

## Revisoning the God Who Is Triune

*The God Who Is Triune: Revisoning the Christian Doctrine of God*, by Allan Coppedge. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007.

With *The God Who Is Triune: Revisoning the Christian Doctrine of God* (hereafter *Triune*), Allan Coppedge, Beeson Professor of Theology at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, has made a noteworthy contribution to modern trinitarian studies. Taking the doctrine of the Trinity as the starting point from which all aspects of Christian theology and experience derive their proper orientation, *Triune* strikes a balance between the extreme emphases of classical and open theism by advocating a trinitarian theism that equally respects both the transcendent and immanent aspects of the Triune God. However, although the implications of the trinitarian starting point both for Christian theology and for the believers' experience of the Triune God are significant, *Triune* ultimately fails to draw those implications to their furthest conclusion because it suffers from a short-sighted view of God's eternal purpose for man.

### A Brief Look at *Triune*

*Triune's* thirteen chapters are well arranged to cover considerable ground in its 330 pages. Because the book is comprehensive in scope, a chapter-by-chapter synopsis is necessary to grasp the breadth of Coppedge's considerations in anticipation of a discussion of the book's merits and deficiencies.

Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the scriptural evidence for a triune understanding of God. Noting that traditional approaches to the study of the Trinity tend to limit the New Testament data to only those passages that closely relate the Father, the Son, and the Spirit together, chapter 1, "The New Testament Foundations for the Trinity," advocates broadening the range of study so that passages relating any two members of the Trinity are given equal consideration in the development of the doctrine of the

Triune God. The chapter further highlights the trinitarian structure of the books of the New Testament and concludes with a look at the trinitarian passages in light of Jesus' command to make disciples (Matt. 28:19-20). Chapter 2, "The Biblical Frame for the Trinity," discusses the relationship between the Old and New Testaments and examines the ways in which the Old Testament indicates plurality in the one God.

Chapter 3, "The Development of the Doctrine of the Trinity," traces the historical circumstances—with particular emphasis on the rise of the heresies of adoptionism, modalism, and Arianism—that forced the early church to clearly define its understanding of the biblical revelation of the Triune God. The contributions of key church leaders to the development of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity are reviewed, and the chapter closes with a brief discussion of the historical development of the Western and Eastern approaches to the Trinity—the former emphasizing the oneness of God and the latter emphasizing His threeness.

*New Testament passages relating any two members of the Trinity should be given consideration in the development of the doctrine of the Triune God.*

Chapters 4 and 5 treat the economic and ontological aspects of the Trinity, respectively. Chapter 4, "The Triune God in Relation to Creation," focuses on the operation of the economic Trinity (i.e., God as He makes Himself known to the world), particularly in the areas of revelation and redemption. Chapter 5, "The Triune God Within Himself," shifts the focus of study from the economic Trinity to the ontological Trinity (i.e., God as He is in His own being). The oneness of the three is affirmed to be a oneness of essence, shared attributes of deity, and mutual indwelling, all of which preserve a monotheistic conception of God while respecting the distinctness of function that characterizes the specific operation of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Chapter 6, "The Nature of the Triune God," notes the traditional approach to the study of the Trinity that gives priority to His existence and attributes. Coppedge deftly reverses that trend by placing the nature of the Triune God as a relational being at the forefront of consideration. The biblical evidence examined in this chapter gives

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strong support to the claim that holiness and love—both relational attributes—compose the essence of God’s being and should control our understanding of all the other moral attributes of God.

Chapters 7 and 8 discuss the attributes of God. Chapter 7, “The Attributes of the Triune God: Personal and Moral,” presents the rationale for a trinitarian approach to evaluating the divine attributes, which gives priority to His personal and moral attributes<sup>1</sup> as relational categories that serve as the base from which His relative and absolute attributes<sup>2</sup> can be properly understood. In considering how God’s essential holiness and love are related to His relative and absolute attributes, chapter 8, “The Attributes of the Triune God: Relative and Absolute,” states, “The best approach is to connect holiness as power to God’s relative attributes and holiness as separation to God’s absolute attributes. The love of the holy, triune God informs and controls these other attributes” (192). With this new way of viewing God’s attributes—whereby the personal and moral attributes have priority—the importance of person-to-person relationships is augmented. Here the God who exists in self-giving relationships of love within the Godhead exercises His power not to autocratically govern His people but “to enable all persons to enter into a relationship with himself” (193). His absolute attributes also receive a different emphasis as He is viewed not merely as the transcendent Creator outside of His creation but even more as a loving Father who relates to the world He has created. This trinitarian theism, Coppedge asserts, “balances God’s infinity with his presence in creation, his transcendence and his immanence” (206).

