

**“In Life and Nature but Not in the Godhead”:
Witness Lee’s Contribution to a Biblical Understanding of Theosis**

“In Life and Nature but Not in the Godhead”

With these few words, Witness Lee (1905-1997) both clarified and enhanced Athanasius’ memorable statement, “For He was made man that we might be made God” (“Αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐνὶ ἡρώπῃσεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν”). Over time, evangelical scholars have become familiar with the fourth-century aphorism, and many now recognize theosis¹ at least as an alternative historical understanding to the nature of salvation. Outside the usual circles, this growing interest has led to fresh engagement with the writings of church fathers and of Eastern Orthodox theology.² Some have engaged in a quest for a specifically *evangelical* doctrine of theosis³ and others for a reconsideration of evangelism itself in light of its implications.⁴ Others have looked for traces of theosis in the writings of Protestant standard-bearers like Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and John Wesley.⁵

¹ For the purposes of this paper, the terms *theosis*, *deification*, and *divinization* will be used interchangeably.

² Although theosis is not a point of emphasis in the Western church, it remains official Catholic doctrine: “The Word became flesh to make us ‘partakers of the divine nature’: For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God.’ ‘For the Son of God became man so that we might become God.’ ‘The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods” (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1992, 460).

³ See, for example, Robert V. Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis,” *JETS* 40/2 (June 1997): 257-269.

⁴ See James D. Greear, “Theosis and Muslim Evangelism: How the Recovery of a Patristic Understanding of Salvation Can Aid Evangelical Missionaries in the Evangelization of Islamic People” (PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2003).

⁵ See, for example, Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); Carl Mosser, “The Greatest Possible Blessing: Calvin and Deification,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (February 2002): 36-57; Kyle Strobel, “Jonathan Edwards and the Polemics of Theosis,” *Harvard Theological Review* (July 2012): 259-279; Michael J. Christensen, “John Wesley: Christian Perfection as Faith Filled with the Energy of Love” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, eds. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 219-229.

Thus far, the presentation of theosis as found in Witness Lee's ministry has gone largely unnoticed. His statement that "God became a man so that man may become God in life and in nature (but not in the Godhead)"⁶ may still elicit a sense of misgiving, especially if one is unfamiliar with its professed scriptural and historical underpinnings. Yet, regardless of one's stance, it may at least be evident that Witness Lee's statement shows an attempt at specifically defining what theosis is ("in life and in nature") and what it is not ("in the Godhead") and seeks to establish definite boundaries as to its scope.

Throughout his ministry, Witness Lee paid much attention to the believers' personal and corporate experience of the Triune God. In doing so, he often referred to this relationship in terms evocative of theosis such as "union" and "mingling." In later years, he embraced more overtly theotic language, including his refinement of Athanasius' iconic saying quoted above. Yet, Witness Lee was not limited to the aphorisms of the early church. Building upon his realization of "union" and "mingling," Witness Lee went on to describe the issue of man's divinization—a corporate entity, a "universal, divine-human incorporation,"⁷ a mutual coinhering of the believers in Christ with the coinhering Trinity.

When considering these statements, it bears mentioning that Witness Lee engaged mostly in spoken ministry of a homiletical style and that his spoken addresses form the basis for his published writings. To understand properly Witness Lee's teaching concerning the union, mingling, and incorporation of God with man, it is important to apply the glossary he uses to set the scope and limitations of deification. Imposing definitions from other theological perspectives may lead to misunderstanding. As his teaching concerning theosis is presented here, Witness Lee's own definitions of key words and phrases will be provided.

⁶ Witness Lee, *Life-study of 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1995), 5. All titles by Witness Lee as cited in this paper are published by Living Stream Ministry, Anaheim, CA. All subsequent references will be cited as LSM followed by the year of publication.

⁷ Witness Lee, *The Issue of Christ Being Glorified by the Father with the Divine Glory* (LSM, 1996), 44.

This paper will begin by offering a brief survey of theosis as taught by several leading theologians from the second through the fourteenth centuries. This will demonstrate that the early church did hold the conviction that salvation itself is the process of deification. Such a historical consideration will lay the groundwork for a review of Witness Lee's understanding that, through salvation, believers experience a *union* with God in His life, a *mingling* with God in His nature, and an *incorporation* with God in His Person. In so doing, this paper will contend that Witness Lee's view of theosis is not only worthy of serious consideration by theologians and scholars but is distinctive in presentation and application, offering a comprehensive approach in both theology and experience, while fully respecting the boundaries of the truth as it has long been understood.

The Focus of the Incarnation: "That We Might Be Made God"

In their writings, a number of the church fathers directly relate the believers' deification to the incarnation of Christ. Deification, from their perspective, is the focus of the incarnation, the overarching end in view, the purpose for which Christ took on the flesh of humanity. Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 200) writes: "Jesus Christ our Lord, the Son of the Most High God...would become the Son of man for this purpose, that man also might become the son of God" (*Against Heresies* III.10.2). Elsewhere, he refers to "the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself" (*Against Heresies* V.pref), a pronouncement that Jeffrey Finch calls "the most compelling and often-repeated form of the perennial *cur Deus homo* question ["Why did God become human?"] for generations to come, even until today."⁸

Athanasius (c. 296–c. 373) frames deification similarly: "For He was made man that we might be made God; and He manifested Himself by a body that we might receive the idea of the unseen

⁸ Jeffrey Finch, "Irenaeus on the Christological Basis of Human Divinization" in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, eds. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2006), 86.

