

## Ontological Transformation apart from Divinity

“You Are Filled in Him: Theosis and Colossians 2—3,”  
by Ben C. Blackwell, *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8.1 (Spring 2014): 103-123. Print.

In recent years the *Journal of Theological Interpretation* has published scholarly articles on theosis in Romans and 2 Corinthians 3:18.<sup>1</sup> Its current issue offers Ben C. Blackwell’s “You Are Filled in Him: Theosis and Colossians 2—3” (hereafter “Filled”), a thoughtful and well-written examination of “one of the clearest accounts in the NT of what was later termed ‘theosis,’ or deification” (103). Acknowledging that Colossians 2 “has received little attention in patristic or contemporary discussions of deification” (105), “Filled” adds to the growing body of literature on theosis by focusing on a portion of Scripture that is indeed worthy of due consideration.

In its detailed reading of Colossians 2—3, “Filled” produces some cogent observations regarding the “connection between Christ’s fullness and believers’ filling” and the development of that connection in the believers’ participation in the death and life of Christ (103). But a detailed reading of “Filled” also generates questions about the nature of the theosis it advocates. While rightly encouraging a deeper experience of the Christian life, “Filled” is so concerned about appearing to not preserve the inviolability of the Godhead that the deification it offers is ultimately void of the divine life and nature. Consequently, deification for “Filled” is primarily a relational reorientation to God and the community of the redeemed, but the transformation it effects never reaches beyond a mere change in thinking and morals. Deification in the New Testament, however, is more fully the process by which the believers are made God in life and nature but not in the Godhead.

### An Overview

In its introduction “Filled” immediately sets forth the central question under consideration and the verses that form the basis of that question:

As he refutes the Colossian error in Col 2:8-23, Paul makes one of the most striking statements about Christ and believers among his letters: “in [Christ] all the fullness

of deity dwells bodily, and you are filled in him” (2:9-10). Given the shared use of filling language (πλήρωμα and πληρώω) in these two verses, Paul seems to be asserting that believers are filled with the same deity that fills Christ, though this reading is often quickly rejected by interpreters...Is this merely a rhetorical flourish, or are believers filled with deity, such that this passage is an early NT witness to the idea of what was later termed “theosis,” or deification? (103-104)

The introduction continues with brief comments on the history of the doctrine of deification and the author’s definition of theosis as presented in his book *Christosis: Pauline Soteriology in Light of Deification in Irenaeus and Cyril of Alexandria*:

Building on my study of patristic soteriology, I developed this definition: “Deification...[is] the process of restoring likeness to God, primarily experienced as incorruption and sanctification, through a participatory relationship with God mediated by Christ and the Spirit. Through the Son and the Spirit believers become adopted sons of God, even gods, by grace and not by nature, because they participate in divine attributes such as life and holiness.” (104)

“Filled” elaborates on this definition, stating,

This is a form of “attributive” rather than “essential” deification, in that believers take on divine attributes through an ontological transformation but remain distinct from the divine essence. Thus, deification is understood in a fully Trinitarian context as a restoration of the divine-human relationship and a transformation of believers into the divine likeness through participation in the Trinity. (104)

Following the introductory material, the bulk of the article is composed of two main sections and a conclusion. In its first main section, “Reading Colossians 2 in Its Literary Context,” “Filled” moves sequentially through portions of Colossians 2—3, beginning with two questions based on 2:9-10: “What is the nature of the fullness of deity in Christ,” and “what does it mean to be filled in him?” (105). To be filled in Christ, “Filled” argues, is to embody the death and life of Christ, and it is in Paul’s use of “a variety of images” (117) in the remainder of chapters 2 and 3 that this embodiment is illustrated:

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My contention, then, is that being filled in Christ entails the embodiment of Christ's death and life, as chaps. 2—3 detail. (112)

Through a variety of images, Paul returns again and again to the embodiment of Christ's death and life—through baptism, circumcision, forgiveness, triumph over powers, mindset, and clothing. In all these things, embodying the Christ narrative is the central soteriological experience for believers. (117)

Theosis, then, is Christosis, a process that reorients believers to God but is “not merely an individual experience” (114), as it reorients believers also to the community of God and is, therefore, ultimately communal.

In its second main section (“Reading Colossians 2—3 in Its Theological Context”), “Filled” argues that its reading of theosis in Colossians 2 and 3 is consistent with patristic views of deification. Further, it gives a final word on the Creator-created relationship that its form of deification is intended to preserve:

The ontological distinction always remains, but Christ has brought the Creator and the created together with the result that the ontological difference no longer entails a relational separation. In fact, through Christ believers come to share in some of the attributes of divinity, such as immortality, holiness, and glory. (121)

The article offers concluding thoughts, among which is the notion that deification is “a metaphor,” though “no less real” for being metaphorical (123).

### Fullness and Participation

“Filled” rightly concurs that “Christ embodies God himself” (106), that “all the fullness of that divine identity is present in Christ” (108), that all the fullness of divinity dwells in the divine-human Christ (105-108), that the word *bodily* in 2:9 is “a reference to Jesus’ bodily existence” (110), that Christ is, as the Council at Nicaea affirmed Him to be, consubstantial with the Father and with humanity (109-111), and that He is “consubstantial with the Father in a way that no other human can or will be” (109). Furthermore, “Filled” sees a potent connection between Christ in 2:9 and the believers in 2:10 through Paul’s use of “filling” language in both verses:

With the close proximity between the two cognates of

πληρώω, Paul wants his readers to see a correlation between the two. Paul’s response to the “empty” philosophy emphasizes the “fullness” found in the divine-human Christ. Thus, one’s experience of the divine fullness is through being filled in him. (111)

“Filled” also makes the well-considered argument that the believers’ experience of the divine fullness is their experience of death and resurrection, which is a participatory experience “in Christ,” as Paul’s repeated use of that phrase in chapters 2—3 indicates:

I, however, argue that this participation in Christ’s death and life is not merely the *means* to possess the fullness, but it actually *constitutes* the fullness. (113)

Paul’s response to the Colossian error in 2:9-23 is founded on a proper understanding of Christ’s divine-human identity and the reconstituted identity of believers in him. However, 2:9-10 serves not only to introduce 2:11-23 but also as the basis of his exhortations in chap. 3. In both chapters, Paul argues that believers are reoriented to God and the world through a participatory relationship “in Christ.” The participatory nature of this relationship cannot be missed. The ἐν/σύν + ᾧ/αὐτῷ formula appears six times in 2:9-15 alone...In 2:11—3:17, Paul uses a variety of images to describe his κατὰ Χριστόν theology, and with each dying and rising with Christ are central. (112-113)

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But does the believers’ experience of death and resurrection “in Christ,” as advocated by “Filled,” match Paul’s understanding of that experience? More pointedly, can believers be filled in Christ, the fullness of God, by a participatory experience of His death and resurrection apart from the divine life and nature?

### The Divine Life and Nature

“Filled” is rightly concerned with preserving the Creator-created distinction between God and redeemed humanity, and that distinction will remain for eternity. To be sure, the Godhead, and Christ’s unique position in it as the only begotten Son of God, can never be violated. However, God has given His divine life with the divine nature to the believers (John 10:10; 2 Pet. 1:4), thus begetting them to be genuine children in life (John 1:12-13), and their position as sons by the divine birth does not threaten the uniqueness of the eternal Godhead.

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Rather, God's communicable attributes have been communicated to them through the divine life with the divine nature so that they are human and divine as Christ is divine and human. In short, Christ is the firstborn Son of God, and they are the many-born sons of God (Rom. 8:29-30), but the many-born never occupy the position of the Firstborn and never become objects of worship. The communicable attributes that they partake of in Christ—such as love, light, holiness, and righteousness—are characteristics of the divine nature that they possess through regeneration, but God also has incommunicable attributes, and the believers will never partake of these. As creatures, they will never be, for example, omnipotent, omniscient, or omnipresent. They will forever be limited and will forever depend on God as their unique source and supply for their existence. "Filled," however, strongly asserts that the believers can never be divine, for their becoming such would amount to their becoming "members of the Godhead":

As believers participate in God, they are transformed to be like him but do not become divine, as though they were members of the Godhead. This "attributive" deification (which patristic and Orthodox interpreters have in mind) is always a metaphor and is distinct from "essential" deification...Believers are gods by grace not by nature. (122)

While believers do not become "members of the Godhead," they do partake of the divine nature in Christ and thus become divine. Apart from the divine life and nature, believers can at most have a changed relationship *toward* God, but they can never be organically united *with* God. Despite its contention that believers undergo "an ontological transformation" through the process of theosis (104), "Filled" has no way to bridge the gap between God and man if the divine nature is not involved in the process of deification. Thus, it can only offer a reconciliation of relationship but not the reality of the genuine sonship that theosis brings to consummation.

