

## Teaching Notes

**Theōsis: The purpose of human existence**

Jerry Truex; September 10, 2017

**A. Theōsis**

Today, we are going to continue our series on theōsis. Theōsis refers to the deification of human beings.<sup>1</sup> Theōsis means becoming like God, union with God, participating in God, communion with God.

Theōsis implies that we are infused with God's power; that we are assimilated, interpenetrated, and transfused by God.

**B. Key biblical texts****1. Partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:3-7)**

*Theōsis* is the process by which humans become "partakers of the divine nature" (θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως; 2 Pet. 1:4).

**2 Pet. 1:3-7.** <sup>3</sup> His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. <sup>4</sup> 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 (epithumia), and may become participants of the divine nature. <sup>5</sup> For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, <sup>6</sup> and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, <sup>7</sup> and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. (NRSV)

There are two things to note:

<sup>1</sup> The Greek Fathers called it "deification" (*theōsis*) or "divinization" (*theopoiēsis*). Eli-Matti Karkkainen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2004) 17. Early church Fathers also used *theopoiēō* ("to deify"), *apothēō* ("to apotheosize"), *theopoiēsis* ("deification").

First, this text makes it clear that “participating in the divine nature” is the product of divine action (“has given us”) and human responsibly (“you must make every effort”).

Divine and human efforts are synergistic; there is divine and human cooperation.

Second, the divine nature (*physis*), which we share, is defined by a list of virtues or character qualities: faith(fulness), goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, brotherly-sisterly love, and love.

We can surmise that *participating in the divine nature* means taking on those character qualities, taking effort to be this kind of person.

## **2. You are gods (Psa 82:6-7)**

This is a quotation from Psalm 82 and is often cited by Eastern Orthodox church fathers to support the idea of theōsis.<sup>2</sup>

**Psalm 82:6-7.** <sup>6</sup> I say, “You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you; <sup>7</sup> nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince.” (NRS)<sup>3</sup>

First, notice that the people of God are called “gods” because they are called “children of the Most High.” This is alternative language for claiming that people are created in the “image of God.”

Second, Israel had a divine calling but, as the first part of Psalm 82 shows, they acted unjustly, showed partiality, and oppressed the weak, so, in verse 7, the poet says they will not attain the “likeness of God” and die like mortals.

## **3. Formation and transformation (Gal. 4:19; 12:2)**

Theōsis can also be talked about in the terms of formation and transformation.

**Gal. 4:19.** My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed [morphoō] in you (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement, and Cyril of Alexandria. Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009) 56.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. John 10:33-36.

**Rom. 12:2.** <sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed [metamorphoō] by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect. (NRSV)

**2 Cor. 3:18.** <sup>18</sup> And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed [metamorphoō] into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (NRSV)

These texts use words with *morphē* as a root. In English, the verb *morphing* refers to undergoing or causing to undergo a process of transformation; e.g., in computer animation, techniques are used to morph one image into another by small gradual steps.

In the biblical texts, what are we morphed into?

- Image of Christ, Christ, glory

How does morphing take place in Romans 12:2?

- We are changed by the renewal of our minds (*nous*)—our thinking
- We are not renewed by our feelings
- ABC paradigm of RET; ANTs
- Our mind is a battle field where we learn to get rid of vices and acquire virtue. It is spiritual warfare—interior combat—takes place in your mind, in your thought life.

#### **4. Imitating Christ (John 13:34-35; 1 John 2:6)**

Corresponding to theōsis, or being formed into the likeness of God, is the language of imitation or the language of apprentice. We become formed by following Christ.

John 13:34-35 <sup>34</sup> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (NRSV)

(On imitating Christ, see Phil 2:3-5; 2 Cor. 3:18; John 13:12-15; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13; 1 Pet. 2:21; 1 John 2:6)

## 5. Union with God (John 15:4-5; 17:21-23)

Most importantly, in Orthodox theology, union with God—theōsis—is considered the foundation of all faith and practice.

**John 17:21-23.** <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (NRS)

**John 15:4-5.** <sup>4</sup> Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. (NRSV)

The ultimate purpose of God sending Son, from an Orthodox theological perspective, is that human beings might become god, might be united with God.

**John 1:14.** And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (NRSV)

Church fathers saw this verse as the foundation for humanity becoming deified or having union with God.<sup>4</sup>

Irenaeus (130-202): He “became what we are in order to make us what he is himself.”

Clement of Alexandria (150-215): “The Word of God became man so that you too many learn from a man how it is possible for a man to become a god.”<sup>5</sup>

Athanasius (296-373): “He became human that we might become divine.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See several similar quotations by church fathers in Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009) 38-39.

<sup>5</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks*, 1.8.4

<sup>6</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.

The underlying logic is this: God heals (saves) only what God takes up into himself. God takes on human, so humanity might become god.

### C. The image and likeness of God

In Orthodox theology, people are created in the "image of God," but because of sin, they lost the "likeness of God." This distinction is drawn from Genesis 1:26-27.

