

An Incomplete Sonship

Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor, by Trevor J. Burke. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

In *Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor* (hereafter *Adopted*), the latest offering in InterVarsity Press's New Studies in Biblical Theology series, Trevor J. Burke, Professor of Bible at the Moody Bible Institute, examines Paul's use of the Greek word *huiiothesia*, favoring the translation "adoption" over the less common "sonship," and attempts to find a metaphor to elucidate the nature of the Christian's entrance into the family of God. Observing that adoption has been sometimes misunderstood in the history of the church and lamenting that more recent scholarly treatments of the term have been too narrowly focused on historical background, Burke offers a well researched but flawed study of this profound and vital subject. Stating that "a strictly legal approach to Paul's adoption term truncates our understanding of the expression and severs it from its full theological scope" (70), Burke indicates that his consideration of *huiiothesia* may be farther reaching than that of many of his predecessors. However, by relegating the term to mere metaphor and still relying upon a largely judicial reading of Paul, Burke misses the organic union with Christ that derives from our having been begotten of God to be children in life and nature by virtue of the divine birth, thus qualifying us to receive the position and right of sons in our organic union with the Son in the Father by the Spirit.

Adopted explores the significance of *huiiothesia* in eight chapters. Chapter 1 identifies examples of purported theological misunderstandings of adoption and states Burke's purposes for writing, namely, to encourage the reconsideration of the importance of *huiiothesia* as a uniquely Pauline metaphor and to incite further discussion on this often neglected and misconceived term. Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of metaphor theory and sets forth the working definition of metaphor that will govern Burke's treatment of Paul's use of *huiiothesia*. Burke writes,

Paul's use of family terms in general and his adoption term in particular is clearly metaphorical: that is, he applies a family expression to a field to which it 'originally' did not belong and understands Christian relations in terms of family relations, by way of some kind of analogy. (33)

Cautioning against imposing a twenty-first century understanding of adoption on a first-century text, Burke posits that "Paul's adoption metaphor is suffused with meaning drawn from the family in the ancient world" (33). Adoption is identified as an important organizing soteriological metaphor for Paul and, as such, merits for Burke more scrupulous attention than it traditionally has been afforded. Chapter 3 explores the origin and background of Paul's alleged adoption metaphor, investigating the Old Testament, Greek, and Roman backgrounds to deduce meaning in historical context, ultimately finding in the Roman adoption procedure of *adoptio* the most relevant application to Paul's use of *huiiothesia*. This procedure involved the fictitious purchase of the male adoptee by the adopting father, whereby the former came under the authority of the latter. The procedure of adoption was overseen by witnesses, the adoptee's tie to the original family was severed, hereditary succession was changed, and "the adoptee's legal position and privileges were the same as that of a legitimate biological son" (69).

Chapters 4 through 6 make an ambitious attempt to demonstrate the roles of the three of the Trinity in adopting believers into the family of God. Burke writes,

A cursory reading of the main texts on *huiiothesia* reveals a theological thrust essentially trinitarian in nature, where each member—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—has a unique and vital part to play in a person's being adopted into the family of God. (72)

One chapter each is devoted to the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, chapters 4 through 6 respectively. Chapter 7 inquires into the significance of honor bestowed upon newly adopted sons in the ancient world and its application to the honor granted newly adopted sons of God who, ironically, are subject to dishonor from the world in the present age. Chapter 8 explores the eschatological outlook of Romans 8:18-27, weighing the tension between the "now" and the "not yet," the paradox that as the believers in Christ are adopted by God yet dishonored by the world, the day is coming when their hidden status as the adopted sons of God will be fully revealed, they will be conformed to the image of the first-born Son of God at the redemption of their bodies, and creation will be liberated from the bondage it presently endures. The book concludes with a summary of the eight chapters and an appendix contemplating alleged cases of adoption in the Old Testament.

*Huiiothesia: Adoption or Sonship?*¹

Burke's exegesis of the five verses where Paul uses the word *huiiothesia* depends on the translation of that term as "adoption"—a legitimate and common rendering—and all of its attendant implications (Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5). While most lexicons offer "adoption" as the primary, and sometimes only, translation of *huiiothesia*, it is worth considering why the word *sonship* is a more desirable translation.

The Greek word *huiiothesia* is composed of *huios*, meaning "son," and *thesia*, from the verb *tithemi*, meaning "to set, put, or place." *Huiiothesia*, therefore, has the literal meaning of "setting as a son or putting in the place of a son." Burke notes that the term "etymologically denotes either the process or act of being placed or 'adopted as son(s)'" (21-22). To translate *huiiothesia* as "adoption" lays stress on a legal, judicial act whereby the adoptee is transferred from one family into another family, in this case, "from an alien family...into the family of God" (27), and it also detracts from the Pauline concept of sonship as the attainment of the full inheritance of God as a result of maturing in the divine life. The translation of *huiiothesia* as "adoption" relaxes the reader into accepting a purely judicial understanding of this most profound and consequential matter. *Sonship*, though rare in modern English translations, is preferable over the more legal *adoption* because *sonship* carries with it the sense of having mature status as a son and, as such, intimates a more fully realized standing in the filial relationship between God as Father and believers as sons. In the light of the revelation of the Bible, *sonship* also reinforces the notion of an organic union between Father and sons, Begetter and begotten, which union is effected by regeneration. Through regeneration, by which the life and nature of God are imparted into the believers (John 1:13; 2 Pet. 1:4), human beings become children of God by virtue of the organic union with Him that is actuated by the divine birth (John 1:12-13; 3:6), and they are positioned to receive the full inheritance of God as genuine and matured sons of God. *Adopted* errs in this fundamental point by misconstruing regeneration for *huiiothesia* and departing even further from the truth embodied in the divine revelation by reducing both terms to mere metaphors. He writes,