### Death, Resurrection, the Spirit, and "True Humanity"

"Filled" offers well-reasoned observations concerning Paul's repeated reference to the theme of death and resurrection, as seen in his use of the images of circumcision (Col. 2:11), baptism (v. 12), forgiveness of transgressions (vv. 13-14), and the stripping off of the evil power of spiritual forces (vv. 15-23). "Filled" also makes this keen observation:

This focus on the death-life narrative is important because Christian theology in the first century did not start with a conception of the pre-incarnate, eternal Son of God who became incarnate. Rather, the church

encountered a man who died and rose from the grave, and they came to realize that this crucified and risen man is to be identified with God, as the eternal Word and Son. What this means is that in the very event of death and resurrection they saw God revealed to such an extent that they came to affirm that all the fullness of God was expressed in this embodied event...This is exactly Paul's argument in Colossians: To know God one must experience the dying and rising Christ because in him all the fullness of deity dwells bodily. (118)

In its commentary on Colossians 3:1-17, in a subsection titled "Living out the Death and Life of Christ," "Filled" defines its understanding of what an experience of the dying and rising Christ actually consists of, saying, "The life of Christ presently entails a noetic and moral transformation (3:5-17), whereas in the future the life of Christ will be experienced as somatic resurrection at the parousia (3:4)" (116). Transformation for "Filled," then, is merely an intellectual and moral change that a believer experiences by "embodying the Christ narrative" of death and resurrection (117), and the apex of that experience is the resurrection of the body at the parousia. "Filled" argues that the believers "are released from the power of death and given the power of life" when they "participate in the divine power in Christ by embodying his death and life" (114), so the change effected on them is real. But their participation in the life of Christ is only a participation in the benefits of what He accomplished through His death and resurrection (120),<sup>2</sup> and the liberating effects of those accomplishments are experienced by the believers through the metaphors of circumcision, baptism, and the stripping off of the evil powers, and the actual forgiveness of transgressions. Apart from the divine life and nature, however, the experience of death and resurrection in Christ that occupies much of "Filled" can remain only at the level of metaphor without any subjective application to the believers.

The experience of death and resurrection is an experience of those elements as they have been added to the Spirit, thus making "the Spirit" more fully "the Spirit of Christ" and "the Spirit of Jesus Christ." It is this Spirit that Paul experienced as the reality of death and resurrection in his human living, as these footnotes from the Recovery Version of the Bible demonstrate:

*The Spirit of Christ* implies that this Spirit is the embodiment and reality of Christ, the incarnated One. This Christ accomplished everything necessary to fulfill God's plan. He includes not only divinity, which He possessed from eternity, but also humanity, which He obtained through incarnation. He also includes human living, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. This is the Spirit of Christ in resurrection, that is, Christ Himself dwelling in our spirit (v. 10) to impart Himself, the embodiment of

the processed Triune God, into us as resurrection life and power to deal with the death that is in our nature (v. 2). Thus, we may live today in Christ's resurrection, in Christ Himself, by living in the mingled spirit. (Lee, Rom. 8:9, note 4)

The Spirit of Jesus Christ is "the Spirit" mentioned in John 7:39. This is not merely the Spirit of God before the Lord's incarnation but the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit with divinity, after the Lord's resurrection, compounded with the Lord's incarnation (humanity), human living under the cross, crucifixion, and resurrection. The holy anointing ointment in Exo. 30:23-25, a compound of olive oil and four kinds of spices, is a full type of this compound Spirit of God, who is now the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Here it is not the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7) or the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9) but the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The Spirit of Jesus is related mainly to the Lord's humanity and human living; the Spirit of Christ is related mainly to the Lord's resurrection. To experience the Lord's humanity, as illustrated in 2:5-8, we need the Spirit of Jesus. To experience the power of the Lord's resurrection, as mentioned in 3:10, we need the Spirit of Christ. In his suffering the apostle experienced both the Lord's suffering in His humanity and the Lord's resurrection. Hence, the Spirit to him was the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the compound, all-inclusive, life-giving Spirit of the Triune God. Such a Spirit has, and even is, the bountiful supply for a person like the apostle, who was experiencing and enjoying Christ in His human living and resurrection. (Lee, Phil. 1:19, note 4)

"Filled" also emphasizes that theosis is not to enable believers to "escape created reality," but it in fact "reveals their (true) humanity" and "therefore fulfills creational intentions":

In the same way that the humanization of God in Christ revealed his deity, the deification of humans in Christ reveals their (true) humanity. (119)

Theosis is not an attempt to escape created reality; rather, deification through participation in God is the humanization of believers and therefore fulfills creational intentions...Though mystical contemplation plays an important role in Orthodox traditions, theosis is not an escape from embodiment based on a spirit-matter dualism; rather, it strengthens the focus on embodiment. It is no coincidence that this creation-

affirming doctrine took root in opposition to second-century Gnostic traditions. (121-122)

This cautionary word is necessary and well stated. Indeed, theosis does not obliterate man's humanity but "fulfills creational intentions." Those intentions, however, are centered on the operation of the divine life with the divine nature to reconstitute redeemed human beings with the very humanity of the man Jesus, a humanity that He sanctified, glorified, and brought into the divine sonship (Acts 13:33; Rom. 1:3-4). It is this divinely enriched humanity that is reproduced in the believers and is "true humanity." When this humanity is fully realized in a corporate Body that takes Christ as its person and lives Him out as its full expression, then God will have the reality of the one new man.

### The Body of Christ

"Filled" highlights Paul's emphasis on the corporate experience of Christ's death and resurrection and his striking statement that in the new man<sup>3</sup> "Christ is all and in all" (Col. 3:11):

This dying and living through Christ is not

merely an individual experience. The embodied and communal event of baptism situates believers in relationship to God and to the entire faith community (as did circumcision). (114)

As believers die and rise with Christ and are freed from the στοιχεῖα, believers' communal practice takes a new form because they are reoriented to the head, that is, to Christ, and his body. Christ is the one "from whom the whole body (πᾶν τὸ σῶμα), supported and held together by its joints and sinews, grows with a growth from God" (2:19). As believers embody the death and life together, they grow into the divine growth (τὴν αὐξησιν τοῦ θεοῦ) and experience the divine fullness that the head shares with the ecclesial body—his death and life. (115-116)

Though Paul speaks of setting one's mind on things above (3:1-2) and being renewed in knowledge (3:10), this noetic transformation does not simply consist of a solitary believer pursuing mystical ecstasy. Rather, this inward, noetic transformation entails a reorientation of believers to the reconstituted community—Christ's body. In this way, "Christ is all and in all" (3:11). (117)

This participating embodiment is not merely for the sake of the individual; it also reorients believers to a reconstituted community. (117)

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The embodiment of Christ's death and life only makes sense in the context of the body of Christ who grows up together through God. (123)

Colossians is a transcendent book, notable for its majestic vision of the all-inclusive Christ as the Head and the church as the Body of Christ, the one new man. "Filled" is right to emphasize the corporate aspect of the experience of the death and resurrection of Christ, but its idea of a "reconstituted" community suggests that reconstitution is merely reorientation toward a community of similarly reoriented people whose thinking and morals have been uplifted by a participation in the accomplished work of Christ. In this view, nothing of the person of Christ has been worked into their being, nothing of the element of God has grown in them, and nothing of divinity has produced in them a metabolic transformation whereby they match the divine-human Christ as the Head whom they are to express. In short, the Creator-created distinction remains, but it is preserved at the expense of the outworking of the divine purpose to make created, redeemed, regenerated, glorified humanity the same as God in life and nature but not in the Godhead.

### Conclusion

The scholarly interest in theosis is sure not to wane, as the literature and the voices contributing to it are only on the rise. "Filled" adds intellectual rigor to the conversation, and its focus on Colossians 2–3 may yet invite further examinations of theosis in these crucial chapters. The critique submitted here is offered with a genuine appreciation for the conversation and the urge for a deeper experience of the Christian life that "Filled" brings to it. Nonetheless, the critique is warranted, for without an experience of the life that deifies the believers by making them divine, "Theos" is absent from theosis.

by Tony Espinosa

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Two articles have been reviewed in this journal. See "Affirming Theosis in Romans," *Affirmation & Critique* 16.2 (2011): 99-103; and "Deified into the Same Image," *Affirmation & Critique* 13.2 (2008): 85-88.

<sup>2</sup>"Filled" explains, "By alternating his discussion between Christ's own death and resurrection and believers' embodiment of Christ's death and resurrection, Paul shows that believers do not create the reality; rather, they participate in God's work in Christ." We agree that believers "do not create the reality" and that they do "participate in God's work in Christ," but they also partake of the divine life with the divine nature and the divine essence, which produces a living that is sourced in God Himself.

<sup>3</sup>"Filled" mistranslates Paul's affirmation that the believers in Corinth had "put off the old man" and "put on the new man" (Col. 3:9-10) as "[put] off the old self" and "[put] on the new self" (117). The new man is a corporate entity constituted of Christ and created by Him on the cross (Eph. 2:15; 4:24). *Self* in the Bible bears a negative connotation. It is individualistic, independent of God, opposes God's will, expresses Satan, and is the enemy of the Body. Hence, it has been crucified with Christ. Believers must execute the effectiveness of Christ's death on the self by remaining under the killing work of the cross, thus denying the self by taking up the cross daily (Matt. 16:22-26; Luke 9:23-25).

### Works Cited

Lee, Witness. Footnotes. Recovery Version of the Bible. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2003. Print.

## A Limited Perspective of the Divine Sonship of Christ

"Psalm 2:7 and the Concept of περιχώρησις," by Michael Straus. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67.2 (2014): 213-229. Print.