Father; and He endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immortality” (*On the Incarnation of the Word* 54). Context indicates that Athanasius was not principally concerned with systematically defining theosis, but rather with defending the first part of his equation: that *God*—and not something less than God—became man. While fighting against the Arian heresy that Christ was not eternally God, Athanasius defends the divinity of the God-man in this way: “The Son is not such by participation” but is *Himself* the “deifying and enlightening power of the Father, in which all things are deified and quickened.” (*De Synodis* 51). “For the Alexandrian doctor,” contends Jules Gross, “the divinization of the Christian is not a more or less secondary and casual element...but the central thought of his theology,” even to the extent that “Athanasius bases upon it one of his principal arguments for the perfect divinity of the Son of God.”⁹ It may thus be considered that the greater miracle is not that man becomes God, but that God began the process of man’s divinization by Himself becoming what man is in creation.

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395) is referred to by Gross as “the witness par excellence of the Greek doctrine of divinization”¹⁰ with whom the “physical conception of divinization outlined by Irenaeus and developed by Athanasius reaches its most accomplished expression.”¹¹ Like his forebears before him, Gregory presents theosis in light of the incarnation, writing in *The Great Catechism*: “He was transfused throughout our nature, in order that our nature might by this transfusion of the Divine become itself divine” (*The Great Catechism* XXV) and later, “The God who was manifested infused Himself into perishable humanity for this purpose, that by this communion with Deity mankind might at the same time be deified” (*The Great Catechism* XXXVII).

Although the light of deification did not shine as brightly in the ensuing years, there remained, in

⁹ Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*, tr. Paul A. Onica (Anaheim: A & C Press, 2002), 163.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

Gross's terms, "occasional attestations."¹² The writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 500) and Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–682) "prove that the doctrine and, perhaps even more, the mysticism of *theopoiesis* were indeed playing a role of the first order in the theological thought and piety of the Greek church of the sixth and seventh centuries."¹³ Both, according to Gross, "agree in seeing deification through the mystical union with God as the goal of creation and of the incarnation, as well as of the moral activity of humankind."¹⁴

Then, in the eighth century, John of Damascus (c. 675–749), in common with many church fathers, "presents the deification of the Christian as a return to original perfection," referring to "the divine likeness" as "a gift of God for our first parent, the result of a 'divine participation' which consisted in the contemplation of the Creator."¹⁵ "Along with the majority of the Greek fathers," contends Gross, "Saint John of Damascus sees divinization as the pinnacle of salvation" and "testifies clearly to the vitality of the Christian ideal of *θέωσις* in the Greek church of the eighth century."¹⁶

The Palamite Light at the Top of Mount Tabor

During the fourteenth century, deification theology advanced significantly through the polemical writings of Gregory Palamas (1296-1359). A prominent monk of Mount Athos, Palamas was a leading proponent of hesychasm, a tradition of prayer that developed among fellow Athonite monks who pursued mystical experiences. When hesychasm came under attack from Barlaam, a Calabrian monk and a contemporary of Palamas, there "erupted," in the words of A.N. Williams, "a dispute over the foundations of theology, and especially, the rightful role of spiritual experience in

¹² Ibid., 190.

¹³ Ibid., 254-255.

¹⁴ Ibid., 254.

¹⁵ Ibid., 256-257.

¹⁶ Ibid., 263.

theology.”¹⁷

This theological dispute then set the venue for Palamas’ unfolding of the possibility for divinization. As Williams points out, Palamas presents deification not as an “end...to attain” but as a “warrant and datum in a dispute about the nature and sources of Christian claims to know God.”¹⁸ He does not “defend his fellow monks by pointing to their experiences as evidence of divine favor. Instead, he uses the bare fact of such experience as a counter to the Barlaamite epistemology, which seemed to envisage little possibility of knowledge of God at all.” Thus the notion of theosis is not itself at issue; instead, it appears in defense of the possibility of a real knowledge of God.

In Palamas’ view, it is the practice of hesychastic prayer that bears the fruit of deification, exemplified in the light of Christ emanating to His disciples at the top of Mount Tabor. There the Lord was “transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as the light” (Matthew 17:2). Palamas applies this experience to “the deifying gift of the Spirit” as the “mysterious light” that “transforms into light those who receive its richness.”¹⁹ Palamas understands the Son, who became a “single body with us,” as personifying the hypostatic union of God with man, to then “illuminate those who worthily commune with the divine ray of his body...by lighting their souls as he illuminated the very bodies of the disciples on Tabor.”²⁰ In other words, says Williams, “what one encounters” is “what one becomes.”²¹

Barlaam of Calabria forcefully opposed this mystical emphasis. He argued that any claim for a direct

¹⁷ A.N. Williams *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁹ Gregory Palamas, *Triads* (III.1.35) in A.N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 123.

²⁰ Gregory Palamas, *Triads* (I.3.38) in A.N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 116.

²¹ A.N. Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 123.

encounter with the Divine constituted a violation of the principle of God's essential unknowability, pushing Palamas into deeper inquiry into the nature of the Trinity and of God's relationship with His creation. Amid the resulting controversy, Palamas more clearly delineated the Cappadocian distinction between God's incommunicable *essence* and His communicable *energies*. While the light from Christ at Mount Tabor was indicative of an energy radiating through Christ that is accessible to man's experience, God in His essence remains essentially impenetrable to human participation or engagement.

