

# Deified Likeness: Creation, Sin and the Path to Deification

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“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” The Jesus prayer, a prayer centered on the apparent sinful nature of man and the mercy requested from Jesus Christ. The Christian acknowledging their own sinfulness, a sinfulness that has been found throughout history. From the beginning in Genesis, Adam and Eve, disobey the Lord and eat the forbidden fruit.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the flood narrative the Lord looks down on his creation and comments that “every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.”<sup>2</sup> In the Book of Judges, there is a continual “doing what is displeasing to the Lord.”<sup>3</sup> In the Gospel of John, Christ says to those about to stone an adulteress, “let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw the stone.”<sup>4</sup> Even Peter, the rock of the church, three times denies he knows Christ, out of fear of persecution.<sup>5</sup> This sinfulness, like in the Jesus Prayer, is acknowledged even to this day; human nature, according to Christianity seems to include sin. Yet, at the end of creation the Lord looked down and saw all that he had created and “it was very good.”<sup>6</sup> How then can Christians understand this apparent universal sinfulness? Certainly, it cannot truly be found in the very nature of mankind.

In this paper, I will argue that sin, although a common experience, is not found as intrinsic to man’s nature, but instead, through understanding man’s creation “in our image, according to our likeness,”<sup>7</sup> sin becomes the result of misdirected acts of the will, during times

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 3:6 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 6:5 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> Judges 2:11, 3:7, 4:1, 6:1 (NRSV)

<sup>4</sup> John 8:8 (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> Matt 26:33-35, Mark 14:29-31, Luke 22:33-34, John 18:17-27 (NRSV)

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 1:31 (NRSV)

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 1:26

of temptation, which is possible because, unlike Jesus Christ, the Image, man is in the process of growing in likeness to Christ; a process known to Eastern Orthodoxy as theosis or deification.

The first question to be answered is: What does it mean in Genesis 1:26 to be created “according to our image and according to our likeness.” To understand this phrase, leaning heavily on Eastern Orthodox theology, the Greek words used for image and likeness, ‘*eikon*’ and ‘*homoiosis*,’ must be defined. ‘*Kat’ eikona*’ in Greek, as defined by Andrew Louth in *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, begs the question of created “according to what image.”<sup>8</sup> Later we will explore what this image is, defining it as Christ Himself. Andrew Louth then describes ‘*homoiosis*’ as “something more precise.” The “*osis* ending,” he says, “implies a process, not a state.”<sup>9</sup> Without spending much time analyzing the linguistics behind image and likeness, the image therefore can be said to refer to a static aspect of man’s nature, as created according to the image, which will be expanded upon shortly, whereas likeness refers to a dynamic aspect of man’s nature, a process of more accurately reflecting the image. Andrew Louth further suggests that what this creation account means for mankind is that man is “created with some kind of affinity for God which makes possible a process of assimilation to God.”<sup>10</sup> Kallistos Ware, an Orthodox bishop, likewise writes in *The Orthodox Church* that the image “refers to human free will, reason and a sense of moral responsibility”<sup>11</sup> whereas the likeness refers to “an assimilation to God.”<sup>12</sup> The image, then, can be conceived of as unchanging, static, qualities of man whereas the likeness, being a dynamic process, involves a tendency to grow

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<sup>8</sup> Louth, Andrew. 2013. *Introducing Eastern Orthodox theology*. London: Spck, p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>11</sup> Kallistos. 2015. *The Orthodox Church: an introduction to Eastern Christianity*, p. 218-219.

<sup>12</sup> Louth. *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, p. 84.

towards, or away from, man's calling in creation; deification, a becoming like God. Man is therefore created with a static nature that involves use of free will, reason and moral responsibility, yet, it is the dynamic portion of man's nature that then uses these static capacities to become deified.

