

## BECOMING LIKE GOD: AN EVANGELICAL DOCTRINE OF THEOSIS

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In one of his letters Athanasius, the fourth-century defender of the faith, made his famous statement that the Son of God became man “that he might deify us in himself.”<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere he wrote similarly that Christ “was made man that we might be made God.”<sup>2</sup> This is the doctrine of theosis, also known as deification, divinization or, as some prefer, participation in God.<sup>3</sup>

While the concept of theosis has roots in the ante-Nicene period, it is not an antiquated historical curiosity. The idea of divinization, of redeemed human nature somehow participating in the very life of God, is found to a surprising extent throughout Christian history, although it is practically unknown to the majority of Christians (and even many theologians) in the west. In Orthodox theology, however, it is the controlling doctrine. Furthermore “it is not too much to say that the divinization of humanity is the central theme, chief aim, basic purpose, or primary religious ideal of Orthodoxy.”<sup>4</sup> With the growing interest in Eastern Orthodox/evangelical rapprochement it is essential that theosis studies be pursued. Evangelicals may receive considerable benefit from a clear understanding and judicious appropriation of the doctrine. This is so particularly in light of the crying need for a robust, Biblical theology of the Christian life that will refute and replace the plethora of false spiritualities plaguing Church and society.

Daniel Clendenin has introduced our topic in a very helpful article in this *Journal*<sup>5</sup> and in his book on Eastern Orthodox Christianity.<sup>6</sup> In my supplement to his work I will draw upon different materials, both primary and secondary. After presenting some of the key ideas and proponents of divinization theology I will offer an introductory critique of the concept.

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<sup>1</sup> Athanasius, *Letter 60*, to Adelphius, 4. See also §§ 3, 8 (NPNF, 2d Series 4.575–578).

<sup>2</sup> Athanasius *On the Incarnation* 54 (NPNF, 2d Series 4.65).

<sup>3</sup> A. M. Allchin entitles his book on theosis *Participation in God: A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Tradition* (Wilton: Morehouse-Barlow, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> D. B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 120.

<sup>5</sup> D. B. Clendenin, “Partakers of Divinity: The Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis,” *JETS* 37/3 (1994) 365–379.

<sup>6</sup> Clendenin, *Eastern*.

## I. BIBLICAL THEMES

Two verses, more than any others, provide the basis for theosis theology: Gen 1:26 and 2 Pet 1:4. The Genesis text speaks of men and women as created in the image and likeness of God. The Greek fathers taught that, in the fall, humanity lost the likeness but retained the image. In their view, according to G. L. Bray,

the Christian life is best conceived as the restoration of the lost likeness to those who have been redeemed in Christ. This is a work of the Holy Spirit, who communicates to us the energies of God himself, so that we may become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). The energies of God radiate from his essence and share its nature; but it must be understood that the deified person retains his personal identity and is not absorbed into the essence of God, which remains for ever [*sic*] hidden from his eyes.<sup>7</sup>

Whether the focus is placed on the image or the likeness of God being restored, or whether one sees these terms as synonymous, the concept of the Christian's reintegration into the life of God remains central in all understandings of theosis.

Peter writes in his second epistle that our Lord's "divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness," so that through his promises we "may participate in [literally, "become sharers (*koinōnoi*) of"] the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Pet 1:4). This text is quoted extensively by divinization writers, who do not believe, as Karl Barth does, that Peter is speaking of nothing more than "the practical fellowship of Christians with God and on this basis the conformity of their acts with the divine nature."<sup>8</sup>

There are numerous other Biblical texts that provide, in the view of theosis theologians, Scriptural grounding for the doctrine. The high-priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17, that all may be one as the Father and Son are one (vv. 11, 21–23), is frequently utilized, as is the Pauline theme of the Christian life being a life "in Christ."<sup>9</sup> Many texts in Ephesians and Colossians are drawn upon, especially those speaking of Christ as the image of God (Col 1:15–18) and Christians as those who put on the image of the heavenly man being renewed in the likeness of God (Eph 3:16–19; 4:13–15; cf. also 1 Cor 15:49).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> G. L. Bray, "Deification," *New Dictionary of Theology* (ed. S. B. Ferguson, D. F. Wright and J. I. Packer; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988) 189.

