

*This article is dedicated to the believer in Christ  
who suspects that there is more to Christian experience  
than modern Christianity lets on to.*

This essay's title question at first seems as much preposterous as it is audacious, and even giving attention to it will strike many as being impious and unworthy of a Christian. But anyone who has merely dabbled in the history of Christian doctrine knows that deification—as the notion is called—has not been completely foreign to Christian thought across the ages. Certainly it has been largely dismissed in the last few centuries among Christian teachers, at least in the West, and is all but gone from the theological understanding of the modern believer, but recently there has been renewed interest in the matter among scholars and even among some of the common believers. Because of this, this essay's title turns out to be something more than an idle and provocative query; rather, in view of the upsurge in interest in deification and due to the many false assumptions and misconceptions about it, the question has become completely relevant and particularly necessary. Given its long and impressive pedigree, its recent reconsideration and guarded acceptance by some, and its perpetual imitation and misapplication by others, the notion of human beings becoming God cannot safely be dismissed but must be met squarely, if only to properly lay it to rest—if need be. And because deification relates to the very core of the Christian faith—in fact, redefines it in many ways—the issue should be seriously considered by every believer in Christ who is more than a mere babe in the Lord. Hence, I beg my reader to read on.

### **The Pedigree of the Doctrine**

Before I attempt an answer to the title question, I first would like to support the claims of my opening paragraph by giving some detail of the history of the doctrine and of its various reconsiderations in the modern era. Further, I would like to set aside the imitations of the doctrine that

have been rejected by the Christian church so as to specify, in a gross fashion, what becoming God does not mean. What it does not mean, more finely considered, and what it does in fact mean will be part of the answer to the title question, to be proposed later.

By far the church's most celebrated expression concerning deification comes from Athanasius, who quite elegantly declared that the Son of God "became man that we might be made God" (*On the Incarnation of the Word*, 54:3).<sup>1</sup> Not many believers today in the West know who Athanasius was much less that he made such a striking statement. But his obscurity is more a testament of the ignorance of our Christian roots than it is of his unimportance. At a time when the Christian church was coming to grips with the full significance of the doctrine of the deity of Christ and when opinions were high that Christ was not the eternal God, but some creature who had been made God, this fourth-century church leader and teacher was the champion of the standard view that we hold today, that Christ the Son and Logos of God is very God in the same sense that God the Father is God. Athanasius also is considered to be the greatest defender of the proper notions concerning the incarnation of Christ. Further, some years after the church had clearly formulated this crucial doctrine and central tenet of the faith, he contributed widely in the debates concerning the deity of the Holy Spirit, again rightly defending the view that the Spirit is as much God as the Father and the Son are. Of course, these two crucial doctrines, taken with the belief that there is a God in the first place, established the uniquely Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which indeed is capital to the Christian faith. It was also Athanasius who first, in 367, after much discussion in the early church, formally defined the authoritative list of books that make up our New Testament. His list was

accepted throughout all the churches of the eastern Roman Empire until universal acceptance for all the churches everywhere was established later in the same century. Thus, Athanasius is far more than a minor figure in the Christian church; through his service our basic faith was unambiguously defined and thoroughly protected, and what we hold today as the normative documents of our faith were clearly identified under his leadership.

In view of the great contributions he made to the Christian church, no one questions the orthodoxy of Athanasius on matters concerning the Trinity and the deity of Christ and of the Spirit, and his acceptance on these points is universal. But there are things that Athanasius taught which are not as universally accepted. For example, his *Life of Saint Antony* is credited with legitimizing and popularizing the monastic movement in the fourth century, a movement that remains to this day but has hardly found universal acceptance in the modern Christian

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church. I mention this in order to identify immediately one of the arguments made against deification, that while Athanasius was imminently clear on the Trinity, the incarnation, and the proper canon of the New Testament, he also espoused concepts which, to some, are not correct, such as the monastic life, and that because of this, his notion of deification should similarly be dismissed. But to have noticed that Athanasius was human and not infallible on all matters does not automatically invalidate all of his other claims, including his declaration that God “became man that we might be made God.” Rather, it simply means that we should carefully weigh his opinion on the matter—in other words, that we should for ourselves ask the question, “Can human beings become God?” Further, it should be noted that there is quite a difference in kind between his recommendation of the monastic life and his belief in deification. The former relates to Christian practice, and Athanasius certainly did not expect all believers to participate in it. While he hoped that the monastic ideal

would be upheld by the entire church (even though it was not), he fully realized that the monastic life was not a universal of Christian experience and practice, nor did he press for that. Deification, on the other hand, was much more central to the faith for Athanasius, as we shall see below. He firmly held that deification was the central goal of salvation for all the believers. For him, deification was a universal of the faith; hence, it was more akin to the doctrines of the Trinity, the deity of Christ and the Spirit, and the incarnation than his notions concerning monasticism. And it is in the most central matters of the faith that the later church universally accepts Athanasius’s clarity and orthodoxy. His area of expertise, so to speak, is the central core of the faith, not Christian practice and experience. Thus, a strong case could be made for deification because it was so strongly put forward by one of the greatest definers and defenders of the most crucial doctrines of the Christian faith, who proved himself well able to navigate through truth and heresy.

Athanasius’s terse and striking declaration is not an isolated statement, but rather the first of a series of similar statements about humankind becoming God written over the course of his long and prolific service to the church. What is most striking about his later use of the notion is that he seemed to regard it as a given, not as a point of contention for his readers (often his opponents) that needed proof. For example, in his work *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia (De Synodis)*, completed in 361 and marking the end of his polemical writings against the Arian sect in the church, he writes,

If He [the Logos] was Himself too from participation, and not from the Father His essential Godhead and Image, He would not deify [Gk. *theopoieo*, ‘make God’], being deified Himself. For it is not possible that He, who merely possesses from participation, should impart of that partaking to others, since what He has is not His own, but the Giver’s; and what He has received, is barely the grace sufficient for Himself. (§51, quoted in Schaff, Vol. IV)

In proving that the Logos, the Son of God, was of the same substance with the Father, and therefore as much God as the Father was, Athanasius points out that Christ could not make human beings God if He were not Himself God in His own right but only God by virtue of having been made so by God, of having been deified Himself. Because Christ is truly God and possesses in Himself the full essence of God as the Father does (Col. 1:19; 2:9), He can rightly deify human beings. Athanasius’s argument stands upon the assumption that Christ deifies human beings, an assumption that he does not feel to defend. This he does repeatedly in his writings, particularly against the Arians, and as Jules Gross points out, “this presupposes that the Arians and catholics agreed in seeing divinization as the goal of the incarnation” (166).

Indeed, this was the case, for in the early centuries of the church, especially the fourth and fifth, deification was all but synonymous with salvation. Jaroslav Pelikan, the eminent historian of Christian doctrine, in commenting on the early church debates concerning the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation, simply notes that “salvation was not merely vivification but deification” (216). It is also interesting to note that in his index to the same volume, under the heading “Deification,” he directs: “See *Salvation*” (384), and under the heading “Salvation,” he provides a number of locations in his book where the term is “defined as: deification” (392).

