* was clearly and definitively articulated by St. Gregory Palamas. St. Gregory summarizing and perfecting the patristic teaching, distinguishes between the various types of union—"essential union", "hypostatic

union" and "union through the uncreated energies"—in order to clarify the doctrine of *theosis.* By means of these critical distinctions it is possible, according to St. Gregory Palamas, to preserve on the one hand the absolute integrity of the inner life of the superessential Trinity and on the other hand the possibility of real communication and participation of man in the divine life of grace.

God communicates himself to man and achieves a truly personal relationship with him by means of His divine energies, operations or manifestations….In the sphere of divine economy the Triune God communicates actually and effectively outside His incomprehensible and unknowable superessence with the created order, establishing a personal and intimate relationship which can lead to a union in the divine life by grace. (152)

[9]The failure to recognize the balance between judicial redemption and organic salvation as it relates to deification is highlighted by Fritz Ridenour's statement, "Orthodoxy stresses deification above justification" (60). He explains:

Protestants believe that putting faith in Christ's death—the atonement—fully restores man's fellowship with God. The Orthodox, however, view Christ's death on the cross and God's grace as the means to enable man to become god, to obtain *theosis* ("deification" or "divinization")….Evangelical Protestant scholars believe that the Orthodox deification approach to salvation leaves them practically ignoring the doctrine of justification by faith. For example, Donald Fairbairn observes that "most elements of the Orthodox understanding of salvation actually pertain to sanctification." (60-61)

[10]See Holy Bible, Recovery Version (907-908) for a detailed outline; also consult *Crystallization-study of Song of Songs* by Witness Lee. In the Recovery Version of the Holy Bible, the subject of Song of Songs is described as "The History of Love in an Excellent Marriage, Revealing the Progressive Experience of an Individual Believer's Loving Fellowship with Christ (909).

[11]See "The Economy of God in Song of Songs." *Affirmation & Critique* IV.3 (July 1999): 24-35.

[12]Henry Drummond, quoted in Vincent, says,

There is another kind of life of which science as yet has taken little cognizance. It obeys the same laws. It builds up an organism into its own form. It is the Christ-life. As the bird-life builds up a bird, the image of itself, so the Christ-life builds up a Christ, the image of Himself, in the inward nature of man….According to the great law of conformity to type, this fashioning takes a specific form….And all through life this wonderful, mystical, glorious, yet perfectly definite process goes on "until Christ be formed" in it. (96-97)

[13]A footnote to Romans 8:29 in the Recovery Version of the New Testament develops this thought:

Christ was the only begotten Son of God from eternity (John 1:18). When He was sent by God into the world, He was still the only begotten Son of God (1 John 4:9; John 1:14; 3:16). By His passing through death and entering into resurrection, His humanity was uplifted into His divinity. Thus, in His divinity with His humanity that passed through death and resurrection, He was born in resurrection as God's firstborn Son (Acts 13:33). At the same time, all His believers were raised together with Him in His resurrection (1 Pet. 1:3) and were begotten together with Him as the many sons of God. Thus they become His many brothers to constitute His Body and be God's corporate expression in Him.

As the only begotten Son of God, Christ had divinity but not humanity. He was self-existing and ever-existing, as God is. His being the firstborn Son of God, having both divinity and humanity, began with His resurrection. With His firstborn Son as the base, pattern, element, and means, God is producing many sons, and the many sons who are produced are the many believers who believe into God's firstborn Son and are joined to Him as one. They are exactly like Him in life and nature, and, like Him, they have both humanity and divinity. They are His increase and expression in order that they may express the eternal Triune God for eternity. The church today is a miniature of this expression (Eph. 1:23), and the New Jerusalem in eternity will be the ultimate manifestation of this expression (Rev. 21:11). This book reveals that God's making sinners His sons is for this expression (12:5) and points to the ultimate manifestation of this expression (Eph. 3:19). (Note 4)

With His firstborn Son as the base, pattern, element, and means, God is producing many sons; the many sons are the many believers who believe into God's firstborn Son and are joined to Him as one.

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