

# THEOSIS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT:

Christification • Deification • Humanization

*Michael J. Gorman*

*St. Mary's Seminary & University*


# SUMMARY

- This PPT (and the essay on which it is based) considers the theme of theosis, or deification, in the New Testament, with emphasis on Paul and, to a lesser extent, John. Defining theosis as “transformative participation in the life and mission of the kenotic, Triune God through Spirit-enabled conformity to the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected/glorified Christ,” it argues that the texts under consideration manifest a unified, triadic transformation (**Christification–deification–humanization**) as the telos of human life. It considers the renewal of interest in theosis, the significance of “becoming” language, Christification as transfiguration, the relationship of Christification to deification, the meaning and means of transformation “from glory toward glory,” and the ecclesial and missional character of theosis.



# Introduction

1. The Return of Theosis/Deification to Theology  
& Biblical Studies
2. The Importance of “Becoming”
3. Transfiguration: Christosis, or Christification

- 
4. Furthering the Connection: Christosis as Theosis
  5. From Glory to Glory
  6. Theosis on the Ground: Ecclesial & Missional
- Conclusion



# Introduction

“ 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 (*genēsthe*) participants (*koinōnoi*) of [or “in”] the divine nature. ”

(2 Pet 1:3–4)

Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Macarius (2<sup>nd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> c.), et al: like iron plunged into a hot fire, we remain human but are transformed by being plunged into the divine fire and filled by the Spirit

# SOME KEY TERMS

## TRADITIONALLY

- Theosis: the process (and result) of becoming Godlike
- Deification/Divinization: the process (and result) of becoming Godlike
- Theoformity/Deiformity (less common): the process (and result) of becoming Godlike; God-shaped existence
  - transformative participation in the life of the Triune God = comm-union
  - assimilation to God as much as it is possible (over time and into eternity)
  - justification, sanctification, and glorification as a unified whole
  - repair or restoration of the image of God within

## MORE RECENTLY

- Christosis: the process (and result) of becoming Christlike
- Christification: the process (and result) of becoming Christlike
- Christoformity: the process (and result) of becoming Christlike; Christ-shaped existence
- Cruciformity: cross-shaped existence in Christ
- Humanization: the process (and result) of becoming more fully human, more like humanity as God intended (our telos = end/goal)
- ALL OF THIS: by the Spirit

# A CAVEAT (WARNING)



- Deification should be seen as a fluid, polyvalent theme with many varieties over time—not a one-size-fits-all doctrine.



1

# The Return of Theosis/Deification to Theology and Biblical Studies

# 20 YEARS OF RENEWED INTEREST

- 2006: Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, eds., *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Pickwick)
- 2007: Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Baker Academic)
- 2009: Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Eerdmans)
- 2016: Ben C. Blackwell, *Christosis: Engaging Paul's Soteriology with His Patristic Interpreters* (Eerdmans)
- 2018: Gorman, *Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John* (Cascade)
- 2024: Paul Copan and Michael M. C. Reardon, eds., *Transformed into the Same Image: Constructive Investigations into the Doctrine of Deification* (IVP Academic)
- 2024: Paul L. Gavriluk, Andrew Hofer, and Matthew Levering, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Deification* (Oxford University Press)

“

CHRIST (OR GOD) BECAME WHAT WE ARE SO THAT  
WE COULD BECOME WHAT HE IS.

”

= The Patristic Principle, from Irenaeus and Athanasius (called “the exchange formula” or “the graced exchange” (Daniel Keating)



(N.B. → the line between creature and creator is never crossed from our side; we become like Christ, like God, but not God. )



2

The Importance of  
“Becoming”

# SOME KEY TEXTS

- **Become** (*ginesthe*) imitators of me as I am of Christ. (1 Cor 11:1; MJG)
- For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might **become** the righteousness of God. (2 Cor 5:21)
- Do not be conformed to this age, but **be transformed** by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12:1–2)
- Stories of transformation: Paul, Nicodemus, Samaritan woman, man born blind
- My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and **become** my disciples. (John 15:8)
- [You] have clothed yourselves with **the new self** (lit. “person,” *anthrōpon*), which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. (Col 3:10)

