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Participation in God

By Charles J. Conniry, Jr.

A book on relational theology requires at least a brief reflection on the concept of “participation in God.” Relationality begins and ends with God. God exists in relationship – the Trinity. Through the act of creation, God extended relationality to all God made. And in the coming age, redeemed humanity will share in Christ’s glory – a glory that includes the creation “liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (see Rom 8:17-21).

There are at least two ways to conceive of relational participation in God. Stated in theological shorthand, they are (1) panentheism and (2) theosis. Allow me to unpack these concepts.

Panentheism

The term panentheism simply means “everything” (*pan*) “in” (*en*) “God” (*theos*). It is based on the doctrine of God’s “omnipresence” (God is everywhere). When the psalmist exclaims, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there” (Psalm 139:7, 8), he is making a statement about God’s *everywhereness*. The apostle Paul makes the same claim: “There is...one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:6).

This means relationally that God’s embrace envelops us. In God “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). God is, in a word, near, because God *wants* to be in a relationship with us. Paul says in Acts 17 that God determined the boundaries and duration of nations in order for them “to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him – *though he is not far from any one of us*” (v. 27, my emphasis).

The term panentheism makes some Christians nervous. Some confuse it with *pantheism*, which means, “God is all and all is God.” That is not what panentheism means! Others struggle with the idea of God’s relational proximity (God’s immanence), because they

think of *physical* and *spiritual* as two distinct spheres of existence that stay pretty much apart. This dualistic way of conceiving reality is due in part to the conditioning we've experienced as products of modern, Western culture.

What's fascinating, however, is that the Israelites viewed the physical and spiritual worlds as dynamically interconnected. They believed we perceive spiritual reality the same way we perceive physical reality: *through the five senses*. There are hundreds of passages in Hebrew Scripture that cite hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, and touching as conduits through which we perceive the spiritual world.

The verb *to hear*, for example, occurs over a thousand times in the Bible and frequently describes discerning spiritual things. The same is true of the other verbs of perception. "*Taste and see that the LORD is good,*" invites the psalmist (Ps 34:8).

This idea carried over into the New Testament. Jesus said to his disciples, "blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear" (Matt 13:16). He was in this context describing the disciples' capacity to discern spiritual reality.

According to this Hebraic view of panentheism, we participate in relational union with God *by means of* our embodiedness, not in spite of it. God is all around us, in us, and through us – and yet God is not us and we are not God. We must tune in our various senses and participate with God.

Theosis

Theosis is the other word many used to talk about relational participation in God. Theosis comes from the Greek word that means, "becoming divine," and it refers to sharing in God's nature of love.

The idea of participating in God's divine nature took root early Christianity. Irenaeus in the second century wrote that Jesus, the Son of God, became "the Son of man for this purpose, that man also might become the Son of God." In almost identical fashion, Clement of Alexandria said, "The Word of God became man, that you may learn from man how man may become God." Similar statements are attributed theologians throughout Christian history.

Theosis has implications for the way we live. It informs the way we behave and describes the nature of our existence. A key biblical passage is 2 Peter 1:3, 4, in which Peter announces that through God's great and precious promises, we have received all we need to live a godly life. These promises, says Peter, "enable you to share his divine nature and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires."

Another important theosis text is Genesis 1:26. It says humans were created in God's "image" and "likeness." Many early Christians said that despite sin, humans retain God's image but lost God's likeness. Through redemption in Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, human beings can share again in God's likeness.

There are both "now" and "then" aspects to theosis. In the present, we relate well with God when we behave in God-like ways. We are God's image bearers, and we reflect more and more of God's likeness in our day-to-day lives. In the life to come, we will realize the fullness of what it means to be co-heirs with Christ. As Jesus became like us in the incarnation, so in glory we will become like him (see Phil 3:20, 21).

Theosis doesn't mean we are like God in all ways. God is the uncreated Creator, for instance, but we are God's creation. In theosis, we do not become all knowing, omnipresent, or almighty. Only God has such attributes.

In sum, our participating with God is often thought of in at least two ways. Panentheism says God is with us all and we are enveloped in God's presence. And theosis calls us to imitate God now with the hope of sharing in God's glory in the future.