In "Psalm 2:7 and the Concept of περιχώρησις" (hereafter "Psalm"), Michael Straus attempts to determine the nature of the relationship between Jehovah and His begotten Son in Psalm 2:7 and examines whether or not the concept of περιχώρησις (perichoresis) as defined and used by John of Damascus in his *De Fide Orthodoxa* supplies further insight regarding this relationship. Although "Psalm" is able to present a keen evaluation of sonship in the Old Testament, it misses the deeper revelation concerning the Son and sonship in Psalm 2:7. Consequently, it not only asks unfitting questions of Psalm 2:7 but also misappropriates the notion of perichoresis as defined by John of Damascus in examining Psalm 2:7.

### Questions concerning Jehovah and His Anointed in Psalm 2:7

"Psalm" takes Psalm 2:7 as a starting point and orders in three sections its examination of sonship and the meaning of the word *begotten* in this verse. In the first section, "Psalm 2:7," "Psalm" groups together 1 Samuel 16:13; 2 Samuel 7:14; and Psalm 2:7 in order to identify the "Son" spoken of in the latter (214-215). It notes that the language used in Psalm 2:7 points most strongly in the direction of "the future establishment of the Lord's rule on earth through a messianic or anointed king in the

Davidic line,” a rule that is forever, implying that the Son who is referenced in the verse “cannot be limited to Solomon” (214). Acknowledging that the anointed king in Psalm 2:7 has a special status, “Psalm” lists and explores three principal kinds of sonship relationships in the Old Testament in order to determine whether the anointed king’s “special status...may be found in the particular nature of his sonship” (215).

In regard to the first kind of sonship—“‘sons of God’ as some form of subordinate created beings”—referred to in Genesis 6:2 and Job 1:6 (215), “Psalm” explains that the use of *sons of Elohim* rather than *sons of Jehovah* in these verses and the fact that there is no mention of these sons as “begotten” indicate that “a distinction is being made between the ‘son of God’ of Psalm 2:7 and other ‘sons of God’ referred to in different portions of the scriptures” (215). It then argues that this distinction does not resolve the question of the relationship between the father and the son in Psalm 2:7—whether the father and the son are “of like or different kind (i.e., both being divine; or one being divine and the other not); or of like or different rank (i.e., both of equal rank as divinities; or both being divine but one of superior rank to the other)” (215-216). Framed in theological terms, it also argues that the Old Testament does not answer the question of whether or not Jehovah as the Father and His Anointed as the Son in Psalm 2:7 are of the same substance; and if of the same substance, whether or not there is subordination between the two (216).

Regarding the second kind of sonship in the Old Testament, “the king as ‘God’s son’” (215), “Psalm” notes mainly that the language of sonship used in Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14 allows for Solomon, David’s son, to be embraced within Nathan’s prophecy (216). “Psalm” also suggests that the comparison of those verses with Psalm 89:26, which includes the element of salvation, takes the relationship described in all three verses “beyond a common enthronement or ‘appointment’ ceremony” (217).

Concerning the third kind of sonship in the Old Testament, “the people of Israel corporately as ‘God’s son’, and individually as His ‘children’” (215), “Psalm” observes that Israel is corporately referred to in Exodus 4:22 and Jeremiah 31:9 as the son of Jehovah and that the language of begetting is used in relation to Israel in Deuteronomy 32:18. “Psalm” suggests that the use of the same language in Deuteronomy 32:18 and Psalm 2:7

implies that God stands in a relationship with His people that parallels the relationship between God and His anointed king (217). “Psalm” concludes this section by stating that the Old Testament writers were comfortable “using language of plurality alongside that of unity when describing God...; the people of Israel...; or the family unity which inheres in God’s relationship with His people” (218). This allows “room for notions of equality both of substance and stature between the Lord and his anointed,...as...might be inferred from the ‘begotten son’ language of Psalm 2:7” (218).

In the second section, “Psalm 2:7 in the New Testament,” “Psalm” examines eight passages in the New Testament that it identifies as quotations or paraphrases of Psalm 2:7 in order to determine whether “the New Testament provides any further understanding as

to the *nature* of the relationship between the Father and the Son, either as to their common divinity, or their ‘equality’ of stature within the Godhead” (219). “Psalm” argues that the first two groups of verses that quote or paraphrase Psalm 2:7—the first, Mark 1:1 and Luke 3:22; and the second,

Matthew 17:5, Mark 9:7, and 2 Peter 1:17—do so in order to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus and His oneness with the Father. It asserts that in Acts 13:32-33, the third group, “Paul reads the words ‘this day have I begotten thee’ to refer to the resurrection” (220). Concerning Hebrews 1:5, which “combines in a single verse quotations from Psalm 2:7 and 2 Sam 7:14,” “Psalm” points out that the writer of Hebrews identifies the anointed king of Psalm 2:7 as a “promised king who will rule not just Israel, but also the Gentiles” (220). Last, “Psalm” suggests that the quotation of Psalm 2:7 in Hebrews 5:5, which links the anointed one of Psalm 2:7 to Melchizedek in Hebrews 5:6, “sheds critical light on the meaning of the term ‘begotten’ in Psalm 2:7” (220). It argues, based on Hebrews 7:3, that *begotten* in Psalm 2:7 “cannot refer to earthly procreation” (220), which would otherwise imply a “beginning of days,” thus contradicting the revelation concerning Melchizedek in Hebrews 7:3. “Psalm” further argues from this verse that the phrase *this day* in Psalm 2:7 refers to “no precise moment in time” (221). “Psalm” concludes the second section by stating that the New Testament verses are only “suggestive, but not conclusive” of the “common divinity” or “equality of stature” of Jehovah and the Son within the Godhead (221).

In the final section, “Circumincision/Coinherence/περιχώρησις,” “Psalm” presents the concept of perichoresis as

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outlined by John of Damascus in *De Fide Orthodoxa* and attempts to apply this concept to the relationship of the Father and Son in Psalm 2:7. “Psalm” asserts that “John’s key insight was that the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost ‘are one in all things *save in the being unbegotten, the being begotten, and the procession*’” (224) and also that whereas John’s framework contains an implicit time element, he addresses that shortcoming by explaining that “the Father’s begetting of the Son is...‘without beginning and eternal’” (225, also quoting F. H. Chase). “Psalm” states that in expounding this discussion of the Trinity, John introduces the concept of perichoresis, the notion that

the three members of the Trinity have *no* ‘difference in place’ with respect to one another, but instead ‘exist in one another, not so as to be confused, but so as to adhere closely together, as expressed in the words of the Lord when He said: “I in the Father and the Father in me”’. (226, also quoting Chase)

“Psalm” argues that John’s concept of perichoresis remains in “tension with...the nature of the human and divine father/son relationships that pervade the scriptures” and is no “more fully expressive of the *relationship* between and among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit than Jesus’ own statement” in John 14:10 (228). It further states that John of Damascus provides a theological expression that is not unique to the Trinity, encompassing also the relationships of the believers in Christ. It concludes that because the term *perichoresis*, or its English equivalents *coinherence* and *circumincession*, can be used in a broader context, there is an “ultimate need to rely on a more personal and relational perspective in our understanding of the Trinity itself” (229).

### Aspects of the Divine Sonship of Christ

In its evaluation of the relationship between the father and the son in Psalm 2:7, even after noting that the anointed king in this verse most likely refers to Christ, “Psalm” is limited in its evaluation of the divine sonship of Christ. In one place “Psalm” acknowledges according to Acts 13:33 that the begetting in Psalm 2:7 refers to Christ’s resurrection (220), yet in another place it argues that the phrase *this day* in Psalm 2:7 refers to no precise moment in time and suggests that it could refer to any time from the days of David the king to that of the ascension of Christ (221).

The New Testament reveals that Christ’s divine sonship is of two primary aspects—as the only begotten Son of God (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18), which mainly relates to His existence in the Godhead, and as the firstborn Son of God (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:18; Heb. 1:6), which mainly relates to His process in God’s economy. Whereas the Bible reveals Christ, the only Begotten, as One who is *eternally begotten* of the Father and possessing only divinity,

we must also understand Christ, the Firstborn, as One possessing both divinity and humanity and who was *begotten at the time* of His resurrection from the dead (John 1:1, 14; Rom 1:3-4; 1 Pet. 3:18). Even though the begetting of Christ as the Firstborn has eternal value and effectiveness, it is nevertheless an accomplishment in time. Not understanding this basic distinction related to the divine sonship of Christ is a critical flaw that plagues the presentation in “Psalm.”

### The Aspect of the Divine Sonship Recorded in Psalm 2:7—Christ as the Firstborn Son of God

The driving question in the analysis presented by “Psalm” concerns the nature of the relationship between the father and the son in Psalm 2:7. Specifically, it asks whether both are divine, and if so, whether one is of a higher rank than the other. To that question, the analysis in “Psalm” comes up inconclusive, for it posits that the New Testament verses that refer to Psalm 2:7 are only suggestive but not conclusive concerning the items in question (221). Actually, the problem is not that there is a lack of evidence in the New Testament but that the question leaves no room for a deeper revelation concerning the Son and sonship in Psalm 2:7.

Psalm 2:7, when considered only in the Old Testament context of Psalm 2, Psalm 89:20-29, and 2 Samuel 7:12-14, presents a basic revelation—a man, Jehovah’s Anointed and the seed of David, is begotten as the Son of Jehovah in a way that this Son possesses a life of special quality, for the throne of His kingdom is forever. This anointed One in Psalm 2:7 is neither David nor Solomon, because the “limits of the earth” will be the anointed One’s possession (v. 8). This basic revelation is clarified and strengthened in the New Testament.