Historians of the early church recognize that Athanasius’s aphorism “He became man that we might be made God” is the echo of the very similar statement made around 140 years earlier by Irenaeus of Lyon in one of his major works, *Against Heresies*: “Our Lord Jesus Christ, . . . through His immeasurable love, has become what we are, that He might cause us to be even what He Himself is” (§5, Pref.). The motives for Irenaeus’s writing are, like those for Athanasius’s, anti-heretical, and his work is universally regarded as solidly orthodox. Yet even in the environment of refuting heresy, he boldly declares that Christ became what we are in order to make us what He is. The implication is obvious: What we are that He was not already and that He had to become is human, and what He is that we are not already and that He must cause us to become is God. God became human to make human beings God. Athanasius was certainly right in making the implication transparent a century and a half later. But even in its less obvious form, the statement by Irenaeus is equally striking not only for its boldness but even more for how early it was and from where it was written. Irenaeus was born during the generation that immediately followed the last days of the apostles and would have enjoyed access to the indirect teachings of the early apostles. In fact, his other major work, whose title is variously translated *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* and *The Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*,<sup>2</sup> claims to be solidly founded in the apostolic tradition handed down in the church. In his refutation of the predominant heresy of his day—Gnosticism—Irenaeus relies primarily on the oral transmission of the apostolic faith as his authority. It should be remembered that he writes at a time when the canon of the Scriptures had not yet been settled in the church and when oral tradition, still so near the time of the apostles, was a viable and dependable source of authority. In combating the supposed secret teachings of the apostles that the Gnostics relied on, Irenaeus could not afford to portray as open, oral apostolic tradition anything that the early churches did not already accept universally as the faith. Thus, his statement concerning human beings being made God should reflect what was commonly held to be apostolic teaching at the time.

Whether or not it indeed was apostolic is another matter (and the other articles in this journal issue will make that clear), but it is noteworthy that the notion of deification was so well-established in the church by this time. Further, Irenaeus served as bishop in Lyon (Lugdunum) in Gaul, a Roman province corresponding roughly to modern France, and this fact shows that the geographical distribution of the doctrine of deification extended far beyond the confines of the Greek-speaking Eastern church. Though he was a Greek speaker, Irenaeus was, by his service, a Western bishop and presented to the church in the West the same doctrine that the Eastern bishops taught and would teach.

These two major Greek-speaking theologians of the second and fourth centuries were not alone in teaching that in God’s salvation human beings become God. The notion was prevalent throughout the early church and particularly so among the Greek-speaking churches.

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Jules Gross, in his seminal work on the subject, *The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers*, presents an extensive collection of citations from thirty-three Greek fathers of the early church (from a total of 184 works) in which they express their belief that human beings are deified in salvation. Gross’s book reads almost like a general survey of the Greek-speaking church of the first eight centuries, for every significant teacher is quoted on the subject of deification, and the quotations are not insignificant asides by these writers but central statements of how they perceived salvation. In many ways, Gross’s book, while focused on the narrow topic of deification, is in fact a general survey of the period in that this particular view of salvation was the general view of the period. While much of the modern church, at least among its Protestant faithful, characterizes salvation in moral, ethical, and judicial terms, Gross demonstrates that the early Greek-speaking church characterized it as divinization, as deification.

Without attempting to reproduce Gross's impressive collection of material, I think it helpful to present a few further citations from early church writers to show how thoroughly they held to the notion of deification. The fourth-century Cappadocians—Basil the Great, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus—who championed a number of refinements in the doctrine of the Trinity, and particularly of the Holy Spirit, taught the deification of the Christian as forcefully as their contemporary Athanasius. The first of these, Basil, very explicitly declares that deification is a gift of the Holy Spirit, from whom "comes foreknowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of what is hidden, distribution of good gifts, the heavenly citizenship, a place in the chorus of angels, joy without end, abiding in God, the being made like to God—and highest of all, the being made God" (*On the Holy Spirit*, 9:23; quoted in Pelikan 216). This quotation makes clear that Basil did not understand deification to be simply "the being made like God,"

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as some embarrassed modern teachers have tried to interpret the early church's doctrine of deification, but more expressly "the being made God." While some wrangling will allow a translator to render Athanasius's *theopoieo* as "become like God" or "become divine" (as has been done, despite the problems associated with such renderings), it is hardly possible to translate Basil's *theon genesthai* here as anything but "being made God," especially when the phrase is set in such emphatic contrast to the less controversial notion immediately preceding it.

In memoriam of Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus recounted the story of how Basil once confronted the prefect Modestus, sent by the Roman emperor Valens, with the truth of man's becoming God. When Modestus asked why he did not honor his sovereign the emperor by accepting the Arian Christianity of the emperor, Basil answered, "'Because,' said he, 'this is not the will of my real Sovereign; nor can I, who am the creature of God, and bidden myself to be

God, submit to worship any creature'" (*Catechetical Orations*, Oration 43, "The Panegyric on S. Basil" §48, quoted in Schaff, Vol. VII). Referring to the Arian belief that Christ was merely a creature and soundly rejecting it, Basil sums up the whole of the divine intention and of the Christian hope in the simple affirmation that we creatures are bidden, commanded, to be God.

Basil's brother Gregory of Nyssa also taught strongly that man becomes God in God's salvation. In his *Great Catechism*, he writes that "the God who was manifested infused Himself into perishable humanity for this purpose, viz. that by this communion with Deity mankind might at the same time be deified" (§37, quoted in Schaff, Vol. V). Earlier in the same work he speaks of deification in terms of its operation on our nature: "He was transfused throughout *our nature*, in order that our nature might by this transfusion of the Divine become itself divine" (§25, quoted in Schaff, Vol. V).

Basil's longtime friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, the third Cappadocian, concurs with his counterparts on the matter of deification and even broadens the use of the teaching to assert, as Athanasius did, the deity of the Spirit: "If He [the Holy Spirit] is in the same rank with myself, how can He make me God, or join me with Godhead?" (*Catechetical Orations*, Oration 31, "On the Holy Spirit" §4, quoted in Schaff, Vol. VII), and "For if He [the Holy Spirit] is not to be worshipped, how can He deify me by baptism?" (*Catechetical Orations*, Oration 31, "On the Holy Spirit" §28, quoted in Schaff, Vol. VII).

The leading theologian of the next century, the fifth, is generally held to be Cyril of Alexandria, who figured prominently in the debates concerning the two natures of Christ and was staunchly opposed to the Nestorian heresy. Concerning Cyril's understanding of deification, Gross points out that "with Cyril of Alexandria the doctrine of divinization indeed appears as the sum total of all that the previous fathers have written on this theme," and that Cyril "has the merit of having outlined a theology of individual deification carried out by the incarnated Logos and His Spirit" (233). In the fifth century and through the teaching of Cyril, the notion of deification, which until that time had primarily been an assumed basis for other doctrinal matters, developed into a full theology of salvation, a theology that survives, with development, in the Eastern Orthodox Church to this day. Being such a synthesist of the doctrine, Cyril had much to say on the matter, but one particular passage demonstrates adequately his conviction that human beings become God in His salvation:

For we are temples of the Spirit, who exists and subsists; because of Him, we are also called gods insofar as, by our union with Him, we have entered into communion with

the divine and ineffable nature. If the Spirit who deifies us through Himself is actually foreign and separate, as to essence, from the divine nature, then we have been defrauded of our hope, assuming for ourselves who knows what vain glory. How, indeed, would we then still be gods and temples of God, according to Scripture, by the Spirit who is in us? For how would the one who is deprived of being God confer this capacity on others? But we are in reality temples and gods....The divine Spirit is therefore not of an essence different from that of God. (*Dialogues on the Trinity*, §7, quoted in Gross 230)

Gross's survey of the doctrine of deification in the early Greek-speaking churches further documents the testimony for it in the writings of Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagorus, Theophilus of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Hippolytus of Rome, Methodius of Olympus, Didymus the Blind, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsoestia, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, and John of Damascus as further attestation of this teaching's acceptability by the ancient church through the eighth century.

