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Every good Protestant Christian knows the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.¹ The great Revelation to humankind is that life is not about humankind at all. Nevertheless, God chose people as his special creation that he might glorify himself through them. Most Protestants explain this special work as the sanctifying activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. An Eastern Orthodox Christian would likely agree with much of the doctrine of sanctification, yet might go on to say that the chief end of man is, “to become god, to attain *theosis*, ‘deification’ or ‘divinization.’”² Eastern Orthodox theology explains the special work of God in the believer through the doctrine of *theosis*. As Daniel Clendenin says, “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.”³ The doctrine of *theosis* is a foreign concept to most Protestants, but in Eastern Orthodox theology, it is the central ideology.⁴

¹ James R. Boyd, ed., *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Publication Committee, 1854), 19.

² Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), 236.

³ Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 120.

⁴ Robert V. Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40/2 (June 1997) : 257.

Though this doctrine is virtually unknown among Protestant believers, the notion of *theosis* is found scattered throughout many early church writings. For example, Athanasius writes concerning Christ, “For He was made man that we might be made God.”⁵ Many Protestants categorize phrases such as this one as poetic speech, said more for aesthetic appeal than literal consequence. Orthodoxy, however, interprets these words quite literally.

The purpose of this paper is to compel one to consider God’s work through Christ in the lives of believers as seen through the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*. Looking more closely at this doctrine will allow Protestant Christians to both affirm and re-examine their own understanding of what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God, to be in Christ, and to partake of the divine nature.

Man Becoming God

How can any Christian, especially the early church fathers, speak in terms of man being deified? The idea of man being a god appeared so offensive to Paul and Barnabas that they tore their clothes in anguish, and this idea was so offensive to God, he caused worms to eat Herod alive (Acts 14, 12). If the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, then is the doctrine of *theosis*, the deification of man, outside the realm of Christian theology? The best way to answer these questions is to begin by explaining what *theosis* is not.

⁵ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.3.

What It Is Not

Eastern Orthodox theologians teach that the activity of humans becoming God is not achieved through human desire or effort. The difference, they say, is between a prideful people seeking to deify themselves, and God taking humbled people and deifying them by his grace. Whereas Paganism gives very human qualities to gods, or divine qualities to humans, *theosis* is the result of the Infinite God uniting with finite humanity through Christ. As Craig Blaising says, “The Pagans are condemned because being men they presume to make gods which like themselves do not endure.”⁶ *Theosis*, he says, is not to be confused with Pagan mythology.

The Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* is also not pantheism. Orthodox theologians seek to make clear that in the act of deification, man remains man and God remains God. When a person “becomes God,” they explain, the person does not lose their humanity.⁷ Instead, people “remain creatures while becoming God by grace, as Christ remained God in becoming man by the Incarnation.”⁸ Orthodox theologians, both of the past and today, are careful to deny any suggestion of pantheism.⁹ As concerns the issue of “essence,” they deny any dissolution or diffusion of substance on the part of the Divine or human being.

⁶ Craig A. Blaising, “Deification: An Athanasian View of Spirituality,” Paper included in Evangelical Theological Society Papers (Portland: Theological Research Exchange Network, 1988), text-fiche, 12.

⁷ Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 237.

⁸ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke, 1957), 87.

⁹ Daniel B. Clendenin, “Partakers of Divinity: The Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37/3 (September 1994) : 373.

Many Orthodox theologians make a great effort to prove that the doctrine of *theosis* does not confuse the Creator with his creation.¹⁰

Theosis, they explain, is not becoming one with God in the sense that man shares God's essence (*ousia*). Instead, to be one with God is more like "a movement of interpenetration between divinity and humanity; . . . human nature is transfigured [deified] by being permeated with the loving, self-giving action of God."¹¹ Therefore *theosis* is not something humans attain by their own will, or a dissolving into the essence of God. It also does not mean becoming a god or a deity in contrast to God, nor losing one's selfhood in becoming one with God.