From Acts 13:33 it is abundantly clear that *My Son, today*, and *begotten* in Psalm 2:7 are references to Jesus the God-man, to the day of His resurrection, and to His resurrection respectively. “Psalm,” nevertheless, claims that the accounts in the Gospels concerning Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration, which paraphrase portions of Psalm 2:7, make the meaning of *today* or *this day* varied (221). A deeper analysis of the baptism and transfiguration passages according to the New Testament revelation will show that they confirm that *today* in Psalm 2:7 does, in fact, refer to the day of the Lord’s resurrection.

The phrase *today I have begotten You*, which appears in the latter half of Psalm 2:7, is not mentioned in any of the baptism or transfiguration accounts. This suggests that these accounts are not concerned with emphasizing the time of the Lord’s baptism or the time of His transfiguration but only with associating the reality of resurrection with His baptism and transfiguration. Therefore, if these accounts

in the Gospels are to be considered as paraphrases of Psalm 2:7, there must be elements of both the baptism and transfiguration of Jesus that are illustrative of the principle of resurrection. And it is indeed possible to see an aspect of resurrection in Mark's account, because in the Lord's baptism, everything related to the old creation was put to death, and when the Lord arose from the baptismal waters, He did so in the principle of resurrection so that nothing natural was operative in His subsequent ministry. The same is true concerning the transfiguration, which is described as "the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (Matt. 16:28). Since the kingdom is a reality that is seen and accomplished only in resurrection (17:9), the transfiguration of Jesus must be understood as an unveiling of the operation of the resurrection life that is the precursor to the coming of the kingdom. While it is possible to associate the Lord's baptism and transfiguration with the principle of resurrection, the omission of the phrase *today I have begotten You* should restrict the use of the word *today* in Psalm 2:7 to the actual day of the Lord's resurrection, not to an indeterminate point in time as suggested by "Psalm."

THE NEW TESTAMENT REVEALS THAT CHRIST'S SONSHIP IS OF TWO PRIMARY ASPECTS— AS THE ONLY BEGOTTEN SON OF GOD, WHICH RELATES TO HIS EXISTENCE IN THE GODHEAD, AND AS THE FIRSTBORN SON OF GOD, WHICH RELATES TO HIS PROCESS IN GOD'S ECONOMY.

Hebrews 1:5-6 and 8-9 affirm not only that *Son* in Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14 refers to Jesus Christ but also that He is referred to in all these passages not as the only Begotten but as the firstborn Son of God. Thus, the revelation in Psalm 2:7 is that on the day of His resurrection, Jesus Christ the God-man with His humanity, that is, as a man, was designated in resurrection, begotten as the firstborn Son of God. This revelation is made plain in Romans 1:3 and 4, which unveil the gospel of God concerning "His Son, who came out of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was designated the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness out of the resurrection of the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord." Witness Lee, in footnote 1 on Romans 1:4, explains the implications of Paul's statement in these verses, saying,

Before His incarnation Christ, the divine One, already was the Son of God (John 1:18; Rom. 8:3). By incarnation He put on an element, the human flesh, which had nothing to do with divinity; that part of Him needed to be sanctified and uplifted by passing through death and resurrection. By resurrection His human nature was sanctified, uplifted, and transformed. Hence, by resurrection He was designated the Son of God with His humanity (Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5). His resurrection was His designation. Now, as the Son of God, He possesses humanity as well as divinity.

The fact that *the Spirit of holiness* and *the flesh* are contrastive indicates that as surely as Jesus' human nature was genuine flesh, so also His designation as Son of God with His humanity was divine as God is divine (cf. John 4:24).

Finally, Hebrews 5:5 adds to the prior points by showing that Jesus Christ's designation in resurrection is not only His being begotten as the Son of God but also His qualification to be a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Christ, as such a High Priest, possesses humanity; thus, He can be touched by the feeling of our weaknesses (4:15). He also possesses divinity; thus He is able to save us to the uttermost (7:25).

The answer to the question posed by "Psalm" related to rank is better found in other portions of the New Testament. For instance, the fact that Christ as the only

Begotten is equal with the Father in the Godhead is made evident in verses such as Philippians 2:6, which speaks of Christ being equal with God, and John 17:5, which reveals that the Father and the Son share the same glory. The fact that there is no rank in the Godhead in the sense

considered by "Psalm" does not mean that there is no order in the economy of God as it relates to Psalm 2:7, to Christ as the Firstborn in His humanity, and to His kingdom. It is in the sense of Christ as the Firstborn in His humanity that 1 Corinthians 11:3 is able to speak concerning God being the Head of Christ, and 15:27-28, concerning the Son being subject to God. All these verses show that the revelation in Psalm 2:7 is much more nuanced than just a question regarding the relationship between the Father and Son in Psalm 2:7 would open up.

### Conclusion

In its analysis of Psalm 2:7, "Psalm" attempts to diagnose the nature of the relationship between Jehovah as the Father and His Anointed as the Son and to examine whether that relationship is aptly described by the concept of perichoresis in the writings of John of Damascus. Due to a limited understanding of the divine sonship of Christ, "Psalm" arrives at an inconclusive result as to the aspect of sonship that is more deeply revealed in Psalm 2:7 and inevitably relates the concept of perichoresis to an "abstraction from nothing" when it is unable to yield tangible results based on an ill-formed comparison (228). Whereas "Psalm" is able to list the various kinds of sonship in the Old Testament, it ultimately misses the deeper

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revelation concerning sonship in Psalm 2:7 as portrayed in the New Testament.

by Joel Oladele

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## A Pilgrim's Progress on His Infinite Journey

*An Infinite Journey: Growing toward Christlikeness*, by Andrew M Davis. Greenville: Ambassador International, 2014. Print.

An endorsement on the back cover of *An Infinite Journey: Growing toward Christlikeness* (hereafter *Journey*) says, "It felt like I was reading a modern Puritan." *Journey* presents sanctification as a journey of an individual Christian toward Christlike perfection through the help of God's infinite power. It describes sanctification as a pathway to Christian maturity that occurs in a cycle of growing knowledge, increasing faith, transformed character, and good works (action); action, in turn, feeds knowledge to repeat the cycle (415). According to *Journey*, these categories are also the components of maturity. *Journey* charts Christian progress as a function of righteousness over time. According to *Journey*, "the goal of the Christian life is absolute perfection in Christ" (61); however, "personal perfection cannot be attained in this lifetime, but it will be granted us when we see the Lord" (21). In a chapter that illustrates this concept graphically, *Journey* compares and contrasts its presentation to John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The interspersing of references to Bunyan and other like-minded writers relates *Journey's* themes and thesis to its Puritan underpinnings:

Like Bunyan's allegory, [this chapter] pieces together various aspects of biblical doctrine and practical experience to describe what sanctification may be like for various Christians...Some may never really be able to embrace such an "engineering" graph of the Christian life. To them I heartily recommend John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as a more artistic way of charting our Christian progress. (58)

*Journey* commendably seeks a scripturally grounded, comprehensive, and practical definition of the doctrine and practicality of sanctification. In so doing, it attempts to define and apply biblical themes such as maturity, perfection, transformation, conformation, and growth. *Journey*

exalts knowledge of the Scriptures, habitual prayer, faith, individual and corporate worship, evangelical and missionary activity, family, stewardship, and spiritual disciplines. *Journey* also emphasizes purity from sin, dealing properly with sin, and having a character, an internal nature, conformed to Christ.

Disappointingly, *Journey* concludes by espousing techniques of goal setting, assessment, and resolutions as ways to put its sanctification model into practice, thereby exposing a self-centric understanding of Christian maturity. *Journey* does not reference the law of the Spirit of the divine life as the power and substance of Christian perfection and maturity and fails to frame maturity in the context of the corporate aspect of God's good pleasure, which is to have a full-grown, corporate new man—the church as the Body of Christ.

