

LSM's Deification—Zero Value Added

“Beginning from the 1991 Winter Training...Brother Lee's remaining years of ministry focused on what he called the high peak of the divine revelation: *that God became man in order that man might become God in life and nature but not in the Godhead.*”^o This is how Living Stream Ministry (LSM) introduces “The High Peak of the Divine Revelation.’ It was marketed as the “diamond in the box of the Bible,”¹ Witness Lee’s crowning achievement. In fact the concept of ‘deification’—“man becoming God”—dates back to Athanasius and beyond; so an “old notion” of the ‘Church Fathers,’ was presented as a “new revelation” to LSM’s Local Church.

No doubt, Athanasius’ maxim gave Witness Lee a new slogan. Certainly this rhetorical phrase had ‘shock value’ to catch people’s attention. But we ask: Did this slogan add any additional insights to Witness Lee’s established teachings? Allegedly it was the “highest truth,” the “highest gospel;”² But, in fact, was this merely a ‘new label, ‘re-branding an existing product’? Or was there something essentially ‘new’ in this ‘high peak revelation’?

“How Does God Make Man God?”

According to the ‘high peak’ deification dogma, God’s goal is to deify mankind; but, how does God do that? W. Lee replied: “How does God make man God? After God regenerates us with Himself as life, He continues to carry out the work of sanctification, renewing, and transformation in us by His Spirit of life. God became man through incarnation; *man becomes God through transformation.*”³ Elsewhere he maintains that, “[God] is doing one thing, that is, to work on all His redeemed and regenerated people to *make them God. How does He do it?* He does it by being in them to continuously sanctify them, renew them, and transform them. This *transformation is to deify them.* The purpose of *transformation is to make man God* until man is...exactly like God (2 Cor. 3:18).”⁴ So, W. Lee’s answer, in brief, is that ‘deification’ is the issue of ‘transformation;’ man is deified by transformation. Expounding a little more, he says, deification results from “a lifetime transformation until we are conformed to His image...*It is through regeneration, sanctification, renewing, transformation, conformation, and glorification that we may become God.*”⁵

Nothing New Here

Anyone familiar with W. Lee’s ministry immediately recognizes that there is nothing new here. All these terms are well-defined and often recited. These components of God’s “complete salvation” were repeatedly taught. For example, prior to the “High Peak’ revelation, Witness Lee asserted “God wants to [transform us]...He does this by putting Himself as a new element into us, first, to *regenerate us, second, to sanctify us, and third, to renew us.* The steps of regeneration, sanctification, and renewing result in the changing of our present form into a further form...This *transformation is the aggregate of regeneration, sanctification, and renewing. When these 3 things are added together, the sum is transformation.*”⁶ Similar statements could easily be multiplied. Here we have the same items--*regeneration, sanctification, renewing & transformation*—as those listed in the previous paragraph in the process of ‘deification.’⁷ What was previously called “God’s complete salvation,” is now designated as “deification;” the content is the same. The obvious implication is that Witness Lee’s ‘high peak’ revelation of deification provided *no new insights* into the process of Christian growth and maturity. Deification was merely a ‘new label’ for his long-established teachings regarding the Christian life.

Sanctification

As a further example consider W. Lee’s exposition of the believer’s experience of sanctification. He discerns three “steps” –(1) before regeneration, (2) at the time of regeneration & (3) after regeneration--as follows:⁸

“Sanctification of the Spirit consists of 3 steps [stages]:

- (1) the Spirit's seeking us & convicting us at the time that He caused us to repent & believe (1 Pet. 1:2; Jn. 16:8);
- (2) His sanctifying us both positionally & dispositionally (Heb. 13:12; 1 Cor. 6:11) at the time we were saved; &
- (3) His sanctifying us dispositionally as we pursue the growth in life (Rom. 6:19, 22).

By these 3 steps of the Spirit's sanctification, God's salvation is applied to us that we...obtain & enjoy it fully.”

Concerning the “third stage,” after we are justified/ saved, W. Lee states “The third stage of sanctification for our *transformation is mainly a dispositional sanctification*. This is...stressed in Rom. 6:19 and 22. This sanctification takes place in our disposition, changing our very nature. *This is for our transformation and also includes our conformation and glorification*. Glorification is actually the last step, the ultimate step, of the Holy Spirit's sanctification. In this all-inclusive sanctification, God's complete salvation is carried out.”⁹ This earlier (‘pre-High Peak’) exposition emphasizes the believer’s sanctification, which is linked to their transformation, conformation and ultimate glorification; it makes no reference to deification.