St John Chrysostom, in his *Homilies on Genesis*, further illuminates this distinction between the image and likeness. While discussing the image and likeness in Genesis he says that the image "refers to the matter of control... as having control of everything on earth, and nothing on earth is greater than the human being."<sup>13</sup> This control could then be correlated with the control of the will, reason and moral responsibility that Kallistos Ware described above; a control that extends outward to other aspects of creation but also involves control over the individual person's own actions, through using his will. While discussing the likeness portion of creation in Genesis 1:26, Chrysostom says, "virtue it is to adopt the attitude of a corpse in regard to the affairs of this life and like a corpse take no interest in what threatens the soul's salvation."<sup>14</sup> Being created according to the likeness, Chrysostom says, has the resulting effect that "we resemble him in our gentleness and mildness and in regard to virtue."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, I think it is possible to see how in Chrysostom's theology there is an agreement that the Image could again be defined as a static, unchanging quality of man and the likeness is the dynamic process of becoming, involving an adoption of an attitude with regards to what a person takes interest; implying a liability to change depending on what attitudes a person willfully adopts. It

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<sup>13</sup> John Chrysostom, and Robert C. Hill. 2004. *Eight sermons from the Book of Genesis*. Brookline, Mass: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, p. 120

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 120

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 120.

is when man willfully takes interest in things that threaten the soul's salvation that he fails to act virtuously and therefore draws further from the goal of his creation; deification. Sin, "hamartia" in the Greek, meaning "missing the mark," manifests when man misuses his natural capacities; not to be found in the static nature of man, but instead in man's failure to willfully adopt the attitudes that will hit the mark, or in the dynamic aspect of man's nature.

Chrysostom says that "there is need to control and tame them and submit them to the rule of reason."<sup>16</sup> The key point being that it is in this dynamic aspect of man's nature where the ability to sin resides; an ability that implies potentiality but not definitive nature, and it is a potentiality that provides man the opportunity through taming the sinful inclinations to grow in likeness to God.

The second question then becomes, what is the mark that is aimed for; the mark that leads away from sin. This is answered by looking to "the Image" which man is created according to. Referring to the Bible, in 2 Corinthians 4:4 Christ is said to be "the Image of God" and again in Colossians 1:15, "He (Christ) is the Image of the Invisible God." For man, who is created "according to the image," is then able to look to Christ, who is "the Image" to understand where he should be aiming. Colossians 2:9 adds to this conception of Christ as a guide for one's aim when it says, "in Him dwells the whole fullness of the deity bodily, and you share in this fullness in Him." The Image of God, Christ, becomes the who and what man is created as a reflection of, and therefore His life becomes the prototype for the dynamic likeness man is called to in creation; a fullness in likeness that through creation in the image

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p 120-121, The them in this quotation refers to the ideas and inclinations of man.

man can share in by adopting certain attitudes; attitudes which Christ exemplifies due to His nature.

This fact regarding Christ's nature was extensively contemplated by the early church during the first Seven Ecumenical Councils. The Sixth Ecumenical Council, held in Constantinople in 680-681, begins by summarizing the previous councils regarding Christ's Divine and human nature, which therefore provides a succinct description of the nature of Christ. "Christ must be confessed to be very God and very man, one and the holy and consubstantial and life-giving Trinity, perfect in deity and perfect in humanity, very God and very man, of a reasonable soul and human body subsisting; consubstantial with the Father as touching his Godhead and consubstantial with us as touching his manhood."<sup>17</sup> This is a basic summary of Christ, which addresses His full divinity and full humanity, consubstantial with both God and man; His full humanity and consubstantial nature with man being particularly important when understanding Christ as the prototype for dynamic living guided by proper aim. The Council goes further to discuss the two natural wills of Christ, who via His two natures, God and man, human and divine, likewise has two wills, one human and one divine, that act according to their own particular operations.<sup>18</sup> Christ in His perfect humanity then submits His human will to the will of the Father, and "His human will, although deified, was not suppressed, but was rather preserved."<sup>19</sup> The Council therefore holds that Christ has both a human and divine will and His deified human will freely submit itself to His divine will. Man can understand

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<sup>17</sup> Davis, Leo Donald. 1987. *The seven pillars of faith: the history and theology of the early Ecumenical Councils*. Wilmington, Del: M. Glazier, p. 282-283.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 283.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 283.

proper use of the will then, which is correlated with deification, by freely submitting his human will to the will of God.

