

Theosis in Discipleship: Becoming Godlike Disciples

Goran Medved

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the 'Aurel Vlaicu' University of Arad
goremedo@gmail.com

UDK: 27-1:27-318
Review paper
<https://doi.org/10.32862/k.17.1.4>

Abstract

If we establish that the meaning of theosis is to become like God through the process of becoming like Christ, and if the goal of discipleship is to become like Christ, then it becomes evident that these two concepts are closely related. The article briefly explains the concepts of discipleship and theosis, and the most common evangelical discipleship setting (one-on-one or small group). Then it suggests four modules for teaching theosis in a discipleship setting: created to be Godlike, Godlikeness lost, restoring Godlikeness, and becoming fully Godlike. This model brings together theosis and discipleship which provides a new and helpful approach for raising Christlike/Godlike disciples.

Keywords: *theosis, discipleship, evangelicals, Christlikeness, Godlikeness*

Introduction

Discipleship and theosis are two of my theological interests. I am currently a member of a team that is studying discipleship in the context of Croatian evangelical churches, and I am currently writing a thesis on theosis in Pauline writings. While engaged in these two themes, I have noticed a strong connection between the two. On the one hand, according to Paul, God is transforming disciples according to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18), who is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15). On the other hand, the goal of discipleship is to become like Christ (eg. Luke 6:40). Therefore, while being transformed into the image of

Christ, disciples become progressively like God. Because of this close connection, this article explores the possibility of using theosis for discipleship, to make God-like disciples. Evangelicals mostly practice discipleship in a one-on-one or a small group format, where more mature disciples teach less mature disciples. Teaching theosis in such meetings can serve as a blueprint for setting a framework in which to practice discipleship. The article lays out a suggestion on how to use theosis in a discipleship setting.

This article does not engage in the doctrine of theosis as formed by the Eastern Orthodox theologians, but rather focuses on the concept of theosis as found in the Bible, and in the early church fathers, and adapted to the understanding of evangelical Christians.¹ To understand the Orthodox doctrine of theosis one has to learn the concepts such as the essence of God (the attributes of God which cannot be shared with humans), the energies of God (the attributes that God shares through grace with the believers), the uncreated light of God (God's uncreated luminance that enhances theosis in those who encounter it), etc. This article will use a simple understanding of theosis as the restoration of the image and likeness of God in Christians, and a simple definition of theosis as believers becoming progressively Godlike, which helps make the connection to discipleship. Finally, since the author comes from an evangelical background, the view of theosis and discipleship will be presented from an evangelical perspective.²

1. Defining Discipleship

Much has been written, discussed, and practiced regarding such an important Christian life topic as discipleship, and most Christians have some idea of what it means. However, if asked to give a precise definition of the concept of discipleship in the New Testament, or the concept of discipleship in contemporary evangelical Christianity, there would be a variety of answers.³ In my mind, the concept of discipleship in the New Testament immediately evokes thoughts of Jesus and his disciples; how he called them, how he spent time with them, how he taught them, how he built them up, and what he asked of them (brought them from non-disciples to mature disciples). On the other hand, the concept of discipleship in contemporary evangelical Christianity brings to mind one-on-one dis-

1 For more about the doctrine of theosis, see: Goran Medved (2019.), Theosis (Deification) as a Biblical and Historical Doctrine, *Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology* 13 (1): 7–38.

2 For more about theosis from an evangelical perspective, see: Goran Medved (2019.), Theosis (Deification) as a New Testament and Evangelical Doctrine, *Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology* 13 (2): 159–182.

3 For a brief discussion about what is a disciple, see: Jeremy Bohall (2019.), Making Disciples in Croatia, *Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology* 13 (2): 187–191.

discipleship, where a more mature Christian is meeting with a less mature Christian to go through a discipleship program set out in a discipleship manual, or a small group of Christians regularly meeting together to share life experiences with the Lord and hold one another accountable to following Christ.⁴ A fellow theologian who studied discipleship brought to my attention that it could be a much broader concept in the sense that everything that a church does ought to be a function of discipleship (including Sunday service, midweek service, etc.).⁵ However, I will focus on the more narrow understanding of discipleship, which is one-on-one or small group meetings for discipling Christians.

