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You Are Gods

by Revd Brian Talbot

“You are gods” (Psalm 82:6; John 10:34)

Much of Western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, is under-pinned with a pessimistic view of humanity called “Original Sin”, a belief that stems from St Augustine of Hippo (354-430). This belief is not shared by Eastern Orthodox Christians, Jews and Swedenborgians, who have a more balanced, neutral, and hopeful view of people. (Compare Psalm 51:5; 58:3 with Psalm 22:9; 71:6)

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Christians have a doctrine of theōsis or divinization or deification, which is becoming more known and valued among Western Christians. They do not believe that we become God, but we can become more god-like or godly. The key text from the New Testament is 2 Peter 1:3-4. “³ His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by^[d] his own glory and goodness. ⁴ Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the

corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature.” (2 Peter 1:3-4) It is the phrase “participants in the divine nature”, that is of interest to us.

How many times in your life have you said or read the Beatitudes? “Blessed are the poor in spirit” and so on. (e.g. Matthew 5:1ff.) Did you know that the Greek word *Makarios* translated “blessed”, means “deified people” or people who share “in the life of God”. (Dort in Jersak and Hardin 2007:516, 517) According to Swedenborg, angels, and therefore us, when we are inspired by the Lord, speak and act authentically and genuinely, motivated by love, compassion and empathy. We judge people and situations humbly and sympathetically. We face new situations enthusiastically and with an open mind. (AC 8301:3; 4295:1; 4402:8; 7268:2; 7463:2) “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48)

Swedenborg’s book *Divine Providence* presents an optimistic view of God and an optimistic view of humanity, because anything virtuous about us comes from the Lord himself. In this book, Swedenborg talks about “derivative divinity is divinity from the Lord in his creatures” and “what is good and what is true are elements of Divinity within us”. (DP §52; §313:2; cf. DP §55)

We are still capable of being images and likenesses of God. (DP §328:5) We Swedenborgians talk a lot of being ‘spiritual’ or being ‘spiritually aware’, which is just another way of expressing our being godly or god-like. You might like to calmly and slowly meditate on these short quotes about you and what they mean to you:

- “people engaged with divinity”;
 - “we also inherit an ability to become spiritual by the removal of those evils”;
 - “we are spiritual only to the extent that we are attentive to what is true”;
 - “the Lord dwells in these abilities in each of us is found in the inflow of the Lord’s intent, an intent that wants to be accepted by us, to make its dwelling within us, and to give us the happiness of eternal life.”;
 - “the Lord is at work in the centre of our being ... the Lord is at work in all the elements of our minds or souls, that is, in all the elements of our spirits.”
- (DP 59; 83:6; 96:5; 119 [Dole])

So far from being too influenced by New Age movements, striving to be godly or god-like, acknowledge our utter dependence on the Lord, is actually strongly Christian.

Dr Kharalambus Anstall “Juridical Justification Theology and a Statement of the Orthodox Teaching”, 482-502, and

Ronald S. Dart “Divinization, the Church and Prophetic Politics in our Post 9-11 World”, 504-518,

in Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (2007) *Stricken by God: Nonviolent identification and the Victory of Christ* (Cambridge, UK: William B Eerdmans)

Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (editors) (2006) *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Edinburgh: James Clarke and Co)

Worthwhile Pursuits

by Barry D. Friend

"Good actions are to be done, because they are of God and from God. These are to be done by a person as if from themselves, but it ought to be believed that they are from the Lord, working in a person and through them."

Today, in a change to my usual lockdown occupations, I have completed the first part of a job which represents possibly the single most worthwhile thing I do all year. I have been wrapping empty shoe boxes for 'Operation Christmas Child', the gift box scheme which provides Christmas presents for needy children overseas. This task always causes me to stop a while and raise my level of thinking to a higher plane, presenting me with challenges both psychological and emotional.

My wife recently bought six new pairs of shoes in a sale. Having put four of the empty boxes aside to use at Christmas, I thought today that it might save me some stress nearer the time if I were to wrap them in their Christmas paper during lockdown. With this in mind, I have completed that task over the past couple of days.

