Theosis in the New Testament: Christification-Deification-Humanization

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Abstract: This essay 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.

In 2 Peter, we hear these words:[1]

> [3][God's] divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and excellence. [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 (*genēsthe*) participants (*koinōnoi*) of [or "in"] the divine nature**. (2 Pet 1:3–4)[2]

Many people will recognize the Greek word *koinōnoi* as a close relative of *koinōnia*, often understood to mean "fellowship" but actually better rendered as "communion," "solidarity," "partnership," or "participation." The idea of sharing in the divine nature of course raises all sorts of questions: "Can a human being actually share in God's *nature*? Does 2 Peter say we can become mini-gods?" Also, "Are we wandering into 'cult' territory with such language?"

Whatever 2 Peter means precisely, three things are clear:

- First, a process of transformation is involved, signaled by the word "become."
- Second, this process is an antidote to "the world" and its corruption.
- And third, the process and its result are so profound, so radical, so spiritual, and also so intimate that the words "participation" and "divine nature" are needed to describe the reality.

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[1] For discussion of this text, see Wyndy Corbin Reuschling, "The Means and End in 2 Peter 1:3–11: The Theological and Moral Significance of *Theōsis*." (Note: full bibliographical information for all resources noted appears in the bibliography).

[2] All translations are from the NRSVue unless otherwise indicated, including my own translations (marked MJG). Boldface text for emphasis is occasionally added.

The Christian tradition has also coined its own words for this transformative process, especially deification (from Latin *deus*, "god") and theosis (from Greek *theos*, "god"). Although certain scholars distinguish theosis from deification (in some cases advocating for the former while rejecting the latter),[3] they can be used interchangeably. And if a person or tradition rejects both words as "unbiblical" or "theologically problematic," the phrase is, to my mind, an appropriate basic gloss on either word. Furthermore, there are additional terms, such as Christification and Christosis, that are important alternatives (or possibly synonyms) to consider using.

It is important to stress that none of these terms means "sanctification" alone. Rather, they signify that the transformative process (i.e., salvation) is a holistic process. If one were to use more common Protestant language, one might think of theosis as encompassing justification, sanctification, and glorification as a unified whole. Here, for example, is my extended definition of theosis: "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 was common in the early church, in writers such as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Macarius, and others, to speak of a process like that of iron being plunged into a hot fire: like the iron, we remain human but are transformed by being plunged into the divine fire and filled by the Spirit.

In this essay I wish to explore this notion of transformative participation in the life of the Triune God as it appears in selected parts of the New Testament, especially certain Pauline letters and, to a lesser extent, the Gospel of John and 1 John.[4] The essay will consider key aspects of theosis that emerge in the texts we consider, including especially its Christlike and hence cruciform character (Christosis) as well as its missional character. One of the main claims I will make is that Christification is deification is humanization. That is, the more we become like Christ, the more we become like God and, simultaneously, the more human we become. According to the texts we will consider, this unified triadic transformation (Christification–deification–humanization) is the telos, or goal, of human life.

In order not to be completely "theoretical," I will give attention to theosis on the ground, so to speak, and to some of the means of theosis. Thus, the essay proceeds as follows:

- Some Key Terms
- The Return of Theosis/Deification to Theology and Biblical Studies
- The Importance of "Becoming"
- Transfiguration: Christosis, or Christification
- Furthering the Connection: Christosis as Theosis
- From Glory to Glory
- Theosis on the Ground: Ecclesial & Missional
- Conclusion

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[3] E.g., New Zealand theologian Myk Habets: "'Theosis, Yes; Deification, No." Habets is concerned that terms like "deification" imply humans literally becoming divine.

[4] For in-depth analysis of these writings with a focus on theosis, see my *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* and *Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John*.

Some Key Terms

Before we get into the substance of this essay, it might be helpful to briefly note a few key terms in the discussion.

The main terms are derived from the Latin and Greek words for "god" noted above. The process (and result) of becoming Godlike, or God-shaped existence, have been, and are, expressed in the following ways:

- Deification
- Divinization
- Deiformity (less common)
- Theosis
- Theoformity (less common)

Some basic understandings of these terms include the following:

- transformative participation in the life of the Triune God, or communion
- 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, in order to emphasize that for Christians deification or theosis means participation in Christ and being transformed into his image, the following terms have emerged to express the process (and result) of becoming Christlike:

- Christification
- Christosis
- Christoformity (Christ-shaped existence)
- Cruciformity (cross-shaped existence in Christ)

In this essay, as already noted, we will also understand deification/Christification as humanization: the process (and result) of becoming more fully human, more like humanity as God intended, which is our telos, or end (goal).