Once again, in 1 John 3:1-3 the issue to the fore is the amazing grace of God in our becoming his sons, which comes about when we are *born* (*gegennēmenos*, 3:9) into the family of God. Thus regeneration, a Johannine term, delineates the imagery of *natural birth*, which the author uses to emphasize the fact that Christian sonship is not

our native condition: a person needs to become a son of God by *spiritual* rebirth....'Not birth but adoption is Paul's analogy for the manner in which childhood begins in the believer' [quoting A. Schlatter]...Thus Paul and John use two very different metaphors to express ways by which the Christian becomes a member of God's family. (27)

The errors here are not inconsequential, as the entire divine economy rests on a proper understanding of these matters. First, Burke wrongly states that being born into the family of God immediately gives believers the standing of sons of God. The Bible nowhere says that we believers are viewed by God as fully mature *sons* at regeneration; we are told unequivocally that we are but *children* at regeneration and that the Spirit witnesses with our spirit to this initial stage of our union with Christ (John 1:12-13; Rom. 8:16). As we grow in the divine life, we progress from being children in the initial stage to being sons who are led by the Spirit of God in the mature stage (v. 14). Second, Paul's use of *huiiothesia* does not refer to a believer's entrance into the family of God at the beginning of his Christian life; this entrance is achieved by regeneration. Paul's use of *huiiothesia* is in reference to the consummate stage of sonship achieved through the growth of the divine life, whereby matured believers become heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (v. 17). In short, we are *born* into the family of God, and only later are we placed in the position of a son, having matured in the divine life. This truth negates the entire premise on which *Adopted* is predicated.

A more fundamental error is *Adopted's* misunderstanding of the nature of regeneration. Two important indicators that it does not rightly recognize regeneration as the actual impartation of the divine life and nature into the believers is revealed when it states, "In the case of Paul's adoption metaphor a human-divine relationship (God as 'Father' and Christians as 'adopted sons') is described..." (34), and that "God's family comprises solely adopted sons and daughters—there are no natural-born sons or daughters in his divine household" (89). For Burke, "natural-born" is used in reference to humans in their "native or natural condition" (89). In this regard he is correct since neither blood, nor the will of the flesh, nor the will of man brings us into the household of God (John 1:13). However, the believers are born of God, and the divine nature is imparted at regeneration. If we say Amen to the first part of John 1:13, we should say Amen to the second part and recognize that we have been made partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). Apparently for *Adopted* the great chasm that separates man and God,

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humanity and divinity, remains unbridged by regeneration, and the most believers can hope for is a loving relationship with a benevolent Father who will eventually grant them a legal status as sons while He remains only divine and they remain only human. What seems to elude *Adopted* is the momentous truth that in the stage of maturity believers are both organically and legally, dispositionally and positionally, sons of God to enjoy an eternal relationship with their Father in life, and as such, they have an abiding status as sons. *Sonship*, therefore, should have primacy in translation as it conveys the sense of this abiding status. To favor *adoption* is to risk overemphasizing the judicial at the expense of the organic. This, as we shall see in our assessment of *Adopted*, is a fatal error.

An Incomplete Sonship: *Adopted's* Unfulfilled Promise

Adopted at times offers brief flashes of insight into something deeper and more satisfying than it is ultimately able to articulate or even comprehend. *Adopted*, however, misaims by predicating its entire thesis on *huiiothesia* as a positional transfer into the family of God and deprives its readers of the profound reality that obtains from the believers' transformation in the divine life whereby they attain to a full and consummate sonship in spirit, soul, and body. Central to this progressive divergence is an incomplete understanding of the twofold sonship of Jesus Christ—the only begotten Son of God and the firstborn Son of God—and how His designation as the Firstborn in resurrection actuates not merely a change of position in the believers but a vital union with Him whereby He leads the many sons into glory (Heb. 2:10) through the same process of designation by which He was made God's firstborn Son.

Sonship and the Life-giving Spirit

Burke rightly stresses that the believers' participation in the effects of salvation and in the family of God derives from and is wholly dependent on their union with Christ. A sampling of his assertions is helpful here (emphasis added):

Sinners cannot have a share in the benefits of salvation unless they are *vitaly united with the Son of God*. (100)

The Christian partakes of the blessings of salvation, including justification, adoption and sanctification, only because he or she has been effectually called to faith in Christ and has been *united with him* in his death and resurrection. (101)

Jesus the incarnate Son of God went to the cross by virtue of which all who are *spiritually united with him* in his redemptive death (and resurrection) are adopted into the family of God. (119)

The sum total of the Christian's spiritual blessings and inheritance is expressly connected and related to *union with Christ, the Son of God*. (121)

The multiplicity of blessings (e.g. election, redemption) Paul lists here [in Eph. 1:5] are enjoyed only through *union with Christ*. (122)

While a cursory reading of these passages will elicit a resolute affirmation from the casual reader, a more discerning and thoughtful reader will be perplexed at the conspicuous absence of explanation as to how the union with Christ is produced.