“

LESS A HUMAN BEING, AND MORE A HUMAN  
BECOMING

”

Frederick David Carr

*Being and Becoming: Human Transformation in the Letters of Paul*





3

Transfiguration:  
Christosis, or Christification

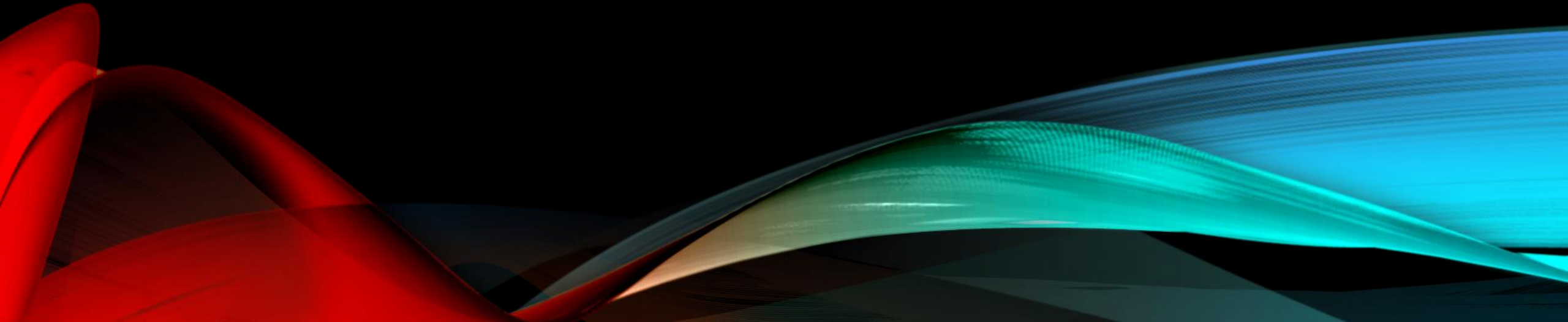
# SOME KEY TEXTS ABOUT “MORPHING”

- Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. **And he was transfigured (*metemorphōthē*) before them**, and his clothes became dazzling bright, such as no one on earth could brighten them. (Mark 9:2-3)
- And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, **are being transformed (or “transfigured”; *metamorphoumetha*) into the same image** from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:18)
- **Cultivate this mindset (*phroneite*)—this way of thinking, acting, and feeling**—in your community, which is in fact a community in the Messiah Jesus. . . [who] although being in the **form (*morphē*) of God**, and indeed **because of being in the form of God**. . . emptied himself by taking the form (*morphēn*) of a slave (Phil 2:5-7a MJG)
- I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and **the sharing (*koinōnian*) of his sufferings by being conformed (*symmorphizomenos*) to his death**, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. . . . He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be **conformed (*symmorphon*) to the body of his glory** (Phil 3 NRSVue alt.)
- Those whom he [God] foreknew he also **predestined to be conformed (*symmorphous*) to the image of his Son**. (Rom 8:29)

“

CHRISTIFICATION, THEN, IS BOTH DEIFICATION AND  
HUMANIZATION.

”





4

Furthering the Connection:  
Christosis as Theosis

# SOME KEY CLAIMS/CONNECTIONS

- What Christ did in his incarnation and crucifixion is not at all what we expect of a deity, and yet what he did was an expression of his divinity, not a contradiction of it.
- The God of Scripture is inherently kenotic because kenosis is self-giving love, and God is love (1 John 4:8, 16): that is, God is self-giving love.
- Ben C. Blackwell, “You Are Filled in Him: Theosis and Colossians 2-3”:
  - Christosis is “participatory embodiment of Christ’s death and life”
  - “Christosis is theosis”



5

From Glory to Glory

# THE PARADOX

- And we all, with unveiled faces, gazing at the glory of the Lord [or perhaps “gazing at the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror”], are being transformed into the same image from one kind of glory toward (eis) another kind of glory, from the Lord (that is, the Spirit). (2 Cor 3:18 MJG)
- 7But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 8We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, 9persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, 10always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. 11For we who are living are always being handed over to death for Jesus’s sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh. 12So death is at work in us but life in you. (2 Cor 4:7–12)
- Paul invites all his readers and hearers to adopt that perspective: to recognize a present glory of participating in the cross that is—paradoxically—participating also in the life-giving power of God. It is resurrectional cruciformity.
- But eventually the trajectory goes from resurrectionally cruciform glory to pure, unadulterated eternal glory: resurrectiformity.