The distinction, according to John Meyendorff, is "a *real* distinction...which implies a 'participation' of created man in the uncreated life of God, whose essence remains transcendent and totally unparticipable."²² In other words, there is a reality in God that allows for theosis (and for the incarnation, for that matter), while still preserving His fundamental transcendence. God's "energies," writes Vladimir Kharlamov, "reveal God himself without revealing God-in-himself. Energies simply make the reality of God present to human participation and understanding, placing an ontological differentiation within God that renders the interiority of God imparticipable and absolutely incomprehensible."²³

Palamas' conception of theosis and the praxis he attached to it differ substantially from those of Witness Lee. However, the classic distinction between God's communicable energies and His incommunicable essence is useful as a bridge to understand Witness Lee's teaching that regenerated man is made God in His communicable "life and nature" but not in His "Godhead," which is incommunicable. This distinction between the communicable and incommunicable attributes of God has been confirmed and maintained by a number of contemporary theologians

²² John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends & Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 186.

²³ Vladimir Kharlamov, "Basil of Caesarea and the Cappadocians on the Distinction between Essence and Energies in God and Its Relevance to the Deification Theme" in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology (Volume Two)*, ed. Vladimir Kharlamov (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2012), 101-102.

including Karl Barth, Vladimir Lossky, Jürgen Moltmann, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, and others, in their discussions of the economic and immanent aspects of the Trinity.²⁴

“Much More” Salvation: Paul’s Appeal to the Seeking Christian

In his epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul presents the broad scope of God’s salvation. “For if we, being enemies, were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more we will be saved in His life, having been reconciled” (Romans 5:10). For Paul salvation incorporates a participation in the grace of God encompassing two aspects—reconciliation to God through the death of His Son and salvation by God in the life of His Son. “Having been reconciled,” Paul tells us, there is still “much more,” a further salvation “in His life.” Speaking on this verse, Witness Lee asks, “Have you been saved? Are you sure that you have been saved? If you have been saved, why does this verse say that we shall be saved?”²⁵ Romans 5:10 compels the question: *What is this “much more” salvation?*

Witness Lee understood the “complete, eternal redemption of God judicially” to be a *foundation* but with a further need for something “organic...the saving in the life of Christ.”²⁶ In other words, the believers’ redemption, of which reconciliation forms a part, is the “initiation of God’s salvation,” but salvation in the life of Christ is an “organic matter.” Justification through the death of Christ, while complete, perfect, and eternally effective, is the gateway, an essential prerequisite, but not the goal. Salvation in the *life* of Christ is the “completion of God’s salvation,”²⁷ a progressive “much more” that is built upon the foundation of redemption. Witness Lee referred to these complementary

²⁴ See Chung-Hyun Baik, *The Holy Trinity—God for God and God for Us: Seven Positions on the Immanent-Economic Trinity Relation in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011).

²⁵ Witness Lee, *The Indwelling Christ in the Canon of the New Testament* (LSM, 1989), 61.

²⁶ Witness Lee, *Crystallization-study of the Epistle to the Romans* (LSM, 1994), 61.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

elements of God's salvation in Romans 5:10 as "judicial redemption" and "organic salvation."²⁸ This distinction is critical to understanding Witness Lee's perspective that deification would be impossible outside of an organic aspect to salvation.

While regeneration and sanctification are certainly aspects of deification, these notions (and others) do not encompass the total thought of it. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov refer to the tendency among some Protestants to make such terms synonymous with theosis as an "attempt to supplant Patristic theology with standard reformation language."²⁹ When this is done, the meaning of divinization, instead of being clarified, is actually obscured.

Many theologians, including certain church fathers, suggest that deification entails a progressive behavioral replication of godly characteristics. Finlan and Kharlamov, for example, describe deification as "imitation of God" that "leads to a reception of the character traits of God."³⁰ Witness Lee, however, taught that human beings experience the grace of God not to make them better persons merely but to enable them to be constituted with God and thereby to live God out as His expression and representation. In his view, deification is not based on imitation but is organic, sourced in God, based on the divine birth with the divine life, and is the issue of a "metabolic process...an organic change" in the inward life and nature of the believer.³¹ Although the outward appearance in terms of behavior may be similar, the inward source is fundamentally different.

The way you think when you consider any matter will bear the stamp of the Lord Jesus.

The way you love people and the way you decide any matter will also be the same as that of the Lord Jesus. This means that in your practical living you will bear the image

²⁸ See Witness Lee, *Crystallization-study of the Complete Salvation of God in Romans* (LSM, 1997), 9-13.

²⁹ Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, eds, *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2006), 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

³¹ Witness Lee, *The Subjective Truths in the Holy Scriptures* (LSM, 2000), 80.

*of the Lord. This is not an outward improvement, nor is it an outward imitation. Rather, it is that you are inwardly being possessed by the Lord and permeated with the Lord, and His element is permeating your mind, emotion, and will.*³²

“The Spirit Himself Witnesses with Our Spirit”: Union in the Life of God

In a commentary on Romans, Witness Lee refers to the relationship between God and His believers as a “spiritual, practical, and experiential union...of the Spirit with our spirit, the regenerated spirit of the believers in Christ indwelt by the Spirit.”³³ He develops this understanding based on Romans 8, particularly verses 11 and 15-17. The latter verses, according to Witness Lee, indicate that “the all-inclusive Spirit of the Triune God” and “our regenerated human spirit” are “one; they live together, work together, and exist together as one mingled spirit.”³⁴ The designation “heirs of God...joint-heirs with Christ” indicates that the believers inherit God and know God in the way of intimate family relations, not only as their Creator but also as their Abba Father. The spontaneous cry of sonship, originating from the Spirit of the Firstborn who indwells the believer (Galatians 4:6), is itself an indication of the Christian’s intimacy with the Triune God:

Such an affectionate cry implies an intimate relationship in life between a genuine son and a begetting father. After being regenerated, we are no longer merely God’s creatures; we are His children. Because we have now been born of God and are related to Him in life, it is very normal and sweet for us to call Him Father. When we cry, “Abba, Father,” there is the witnessing of the Spirit. Such a witnessing testifies to us and assures us that we are the children of God, who possess His life; it also limits us and restricts us to a living and walk that are according to this life, in keeping with our being children of God. The Spirit witnesses to our most basic and elementary

³² Ibid.