The nature of the union with Christ and its inception can be grasped by a brief consideration of the progressive line of thought in 1 Corinthians 15:45, John 3:6, 1 Corinthians 6:17, John 4:24, and Romans 8:16. Of these five key New Testament verses, only Romans 8:16 is mentioned in *Adopted's* 180 pages. This is tragic considering the depth of revelation contained therein, which bears directly on a proper understanding of regeneration and, ultimately, the *huiiothesia* of believers. With 1 Corinthians 15:45 we have a stunning declaration that "the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit," indicating that Christ in resurrection became not only the firstborn Son of God but also the Spirit who gives life. Existing in this form, the resurrected Christ, with His divinity and uplifted humanity, can now come into the human spirit of a repentant believer to beget him with the divine life and nature (John 3:6). This begetting joins the believer to the Lord to be one spirit with Him (1 Cor. 6:17), thus accomplishing the union in life that so evades *Adopted's* notice. It is in this union of the divine Spirit mingled with the human spirit that believers can worship God, who is Spirit (John 4:24), and enjoy the witnessing of the Spirit that they are indeed children of God by virtue of the organic union with Him (Rom. 8:16).

Conformation, Redemption of the Body, and the Right of Inheritance

An important concept in helping us to understand the consummation of the *huiiothesia* of believers is that of conformation, which Paul pinpoints in Romans 8:29. Here again, consistent with the pattern throughout the book, *Adopted* tantalizes with the prospect that something deeper will be presented. Burke writes,

It is a salutary thought, as Paul states a little later in this chapter, that the goal of our *huiiothesia* is our transformation 'into the image (*eikonas*) of God's Son'...It is possible that in verse 29 [of Romans 8] Paul is talking about progressive conformity...Thus, as *we* with the help of God's Spirit 'put to death the misdeeds of the body' (Rom 8:13b), *God* is also at work changing us...The

emphasis in Romans 8:29 is on the latter, since the verb 'be conformed' refers to an inner change, and the divine surgery Paul has in view is of the more deep, invasive kind rather than that of the superficial, cosmetic variety. (147)

It seems that *Adopted* will shed light on the intrinsic nature of conformation, but it is disappointing that for Burke conformation is brought about only by outward obedience to the Father and a Christ-like endurance of sufferings on earth. Favoring the notion of a "growing conformity of God's adopted sons to God's Son *in suffering and obedience*" and contending that "the way to be conformed to the Son's likeness and glory is via suffering and treading a similar path to the one Christ trod" (148), *Adopted* continues its divergence from the power and operation of the divine life revealed in the Scriptures to an impotent doctrine of conformation fueled by religious notions of human effort fortified by the assistance of the Holy Spirit. In *Adopted's* estimation, then, conformation seems to imply for the many brothers only a consummate likeness of behavior with their elder Brother. This inaccurate understanding operates outside of the sphere of the work of the divine life in the believers and neutralizes the goal of the divine enterprise to reproduce Christ in millions of redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified sons of God.

Conformation is the end result and consummate effect of the transformation carried out in the believers by the saturating and shaping work of the law of the Spirit of life (Rom. 8:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; cf. Rom. 12:2). This law operates innately and automatically to organically produce sons of God through their transformation with the divine element unto conformation and glorification. Just as the life of an apple tree has a particular life-essence and life-power to produce apples with a particular shape and form predetermined by their genetic programming, so the life of God has its particular life-essence and life-power to produce sons of God with the shape and form of Christ, which shape and form are predetermined in the divine life which the believers receive through regeneration. Through the operation of the divine life, the inward essence and nature of the believers are transformed, resulting in the change of the outward form to bear the shape, image, and expression of Christ, with whom they have been saturated unto glory (Heb. 2:10).

For regenerated believers to be conformed to the image of the firstborn Son of God, they must first be conformed to His death through the fellowship of His sufferings (Phil. 3:10). The death of Christ operates in the Spirit to put to death the natural life of the believers that resurrection life and power may be released to saturate God's people with the divine element (Rom. 8:13; 6:5; cf. 1 Pet. 3:18).

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Having been placed into Christ as the "mold," the believers are daily transformed "from glory to glory" by this divine and spiritual process until they reach maturity at their full conformation to the image of Christ to be His glorious duplication (2 Cor. 3:18; 1 John 3:2). The sufferings that the believers endure, therefore, are not merely to achieve a likeness of behavior with Christ but are to shape them to His image that He would effectively be reproduced in a corporate people. The consummation of this process is the redemption of the believers' bodies, whereby they now bear the glorious image of Christ in all three parts of their being. Having been regenerated in their spirit and transformed in their soul (John 3:6; Rom. 12:2), the final step of their conformation is to be transfigured in their body (Phil. 3:21), by which they are brought into the full enjoyment of their inheritance—God Himself (Rom. 8:17; Eph. 1:14). The *huiiothesia* of the believers is brought to completion as they now have in consummation the full position of mature sons who have the right to wholly enjoy God their Father as their unique, eternal inheritance in the organic, spiritual union with Him that is made possible only in and through Jesus Christ, the firstborn Son of God, the One in whom "dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9). In this consummation, the believers are "designated" sons of God in full by the blossoming of the divine life in glory from within their transformed beings and are made exactly like Christ the

Firstborn. For this cause, the Firstborn is not ashamed to call these many-born His brothers, having as He does the same paternal source in God the Father (Heb. 2:11).