Finally it is important to stress that the process of deification-Christification-humanization is enabled by the Holy Spirit and is impossible without the Spirit (Greek *pneuma*). A term we will not use, however, is something like "pneumaformity" or "pneumosis." Such terms are meant to stress the transforming power of the Spirit that enables theosis/Christosis. However, "pneumaformity" as a theological word might be misunderstood as formation into the image of the Spirit, when in fact the Spirit's work is to form people into the image of Christ. And "pneumosis" could easily be misunderstood in the same way.[5]

[5] "Pneumaformity" is the coinage of Mark J. Keown is his book *Pneumaformity: Transformation by the Spirit in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2024). My concern about the word does not mean, however, that I disagree with Keown's proper emphasis on the transforming role of the Spirit. The word "pneumosis" is

As we begin our substantive discussion, it is also important to keep in mind that theosis/deification should be seen as a fluid, polyvalent theme with many varieties over time. It is not a one-size-fits-all doctrine.

The Return of Theosis/Deification to Theology and Biblical Studies

The words theosis and deification, when known, are often associated with the Orthodox Christian tradition, certain patristic writers, or both. For many Protestants, it has been unknown or, if known, anathema. In response to a paper on Romans and theosis I gave in about 2010, a Presbyterian biblical scholar said that "theosis" sounded like a disease, while a Methodist biblical scholar said that the last thing Americans need is to think they are more like God than they already do. More substantively, some Protestants have been hesitant to embrace deification out of fear that it minimizes or displaces justification.[6]

When I was first working on my 2009 book *Inhabiting the Cruciform God* about two decades ago, I had never even heard of the word theosis. I had read, but not really absorbed, an essay from 1996 by Ann Jervis titled "Becoming like God through Christ: Discipleship in Romans," in which she argues that "the goal of discipleship is to attain godlikeness," manifested as conformity to Christ and the embodiment of God's righteousness.[7] But in developing that book, I had arrived at the conclusion that *crucif*ormity—cross-shaped existence in Christ[8]—was in fact *theo*formity. If I had known the word *Christo*formity, I could have used it as well: *Christo*formity is *theo*formity. That is, to become like Christ is to become like God. The basic logic in that is not difficult: if Christ is the divine Son of God who is the ultimate revelation of God, then to become like Christ is to become like God.

While I was writing *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, however, things began to change dramatically:[9]

- 2006: New Testament scholar Stephen Finlan and practical theologian Vladimir Kharlamov edited *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, which included a chapter on 2 Peter, with a few references to Paul.
- 2007: Stephen Finlan published a chapter entitled "Can We Speak of *Theosis* in Paul?" in another volume of essays called *Partakers of the Divine Nature*.
- 2008: A young scholar, David Litwa, published a highly influential essay titled "2 Corinthians 3:18 and Its Implications for *Theosis*."[10]
- 2009: Norman Russell's book *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* came out the same year my *Inhabiting the Cruciform God* appeared.

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the creation of Holly Beers in a response to this essay at a conference at Westmont College in May 2024. Her point was similar to Keown's.

[6] For an argument that interprets justification actually as theotic, see my *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 40–104.

[7] L. Ann Jervis, "Becoming like God through Christ: Discipleship in Romans."

[8] See my *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality oof the Cross*.

[9] This list is representative, not exhaustive.

[10] In 2012 Litwa published *We Are Being Transformed: Deification in Paul's Soteriology*.

- 2007–2011: Ben Blackwell wrote and published his Durham University dissertation, re-published in 2016 as *Christosis: Engaging Paul's Soteriology with His Patristic Interpreters*.

These particular authors came from mainline Protestant, evangelical/charismatic Protestant, and Orthodox backgrounds. They represent the tip of the iceberg of (to mix metaphors) an avalanche of books and essays on theosis/deification from every part of the Christian tradition, by biblical scholars as well as theologians and others. (It may surprise some people that even N. T. Wright thinks that Paul is writing about theosis, or "cruciform divinization," in Romans 8.[11]) To catalog all of the contributions would take the remainder of this essay. I will mention just two from last year (2024).[12]

IVP Academic released *Transformed into the Same Image: Constructive Investigations into the Doctrine of Deification*, edited by Paul Copan and Michael M. Reardon. Among the contributors are younger and more senior theologians, including Oxford's Alistair McGrath, Fuller's Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, and the aforementioned Ben Blackwell. Then, from Oxford, there appeared *The Oxford Handbook of Deification*, edited by Paul L. Gavrilyuk, Andrew Hofer, and Matthew Levering, with essays from well-known biblical scholars such as Blackwell (again), Edith Humphrey, and Grant Macaskill, plus many theologians.