<sup>8</sup> K. Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics 4.4, Lecture Fragments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 28.

<sup>9</sup> T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1993) 231. See also R. Williams, "Deification," *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (ed. G. S. Wakefield; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 106.

<sup>10</sup> Other theosis texts are Gal 2:20 and 1 John 4:16. See P. Nellas, *Deification in Christ* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1987) 23–25, 35–39, 127, 139.

## II. PATRISTIC DEVELOPMENT

As with most areas of theology, the doctrine of theosis began to develop indirectly at first and then became more explicit. Irenaeus, writing in the latter years of the second century, closely connects Christ's incarnation with human redemption, the Holy Spirit, immortality and communion with God. He writes that

the Lord . . . has redeemed us through His own blood, giving His soul for our souls, and His flesh for our flesh, and has also poured out the Spirit of the Father for the union and communion of God and man, imparting indeed God to men by means of the Spirit, and, on the other hand, attaching man to God by His own incarnation, and bestowing upon us at His coming immortality durably and truly, by means of communion with God.<sup>11</sup>

According to Irenaeus the Son of God determined "that He would become the Son of man for this purpose, that man also might become the Son of God."<sup>12</sup>

The author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* writes in the second or third century: "Do not wonder that a man may become an imitator of God. He can, if he is willing." By loving God and neighbor, especially by distributing to the needy, he "becomes a god to those who receive [his benefits]: he is an imitator of God."<sup>13</sup>

Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315–367) writes more explicitly. In the incarnation "the assumption of our nature was no advancement for God, but His willingness to lower Himself is our promotion, for He did not resign His divinity but conferred divinity on man." Christ sought "to raise humanity to divinity." While on earth, Jesus taught his disciples "to believe Him the Son of God, and exhorted [them] to preach him the Son of Man; man saying and doing all that belongs to God; God saying and doing all that belongs to man."<sup>14</sup> The object for Christ's continuance in the incarnation was "that man might become God."<sup>15</sup>

Deification played a major role in the Christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries since, it was argued, Christ must be God if what he imparts to us is divine life. Rowan Williams states that

this made it necessary for the Eastern Christian world from the Council of Nicaea onwards to distinguish carefully between Christ's "natural" sonship and our incorporation into it by will and grace. Maximus the Confessor, in the seventh century, claimed that we may be by grace all that God is by nature; but this occurs only through God's free self-emptying in the incarnation, enabling

<sup>11</sup> Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 6.1.1 (ANF 1.527).

<sup>12</sup> Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.10.2 (ANF 1.424).

<sup>13</sup> *Diogn.* 10 (ANF 1.29).

<sup>14</sup> Hilary of Poitiers *On the Trinity* 9.4–5 (NPNF, 2d Series 9.156).

<sup>15</sup> Hilary of Poitiers *On the Trinity* 9.38 (NPNF, 2d Series 9.167; see also Hilary of Poitiers *On the Trinity* 10.7 [NPNF, 2d Series 9.183–184]). A very helpful work on Hilary is by P. T. Wild, *The Divinization of Man According to Saint Hilary of Portiers* (Mundelein: Saint Mary of the Lake Seminary, 1950).

and prompting our self-emptying in reply. So in Christ and in Christ's people there is a movement of mutual interpenetration (*perichoresis*) between divinity and humanity; not that the natures are confused or mingled—the acts (*energeia*) of both interrelate, and human nature is transfigured by being permeated with the loving, self-giving action of God.<sup>16</sup>

Williams observes that for Maximus, as for early writers like Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century, deification meant taking on God's modes of activity (such as compassion and self-surrender) rather than simply sharing a set of abstract and static attributes (such as incorruptibility). Shared attributes are only significant as a dimension of shared activities, or else deification means fusion directly with the transcendent divine nature.<sup>17</sup>

It is helpful to realize that there are two strands to the classical patristic view of deification, one emphasizing the communication of divine attributes to Christians and the other concentrating on the Christian's participation in intradivine relationship. Williams notes that "these are not seen as contradictory by the Fathers, though we can learn a good deal about the general cast of a writer's thought by observing which strand predominates."<sup>18</sup>