It is important to note that Burke recognizes that God "favourably places his own life within" the believers, though he gives that life the nebulous description of "the life-giving power and energy of the Holy Spirit" (172). He also defines "the consummation of adoption" as "the very climax of redemption, when through the Holy Spirit" the believers "are transformed and physically resurrected as sons" (190). Furthermore, he states that "the inheritance believers can look forward to is God himself" (99). While these statements, taken at face value, approximate what has been discussed above, they do not contain the vital link that a proper understanding of regeneration and the operation of the divine life would give them. Again, *Adopted* hints at something resembling the divine economy, but it misses the mark entirely.

The Goal of Huiiothesia: Worldwide Family of Believers or the Organic Body of Christ?

In his discussion of "adoption" in Ephesians 1:5, Burke points out "the clear progression in the apostle's thought"

as he (Paul) moves from the “adoption” or “sonship” of believers individually to the “ecclesiological context” and “corporate dimension” enunciated in chapters 2 and 3 (79, 82). Burke’s comments in light of this corporate aspect of “adoption” are worthy of affirmation, though he assuredly does not realize their full import:

In all this God’s new family is neither a human *organization* nor a secular club to which a person signs up; rather, something much more profound and far reaching is involved, in that we have been marked out, chosen and adopted by God to become members of a vibrant, dynamic *organism*, the household of God, with the very life and energy of the ‘Spirit of adoption’ (*pneuma huiothesia*, Rom. 8:15) flowing through and at work within. (82-83)

The insight here regarding the family of God as an organism versus an organization is genuine and revelatory, though Burke frustrates his own progress by limiting himself to general appellations for this family such as “one new community” (80, quoting R. Atkins), “church family,” “household of believers” (82), “a vast network of brothers and sisters in Christ,” and “worldwide family of believers” (197) instead of satisfactorily locating this organism in Paul’s own language for it—the Body of Christ.

The gospel of God in the book of Romans is a gospel of sonship (1:1-3; 8:14-15, 19, 23), and the goal of this sonship is the Body of Christ (12:4-5). The Body of Christ is composed of all of the redeemed, regenerated, transformed, conformed, and glorified sons of God, brothers of the Firstborn, who are the increase of Christ to constitute His Body as His full expression. This Body cannot be constituted with sinners in the flesh; it can only be constituted with sons of God. This corporate entity is “the Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12), the Head with the Body, to be the organism of the Triune God for His move and spread on the earth. The Body exists because fallen human beings are being made God in life and nature, though not in the Godhead and never to be objects of worship, and this Body—a real and living organism—could not exist as such if the same human beings were only positionally transferred into a family joined merely by faith and not also by the divine life and nature in their union with Christ the Head. Here again *Adopted* stops short of a fully realized salvation.

Conclusion

Trevor J. Burke is clearly a well-trained scholar, and *Adopted* attests to his love of God’s Word and his passion to convey what he understands as truth to the scholarly Christian community. Ultimately, however, *Adopted* calls to mind the Lord’s solemn pronouncement to the church

in Sardis: “I have found none of your works completed before My God” (Rev. 3:2). A proper and balanced understanding of sonship leads us to a richer and more profound experience of the firstborn Son realized as the life-giving Spirit in our regenerated human spirit, in which spirit of *huiothesia* we cry “Abba, Father!” as we progressively mature in the divine life to attain to our full inheritance as sons of God in Christ (Rom 8:15, 23).

by Tony Espinosa

Notes

¹I owe much of what follows in this brief section to Roger Good’s fuller treatment of the same subject. See “Glossa: Sonship or Adoption as Sons?” *Affirmation & Critique* V.4 (Oct. 2000): 39-40.

Letting Luther Speak

Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification, by Tuomo Mannermaa (trans. by Kirsi Irmeli Stjerna). Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

In 1977 Tuomo Mannermaa, a Lutheran theologian at the University of Helsinki, participated in an ecumenical conference between the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Russian Orthodox Church. In the course of discussion it became apparent to the participants that the Lutheran concept of justification and the Orthodox notion of *theosis* bore considerable resemblance to each another. This discovery inspired Mannermaa to commence a line of research that has since developed into what is now commonly called the Finnish school of Luther studies. The first major article that Mannermaa offered on the topic was printed in 1979 in the Finnish language, and ten years later it appeared in German. Mannermaa’s seminal work, which has stirred up vigorous conversation among Lutheran theologians, was finally brought to English-speakers last year, when Fortress Press published it under the title *Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification* (hereafter *Present*).