Chapter 9, “The Roles of the Triune God: The Way the Economic Trinity Works,” examines the analogical language (e.g., King, Priest, Shepherd), particularly metaphor, that the Bible uses to describe the persons of the Trinity and how they operate to carry out God’s purposes in creation. While each person has a distinct function in the economy, or plan, of the Triune God, all three, by virtue of their eternally perichoretic (from *perichoresis*, Gk., indicating mutual indwelling and interpenetration) relationships, are involved in all the aspects of His plan.

Chapters 10 and 11 examine the work of the economic Trinity in creation. Chapter 10, “The Triune God Creates a Cosmos,” looks at the act of creation from the trinitarian starting point. From this angle, the act of creation is seen as an expression of the loving, self-giving Triune God who “has chosen to create human persons with whom to share life and love as an outward expression of what happens within his own being” (250). Chapter 11, “The Nature of Creation,” first presents creation as essentially good because “it continues to be an expression of God’s creative intention and a place where he manifests himself”

(263). The chief purpose for God’s creation is seen as His desire to have fellowship with other persons.

Chapters 12 and 13 round out the volume with a study of the work of the economic Trinity in His providential care for the world that He has created. Chapter 12, “The Triune God’s Work of Providence,” views the doctrine of providence from the trinitarian starting point. From this perspective God is not firstly a sovereign King but a loving Father who interacts with His children and providentially arranges their circumstances to enable them to make right choices without violating their free will. Chapter 13, “The Triune God, Freedom and Providence,” further considers the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human free will. To accomplish His “chief purpose”—to have personal relationships of fellowship with His people—God limits His own freedom by endowing His people with a genuinely free will (316). In His foreknowledge God knows the choices that His people will make, but He does not foreordain those choices. Rather, He is intimately involved in the details of His children’s lives and operates in their circumstances to help them make positive choices that are in line with His purpose. It is knowledge of this providential care, *Triune* maintains, that should render comfort to believers during painful times as they acknowledge that God is working positively in their behalf. *Triune’s* view of providence counters open theism’s de-emphasis on God’s sovereignty, whereby He does not know what the future holds but remains “open” to what will happen as a consequence of giving His people a free will.

### Affirming *Triune’s* Approach to the Study of the Trinity

#### *Reordering the Attributes of God*

*Triune’s* most valuable contribution to modern trinitarian studies is its fresh reordering of the attributes of God, which shifts the focus from God’s transcendence and impassibility—prevalent in the classical model—to the relationality that characterizes His own triune being and finds expression in His relationships with man. *Triune* states,

Our trinitarian approach to the attributes of God not only expands our understanding of the personal attributes but also changes the order of the discussion of the attributes, and this is not just an academic exercise. Usually the attributes discussed first dominate the discussion of the others. In classical theism the absolute (infinity, immensity, eternity, simplicity, and immutability) and the relative (omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence) attributes are viewed as primary. Thus God’s sovereignty is the controlling rubric. God’s personal and moral attributes are subsumed under this approach, and their role in understanding the nature of God is minimized.

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The trinitarian approach significantly changes our view of God by placing the personal and moral attributes first. Now God's sovereignty is seen in a different light. The absolute and relative attributes are governed by God's personal nature and moral character, which make person-to-person relationships much more important. This shift in perspective recognizes all of God's attributes as they function in a different and more biblical manner. (191)

This is a bold and sweeping move, and one that is convincingly executed. By starting with the personal and moral attributes, *Triune* grounds its discussion in the persons of the Trinity who are social<sup>3</sup> by nature and relational in essence. How the trinitarian starting point radically reorients the other attributes of God to advance a more balanced understanding of His immanent and transcendent aspects is worthy of a substantive review and affirmation, although the final conclusions stand in need of critique.