Among the Latin writers of the church, we do not find a similar interest and emphasis on deification. The theological issues that occupied the minds of Latin church writers did not require them to develop the notion, and thus there is no theology of deification in the West that corresponds to what developed in the East. However, it would be wrong to see in this a rejection of the doctrine in the Western church. What we find instead is scattered evidence of a latent understanding that God deifies human beings in His salvation. It appears that many Latin writers accepted the doctrine as part of their inheritance from the church before them. For them the notion did not require defense even if it did not warrant development; thus, we find occasional references to deification in their writings, almost like asides that provide additional weight to their main arguments. There is no need to reproduce many of these references to make the point, but a few, from some of the more important Latin writers, are appropriate.<sup>3</sup>

Tertullian, the leading Latin theologian of the second century, speaks of deification in much the same way that Irenaeus does, not in explicit terms but with clear enunciation of the concept nevertheless, as this portion illustrates:

Whatever attributes therefore you require as worthy of God, must be found in the Father, who is invisible and unapproachable, and placid, and (so to speak) the God of the philosophers; whereas those [human] qualities which you censure as unworthy [of God] must be supposed to be in the Son, who has been seen, and heard, and encountered, the Witness and Servant of the Father, uniting in Himself man and God, God in mighty deeds, in weak

ones man, in order that He may give to man as much as He takes from God. What in your esteem is the entire disgrace of my God is in fact the sacrament of man's salvation [which] God held converse with man, that man might learn to act as God. God dealt on equal terms with man, that man might be able to deal on equal terms with God. God was found little, that man might become very great. (*Against Marcion* 2:27, quoted in Roberts)

By far the greatest Latin theologian is Augustine of Hippo, who served the church in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, and in many respects he is the greatest Christian writer of all time after the apostles. The Protestant Reformation owes much to his insights and prolific presentation of the Christian faith, and Catholicism views him as the greatest doctor of the church. Generally, scholars have tended to overlook Augustine's view on deification, there being so many other more developed topics to attend to in his writings. But in the immense lit-

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erary output of this saint the notion of deification can indeed be found, and because of ample references to it in his work a few excellent studies have been made of his understanding on the matter. In English we have Gerald Bonner's "Augustine's Conception of Deification," which brings together the relevant passages from Augustine's writings and offers a thorough evaluation of how he saw the doctrine. One of the most striking passages that Bonner quotes is from *Exposition on Psalm 50* (where Augustine quotes Psalm 82:6: "I said, You are gods, / And all of you are sons of the Most High"):

For He justifies, who is just of Himself and not of another; and He deifies, who is God of Himself and not by participation in another. Now He who justifies, [He] Himself deifies, because by justifying He makes sons of God. For *to them gave He power to become the sons of God*. If we are made *sons of God*, we are also made *gods*. (Bonner 378)

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Elsewhere Augustine echoes his understanding that becoming sons of God equals being made God:

God wishes to make you a god, not by nature, like Him whom He begot, but by His gift and adoption. For just as He through His humanity was made a partaker of your mortality, so He makes you a partaker of His immortality by exaltation. (*Sermons*, 166, quoted in Bonner 378)

Like many of his Greek contemporaries, Augustine also appealed to the doctrine of deification as a proof that Christ was truly God and, by His intrinsic nature, divine, again giving us evidence that the doctrine held universal acceptance in the early church:

If men are made gods by the word of God (*per sermonem Dei*), if by participating (*participando*) they are made gods, is not He in whom they participate not God? If lights which are kindled are gods, is the light which

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enlightens not God? If they are made gods being warmed in a certain fashion by the saving fire, is He by whom they are warmed not God?...If therefore the word (*sermo*) of God makes you gods, how is the Word (*verbum*) of God not God? (*Exposition on the Gospel of John*, 48:9, quoted in Bonner 379)

From the pen of any other writer we might blanch, but from so great a theologian as Augustine this way of speaking about what God wishes for human beings requires us to at least pause and consider the possibility that human beings can somehow become God, even if we can casually dismiss all other testimony of the early church.

As the article on deification in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* shows, the doctrine enjoyed a prominent place in the West during the Middle Ages (cols. 1399-1445), when monasticism, mysticism, and spirituality flourished in the Catholic Church. The great attention to deification in this

period has been largely ignored and discounted because of the spiritual and mystical excesses of that time, something that the Reformers reacted to violently. But the fact remains that for many writers of the Middle Ages deification plays as central a role in their thought as it has in the Greek East from the earliest centuries until today. Understanding the suspicion that attaches to these writers, I will not foist the words of monks and mystics upon any of my possible evangelical readers—except the words of one, Thomas Aquinas, who far excels all others of the period after the close of the early church in the sixth century and before the beginning of the Reformation in the sixteenth.

Aquinas's understanding of deification, according to the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* (cols. 1426-1432), depends heavily on the notion of partaking, which he adopts from 2 Peter 1:4: "you might become partakers of the divine nature." Partaking of God ushers the believers into a participation in Him that makes them God, not at all by virtue of anything that they are but completely by virtue of what He is. A few quotations from his masterpiece, the *Summa Theologica*, will demonstrate that even in the thought of this greatest of medieval Latin theologians the concept of deification is not lost nor rejected.

Nothing can act beyond its species, since the cause must always be more powerful than its effect. Now the gift of grace surpasses every capability of created nature, since it is nothing short of a partaking of the Divine Nature, which exceeds every other nature. And thus it is impossible that any creature should cause grace. For it is as necessary that God alone should deify, bestowing a partaking of the Divine Nature by a participated likeness, as it is impossible that anything save fire should enkindle. (2,1:112:1)

Here Thomas equates the giving of grace with deification, indicating that the goal of the divine grace is the deification of human beings. Grace, in Thomas's very full analysis and categorization of it, is of two parts, the second of which is sanctifying, and it is this sanctifying grace that makes human beings God in its ultimate effect. This identification of sanctifying grace and deification, derived from Aquinas, has led many modern writers to oversimplify the doctrine of deification and dismiss it as nothing more than sanctification. But it should be noted that by equating the causation of grace with deification, Thomas does not necessarily make the two indistinguishable; rather, he appears to be observing a distinction between cause and effect in the one operation of the divine giving of grace, and in this distinction lies the basic motivation for strongly holding to a doctrine of deification in its own right.

Earlier in the *Summa* Aquinas relates deification to the state of blessedness, which God possesses and shares with human beings through their participation in Him.

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God is happiness [Lat., *beatitudo*, “blessedness”] by His Essence: for He is happy [Lat., *beatus*, “blessed”] not by acquisition or participation of something else, but by His Essence. On the other hand, men are happy, as Boethius says (*De Consol.* iii), by participation; just as they are called “gods,” by participation. (2,1:3:1)

**T**homas, like the theologians of the early Greek-speaking church, distinguishes between the unique God, who is so by His very essence, and human beings who are made gods by participation in the unique God. This distinction is fundamental to a proper and acceptable doctrine of deification, and Thomas’s appropriation of it in his own comments on deification shows the attention he gave to the matter and his depth of understanding in it.