Mannermaa’s argument in *Present* is that the Lutheran conception of justification is analogous to the Eastern Orthodox notion of *theosis*. Mannermaa takes Luther’s *Lectures on Galatians* (supplemented by Luther’s lecture notes for that series) as the primary evidentiary text in this particular study, especially since the *Formula of Concord*, one of the foundational Lutheran confessional documents,

states that *Lectures on Galatians* gives the fundamental Lutheran presentation of justification. In part one of the book (“The Doctrine of Justification and Christology”), Mannermaa points out that various expressions in Luther’s *Lectures* indicate that justification is a process that may be described as “divinization,” both in content and as a term (87). This idea is summarized in Luther’s phrase *in ipsa fide Christus adest*: “in faith itself Christ is present” (5). Luther’s utterance reveals that he did not separate justification and the presence of Christ in the believer, unlike later theologians. Mannermaa observes that

according to Luther, Christ is, in one and the same person, both God’s ‘favor’ (forgiveness, the removal of God’s wrath, and the ‘justification’ of which the *Formula of Concord* speaks) and God’s ‘gift’ (God’s presence in God’s very being, and human ‘participation in the divine nature’; 2 Peter 1:4). (87)

Both justification and union with God are enjoyed by faith in Christ, that is, by Christ’s real presence in faith. Mannermaa contends that according to Luther’s understanding, justification entails not merely a new ethical relationship between God and man but an ontological one as well. When a person believes into Christ, he becomes united to God and participates in both Christ’s human nature (in which Christ bore the sins of all) and divine nature (in which is eternal righteousness and life). In this union, the attributes of God’s essence are transmitted to the believer, and the believer and Christ become “one person” (87). Seeing this truth through to its logical conclusion, Luther states that through faith man becomes God.

In the second and final part of the book (“The Presence of Christ in Faith and the Holiness of Christians”), Mannermaa goes on to posit that according to Luther, Christ’s real presence in faith is also the key to sanctification. Condensing Luther’s thought, Mannermaa states that by faith “Christ, whose presence and efficaciousness in faith are real, is the primary subject and the actual agent of the good works of the believer” (8). This agent is linked to the interceding Spirit of Christ, whom Luther¹ observes to be in the believer “not speculatively but actually” and who groans within the believer so that he or she, who is righteous yet still a sinner, may lay hold of the word that is connected with the work of the Spirit and continue the Christian struggle (76-77). Since the Spirit of Christ is the energizing factor in the believer, it is actually Christ in faith, and not the believer through works in the flesh, who is the One living the Christian life. Mannermaa echoes Luther’s understanding that the

word and the sacraments are the means by which the believer participates in the essence of God. Luther considers these as essential signs, signs in which the essence of the representation is identical to the essence of what is being represented. Through the believer’s participation in these essential signs, he or she becomes holy and is created after the likeness of God (*imago Dei*), that is, created according to the embodiment of what is essentially symbolized. True holiness, then, like justification, is the real and actual presence of Christ in one who, believing, enjoys the essence of God, is empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit, and participates in the essence of God to bear the image of Christ.

By teasing out Luther’s theological insights regarding the believer’s participation in the life of Christ and in the Chalcedonian relationship (“distinct, but not separate”) between justification and the divine indwelling, Mannermaa discovers what he considers to be Luther’s authentic doctrine of justification—one which is remarkably similar to the Orthodox doctrine of deification—and concludes that the Lutheran concept of justification, particularly as enunciated by the Reformer himself, is analogous to the Orthodox notion of *theosis*. Based on the mutually held understanding that believers can and do participate in the divine life of Christ, the author hopes that his work and that of many sympathetic scholars will trigger renewed ecumenical effort between Lutherans and Orthodox Christians. Although the book is first and foremost an ecumenical project, Mannermaa’s thought ultimately proffers a way of understanding the Reformer in ways that sets him at odds with the theology that bears his name and places both him and it in a new light.²

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Ontological Implications

Present’s new interpretation of Luther is based on the conviction that Luther is engaged in reality talk—that Luther articulates in his theological language that which really *is* in an ontological, existential sense. Mannermaa understands Luther’s language regarding justification, the *inhabitatio Dei* (indwelling of God), deification, and Christian holiness as being focused on actual realities and not merely on forensic, ethical, or juridical constructs, which have prevailed in Lutheran theology since shortly after Luther’s death (4).

To arrive at this understanding, *Present* disposes of two ways of interpreting Luther that have inhibited a clear appreciation of Luther’s strident realism. First, it points out the disjunction between the theology of justification as is presented by Luther and the theology that is

expressed in the *Formula of Concord* and remains dominant today in many Protestant circles. While the *Formula of Concord* is partially derived from Luther's theology, it describes justification as a thoroughly forensic affair and separates the indwelling of God in man from justification—which separation Alister E. McGrath judges to be a theological *novum* (184). Of the *inhabitatio Dei* itself, the *Formula of Concord* stipulates that “not God dwells in the believers, but only the gifts of God” (Solid Declaration III:65). *Present* argues that Luther personally viewed justification and the *inhabitatio Dei* as two sides of one phenomenon, understanding that God in Christ is present in the believer in justification. While the real and actual indwelling of God in the believer is explicitly denied in the Formula, Mannermaa contends that Christ's actual presence in faith—and thus in the believer—forms the heart of Luther's theology:

Luther's notion of the “righteousness of faith” is permeated by christological thinking. He does not separate the person (*persona*) of Christ and his work (*officium*) from each other. Instead, *Christ himself*, both his person and his work, is the Christian righteousness, that is, the “righteousness of faith.” Christ—and therefore also *his entire person and work*—is really and truly present in the faith itself...Thus, the notion that Christ is present in the Christian occupies a much more central place in the theology of Luther than in the Lutheran theologies that came after him...The idea of the divine life in Christ that is present in faith lies at the very center of the theology of the Reformer. (5)

Present also attempts to stem the influence of neo-Kantian thought in the dominant Lutheran understanding that man's relationship with God should be seen as an ethical relation. Such a limited relation between God and man does not allow for man's ontological participation in God. At the very least, it separates the *inhabitatio Dei* from justification. As *Present* sees it, the influence of neo-Kantian philosophy has made it all but impossible to accurately understand Luther's language, particularly when it verges on the mystical. Take for instance where Luther states that “we are filled with God, and He pours into us all His gifts and grace and fills us with His Spirit” (21). *Present* also notes that “at least on the level of terminology, the distinction between justification and the divine indwelling in the believer, made by the *Formula of Concord* and by the major part of later Lutheran theology, is alien to the Reformer” (41).