Now consider the parallel (later) exposition of sanctification, in the context of deification. Witness Lee asks,¹⁰

“How does God make man God? First, God became a man....In His resurrection He became the life-giving Spirit. In this Spirit He [is] making man God. [1] First, He [God] is now the sanctifying Spirit...1 Pet. 1:2. We were people fallen into sin, but some believers were moved by God to come & preach the gospel to us. Through the preaching of the gospel this sanctifying Spirit comes to separate us, the God-chosen people... We were sanctified [‘positionally’] before we were saved. [2] Second at the time we heard the gospel, the Spirit put faith into us. [3] Third, when we believed, the life of God...entered into us. Thus we were regenerated. The sanctification we experience after our regeneration is not positional sanctification but [4] dispositional sanctification... This...is not accomplished in one day. This sanctification issues in renewing, which is a lifelong matter. Renewing issues in transformation, which is also a lifelong matter. The final result of transformation is to be conformed to the image of the Lord and be the same as He is. From the first step of regeneration to the final step of conformation, everything is carried out by the Spirit. Eventually, this Spirit will bring us into glory. That is glorification, as spoken of in Rom. 8:30...It is by these steps that God is making us God.”

We note, first, that the same components are present here. Witness Lee answers the query, “How does God make man God?” in terms of the “three stages (steps) of sanctification” (now sub-divided into 4 components, numbered [1] to [4] above). Second, “dispositional sanctification” is expounded in terms of “renewing, transformation, conformation and glorification.” These are exactly the same elements identified in W. Lee’s earlier (pre-High Peak’) exposition. A detailed comparison of this later (‘High Peak’) exposition with the earlier (‘pre-High Peak’) account underscores the close correspondence and high correlation between the two.¹¹ Again there is nothing new here; there are no new insights into how to progress in the Christian life unto maturity.

LSM’s “Becoming God” vs. Charismatics’ “Little gods”

Ron Kangas contrasts LSM’s notion of man “becoming God” with the Charismatics’ concept of ‘little gods.’¹² He assigns the latter to “Spurious Notions of Deification,”¹³ observing, “it is alarming that certain television evangelists hold the concept of ‘little gods’—the idea that *human beings...are ‘God’s kind of being’.*” LSM’s Ron Kangas names Kenneth Copeland, Paul Couch, Kenneth Hagan and Benny Hinn. But, what is “alarming”?

Charismatics’ “alarming” claim--“*human beings...are ‘God’s kind of being’.*”

Witness Lee’s claim—“*we are gods belonging to the species of God.*”

Why does Ron Kangas find this claim “alarming”? What is “spurious”? At least these preachers qualify their claims by using “little gods,” rather than LSM’s capital ‘G’— God. Moreover, W. Lee made essentially the same assertion. He said,¹⁴ “We are regenerated of God the Spirit to be spirits—gods (John 3:6b) belonging to the species of God... Our second birth caused us to enter into the kingdom of God to become the species of God. The animals and plants have their particular species. We are born of God, so *we are gods belonging to the species of God.*” I see no essential difference between Charismatics’ claim that “*human beings...are ‘God’s kind of being’.*” and Witness Lee’s assertion that “*we are gods belonging to the species of God.*” Nevertheless, Ron Kangas tries to distance LSM from them, saying,¹⁵ “We do not wish to align ourselves with devotees of ‘little gods’ doctrine, even though certain elements of the truth are found scattered among their teachings.”

We suspect that what LSM finds “alarming” about the “little gods,” or “Word-faith movement,” is not the theological claim itself, but the implications drawn from it. Some Charismatic preachers assert that, since

Christians are “little gods,” they can command the weather, instantly reject sickness and claim prosperity. It’s worth noting that (in contrast to LSM) at least they derive practical and testable implications. Perhaps a believer embracing the “little gods” concept, commands a tornado funnel-cloud to depart. When it fails to do so, he/she ought to deduce that he/she has been misled. Practical testable implications are a “litmus test,” providing opportunities for discernment. LSM’s deification dogma offers no equivalent “litmus test.” On one occasion, W. Lee says,¹⁶ “As God’s children *we are ‘baby gods,’* having God’s life & nature but not His Godhead ...God wants those who can say, ‘...*I am God....*’” LSM’s only practical issue is declaring, “I am God! I am God!”