The understanding of theosis varies from author to author, from tradition to tradition, and even within specific traditions. It is best, therefore, to think of it as a theological theme and a spiritual reality rather than a doctrine or dogma. Contemporary expressions of the theme are often rooted in the patristic refrain of Irenaeus and Athanasius that "Christ (or God) became what we are so that we could become what he is."[13] But what all of the Christian versions of theosis/deification have in common—and there are lots of non- or quasi-Christian versions on offer—is that this patristic claim means that we become *like* Christ, *like* God, but not God. We become (to varying degrees in this life) by *grace* what Christ, or God, is by *nature*. A Pauline text, to which we will return later, foreshadows this patristic principle:

> 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)

That is, the sinless one who is the embodiment of God's righteousness/justice became in his incarnation what we are—fully human, apart from sin—so that we, *in* him, would become *like* him: characterized by divine righteousness/justice instead of by sin. Note here the fundamental characteristics of theosis or Christosis: participation ("in him") and transformation ("become").

The patristic principle (often called "the exchange formula" and sometimes, in the words of Daniel Keating, "the graced exchange") means two important things. First, it means that the distinction between creature and creator is never compromised. We remain creatures, indeed, sinful

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[11] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 955, 1021–24, 1031.

[12] For a helpful overview of the work of recent Pauline scholars, see Michael C. Reardon, "Becoming God: Interpreting Pauline Soteriology as Deification."

[13] See, e.g., Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54.3.

creatures, forever, even as we grow in righteousness/justice. Second, it means that there are certain divine attributes that we can share (such as righteousness/justice and holiness, on the one hand, and immortality, on the other) and certain attributes that we can never share (such as omniscience or omnipotence). Ben Blackwell helpfully distinguishes between *essential and attributive* ontological deification. In each case, we are in fact changed, transfigured. In the former, however, we become gods or God; in the latter, we participate in the true God, sharing certain of God's attributes.[14]

It is helpful to note that in the Christian tradition, theosis has often been associated with becoming God's children, using the metaphor from John of rebirth from God/above (John 1:12–13, 3:1–10; 1 John) and from Paul of adoption (Romans 8). Children are not their parents, but they are like them and often naturally become more like them as they mature. The CEB translation makes an interesting point in this regard: "Those born from God don't practice sin because God's DNA [lit. "seed" = Gk. *sperma*] remains in them" (1 John 3:9).[15] The rest of 1 John, in which we learn that claiming to be sinless is a grave act of self-deceit (1 John 1:5–10), makes it clear that this text means something like "they do not habitually walk in their previous way of sin prior to their rebirth."

Another good illustration of theosis and being God's children comes from the letter to the Hebrews:

> [7]Endure trials for the sake of discipline. **God is treating you as children**, for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? [8]If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, **then you are illegitimate and not his children**. [9]Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? [10]For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but **he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share** [*metalabein*] **his holiness**. [11]Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later **it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness** [*dikaiosynēs*] to those who have been trained by it. (Heb 12:7–11)

This text from Hebrews demonstrates the patristic principle that we are not God but that God wills for us to share in his character, specifically in his holiness. Moreover, as in 2 Cor 5:21 and in the patristic formula, God takes the initiative and participates with us, in our common humanity, before we participate in God: "Since, therefore, the children share (*kekoinōnēken*) flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared (*meteschen*) the same things" (Heb 2:14).

The Importance of "Becoming"

[14] Blackwell, *Christosis*, 103–10. Note Blackwell's definition of theosis/deification, based on his study of patristic texts (263): "the process of restoring likeness to God, primarily experienced as incorruption and sanctification, through a participatory relationship with God mediated by Christ and the Spirit. Through the Son and the Spirit believers become adopted sons of God, even gods, by grace and not by nature, because they participate in divine attributes such as life and holiness."

[15] Most translations have "seed." A note in the CEB offers "genetic character" as an alternative translation for "DNA."

In his 2022 book *Being and Becoming: Human Transformation in the Letters of Paul*, Frederick David Carr argues creatively and persuasively that for the apostle Paul each believer within the body of Christ is "less a human being, and more a human *becoming*."[16] We have already seen this claim expressed in 2 Cor 5:21: "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." In 1 Corinthians, Paul says, "**Become** (*ginesthe*) imitators of me as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1; MJG), not merely "be imitators" (so most translations).