## A Taxonomy of Sanctification

According to *Journey*, there are two journeys—external evangelism and personal growth—which cannot be completed without the power of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the priestly ministry of Christ (21-22). Both are gradual and require much work:

The external journey of the worldwide advance of the Kingdom of Christ—from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, through the ministry of the gospel—is a gradual process requiring great effort, labor, and suffering. The internal journey of individual, personal salvation—from justification, through sanctification, into glorification—is also a gradual process requiring great effort, labor, and suffering. (17)

Furthermore, these two journeys are intrinsically linked:

It is impossible for the Church to make progress externally to the ends of the earth if there are no Christians mature enough to pay the price to go as missionaries and martyrs. And it is impossible to make genuine progress in sanctification if the people only read good Christian books and stay in classrooms, but refuse to get out into the world as witnesses. These journeys are mutually interdependent: without progress in one, there can be no progress made in the other. (24)

According to *Journey*, "sanctification is growth into Christlikeness in all areas of life" (27); thus, it is immensely beneficial to have an accurate map of the journey from spiritual immaturity to maturity: "This is one of the lasting appeals of John Bunyan's classic book on sanctification, *Pilgrim's Progress*: it lays out a roadmap from conversion to heaven" (28). The author sets forth one of his motivations for attempting a taxonomy of sanctification: "I am seeking to organize the Bible's teachings

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on sanctification so that there is a place for everything and everything can be put in its place” (29). *Journey* identifies four distinct stages of salvation that correspond to a Christian’s past, present, and future experience:

Stage I) the process of calling/drawing; Stage II) the moment of regeneration, faith, and justification; Stage III) the process of sanctification; Stage IV) the moments of glorification (first of the soul at death, and then of the body at resurrection)...Thus, speaking in terms of time for a Christian in the process of sanctification, we have been saved, (Titus 3:5, Ephesians 2:8), we are being saved, (1 Corinthians 1:18, 1 Peter 1:8-9), and we will be saved (Romans 5:9-10). (40)

Regeneration is described as the “moment of spiritual clarity about Christ,” when “the glory of Christ specifically proclaimed in the gospel message of the cross and empty tomb becomes exceedingly attractive” (44). As a result, “the person is alive to truths to which up until that moment they had been utterly dead. They are made a ‘*new creation*’ (2 Corinthians 5:17) at this moment, ‘*born again*’ by the Spirit of God (John 3:3)” (44).<sup>1</sup>

### Romans 6 through 8 Being Central to *Journey’s* Treatise on Sanctification

According to *Journey*, “the basic idea of Romans 6 is that, since we are united with Christ, we have died to sin, and cannot live in it any longer (Romans 6:2-5)” (44). A regenerated person, a Christian, therefore has a

new status (dead to sin, alive to God in Christ) [that] should produce new thinking (I am dead to sin, I am alive to God), resulting in a new presentation of the body and its members in service to ever-increasing righteousness. (49)<sup>2</sup>

*Journey* then raises an interpretational issue with respect to Romans 7:

The bitterness of the struggle to walk in holiness in our mortal bodies is clearly highlighted in Romans chapter 7. Many commentators have struggled with Romans 7, wondering if Paul was speaking pre-conversion or post-conversion, or some other more eccentric option. (49-50)

Whether or not Paul was speaking before or after his conversion may, on the surface, seem to be a minor

doctrinal matter that could admittedly be understood from a variety of perspectives. However, *Journey’s* interpretation becomes a lynchpin in its overall thesis of sanctification:

One verse shows us that he is speaking as a converted, justified man, a man with a new status and a new nature when he says, “*as it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me*” (Romans 7:17)...The words “*no longer*” imply a decisive break with sin that can only have happened in Christ. (50)

*Journey* then continues to build on its implied conclusion that Romans 7 is the experience that a Christian should expect to have his entire life:

Through deeply ingrained habits, we still sin. And that is also the purpose of Romans 7—to show us that we will be struggling with sin the rest of our lives. The “*sin living in me*” has built up such strength of habit in the members of this “*body of death*” that we are fighting its pull at every single moment of our lives. (50)

JOURNEY CONCLUDES BY ESPOUSING  
TECHNIQUES OF GOAL SETTING, ASSESSMENT,  
AND RESOLUTIONS AS WAYS TO PUT ITS  
SANCTIFICATION MODEL INTO PRACTICE,  
THEREBY EXPOSING A SELF-CENTRIC  
UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTIAN MATURITY.

*Journey* particularly neglects to discuss the first six verses of chapter 7, concerning the two husbands, and does not distinguish the four laws and their correspondence with three different lives in the subsequent verses (vv. 22-23, 25; 8:2). Instead, *Journey* simply states that “Romans 7:14-25 shows the bitterness of the journey of sanctification” (50). Therefore, it seems that *Journey* consigns the regenerated believer to a wretched, bitter lot in the present age (during which sanctification is supposed to be taking place) and postpones the deliverance from the body of death to a future time.

Based on Romans 8, *Journey* returns to its explication of the process of sanctification, particularly emphasizing the role of the indwelling Spirit:

Romans chapter 8 speaks of the transcendent power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the consistent victory of the Spirit in the life of the true believer...

In between [verses 1 and 39], Paul speaks of the nature of the triumphant work of the Spirit in the life of the true Christian. The Spirit’s presence in our lives is the grounds for our assurance that we will not be condemned on Judgment Day. There is a clear contrast between the non-Christian life—dominated by the “*mind of the flesh*,” which cannot please God, cannot obey God, cannot live

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for God, and cannot love God—and the Christian life, led by the Spirit of God (Romans 8:5-8).

The central act of the Holy Spirit in sanctification is to lead the Christian into battle against sin...Romans 8:13 may be the key verse in the Bible on the Christian's responsibility and victory in the bitter ongoing struggle with sin. The blending of the Spirit's power ("if by the Spirit") and the believer's responsibility ("you put to death the deeds of the body") is clear. And the stakes couldn't be higher, for the verse contrasts that daily battle with the opening statement, "if you live according to the flesh you will die," then Paul says that only those who are led to put sin to death by the Spirit are truly children of God; the word *for* connecting verse 13 and verse 14 supports this strong conclusion: if you are not led by the Spirit into battle against sin, you are not a child of God. (51-52)

### Sanctification Requiring the Collaboration of the Believer and God

*Journey* concludes its description of the process of sanctification, as the third stage in our great salvation by emphasizing the "mysterious collaboration" of the believer and God (52). According to *Journey*,

A vital passage on this collaboration is Philippians 2:12-13...The human side of sanctification is intense labor, working out salvation in fear and trembling. It is a serious struggle, a fight against the world, the flesh and the devil, and as far as the believer is faithful in this struggle, he will make good progress in sanctification. Yet he does not struggle alone; rather it is God who is at work in him to will and to do according to God's good purpose. Sanctification is a collaboration, the believer and God working side by side, but with priority given to God's power, apart from which we will certainly fail. (52)

### A Series of Today's, Used Well or Poorly—History Being Composed of Moments

A chapter entitled "Graphing Christian Progress" is the most interesting section of *Journey*, where a series of two-dimensional (XY) graphs is used "to capture the variety of experiences that the people of God have in sanctification" (57). The basic chart consists of a y-axis (vertical) labeled "Righteousness" and an x-axis (horizontal) labeled "Time." *Journey* identifies two types of righteousness—positional, or imputed, righteousness and practical righteousness—correlating them respectively to *Journey's* understanding of Luther's concept of alien and proper righteousness (63). On the chart 100% righteousness corresponds to "Christ's perfect righteousness, imputed or credited to our account by faith at the moment of justification" (62). Justification is represented on the charts by a dotted line that jumps from zero to 100% at the time of

conversion. Practical righteousness "is our actual, daily heart obedience to God's laws" (62). It is depicted by a line on the chart that rises and falls, representing "our daily struggle with practical righteousness: with moment-by-moment obedience to the Law of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, as well as occasional lapses into sin" (64).

The x-axis represents time, with three key events: birth, conversion, and physical death. *Journey* says that "as Christians, we should think of time as opportunity to grow in righteousness" (64). *Journey* goes on to categorize the life trajectory of the Christian experience with seven illustrative varieties of sanctification curves: (1) consistent abundant fruitfulness, (2) late bloomer, (3) the thief on the cross, (4) restored from great sin, (5) forsaken first love, (6) mired in mediocrity, and (7) ultimate discipline for sin (68-79). Each of these graphs shows a gap between the Christian's final state of sanctification at death and 100% perfection, a gap that is closed by an upward vertical line. *Journey's* explanation is as follows:

At death, the person's soul is separated from their physical body and is immediately with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). At that moment, the soul is instantly made perfect, one hundred percent righteous in actuality, just as they were seen by God in Christ all their lives from justification to that moment. This is glorification...Hebrews 12:23 speaks of the inhabitants of the heavenly Zion as "the spirits of righteous men made perfect." Disembodied perfected spirits are presently with the Lord, and so will all dead Christians be until the great resurrection day, when the body will be as conformed to Christ's resurrection body as the soul was conformed to Christ's perfect soul. In this condition of perfect glorification, we will spend eternity. (68)

*Journey* does not ascribe any punishment or negative consequence to differences in these gaps; nevertheless, *Journey* does say those who progress more faithfully in the present age will have a greater capacity for heavenly joy in eternity:

Whatever distance there was still to travel in our pressing on to perfection in Christ, God will instantly perform for us in glorification. But whatever distance we did travel will be reflected in our capacity for heavenly joy. Then and only then will we completely realize how eternally significant was our progress in sanctification.

Why do I say that? Because I believe the progress we will have made will affect our eternal joy: the greater our sanctification on earth, the greater our enjoyment of Christ in eternity...If we were satisfied with a little of Christ on earth, that small measure will be reflected and perfected in heaven. If we pressed on to an ever-greater measure of holy joy in Christ, that larger measure will be

reflected in heaven. Not a single redeemed person will be dissatisfied by his or her heavenly portion, but not all will have equal experience of heavenly joy. By their earthly sacrifices in personal holiness and other-worldly ambitions, some will soar above others in heavenly capacity to savor the infinite greatness of God in Christ. (466-467)

*Journey* concludes this section on graphing Christian progress by saying,

We could probably do a graph for individual areas of sanctification such as personal prayer, Bible reading, kindness to our spouses, faithfulness in evangelism, attitude during suffering, purity in battling lust, humility, etc.... The curves may well serve a useful purpose in stimulating us to growth and warning us against sin. (78-79)

This conclusion hints at a method of focusing on improving in specific areas of sanctification by setting objectives, tracking progress, and measuring results, which *Journey* develops more fully in one of its final chapters.