*Triune* identifies holiness, a moral attribute, as the essence, or *ousia* (Gk.), of God that, typically regarded as a static quality, is here understood as relational. Its line of reasoning goes like this: Holiness is attributed to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit who, being one God, are mutually holy, thus implying that holiness is relational within the Godhead. Further, "this holy God enters into relationships with persons whom he wants to be holy—like himself," which "ties the holiness of God to relationality" (153). When love as "the dominant expression of holiness" is added to the equation (163), both are regarded as composing the one essence of God, which carries implications not only for the relationality within the Trinity but also for the relationships of human persons who are created in the image of God. *Triune* states,

Thus the relationships among the persons of the Trinity are best described in terms of self-giving love. If love is an expression of holiness, the *ousia* of God, then it is natural to see holiness in a shared life where there is also a mutual self-giving to one another in love. So the distinctness of the persons in terms of their personal identities assists in understanding how they relate in other-oriented love.

This is a new way of understanding all reality. It is based on person-to-person relationships growing out of holy, self-giving love that is expressed in terms of mutual giving and receiving...If this is an accurate understanding of the triune God, it sets the stage for an appropriate understanding of the way human persons should relate as well. (135-136)

*Triune* further develops this thought by pointing out that the God who is holy is expressed first in love and then "through the other moral attributes: truth, purity, grace,

righteousness and goodness" (189). These moral attributes are intimately connected with His personal attributes because the "moral attributes can be exercised only by persons" (190), in this case, coinhering persons; therefore, "the moral attributes are expressed through the ontological Trinity's perichoretic relationships and then through the economic Trinity's relationships with human persons" (190). The primacy of the personal and moral attributes in this schema carries far-reaching implications for the relative and absolute attributes, which traditionally govern the inquiry into the Trinity but are here governed by a view of God that begins with holiness and love.

### *The Implications of the Reordered Attributes for God and Man*

Two examples will suffice to make the point that *Triune's* approach sets us on a right course toward experiencing the personal, relational God, even though the full promise of that approach is never fulfilled in the trinitarian theism espoused in *Triune*. Once holiness and love (moral attributes) have been established as constituting the essence of God and are understood as relational, our realization of omnipotence (a relative attribute) and immensity (an absolute attribute) is broadened to account for a God who is eternally distinct from His creation and yet has chosen to relate to it.

In the classical model, omnipotence is seen as an autocratic exercise of power by the God who controls all things by His might of authority. By seeing God firstly in His holiness and love, as in the proposed trinitarian model, omnipotence receives a different accent and "is now understood as the triune God exercising his might by giving himself to others" (193). With this fresh view of God as "the Holy One who in self-giving love uses his power to enable all persons to enter into a relationship with himself," even "the role of personal freedom, both divine and human, is elevated within our theology" as the Triune God freely uses His power to relate to the persons whom He has created in His own image, all the while respecting the freedom that He has given to them to choose to respond to Him (193-194).

From a trinitarian perspective, God's immensity, or "his infinity in relationship to space" (204), also portends His relationship to the created order rather than only indicating His separateness from it. Being infinitely immense, God is able "to simultaneously accomplish his purposes throughout all of creation," and His foremost purpose, *Triune* maintains, is "not only to share his personal life but also his love with persons in this creation" (205). To carry out this desire, God firstly reveals Himself to man "through all the faculties of personhood that make such communication possible," which "again places God's

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personal attributes in the midst of his absolute attributes” (206). He then “forever weds himself to the created world” (206) through the incarnation while maintaining a clear distinction from it. Again, the key to the trinitarian theism advocated by *Triune* “is the relational, triune God, who created a world separate from himself so he could share triune life and love with other persons made in his image” (206). This, however, is as far as *Triune* presses in its understanding of the Triune God’s relationship with man. As significant as the trinitarian starting point is in moving the discussion forward, the progress regrettably grinds to a halt as *Triune* sees only the union of the human and the divine in the man Jesus and not also in the persons whom He has created in His image and for His glory.

