

Theosis: Partaking of the Divine Nature

By Mark Shuttleworth

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I said, “You are gods,

And all of you are children of the Most High.” (Psalm 82:6)

This is a verse that most Protestants do not underline in their Bibles. What on earth does it mean—“you are gods”? Doesn’t our faith teach that there is only one God, in three Persons? How can human beings be gods?

In the Orthodox Church, this concept is neither new nor startling. It even has a name: theosis. Theosis is the understanding that human beings can have real union with God, and so become like God to such a degree that we participate in the divine nature. Also referred to as deification, divinization, or illumination, it is a concept derived from the New Testament regarding the goal of our relationship with the Triune God. (Theosis and deification may be used interchangeably. We will avoid the term divinization, since it could be misread for divination, which is another thing altogether!)

Many Protestants, and even some Roman Catholics, might find the Orthodox concept of theosis unnerving. Especially when they read a quote such as this one from St. Athanasius: “God became man so that men might become gods,” they immediately fear an influence of Eastern mysticism from Hinduism or pantheism.

But such an influence could not be further from the Orthodox understanding. The human person does not merge with some sort of impersonal divine force, losing individual identity or consciousness. Intrinsic divinity is never ascribed to humankind or any part of the creation, and no created thing is confused with the being of God. Most certainly, humans are not accorded ontological equality with God, nor are they considered to merge or co-mingle with the being of God as He is in His essence.

In fact, to safeguard against any sort of misunderstanding of this kind, Orthodox theologians have been careful to distinguish between God’s essence and His energies. God is incomprehensible in His essence. But God, who is love, allows us to know Him through His divine energies, those actions whereby He reveals Himself to us in creation, providence, and redemption. It is through the divine energies, therefore, that we achieve union with God.

We become united with God by grace in the Person of Christ, who is God come in the flesh. The means of becoming “like God” is through perfection in holiness, the continuous process of acquiring the Holy Spirit by grace through ascetic devotion. Some Protestants might refer to this process as sanctification. Another term for it, perhaps more familiar to Western Christians, would be mortification—putting sin to death within ourselves.

In fact, deification is very akin to the Wesleyan understanding of holiness or perfection, with the added element of our mystical union with God in Christ as both the means and the motive for attaining perfection. Fr. David Hester, in his booklet, *The Jesus Prayer*, identifies theosis as “the gradual process by which a person is renewed and unified so completely with God that he becomes by grace what God is by nature.” Another way of stating it is “sharing in the divine nature through grace.”

St. Maximos the Confessor, as Fr. Hester notes, defined theosis as “total participation in Jesus Christ.” Careful to maintain the ontological safeguard noted above, St. Maximos further stated, “All that God is, except for an identity in being, one becomes when one is deified by grace.”

C. S. Lewis understood this concept and expressed it compellingly in *Mere Christianity*:

The command “Be ye perfect” is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. He said (in the Bible) that we were “gods” and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him—for we can prevent Him, if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to Him perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what he said. (Macmillan, 1952, p. 174)

With the Incarnation, God has assumed and glorified our flesh and has consecrated and sanctified our humanity. He has also given us the Holy Spirit. As we acquire more of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives, we become more like Christ, and we have the opportunity of being granted, in this life, illumination or glorification. When we speak of acquiring more of the Holy Spirit, it is in the sense of appropriating to a greater degree what has actually been given to us already by God. We acquire more of what we are more able to receive. God the Holy Spirit remains ever constant. Theosis in the New Testament

Many passages in the New Testament speak to the Orthodox understanding of deification/theosis. First is 2 Peter 1:3–4, which states that God’s “divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness” through the knowledge of God, who called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these things, He has given us His great promises so that we “may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”

This verse clearly and unequivocally states that we can become partakers of the divine nature. How so? Through God’s divine power at work in us, we gain life and godliness and are given His promises so that we can escape from corruption. There is God’s action in and upon us, and there is response and corresponding effort on our part.

This brings to mind Philippians 2:12–13, where St. Paul tells us to “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling,” for it is God who is at work in us “both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” Thus we get a clear picture here of the process by which we are renewed and unified so completely with God that we become by grace what God is by nature. God works in us, and we cooperate with His grace.

Another passage of note is John 10:34–36. In a dispute with the Pharisees, Jesus refers to the verse quoted above, Psalm 82:6, where human beings are referred to as “gods.” The Jewish leaders accuse Jesus of blasphemy and are ready to stone Him for equating Himself with the Father (vv. 22–33). Jesus replies, “Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, “You are gods” ’? If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken),” then why do they label as blasphemy Jesus calling Himself God’s Son? Jesus is truly God’s Son, and we are gods because we share in His sonship.

Consider Acts 17:28–29, where St. Paul approvingly quotes the Greek poets, who state that we are God’s “offspring.” Paul concludes that since we are “the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature” is like some lifeless object.