What It Is

Though Protestants might be relieved to learn what *theosis* is not, they may still be surprised to learn what it is. For Eastern Orthodox Christians, deification is more than simple imitation of Christ's example or trying to be *like* God. True, believers are supposed to imitate Christ, they say, but it is through *theosis* that they are enabled to do so—it is God's work within the believer. Man is made in the image and likeness of God and the believer is one with him in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Being in Christ, sharing the divine nature, and being made in the image

¹⁰ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 281.

¹¹ Alistair Kee, "Deification," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Gordon S. Wakefield (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1998), 107.

and likeness of God are viewed quite literally through the lens of *theosis*.

Meister Eckhart, who was a fourteenth-century German mystic and teacher at the University of Paris, says, “Now all creatures have not being, for their being depends on the presence of God. Were God to turn from his creatures for only a moment, they would be annihilated.”¹² In other words, without God ‘man is’ cannot exist. Eckhart later states, “What is in God is God.”¹³ He is not speaking in terms of pantheism, but that humans have their being and find their existence only in God. Alistair Kee relates this idea to the Father and Son “making their home” in the believer from John 14:23.¹⁴ He goes on to say that “the ‘glory’ and ‘eternal life’ [from John 17:5] given to the believer consist precisely in sharing this relationship.”¹⁵ The same type of relationship the Son has with the Father is also available to the believer through the Holy Spirit. By being made a child of God through adoption, the believer is given the Holy Spirit through which the powers that belong to Christ are made accessible. The result, says Orthodoxy, is that the redeemed in Christ will be made God.¹⁶

¹² Meister Eckhart “Omne datum optimum” (*Deutsche Predigten*), 171; quoted in Winfried Courduan, “A Hair’s Breadth from Pantheism: Meister Eckhart’s God-Centered Spirituality,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37/2 (June 1994) : 265.

¹³ Eckhart “Omne datum optimum,” 266.

¹⁴ Kee, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 106.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ G.L. Bray, “Deification” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, J.I. Packer (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 189.

So what is *theosis*? To answer succinctly, Daniel Clendenin accumulates several terms used by the fathers and defines it as:

*A transformation, union, participation, partaking, intermingling, elevation, interpenetration, transmutation, commingling, assimilation, reintegration, adoption, recreation. Divinization implies our being intertwined with Christ, an influx of the divine, or the attainment of similitude with God.*¹⁷

In Christ

The doctrine of *theosis* is built primarily on an esoteric interpretation of the Incarnation of Christ. Not only is God able to become flesh, but he does so in order that flesh might become divine. Irenaeus seems to echo this though in his work, *Against Heresies*, when he says, “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.”¹⁸ The deification of humanity happens only because of and through the humanness of God. Because Christ became everything humanity is, yet sinless, humanity is now able to become what God is—even sinless.

St. Hilary of Poitiers wrote that only God could become something other than what he was and still not cease to be God.¹⁹ He goes on to say:

¹⁷ Clendenin, “Partakers,” 374.

¹⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book V Preface.

¹⁹ St. Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, IX 4.38.

*The Incarnation is summed up in this, that the whole Son, that is, His manhood as well as His divinity, was permitted by the Father's gracious favour to continue in the unity of the Father's nature, and retained not only the powers of the divine nature, but also that nature's self. For the object to be gained was that man might become God.*²⁰

The whole point of Christ's coming to earth, says Hilary, is "that man might become God." In order for God to deify man, he had to become man, yet not cease to be God. In so doing, man remains man, yet through Christ, becomes God.

Orthodox theologians offer several Scripture references in support of *theosis*. For example Galatians 2:20:²¹

*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*²²

Even Protestant theologians commenting on this verse tend to speak in *theosis*-type language. For example, in Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians he says, "Thou art so entirely and nearly joined unto Christ, that he and thou art made as it were one person; . . . for by faith we are so joined together, that we are become one flesh and one bone."²³ Luther shows this

²⁰ Ibid., IX 5.38.

²¹ Others are: 1 John 4:16; Col. 1:15-18; 1 Cor. 2:10-14; 15:49; Eph. 3:16-19; 4:13-15; John 17:11, 21-23; Rom. 2:7; 5-7; 2 Tim. 1:10.