### A Way Forward

In assessing the conclusions drawn by *Triune*, we are forced to ask, “Did the Triune God create man in His image only to share a loving, personal, self-giving relationship with him while yet remaining separate from him?” The Bible does not support an affirmative answer to that question; rather, the witness of Scripture is that God desires to be mingled with man to produce a divine-human constitution as His eternal expression in humanity.

### *Why God Is Revealed as Triune: The Divine Dispensing of the Divine Trinity into Redeemed Humanity*

In rightly pointing out that while we can have true but not exhaustive knowledge of God, *Triune* falls short in its assessment of what we can know about God in His Trinity. Stating that “in Christian theology we clearly understand that God is triune without fully knowing *how* he is so” (141), *Triune* regrettably fails to explore *why* God is revealed as triune and, in so doing, misses the key to the eternal economy of God: the divine dispensing of the divine Trinity into redeemed humanity.

Second Corinthians 13:14, most commonly viewed as a mere parting benediction from Paul to the church in Corinth, is rarely seen as a revelation of God in His Trinity for the divine dispensing. In this verse the love of God is the source of grace, which is Christ as the embodiment and expression of God for the believers’ enjoyment. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit is the Spirit Himself as the transmission of the grace of the Lord with the love of God for the believers’ participation in all that God is. The perichoretic relationships of the Father, Son, and Spirit, then, are not only indicative of the mutual interrelatedness of the three; they point to the divine dispensing as the Son is now seen to coinhere with the Father so that He with the Father may be dispensed as the Spirit into His redeemed believers.

The Triune God is a divine dispensing. The Father is eternally imparting and the Son is eternally receiving the divine dispensing in the fellowship of the Spirit. This eternal dispensing, however, did not remain merely within God Himself. With the incarnation, the Triune God dispensed Himself into a human being, the God-man Jesus Christ, who was God “manifested in the flesh” (1 Tim. 3:16; John 1:14). Then through death and resurrection, Christ released the divine life from within the shell of His humanity and became a life-giving Spirit in order to dispense Himself as the embodiment of the Triune God into the human beings whom the Father has given to Him (12:24; 1 Cor. 15:45; John 20:22; 10:29; 17:9). The divine dispensing, therefore, has been enlarged to include man, who, by virtue of his regeneration with the divine, uncreated, dynamic life of God, is brought into an enjoyment of the same fellowship of Spirit that the Father, Son, and Spirit have enjoyed for eternity. This truth of the divine dispensing of the Divine Trinity corrects *Triune*’s deficient view of a God who is merely objectively related to persons made in His image without being essentially constituted into them to make them what He is.

### *The Issue of the Divine Dispensing: The Deification of the Believers*

It is also important to see that the issue of the divine dispensing is the deification of the believers, who are made God in life, nature, and expression, though they will never be a part of the Godhead and will never be objects of worship. The process of deification is initiated with the dispensing of the divine life into man’s human spirit through regeneration (3:6), whereby his spirit is made life (Rom. 8:10). The divine life then spreads to man’s soul through his mind (v. 6; 12:2) and consummates in the redemption of his body (8:11), thereby saturating his entire tripartite being of spirit, soul, and body with the divine life of the Triune God (1 Thes. 5:23). *Triune* misses this crucial point because it neglects the human spirit as the organ with which man receives, contains, experiences, and worships God (John 3:6; Rom. 1:9; Phil. 2:1; John 4:24), and defines a human person only as “a social being with conscious life who exercises reason, imagination, emotion and will in moral choices, freedom, creativity and responsibility” (181). Absent a correct understanding of the tripartite nature of man and the centrality of the human spirit, the process and glorious issue of the divine dispensing remain largely veiled.

*Triune* also suffers from a deficient understanding of the image of God according to which man was created.