Throughout Paul’s epistles, we find many descriptive passages referring to the same concepts that we have been considering: union with God, sharing in the divine nature through grace, and total participation in Jesus Christ—the biblical concept of theosis/deification. In Ephesians 1, Paul states that we have been given “every spiritual blessing” (v. 3) so that we should be “holy and without blame” (v. 4); we are His “sons” (v. 5). He made “the riches of His grace . . . to abound toward us” (vv. 6–7). We are given wisdom and insight into the “mystery of His will” (v. 9), which is to “gather together in one all things in Christ” (v. 10).

Furthermore, we are “sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise” (v. 13), the “guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession” (v. 14). We are recipients of “wisdom and revelation” (v. 17), having “the eyes of [our] understanding . . . enlightened” (v. 18); knowing the “exceeding greatness of His power toward us” (v. 19). We are the “body” of Him who is the head and “the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (v. 23).

These are descriptions of sonship, of human beings as children of God with full pedigree and inheritance rights. We are brought into God’s intimate inner circle to know the mystery of His will, being given wisdom and enlightenment. We have grace lavished upon us and are His body, His fullness. The whole purpose of God’s mystery is that all things will be united in Christ and that He will be all in all. Does this not describe partaking of the divine nature, becoming by grace what God is by nature?

Certainly there is much more being described here than “growing in faith and good works,” progressing in sanctification or mortifying sin. Those are indeed excellent enterprises, but not ends in themselves. They are means employed toward a greater end. St. Paul is outlining this compelling, inspiring description of our identity in Christ, indeed showing us what total participation in Christ actually is. Ephesians 1 is a description of theosis.

In other verses in Ephesians, St. Paul continues: we are to “be filled with all the fullness of God” (3:19) and to attain to “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (4:13). We are to “grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ” (4:15). Again, this describes the process of being deified by grace, acquiring the fullness of Christ.

In Romans 6, Paul gives us a wonderful picture of deification. Through baptism we “walk in newness of life” (v. 4). We are not to let sin “reign in [our] mortal bod[ies]” (v. 12), but are to “present [ourselves] to

God" (v. 13) so that sin will "not have dominion over" us (v. 14). Our members are to be yielded to "righteousness for holiness" (v. 19). Therefore we have "been set free from sin, and hav[e] become slaves of God" (v. 22). Our hope is to share in "the glory of God" (5:2). Even the very creation "eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God" (8:19).

Continuing in chapter 8, we are indeed called "sons of God" (v. 14) who have received a "Spirit of adoption," crying (as Jesus did) "Abba, Father" (v. 15). The Spirit bears witness "with our spirit" — union — that we are "children of God" (v. 16). We are children, "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ . . . that we may also be glorified together" (v. 17). Verse 17 also stipulates, "if indeed we suffer with Him." We will come back to that in relation to the experience of the saints who have attained deification.

In verse 29, St. Paul writes that we are destined to be "conformed to the image of His Son." Furthermore, those He "justified, these He also glorified" (v. 30). Note that he did not say God will glorify them only after they die, at the final resurrection. This glorifying can be a present reality. Verse 32 says that God will "with Him also freely give us all things."

Does this not get you just a little bit excited? Does it not describe something more than "being saved" or "going to heaven when I die"? Is your heart racing just a little? If so, you are starting to grasp theosis. It is an understanding of our purpose as believers that is not just Orthodox, it is thoroughly biblical.

Before we briefly note some other New Testament passages, let's consider an additional way to understand deification from the Book of Genesis. There we learn that we are created in God's image. Through sin, that image has been greatly broken and damaged, but through redemption in Christ it is renewed "according to the image of Him who created" it, as Paul notes in Colossians 3:10. Add all these other motifs — sonship, being fellow heirs, union, being made like Christ, partaking of the divine nature — and we see that these describe the divine image, broken and marred (but not altogether lost) through Adam's fall, being remade in us through Christ's redeeming work, so that we become like God. Thus in Genesis we are created in God's image; through Christ we are given the opportunity to acquire God's likeness. In Ephesians 4:23–24 this very idea is reinforced: "be renewed in the spirit of your mind" and "put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness." And in 5:1 we are enjoined to be "imitators of God."

A number of other New Testament passages describe theosis:

Romans 12:1–2: We are to present our bodies as a "living sacrifice," doing so as part of our spiritual worship. And we are to "be transformed" by the renewing of our minds into the likeness of God.

1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:17: We are reminded that we are God's "temple" and that "he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him" — union with God.

Galatians 2:20: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

Philippians 1:21: "For me, to live is Christ."

Colossians 3:3: We have "died" and our lives are "hidden with Christ in God" — total participation in Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:23: May God "sanctify you completely" — complete conformity to the image and likeness of God.

2 Thessalonians 2:14: We were called by God "for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

1 John 4:17: "Because as He is, so are we in this world" — the possibility of deification, total participation in Christ this side of eternity.

John 17:22: In His high priestly prayer, Jesus says that He has given us the glory that the Father gave Him.

Revelation 21:7: At the beginning of the eschaton, Christ says of each of us, "I will be his God and he shall be My son."

1 John 3:2: "We know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

Philippians 3:21: Christ will "transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body."