Kallistos Ware, comments on Christ's Incarnation in *The Orthodox Way*, saying that, "the Incarnation of Christ, effects more than a reversal of the fall, more than a restoration of man to his original state.... When God becomes man, this marks the beginning of an essentially new stage in the history of man."<sup>20</sup> It is this new stage of human history where man can see clearly, exemplified in Christ, the proper aim and is shown the path which will then help steady that aim. John Chrysostom says "as God and God's Son, God's image, he shows the exact likeness. Although an image ought to be exactly similar, this is not possible for human art fails in many respects, but where God is, there is no error no failure."<sup>21</sup> Kallistos Ware and John Chrysostom both begin to bring to light the guide that Christ is for proper dynamic living. Chrysostom, in particular, addresses that although Christ, as He is God, can be a perfect Image in perfect likeness to God the Father, man due to the limits of human creation, necessarily fails to some extent in showing forth the likeness of God. This can be taken a step further and it can be said that Christ, acting according to His perfect human nature, submits His human will freely to His divine will; exemplifying the proper use of the human will when perfectly drawn into the likeness which man is created according to. Christ necessarily shows the perfect use of His human will, being the perfect likeness, whereas man must necessarily strive to perfect the use of his will.

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<sup>20</sup> Kallistos Ware. 1979. *The Orthodox Way*. Crestwood, New York. St Vladimir's Seminary Press, p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, John Chrysostom, and Philip Schaff. 1956. *A Select library of the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers of the Christian church*. Volume XIII: Chrysostom's Homilies on Colossians, p. 479.

If sin emerges due to the dynamic nature of man creation “according to our likeness” and the mark that is aimed for, as evident in Christ’s life, is that of submission of the will to the divine, the final question is why does man still give in to sin and how does he progress on the path to deification. The answer lies again in Christ, the Image, and His perseverance through temptation. The Gospels do not describe a reality where Christ avoids temptation all together. It would be rather easy to discredit Christ’s example if He failed to face any form of temptation which could lead to sin and coasted through life on some divinely perfected road, but instead in Matthew 4:1, for example, Jesus is “led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted.” Christ, like man, experiences temptation, but where man so often fails Christ perseveres. An important note is that this therefore implies that temptation is not in and of itself a bad thing, because even in the perfect humanity exemplified in Christ, temptation is present. Chrysostom comments on Christ’s temptations saying that “He endures, in order that we may not be troubled by temptations that will inevitably arise after baptism.”<sup>22</sup> He says these trials “build strength and modesty” and they are “part of the fight” that man experiences during their natural lives.<sup>23</sup> Christ exemplifies this in His temptations when He turns to Scripture to defend against the ploys of the devil; fasting in the desert when Christ was certainly hungry, even “famished.”<sup>24</sup> His human will, by nature, would have enjoyed and desired food, but He submits that desire to the divine will which desires spiritual food when He replies to the devil, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”.<sup>25</sup> His

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<sup>22</sup> Augustine, John Chrysostom, and Philip Schaff. 1956. *A Select library of the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers of the Christian church*. Volume X: Chrysostom’s Homilies on Matthew, p. 150.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 4:2 (NRSV).

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 4:3 (NRSV).



reminder is that through submitting His human will to God, He is able to persevere through times of temptation. Furthermore, what is implied in Chrysostom's writings is that it is through perseverance in times of temptation which helps man grow in virtue. Chrysostom further notes that "not knowing Scriptures, is the cause of all evils" because it is as if "going into battle without arms."<sup>26</sup> Christ showed how in the face of temptation it was by turning to Scripture that He could disarm the devil and persevere. Likewise, Chrysostom would say this is what man is called to do as well, turn to Scripture, where Christ is the witness to man's true calling and Christ is the witness to proper alignment of the human will; submission and obedience to the will of God.