²² All Scripture references come from the English Standard Version, 2011.

²³ Martin Luther, *A Commentary Upon the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (Connecticut: Salmon S. Miles, 1837), 163-164.

relationship, this event, as something more than mere fellowship as between friends. It is an intermingling, so closely joined with Christ that believers become one flesh and one bone. John Calvin comments that the believer receives a “secret energy” by being engrafted into Christ’s death.²⁴ Just as the root nourishes the twig, so the Christian survives by the divine nourishment of God. It appears these are not mere metaphors for Luther and Calvin, but are actual events in the lives of believers.

Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica in the fourteenth century, also used the notion of “God’s energies” in his teachings. Contrasting God’s energies with God’s essence Palamas says, “The essence is simple, indivisible, not capable of being shared; the energies are multiple and sharable. Deification is union with the divine acts or operations.”²⁵ The way in which God shares his energies, he says, is through the Holy Spirit. As Georgios Mantzarids says, “The Holy Spirit is everywhere present in both essence and energy; but whereas His essence remains inaccessible and may not be shared, His energy is shared . . . by the saints.”²⁶ To be in Christ, then, means to believe “by faith in the Son of God . . . who gave Himself up for me” and allowing him to live “in me” by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (John 17). Believers, says the doctrine of *theosis*, are deified because of the incarnation of Christ and through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 74.

²⁵ Kee, *The Westminster Dictionary*, 107.

²⁶ Georgios I. Mantzarids, *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (New York: St. Vladimir’s, 1984), 36.

Partakers of The Divine Nature

To be in Christ means to partake of the divine nature, and Orthodox theologians quote 2 Peter 1:4 in support:

By which [God's glory and excellence] he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

Orthodoxy says that to be partakers means to *actually* possess the divine nature. Protestant theologians on the other hand, are cautious when explaining this verse. For example, Calvin is careful to note that the word “nature,” in this verse, does not mean God’s essence.²⁷ Instead, he says the apostle Peter means that “when divested of all the vices of the flesh, we shall be partakers of divine and blessed immortality and glory, so as to be as it were one with God as far as our capacities will allow.”²⁸

Calvin hesitates to say believers will partake of the divine nature fully while still on earth. Instead, he says partaking of the divine nature will be more fully realized (though still limited) after death. Yet, regarding the resurrection, he does not hesitate in the least when he says, “Let us then mark, that the end of the gospel is, to render us eventually comfortable to God, and, if we may so speak, *to deify us.*”²⁹

²⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Volume XXII: Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John, James, 2 Peter, Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 371.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, 371, emphasis mine.

Jesus prays in John 17:22-23a, “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me.” The point Orthodox theologians attempt to make is that partaking in the divine nature is more than a simple relationship as with friends. Christ did not merely follow the Father’s example but was truly one with the Father. Panayiotis Nellas says that deification is synonymous with Christification. He says that when Paul teaches that the believer is one with Christ, he “is not advocating an external imitation or a simple ethical improvement but a real Christification.”³⁰ The believer is *truly* in Christ and is *truly* able to partake of the divine nature. Henry Scougal sees it as “a real participation of his nature; . . . and they who are endued with it may be said to have *God dwelling in their souls and Christ formed within them.*”³¹ According to the doctrine of *theosis*, “Christ formed within” means the Christian does not live his or her own life, but is active by the “secret power” of Christ.³² In this way, the secret power, or energies, of the Holy Spirit is what allows the believer to be in Christ and partake of the divine nature.

In The Image and Likeness of God

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’” (Gen. 1:26). In a paper delivered to the Evangelical

³⁰ Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s, 1997), 39.

³¹ Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1948), 33-34.

³² Calvin, *Commentaries*, 74.