These passages promise to all Christians an ending "like Christ" at the consummation of history. Since that is our end—actually a new beginning, for which we were created and redeemed—we are urged throughout the New Testament to obtain more and more of that reality in this life, as a "dress rehearsal" for the life to come. In short, this is what theosis/deification is: the possibility that we can acquire in this life that state that we will have as resurrected, glorified persons in the presence of God in eternity.

Finally, we must consider our Lord’s transfiguration on Mt. Tabor (Matt. 17:1ff; Mark 9:2ff). One of the twelve major feasts of the Orthodox Church, it provides great insight for our understanding of theosis. Jesus went up the mountain with Peter, James, and John and was transformed before their eyes. He appeared to them in His glorified humanity and was illumined with the light of divinity. Moses and Elijah, representing the Law and the Prophets, appeared with Christ as He was enveloped by the glory cloud, the presence of the Holy Spirit. As at His baptism, the Father spoke, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" (Matthew 17:5).

Here we have the whole Bible summed up in this one event. The Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets, point to Christ, the eternal Son come in the flesh. He appears with the Holy Spirit and the Father—the Trinity. Through His Incarnation He is joined to our humanity and glorifies it in Himself, uniting us to God, fulfilling the purpose of our creation in Genesis. We are to listen to Him because He is God’s ultimate revelation of Himself to us (cf. Hebrews 1:1; John 1:14). Furthermore, this event occurred to prepare the disciples for Christ’s crucifixion, which would deliver our fallen humanity from sin and death and raise us up with Him in His resurrection.

Thus we may be glorified together with Him. We are joined to Christ in His glorified, deified humanity and so are united to God. Through this union we are made partakers of the divine nature. Through grace we can become what He is. Theosis in the Writings of the Fathers

We began with a somewhat startling quote by St. Athanasius: "God became man so that men might become gods." Keep in mind that this is the same Athanasius who championed the orthodox (in its common sense of correct) understanding of the full divinity of Christ in opposition to the Arian heresy. Numerous other early Church Fathers made similar statements.

Gregory of Nazianzus, another great champion of correct views about the Trinity and Christ’s divinity, stated: "Man has been ordered to become God." His close friend, Basil the Great, said, "From the Holy Spirit is the likeness of God, and the highest thing to be desired, to become God."

Origen noted that the spirit "is deified by that which it contemplates." And Cyril of Alexandria commented that we are all called to take part in divinity, becoming the likeness of Christ and the image of the Father by "participation." Irenaeus noted, "If the Word is made man, it is that man might become gods." Finally, John of Damascus taught that Christ’s redemptive work enables the image of God to be restored in us so that we become "partakers of divinity."

These are not just Eastern Church Fathers being quoted. Most, if not all, are recognized by East and West. Theosis is a truly catholic understanding of the goal of our relationship with God in Christ. Theosis in the Lives of the Saints

Finally, countless saints throughout history have demonstrated the possibility of deification as a reality in their lives. They attained deification only after intense suffering. Their sufferings came through persecution and martyrdom, intense ascetic discipline and countless nightly prayer vigils wrestling with evil spirits to obtain victory in the spiritual life. Through suffering such blessed victory was won.

Two stories of two saints show the effects of theosis on the body. Some may wish to discount these accounts as "hero worship" or "mythology" or "hagiographic exaggeration." I prefer to offer them as inspiration to strive toward theosis in each of our lives.

St. Seraphim of Sarov, a Russian monk of the nineteenth century, went into the forest with his disciple, Motovilov, during a snowstorm. While praying, St. Seraphim became iridescent in appearance, to the point of emitting what was for Motovilov an almost blinding light. Accompanying this glow was a warmth in the midst of the Russian winter snow, along with a beautiful fragrance and unspeakable joy and peace. St. Seraphim attributed this blessed state to his having acquired the Holy Spirit, or deification.

Abba Joseph, a desert father, was approached by Abba Lot, who informed him that he had kept his rule of prayer, fasted, purified his thoughts, and lived peaceably—what more could he do? Abba Joseph held out his hands toward heaven, fingers extended, and said, "You can become fire." Each fingertip blazed like a candle. Abba Joseph’s point was that the younger monk could be set ablaze by the Holy Spirit.

May we all be set ablaze by the Spirit, the "Heavenly King, the Comforter . . . Treasury of blessings and Giver of life"—as the Orthodox prayer addresses Him. And through that same Holy Spirit, may we come into union with God and experience "total participation in Jesus Christ." May our lives be "unified so completely

with God” that we become “by grace what God is by nature,” so that we share in “the divine nature through grace.” So much so that we become not just Christ-like, but the likeness of Christ.

Suggested Reading

At the Corner of East and Now, by Frederica Mathewes-Green. She writes clearly, with wit and charm. But she also communicates the majesty and beauty and profound glory of Orthodox worship and life.

The Jesus Prayer, by Fr. John Hester. This booklet is an excellent overview of the Jesus Prayer, its history, and its influence in the process of deification.

Living Icons, by Fr. Michael Plekon. The book begins with a wonderful chapter on St. Seraphim of Sarov and stresses his impact on the lives and thought of so many Russian émigrés after the Bolshevik Revolution.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity, by Daniel B. Clendenin. This is an insightful and mostly sympathetic examination of Orthodoxy by a Protestant scholar.

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