Christ again reminds His disciples to submit their wills to the divine when in Matthew 16:24 He tells His disciples that for man to come after Him they must "renounce themselves, take up their cross and follow him." For Chrysostom, this again implies the free choice of the will. "If any man will come," he says, "if they choose to become a disciple, it is a free choice."<sup>27</sup> Let him follow me, "to follow" he says, "gives heed to the other virtues and for Christ's sake, suffering anything that he may endure."<sup>28</sup> It is by losing life that one gains it. Chrysostom describes this as a process of destruction and salvation that is implied in the submission of the human will to the divine. Man destroys the self, submits the will, obeys God, to in the end be saved from sin by drawing towards that which he is truly called for, deification. Christ knows that man is afraid of death, and experiences it Himself in Gethsemane when he despairs over

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 535f.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, John Chrysostom, and Philip Schaff. 1956. *A Select library of the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers of the Christian church*. Volume X: Chrysostom's Homilies on Matthew, p. 592.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 592.

His coming crucifixion, but He also exemplifies obedience and submission to God saying, “May thy will be done.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise, man is called to allow that sinful part of himself to die away; that part which is drawing him away from his true nature. He is aided in this destruction through obedience and submission to the divine will so that he can be redeemed; so that the true nature of man, the dynamic likeness can manifest itself more fully, and draw man towards his deified self.

Part of the destruction is then a destruction of self-will; a destruction that provides an outlet for the divine will to work through the obedient man. Destruction is also found if man remains engrossed in self-will, self-driven desires. Colossians 3:5 tells mankind to “put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature” and instead to “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” This implies that the opposite can be done and by living a Chrysostom comments on these passages by saying that “it is the moral choice that determines one rather than the substance.”<sup>30</sup> It is not then man’s nature that determines who he is but instead his moral choices. Man can be thought of as created in the static image, controlling dynamically his own deification through proper use of the will and reason according to the moral guidelines, exemplified in Christ, which ask him to submit his human will to the divine will for the divine will of God to aid him in his salvation. These things all helping man to become that which he truly is; a deified being. The destruction comes from both sides. You either destroy yourself, submit your self-guided will to the divine and grow in likeness to God, or you destroy yourself by continuing to self-guide your will towards human things which

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<sup>29</sup> Luke 22:39-42.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, John Chrysostom, and Philip Schaff. 1956. *A Select library of the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers of the Christian church*. Volume XIII: Chrysostom’s Homilies on Colossians, p. 523.

destroys your likeness to God. In a way a paradox, where the man is destroyed from both ends, but the former leads to the true self as created by God, whereas the latter leads to a self-deluded man formed by misconceptions of true human nature.

A potential misconception would lead this pattern of thought to a heresy known as Pelagianism. Pelagianism involves the human will being strong enough to guide one through times of temptation<sup>31</sup>. The idea would be that Christ had a superior human will than man and it was the strength of the will that allowed him to persevere through temptation. It is important to remember that “the Spirit led him into the desert to be tempted” and therefore it is not through acts of the will alone that man is able to persevere through temptation. There is not sufficient time or space for an ample discussion on how the sacraments, or mysteries of the Church aid man in his journey towards deification, but it needs to at least be commented on. In short, it is through grace, received through sacramental living, provided when the Holy Spirit guides a person, like Christ through his times of temptation, that man can properly order his will. It is through grace that one truly understands the Scriptures well enough to properly use the weapons they provide. Therefore, the importance of grace is not to be undermined by thinking that through strong arming the will alone, man will save himself. This is mistaken and would be a form of Pelagianism.

To summarize, the three main questions addressed in this paper are the following: What does it mean to be created “according to our image and according to our likeness,” what is the mark that man is aiming for if sin is a “missing the mark,” and lastly why does man sin and

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<sup>31</sup> Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 222.

how can it be avoided. The answer to the why sin and how to avoid sin becomes a failure to understand the calling to discipleship addressed in the Gospels, a failure to control the will and submit it obediently to divine; avoiding giving in to temptation which draws man away from God by steeping himself in knowledge of the scriptures as weapons. The mark that is aimed for is shown through looking at the life of Christ, who is the Image which man is trying to reflect; a life which teaches man how to grow in theosis, by perseverance through temptations by the means described previously. Finally, it is by understanding the dynamic process of creation according to our likeness where the gateway for sin is found, not in the nature of man, but in the free will of man which can dynamically begin to resemble God, become deified, or through sin, draw away from God; a destruction of the perfect potential, a potential which is shown in its perfection in the Image, Christ, who is the deified likeness exemplified.

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