### III. DEFINING THEOSIS

It is not easy to give a definition of theosis, since so many aspects of Christian truth are utilized by those who advance the teaching, and different writers and traditions emphasize different truths. The word "theosis" is the transliteration of a Greek word meaning "deification" (being made God). Our English word "apotheosis" has much the same meaning.<sup>19</sup> In his definition Kenneth Leech builds upon the words of Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–662), considered to be perhaps the most creative of Byzantine theologians and the most helpful formulator of the doctrine of theosis. Leech writes that according to Maximus "deification is the work of divine grace by which human nature is so transformed that it 'shines forth with a supernatural light and is transported above its own limits by a superabundance of glory.'<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Williams, "Deification" 107.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. T. C. Oden notes that the traditional distinction between incommunicable and communicable attributes clarifies how the soul may partake of the divine nature: There can be godlikeness by participation in the communicable attributes, such as grace, mercy and patience, but there is no possibility of finite creatures being made infinite, invisible, pure spirit, etc. (*Life in the Spirit* [San Francisco: Harper, 1992] 208–209). W. Corduan similarly explains how in Eckhart the believer is said to possess the nature of God ("A Hair's Breadth From Pantheism: Meister Eckhart's God-Centered Spirituality," *JETS* 37/2 [1994] 269–271).

<sup>18</sup> Williams, "Deification" 106.

<sup>19</sup> See the articles θεωσις and θεοποίησις in *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (ed. G. W. H. Lampe; Oxford: Clarendon, 1961–68).

<sup>20</sup> K. Leech, *Experiencing God: Theology as Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985) 258. Theosis writers speak often of the concept of glory: the supernatural light of God's essence that may be, in some way, manifested in the children of God; cf. e.g. V. Lossky, *The Vision of God* (Bedfordshire: The Faith Press, 1963) 129–137; K. Ware, "The Hesychasts: Gregory of Sinai, Gregory Palamas, Nicolas Cabasilas," *The Study of Spirituality* (ed. C. Jones, G. Wainwright and E. Yarnold; New York: Oxford University, 1986) 251–253.

Archbishop Basil Krivocheine, expressing the thought of St. Symeon the New Theologian, writes:

Divinization is the state of man's total transformation, effected by the Holy Spirit, when man observes the commandments of God, acquires the evangelical virtues and shares in the sufferings of Christ. The Holy Spirit then gives man a divine intelligence and incorruptibility. Man does not receive a new soul, but the Holy Spirit unites essentially with the whole man, body and soul. He makes of him a son of God, a god by adoption, though man does not cease being a man, a simple creature, even when he clearly sees the Father. He may be called man and god at the same time.<sup>21</sup>

A more westernized definition comes from the late Philip Edgecumbe Hughes. Like a fair number of older Anglicans he understood and saw considerable value in the doctrine of theosis. Commenting on the words of Athanasius that we quoted at the start of this paper, Hughes notes that while Athanasius did not clarify in every reference what he intended by his concept of deification he made it quite clear from his writings as a whole that he did not have in mind a transformation of the human into the divine, an ontological or essential change of humanity into deity.

Hughes goes on to explain—correctly, I believe—what Athanasius did mean, and in so doing he gives us a useful definition of theosis as

the reintegration of the divine image of man's creation through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit conforming the redeemed into the likeness of Christ, and also of the believer's transition from mortality to immortality so that he is enabled to participate in the eternal bliss and glory of the kingdom of God.<sup>22</sup>

Above all, theosis is the restoration and reintegration of the "image" or, as some prefer, "likeness" of God, seriously distorted by the fall, in the children of God. In this life Christians grow more and more into the very likeness and character of God as God was revealed in the man Jesus Christ.

This is more than the customary Protestant concept of sanctification, however. In theosis, while there is no ontological change of humanity into deity there is a very real impartation of the divine life to the whole human being—body and soul. Lutheran Ross Aden observes that Orthodox theologians such as John Breck use the expression "communion with God" to mean "ontological participation." In contrast to Lutheranism "the Orthodox hope of salvation in its broadest sense is more than hope of a divine sentence of 'not guilty' or even of a beatific vision; it is 'human participation in the being of God . . . a total sharing in the Triune life.' . . . Created in the *image* of God, human beings are called to become *like* God by realizing the potential for ontological sharing in the life of God," yet never in such a way that theosis means sharing in God's essence (nature). "Lutherans and Orthodox would

<sup>21</sup> B. Krivocheine, *St. Symeon the New Theologian* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1986) 389.