Conclusion

Athanasius’ maxim—“*God became man to make man God*”—supplied Witness Lee with a new slogan. It has served as LSM’s mantra for two decades. However, we ask, what was the impact of deification on W. Lee’s view of the Christian’s path of progress from initial redemption/justification/regeneration to final transfiguration/conformation/glorification? We examined his exposition of the Christian’s growth through sanctification/transformation to maturity. We compared W. Lee’s exposition prior to adopting deification with his exposition within the context of the deification paradigm. We conclude that there is no significant difference; there is nothing new here. The basic view of the believer’s progress from an unregenerate sinner to a glorified child of God remains unchanged, except it is now alleged that “*by these steps...God is making us God.*” However, the steps themselves (their cause, definition and issue) are unchanged. No new insights are provided; no new practical implications are identified. The same path of Christian progress is now described as “deification.” Hence, we conclude that LSM’s deification dogma has a “*net value added*” of zero. The same content has simply been “re-packaged” and “re-branded” as “deification.”

In his final years Witness Lee appropriated Athanasius’ maxim. Thus he decked his own homespun theological system with the mantle of Eastern Orthodoxy’s deification.¹⁷ Witness Lee’s theology (like Watchman Nee’s) is a ‘patchwork quilt,’ cobbled together from Keswick ‘higher life,’ Brethren dispensationalism, typology, etc.¹⁸ Cloaking this theological *potpourri* with deification gives an aura of respectability and novelty. However, in terms of the practical implications, ‘deification’ adds nothing to Witness Lee’s underlying teaching about the Christian’s path of progress through growth to maturity. *The net value added by the deification dogma is zero.* In LSM’s hands deification is a doctrine “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Nigel Tomes,

Toronto, CANADA

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Notes: As always thanks to those commenting on earlier drafts. The author alone is responsible for the contents of this piece. The views expressed here are solely the author’s and should *not* be attributed to any believers, elders, co-workers or churches he is associated with.

- o. <http://www.ministrybooks.org/high-peak.cfm> “The High Peak of the Divine Revelation: Beginning from the 1991 Winter Training on the Life-study of Jeremiah, Brother Lee’s remaining years of ministry focused on what he called the high peak of the divine revelation: *that God became man in order that man might become God in life and nature but not in the Godhead.*” This is followed by a list of 48 “High Peak” books. For some reason LSM dates the start of Witness Lee’s “High Peak” period as 1991. Witness Lee himself referred to 1993/4. He said: “*In the spring of this year [1994] (actually I saw it last year [1993]) I continued to go higher. I saw that it is only by God’s becoming man to make man God that the Body of Christ can be produced. This point is the high peak of the vision given to us by God. Actually, early in the 4th century Athanasius, who was present at the Nicene Council, said that ‘He was made man that we might be made God.’*” [W. Lee, *High Peak of the Vision & the Reality of the Body of Christ*, (1994) Ch. 1, St. 4 (emphasis added)]
1. “*The ‘diamond’ in the ‘box’ of the Bible is the revelation that in Christ God has become man in order that man might become God...The vast majority of today’s Christians neglect [this] crucial point in the Bible...*” according to W. Lee [Witness Lee, *Life-study of 1 & 2 Sam.*, pp. 203-204]
2. W. Lee says: “The Triune God has been incarnated to be a man; on our side, we are being deified, constituted with the processed & consummated Triune God so that we *may be made God in life & in nature* to be His corporate expression

- for eternity. This is *the highest truth*, & this is *the highest gospel*.” [W. Lee, *Life-study of Job*, p. 122 (emphasis added) reprinted in *Truth Concerning the Ultimate Goal of God's Economy*, Ch. 1, Sect. 1]
3. W. Lee, *High Peak of the Vision & the Reality of the Body of Christ*, (1994) Ch. 2, Sect. 5 (emphasis added)
 4. W. Lee, *High Peak of the Vision & the Reality of the Body of Christ*, (1994) Ch. 4, St. 1 (emphasis added)
 5. W. Lee, *High Peak of the Vision & the Reality of the Body of Christ*, (1994) Ch. 2, Sect. 5 (emphasis added)
 6. W. Lee, *Central Line of the Divine Revelation*, (1991) Ch. 25, Sect. 3 (emphasis added) This is not a “High Peak” book
 7. Similar quotes can be easily assembled, including ones explicitly mentioning “conformation, transfiguration & glorification,” along with the items listed above.
 8. 2 Thess. 2:13 note #3, RcV
 9. W. Lee, *Living In & With the Divine Trinity*, (1988) Ch. 6, Sect. 6. This is a “pre- High Peak” publication.
 10. W. Lee, *High Peak of the Vision & the Reality of the Body of Christ*, (1994) Ch. 3, St. 4 (emphasis added)
 11. A detailed comparison of this “pre-High Peak” presentation with the later (‘High Peak’) exposition underscores their close correspondence:
 - a. The Pre-High Peak Presentation:

“Sanctification in [2 Thess. 2] verse 13 is all-inclusive. It covers all three stages of sanctification. The first stage of sanctification is for our repentance and is mentioned in 1 Peter 1:2. First, we were foreknown by God the Father for His choosing. Then according to what God chose, the Holy Spirit came to us *to separate us, to sanctify us* from the world, from sin, and from all the sinners unto God. Through that kind of sanctifying, we repented and returned to God. This is the first stage of sanctification for our repentance.” [W. Lee, *Living In & With the Divine Trinity*, Ch. 6, St. 6]
 - b. The High Peak Presentation:

“God became man through the process of being incarnated, living a human life, being crucified, and entering into resurrection. *How does God make man God?* First, God became a man. The process which God went through from incarnation to resurrection was the procedure for Him to become man. Eventually in His resurrection He became the life-giving Spirit. In this Spirit He comes to carry out the work of making man God. [1] First, He [God] is now the sanctifying Spirit, as we are told in 1 Peter 1:2. We were people fallen into sin, but some believers were moved by God to come and preach the gospel to us. Through the preaching of the gospel *this sanctifying Spirit comes to separate us*, the God-chosen people. The Spirit’s sanctifying work on the sinners is like the woman’s lighting a lamp and seeking carefully for the lost coin, as recorded in Luke 15 (v. 8). We were sanctified before we were saved [positional].” [W. Lee, *High Peak of the Vision & the Reality of the Body of Christ*, (1994) Ch. 3, St. 4] **Note:** Both reference 1 Pet. 1:2 & the role of the Spirit “*to separate us, to sanctify us,*” God’s operation upon us, prior to our believing
 - c. The Pre-High Peak Presentation:

“The 2nd stage of sanctification is for our justification. In the 2nd stage, the sanctification which we receive in God’s full salvation is both positional & dispositional. Positional sanctification is mentioned in Heb. 13:12 which says that Jesus sanctified us through His own blood. Positional sanctification is obtained by us through Christ’s redeeming blood shed on the cross. Once we are bought back by the Lord’s blood, we are separated from the world, receiving a sanctified position & being made holy unto Him. Furthermore, when we were saved & justified, we entered into an organic union with the Lord, partook of His divine life & nature, & were sanctified dispositionally (1 Cor. 6:11).” [W. Lee, *Living In & With the Divine Trinity*, (1988) Ch. 6, St. 6]
 - d. The High Peak Presentation:

“[2] Second, at the time we heard the gospel, the Spirit put faith into us. [3] Third, when we believed, the life of God, which is God Himself, Christ Himself, entered into us. Thus we were regenerated. The sanctification we experience after our regeneration is not positional sanctification but dispositional sanctification. When the Spirit separated us from sinners, that was the positional sanctification that took place before we were saved.” [W. Lee, *High Peak of the Vision & the Reality of the Body of Christ*, (1994) Ch. 3, St. 4] **Note:** Both accounts talk about “positional” & “dispositional” sanctification; the former, pre-High Peak, account is more clear
 - e. The Pre-High Peak Presentation:

“The third stage of sanctification for our transformation is mainly a *dispositional sanctification*. This is the very sanctification stressed in Rom. 6:19 and 22. This sanctification takes place in our disposition, changing our very nature. This is for our *transformation* & also includes our *conformation* and *glorification*. *Glorification* is actually the last step, the ultimate step, of the Holy Spirit’s sanctification. In this all-inclusive sanctification, God’s complete salvation is carried out.” [W. Lee, *Living In & With the Divine Trinity*, (1988) Ch. 6, St. 6]
 - f. The High Peak Presentation:

“The sanctification we experience after our regeneration is...*dispositional sanctification*...When the Spirit comes into us to change our disposition, that is the *dispositional sanctification* that takes place after our regeneration. This dispositional sanctification is not accomplished in one day. This sanctification issues in renewing, which is a lifelong matter. Renewing issues in *transformation*, which is also a lifelong matter. The final result of transformation is to be conformed to the image of the Lord and be the same as He is. From the first step of regeneration to the final step of *conformation*, everything is carried out by the Spirit. Eventually, this Spirit will bring us into glory so that God will be completely expressed from within us through our corrupted body. At that time, our corrupted body will also be redeemed and transformed. That is *glorification*, as spoken of in Romans 8:30: ‘Those whom He justified, these He also glorified.’ *It is by these steps that God is making us God.*” [W. Lee, *High Peak of the Vision & the Reality of the Body of Christ*, (1994) Ch. 3, St. 4] **Note:** Both accounts talk about “dispositional sanctification,” “transformation,” “conformation” & “glorification (the ultimate step).” The two accounts describe essentially the same process.

12. The Charismatics’ “little gods” teaching is also called the “Word of Faith” [WoF] movement: *Suffer the Children*, a documentary, has a video clip of Creflo Dollar teaching the “little gods” doctrine based on the notion “everything reproduces after its own kind”: [Creflo A. Dollar, Jr., is an American televangelist, pastor, and the founder of ‘World Changers Church International’ in College Park, a suburb of Atlanta, GA., USA] The transcript reads:
 - Dollar: "If horses get together, they produce what?"
 - Congregation: "Horses!"
 - Dollar: "If dogs get together, they produce what?"
 - Congregation: "Dogs!"
 - Dollar: "If cats get together, they produce what?"
 - Congregation: "Cats!"
 - Dollar: "So if the Godhead says 'Let us make man in our image', and everything produces after its own kind, then they produce what?"
 - Congregation: "gods!"
 - Dollar: "gods. Little "g" gods. You're not human. Only human part of you is this flesh you're wearing."**Note:** These claims are essentially the same as Witness Lee, who says: “In regeneration God begets gods. Man begets man. Goats beget goats. If goats do not beget goats, what do they beget? If God does not beget gods, what does He beget? *If the children of God are not in God's kind, in God's species, in what kind are they? If they are not gods, what are they? We all who are born of God are gods.*” [W. Lee, *Crystallization-Study of the Gospel of John*, Ch. 12, Sect. 3]
13. Ron Kangas, “*Becoming God*,” *Affirmation & Critique*, Vol. VII, No. 2, (Oct 2002) p. 9. The heading, “Spurious Notions of Deification,” appears on p. 9. The following quote appears on p. 10
14. W. Lee, *The God-man Living*, pp. 8-9, also reproduced in W. Lee, *Raising Up the Next Generation for the Church Life*, Ch. 6, Sect. 3 (emphasis added)
15. Ron Kangas, “*Becoming God*,” *Affirmation & Critique*, Vol. VII, No. 2, (Oct 2002) p. 11.
16. W. Lee, *Life-Study of 1 & 2 Samuel*, Ch. 25, Sect. 2, pp. 166-167. The quote in context reads: “1 John 3:2 says, ‘Beloved, now we are children of God...We know that if He is manifested, we will be *like Him*.’ This verse clearly reveals that we will be like God....John 1:12-13 says that we were born, regenerated, by God with His life. As God’s children *we are ‘baby gods*,’ having God’s life and nature but not His Godhead. ...God wants those who can say, ‘...*I am God* in life and in nature but not in His Godhead.’...The New Testament reveals that we, the believers in Christ, have God’s life and nature and that *we are becoming God* in life and in nature but will never have His Godhead.” We note that W. Lee extrapolates from what Scripture says—that we are children of God, born of God—to what the Bible does *not* say—that we are “baby gods,” who declare ‘I am God...’
17. We maintain that the sole item W. Lee appropriated from Orthodoxy was Athanasius’ maxim. Despite the superficial resemblance, W. Lee did not adopt Orthodoxy’s *theosis*; his version of deification is radically different from theirs.
18. Alexander Chow says, Watchman Nee’s “theology came largely through a re-articulation of two schools of fundamentalist thinking: Keswick sanctification and Brethren dispensationalism... Nee’s eschatology [was] developed from Brethren dispensationalism.” [Alexander Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment*, p. 42]