# ASPECTS OF CONTEMPLATION

- Being in Christ
- “Chewing on” Scripture
- Worship
- Observing and Imitating Saints
- Considering the Poor and Weak
- Embodying the Gospel and Suffering in the World

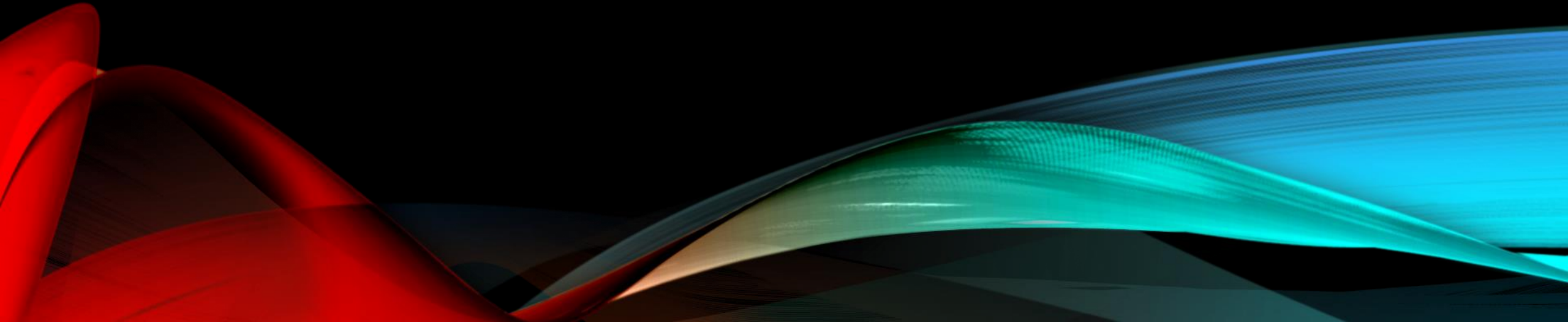


6

Theosis on the Ground:  
Ecclesial and Missional

“  
GOD *DOES* WHAT GOD *IS*, AND THOSE WHO DO  
WHAT GOD IS AND DOES PARTICIPATE IN THOSE  
DIVINE ATTRIBUTES.

”



# SOME KEY TEXTS

- Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; **everyone who loves is born of God and knows God**. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 John 4:7–8)
- So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and **those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them**. (1 John 4:16)
- For our sake God made the one who knew no sin [Christ] to be sin, **so that in him we might become the righteousness [or “justice”; *dikaiosynē*] of God**. (2 Cor 5:21)
- “[Paul] does not say ‘that we might know about the righteousness of God,’ nor ‘that we might believe in the righteousness of God,’ nor even ‘that we might receive the righteousness of God.; **Instead, the church is to become the righteousness of God**: where the church embodies in its life together the world-reconciling love of Jesus Christ, the new creation [and, we might add, the new person] is manifest. The church incarnates the righteousness of God.” (Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, commenting on 2 Cor 5:21)

# Conclusion

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. **What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. (1 John 3:1–3)**



# ASPECTS OF DEIFICATION

- By grace / the Spirit / cooperation
- Transformative participation
- Sharing in divine attributes while remaining fully human
- Continual process of conformity to Christ from faith/baptism to eschatological transformation
- Corporate (ecclesial) and missional
- To be truly human is to be Christlike, which is to be Godlike, which is to be kenotic and cruciform.

“

CHRISTIFICATION IS DEIFICATION IS HUMANIZATION.

”