**Gen. 1:26-27.** <sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image (*tselem*) according to our likeness (*demuth*); and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." <sup>27</sup> So God created humankind in his image (*tselem*), in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (NRSV)

Although modern scholars think making a sharp distinction between "image" and "likeness" in Gen. 1:26-27 isn't justified, the Orthodox tradition developed helpful spiritual psychologies that entailed the distinction.<sup>7</sup> They taught that:

- The image refers to the rational and volitional nature that we are born with.<sup>8</sup>
- The likeness refers to the moral quality we acquire during life.<sup>9</sup>

After the fall, people retained the "image of God" (reason and will), but lost the "likeness of God" (moral qualities).<sup>10</sup> All people retain the "image of God," but have lost the "likeness of God."

The image of God was given to us in our nature; it is unchangeable; it remains. The likeness, in contrast, we gain and achieve through effort and God's grace.

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<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, 2001); Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976) 114-34; Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theōsis* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009) 73-91.

<sup>8</sup> In the eastern tradition, the image has referred to the spiritual nature or soul of a person, the ruling part of a person, namely, the mind (*nous*), which include intellect, reason, and free will. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976) 115.

<sup>9</sup> The image resides in the soul, or in the highest part, the intellect; it is part of humanity's created structure; the likeness is a moral quality; it is attained as a result of ascetic effort." Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theōsis* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009) 80.

<sup>10</sup> The body is also shares in the image. "It is only through its [the soul's] union with the body that the soul is capable of attaining the divine likeness," since the body and the soul together constitute the image of God, according to Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Palamas. They did not restrict the image to any part of human beings. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976) 116.

That means that the aim or purpose of life is the life-long process of recovering the “likeness of God” or *theōsis*. Recovering the “likeness of God” means developing the character of Christ or acquiring the divine qualities of love, holiness, wisdom, righteousness, justice, mercy, and peace—“the communicable attributes” of God.<sup>11</sup>

*Theōsis* is not optional. It is the call of every human become “like God”.

#### **D. Theōsis as salvation**

Based on biblical texts and the Eastern Orthodox perspectives, it becomes clear that theōsis is salvation. Think about it.

- If we became like God or had union with God, that would probably heal us of our mental and spiritual afflictions. It would make us whole and happy, wouldn't it?
- If we took on the divine character, that would probably save us from harming ourselves and others, would it not?
- If we had deep abiding union with God—if we had theōsis—it would probably save us from anger, envy, greed, anxiety, and fear, and empower us to have hope, joy, happiness, gratitude, love, and compassion.
- If a lot of people experienced theōsis, it would save us from hatred and violence; save us from waging war; save us from exploitation and oppression; maybe save the planet.

So, theōsis is healing and wholeness; it is salvation; it is the overarching purpose of life. When it comes to stating the purpose of human existence, Eastern Orthodox Christians prefer the term theōsis. Theōsis is the very essence of Christianity.

In this view, salvation is not primarily about God forgiving us of sin or saving us from divine punishment or declaring us to be guilt free; rather, salvation is about how God transforms us, how God gives us the grace to participate (cooperate) with God in healing and loving the ourselves and the world.

However, we should be very clear about one thing. Theōsis does not mean we seek to be God or have the very essence of God, but rather it means we seek to acquire the moral character of God.

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<sup>11</sup> The “communicable attributes” of God refers to the divine qualities that God shares or communicates to humans (holiness, love, mercy, justice, patience, wisdom, etc.), whereas the “incommunicable attributes” are divine qualities that cannot be shared or communicated with created beings because they are constituent of what God is—immutability, eternity, omnipresence, self-existence, etc.

## E. The path of theōsis

As we have seen, the goal of human life is for people to reflect the divine image, which is theōsis. As I have noted, all human beings are created in the “image of God,” but not all human beings reflect the “likeness of God. We are created in the image of God, so that, over our lifetime, we might learn to reflect the likeness of God and thus be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29).

What is the path of theōsis? How do we get there? The passage we read this morning tells us. We must cooperate with God’s grace and take specific actions of *relinquishing the old self* and *realizing the new self*, which spelled out for us in Colossians 3.

### ***Raised with Christ – Theōsis***

<sup>1</sup> So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth...

### ***Relinquish the old self***

<sup>5</sup> Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry) ...<sup>8</sup> But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. <sup>9</sup> Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices <sup>10</sup> and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator...

### ***Realize the new self***

<sup>11</sup> In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all. <sup>12</sup> ... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup> Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

***The means of theōsis***

<sup>15</sup> And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col 3:1-17 NRS)

**F. Conclusions and reflection**

*Relinquishing the old self* and *realizing the new* is the essence of spiritual growth—it is the path of theōsis—but does not happen automatically.

Each person must take action. Notice the imperatives:

- put to death whatever is earthly,
- get rid of vices,
- strip off the old self,
- put on the new.

What is one of the results of this *inner transformation*? Look at Col. 3:11 again. The *inner transformation* results in a *social transformation*. Humans are no longer divided along racial, ethnic, or class lines, but rather “Christ is all and in all.”

The image of God—which none other than the character and being of Christ—is brought to fullness in each human being, which results in a new humanity, theōsis.