³³ Witness Lee, *Crystallization-study of the Complete Salvation of God in Romans* (LSM, 1997), 23.

³⁴ Ibid., 24.

*relationship with God, namely, that we are His children. Therefore, this witnessing of the Spirit begins from the time of our spiritual birth, our regeneration.*³⁵

Witness Lee understood Paul to say that fallen man has two main problems. First, because he is sinful, he needs redemption and the forgiveness of sins through the death of Christ (Romans 3:24; 1 Corinthians 15:3; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14). Second, because he is alienated from the life of God (Ephesians 4:18), he also needs a new birth. The trajectory of organic salvation begins when a person receives eternal life and is born of God (John 1:12-13; 1 John 5:11-12). Through a lifelong process of partaking of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), the redeemed and regenerated child of God grows in the divine life until that life is manifested (Romans 8:19) and he is glorified (Romans 8:17; Romans 8:30; 2 Thessalonians 1:10) to be “even as He is” (Matthew 5:48; 1 John 3:2-3, 7; 1 John 4:17) for all eternity. Regeneration marks the beginning of this organic process, the point at which the believer in Christ is born of the Father through a “divine birth” that imparts to him the life of God with the nature of that life, the divine nature. “Once we receive the Lord,” Witness Lee writes, “God’s life enters into us, and we immediately have a union with God in life. Our believing into the Lord is for our being begotten of God, that is, for God to come into us to be our life.”³⁶

For John Calvin, repentance embodies the significance of regeneration. “Therefore, in a word, I interpret repentance as regeneration, whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God that had been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam’s transgression.”³⁷ Witness Lee would counter that regeneration is not merely an act of restoration necessary “because our life is bad and cannot be improved. This concept is wrong. I say once again that even if Adam in the garden of Eden had never fallen, he still would have needed to be regenerated, to be born again, that he might have

³⁵ Ibid., 23-24.

³⁶ Witness Lee, *Life and Building in the Gospel of John* (LSM, 2012), 65.

³⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: The Westminster Press, 1960), book III, ch. III, 601.

another life, the life of God.”³⁸ This is a view shared by certain of the early church fathers. Archibald T. Robertson writes that for Irenaeus, man was “created for a destiny which he had never realized; the interruption in the history of our race introduced by sin was repaired by the Incarnation, which carried back the race to a new head, and so carried it forward to a destiny of which under its original head it was incapable.”³⁹ In other words, salvation is not merely a “restoration to,” but an “advance upon,” something far beyond the innocence of Eden. Man was created “not so much in a state of perfection as with a capacity for perfection...and with a destiny to correspond with such capacity.”⁴⁰ The incarnate Christ—and not Adam—is the living manifestation of what God intended man to be.

Witness Lee observes that, “We have received eternal life through our divine birth.”⁴¹ By this birth, according to 1 John 3:9, a “seed” is implanted in the believers. As he remarks, “With any seed there is life and in that life there is the nature which is going to be developed,”⁴² a biological principle that is applied in Scripture to illustrate the spiritual:

A grain of wheat is a seed of wheat. When this seed is sown into the earth it develops in life with its nature. The full development of the life of the seed with its nature issues in a stalk with many grains, many seeds. The development of the grain of wheat comes out of the nature of that grain or seed. The same thing is true of a carnation seed. If a carnation seed is sown into the earth, it develops with its nature into a beautiful carnation blossom.

We have received the divine life through the divine birth and this divine life has a

³⁸ Witness Lee, *Life-study of John* (LSM, 1985), 98.

³⁹ Archibald Robertson, “Prolegomena” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1891), lxxi.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Witness Lee, *Life-study of 1, 2, & 3 John, Jude* (LSM, 1984), 248.

⁴² Witness Lee, *God’s New Testament Economy* (LSM, 1986), 326.

nature which is the divine nature of God. John 1:13 tells us that we have been born of God, 1 John 3:9 says that since we have been born of God we have the divine seed in us, 1 Peter 1:3 says we have been regenerated by God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and 2 Peter 1:4 indicates that since we have received the divine life we are now partakers of the divine nature. We are not receiving the divine nature, but partaking of, enjoying, what we have already received.⁴³

Some may demur at the suggestion that man's participation in the life and nature of God is within the bounds of possibility and, like Calvin, equate new birth with restoration to a pre-fallen, Edenic condition. Yet, not all evangelicals agree. For example, Lewis Sperry Chafer points to the breadth of biblical support, "upwards of eighty-five New Testament passages referring directly to this fact of a new imparted divine life," for the assertion that the divine life is "none other than the indwelling Son of God":

"He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life" (1 Jno. 5:12); "When Christ, who is our life, shall appear" (Col. 3:4); "Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2:20); "Christ in you the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). This indwelling One being the Son of God and eternal, the life is eternal. "I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish" (Jno. 10:28); "The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

This is the great supernatural fact of regeneration. By this regeneration legitimate children of God are formed who are by all right and title the true sons of God, and if sons, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ. They form a "new generation" or species, and their destiny is, in consonance with their new divine nature, in the eternal glory of the household and family of God.