As the Middle Ages waned and the Protestant Reformation began to change the Christian landscape, the doctrine of deification fell by the wayside as the fundamental issues of justification by faith and the basis of salvation occupied the minds of Christian writers and sparked new debate. Luther’s radical departure from tradition as a source of authority in the church cast a dark shadow over the majority of the previous writings of the church and brought them en bloc under intense suspicion, even though, upon further examination, it was not his intent to “throw the baby out with the bath water.” In fact, one of the late medieval works that he himself rediscovered and published, the *Theologia Germanica*, strongly asserts the deification of human beings.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, for all practical purposes deification became a lost doctrine of the church. Furthermore, in the late nineteenth century the efforts of the leading church historian of the day, Adolf Harnack, to rid Christianity of any dogmatic theological trappings derived from Hellenic influences and to return it, in his view, to the primitive religion of Jesus and the Semitic apostles have thoroughly undermined the notion of deification since his day. Harnack’s immense influence on how the modern church views the patristic period cannot be understated, and many Christian writers and thinkers today accept as normative his distinction between a “true” Semitic Christianity of the first century and a derived Hellenic one of the third through sixth centuries. In characterizing the theology of the church in this latter period as Hellenic, Harnack took repeated aim at the doctrine of deification since this was the basic understanding of salvation at the time (see his *History of Dogma*, III:121-304). And at first blush, it is easy to swallow his objections. But many of Harnack’s assessments have now themselves become suspect after more critical study of the patristic period by later scholars, and there is a growing feeling among present-day church historians that Harnack oversimplified and overgeneralized to a great extent.

Unfortunately, like Harnack, many students of the patristic period fail to credit the writers then with the

sophistication that they actually possessed. Contrary to modern natural expectations, the Greek fathers were not completely oblivious to their Hellenic background. Further, they can hardly be accused of being so thoroughly influenced by the world of ideas that surrounded them that they could not transcend those influences, any more than a nineteenth-century Harnack (or a twenty-first-century critic of Harnack) could be accused of being unable to transcend his own world of surrounding ideas. Unlike some modern analysts, the fathers easily identified the influences that bore upon them and met them squarely in their extensive writings. I suspect that they would take great umbrage at the modern criticism of a pervasive Hellenic influence and would strenuously counter that indeed they were advancing something that transcends their human and social background, particularly in the matter of human beings being made God. It is easy to confuse Christian deification with some of the very pagan notions that preceded it, such as apotheosis, and to there-

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fore dismiss the former because of the undesirable nature of the latter. But the fathers of the early church were not so easily confused, probably because they were so close to the sources of confusion and were therefore forced to clearly enunciate the differences. Only a careful reading of how they approached this subject will reveal how thoroughly unconfused they really were. (The value of Jules Gross’s work suggests itself here.) Hopefully, readers today will be able to read for these differences and at least try to hear how the fathers saw in deification a decidedly Christian doctrine. They came to the doctrine of an assimilation to God with much the same concern that we moderns have, that is, the integrity of the otherness of God. Contrary to the natural suspicions which arise when one first considers deification (and which, unfortunately, Harnack seems to have fallen prey to), the Greek fathers steered ably between this theological Scylla and Charybdis to present a notion of human deification which properly respects God’s transcendence while acknowledging the

mystical character of His incarnation. Perhaps the bugaboo of Hellenization, raised by Harnack, can finally be dispelled from the notion of deification as held by the Christian church.

While the doctrine of deification did not maintain its prominence throughout the Christian church beyond the first five centuries and is only incidentally noticed in the West after that, this is not to say that it has lost its place altogether. Certainly in the East, in Orthodoxy, the doctrine has survived and holds a key position in the general understanding of salvation for that tradition. After the first five centuries of the church, deification theology took on a sophisticated and elaborate structure in the Eastern churches. In the fourteenth century, particularly through the labors of Gregory Palamas (d. 1359), the doctrine obtained its current Orthodox form, which is now highly intertwined with the theology of the sacraments. Yet in the West the doctrine can hard-

People naturally first expect that deification destroys the distinction between the unique, supreme, uncreated God and the human beings created by Him.

But any notion of deification that fails to respect this distinction should be rejected immediately as thoroughly unchristian.

ly be seen as having been dismissed. Recently the doctrine has gained at least a nominal standing once again in Catholic theology, as exhibited in the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, where we are told that the Word became flesh that we might become God (§460), a repetition of Athanasius's famous aphorism of the fourth century. Even in Protestantism the doctrine has lately received more than merely negative attention, as a small number of scholars, like F. W. Norris and Robert V. Rakestraw, have attempted to examine it for a Protestant relevance. It is interesting to note that the latter scholar published his research under the title "Becoming like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of *Theosis*"<sup>5</sup> in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, the prestigious mouthpiece of evangelical scholarship in the United States. These more modern indications of interest hopefully portend a "renaissance" for the ancient doctrine, especially when the doctrine is more often misunderstood than properly understood.

### Some Misconceptions

Unfortunately, today in the West recognition of the doctrine of deification (though not necessarily its acceptance) is limited almost exclusively to the academic elite. While most theologians and historians of Christian thought realize the prominence that deification played in the early centuries of the church and particularly in the formation of some of the crucial doctrines of the Christian faith, very few common Protestant Christians (and Catholic Christians, for that matter) are aware of this basic fact. Thus, for them the mere mention of human beings becoming God smacks of irreligiosity and, worse, heresy. Hopefully the foregoing survey of the doctrine's history will adequately introduce the orthodox pedigree of the doctrine to this latter group of Christians among my readers. The early adherents of deification were none less than the major teachers and writers of the Christian church, and while major teachers of the later church cannot be said to have given deification a central role, it is clear that they did not reject it or even ignore it, and neither should the common believer today. The real question, then, is not whether deification is orthodox; this has been established by the testimony of the church throughout the centuries. The more significant question is whether it is necessary or even profitable to view God's salvation in terms of human beings becoming God. The answer to this question depends on an understanding of exactly how human beings may become God.

But before we examine what it means to be made God, we should make clear what it does not mean. There are, I believe, two main misconceptions about deification that should be rejected outright, one based on a common misunderstanding of the notion and the other formally endorsed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. People naturally first expect that deification destroys the distinction between the unique, supreme, uncreated God and the human beings created by Him. But any notion of deification that fails to respect this distinction should be rejected immediately as thoroughly unchristian. God is uniquely prior to the entire created realm and remains distinct from it eternally. As such, He possesses in Himself qualities and attributes which He alone can possess and which can never be communicated to, or shared with, His creatures. Because of the incommunicable aspect of God's existence, human beings will never take part in the Godhead; they will never constitute an additional person or persons in the Trinity; they will never be worshipped as God. Because human beings will never lose their attributes as creatures, they will never be the Creator or have the creative and boundless powers of the Creator; neither will they ever deserve or receive the praise that the sole Creator deserves and should receive. Human beings will forever possess the human form and the human nature; thus, they will be

limited to the confines of a created universe and never be omnipresent as the unique God is. Humans will forever be endowed with the limited mental faculties that they were given in creation; hence, they will never be omniscient. God is God both outside of creation and within creation; human beings can at best be joined to God and thereby become God within the confines of creation, but even here, they will not usurp the unique identity that the sole God has. Unfortunately, many modern teachers who accept the notion of deification fail to respect these caveats, particularly some of those in today's Word-faith movement.