Both the forensic and neo-Kantian approaches denude Luther's writing of any ontological realism, specifically as regards justification and God's indwelling in the believer. Kirsi Irmeli Stjerna, the editor and translator of *Christ Present in Faith*, highlights Mannermaa's attitude on this score when discussing the influence of Karl Holl, a

neo-Kantian, and his students on the present understanding of Luther:

What Mannermaa criticizes the most in Holl and his school is their too quick and unnecessary rejection of everything “ontological” in Luther [“ontological,” to put it simply, referring to “being” and the “real”]. Mannermaa has challenged their rejection of the idea of ontological participation with his reading of Luther's central idea that “in faith itself Christ is really present,” with the emphasis being on the words “really present.” Arguing from Luther's Christology, which draws from the teachings of the early church and patristic theology, Mannermaa shows exactly how “ontological” it is for Luther that Christ is in and for us—really, truly, and personally. From this christological starting point, Luther can talk about righteousness as a human being becoming one with God through a real exchange of attributes between the sinner and Christ. Mannermaa posits that ontological language is exactly the language needed to present what Luther is actually saying...Reading Luther in his medieval context and not trying to make him stand in opposition to the mystical tradition, Mannermaa reveals the ontological dimension of Luther's theology and thereby Luther's mystical and realistic view of the personal union between the believer and God. (xv)

According to Mannermaa, an ontologically oriented understanding is vital if one is to express the ontological realism that pervades Luther's theological thinking. This is especially apparent in three issues that Mannermaa touches on in this book: (1) the inseparability of Christ and His “goods” (*bona*); (2) the “happy exchange,” and, related to it, the *communicatio idiomatum* (communication of attributes) that we enjoy in justification; and (3) Christian deification.

Christ's Real Presence in His Bona

Mannermaa's argument for ontological realism is grounded largely in the words of Luther that form the title of his book: “In faith itself Christ is really present.” Using Aristotle's language concerning causation, Luther remarks that Christ is the *forma*—the “formal cause”—of faith:

Faith takes hold of Christ and...He is the form that adorns and informs faith as color does the wall. Therefore Christian faith is not an idle quality or an empty husk in the heart, which may exist in a state of mortal sin until love comes along to make it alive. But if it is true faith, it is a sure trust and firm acceptance in the heart, which takes hold of Christ. Christ is namely the object of faith, or rather not the object but, so to speak, the One who is present in the faith itself. (27)

According to Luther, faith justifies precisely because

Christ is personally present in it. However, if Mannermaa is right, Luther does not stop there. Christ is not merely *in* faith. Christ *is* faith: “To Luther, faith has the actual divine reality (*Seinswirklichkeit*), that is, *forma*. This faith, *forma*, is Christ himself present in faith, the only way of salvation” (26).

Present’s ontological reading of Luther on this score causes him to draw some remarkable conclusions vis-à-vis Luther’s christological view of who God is and what the believer receives of Him in faith. There is a strong tendency among Christian thinkers to dissociate God in Christ from Christ’s “goods” (*bona*). Yet Mannermaa finds that Luther displays no such proclivity. By identifying Christ with His attributes, Luther establishes a strong link between who Christ is and what He has done, what He possesses within Himself, and what He imparts to His believers. Mannermaa finds that in Luther’s concept, God in Christ is, in an ontologically real manner, “the real self-giving of God to the human being” (19): the divine nature, righteousness, joy, life, power, grace, faith, the way of salvation, God’s forgiving righteousness, the forgiveness of sins, the believer’s righteousness, the believer’s life and blessedness, the believer’s freedom, justification, “the life that the Christian now lives” (39), “the true subject and agent of good works in the believer” (49), and “the effective producer of everything that is good in them” (49). All these “goods” are transferred to the believer through faith, and they are nothing less than Christ Himself. *Present* illustrates this reality with particular clarity when discussing the “happy exchange”:

It is precisely the Christ present in justifying faith who communicates God’s saving attributes to the believer in “the happy exchange.” God *is* righteousness, and in faith the human being participates in righteousness; God *is* joy, and in faith the human being participates in joy; God *is* life, and in faith the human being participates in life; God *is* power, and in faith the human being participates in power, and so forth. (22)

Present concludes that according to Luther, Christ Himself and the “goods” that the believer enjoys through Christ-present faith are identical.