Other texts in Paul support Carr's assertion, even when the word "become" is not present, such as Paul's famous words in Romans 12, in which transformation encompasses the whole person, mind and body—thinking and doing:

> [1]I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your **bodies** as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. [2]**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)

Carr's notion of "human becoming" is applicable to other New Testament texts too. In the Gospels, for instance, we see the development of characters as examples of this reality. Consider especially the Gospel of John, in which several individual characters get fairly fully developed in one episode (the Samaritan woman in John 4; the man born blind in John 9), over two episodes (Mary in John 11:1–12:8), or over the course of the Gospel (Peter in John 1, 6, 13, 18, 20–21; Nicodemus in John 3, 7, and 19; and Thomas in John 11, 14, and 20). In that gospel Jesus says to his disciples, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become [not "prove to be," as in some translations] my disciples" (John 15:8). And of course Paul himself, according to both Acts and the letters, was a person transformed and constantly being transformed.

Paul writes about this human becoming, or humanization, in Colossians and Ephesians:[17]

> [You] have clothed yourselves with **the new self** (lit. "person," *anthrōpon,* implied from v. 9), which is **being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator**. (Col 3:10)

> **[20]**That [the way of the gentiles] is not the way you **learned Christ**! **[21]**For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus, **[22]**to **put away** your former way of life, **your old self** (*anthrōpon*), corrupt and deluded by its lusts, **[23]**and to be **renewed** in the spirit of your minds, **[24]**and to **clothe yourselves with the new self** (*anthrōpōn*) , **created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness**. (Eph 4:20–24; note similarity to 2 Pet 1:3–4)

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[16] *Being and Becoming*, 165; emphasis his.

[17] I take Paul to be the author of Colossians and Ephesians.

By virtue of context here in Colossians, and explicitly in the Ephesians text, we see that for Paul becoming human, or humanization, is in fact becoming like God by becoming like Christ: Christification, or even "transfiguration."

Transfiguration: Christosis, or Christification[18]

One way to speak about the transformation Paul and other New Testament writers envision is to use the word "transfiguration," an obvious allusion to Jesus' own transfiguration. Colloquially, we could refer to this process as "morphing," and for good linguistic reasons. Both Mark and Matthew use the Greek verb *metamorphoō*—in which we hear "morph" and from which we get the English word "metamorphosis"—in the passive voice (Mark 9:2; Matt 17:2) to describe Jesus' dramatic, temporary, glorious change in appearance as a foreshadowing of his glorious resurrection, ascension, and session at the right hand of the Father.[19] Both Mark and Matthew say Jesus "was transfigured before them" (i.e., before Peter, James, and John): "Six days later, 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).[20]

Paul also uses *metamorphoō* in the passive voice, on two occasions, once in the indicative mode and once as an imperative:

> 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)

> Do not be conformed to this age, but **be transformed** (or "transfigured"; *metamorphousthe*) **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 12:2)

These two texts tell us several important things about this transformation, or transfiguration:

- it is a process;
- it is a responsibility;
- it requires an effective agent (the Spirit) other than the self;
- it is a present reality with a future (undoubtedly eschatological) telos; and
- it is both moral and ontological in character.

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[18] The next few paragraphs are drawn from the Introduction to my forthcoming book *Life Transfigured*.

[19] Luke's account does not use the verb, and there is no account in John. On the transfiguration, see Patrick Schreiner, *The Transfiguration of Christ*.

[20] All biblical translations are from the NRSVue unless otherwise indicated; those marked MJG are my own.

The immediate and larger Pauline contexts reveal, in only slightly different language,[21] that believers' transfiguration is ultimately about becoming Christlike; it is "Christosis" or "Christification" with respect to both present growth in Christlikeness (i.e., cruciformity) and ultimate conformity to Christ's exalted body (i.e., what we might call "resurrectiformity"):

> [T]hose whom he [God] foreknew he also **predestined to be conformed** (*symmorphous*) **to the image of his Son**. (Rom 8:29)

> 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. . . . But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. **He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed** (*symmorphon*) **to the body of his glory**, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. (Phil 3:10–11, 20–21 NRSVue alt.)[22]

The language of "conformity"—or "co-formity"—also tells us some important things about the process, including some new dimensions:

- it is transformative;
- it is a present reality with an eschatological telos;
- is both moral and ontological in character;
- it has a pattern (namely Christ and his story of humiliation followed by exaltation);
- it requires an effective agent (God, Christ) other than the self; and
- it is a matter of participation, or *koinōnia*.