The doctrine of deification as held by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly called the Mormon Church; henceforth LDS) must likewise be set aside but not for the same reason. While many of the writings of the LDS may seem to ignore the fundamental distinction between God and the exalted believers (and to be fair, a number of other writings demand that the distinction be respected), there is a more fundamental problem with the LDS doctrine of deification, namely, the concepts of God and Godhood that underlie it. It is important to understand that in LDS thought there exists no ontological distinction between God and human beings in the first place.

Latter-day Saints deny the abstract nature of God the Father and affirm that he is a concrete being, that he possesses a physical body, and that he is in space and time. They further reject any idea that God the Father is "totally other," unknowable, or incomprehensible. In LDS doctrine, knowing the Father and the Son is a prerequisite to eternal life (John 17:3; Doctrine and Covenants 88:49). In the opinion of many Latter-day Saints, the concept of an abstract, incomprehensible deity constitutes an intrusion of Greek philosophical categories upon the biblical record. (Robinson, online)

Gods and humans represent a single divine lineage, the same species of being, although they and he are at different stages of progress. This doctrine is stated concisely in a well-known couplet by President Lorenzo Snow: "As man now is, God once was: as God now is, man may be" (see *Godhood*). This principle is clearly demonstrated in the person of Jesus Christ, a God who became mortal, and yet a God like whom mortals may become (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18). But the maxim is true of the Father as well. As the Prophet Joseph Smith said, "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 345). Thus, the Father became the Father at some time before "the beginning" as humans know it, by experiencing a mortality similar to that experienced on earth. (Robinson, online)

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. (Carter, online)

The deification of human beings in LDS teaching is part of a process that both God and human beings participate in, namely, eternal progression, and this progression serves to enhance the ongoing progress that God Himself is understood to make.

No official [LDS] Church teaching attempts to specify all the ways in which God progresses in his exalted spheres; "there is no end to [His] works, neither to [His] words" (Moses 1:38). God's glory and power are enhanced as his children progress in glory and power (see Moses 1:39; [Brigham] Young, *Journal of Discourses* 10:5). Ideas have been advanced to explain how God might progress in knowledge and still be perfect and know all things (see *Foreknowledge of God; Omnipotent God*). (Adams, online)

God is God both outside of creation and within creation; human beings can at best be joined to God and thereby become God within the confines of creation, but even here, they will not usurp the unique identity that the sole God has. Unfortunately, many who accept the notion of deification fail to respect these caveats.

While the previous misconception about deification makes of human beings all that God uniquely is and raises them to a level of existence that exceeds the capacities of their created state, the LDS concept makes of God an exalted human being and thus progression into Godhood becomes a natural process for human beings. The LDS concept of deification must be rejected for a few reasons.

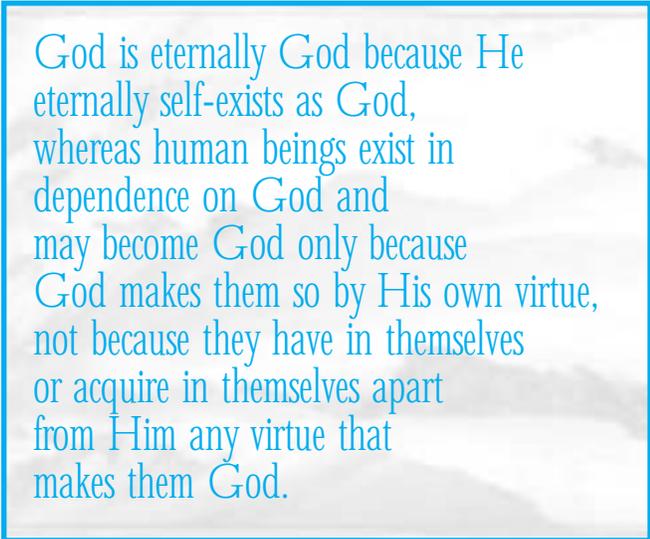
First, it is founded on a notion of God that is fundamentally different from what Christians (and Jews and Moslems, for that matter) have long held. Second, it is based on the concept of progression into Godhood, a progression which God Himself undergoes even if He is far ahead of human beings in it. Third, it does not preserve the uniqueness, or otherness, of God, which the LDS denies. Since God in LDS thought is creaturely, the deification of human beings turns out to be creaturely as well, a natural assimilation into a natural God, and is thus no deification at all.

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## Deification, Properly Understood

If we can get past the suspicions and misconceptions about deification and admit that the testimony of the church across the ages deserves some respect, we can begin to examine how it is that human beings may properly be said to become God through His salvation. Ample thought has been given to deification by numerous church writers, and it is worthwhile to pay attention to some common principles that they all seem to respect. These principles will help us define exactly what it means to be made God according to a proper Christian understanding.

First, the identity of God as God cannot be compromised at all. He is transcendent and beyond creation, and He is completely other than the created realm. This is a mode of His existence that abides eternally; that is, He has been and always will be transcendent and other. Thus, with Him there is an eternally, inviolable existence as the



God is eternally God because He eternally self-exists as God, whereas human beings exist in dependence on God and may become God only because God makes them so by His own virtue, not because they have in themselves or acquire in themselves apart from Him any virtue that makes them God.

unique God, who is other than the created realm. Further, His existence does not depend on anything or anyone other than Himself. He self-exists, and of all things that exist, only He self-exists.

Second, the human beings who are to become God through His salvation are His creatures and remain so forever. There is no imaginary change of existence into the uncreated God, and human beings do not acquire in themselves the attributes of the uncreated God, particularly His transcendence and otherness. Further, as they are by creation, human beings will always exist as dependent creatures (even if they imagine that they are otherwise). They come into existence because they were created by God, and they continue to exist because they are maintained by Him. In His “hand is the life of every living thing / And the breath of all flesh of man” (Job 12:10).

These two principles regarding God and human beings

are carefully respected in all orthodox notions of deification. God is eternally God because He eternally self-exists as God, whereas human beings exist in dependence on God and may become God only because God makes them so by His own virtue, not because they have in themselves or acquire in themselves apart from Him any virtue that makes them God. Thus, the early writers of the church distinguished between Him who is God by nature and those who become God by grace. By the former, they meant that God exists as God by virtue of His own self-possessed divine nature, which He derives or receives from no one else; by the latter, they meant that human beings become God because something is given to them, because there is a grace imparted that lends to them virtues that they do not possess by creation, and this makes them God. At the simplest level of expression, He is God, but human beings can *become* God. Their becoming results, not from anything that they do, but from His action of grace, whereas His being derives from His own eternal self-existence. Thus, deification is an action that puts human beings in a continual dependence on the God who deifies and, in fact, glorifies Him who deifies.

An objection could be raised that the complete otherness of God would be violated if human beings were to be afforded His virtue and made God, even if that were through dependence on Him. How can God be transcendent and other if human beings can become God, even by grace? Would not His otherness be violated by this participation by human beings? The early writers of the church recognized the dilemma and offered a response by an appeal to the incarnation. When the aphorism “God became human to make human beings God,” in its various enunciations, was offered, they made reference to the great mystery that the transcendent God became finite and creaturely through incarnation, and pointed to the implicit fact that there is in God a mode of existence that allows Him to enter finite creation and become one with it. The most basic tenet of Christian faith is that Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God, that He is God made flesh. While we may desire to know how human beings can become God, we must first wonder how God could become a human being and still be transcendent and other in the first place. Generally, we assign the answer to this more basic question to the mystery of faith, but the incarnation is evidence that in God there is both a mode of existence that makes Him completely other and incommunicable to His creation and a mode of existence that allows Him to participate in His creation and even become a member of it.