In Scripture this image [of God in persons] includes the social or relational image of God, where three persons of the Trinity have created men and women in their (the Trinity’s) own image, so that human persons must relate

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to other human beings in order to reflect the image of the triune God. (105)

The image of God is Christ (Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4), who is the expression of the invisible God in the essence of His attributes, such as love, light, holiness, and righteousness. Man is created according to Christ as the image of God, with human virtues that match what God is in His attributes. Man, therefore, is naturally endowed with a capacity for love, light, holiness, and righteousness, but his human virtues are created to be filled with the divine attributes as the reality of what he possesses in shadow form only. *Triune* rightly holds to a conception of God's intrinsic essence as holiness and love, but it is Christ as the reality of these who is dispensed into man to mingle the divine attributes with the human virtues for God's expression in humanity. It is through the operation of the divine life with the divine essence in man, and not through the acquisition of theological knowledge (221), that man is transformed and conformed to the image of the firstborn Son of God (Rom. 8:29). Thus, the essence of the Triune God is imparted into the tripartite man so that man becomes holy by becoming God (1 Pet. 1:16; Eph. 5:27), who is holy (1 Sam. 2:2; Rev. 15:4), and becomes love by becoming God, who is love (1 John 4:8, 16). To insist that man was made in the image of God only to relate to other human beings as a reflection of the relationality of the persons of the Trinity is to miss the goal of the divine economy by a wide margin.

### ***The Divine-Human Incorporation as the Coinherence of the Coinhering Triune God with the Regenerated Believers***

Stating that “the trinitarian fellowship of the three divine persons is enlarged to include fellowship with human persons” (268), *Triune* hints at a larger view of God's “chief purpose” (269) but ultimately remains mired in its insistence that God merely wants human beings to relate to Him and to other like-minded persons to reflect His loving, social character. A closer reading of Scripture, however, bears out a most remarkable and profound truth: The God who has eternally existed as the coinhering Father, Son, and Holy Spirit provides in Christ the way for His redeemed, regenerated believers to be brought into that same relationship of coinherence without breaching His unique and inviolable Godhead.

John 14 reveals this mutual coinherence of God and man. In verses 10 and 11 Christ states that the Father is in Him and that He is in the Father, thus unveiling the coinherence of the hypostases who compose the Godhead. In verse 20 Christ points to man being added to this realm of coinherence on the day of His resurrection, indicating that time when the disciples would know that He is in the Father, they are in Christ, and Christ is in them. This is a

revelation of the divine incorporation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit being enlarged to include man, thus effecting the increase of the God-man Jesus Christ as the expression of the eternal God in humanity. Christ, therefore, is not merely our way into a broadened understanding of God; He is our way into God Himself (v. 6). This is the mutual indwelling of God and man as a divine-human incorporation of divinity mingled with humanity for the glory of the blessed God unto eternity.

### **Conclusion**

*Triune* is a well-written book that is valuable for its offer of a fresh and important reordering of the attributes of God that places emphasis on His relational nature and His desire to interact with the people whom He has created in His image. However, by missing the divine dispensing of the Divine Trinity as the means for God to fulfill His eternal economy to have a glorious expression in humanity, *Triune* cannot fulfill its promise that the application of the new knowledge it offers will “produce the richest spiritual experience” in the lives of its readers (330). On the contrary, it can only offer a God whose life, nature, and attributes remain practically incommunicable to man and whose eternal purpose has no way to be realized.

*by Tony Espinosa*

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>The personal attributes are those that constitute personhood and “include the concepts of reason, imagination, emotions and will that are expressed in life, sociality, freedom, morality, creativity and responsibility” (133). The moral attributes “require other persons for expression” and include “holiness through love...[as] grace, goodness, truth, faithfulness, righteousness and purity” (133).

<sup>2</sup>The relative attributes are those that “depend on the relationship of God to his creation for their expression” and “include his omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience and wisdom” (133). The absolute attributes “hold true apart from any relationship to creation” and “include the simplicity of God, his infinity, including his eternity and immensity, his constancy, his aseity and his perfection” (133-134).

<sup>3</sup>On this point Coppedge offers a clarifying footnote regarding his use of the word *social*:

Referring to God as a social being does not mean endorsing all the current theories of the social Trinity. Some, following the lead of Moltmann, have so closely identified the relational nature of God with social human communities that the Trinity devolves into tritheism. By “social being” we are referring to God's relational nature within himself. The emphasis is on the perichoretic interrelatedness of the three divine persons. (170)

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## Deification in the Bible

“Deification in Contemporary Theology,” by Roger E. Olson. *Theology Today* 64 (2007): 186-200.