Since we have considered some aspects of Philippians 3, we should also look briefly at Philippians 2, where Paul poetically tells the story of Jesus' own humiliation and exaltation that is the basis of his remarks in Philippians 3. It is also more "ethically" oriented than the brief reference to conformity to Jesus' death in Philippians 3:

> [1]If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, [2]make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. [3]Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others [lit. "one another"] as better than yourselves. [4]Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. (Phil 2:1–4 NRSVue)

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[21] The critical words in question all have the Greek word *morphē*, "form," at their center.

[22] In 3:10, the NRSVue simply has "becoming like him in his death" rather than "being conformed to his death." Some translations actually do use "conformed" (e.g., CEB, NABRE, NASB1995).

[5]Cultivate this mindset (*phroneite*)—this way of thinking, acting, and feeling[23]—in your community, which is in fact a community in the Messiah Jesus,

[6]who, *although being* in the form of God,
and indeed *because of being* in the form (*morphē*) of God,[24]
did not consider this equality with God as something to be exploited for his own advantage,
[7]but rather emptied himself,
by taking the form (*morphēn*) of a slave,
that is, by becoming a true human being.[25]
And being found in human form (*schēmati*),
[8]he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

[9]Therefore God [the Father] superexalted him
and bestowed on him the name that is above every name ["Lord"],
[10]so that at the name of Jesus
every knee will bend—
in heaven and
on earth and
under the earth—
[11]and every tongue will acclaim,
"Jesus the Messiah is Lord!"—
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:5–11 MJG)

There is much that could be said about this text, but we will limit the remarks to just a few for now and return to it below.

First, the correspondence between the first half of the poetic story of Christ (vv. 6–8) and the exhortations to the Philippian community "in Christ" in the poem's preface (vv. 1–4) is clear: the way of self-giving, self-emptying, self-humbling love (kenosis) is the norm for the church; it is the way to express mutual love and to achieve communal unity. The preface, in light of the poem itself, is clearly a call to Christoformity, indeed to cruciformity.

Second, as in earlier passages from Paul quoted above and not surprisingly here, the Greek word *morphē*, "form," occurs twice in this text (now as the basic lexeme), plus a near-synonym (*schēma*). These words describe Jesus the Messiah but also reinforce the need for correspondence in "form" for those who are in the Messiah. The emphasis here is not ontological or eschatological

[23] This is the interpretation of the verb *phroneite* (NRSVue: "have this mind") in Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians*, 88–90; cf. 28–9.
[24] I will explain this translation in the next section.
[25] Many translations have "in human likeness (*homoiōmati*)," but this can be misunderstood as the opposite of what the text means to convey—taking on full humanity. See also Rom 8:3.

but moral. Christ, who was in the form of God, took on the form of a slave in his incarnation, and in his humanity he humbled himself to the extreme of crucifixion—two acts of humility and love, as 2:1–5 makes clear. To become human, and then to live out that humanity *in extremis*, was fundamentally a two-step instantiation of self-giving love, both divine (incarnation) and human (crucifixion, implicitly for others).[26]

Those who are in Christ are called to a deep consideration of this story of divine and human humility and love for the shape of their life together. *Christification, then, is both deification and humanization*. Since no believer or church has yet to achieve perfection (as Paul says about himself in Phil 3:12), the implication is that there needs to be an ongoing process of transformation into Christlikeness. The final result, as with Christ (2:9–11), will be that humiliation is transformed, even bodily, into exaltation (Phil 3:20–21)—the telos of Christosis.

Furthering the Connection: Christosis as Theosis

Some people have wondered why we need the language of "theosis." Wouldn't "Christosis" and its various synonyms suffice? In addition to Philippians 2 (as argued in the last few paragraphs), there are several texts in Paul that lead us to the language of theosis.

The first such text is again Philippians 2 itself, from another angle. In Phil 2:6, Paul describes Christ in the words "although being in the form of God", or "although he was in the form of God." But the Greek participle in this verse (*hyparchōn*) can also mean "because of being in the form of God," or "because he was in the form of God." In other words, what Christ did 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.[27] To put it theologically, 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.

Another text to consider, once again, is 2 Cor 5:21:

> 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)

The transformation of which Paul speaks in this theology of "exchange" is transformation into the righteousness or justice of *God*. This is surprising since the natural complement to the first part of the verse would be something like "so that in him we sinners might become sinless [or perhaps "increasingly less sinful"]." But instead, Paul avers that God's purpose is the transformation of people into *Godlikeness*, not Christlikeness. Now for Paul this is not really an either-or matter. *Christification is deification*. This is because Christ was "in the form of God" (Phil 2:6) and is indeed the image of God (2 Cor 4:4).