Participation in Christ

This being the case, *Present* with Luther states that those who have faith actually possess the justifying Christ. Not only is Christ God’s favor (*favor*), that is, justification, but He is God’s gift (*donum*), which is nothing less than the God-granted divine nature (19), which has been granted

to us (2 Pet. 1:3-4). Hence, the central theme of Luther’s theology may be said to be “the idea that faith means the presence of Christ and thus participation in the ‘divine life’” (39). Through Luther’s “happy exchange,” in which all that is ours in the fall, including we ourselves, is transferred to and participated in by Christ, and all that is Christ’s, both His person and His work, is conveyed to and participated in by us, “the life that the Christian now lives *is*, in an ontologically real manner, Christ himself” (39). Luther describes how the Son of God “wanted to communicate Himself to the body and blood of those who were thieves and sinners. Therefore He is immersed in all” (14). Mannermaa elaborates on this thought and posits that according to Luther, the Logos took upon Himself “precisely the concrete and actual human nature. This means that Christ *really* has and bears the sins of all human beings in the human nature he has assumed” (13). So much does Luther identify the incarnate Christ with fallen humanity that he states that Christ is the “greatest person” (*maxima persona*) (15), outside of whom no sin existed (since He bore it all), and therefore also the “greatest sinner” (*maximus peccator*) (13), even the “only sinner” (*solus peccator*) (15). When Luther speaks of the communication of our characteristics to Christ, he does so in a way which indicates that Christ actually assumed those things. Christ was not merely the One to whom, according to the traditional view, the sin of all mankind was imputed; the exchange of which Luther speaks is ontologically real as well.

It should come as no surprise that Luther teaches that by faith, in which Christ is really present and through which Christ communicates His divine attributes to man, Christians are divinized.

Because Christ literally became sin on our behalf and the victory over sin took place in Him on the cross, it is only *in Him* that we experience salvation. By participating in Christ through faith, we enjoy our side of the “happy exchange”: whereas Christ participated in what we were—sin, death, and curse—we through our justification participate in what Christ is—righteousness, life, and blessing. Because, as we have seen, these attributes are nothing less than Christ Himself, our enjoyment of the “happy exchange” is a genuine *communicatio idiomatum* in which we participate on an ontological level in all that God in Christ is (xv). Thus, Mannermaa concludes with Luther that “salvation is participation in the person of Christ” (16). It should therefore come as no surprise that Luther teaches that by faith, in which Christ is really present and through which Christ communicates His divine attributes to man, Christians are divinized.

Divinization

Although Luther speaks clearly concerning our participation in Christ and the divine life through faith—a teaching

that is analogous to the patristic doctrine of *theosis*—attributing such thoughts to Luther raises eyebrows, if not hackles, in many Protestant quarters. Nevertheless, *Present's* evidence shows that Luther did indeed teach divinization. To Luther, divinization is the logical conclusion to Christ's real presence in the believer. While divinization is clearly not the centerpiece of Luther's theology, one can make a persuasive case that it is the *telos* toward which his theology is oriented.

For the biblical foundation of this teaching, Luther cites the verse upon which the church has historically based its teaching of *theosis*:

Seeing that His divine power has granted to us all things which relate to life and godliness, through the full knowledge of Him who has called us by His own glory and virtue, through which He has granted to us precious and exceedingly great promises that through these you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption which is in the world by lust. (2 Pet. 1:3-4)

Of this passage, Luther writes,

This is one of those apposite, beautiful, and (as St. Peter says in 2 Pet. 1) precious and very great promises given to us, poor miserable sinners: that *we are to become participants in the divine nature and be exalted so highly in nobility* that we are not only to become loved by God through Christ, and have His favor and grace as the highest and most precious shrine, but also to have Him, the Lord Himself, *dwelling in us in His fullness*. (20-21, emphasis added)

To Luther, Christ and the believer are one, and not merely metaphorically or intellectually so. In speaking of Paul's word in Galatians 2:20, Luther writes, "'Christ,' he says, 'is fixed and cemented to me and abides in me. The life that I now live, He lives in me. *Indeed, Christ Himself is the life that I now live. In this way, therefore, Christ and I are one*'" (39-40, emphasis added).

The unity that Christ and the believer enjoy is one in which, Christ dwells in the believer in the fullness of His person and work; *Present* quotes Luther thus:

So far as justification is concerned, Christ and I must be so closely attached that He lives in me and I in Him. What a marvelous way of speaking! Because He lives in me, whatever grace, righteousness, life, peace, and salvation there is in me is all Christ's; nevertheless, it is mine as well, *by the cementing and attachment that are through faith, by which we become as one body in the Spirit*. (40, emphasis added)

By faith Christ and the believer become "as one person"

(*unio personalis*) (40), a fact upon which Luther stakes the entire doctrine of justification:

Faith must be taught correctly, namely, that by it you are so cemented to Christ that He and you are as one person, which cannot be separated but remains attached to Him forever and declares: "I am as Christ." And Christ, in turn, says: "I am that sinner who is attached to Me, and I to him. For by faith we are joined together into one flesh and one bone." Thus, Eph. 5:30 says: "*We are members of the body of Christ, of His flesh and of His bones,*" in such a way that this faith couples Christ and me more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife. Therefore this faith is no idle quality; but it is a thing of such magnitude that it obscures and completely removes those foolish dreams of the sophists' doctrine—the fiction of a "formed faith" and of love, of merits, our worthiness, our quality, etc. (41, emphasis added)

When it comes to justification, therefore, if you divide Christ's Person from your own, you are in the Law; you remain in it and live in yourself, which means that you are dead in the sight of God and damned by the Law. (42)

It should therefore not startle us that the Reformer would call the believer—who is a partaker of the divine nature, who is indwelt by Christ, and who is one person with Christ—a divine man: "*The one who has faith is a completely divine man, a son of God, the inheritor of the universe*. He is the victor over the world, sin, death, and the devil. Hence he cannot be praised enough" (43, emphasis added).