In a recent article focusing on the rising interest in the “concept of humanity’s deification, or *theosis*” (186), “Deification in Contemporary Theology” (hereafter “Deification”), Roger E. Olson provides a concise survey of the issues involved in the emerging discussion. He also identifies a broad group of theologians who are seriously addressing the concept of deification. His identification of this emerging trend is welcome, but it should not be a surprise since deification is at the core of the scriptural message in the Bible. As Christians, who are created in the image and likeness of God for the purpose of expressing, not merely imitating, God, we should know, treasure, and experience the reality of deification as it is revealed, here a little and there a little, in the Bible (Isa. 28:10). We should not shy away from it, but seek, as “Deification” does, to find a balanced understanding that “expresses real union between God and humans without the pantheistic or panentheistic connotations of much that goes under the label of New Age” (187).

*As Christians, who are created in the image and likeness of God for the purpose of expressing, not merely imitating, God, we should know, treasure, and experience the reality of deification.*

“Deification” begins by acknowledging the “ecumenical renaissance” of the concept of *theosis* in “modern and contemporary Christian theology” (186), attributing its emergence to an “increasing cultural thirst for real spiritual experience and even for some union with God in and through religion” (187). “Deification” then cites an impressive group of scholars who have contributed to this renaissance. This group spans the theological spectrum, including Catholic scholars Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and the recently converted Bruce Marshall; Lutheran scholars Tuomo Mannermaa, Carl Braaten, and Robert Jenson; Anglican scholar A. M. Allchin; Church of Christ scholar F. W. Norris; Reformed scholars Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg; Evangelical scholars Clark Pinnock, Stanley Grenz, Robert Rakestraw, Daniel Clendenin, and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen; and lastly, Orthodox scholars Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas (188-189).

Although “Deification” includes Orthodox theologians in its summary of recent scholarship, it clearly states that the

teaching of deification “has traditionally been most at home” within Orthodoxy (189). “Deification,” however, does draw attention to the presence of competing understandings of deification within Orthodoxy, represented respectively by Lossky and Zizioulas, and then uses these differences to suggest how other interested theologians could best enter into this ongoing discussion.

“Deification” summarizes Lossky’s affirmation of the traditional Orthodox understanding of deification, as presented in the teachings of Gregory Palamas, and Zizioulas’s recent Orthodox variation. It then situates the work of contemporary Catholic and Protestant scholars in relation to these two competing Orthodox positions, examining in more detail the work of LaCugna, Norris, Allchin, Moltmann, Pinnock, Grenz, and Mannermaa, and placing each in the sphere of either Lossky’s or Zizioulas’s teaching.

Lossky’s understanding of deification, which is the commonly accepted understanding of deification in Orthodoxy, is based on the “traditional Palamite distinction between God’s essence and energies” (189). It is a distinction that seeks to preserve the “difference between uncreated God and the creature” (190), while acknowledging that humanity can participate in a “synergistic process that includes divine initiative and human response in an endless cycle until its completion, when the person is fully perfected in union with God” (190). According to Palamas and Lossky, as attributed by “Deification,”

“God...exists both in His essence and outside of His essence” in his energies, which are emanations of God’s hidden and ineffable essence. God is more than his essence; he is also his energies and is wholly present in each “ray” of his divinity. Lossky explains the distinction most clearly in his statement that “wholly unknowable in His essence, God wholly reveals Himself in His energies, which yet in no way divide His nature into two parts ‘knowable and unknowable’ but signify two different modes of the divine existence, in the essence and outside of the essence.” This is how Lossky and Eastern Orthodoxy in general understand 2 Peter 1:4. Christians become partakers of the divine uncreated energies and of the divine essence only through them. Otherwise, deification would mean a pantheistic dissolution of the person in God or God in creation. (191)

In contrast to Lossky’s view of deification in Orthodoxy,

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John Zizioulas, again as attributed by “Deification,”

has challenged or attempted to circumvent the traditional Palamite distinction between God’s essence and energies. Zizioulas regards deification as participation in the hypostasis of Christ rather than in the divine energies....For Zizioulas, the church is Christ’s identity in history and Christ is the church’s identity; there exists a real ontological unity between them. (191-192)

Of the contemporary theologians who are subsequently surveyed, “Deification” describes the work of Norris, Allchin, and Moltmann as being more in line with the traditional Palamite distinction of Lossky. In contrast, “Deification” finds the work of LaCugna and Mannermaa as being more in line with Zizioulas’s emphasis.