<sup>22</sup> P. E. Hughes, *The True Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 281.

agree that the essence of God is utterly transcendent and therefore inaccessible to any created reality."<sup>23</sup>

G. I. Mantzaridis writes in a recent work that deification is God's greatest gift to man and the ultimate goal of human existence:

It is that which from the beginning has constituted the innermost longing of man's existence. Adam, in attempting to appropriate it by transgressing God's command, failed, and in place of deification, met with corruption and death. The love of God, however, through His Son's incarnation, restored to man the possibility of deification:

Adam of old was deceived:  
wanting to be God he failed to be God.  
God becomes man,  
so that He may make Adam god.<sup>24</sup>

The Greek Fathers and St. Gregory Palamas incorporate a strongly physical view of theosis, which derives the deification of human nature from its hypostatic union with the incarnate *Logos* of God. This view "does not imply any mechanical commutation of humanity, but an ontological regeneration of human nature in the hypostasis of the incarnate *Logos* of God, accessible to every man who participates personally and freely in the life of Christ."<sup>25</sup>

Concerning the time factor in divinization Vladimir Lossky writes:

The deification or *theosis* of the creature will be realized in its fullness only in the age to come, after the resurrection of the dead. This deifying union has, nevertheless, to be fulfilled ever more and more even in this present life, through the transformation of our corruptible and depraved nature and by its adaptation to eternal life.<sup>26</sup>

With regard to those who receive this gracious gift, Krivocheine gives the thought of Symeon:

<sup>23</sup> R. Aden, "Justification and Sanctification: A Conversation Between Lutheranism and Orthodoxy," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38/1 (1994) 96–98. See also *Salvation in Christ: A Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue* (ed. J. Meyendorff and R. Tobias; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992). While theosis theologians do not espouse a fusion of deity with humanity in deified believers, they at times do speak of ontological change in them. J. Pelikan observes that in the Cappadocians there seems to be some sort of fundamental ontological change in the theosis experience (*Christianity and Classical Culture* [New Haven: Yale University, 1993] 318). Krivocheine states that in the thought of St. Symeon deification refers to "an ontological rather than to a purely spiritual transformation, although Symeon does not pretend that man abandons his created nature when he becomes a god through adoption" (*St. Symeon* 390). On the distinction between God and man, J. Quasten writes that while for Athanasius one of the major themes in his divinization theology is Christ's granting of immortality to humankind, this is not accomplished by changing humanity into deity but by suffering death for us in his body and by conjoining the divine nature with the human (*The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature* [Utrecht: Spectrum, 1975] 71–72). A. Louth notes how basic the ontological gulf between God and humankind was to Athanasian theology ("The Cappadocians," *Study* [ed. Jones et al.] 161–162).

<sup>24</sup> G. I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1984) 12–13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

<sup>26</sup> V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1976) 196.

While remaining a spiritually conscious state and clearly felt by the one who receives it, divinization will always remain an awesome mystery, surpassing all human understanding and unobserved by most people. Indeed, the ones who are granted it are rare, although all the baptized are called to it. It is their fault if they deprive themselves of it.<sup>27</sup>

John Meyendorff speaks of the never-ending nature of deification:

Man is not fully man unless he is in communion with God. . . . However, because God remains absolutely transcendent in his essence, man's communion with Him has no limit. It never reaches an End, which would be a dead end. God is both transcendent and inexhaustible. . . . In Christ [according to Palamas], man enters into communion not with "the God of the philosophers and the savants" but with the one who in human language can only be called "more than God."<sup>28</sup>