### Knowledge, Faith, Character, and Action

According to *Journey*, the pathway to Christian maturity consists of factual and experiential spiritual information (knowledge), assurance and commitment to spiritual truth (faith), internal nature conformed to Christ (character), and external lifestyle of habitual obedience (action) (415). *Journey* sets forth a simple and actionable mnemonic of these steps—*know, believe, be, and do* (461).

### Knowledge—of the Scriptures and from Human Life

According to *Journey*, the first aspect of knowledge, factual knowledge, is gained from actively interacting with the content and facts of the Bible. The author of *Journey* is a strong advocate of Scripture memorization and, in another of his publications, he provides a daily procedure for memorizing entire chapters and books. In the introduction of that booklet he relates his systematic approach to sanctification:

Growth in the Lord is called “sanctification,” the process by which we become more and more like Jesus Christ and more and more separated from the world. Jesus Christ says that happens by the Word of God: “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.” (John 17:17) However, the Word of God must enter us through our MIND—through our understanding—in order to change our hearts. Thus

we are to meditate deeply on Scripture in order to understand it better, so that our hearts may be changed... There is no more useful discipline to this careful process of verse by verse meditation than memorization. (*Memorization*)

According to *Journey*, a constant interaction with the contents of the Bible results in the renewing of the mind:

How is our mind to be thus renewed? It is only by consistent immersion in the word of God. It is the unique role of the written word of God, as illuminated and applied by the indwelling Spirit, to change the way we think, and therefore the way we live. As we’ve already noted, the human mind is the battleground between the Spirit and Satan, and between the Spirit and the flesh. (95)

The second aspect of knowledge, experiential knowledge, consists of human life experience. *Journey* illustrates this with several biblical examples, including Paul, who testified that he had learned the secret of contentment. Davis says,

The secret of Christian contentment in “any and every situation” can only

be learned by experience, by walking with Christ through all circumstances. The answer to the question, “What is the secret of Christian contentment?” is perhaps unsatisfying to an immature Christian: “*I can do everything through him who gives me strength*” (Philippians 4:13). That person might say, “Of course, I know that that’s the right answer. But I am still frequently discontent, both in times of plenty and in times of want.” Not until that person learns by personal experience how Christ gives strength for Christian contentment in any and every situation will they be mature in this vital area. (117)

*Journey* concludes the section on knowledge by saying,

Grow up by knowledge! Develop an insatiable appetite for the Word of God and then follow where it leads. As you do, watch for the Lord to lead you into ever-increasingly challenging circumstances to train you for his glory. This knowledge primes the pump for all following steps in Christian sanctification. (124-125)

### Faith—Growing for Sanctification

Faith is the second step in Davis’s cycle of sanctification. According to *Journey*, faith in its initial stage is sufficient for justification but needs further growth for sanctification:

ACCORDING TO *JOURNEY*, CHRISTIAN MATURITY CONSISTS OF FACTUAL AND EXPERIENTIAL SPIRITUAL INFORMATION, ASSURANCE AND COMMITMENT TO SPIRITUAL TRUTH, INTERNAL NATURE CONFORMED TO CHRIST, AND EXTERNAL LIFESTYLE OF HABITUAL OBEDIENCE.

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Like every living thing in God's creation, faith is designed to grow. The growth of our faith is essential to our ongoing sanctification...Faith is comprised of five elements: The certainty of invisible, spiritual realities: past, present and future; the assurance of things hoped for, both in this world and the next; the conviction of personal sin; active reliance on Christ as all-sufficient Savior, provider, and protector; [and] reception of spiritual guidance. (130-131)

### **Character—Loving, Desiring, Choosing, Thinking, Feeling, and Being**

Character is the third step in Davis's cycle of sanctification and includes affection, desire, will, thought, emotions, and virtues:

Christian character is 1) loving what Christ loves and hating what Christ hates; 2) desiring what Christ would desire; 3) choosing what Christ would choose and rejecting what Christ would reject; 4) having the mind of Christ, so thinking his thoughts; 5) feeling what Christ would feel; 6) being what Christ is in his nature. (201)

*Journey's* concept of a mature Christian comes into focus in this step. With respect to the will, *Journey* says,

A mature Christian has learned by faith to follow consistently the example of Christ by saying to God, "Not my will, but yours be done." The foundation of the right exercise of the will is the new heart that God put in at conversion. By that new heart, the will of the mature Christian makes its choices based on an ever-increasing database of scriptural and experiential knowledge, empowered by faith in the presence and promises of God, and in line with the affections and desires of his new heart. (237-238)

Scripture is again emphasized concerning emotion:

Because...Jesus displayed perfect emotions, a healthy emotional life is part of spiritual maturity. This includes such wide-ranging emotions as joy, sorrow, fear, compassion, and zeal. The indwelling Spirit works these emotions in us as appropriate, healing us from the extremes of either emotional deadness or of emotionalism. He teaches us to address faulty emotions with Scripture, especially training us to preach truth to our hearts until our emotions are rightly aligned with those of Christ. (262)

**I**n the context of providing "a thorough list of virtues to which Christians are called" and "a thorough list of traits which Christians are called to reject," *Journey* says,

The indwelling spirit is the skillful craftsman who knows how to pull from your "character toolbox" whatever virtue the situation calls for. Much of the Spirit's training

of a person's responses comes by experience...The quest for perfect character will be ongoing until the day we die. (266-267)

### **Action—Fleeing the Habits of Sin and Presenting the Body unto Habitual Obedience**

According to *Journey*, the fourth step in the cycle of sanctification is action (415). Davis says,

A spiritually mature Christian will lead an active lifestyle of **habitual obedience** to the commands of God... Sanctification (holiness) is both negative and positive, consisting of things we **must not** do in the body, and things we **must** do. Concerning things we must not do, I will speak of purity in four key arenas: sexual purity, speech purity, relational purity, and purity in lawful pleasures. I will also address the negative topic of how a mature Christian deals with their own sin, how we must respond when we do what we ought not to do, or when we fail in some responsibility. (273-274)

*Journey* has a number of notable statements that both motivate action and provide details of its concept of a mature Christian in action. Concerning purity from sin, *Journey* says,

A mature Christian understands that the Christian life is warfare against sins, against specific practices that manifest the sin nature, and that are forbidden by God. The negative aspect of holiness is clearly spelled out in these prohibitions, and a mature Christian puts these sins to death.

...Christian maturity consists in a life increasingly free from these evil deeds of the flesh. (307-308)

The mystery of sanctification is that, while it is God who cleanses us through Christ, yet we are most certainly required to purify ourselves as well. We are to be active in fleeing pollution and purifying our minds, hearts, and bodies from habits of sin already engraved in our lifestyles. (310)

**C**oncerning dealing with sin, *Journey* says, "Basically, dealing properly with sin involves a vertical and horizontal aspect: vertically, the Christian must deal with God over his sin; horizontally, the Christian must deal with others that the sin has affected" (325). *Journey* describes the worship rendered by a mature Christian in practical ways, all of which emphasize the components of Scripture and prayer. Concerning private worship, *Journey* says,

The foundation of private worship is regular intake and meditation on the word of God. The key to this is the daily quiet time, a time regularly set aside for spiritual disciplines...A mature Christian lives a life of personal

worship to God. He rises early in the morning to praise and give thanks to God for his salvation. He pores over Scripture to find ways to praise God, and he personally delights in what the Scripture teaches him of the nature, names, acts, and purposes of God. His private worship life is the foundation of his public worship life, for he is no hypocrite, no whitewashed tomb, doing everything for others to see. (336-337)

According to *Journey*, prayer and the Scriptures should likewise be part of the daily life of a mature Christian, and be at the core of spiritual disciplines:

As the mature Christian makes his way through the day, he or she is calling to mind memorized Scriptures, meditating on biblical truth and stimulating himself to worship. She is praying “without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and much of that prayer is worship and thanksgiving to the God who never changes. In this way, the mature Christian seeks to practice the presence of Christ all day long and to give him glory. (338-339)

From a heart prepared for worship comes a river of sacrificial praise, in a wide variety of actions and at various times: alone in the morning quiet time, throughout the day informally, and during corporate worship. Like everything else in the Christian life, this rich offering of worship is empowered and directed by the indwelling Holy Spirit, and it is deeply satisfying to the Christian. (341)

Concerning relationships, *Journey* particularly emphasizes obedience to God in marriage and family, because these relationships are under Satan’s attack:

Mature Christian husbands and wives will give concentrated daily attention to their marriages, seeking to fulfill their Christ-ordained responsibilities. Without sweet, Spirit-induced harmony at home, it will be impossible for the husband and wife fully to walk in all the good works God has for each of them, and they will be increasingly disqualified from his service in vital areas. But if by the Spirit they are fruitfully obedient here, God will put their home on display as a powerful gospel outpost, a way-station of rest, a launching pad of Kingdom weapons (children) for generations to come. (357)

*Journey* speaks of building the Body and the church by ministering to the believers:

The most important work going on in the world today is

the building of the Church of Jesus Christ. Spiritually mature Christians recognize this, and spend their lives in works of service to build up the Body of Christ. Our ministry to other Christians follows two basic patterns—specific good works done as a pattern governed by spiritual gifts, and general good works all Christians do for one another. This is the love God commands for us to show to one another, by which the world will know we are Christ’s disciples (John 13:35). (378)

According to *Journey*, a mature Christian is active in evangelism and a faithful steward of time, money, and his physical body:

Every mature Christian who is not called to go to a distant unreached people group still embraces his responsibility to assist those who are....