⁴³ Ibid.

The practical value of knowing this relation to God, or to be able to say, "Christ liveth in me," is but to be impelled to go on to the place wherein it may also be said, "and the life I now live, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." As certainly as a member is vitally joined to the body, so certainly the life of the Head flows into that member, and by this new vitality it is alive and in possession of every vital power. It also follows that such a member should be wholly submissive to the mind and will of the Head. How imperative, reasonable and blessed it is to be wholly yielded to Him that every thought of His great heart may find instant and perfect expression through every member in His own body!"⁴⁴

Witness Lee calls it "the greatest wonder in the universe that human beings could be begotten of God and sinners could be made children of God."⁴⁵ As children of God, begotten of God, the believers in Christ possess the life and nature of God. The Apostle John invites believers to "behold what manner of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God" (1 John 3:1) and emphatically affirms—"and we are!"—as though he anticipated their susceptibility to circumvent this truth or doubt its reality.

"Partakers of the Divine Nature": Mingling in the Nature of God

Theologians continue to grapple with the significance of the Petrine appellation, "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). To apprehend Peter's meaning requires that we understand what it means to *partake* and what is being partaken *of*. Apparent unease over the implications of 2 Peter 1:4 is often expressed as questions over the authenticity of the epistle itself or as allusions to its alleged similarities with pagan notions of *apotheosis*.⁴⁶ The prevalence of such controversies to the

⁴⁴ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Salvation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1947), 76-77.

⁴⁵ Witness Lee, *The Conclusion of the New Testament* (LSM, 1986), 1071.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Ernst Käsemann, "An Apologia for Primitive Christian Eschatology," in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, tr. W. J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1964), 169-95; Ben Drewery, "Deification," in

context of scholarly appraisals of 2 Peter 1:4 would seem to betray a skittishness to the very *idea* conveyed there.

In an essay on this subject, James Starr tentatively asks his readers, “Does 2 Peter 1:4 Speak of Deification?” While Starr accepts the validity of deification, he proposes that “‘sharers in divine nature’ should be read as theological shorthand for a constellation of ideas: knowledge of Christ producing escape *from* passion and decay *to* divine moral excellence and divine immortality, both of which are in the process of being realized already now.”⁴⁷ He defines the divine nature as that which is “contrasted with its opposite: this world’s corruption” or “that which is ‘*incorruptible* or *eternal*,’”⁴⁸ unenumerated “specific divine attributes and qualities.”⁴⁹

Stephen Finlan asserts that the “necessary preconditions” for Peter’s “notion” of theosis are “ethical character and proper belief” and that “divinization commences” only with their presence within the believer. The perpetuation of divinization is then contingent upon the believer’s nascent ethics and orthodoxy stimulating the “enhancement of one’s ethical character, and establishment of one in proper belief.” Thus, “the means and the destination are quite alike.”⁵⁰

However, as Witness Lee points out, the word *partaking*—or *participation*—implies something continuous, something of experience, an involvement or enjoyment: “Although we have the divine life once for all, we cannot enjoy the divine nature once for all. During the entire course of our Christian life on earth and even in eternity, we shall still be partaking of the divine nature....Just as

Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Gordon Rupp, ed. Peter Brooks (London: SCM Press, 1975), 35-62; Adolf Von Harnack, *History of Dogma (Volume 2)*, tr. Neil Buchanan (New York: Dover, 1961), 318.

⁴⁷ James Starr, “Does 2 Peter 1:4 Speak of Deification?” in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, eds. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 84.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵⁰ Stephen Finlan, “Second Peter’s Notion of Divine Participation,” in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, eds. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2006), 46.

we do not eat food once for all, so we do not partake of the divine nature once for all. We eat food daily, and for eternity we shall be partaking of the divine nature.”⁵¹ In other words, to partake of God’s nature is not a matter of ethical behavior and proper belief. To *partake* is to embrace a reality outside of oneself and to receive that reality inside of oneself, so that the object is assimilated and becomes one with the partaker. Consistent with his view of God’s salvation in life, Witness Lee understood *partaking* as an organic matter.

The object of this partaking, the divine nature, is for Witness Lee a profound simplicity. “The divine nature is what God is”⁵² in His communicable aspect—Spirit (John 4:24), love (1 John 4:8, 16), and light (1 John 1:5). “To be a partaker of the divine nature is to be one partaking of God as Spirit, as love, and as light.”⁵³ God alone is incorruptible and eternal, the “incorruptible, invisible, the only God,” to whom be “honor and glory for ever and ever” (1 Timothy 1:17), and He regenerates His believers of an incorruptible seed (1 Peter 1:23) unto an incorruptible inheritance (1 Peter 1:4).

In 2 Peter 1:4, the believers’ partaking of the divine nature is based on their having received “all things” related to the divine life and godliness in the verse preceding. According to this view, the expression of God’s attributes, “godliness,” is the issue of partaking of the nature of the divine life. To *partake* is not to imitate God or to adopt a Christian ethic, but to “fellowship with the Lord” to “realize and enjoy the Lord as the Spirit” and God as love until love “saturates” and “even becomes” who the believer is.⁵⁴ For Starr, Finlan, and others, to *imitate* God’s attributes is to partake of the divine nature. Witness Lee, on the other hand, understands “godliness,” sourced in the divine life, to be the *issue* of the believers’ partaking of the divine nature. Through this partaking, man’s human nature and God’s divine nature mingle together as the expression of the same two natures

⁵¹ Witness Lee, *Life-study of 2 Peter* (LSM, 1985), 26-27.