The divinization of man in God's salvation is not objective only. Divinization is an ongoing experience of being filled with God throughout our Christian existence. In such a life, God fills us to the extent that we become thoroughly divinized, as explained by Luther:

Put briefly, He fills us in order that *everything that He is and everything He can do might be in us in all its fullness, and work powerfully, so that we might be divinized throughout* [Ger. *gantz vergottet*]—not having only a small part of God, or merely some parts of Him, but having all His fullness. Much has been written on the divinization of man, and ladders have been constructed by means of which man is to ascend to heaven, and many other things of this kind have been done. However, all these are merely works of a beggar. What must be done instead is to show the right and straight way to *your being filled with God*, so that you do not lack any part but have it all gathered together, and so that all you say, all you think and everywhere you go—in sum, *all your life—is throughout divine*. (45)

If anyone understood the chasm that separates sinful man

from the righteous God, it was the man who was plagued throughout his life by spiritual crises (*Anfechtungen*) in which he trembled in abject terror before the returning and judging Christ. And yet he writes that faith causes us to become with Christ “as one body in the Spirit,” such that it joins Christ and us “more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife,” and, as if to remove any trace of doubt in our minds about his meaning, states categorically that “faith makes a [person] God. (2 Peter 1:4)” (43).

Concluding Thoughts

While *Present*'s investigation of Luther springs from ecumenical impulses and questions in historical theology, the issues that this scholarship penetrates touch on something much deeper than interconfessional dialogue and theological scholarship. Whether Mannermaa is conscious of doing so or not, the questions that he raises ultimately concern how we conceive Christian reality and how we experience our justifying, divinizing God.

Present is a serious discussion of Luther's treatment of the Bible's ontological language. If Mannermaa is right, then to read his book is to meet the real Luther, the Luther whose theology bears an indelible mark of ontological realism, the Luther who demands to be understood—*contra* theological fashion—quite literally. Not only so, Mannermaa's conclusions, if correct, will require a thoroughgoing reexamination of all theology that draws on Luther's thought. Indeed, Mannermaa and the Finnish school have managed to occasion a thorough re-thinking of ontological realism in such matters as justification and the union of God and man.

Yet on a deeper level, Mannermaa's close reading of the Reformer helps us to find in Luther the pattern of one who allowed the Scriptures to speak with as much meaning and urgency as they bore when they were newly inspired. *Present* shows Luther as a man who did not constantly qualify himself in deference to regnant theological constructs or allow doctrinal narrow-mindedness to limit his knowledge and experience of God. Luther's insights into the Bible—especially with regard to such matters as justification, deification, participation in Christ, and Christ's self-giving to His believers—and Mannermaa's insight into Luther should provide much benefit to believers who wish to “lay hold on that which is really life” (1 Tim. 6:19). *Present* holds forth the hope that Luther's approach to understanding the realism in biblical thought can exert a considerable influence on today's biblical scholarship and on our own Christian experience.

The entire realm of God's eternal economy, quite significantly, is in faith (1 Tim. 1:4), in which Christ is really present. God's economy, by implication, is an entrance into a realm of “being” in the highest and most fundamental sense. If we wish to enter this realm and live in it,

we have an obligation to confront the Bible's language in all its ontological splendor. Protestant readers—particularly those who have been restricted by both traditional and modern ways of understanding the Scriptures—would do well to consider, in prayerful humility, several key passages of the Scriptures that are reflective not merely of juridical, forensic, intellectual, mechanical, and objective facts but of organic, subjective, existential, ontological realities.³

Concerning Isaiah 53:6, Martin Luther wrote, “These words must not be diluted but must be left in their precise and serious sense. For God is not joking” (14). With the publication of *Christ Present in Faith*, we look forward to the time when we can enter into the reality of the proclamation of the Scriptures, having faithfully enunciated them with an unstinting deference to God's complete and utter seriousness.

by Nathan Betz

Notes

¹References to quotations of Luther refer to the page on which the quotation appears in *Christ Present in Faith*, which is extensively cross referenced to corresponding pages in the critical editions of Luther's work.

²As with *Union with Christ* before it, *Present* has stirred up intense debate in Lutheran circles. Some writers have suggested that Dr. Mannermaa and his adherents, in their ecumenical fervor, have in fact misunderstood Luther. Some critics note that the Finns tend to draw primarily from Luther's earlier works and thus may be guilty of setting aside Luther's later and more balanced theological notions. Others who question the new Finnish interpretation of Luther have wondered whether Mannermaa and others have taken Luther out of context or have submitted him to their own preconceived notions. While I do not discuss the historicity of the Finnish scholarship related to Luther in this article, I am given to think that Mannermaa and his colleagues are focusing on long neglected issues. While I leave it to others to determine whether they have indeed discovered the authentic Luther, I have assumed, for the purposes of this article, that his Luther is the Luther of history.

³Several such key verses are John 14:17, 20; 15:4-7; Romans 8:1, 9-11; 1 Corinthians 6:17; 12:12; Galatians 1:15-16; 2:16, 20; 4:6, 19; Ephesians 1:22-23; 3:16, 19; 4:10; 5:30; Philippians 1:20-21; and 2 Peter 1:4.

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