Theological Society concerning *theosis*, James B. Jordan said that people were created to be a “symbol of God”; their lives are to image God, an active event.³³ Yet, several church fathers were divided on what it means for humans to be in the image and likeness of God.³⁴

For example, Irenaeus said humans were made up of flesh, spirit, and soul. The flesh and soul consisted of the image of God, and the spirit was the likeness of God: “But if the Spirit be wanting to the soul, he who is such is indeed . . . an imperfect being, possessing indeed the image [of God] in his formation (*in plasmate*), but not receiving the similitude through the Spirit.”³⁵ Irenaeus believed Adam was perfect because he had both the image and likeness of God.³⁶ At the fall he was torn in two and lost the likeness, the similitude with God. His conclusion is that Adam, when he rebelled against God, lost the presence of the Spirit. For Irenaeus, then, the Incarnation was the means by which God brought the Spirit back to fallen humanity. Through the Incarnation, people now have the opportunity to regain the likeness of God, through the presence of the Spirit.

³³ James B. Jordan, “Some Encouragements toward an Evangelical Doctrine of the Deification of Man,” Paper included in *Evangelical Theological Society Papers* (Portland: Theological Research Exchange Network, 1987), text-fiche, 3.

³⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book V 6.1; Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity* 7.6.12; 11.5.8; Diadochus of Photice, *On Spiritual Perfection* 4; Origen, *On First Principles* 3.6.; Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks*, 10.

³⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book V 6.1.

³⁶ Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers* (Anaheim: A&C, 2002), 124.

Along this same line of thinking, some argue that Adam and Eve were a type of incarnation themselves. James Hastings says, “God intended man to be the incarnation of Himself, for He ‘made man in His own image.’”³⁷ The Word became flesh so that people might regain what was lost. Lossky says, “What man ought to have attained by raising himself up to God, God achieved by descending to man.”³⁸

In contrast to Irenaeus, Athanasius does not speak in terms of people losing or regaining the likeness or image of God. Instead, when he says, “For He was made man that we might be made God,” he means God did something completely new.³⁹ *Theosis*, he says, is not so much the restoration of something lost, but a completely new event never before seen.⁴⁰ Andrew Louth says that “for Athanasius deification no longer meant restoration of our natural state but the realization of a new possibility offered to us by God through the incarnation.”⁴¹ In Christ, people are offered something which could never be attained any other way.

What If

There are some who say that Adam and Eve would have gained deification eventually had they only waited. Donald

³⁷ James Hastings, *Great Texts of the Bible: Genesis to Numbers Vol. I* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 63.

³⁸ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, 136.

³⁹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.3.

⁴⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15.

⁴¹ Andrew Louth, “The Cappadocians,” in *The Study of Spirituality*: ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnhold (New York: Oxford, 1986), 162.

Winslow states that they “sought to grasp the very thing that was to have been theirs, had they been willing to wait, namely, *theōsis*.”⁴² Jordan says that people were like infants (which is why they felt no shame in their nakedness), and although made in the image of God, were to become like God “through a process of growth and maturation.”⁴³ He says that at some point, humans would have been clothed by God deifying them when he was ready.

Such a thesis, however, seems to weaken the argument for *theosis* more than help it. If there is even the most remote possibility that people could have achieved deification on their own, then the doctrine ceases to be Christian. Just as Lossky so wisely points out, “God has foreseen the fall of Adam, and the Son of God was ‘the Lamb slain before the ages’ in the pre-existent will of the Trinity.”⁴⁴ To open the possibility of “earning” deification, is to nullify the Incarnation and the gospel message.

East and West

Theosis looks very similar to the Protestant doctrines of justification and sanctification. Where Eastern Orthodox Christians see the process as all of a whole, Protestant Christians see a distinction between justification and sanctification. As J.C. Ryle says, “In justification the word to be addressed to man is

⁴² Donald F. Winslow, *The Dynamics of Salvation: A Study in Gregory of Nazianzus* (Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd., 1979), 64.

⁴³ Jordan, “Some Encouragements,” 4.

⁴⁴ Lossky, *The Mystical Theology*, 137-138.