⁵² Witness Lee, *God’s New Testament Economy* (LSM, 1986), 327.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 328.

embodied in the God-man Jesus:

Mingling is deeper than union. In the incarnation, God not only united Himself with man but also mingled Himself with man...When a branch from one tree is grafted to another tree, they are mingled together. In the same way, God was mingled with man in incarnation. Then in Christ's resurrection, man was mingled with God. This is why the New Testament tells us that we were crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20a) and were resurrected with Christ (Eph. 2:6). Through Christ's death and resurrection we were not only united to Christ, to God, but also mingled with Him.⁵⁵

Witness Lee makes clear that his usage of the word “mingling” is not meant to suggest that the divine and human natures combine such that a “third nature” is produced. Instead, he uses the common definition of the word—“to bring or combine together or with something else so that the components remain distinguishable in the combination.”⁵⁶ He affirms, “Although the Lord has two essences, He is still a single complete Person, One who is both God and man.”⁵⁷

Just as God took on the human nature to become what man is in creation, so His children partake of the divine nature to become what He is in incorruptibility. God bridges the ontological gap—not once, but twice; not downward only, but upward also—first through Christ and then within His believers. The partakers of the divine nature live with God as He lives in fellowship with man. God indicates His intention through the mingling of divinity and humanity in the incarnation, and He effects this same mingling in His children as they partake of Him. “As the living Father has sent Me and I live because of the Father, so He who eats Me, he also shall live because of Me” (John 6:57). On this basis, Witness Lee, evoking Peter, defines theosis as a “participation in the divine life and

⁵⁵ Witness Lee, *The Christian Life* (LSM, 1994), 133.

⁵⁶ *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, s.v. “mingle.”

⁵⁷ Witness Lee, *Life-study of Luke* (LSM, 1985), 6.

nature of God.”⁵⁸

The distinction between God in His communicable and incommunicable aspects is implied in the contrast made by the Cappadocian fathers between God in His “energies” and God in His “essence.” In a similar manner, Witness Lee’s use of “life and nature” points to God in His communicable aspect, and his qualifier “not in the Godhead” to God in His incommunicable aspect. Witness Lee uses the biblical term “nature,” the same term that Peter uses in 2 Peter 1:4, to indicate that of which the believers “partake,” suggesting God in His communicability.

“But Not in the Godhead”: The Limits of Theosis

Believers in Christ, in Witness Lee’s understanding, enjoy a union with God in God’s life and a mingling with God in God’s nature, resulting in an experiential, ever-deepening intimacy that ultimately issues in their *becoming* God in life and nature. In saying this, Witness Lee expressed caution that the word “deification” be applied only with proper qualification and used only “in a limited sense to convey the fact that we have been born of God to become sons of God.”⁵⁹ This “limited sense” is articulated in the phrase “but not in the Godhead.”

Godhead, in other words, indicates the incommunicability of who God is in Himself with His omnipresence, His omniscience, His omnipotence, His headship, His lordship, etc. God is. He is the “I AM.” Witness Lee recognized and affirmed that God existed apart from creation in eternity past and will remain distinct from His creation for eternity future:

We worship God in His Godhead; we do not worship those who have His divine nature.

We can be transformed into the image of God (2 Cor. 3:18), having the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4), but we absolutely cannot become the Person of God or the Godhead. We can never share the Godhead...We are not transformed to be a part of the Godhead; rather,

⁵⁸ Witness Lee, *The Christian Life* (LSM, 1994), 134.

⁵⁹ Witness Lee, *Life-study of Galatians* (LSM, 1984), 175.

*we are transformed to have the divine nature. Today we do have God's divine nature within us, but we cannot share His Godhead. The Godhead is special and unique, but because of the divine life, we may have the divine nature in a general, or universal, way. As I have said, Christ is the Head and the Body, but we are the Body and cannot be the Head; the Head is a matter related to the Godhead.*⁶⁰

Attention must be given, in any comparative study, to the glossary at hand. While Witness Lee's usage of such phrases as "in life and nature" and "not in the Godhead" may differ from what is linguistically familiar in classical theology, these phrases themselves attest to the fact that he respected the distinction between God in His eternal divine being and God in His economy that theologians in East and West have recognized for centuries. Theologically, the basis for theosis is a distinction in God that allows for His having been incarnated in the first place.

Just as there is no perfect term to fully describe any aspect of God, there is no perfect term to fully describe God's otherness. Yet, theologians have formulated ways of making this distinction for millennia. The expression "in life and nature but not in the Godhead" is one way of conveying the same idea—that there is a reality in God that allows Him to take on the humanity of His creation and to share His divinity, while still respecting His perfect transcendence and total otherness. To "become God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead" takes Athanasius' well-known expression and clarifies it, refining it by conveying in a biblically precise yet accessible way the significance of the divine birth, the divine seed, union with God, mingling with God, partaking of the divine nature, and organic salvation.