After situating the various teachings of these contemporary theologians within the orbits of the Orthodox positions of Lossky and Zizioulas, “Deification” concludes by asserting that Lossky’s understanding of deification should be the starting point for discussion, stating, “Protestants who experiment with the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of deification or who talk about deification should consider adopting the Palamite distinction” (199). This preference clearly reflects the fundamental view that the teaching of deification should not include the thought of “being blended with God’s own essence, which remains transcendent” (199).

While this is a valid concern and even a necessary consideration, “Deification” implies, perhaps unwittingly, that entering into the ongoing contemporary debate requires one to first choose between the views of Lossky and Zizioulas. This, I believe, is a false choice that unnecessarily constricts the consideration of this great biblical truth.

“Deification,” however, does not deserve to be criticized for implicitly positing this choice for several reasons. First, “Deification” does not claim to be an in-depth study of the teaching of deification. Instead, it is a survey of the emerging interest in deification in Protestant theology, and it contains an implicit call for more consideration. Consequently, “Deification” supports a worthy intention. Second, in pursuit of this intention, it points out the pitfall of recklessly approaching this teaching without due consideration being given to the distinction between the incommunicable and the communicable aspects of God. Consequently, “Deification” contains a healthy warning. Third, considering the long history of the teaching of deification within Orthodoxy, it is not unreasonable to suggest that a consideration of this truth should begin with an examination of the Orthodox perspective. This expectation, in turn, would suggest a need to choose between the views of Lossky and Zizioulas before embarking on a

more detailed examination. Consequently, “Deification” follows a reasonable approach.

Zizioulas’s teaching, however, has emerged from the Orthodox sphere in contradistinction to Orthodoxy’s more codified teachings on deification. This development alone should give one pause to consider the impetus behind his reconsideration. Clearly, Zizioulas has a concern about or a realization of some deficiency associated with a dogmatic adherence to the Palamite distinction. “Deification” does not attempt to examine these concerns, but I doubt that they extend to the point of rejecting the intrinsic point of the Palamite distinction, that of preserving the transcendence of God in relation to deified humanity. Rather, it seems to me that Zizioulas’s concerns are twofold.

The first concern, I believe, relates to the inability of the truths expressed through the Palamite distinction to address “the increasing cultural thirst for real spiritual experience” (187). A thirst for spiritual experience is more than a cultural phenomenon; it is a God-created tendency made possible through the formation of the human spirit, which serves as the lamp of the Lord (Gen. 2:7; Prov. 20:27), and it is a God-implanted longing made possible by the regeneration of the human spirit with the Holy Spirit (John 3:6). It is a thirst which can be satisfied only by the water which the Lord gives (4:14) And this water, which speaks of the genuine impartation of the Lord’s life into a believer, flows toward a specific goal, which is the manifestation of the divine, eternal, uncreated life of the Triune God.

Consequently, our teaching must engender genuine spiritual transformation and be able to establish us according to the contents of the revealed mystery, which is the gospel (Rom. 6:17; 16:25). If it does not, any deliverance into the underlying reality of our teaching will be incomplete and lacking in transformational impact. Therefore, while the language of the Palamite distinction related to the essence and uncreated energies of God safeguards us from a heretical understanding of deification, it does little to assuage the thirst of spiritual seekers by delivering them into the experience of deification. Rather than focusing on what makes a believer the same as God, that is, receiving and enjoying His life and nature, the language of the Palamite distinction implicitly reinforces only that which makes a believer different from God, that is, His immanence in His transcendence.