‘believe’ - only believe; in sanctification the word must be ‘watch, pray, and fight.’ What God has divided let us not mingle and confuse.”⁴⁵ In this way, one does not have to wonder if one has “acquired” enough sanctification to be justified. Speaking on the differences between Lutheranism and Orthodoxy, Ross Aden says, “Once the line was drawn, however finely, everything had to be placed on one side of the line or the other.”⁴⁶

Though the apostle Paul uses legal language to teach justification through Christ, the distinction he makes with sanctification seems to show it as the continuation of God’s work of salvation from the very beginning. Paul teaches that the one springs naturally from the other as the believer is “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Essentially Paul says, “You used to do these things, but now that you have been justified, you *do* these things instead.” Believers do not win merit, but are created in Christ for good works. Aden goes on to say, “What Lutherans have divided into justification and sanctification, Orthodoxy sees as two aspects of the single process of human transformation into union with the divine life.”⁴⁷

The *Philokalia*, the single most important collection of Orthodox writings, says, “We receive salvation by grace and as a divine gift of the Spirit. But to attain the full measure of virtue we need also to possess faith and love, and to struggle to

⁴⁵ J.C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Differences, and Roots* (Moscow: Charles Nolan, 2001), 28.

⁴⁶ Ross Aden, “Justification and Sanctification: A Conversation Between Lutheranism and Orthodoxy,” *St. Vladimir’s Quarterly* 38:1 (1994) : 91.

⁴⁷ Ross Aden, “Justification and Sanctification,” 99.

exercise our free will with integrity.”⁴⁸ The difference appears to be what each side stresses. Orthodoxy speaks in terms of a mystical union with God which is bolstered through the sacramental system. There is something sacred and hidden in *theosis* that can only be gained through divine activities. The Protestant view speaks in terms of juridical categories so that through willful humiliation before Christ, believers are justified and begin a life-long process of becoming more *like Christ* through the work of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁹ Still, perhaps both Orthodox and Protestant believers will agree that one is justified to God through Christ, and at the same time begin an *actual* process of becoming like God which is finally perfected in the resurrection.

Wayne Grudem says, “Our resurrection bodies will show the fulfillment of God’s perfect wisdom in creating us as human beings who are the pinnacle of his creation and the appropriate bearers of his likeness and image.”⁵⁰ In resurrected form, believers will have heavenly bodies which are immortal and glorious, and they will reign with Christ (1 Cor. 15:48-49; Rom. 2:7; 1 Cor. 15:53-54; 2 Tim. 1:10; Matt. 13:43; Dan. 12:3; 2 Tim. 2:12). Speaking of the resurrected body Paul says, “What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.” (1 Cor. 15:42-44). He completes this in verse 49 by saying “Just as

⁴⁸ Macarius of Egypt, “Makarian Homilies 1.1” (Philokalia 3:285); quoted in Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 135-136.

⁴⁹ Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 124.

⁵⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 831.

we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.”

Human separation from God was never a natural event but penal, and yet, it is completely wiped away in the resurrected and glorified body.⁵¹ In the glorified body there will be no more tears, no more death, no more mourning, nor pain as the old things pass away (Revelation 21:4). These things can only happen if humans become something more than merely human. In the Incarnation God knew pain, and tears, and mourning, and death. Christ is not merely human, however, and in the resurrection he became the “firstborn from the dead.” According to the doctrine of *theosis*, the glorification of believers in the resurrection is the result of an activity which began before death. It is, instead, an actual recreation of the human into the divine.

Critique and Thoughts for Further Study

An initial concern with the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* has to do with the term itself. By translating the word literally as “deification” or “becoming God,” Orthodox theologians create unnecessary barriers to discussion and, therefore, must put great effort into explaining what *theosis* does not mean. A literal translation of the meaning rather than a of the term itself may help alleviate some of the common concerns of pantheism or changing God’s essence. For example, the phrase “becoming like God” not only remains faithful to the meaning of *theosis* but also provides common ground on which the doctrine can be presented to Protestant Christians.

⁵¹ John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 65.