This distinction has been variously expressed in the history of the church. Among theologians of the Greek-speaking East, the distinction is made between the essence and energies of God, which is first clearly

employed by the Cappadocians of the fourth century and later more fully developed by Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth. Having been endorsed by the Councils of Constantinople of 1341, 1347, 1351, and 1368, councils of great authority for the Eastern Orthodox Church, it is now considered an accepted doctrine of Eastern Christianity. Bishop Kallistos Ware, the eminent British scholar and de facto spokesman for Orthodoxy in the English language, explains the distinction and how it relates to deification in this way:

According to Palamas, the divine essence (οὐσία) signifies God in his otherness and transcendence, the energies (ἐνέργειαι, δυνάμεις) God in His nearness and immanence. As regards his essence, God is beyond all participation (ἀμέθεκτος) and unknowable. As regards his energies, God is open to sharing and participation (μεθεκτός); that is to say, He is knowable, although never exhaustively known. In St. Basil's words, "We know our God from his energies, but we do not claim that we can draw near to his essence. For his energies come down to us, but his essence remains unapproachable" [*Epistles*, 234.1]. Applying this distinction to the doctrine of salvation, it follows that in *theosis* [Greek for "deification"] we share not in God's essence but in his energies. (177)

The term *energies* can be misleading, and because of this some, especially in popular circles, have understood it to refer to virtues or powers (i.e., energies in the purely English sense of the term) which God sends forth to His believers and which are separate from Him. This, however, is not what the Cappadocians, Palamas, and the modern Orthodox mean by the term. The energies are God Himself, only in a mode of existence that is distinct from His ineffable and transcendent essence. Ware continues:

These energies, in the Palamite view, are not merely the created effects of God's action in the world, but are themselves eternal and uncreated. They are to be conceived not in abstract but personal terms. They are not a thing or object, a gift that God bestows, an intermediary between the Deity and humankind, but God himself in his personal action—from all eternity, the three persons of the Holy Trinity relating to each other in mutual love; and then, from the creation of the world, the three persons going out from themselves to create, redeem and sanctify. Likewise the energies are not a part or subdivision of God, but the one indivisible God in the fullness of his self-manifestation. (177)

While many modern writers understand that Eastern Orthodoxy teaches deification as its central characterization of salvation and find little fault with it,<sup>6</sup> few admit that the doctrine relies solidly on this distinction between the essence and energies of God.<sup>7</sup> But there could be no deification unless the transcendence of God is

fully respected and at the same time the communicability of God is fully recognized. The distinction is as valid and as important as that between the oneness and threeness in God. This was a central concern for Gregory Palamas, who more fully developed the Cappadocian idea. Vladimir Lossky relates Gregory's concern:

Just as God is at the same time both one and three, "the divine nature must be said to be at the same time both exclusive of, and, in some sense, open to participation. We attain to participation in the divine nature [2 Pet. 1:4], and yet at the same time it remains totally inaccessible. We need to affirm both at the same time and to preserve the antinomy as a criterion of right devotion. (69, quoting Palamas's *Theophanes*)

This distinction between God in His ineffable essence or transcendent existence and God in His energies or, shall we say for the Western mind, operations, may not seem

This distinction between God in His ineffable essence or transcendent existence and God in His energies or, shall we say for the Western mind, operations, may appear to be an ad hoc construct made solely for the sake of a notion of deification. But it must be remembered that the distinction is not suggested merely by deification but more basically by the incarnation.

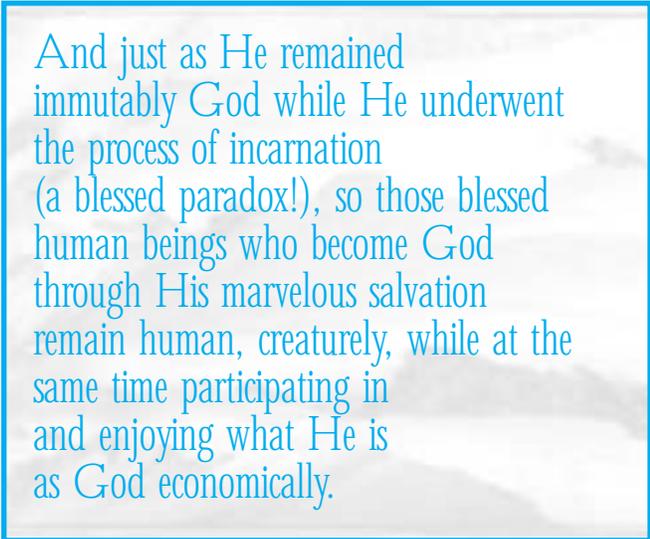
necessary and may even appear to be an ad hoc construct made solely for the sake of a notion of deification. But it must be remembered that the distinction is not suggested merely by deification but more basically by the incarnation. While the Christian East employs it for a theology of deification, the Christian West has been more interested in it in order to better understand the very possibility of the incarnation. In the West, however, the distinction is expressed differently, theologians here distinguishing between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. The former designation, sometimes also expressed as the essential Trinity, refers to the Trinity in the aspect of His inner self-existence; the latter, to "the Trinity as it is manifest in the economy of salvation, in the saving acts of God" (O'Carroll 94). "The economy of salvation" is the saving action of God that commences with the incarnation and ultimately leads to the full salvation of human beings. Western theologians are careful to assert that while the Trinity of God is more clearly manifest in

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the economy of salvation, the economy does not form the basis of the Trinity, as though something in the created realm motivated a change in the Godhead.

The Trinity was not simply brought about in the history of salvation by means of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, as though an historical process were necessary for God to emerge as trinitarian. Therefore, the distinction must be maintained between the immanent Trinity, where liberty and necessity are the same thing in the eternal essence of God, and the Trinity of the economy of salvation, where God exercises his liberty absolutely, with no necessity arising from his nature. The distinction between the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'economic' Trinity is intrinsic to their real identity. (*La Documentation Catholique* 1983 [n.d.):121, quoted in O'Carroll 95)

In the writings of Witness Lee, which greatly inspire the articles in this journal, the distinction has been expressed



And just as He remained immutably God while He underwent the process of incarnation (a blessed paradox!), so those blessed human beings who become God through His marvelous salvation remain human, creaturely, while at the same time participating in and enjoying what He is as God economically.

more casually by the formula: "God became man that man may become God in life and nature but not in the Godhead." Comparing this to the classical expressions of the distinction, "God in life and nature" should correspond to the economic Trinity of the West and the energies of God in the East, and "the Godhead," to the immanent Trinity of the West and the essence of God in the East. In numerous places in Witness Lee's writings, "the Godhead" is set in apposition to "an object of worship," but this seems to be the limit of development of the distinction. Hopefully, his formulation can be further explored, from his own writings, to define exactly how "life and nature" and "object of worship" provide identity for the two elements of the distinction. Those familiar with the history of the distinction may recognize some problems with applying "nature" to the energies of God and "worship" solely to the essence, but as an avid reader and student of Witness Lee's writings (not to mention a personal acquaintance of his), I feel that his distinction

can be solidly defended as formulated and that "nature" and "worship" can be comfortably assigned to the sides of the distinction as he does. At any rate, the utility, and beauty, of Witness Lee's expression lies in the fact that it gives the necessary distinction common parlance for the believers; it serves as well as any on a theological level and better than others on a practical one. It lacks only a formal defense. Unfortunately, another time and place is necessary for this.