Another text, or set of texts, to consider comes from one of the "disputed" letters of Paul, namely, Colossians (emphasis added):

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[26] Various texts reveal that Christ's death was an act of love, e.g., Rom 8:35; 14:15; Gal 2:20; 2 Cor 5:14; Eph 5:2.

[27] For an extended, nuanced defense of this interpretation, see my *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 1–39.

> For in him [Christ] all the **fullness** of God was pleased to dwell. (Col 1:19)[28]
>
> As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to **walk in him**, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. . . . For **in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him**, who is the head of every ruler and authority. (Col 2:6–7, 9–10)

Paul's theo-logic is fully on display here:

- the fullness of God was in Christ;
- believers are in Christ;
- thus, believers, located in the location of the divine fullness, are "filled" with God.

Moreover, not only are believers located in Christ, but he is in (or among) them:

> To them ["God's saints"] God chose to make known how great among the gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is **Christ in [or "among"] you [plural], the hope of glory**. (Col 1:27)

It is difficult to call such an experience anything other than theosis, but it is clearly a *Christological* theosis, and in fact, a *cruciform* theosis.[29] Even though believers have been "raised with Christ" (Col 3:1), ultimate glory is still a hope, not a realization. In this life, therefore, believers are called, negatively, to "put to death . . . whatever in you is earthly: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)" (Col 3:5). And they are equally called, positively, to Christlike "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience," forgiveness, love, and peace (Col 3:12–15). These are the negative and the positive sides of cruciformity.

This cruciform theosis is an ongoing process of putting into daily life the reality of having taken off the "old self" and having put on the "new self" (Col 3:9–10), which is a process of renewal in the "image of its [the self's] creator" (Col 3:10). This renewal is not merely individual but also corporate, for "In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved and free, but Christ is all and in all!" (Col 3:11).

Because fullness (i.e., theosis) is a transformative process, a "walk" (Col 1:10; 2:6) rather than a *fait accompli*, Paul prays for it to take place among those who read or hear his words:

> For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and **asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will** in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, **so that you may walk worthy of the Lord**, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and **as you grow in the knowledge of God**. (Col 1:9–10)

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[28] The words "of God" do not occur in the Greek text, but that is certainly the implication from the context.
[29] See further Ben C. Blackwell, "You Are Filled in Him: Theosis and Colossians 2-3." He concludes that Christosis in Colossians is "participatory embodiment of Christ's death and life" (117) and that "Christosis is theosis" (118).

From Glory to Glory

In 2 Cor 3:18 we find the famous phrase "from one degree of glory to another" or, more literally, "from glory toward (*eis*) glory." It has been called "the most frankly theotic" text in Paul.[30] The context of this verse is a discussion of the similarities and (especially) differences between (1) the glory associated with Moses, the letter, and the old covenant and (2) the glory associated with Christ, the Spirit, and the new covenant. When God makes covenant with humanity, it involves humanity having a share in the glory of God—God's beauty, holiness, and brightness. Only with this basic premise in mind can we see that the partiality of humanity's exposure to God's glory and the need to be veiled from its fullness (2 Cor 3:12–15) under the old covenant are not merely foils for the new covenant but anticipations of it, though marred by human sin.

The most significant aspect of Paul's discussion is the *present*-ness of God's glory. It is not a mere eschatological hope but a present reality that can be experienced in a way that is both enlightening and transformative. As 2 Corinthians 3 unfolds and then leads into chapter 4, this enlightening, transformational experience of God's glory will become both central to Paul's concerns and defined by the crucified Messiah. The focus on the present reality of God's glory and of the human experience of that glory is preparing us for the bold claim of 2 Cor 3:18. I suggest that it means not a change in the *degree* of glory but a change in the *kind* of glory: a transformation from present, partial, cruciform glory into future, complete, resurrection glory. Here is a possible translation of the text:

> 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)

We know that Paul offers believers the *hope* of glory, of a future sharing in God's glory (e.g., Rom 5:2; Col 1:27), but what could it mean to experience glory *now*, in the present?

To be sure, life in Christ is full of joy and other wonderful blessings, even in the midst of trials and tribulations (see especially Philippians). That might be considered a form of glory. But I think it is more likely that what Paul has in mind in 2 Cor 3:18 is a trajectory, a transformation into Christlikeness that follows the pattern of Christ's own story found in Phil 2:6–11. And that, as we have seen, is a story of cruciformity before resurrectiformity, of humiliation before exaltation.