A mature Christian will constantly be challenging himself to see if the Lord can use him overseas. (383)

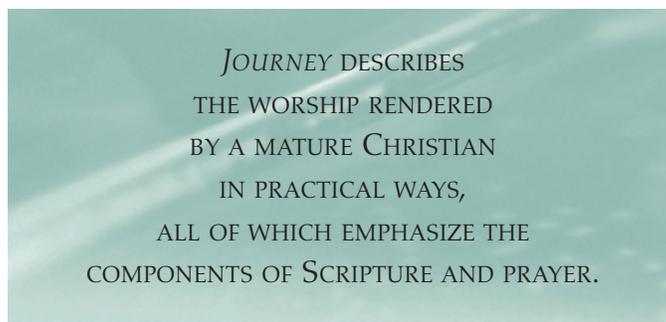
A mature Christian “sends it on ahead” by investing in eternity. He makes sacrifices in his present daily life—with both necessities

and pleasures—so he can store up treasure for eternity. He invests sacrificially in his local church, as well as in other ministries that are advancing the Kingdom of God...A mature Christian will constantly guard their heart from wandering from the faith through love of money and possessions. (397)

A mature Christian looks on staying in good physical condition, eating well, and exercising consistently as a part of the responsibility of a good steward. Many American Christians are given to gluttony, and to the obesity that comes as a result. Also, due to the ironic busyness of a basically sedentary life, many do not make time for regular exercise, and so get out of condition. (399)

*Journey* presents a scripturally derived theology of work (406-411) and reaffirms the Puritan doctrine of “the sacredness of all honorable work” (412); thus, a mature Christian glorifies God by how he works:

A mature Christian seeks to glorify God with all his labor, whether in menial daily chores or in a career. A mature Christian will feel the pleasure of God in all his tasks: whether a scientist doing an experiment for a pharmaceutical company, or a janitor cleaning a toilet in a public washroom, or a journalist writing an article for a newspaper, or a missionary learning a language, or a pastor



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preparing a sermon, or a college student studying for an exam, or a housewife cleaning the dishes. All godly work is sacred. (414)

### Making Resolutions and Pursuing Holiness for the Sake of Heavenly Joy

*Journey* concludes with some practical suggestions to individual Christians, parents, Christian workers, and counselors for applying its sanctification map. Prior to listing thirty-three suggested resolutions for individual Christians (readers are encouraged to identify even more or different ones with the aid of the Holy Spirit), *Journey* espouses the helpfulness of setting goals and trying to achieve them:

Every New Year's Day, thousands of Americans resume the habit of making (and sadly, breaking) New Year's resolutions. But while that process can be tragic for someone still enslaved to sin, it is helpful for making progress in sanctification. Even if one doesn't go to the formal length of writing out specific resolutions and seeking to keep them, yet a holy plan for godliness driven by zeal for the glory of God is a powerful tool for this journey. (453)

While not discounting the benefits of such a system, I must point out the futility of this approach through the experience of others who have sought perfection through methods. Benjamin Franklin, for example, said the following:

I conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wish'd to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into...But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employ'd in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason...Contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. (71)

Franklin's method included a regimented daily and seasonal time schedule with cyclical focus on improvement in thirteen specific virtues. For example, the third virtue was "ORDER. Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time" (71). Notwithstanding Franklin's good intentions, it is hard to know whether he was a regenerated Christian (His thirteenth virtue goal was "HUMILITY. Imitate Jesus and Socrates" (72), as if these two persons are in any way equal patterns of humility!).

### A Manual for Pursuing Christian Perfection

*Journey* is grounded in the fundamental items of the com-

mon Christian faith. A reader will quickly realize *Journey's* explicit and implicit acknowledgment of the Bible as the inspired Word of God; the Trinity (92-93); the person and work of Christ, including His incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection; the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; and Christ's second coming (282). *Journey* defines clearly the steps of salvation, beginning with justification by faith in the redeeming work of Christ on the cross. *Journey* is particularly rich in its frequent and voluminous references to Scripture, including references to nearly every book of the New Testament and numerous references to the Old Testament. For example, *Journey* refers to the four Gospels over two hundred fifty times, to Romans and Hebrews over one hundred times each, and to the heart of Paul's Epistles (Galatians through Colossians) over two hundred times. There are over one hundred references to Psalms and close to fifty references respectively to Proverbs and to James. *Journey* takes every opportunity to encourage the constant, frequent, and in-depth reading, study, and even memorization of the Scriptures and never fails to connect and apply the Scriptures to its themes and topics.

Speaking inclusively concerning the church and avoiding sectarianly charged language, *Journey* makes frequent mention of the church, the church of Jesus Christ, and the Body of Christ. The local church is referred to various times particularly in the context of personal participation in ministry, financial giving, preaching, pastoring, shepherding, and exercising the spiritual gifts. *Journey* calls the distinction of clergy and laity "an unbiblical dichotomy" and commends Martin Luther for emphasizing the "priesthood of all believers." (411-412).

*Journey* must also be commended for an ambitious, all-encompassing, yet logical treatment of the subject of sanctification. It notably includes not only the more obvious aspects of sanctification—holiness and perfection—but also the less oft-referred aspects, such as maturity, growth, transformation, and conformation. *Journey* goes deeper by associating sanctification with the nature of the person of the Christian, making it something more than a mere recipe of outward Christian behavior. It is also balanced by the expectation that the outward actions will confirm the maturity of the inward person.

Commendation can be extended to the many practical suggestions put forth by *Journey* for improvement in practical daily holiness and righteousness. This practical and applied aspect extends to a Christian's individual habits and behavior, family life, and redeeming the time for both work and leisure. *Journey* rightfully identifies habitual sins that ensnare Christians and makes suggestions for dealing with them. In this line *Journey* almost becomes, similar to the Epistle of James, a manual for pursuing practical Christian perfection.

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## Incentivized by God's Good Pleasure, Not Merely Our Personal Joy and Benefit

However, *Journey's* motivation for an ongoing, present pursuit of sanctification, premised on a future increased capacity to enjoy eternal pleasure, is misleading. While it is natural to read the Bible from man's perspective and for man's benefit, the God-breathed, Holy-Spirit-borne Scriptures should be interpreted first from the point of view of God's will, not the will and pleasure of man (cf. 2 Pet. 1:20-21). Witness Lee states in a footnote on 2 Peter 1:21, "Man's will, desire, and wish, with his thought and exposition, were not the source from which any prophecy came; the source was God, by whose Holy Spirit men were borne, as a ship is borne by the wind, to speak out the will, desire, and wish of God" (Recovery Version, note 2). Therefore, as with any truth in the Bible, sanctification should be considered first from God's perspective.

Sanctification should be motivated by a sense of God's good pleasure, His will, His wish, and His desire (cf. Eph. 1:9; Phil. 2:13). Ephesians 1:4-5 links our being chosen to be holy and being predestinated to be matured sons positionally and dispositionally to God's good pleasure: Only God is holy; holiness is His nature (cf. 1 Pet. 1:15-16). It makes God happy to have sanctified and mature sons who match and express Him in His nature of holiness. Therefore, the motivation for Christian maturity should not be self- or man-centric; it must be God-centric, sourced from God's will, wish, desire, and good pleasure and returning to Him for His satisfaction and delight. Of course, when God is happy, we also will be joyful, satisfied, and delighted.

### The Normal Christian Experience Needing to Be That of Romans 8, Not Romans 7

*Journey* says concerning Romans 7:24 that "God will rescue us from the body of death through Jesus Christ! But in the meantime, while we live in the mortal body, we struggle bitterly" (51). However, the experience of the normal Christian should not be that of struggling but of doing everything (living, walking, setting the mind, being led, praying, etc.) in and by "the Spirit...with our spirit" (8:16). The subjective positive evidence of such an experience is "life and peace" (v. 6), a condition attainable in this age.

The body of death referred to in 7:24 is called "the body of sin" in 6:6 and "the flesh of sin" in 8:3. Romans 6:6-7 says, "Knowing this, that our old man has been crucified

with Him in order that the body of sin might be annulled, that we should no longer serve sin as slaves; for he who has died is justified from sin." Speaking concerning verse 6, *Journey* says that "our sinful identity in Adam died when we came to faith in Christ, but we still have the body of sin that we had when we were the old person" (285). *Journey* agrees that the crucifixion of the old man is an accomplished fact, but how should we interpret the phrase *that the body of sin might be annulled* (*annulled* is translated "done away with" in NIV)?

Witness Lee has some helpful commentary on these verses. His footnote on *the body of sin* says that this is

the body indwelt, occupied, corrupted, possessed, utilized, and enslaved by sin, so that it does sinful things...The body of sin is not the sinning person but the

sinning instrument utilized by the old man to express himself by committing sins, thereby causing the body of sin to become the flesh. (Recovery Version, v. 6, note 4)

A footnote on *might be annulled* says,

Because the old man has been crucified with Christ, the body that had been utilized by him as the instrument for sinning now has nothing to do; it is unemployed, jobless. Thus, we have been freed from sin (vv. 18-22) and no longer need to be under the bondage of sin to serve sin as slaves." (Lee, Recovery Version, v. 6, note 5)

We must therefore conclude that Romans 6 is referring to the normal experience of a Christian today.