While the doctrine of theosis is associated primarily with the Orthodox churches of the east, it has similarities with the teaching about sanctification in the west. As noted above, however, the two are not identical. In the western churches, as Bray notes, the concept of the imitation of Christ is the closest analogy to the theosis doctrine of the east. In Orthodox theology, while we are called to imitate Christ we are also called to manifest the energies of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who proceeds from the Father rests on the Son and becomes his energies. The Spirit then, by adopting us as sons of God, makes accessible to us the spiritual power that belongs to Christ.<sup>29</sup> Eastern writers stress, however, the distinction between God's essence and his energies. According to theosis proponent Timothy Ware, "union with God means union with the divine energies, not the divine essence: the Orthodox Church, while speaking of deification and union, rejects all forms of pantheism."<sup>30</sup>

Orthodox churches also work more with the incarnation than with the crucifixion of Christ as the basis for man's divinization. This is not to say that Christ's atonement is minimized in the work of redemption<sup>31</sup> but that the intention of the Father in creating humanity in the first place, and of joining humanity to divinity in the incarnation, is so that human beings might assume godlikeness and be imagers of God in his divine life, character and actions.

Regarding the manner in which one attains theosis in this life, Clendenin is quite helpful. He notes that the *Philokalia* (literally, "love of the beautiful") is considered by many to be the chief instrument or means of deification. This multivolume work, containing writings of Orthodox Christians from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries, teaches that theosis is bestowed by grace through faith, not by works. Yet there is a definite synergism in the

<sup>27</sup> Krivocheine, *St. Symeon* 389–390.

<sup>28</sup> J. Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1982) 188–189.

<sup>29</sup> Bray, "Deification" 189.

<sup>30</sup> Ware, *Orthodox Church* 232. For G. Palamas' thoughts on the essence and energies of God see Lossky, *Vision* 127–129; Ware, "Hesychasts" 250–251.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Athanasius *On the Incarnation* 8–9.

path to theosis. While the grace of God is mightily at work, the Christian's *nepsis* is essential. *Nepsis* is a Greek word for vigilance, watchfulness, intensity, zeal, spiritual wariness. Some ways in which it is expressed include asceticism (fastings, vigils, prostrations, tears, repentance), contemplation, continual utterance of the name of Jesus in prayer, participation in the sacraments, keeping the commandments of God, and, above all, loving one another.<sup>32</sup>

#### IV. BRITISH TEACHING

The Protestant churches in Great Britain have sustained a strand of theosis teaching that incorporates both eastern and western emphases. In the eighteenth century Henry Scougal wrote what has become a classic work<sup>33</sup> that George Whitefield spoke of as having changed his life: "Though I had fasted, watched, and prayed, and received the sacrament so long, yet I never knew what true religion was till God sent me that excellent treatise by the hand of my never-to-be-forgotten friend."<sup>34</sup>

That friend was Charles Wesley. Scougal explains why he chose the name he did for his book. He speaks of true religion as "a resemblance of the divine perfections, the image of the Almighty shining in the soul of man: . . . a real participation of his nature, it is a beam of the eternal light, a drop of that infinite ocean of goodness; and they who are endued with it, may be said to have 'God dwelling in their souls,' and 'Christ formed within them.'"<sup>35</sup> "I know not how the nature of religion can be more fully expressed, than by calling it a divine life."<sup>36</sup>

Wesley understood the Christian life similarly. Brought up by Samuel and Susannah in the Church of England and surrounded by the works of the Puritans and other theological writers in his home, Wesley longed continually for the life of God in his soul. In his music he expresses the theosis doctrine. For example, in one hymn he writes:

He deigns in flesh to appear,  
Widest extremes to join;  
To bring our vileness near,  
And make us all divine:  
And we the life of God shall know,  
For God is manifest below.<sup>37</sup>

In the expression "make us all divine" the word "all" may refer to either all people or the extent of the divinization. Wesley would agree with both. Whatever his primary understanding, his thought is clear: In the incarna-

<sup>32</sup> Clendenin, *Eastern* 135–137.

<sup>33</sup> H. Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1986); idem (ed. W. S. Hudson; Minneapolis: Bethany, 1976).

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Scougal, *Life* (Bethany edition) 13.

<sup>35</sup> Scougal, *Life* (Sprinkle edition) 40.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Allchin, *Participation* 26–27.

tion God adds to himself human flesh so that human flesh may actually become transformed as it is changed by the very life of God indwelling it.

At the end of one of his eucharistic hymns Wesley prays:

Thy Kingdom come to every heart  
And all thou hast, and all thou art.