We know from 2 Cor 4:4 that the "image" referred to in 3:18 is Christ, "who is the image of God." The Christ that Paul proclaims and embodies, in the present, is inseparable from the paradoxical life-giving glory of the cross:

> [7]But 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. [8]We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, [9]persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, [10]**always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life**

[30] Stephen Finlan, "Can We Speak of *Theosis* in Paul?", 75.

> **of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies**. [11]For 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**. [12]**So death is at work in us but life in you**. (2 Cor 4:7–12)

Paul is describing the gospel ministry undertaken by himself and his colleagues as one of power in weakness, as he will put it later in the letter (2 Cor 12:10). This is glorious, paradoxically, simply because it reflects the one who is the image of the glorious God. Such experiences of death, of cruciformity, do not cause Paul to lose heart for two reasons: first, because the life of Jesus is being manifest in and through his cruciform ministry; and second, because "our slight, momentary affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure" (2 Cor 4:17).

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.[31] But eventually the trajectory goes from resurrectionally cruciform glory to pure, unadulterated eternal glory: resurrecti*form*ity.

The process of transformation from the former to the latter glory to which Paul refers in 2 Cor 3:18 is the work of the Spirit. It happens "even though our outer nature is wasting away" because "our inner nature is being renewed day by day" (2 Cor 4:16). This process takes place by "gazing at the glory of the Lord" (2 Cor 3:18). In antiquity people believed that they would become like any object at which they gazed.[32] What does it mean for Paul and for us to "gaze at," or visually contemplate, the glory of the Lord?

Paul does not answer that question explicitly, but the context suggests at least five plausible, Christ-centered answers. (Although I believe all of these practices are mentioned by Paul in his letters, I am not claiming he had every one of them explicitly in mind when he penned 2 Cor 3:18.) While I will use the word "contemplate" to describe these acts of gazing, by "contemplation" I mean not only thinking, praying, or meditating.

First, contemplating the glory of the Lord occurs simply by virtue of having turned to the Lord and having been relocated into Christ—and having Christ, by his Spirit, within. The veil is lifted at this point, the transformation process has begun, and contemplation is simply part of being located within the sphere of the Messiah in which the Spirit is at work and the divine glory is present. Because "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:5), believers individually and corporately have an indwelling power of love that is transformative simply because it is God's own loving presence.[33]

This does not mean that those in Christ can simply be passive. Second, then, contemplating the glory of the Lord occurs by actively reading, hearing, and "chewing on" his word and words about him, including word-pictures (e.g., Heb 12:1–3). This would include attending to Moses and the entirety of the Scriptures of Israel "backwards," that is, through the lens of Christ. It would also especially mean considering the accounts of Jesus' story in gospel-narratives, poetry (like Phil 2:6–11), and creeds (like 1 Cor 15:3–9). This is because Jesus is the defining locus of God's glory

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[31] See especially my *Participating in Christ*.

[32] See Jane Heath's *Paul's Visual Piety*.

[33] See Alex R. Wendel, "Tidings of Comfort and Joy: Trinitarian Processions, Participation in God, and the Holy Spirit's Cultivation of Human Holiness."

and the paradigm of human glorification. Paul can even refer to his own preaching as a kind of occasion for the visible contemplation of Christ (publicly portrayed—Gal 3:1–5).

Third, since contemplating the glory of the Lord is expressed grammatically as a plural, and therefore communal, experience, it occurs in the life and worship of the gathered community. Contemplating the mystery of God in Christ must include the experience of worship. If the divine glory (Heb. *shekinah*) is present in the temple, and the church is God's temple (1 Cor 3:16–17), then the gathered community is a place to "gaze on" the glory of the Lord, to become what—actually whom—we worship. In church buildings, this contemplation can actually include gazing at crosses, crucifixes, stained-glass windows, sculptures, statues, and more.

Fourth, contemplating the glory of the Lord would mean observing and imitating those who embody the story of Jesus. In 2 Corinthians, such people include especially Paul and his colleagues inasmuch as they instantiate the cruciform ministry of life-giving dying in service to others about which Paul speaks in chapter 4.[34] When Paul says to the Corinthians, "Become imitators of me as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1; MJG; cf. Phil 4:9), he is implicitly calling them to observe him, or "gaze at" him.

More generally, other believers (e.g. Tinothy and Epaphroditus; Phil 2:19–30) and entire Christian communities (e.g., the impoverished Macedonians; 2 Cor 8:1–7) can be objects of contemplation. They are living examples of the cruciform existence that is ultimately rooted in the narrative of Jesus (Phil 2:6-11). The image of a "cloud of witnesses" that inspires contemplation of, and faithfulness to, Jesus may belong to Hebrews (Heb 12:1–3), but it is an image that Paul would embrace.