However it is expressed, the distinction between God in His incommunicable essence and God in His operations is a very necessary one, not just for the less common notion of deification but also for the most basic Christian doctrine, that of the incarnation. While the truth that God became human—the first proposition of Athanasius's aphorism—is almost universally accepted in the Christian church, few believers realize that this great event in the "history" of God requires some distinction in His existence, a distinction that allows Him to be one with His creature (the "liberty" in the quote above) while at the same time being by definition completely transcendent to and other than His creature (the "necessity" in the quote above). But careful reflection by theologians across the centuries compels us to accept the distinction if we are to understand more deeply the mystery of the incarnation, even if we can never understand it completely. Many common believers, as well as many of their less-trained modern teachers, are easily stumbled by the notion of deification, and generally the source of offense is the common-sense axiom that God is completely transcendent and other. However, God does not completely conform to common sense, and the incarnation is a basic proof of that. Christian faith requires that we cast aside common sense to believe that God became a human being, but common sense stumbles some when they are asked to believe the second proposition of Athanasius's aphorism, that human beings become God. It should be that the source of greater offense is that God could become human, not that humans could become God, for to seemingly diminish His transcendence and otherness is far more serious than to exalt humans to the divine level. But by the incarnation the transcendence and otherness of God was in no way violated, and this, the common believer should understand, is the very basis of our Christian faith—God became human without becoming at the same time anything less than God. By the same token, God makes human beings God not by admitting human beings to His transcendence and otherness but by introducing them into who He is in His communicable operation, manifestation, and economy. And just as He remained immutably God while He underwent the process of incarnation (a blessed paradox!), so those blessed human beings who become God through His marvelous salvation remain human, creaturely, while at the same time participating in and enjoying what He is as God economically.

How human beings can be introduced into who God is in His communicable existence and thereby be made God has been suggested by the writers of the church, some of whom I have quoted above. A major study of its own would alone do justice to the matter; thus, here only an outline is possible. First and foremost, the fundamental basis of deification is participation in God and union with Christ. The Scriptures speak directly of this. Second Peter 1:4 characterizes the believers as “partakers of the divine nature,”<sup>8</sup> and Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:17, among other places, refers to our union with Christ: “He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit.” Typically, Protestant commentators reduce the phrase in 2 Peter 1:4 to a metaphor, finding the literal meaning offensive to the transcendence of God. But as Lossky points out, it is childish, if not impious, to reduce the expression to a mere metaphor or rhetorical expression so that it will fit the modes of thought concerning God that we have developed over time (67-68). Again, such a reduction is motivated by failing to recognize the distinction in God between His ineffable Being and His communicable existence in the economy of salvation. This motivation being set aside, we can more easily see that in some real sense the believers partake of the divine nature. This participation renders to them, again in some real sense, the attributes and qualities of God for their enjoyment and experience. Paul refers to this communication of God’s attributes to the believers in a way that is strikingly similar to the form of expression that Irenaeus, Athanasius, and others will adopt in later centuries: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, for your sakes *He became poor in order that you, because of His poverty, might become rich*” (2 Cor. 8:9, emphasis added). Elsewhere, Paul, employing a similar grammatical form, speaks of this communication even more forcefully: “Him who did not know sin He made sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (5:21). When these apostolic words are considered, it is no wonder that later writers would be so bold in their expressions of deification. Paul’s declaration that we “become the righteousness of God in Him” can certainly be reduced to be more comfortable; for example, we could say, as many commentators do, that the expression is hyperbolic and should be understood to mean that we become righteous through the righteousness of Christ, which is imputed to us in a forensic justification. This well preserves the otherness of God and should properly respect the piety of a Paul. But the fact remains that Paul uttered it the way he did, and if he were indeed the apostle of a purely forensic justification based on an external righteousness, why would he endanger his message with such imprecise, even misleading, language? It certainly seems that the externality and judiciality of some forms of modern Protestantism obscure the participation in Christ, with its communication of attributes to the believers, that Paul is trying to convey.

We “become the righteousness of God in Him” because we participate in Him who is the righteousness of God (1 Cor. 1:30). Certainly, there is no righteousness in us natively (Rom. 3:10; cf. 7:18), but “in Him,” in the Christ who is the righteousness of God, we are attached to righteousness. Our union with Him makes us one with Him who is not merely righteous but righteousness itself. In this sense, we indeed become the righteousness of God in Christ. Paul’s signature expressions *in Him, in Christ, in Christ Jesus*, and the like are well-known, and it is difficult to make anything less of them than a mystical union between Christ and His believers. (But, shamefully, even that has been tried by some.) The result of this union, if it is to be a real union and not again a metaphor for some mere ethical, moral, or juridical relationship, has to be the uplifting of the poorer by the excellent virtue of the Richer, and this is precisely Paul’s message. This uplifting is not simply imputed but communicated by actual participation, and the virtues now possessed by the believers

In the economy of God’s salvation  
Christ comes to humankind as the  
life of the world, and as this life He  
enters the believers to regenerate them  
and make them the children of God.  
And by the application of His  
divine life, with its attendant  
divine nature, to the believers  
He causes them to organically bear  
the form of God that He bears.

are not merely external but actually theirs inasmuch as Christ Himself is theirs (1 Cor. 1:2).

Through their organic union with Christ, into which God’s salvation brings the believers, they become what He is not in the sense of His immanent existence as one of the Trinity but by virtue of who He is in the economy of salvation. He is the Son of God, not only ineffably but also manifestly among humankind: “We beheld His glory, glory as of the only Begotten from the Father” (John 1:14), and by His manifestation as the Son, He makes us as He is—sons of God (Gal. 3:26; Rom. 8:14; Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). In the economy of God’s salvation Christ comes to humankind as the life of the world (John 6:33, 51), and as this life He enters the believers to regenerate them and make them the children of God (Rom. 8:10; Col. 3:4; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23; Titus 3:5; John 1:12; 1 John 3:1). Immanently and eternally Christ exists in the form of God (Phil. 2:6); that is, He expresses the very essence

and nature of the Godhead (Col. 1:19); and in the economy of salvation He “trans-forms” the believers; that is, by the application of His divine life, with its attendant divine nature, to the believers He causes them to organically bear the form of God that He bears (2 Cor. 3:18). To view biblical transformation as anything other than a process that makes of human beings something that they are not by creation, that is, to deny that they become God through union with God, is to strip the words of Scripture of any real force and demote the salvation of God to a scheme for mere human improvement. We are already human beings; we do not need transformation to become better ones. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ in incarnation is personally the Holy One of God (Matt. 1:20; John 6:69), and through the same Holy Spirit, the believers in Christ are sanctified, made holy (2 Thes. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:2), becoming themselves the holy ones, as the Greek word *hagioi* (“saints”) can most literally be translated (Rom. 1:7 et al.). Finally, in the Trinity, Christ exists as the glory of

A salvation that is simply judicial and makes of human beings nothing more than forensic objects, or one that amounts to no more than an improvement of our ethics or morality and makes of us nothing more than “better” men and women, offers little benefit to us as creatures and to God as Creator.

the Father, and He manifested Himself to humankind as such (John 1:14; Matt. 17:1-2, 5; Luke 9:32; 2 Pet. 1:16-18). Ultimately, His glory will be our glory as we manifest Him for eternity (Col. 3:4; Rom. 8:17; Phil. 3:21).