"That They Also May Be in Us": Incorporation in the Person of God

While Witness Lee affirmed all the essential truths concerning the Trinity, he placed particular emphasis on the coinherence of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the Godhead. He taught,

⁶⁰ Witness Lee, *One Body, One Spirit, and One New Man* (LSM, 2000), 47.

according to John 14, that “the three of the Divine Trinity are an incorporation by coinhering mutually and by working together as one...by what They are and by what They do.”⁶¹ The Father, the Son, and the Spirit, who are “distinct but inseparable,”⁶² “not only coexist but also coinhere.”⁶³ As Kerry Robichaux describes, “When any one of the three of the Divine Trinity acts, all three operate...when any one of the three acts, He incorporates the operation of the other two in His action. What is manifest is the action of the one, but in that manifest action there is the incorporate operation of the other two.”⁶⁴

In John 14:10-11 the Lord Jesus refers both to coinherence (“Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me?...Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me”) and to con-joint operation (“The words that I say to you I do not speak from Myself, but the Father who abides in Me does His works...Believe...because of the works themselves.”). Although the disciples had seen the works of the Son before their eyes, in reality those works were the works of the Father working in and through the Son.

For Witness Lee, the eternal condition of the Father, Son, and Spirit is an interpenetrative relationship that characterizes everything related to Their being and Their working. This eternal, mutually coinhering condition is then extended to the believers in the resurrection of Christ. “In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (John 14:20). In Witness Lee’s understanding, “that day” refers to the day of the Son’s resurrection.

In resurrection, “the Spirit enters into us as the reality of the Son, who is the embodiment of the

⁶¹ Witness Lee, *The Issue of Christ Being Glorified by the Father with the Divine Glory* (LSM, 1996), 26.

⁶² Witness Lee, *The Revelation and Vision of God* (LSM, 2000), 35.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁴ Kerry S. Robichaux, “The Incorporation of the Triune God in the Character and Service of the Apostles (1),” *Affirmation & Critique* (October 2008): 47.

Father. In other words, He enters into us as the totality of the Triune God.”⁶⁵ The phrase, “you will know that I am in My Father,” suggests the incorporation between the Father and the Son, while “you in Me” suggests the incorporation of the believers into the Son and into the incorporation between the Father and the Son. Finally, the phrase “and I in you” suggests this incorporation within the believers. Such a mutual incorporation is made real by the Spirit of reality who “abides with you and shall be in you” (John 14:17).

While “union” and “mingling” are, to a limited degree, adequate to describe certain aspects of theosis, they are inadequate to convey the entire thought of it, particularly in light of John 14:16-20 and 17:21-23. As Witness Lee points out, “Humanly speaking, we can have our physical father’s life and nature, but our father as a person cannot be in us.”⁶⁶ Yet, the Son is in the Father, the Father is in the Son, and the believers are in the incorporation of the Father and the Son. The Triune God, who lives in an eternal condition of incorporation, indwells His believers, and His believers indwell the Triune God: “In this universal, divine-human incorporation, persons indwell one another, that is, they coinhere.”⁶⁷

James D. Gifford Jr. believes that many Protestants avoid interpreting such a “perichoretic soteriology” from John 14 because of their aspiration to preserve an “ontological gulf” wherein “God is God and humans are not.”⁶⁸ Gifford maintains that there are three types of perichoresis (referring to coinhering or mutual indwelling)—the first being the perichoresis of the Divine Trinity, the second being the perichoresis of the divine and human natures in Christ, and the third being the soteriological perichoresis that Gifford defines as “the mutual indwelling and active participation in the other between Christ and the believer” that “facilitates the Christian becoming a partaker of the

⁶⁵ Witness Lee, *Crystallization-study of the Gospel of John* (LSM, 1996), 145.

⁶⁶ Witness Lee, *The Issue of Christ Being Glorified by the Father with the Divine Glory* (LSM, 1996), 41.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ James D. Gifford, Jr, *Perichoretic Salvation: The Believer’s Union with Christ as a Third Type of Perichoresis* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 37.

divine nature.”⁶⁹

Gifford also maintains that there will always be some measure of “gulf” between Creator and created, given that the perichoresis of the Trinity is eternally “underived,” while the perichoresis of the believers is forever “derived.”⁷⁰ At the same time, Christ has already bridged the gap between the essential, underived perichoresis of the Trinity and the derived ecclesiological perichoresis of the believers through His hypostatic perichoresis in the incarnation when the “perichoretic divine life” was brought “into the world of human beings.”⁷¹ “Therefore the human nature of Christ is deified (or experiences *theosis*) at the hypostatic union,” Gifford writes.

“Theosis for other human beings was therefore made possible because a real human nature, the human nature of Jesus Christ, was deified. Because it has happened to one human, it could potentially be passed to others. There is only one incarnation, and the deification of Christ’s human nature is due to the (perichoretic) hypostatic union. But the possibility is present for the deification of others too. Because of the incarnation and the deification of a real human, the possibility, though not the guarantee, of theosis has been opened to the rest of the human race.”⁷²

At the end of John’s Gospel, the resurrected Lord returned to the disciples and “breathed into them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22). The entire Book of Acts may then be considered a record of the actions of the ascended Christ in the Spirit living in and through the disciples, “the apostolic ministry incorporated with Christ’s heavenly ministry.”⁷³ God continued to be operative on the earth through the apostles’ living and working *in the reality of the incorporation*.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 190.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 24-28.

⁷¹ Ibid., 27.

⁷² Ibid., 80.

⁷³ Witness Lee, *Crystallization-study of the Gospel of John* (LSM, 1996), 133.

This can be seen not only in the actions and activities of the apostles as recorded in Acts, but also in the New Testament epistles, in which the writers give repeated indication of their realization that they lived and served within the divine-human incorporation—in God and with God.