In the path of sanctification Romans 8 should be the experiential continuation of Romans 6, but the question of where to put Romans 7 in the line of this experience is crucial. As Witness Lee states in *Life-study of Romans*,

The issue of sanctification is life eternal (6:22). Thus, Romans 8 follows Romans 6. Romans 6 concludes with sanctification unto eternal life; Romans 8 begins with the Spirit of life...

What the Apostle Paul means in Romans 6 is that, on the one hand, we are in the fact of having been crucified and resurrected with Christ and that, on the other hand, we have the divine life. That fact that we have been crucified and resurrected with Christ has transferred us out of Adam into Christ. The divine life enables us to live a sanctified life. We need to see that we have been transferred.

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Based upon our seeing, we reckon ourselves as such by believing. Then we need to cooperate with the divine life by rejecting sin and by presenting ourselves and our members to God. We do have a position to reject sin, for now we are “not under law but under grace” (6:14). (137-138)

Where then does Romans 7 fit, and why is it there? Lee goes on to say,

In Romans 5 and 6 Paul explained clearly that we are now under grace, not under law...Because in 6:14 Paul said, “you are not under law,” he must write another chapter to explain how we are not under law. Without Romans 7 we could never be clear about this matter. Although the law continues to exist, we are not under it; we have nothing to do with it any longer. Has God recalled the law? Has He annulled or abolished it? The answer to these questions is no. How then can we say that we are not under the law? How can we be outside of the law and discharged from it? How can we be freed from the law? The answer to these questions is found in Romans 7. (139-140)

### The Divine Life and the Corporate Building Being Major Lines of the Scriptures

*Journey* prioritizes scriptural and human knowledge but neglects the central role of the divine life in regeneration and in sanctification. While repentance (a change of mind) is a crucial step in the initial step of becoming a “true believer,” the new birth is altogether a matter of receiving another life, the divine, eternal (zoe) life of God. The children of God are born of God by receiving the Son, who is life, to be their life (cf. John 1:12-13; 1 John 5:12; Col. 3:4). The enjoyment of this life is certainly a future expectation—we will have right to the tree of zoe (Rev. 22:14)—but it is also for the believer’s present experience and enjoyment (John 6:47; 10:10; Rom. 6:4). The divine life is distinct from the human, natural (psuche) soul-life (cf. John 12:25), and the present physical (bios) life (cf. Luke 8:14; 2 Tim. 2:4).

### Romans 8 Speaking of the Law of the Spirit of Life and the Dispensing of Life (Zoe) into the Believer’s Tripartite Being

Romans 8 specifically identifies and locates the divine, eternal life within the believer in his progression from regeneration to glorification. Verse 16 indicates that as regenerated believers, the (Holy) Spirit Himself is with our (human) spirit witnessing that we are children of God. Verse 10 says, “If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is life because of righteousness,” indicating that zoe is in our human spirit. Our spirit became life when we were born again at the time of regeneration. Verse 6 says that the mind set on the spirit is zoe, implying a dispensing of zoe from the spirit to the mind,

thereby causing the mind to be life. Minding the things of the Spirit and setting the mind on the spirit must be a continuous exercise during the entire Christian life, an exercise that begins by our contacting the Lord with our regenerated human spirit; otherwise, we will attempt to not mind the things of the flesh by relying on the mind set on the flesh (vv. 5-6), the source of Franklin’s methodological weakness. Verse 11 says, “If the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you.” Although this corresponds to the step of glorification at the time of the future resurrection, a believer can have a foretaste of life (zoe) enlivening his or her body to carry out God’s will on the earth today, contrary to the body of death that is weak in acting to please God. This victory occurs not by will power but by “zoe power.”

There is no reference in *Journey* to Romans 8:2, which is the key to a Christian’s experience of sanctification: “The law of the Spirit of life has freed me in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and of death.” This verse is crucial because it relates zoe with the Spirit and with a spiritual law. From the context of Romans 8 the law of life is related to the Spirit with our spirit. This law of life is very different from the enslaving law of sin and of death. The law of sin is “in my members” and “with the flesh,” hence, in the body (7:23, 25). Verse 23 also mentions “the law of my mind” that delights in the law of God and wills to do good (vv. 21-22) but finds itself unable to do so. Hence, Romans 7 and 8 speak of four laws, one outside of man—the law of God—and three within man, each related to man’s three parts—the law of sin and of death (in the fallen body, the flesh); the law of my mind, with its desire, affection, and intention (in the soul); and the law of the Spirit of life (in the spirit). These three laws also correspond to three persons—Satan in our flesh, Christ as the Spirit in our spirit, and the independence-seeking self in our soul. This is reminiscent of Genesis 2, where man had the tree of life available to him but instead ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In Romans 7 Paul was attempting to do *good*, based on his *knowledge* of God’s law, but found himself doing *evil* because he was altogether in the wrong tree, which led to death. Romans 8 describes the normal experience of one who has been saved back to the tree of life and is growing from a child, to a son, and ultimately to an heir (cf. vv. 16-17, 19).

### First Corinthians 3 Connecting Growth in Life with God’s Building

First Corinthians provides a different context involving Paul’s connection of spiritual maturity to the three parts of man and to the purpose of maturity—the building of God. Paul speaks of “a soulish man” and “the spiritual man” (2:14-15), and he contrasts “spiritual men” to

“infants in Christ,” who are fleshy and fleshly and not capable of taking in solid food (3:1-3). Paul wanted to speak God’s wisdom in a mystery to those who are full-grown (2:6-7), that is, “the things which God has prepared for those who love Him,” which involve the things of man and the things of God, even the deep things of God (vv. 9-10). To speak, see, and interpret these spiritual things, spoken and interpreted with spiritual words, requires the spirit of man and the Spirit of God (vv. 11-13). Therefore, a mature Christian is one who thinks, speaks, moves, acts, walks, and lives in the mingled spirit. An immature Christian is one who lives and acts in and by the flesh, or in and by the soul.

In 1 Corinthians 3:6-16 Paul goes further to relate growth to building, juxtaposing agricultural and architectural terms. The believers are God’s farm, or cultivated land. Growth is caused by God, based on the planting and watering by God’s fellow workers. This farm is a building (the temple of God) with a foundation (Jesus Christ), laid by the apostle, upon which all the believers can build. The “fruits” of the farm become the building materials in one of two categories—transformed materials (gold, silver, precious stones) or natural materials (wood, grass, stubble) (v. 12). Concerning the latter category, Witness Lee comments,

JOURNEY PRESENTS A SANCTIFICATION  
MODEL THAT BEGINS WITH KNOWLEDGE  
AND CONCLUDES WITH HUMAN RESOLUTIONS  
AND EFFORT TO PRODUCE CONSTANTLY  
IMPROVING, IF NEVER PERFECT,  
INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIANS.

Wood, grass, and stubble signify the knowledge, realization, and attainments that come from the believers’ natural background (such as Judaism or other religions, philosophy, or culture) and the natural way of living (which is mainly in the soul and is the natural life). Wood, in contrast to gold, signifies the nature of the natural man; grass, in contrast to silver, signifies the fallen man, the man of the flesh (1 Pet. 1:24), who has not been redeemed or regenerated by Christ; and stubble, in contrast to precious stones, signifies the work and living that issue from an earthen source and have not been transformed by the Holy Spirit. All these worthless materials are the product of the believers’ natural man together with what they have collected from their background. In God’s economy these materials are fit only to be burned (1 Cor. 3:13). (Recovery Version, v. 12, note 3)

The divine life of God produces matured believers who are not merely perfect individual specimens but are an integrated part of God’s corporate building, which is the church as the house and temple of God in this age (1 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 2:21-22) and the city, New Jerusalem, in the coming ages (Rev. 3:12). The Corinthian believers in their

immaturity were in division and confusion (1 Cor. 1:10). Thus, the true test of Christian maturity is the building of God. A believer who neglects God’s building or builds with the natural materials “will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (3:15).

*Journey* rightly focuses on sanctification in the Christian journey. However, it presents a sanctification model that begins with knowledge (albeit scriptural and experiential) and concludes with human resolutions and effort to produce constantly improving, if never perfect, individual Christians, who are motivated by the expectation of a joyful eternal destiny. This model fails to bring believers into the experience of the divine life on the line of the tree of life, as the element, source, and power for growth, transformation, and building. It also misdirects them to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which will cause them to suffer loss by building through self-effort with natural and fleshly materials. May we embrace the light concerning God’s purpose and divine way of sanctification through His life to be transformed and built up into a corporate mutual habitation of God and man for His satisfaction and glory!

by James Fite

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This description of regeneration seems to emphasize a moment of mental clarity and enlightenment in knowledge as a result of God’s word, instead of stating unequivocally that the new birth is the receiving of another life, the divine life of God.

<sup>2</sup>*Journey*, in its discussion of Romans 6, omits any reference to the effect of baptism in transferring the believer out of Adam into Christ and into His death to walk in the newness of the eternal, divine life (zoe) (v. 3).

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