Wesley desires not only God's gifts but also his life and perfections—all that can be conjoined to human beings. In another hymn he is even more explicit:

Heavenly Adam, Life divine,  
Change my nature into thine;  
Move and spread throughout my soul,  
Actuate and fill the whole;  
Be it I no longer now  
Living in the flesh, but thou.<sup>38</sup>

As A. M. Allchin, an advocate of divinization theology, notes: "The whole text celebrates the *nowness* of eternity. Already, here and now, the Son has set me free. I can triumph through the grace and gift of God. Already I am free to ask with boldness for the whole fulness of the divine life."<sup>39</sup> Thus while these hymns do indeed focus on our eternal life in glory they also contain a strong element of the life of God in our souls now. Even the more popular "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" presents theosis teaching.

In eighteenth-century Welsh Methodism, which theologically was predominantly Calvinist rather than Arminian, the hymnwriters William Williams and Ann Griffiths are noteworthy for the inclusion of theosis in their music. Williams (1719–1791) writes: "It is everlasting love [that] has made God and myself to be one." He prays:

Plant in my soul every one  
Of those principles which are like spices  
In your nature. . . .<sup>40</sup>

According to Williams, the Christian's reintegration into God is accomplished through the union of God with humanity in the incarnation. Allchin remarks about Williams' message:

In Christ we see the true destiny of every human being. The bond which links man to eternity is immeasurably more powerful than all the bonds which bind him to earth, for he was made for God and can only find himself in God. . . . In terms of classical Christian theology our union with God is made possible because both the Son and the Spirit are of one substance (*homo-ousios*) with the Father. We are united with the Father in the Son who at once is both man and God through the power of the Spirit who is also truly God, and who makes us participant in God.

In Williams, as in other theosis teachers, "the doctrines of Trinity, incarnation and deification belong together in an indissoluble knot."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 32–33.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 33.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 38–39.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 44–45.

Ann Griffiths (1776–1805) gloried in her union with God. In one of her hymns, which (it is said) she composed while riding home over the hills from a Sunday communion service, she writes:

O blessed hour of eternal rest  
 From my labour, in my lot,  
 In the midst of a sea of wonders  
 with never a sight of an end or a shore;  
 Abundant freedom of entrance, ever to continue,  
 Into the dwelling places of the Three in One.  
 Water to swim in, not to be passed through,  
 Man as God, and God as man.

The “blessed hour of eternal rest” refers most likely to the communion time, where she enjoys soul rest of an eternal quality because of her union with God. She is not saying, as some commentators have thought, that she is simply absorbed into the sea of the divine being. Rather, she speaks of the union of her nature with that of God, not so that human nature is annihilated by merging with the divine but that the two natures are united without separation. The last line of the hymn in Welsh is actually stronger than it appears in English. Instead of “man as God, and God as man,” it could read “man *being* God, and God *being* man.”<sup>42</sup>

To the names of Scougal, Wesley, Williams and Griffiths we may add among others the names Richard Hooker, Lancelot Andrewes and E. B. Pusey as representatives of the British tradition of deification.

#### V. CRITIQUE OF THE DOCTRINE

Having presented some of the significant themes and advocates of theosis teaching, I would like to make a few observations. First, some areas of concern. Perhaps the most obvious deficiency is the terminology itself. To speak of divinization, deification, and human beings “becoming God” seems to violate the historic Christian understanding of the essential qualitative distinction between God and the creation. “Becoming like God” appears to express more Biblically the concept of the Christian’s union and communion with God in sanctification.<sup>43</sup> Why use terminology that, at first glance at least, will alienate those unfamiliar with this line of thinking in Christian theology, with the result that they miss what might be of benefit to them? Some may reply, however, that the shock value of the terms may be just what is needed to awaken lethargic or defeated Christians to the truth of their union with Christ.

Another area of concern has to do with the interpretation of Scripture. Some writers, in their eagerness to present what to them has become a very

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 46.