The Apostle Paul declares that his service is fulfilled “according to His operation which operates in me in power” (Colossians 1:29), referring to the operation of God within him and through him for his apostolic labor. Robichaux finds that a reading of Acts through Jude garners “85 instances of the incorporation of the Triune God by Christ, 61 by the Spirit, and 368 by the believers (all told, 514 instances),” all “supported by genuine textual material.”⁷⁴ While an analysis of these many instances is beyond the scope of this paper, even a cursory reading of the New Testament confirms that its pages are replete with such phrases as “in God,” “in Christ,” “in Jesus,” “in Jesus Christ,” “in Christ Jesus,” “in the Spirit,” “in Him,” “in the Lord,” “with Christ,” “through Christ,” etc. All of these are used to describe the believers’ actions, thoughts, feelings, opinions, and statuses as exemplified in the living and service of the New Testament apostles. “For to me, to live is Christ” (Philippians 1:21), Paul writes. “I am crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

Through such an incorporation of persons, the believers’ living becomes Christ’s living again on the earth. When Christ was living on the earth, “He was one with the Father, and when people saw Him, they saw the Father. This is the meaning of Christ being in us. This is God’s purpose in having Christ live in us. God wants all that Christ is and has to be fully expressed through us.”⁷⁵ Thus does Witness Lee draw the conclusion:

Union is concerning our oneness in life with the Lord. Mingling is related to the divine and human natures. The Lord has gone further to show us that our relationship with

⁷⁴ Kerry S. Robichaux, “The Incorporation of the Triune God in the Character and Service of the Apostles (1),” *Affirmation & Critique* (October 2008), 48.

⁷⁵ Witness Lee, *Christ and the Cross* (LSM, 2013), 38-39.

Him is not only one of union and mingling but also one of incorporation. John 14 stresses the word in four times. Verse 17 says that the Spirit of reality, another Comforter, would not only be with the disciples but also in them. The Spirit of reality, the person, is in us. Humanly speaking, we can have our physical father's life and nature, but our father as a person cannot be in us. But John 14:17 says that the Spirit of reality as a person would be in us.

Then in verse 20 the Lord said that on the day of resurrection the disciples would know that He is in the Father, that they are in Him, and that He is in them. The Son, the person, is in the Father, another person. Then we, the millions of persons, are in the Son, the person. Also, the Son is in us. Union and mingling refer to our relationship with the Lord in our life and nature but not in our person. Humanly speaking, no person can be in another person. But in the divine and mystical realm, the consummated God and the regenerated believers, the persons, indwell one another. This is an incorporation. In this universal, divine-human incorporation, persons indwell one another, that is, they coinhere.

In the whole universe, there are God, man, Satan, and the angels. The angels, including Satan and his fallen ones, are not considered persons. God and man are both corporate persons. God is not just a single person. He is three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—a corporate person. We, the millions of believers, are also a corporate person. These persons are now in one another. This is not a mingling but an incorporation.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Despite its rich historical tradition and biblical basis, the idea of deification has largely been ignored by evangelicals. This appears, however, to be slowly changing. Deification was a

⁷⁶ Witness Lee, *The Issue of Christ Being Glorified by the Father with the Divine Glory* (LSM, 1996), 40-41.

universally accepted concept in the early church and remains a central doctrine, in some form, in both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic theology. Recent years have seen growing interest in theosis as found in the writings of the early church, in Eastern Orthodox theology, and even in the theology and writings of leading Protestants.

That the Greek fathers saw deification as the goal of forgiveness and salvation is evidenced in many of their writings, particularly in the first five centuries of the church. In that era statements on deification were presented without controversy, as universally accepted teaching in the context of refuting heresy. While deification is less emphasized in the Latin fathers, it remains a Catholic doctrine. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) repeats Athanasius' declaration, "For the Son of God became man so that we might become God." Yet, within both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic theology, deification is largely a sacramental exercise.

Witness Lee taught that "God became man to make man God in life and nature but not in the Godhead," understanding deification as God's full salvation through the process of organic salvation, based upon judicial redemption, to gain the expression of God through humanity. Witness Lee would argue that to reject the notion that there is an organic aspect to God's salvation is to reject that there is "much more" to salvation beyond redemption (Romans 5:10). Such a rejection would also suggest that God had no particular intention for man before the fall and would relegate so many biblical passages related to life, birth, growth, maturity, and expression to mere metaphor.

Witness Lee believed that the new birth is not the restoration of man to a pre-fallen condition but the producing of a new creation through the imparting of the divine life into believing humanity, made possible through the resurrection of Christ. Through the divine birth with the divine life, the believers in Christ are children of God, begotten of God to share a union with God in the life of God. Thus, for man to be born of God is something much higher than restoration to a pre-fallen condition. By partaking of the divine nature, the believers in Christ enjoy a mingling of God with man in the divine and human natures. Not only so, the Triune God has become available to His

believers to incorporate them with Himself into a divine-human incorporation of God with man and man with God for their living and working together as one. In this incorporation, man lives out God for His corporate expression in humanity, and God is ever the source of this living. By the union in life, mingling in nature, and incorporation in person of the believers and the Triune God, man becomes God in *life* and in *nature*, but not in the *Godhead*.

Witness Lee would not claim to offer a final presentation of the meaning of theosis, understanding that no human thought or language could adequately convey the depth of God and of His work in the believers. Nevertheless, his presentation has much to offer to the ongoing discussion of deification. This review cannot summarize comprehensively all of his teaching on this or on any other point of Christian truth. However, if it serves to stimulate other lines of inquiry concerning deification and Witness Lee's understanding of it, it has served its purpose.

—Defense & Confirmation Project