Some may deny that deification is a valid Christian notion, and others go so far as to say that it is entirely unscriptural.<sup>9</sup> But these exercise extremely narrow readings of the Scriptures. Certainly, the Scriptures do not use the term *deification* or say explicitly that human beings can become God. But some amount of what we hold as Christian faith is not spoken of explicitly in Scripture. Terms like *Trinity*, *substance/essence*, and *homoousios*, while solidly orthodox and accepted by the major branches of Christianity, are nowhere to be found in the Bible, yet we would not say that they do not express Scriptural concepts. Notions like the mutual existence and indwelling of the three of the Trinity and the two natures in Christ are not spoken of explicitly in the Scripture, but

we would not, for that reason, dismiss them from our faith, for they can be ascertained by careful study of the explicit text. Indeed, doctrines accepted less universally than these are held by various subsets of believers with far less than explicit support from the Scriptures. That the Scriptures do not use the term *deification* or say explicitly that human beings can become God does not invalidate the notion at all. What validates it, like any other doctrine in the Bible, is the system of truth that exists in the whole Scriptures. Of course, there are differences of opinion about the system of truth in the Bible, and the doctrine of deification can survive only in a system that accepts a close, organic relationship between Christ and His believers as a foundation. (The other articles in this issue take up the task of making this point clear.) Systems that see the Christian life as simply judicial, ethical, or moral, as in much of modern Christianity, will not derive much benefit from the possibility that human beings can become God through His salvation. But, then again, a salvation that is simply judicial and makes of human beings nothing more than forensic objects, or one that amounts to no more than an improvement of our ethics or morality and makes of us nothing more than “better” men and women, offers little benefit to us as creatures and to God as Creator.

A final objection to deification can be made. Robert Rakestraw, the Evangelical scholar, expresses it well:

Why use terminology that, at first glance at least, will alienate those unfamiliar with this line of thinking in Christian theology, with the result that they miss what might be of benefit to them? Some may reply, however, that the shock value of the terms may be just what is needed to awaken lethargic or defeated Christians to the truth of their union with Christ. (266)

Even if we can accept a union with Christ and participation in God that makes the believers God by virtue of our dependence on Him, are we not simply expressing in stark and shocking terms something that could be stated less dramatically? Is not the real value of deification nothing more than its audacity, something that appeals to mavericks or to persons thirsty for attention of any kind? In my experience, objections of this kind are a good sign, because they imply basic agreement with the notion of deification, even if there is not a willingness to assume the risks and the stigmata associated with it. If, after the writing of this article thus far, this is the only remaining objection to deification, then I feel that I have done an adequate job of answering this essay’s title question. But propriety compels me to offer a response to this final objection, which will also serve as a closing remark.

God’s salvation offers more than a single benefit to the believers and, more significantly, provides benefit to God

Himself. We cannot know fully why God desires to be expressed through humankind, but we know that such is His purpose (cf. Gen. 1:26; Psa. 8). God's salvation does not merely clean up a fallen creature; it works out His intention for creating humankind in the first place. For this greater goal of His salvation, His actions to forgive, redeem, justify, and reconcile, though fundamental and absolutely necessary, are not sufficient, even if these provide the believers immeasurable benefit and secure for us an eternal place with God. Perhaps because these "lower" aspects of God's full salvation relate to our problems, Christianity today seems fixed on them as the focus of what God does when He saves us. Little attention is paid to the "higher" aspects, which work out for God His greater purpose to have an expression in humankind. It is unfortunate that His full-saving work to regenerate, sanctify, transform, conform, and glorify His elect is so easily relegated to the confines of theological debate, rejected as too spiritual or mystical, or even dismissed completely as nice metaphors. At any rate, His intention remains firm and unchanged; He will be expressed in humankind, and for this He regenerates His elect with His very life, sanctifies them with His very nature, transforms them into and conforms them to His very image, and glorifies them with His very expression. These higher saving actions do not merely express His attributes of righteousness, mercy, and love, as do the lower aspects of His salvation. Rather, they express who He is in life, nature, image, and expression—His very being—through His manifestation in His believers. Only when the believers enter into union with Him to such an extent that the union regenerates, sanctifies, transforms, and even glorifies, so that they become what He is in life, nature, image, and expression—only then is God made as fully manifest as humankind can make Him manifest. It is only through deification that God fully expresses Himself in humanity. Further, our own Christian experience and enjoyment are greatly enhanced when our view of what God is doing is uplifted to its proper plane. If our view of God's salvation is merely judicial, our experience is merely judicial; if it is merely ethical or moral, our daily Christian life is limited to a merely ethical or moral human life. I contend that we do not need the fullness of God's salvation for that kind of Christian life; indeed, for ethics and morality alone we do not need a Christian salvation at all. But if we see salvation as becoming God in life, nature, image, and expression, our aspiration, our standard, and ultimately our experience will follow, and we will be, on this earth among our peers, God expressed. There will never be another God beside the unique and marvelous Triune God; that much is eternally true. But there will be for eternity to come an expression of Him that *is* Him, and the whole meaning and purpose of humankind will be achieved. No longer will we stand apart from Him as a problem to Him, but we will be one with Him as His glorious expression. Then will the

apostle's consummate hope be true: "that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). 

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Unless quoting published translations directly, I will limit citations of the Church Fathers to titles of works and relevant sections since the texts are readily available in a number of translations and editions.

<sup>2</sup>Like most of his works, originally written in Greek, this treatise survives only in translation. While *Against Heresies* comes down to us in Latin, *The Demonstration* is preserved in an ancient Armenian translation. The title of the Greek original is understood to begin with the word *epideixis*, which can mean either "demonstration" or "proof."

<sup>3</sup>One of the best studies on deification in general, and one which details the understanding among the Latin writers of the church, is the excellent, book-length article on the topic in

For ethics and morality alone we do not need a Christian salvation at all. But if we see salvation as becoming God in life, nature, image, and expression, our aspiration, our standard, and ultimately our experience will follow, and we will be, on this earth among our peers, God expressed.

*Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire.*

<sup>4</sup>Evelyn Underhill, in her book *Mysticism*, provides a striking example from the German work:

'Some may ask,' says the author of the *Theologia Germanica* 'what is it to be a partaker of the Divine Nature, or a Godlike [*vergottet*, literally deified] man? Answer: he who is imbued or consumed with Eternal or Divine Love, he is a deified man and a partaker of the Divine Nature' (ch. 41). (418)

<sup>5</sup>*Theosis* is one of the Greek terms for deification that was used by a number of patristic writers.

<sup>6</sup>Consider, for example, the comments of Hank Hanegraaff in his very popular book *Christianity in Crisis*:

First, it should be pointed out 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. The Eastern Orthodox church, for example, 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)

Unfortunately, Mr. Hanegraaff's characterization of Orthodox deification is extremely evangelical in composure and does not do full justice to what Orthodox theology actually teaches.

<sup>7</sup>For example, in his academic article (see Works Cited) on *theosis*, in which he reviews the Orthodox doctrine, Rakestraw fails to even mention the distinction.

<sup>8</sup>A long history of discussion on what *nature* means in 2 Peter exists, and again we must ignore it here. But, as an aside, Witness Lee's formulation of the distinction in God, at least one side of it, relies on the text of 2 Peter and the use of *nature* there.

<sup>9</sup>G. W. Butterworth, for example, in his study on deification in the writings of Clement of Alexandria, remarks, "There is nothing in either the Old or the New Testament which by itself could even faintly suggest that man might practice being a god in this world and actually become one in the next" (163).

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