<sup>43</sup> E. C. Miller, Jr., observes that M. Ramsey, while he does not use the actual terms “deification” or “theosis,” nevertheless expounds the doctrine that “salvation consists in an actual participation in the life of God wherein we become by grace what Christ is by nature.” Because Ramsey insists on adhering to Biblical categories he prefers the terms “Godlikeness” and “Christlikeness” (*Toward a Fuller Vision: Orthodoxy and the Anglican Experience* [Wilton: Morehouse Barlow, 1984] 122).

precious teaching, incorporate texts that have at best a remote bearing on the topic and possibly no connection at all. Frequent allusions to Ps 82:6, for example, where the psalmist states "I said, 'You are gods,'" are unwarranted in light of the context.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, to identify the good wine kept until last at the wedding of Cana with the word of God by which we are made divine is to distort the meaning of the text.<sup>45</sup>

Then too the repeated emphasis upon humanity, rather than human beings, being divinized seems to put the focus more on generic human nature rather than individual men and women. Unless one is a universalist, humanity will not be totally deified.<sup>46</sup> In addition there are no Scripture texts that to my knowledge use the language of humanity, as generic essence, participating in the life of God.

Other weaknesses of deification thought, particularly in the Orthodox versions, include a heavier than necessary emphasis upon the sacraments as a principal means of theosis<sup>47</sup> and a negative attitude, at least by some, toward sexual desire, sexual union, and even biological birth.<sup>48</sup>

The strengths of theosis theology outweigh these weaknesses, however. The most significant benefit is that the concept as a whole, if not the specific terminology, is Biblical. Pauline teaching supports much that is emphasized by theosis theologians. Paul writes that Christians, "who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:17–18). The Christian who experiences this transformation develops a remarkable God-given assurance that she is actually thinking the thoughts of God, doing the works of God, and at times even speaking the words of God. These energies and ministries of God in the Christian yielded to her Lord are the natural outcome of the life of God in the soul.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> See S. Lash, "Deification," *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (ed. A. Richardson and J. Bowden; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 147; J. Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974) 10.

<sup>45</sup> This is the interpretation of Maximus; see Pelikan, *Spirit* 10.

<sup>46</sup> D. Cairns notes that from some statements of Irenaeus "it might be thought that [he] conceived of human nature as a kind of substance existing in its own right, apart from the human beings who share in it, and that he believed that since Christ had taken hold of it, it was automatically transformed. . . . The danger of this line of thought is, that if it is carried to its logical conclusion, Irenaeus will have to say that as, owing to our organic connection with Adam, we are all fallen; so by the fact of the incarnation we are all automatically saved. But he never even comes near to saying this" (*The Image of God in Man* [New York: Philosophical Library, 1953] 104). Cairns is quite negative toward the doctrine of theosis, primarily because he understands it (mistakenly) to mean fusion of the believer or the Church with Christ (pp. 41–43, 102–109). He admits, however, that 2 Pet 1:4 does teach that believers actually share in the nature of God and that Gal 2:20 comes close to saying this also. He dismisses Peter's statement, however, as an "off the record" remark (p. 42). An Orthodox perspective on the divinization of human nature is presented in Mantzaridis, *Deification* 25–33.

<sup>47</sup> Nellas, *Deification* 120; Krivocheine, *St. Symeon* 387, 389.

<sup>48</sup> Nellas, *Deification* 73.

<sup>49</sup> Pelikan writes that according to Maximus "part of the process of salvation as deification was the gradual assimilation of the mind of man to the mind of God. Through the grace of prayer it was joined to God and it learned to associate only with God, becoming ever more godlike and withdrawing itself more and more from the dominance of this mortal life" (*Spirit* 14).

In his discourse on wisdom from the Spirit, Paul states that the spiritual person has “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). We learn to think the thoughts of God. We also speak “words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words” (2:13; see also 1 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 4:11). What we say in significant moments of teaching, preaching and encouraging can have the quality and effect of God’s words themselves. Concerning our doing the works of God, Jesus said that his followers would do greater works than he himself did because he was going to the Father (John 14:12). Because the ascension of Christ brought the Spirit to earth in increasing measure (Acts 1–2), the Christian may now participate in the acts of the risen Christ by the energy of the indwelling Spirit. Panayiotis Nellas writes:

The real anthropological meaning of deification is Christification. It is no accident that in his Letter to the Colossians, where he hymns Christ as “the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation” (Col 1:15), St Paul calls on “every man” to become “mature in Christ” (Col 1:28), and adds that the faithful “have come to fullness of life in Him” (Col 2:10). When he urges the faithful to show that they are attaining “to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13), and to acquire “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16), the heart of Christ (cf. Eph 3:17) and so on, St Paul does not do so for reasons of external piety and sentiment; he speaks ontologically. He is not advocating an external imitation or a simple ethical improvement but a real Christification. For, as St Maximos says, “God the divine Logos wishes to effect the mystery of His incarnation always and in all things.”<sup>50</sup>

The Pauline concept of our being “in Christ” may take on new meaning as we realize more and more our genuine participation in the life and energies of God. Indeed, as we read in John Wesley’s favorite preaching text, “it is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Therefore, . . . let him who boasts boast in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:30–31).

Paul also writes that “you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God” and speaks of Christ as “your life” (Col 3:3–4; cf. Gal 2:20). He also exhorts us to “put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24). “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ” (Col 2:9–10). John’s great section on our union with Christ as vine and branches (John 15:1–17) has a direct bearing on the topic, as does his teaching that the one born of God has “God’s seed” living in him (1 John 3:9). Many other Scripture passages relate to the subject.<sup>51</sup> While much exegetical work on these and related texts needs to be done by evangelicals in developing a high view of participation in God, there is a solid Scriptural foundation on which to build.

Another strength of theosis teaching is that it may offer hope to some Christians who despair of finding the truly abundant life here on earth. Many of us are weary of the expression “paradigm shift.” But while we may

<sup>50</sup> Nellas, *Deification* 39.

<sup>51</sup> See Oden, *Life* 205–212.

not care for the term because of its familiarity, we dare not ignore the significance of fundamentally new ways of perceiving reality. Perhaps some Christians today will be helped considerably by a paradigm shift in their view of holiness and ministry. Rather than seeing our progressive sanctification as something done for us by God from outside, by God's acting upon our minds and wills from some external habitation, or as something we do from below as we pray to God above and seek to obey God here on earth, we may take a kind of quantum leap forward by understanding sanctification as the very life and energy of God in us. We are becoming increasingly like God because we are participating more and more in his divine nature. As Christians, our bodies are in very truth temples of the indwelling Spirit, who radiates his presence and power through us to others. Aden correctly notes that, to the Orthodox,

grace is not a divine pardon, attitude, or promise as it is for the Lutherans, who tend to focus grace primarily on justification. It is the divine dynamic (energy) that comes from God, unites us to Christ, and changes us so that "Christ is formed in us" (Gal. 4:19). Thus deification is a process of transformation and driven by deifying grace.<sup>52</sup>

Rather than viewing grace as either pardon or energy, however, it is more Biblically comprehensive to understand grace as both pardon (favor) and energy (inner strengthening). Orthodox theologians rightly stress the actual empowering nature of grace, but the NT emphasis on grace as God's abundant forgiveness and unmerited favor through Christ must be kept equally prominent.<sup>53</sup>

A final benefit pertains to the art and science of theology itself. As Leech writes, "so central is the theme of deification in Eastern tradition that it is seen as the meaning of theology itself. For according to Orthodox theologians there can be no theology apart from the process of transformation. The work of theology involves a radical re-creation of the human person."<sup>54</sup> In the words of Lossky, theology

is an existential attitude which involves the whole man: there is no theology apart from experience; it is necessary to change, to become a new man. To know God one must draw near to him. No one who does not follow the path of union with God can be a theologian. The way of the knowledge of God is necessarily the way of deification.<sup>55</sup>

While there are weaknesses in theosis theology, these strengths are considerable. The doctrine of divinization merits the ongoing attention of Scripture scholars, theologians and pastors who desire to provide significant resources to Christians in their quest to become like God. For this is indeed why we were created.

<sup>52</sup> Aden, "Justification" 98–99.

<sup>53</sup> On grace as God's power and energy in the believer see Acts 4:33; 6:8; 14:26–27; 1 Cor 15:10; 2 Cor 12:9–10.

<sup>54</sup> Leech, *Experiencing* 258.

<sup>55</sup> Lossky, *Mystical* 39.