Wrapping these boxes provides a pause from my daily routine. For the time upon which I am occupied with the task, I reflect upon the many blessings with which I have been bestowed and I like to think that some of that gratitude gets wrapped in with the paper. Those who know me will know that I like to make the best job possible of the wrapping. Over the years, I have found a way of wrapping the boxes which makes them both look good and should be long lasting. But, I ask myself, who am I really doing it for? The child who receives the box probably won't mind how well it is wrapped. For them, the gifts inside will be the source of greater excitement. I will never meet the children who receive my boxes: why should it matter how well they are wrapped? Is it selfish pride which drives me to make them look good, or is it truly because I want the recipient to have the best job that I am capable of doing? I get quite emotional with the thought that this simple box of gifts could be all that the child who receives it will get all year. What a contrast to our own lives, where we nearly all have more than we need and, as a consequence, often don't truly value any of it.

In my life, I encounter situations where I am reminded of things which my parents have told me over the years. My mother used to say to me "if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well." Too often, this has meant that jobs are either incomplete or haven't been done at all, as I don't always set aside enough time to do things to my satisfaction. However, I like to think that this little mantra is borne out when I wrap my Christmas boxes. If I get a little confused as to the motivation behind my desire to make a good

job of my wrapping, I take comfort from words of my father, who told me once that the hells cannot inspire anything of their own volition. Once you have good thoughts, they can attack them and persuade you that they are not what you really think. Therefore, your initial thoughts are the representation of your true nature and underlying love.

Packing the Christmas boxes, with their few simple gifts, leads me to reflect on my own life, with its excess of worldly baggage. During my lifetime, I have amassed a lot of possessions, which are kept in a room in our house. Stored would probably be a better description, as rarely do I look at the majority of them. Occasionally, I find that they can get in the way of my doing what is right in life. Sometimes I wish that I had the courage to act upon Jesus's words from Luke's gospel, when he tells a rich young man to "sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."

We are told that our possessions should be used in service to others. Why do I therefore find it difficult to lend things to people? There are times when I read a book, listen to a CD or watch a DVD and think that a friend might enjoy it too. In the past, I have more often bought that friend their own copy, rather than lend them my own. Although, as a musician, I am aware of the copyright issues involved with loaning certain items, I know deep down that I just don't want my things to be borrowed, as they often come back in a lesser condition than that in which they were lent out. Too often, I place the emphasis on the object, rather than the deed.

I recently bought a DVD which, after watching, I lent to a friend who I thought would enjoy it. He has eventually watched it, after four months! During this time, he kept it in a drawer with his own DVDs. This riled me somewhat, as I had been taught that, if we borrowed something, we kept it separate from our own things and gave it back in good time. However, I had watched the disc, why was I worried about when it came back? My selfish wish to protect my belongings had usurped the original thought that my friend would enjoy watching the programme and so I should lend him the DVD.

Sometimes I think that I should be excused these feelings, as I am willing to DO things for people. I am happy to help with jobs if I can, just so long as people don't want to borrow things from me. But of what benefit is that to me? I am not going to develop spiritually if I only operate within my comfort zone. Then again, do I assist out of a true sense of compassion or a selfish one of 'wasn't I good to help'? What if I am asked for help from somebody who I don't particularly like? I hope that I would act in a generous way, but often fall at this hurdle. I am reminded of the words from Luke's gospel: "...love your enemies and do good and lend, expecting nothing in return". How challenging life is at times.

So, where does all this leave me on my spiritual path? Probably not very far along, at the moment. I sometimes wonder where I have gone off the rails. A lack of regular input

from church services hasn't helped, which is why I have greatly enjoyed our online worship gatherings. Somehow, I have felt more in touch with my inner self than I have for a long time. Applying myself to certain tasks during the lockdown has helped me regain some sense of purpose. At this strange time, maybe I have been able to reconnect with some of those things which make me truly me. With this in mind, when I pack the Christmas boxes in November and reflect upon the joy that they will bring to those children who receive them, I will rest somewhat happier in the knowledge that my thoughts were to give of my best for them, rather than for myself. And, as reflected in the words of our faith, I shall be grateful that the Lord chose me to be a channel through which his love is shown to others.