This same point applies to the use of the phrase “God’s energies” or “energy” when speaking of the work of the Holy Spirit. Such impersonal language when referring to the work of the Spirit runs the risk of relegating the Spirit to a kind of cosmic force rather than the third Person of the Trinity. Instead, the biblical metaphor “fruit of the Spirit” is more appropriate when referring to God’s work in the life of the believer. As Rakestraw says, “Why use terminology that, at first glance at least, will alienate those unfamiliar with this line of thinking in Christian theology, and thus miss what might be of benefit to them?”⁵²

Beyond words and phrases there are deeper issues with which theologians must deal. For instance, if Christians are in the earthly process of “becoming God by grace,” how does this coincide with the Orthodox teaching that believers must struggle to exercise their free will with integrity?⁵³ The Eastern Orthodox Church answers this by appealing to the sacramental system. Believers are “exposed” to the Scriptures as taught by the Church, and thereby strive to live godly lives, but they must also participate in the sacraments.⁵⁴ The sacramental aspect, at least, is unacceptable to Protestant theology. In light of *theosis*, however, Protestants can readdress the doctrines of justification, sanctification, and glorification as an inseparable process that is God’s work in the believer.

More study should also be given to the understanding of what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God as

⁵² Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God,” 265.

⁵³ Macarius of Egypt, “Makarian Homilies 1.1” (Philokalia 3:285); quoted in Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 135-136.

⁵⁴ Ross Aden, “Justification and Sanctification,” 108.

regards *theosis*. Is Irenaeus' claim correct, that people retained the image but lost the likeness of God when they sinned? If so, why is the biblical language the reverse of his argument? Romans 8:29 says the believer is being conformed to the *image* of Christ, while James 3:9 says people are made in the *likeness* of God. Calvin certainly saw no difference: "As for myself, before I define the image of God, I would deny that it differs from his likeness."⁵⁵ How does this fit with Athanasius' argument that the work of Christ is not about restoring people to what they were before the fall, but is about making them into something completely new?

If Eastern Orthodox theologians wish to use the arguments of Irenaeus and Athanasius, they will, in addition, need to address these issues.

Conclusion

Scripture teaches that believers speak the words of God, serve in the strength of God, think the thoughts of God, and have the mind of Christ (1 Peter 4:11; 1 Corinthians 2:13, 16; 1 Thessalonians 2:13): God's words, God's strength, God's thoughts, Christ's mind. These qualities may be the ways in which believers partake of the divine nature, but what do they mean?

Protestants might answer that this process comes about at the point of justification by faith. Sanctification comes through a growing knowledge of God's revealed Word through the work

⁵⁵John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis: Vol. I* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 93.

of the Holy Spirit. As Luther says, “Christ is the Christ because He achieved our redemption from sin and death for the very purpose that the Holy Spirit should change our old Adam into a new man, so we can die to sin and live to righteousness.”⁵⁶

The words of the Bible are God’s words; they are his mind and thoughts. By the indwelling of the Holy Spirit believers are able to comprehend this great mystery, and by his strength, and in this way, partake of the divine nature. “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (1 Corinthians 2:12).

Eastern Orthodox Christians, however, believe there is still something much more mysterious and supramundane involved in this process. They believe that aspects of glorification, the time when the human body is transformed from perishable to imperishable, do not have to wait until the resurrection. As Rakestraw says:

*Rather than seeing our progressive sanctification as something done for us by God from outside . . . or as something we do from below as we pray to God above, . . . we may take a kind of quantum leap forward by understanding sanctification as the very life and energy of God in us.*⁵⁷

God became man that man might become God. Through Christ God recreates believers, remaking them into his perfect likeness

⁵⁶ Charles P. Schaum, ed., *Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2010), 136.

⁵⁷ Ross Aden, “Justification and Sanctification,” 267.

and image. “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

This article is a brief survey of *theosis*, and Protestant theologians may have additional issues with this doctrine, but by learning more about the Eastern Orthodox view, Protestants can re-evaluate, and be reminded of, just how glorious, how “spiritual,” is the work of God in the life of the believer. In Christ, we are truly new creations.