A second concern, I would suggest, relates to the failure of the teaching of deification, as it is framed by the Palamite distinction, to clearly present the purpose of deification, which is to produce the organic Body of Christ. This failure, consequently, relegates the experience of deification to a theoretical or outwardly sacramental realm, often

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with a emphasis on individualistic spirituality. It is instructive to note that Zizioulas presents his reconsiderations related to the teaching of deification in a book entitled *Being as Communion* which emphasizes fellowship. "Deification" acknowledges Zizioulas's emphasis on the corporate aspect of deification as it is reflected in the communion or fellowship of the Body of Christ.

For Zizioulas, the church is Christ's identity in history and Christ is the church's identity; there exists a real ontological unity between them...The church not only reflects but really participates in the Trinity, which exists eternally as communion between three persons. "God" is the communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, just as "church" is the communion between Christ and his people and between believers and believers through the Spirit... "The significance of the union with Christ is not the communication of divine energies, but becoming a son of God by transforming one's hypostasis through a relationship identical with that of the Son [with the Father]." (191-192)

I think that both of these limitations could be overcome and a more fruitful discussion would occur if the expressions used to present the doctrine of deification were more grounded in the terminology of the biblical revelation of deification, which is primarily associated with Christ and the church, namely, *Christ, Son, Firstborn, members, Body of Christ, and church*. The process of deification is centered on the economical process that produced Christ as the Firstborn, the Head of the Body, and the economical process that produced the church as the many brothers of the Firstborn, the Body of Christ. Zizioulas's emphasis on the hypostasis of the Son and on the church more clearly frames the discussion of deification in terms of the biblical revelation. Consider the following two verses, which, at their core, speak of the economical process of deification.

Ephesians 4:15 speaks of holding to truth in love and of growing up into Him in all things, who is the Head, Christ. The growth of the Body is our growing up into Christ, who is the Head, and this growing up is the deification of the Body for the full expression of Christ. While this verse clearly speaks of deification in relation to our inseparable incorporation into the person of the Son, which clearly involves a corporate aspect, there remains a distinction between Christ and the church by virtue of the Son's identification as the Head and the church's identification as the Body.

Colossians 3:10-11 speaks of putting on the new man, "which is being renewed unto full knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all and in

all." Both the putting on of the new man and the renewing of the new man unto full knowledge speak of the church's deification, which reproduces a corporate image and expression of Christ, who created the Body of Christ *in Himself* through His death on the cross (Eph. 2:15). While these verses in Colossians include both the person of the Son and the corporate expression of the Son, the new man, in its revelation of deification, the immanence of God is not blended away in the economy of God, because even though Christ is all, He also is in all, which indicates that there is still a distinction between Christ and those in whom He is. In the deified corporate Christ, the church as the new man, distinction is signified by the truth that He is in all, but identification without separation is signified by the truth that He is all.

In the economy of God, the distinct but not separate relationship between Christ and the church is mysteriously maintained, just as the distinct but not separate relationships among the three persons of the Godhead are mysteriously maintained. In the distinction between Christ and the church, as it is revealed in His economy, the transcendence of God is never in doubt, nor should it be in doubt. In the New Jerusalem, which is the ultimate sign of the deification of redeemed and regenerated humanity, the throne of God and the Lamb is prominently at its center. This throne is not shared with the constituents of the city; it belongs to God in His immanence alone. Rather, from the throne, the city is watered and the city is brought into the fellowship of the Father with the Son through the Spirit.

The Bible principally reveals the economical outworking of the purpose of God through the revelation of the Triune God in His economy. Deification is the aim and the consummation of God's economy. While the Bible speaks of the reality of the immanent Trinity, it emphasizes the economical Trinity and the economical process that produces a counterpart for the Son. This counterpart, which is the church as the wife of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7), has the same life and nature of the Triune God, which has been made receivable by humanity through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. But our receiving and partaking do not blend humanity into the Godhead nor make humanity an object of worship.

Rather than merely trying to avoid heresy by clinging to language that respects the distinction between God and His redeemed and regenerated people, but does not bring us into the experience of partaking of the divine life and nature, theologians should be more cognizant of how the economy of God in the experience of the believers is the practical basis for understanding and entering into the deification of the believers.

by John Pester