Fifth, with respect to contemplating the glory of the Lord, Paul would want the Corinthians and us to see the glory of the Lord revealed in the poor and weak. Paul had told the Corinthians that God's power-in-weakness—God's cruciform glory—was manifested not only in the crucified Messiah (1 Cor 1:18–25), not merely in apostolic weakness (1 Cor 2:1–5), but also in the weak, ignoble, and insignificant (1 Cor 1:26–31). He informed them that the body of Christ was to pay greatest attention to its weaker members (1 Cor 12:14–26; Rom 12:16; 14:1) in conformity to Christ (Rom 15:1–3). When the church does not do so, its feasts allegedly in honor of its Lord are no longer the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34).

Sixth, and closely related to the fifth, is the transformative power of seeing Christ in the world as believers embody the gospel in and for that world, including suffering for Christ and the gospel. To that final subject we now turn briefly.

Theosis on the Ground: Ecclesial and Missional

We should not leave the topic of theosis without stressing that it is not something theoretical or mystical in the (pejorative) sense of a vague or even vacuous mysticism. As we see in Philippians 2, Christosis/theosis signifies a set of very concrete practices. Similarly, to return to Rom 12:2 ("Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed [*metamorphousthe*] by the renewing of the mind"), we see what this metamorphosis looks like, in part, in the following verses:

[34] See also Gal 3:1–5; 1 Cor 2:1–5.

> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.
>
> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Rom 12:9–18).

Such practices are not merely ways of being "nice"; they are manifestations of being Christlike and Godlike. For instance, Paul himself describes God's activity in Christ as making peace with enemies (Rom 5:1–11; 2 Cor 5:14–21; Eph 2:11–22) because God is the God of peace (Rom 15:33; 16:20; 1 Cor 14:33; 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 4:9; 1 Thess 5:23), the God who is characterized by peace and effects peace. God is also the God of hope who generates hope (Rom 15:13). And of course God is the God of love (2 Cor 13:11) who loves people and generates love among them.

That is, *God does what God is*, and those who do what God is and does participate in those divine attributes. As 1 John puts it with respect to love:

> 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)

First John offers us another critical, eschatological perspective, expressing the telos of theosis:

> 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)

Finally, to return one last time to 2 Cor 5:21, we need to attend to these words from Richard Hays about that verse:

> [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.[35]

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says something similar: "My Father is glorified by this, that you [plural] **bear much fruit and become** (*genēsthe*) **my disciples**" (John 15:8). Many translations have "prove to be" or something similar instead of "become." But the NRSVue is right to translate the Greek verb *ginomai* ("become") as "become." Jesus is speaking about disciples becoming disciples, about transformation by abiding in him, his love, and his words like branches in the vine (the theme of John 15) *and* by simultaneously going out: "I appointed you [plural] to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last" (John 15:16). Another theotic paradox.

That is, the full transformation of the self takes place only in community, and only in getting outside the self and into the world.[36] Such participation in the *missio Dei* comes with the inherent risk of suffering, as Paul knew well. According to Paul, such suffering can be formative (Rom 5:3–5); it is part of the narrative of theosis: "Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12; cf. Rom 8:17).[37]

Conclusion

Some conclusions to summarize where we have been:

1. Theosis is possible only by God's initiative in participating with us, and it occurs by grace and the work of the Spirit. Yet it requires our cooperation.
2. Theosis is transformative participation in the life and mission of the kenotic, Triune God through Spirit-enabled conformity to the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected/glorified Christ.
3. Theosis means we share in certain divine attributes without ever ceasing to be fully human.
4. Theosis is a continual process of conformity to Christ, the image of God, from inauguration into him (through faith and baptism) until resurrection and bodily transformation.
5. Theosis is not merely individual or private; it is corporate (ecclesial) and missional.
6. To be truly human is to be Christlike, which is to be Godlike, which is to be kenotic and cruciform. "As believers embody Christ's narrative, they embody God's narrative: Christosis is theosis."[38]

That is, *Christification is deification is humanization*.

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[35] Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 24.

[36] See also my *Becoming the Gospel* and *Abide and Go*.

[37] On suffering, see, e.g., Helen Rhee, "A Response to Bruce Hindmarsh's Diagnosing the Problem of Christian Immaturity: A Historical Perspective."

[38] Blackwell, "You are Filled in Him," 123.

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