Another way that evangelical Christians perceive discipleship is through the Great Commandment given by Christ himself: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20a). In my judgment, most evangelicals understand this in a way that a person becomes a disciple when she or he is baptized, which is then followed by a lifelong process of discipleship. Baptism is a one-time event and a visible sign that a person has repented, believed in Christ and decided to follow him, while discipleship is a lifelong commitment to learning and practicing the commands and teachings of Christ. In the process of discipleship, a person is progressively transformed to be more like Christ. Onyinah (2017, 1) states, “The mandate of the Great Commission, making people disciples, is the process of making someone become like Christ.” On that same note, Lancaster (2006, 50–51) observes the following: “In Judaism in the days of the apostles, the job of a disciple was well understood. A disciple’s job was to become like his or her teacher. So it is written for us in the Gospel of Luke, ‘Every [disciple], after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher’ (6:40). At its simplest, discipleship is the art of imitation. It is the art of walking after a teacher.” Hence, even though we might be tempted to think about discipleship in terms of “doing,” discipleship is primarily about “becoming.” In this paper, I will continue with the premise that discipleship is a process of learning and obeying the teachings and commands of Jesus by which Christians become more and more like Christ.

2. Defining Theosis

A fairly simple way to define theosis is to state that it is a process through which Christians become progressively Godlike. The first definition of theosis was given

4 One could argue that in the case of Jesus and his disciples, a similar format was established, where a perfectly mature disciple (Jesus Christ), successfully raised disciples from non-disciples to mature disciples (the Twelve minus Judas).

5 Jeremy Bohall, conversation on discipleship, Zagreb, Croatia, 3 January 2023.

in the sixth century by a theologian whom we call Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: “Deification [θέωσις] is the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as is possible” (Russell 2004, 1). Human beings were the only creatures made in the image and likeness of God, but because of the rebellion against God, Godlikeness was seriously corrupted in three major ways – brokenness in the relationship of humans to God, in the relationship between humans, and the relationship between humans and creation. God had a plan of restoration and brought the nation of Israel into existence, and chose to bring the Messiah to this world through them. When God became human in the form of Jesus Christ (the Messiah), hope came to this world that humans could become Godlike again. Because of the death and resurrection of Christ, humans which believe in Christ and are baptized in Christ, are cleansed of all sin, inhabited by the Holy Spirit, and start the process of the restoration of likeness to God. Jesus teaches that we should be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect (Matt 5:48). Peter teaches that we are partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). John teaches that through Christ we possess eternal divine life in this age. He states, “whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (Jn 3:36), and “whoever has the Son has life” (1 John 5:12). Therefore, in John, the divine life is operating in the believers now, which implies the process of theosis.

Paul teaches that we are being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:29) and that we are being transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18), who is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15). Therefore, in Paul, being changed into the image of Christ, equals being changed into the image of God. Being Christlike is to be Godlike. This is theosis by the way of Christosis or Christification. Blackwell (2010, 253) asserts that “... christosis serves as a better description because believers are formed into Christ’s image in death and life through a participatory triune divine encounter.” Cho (2019, 55) states, “The Christification of a believer’s humanity refers not only to their moral likeness to Christ but also to the real transformation of one’s entire humanity as far as possible for a creature-man in degree, not in kind.” Therefore, if the goal of discipleship is to be like Christ in everything, that goal can be reached through theosis. Theosis could be used as a blueprint for discipleship, particularly for studying the Bible and applying theotic truths in our lives to become like Christ, who is God. In the following section, I will briefly lay out a discipleship model for Bible study using the concept of theosis.

2.1. Module One: Created to be Godlike

We start with theosis in Genesis by learning that we are made in the image and likeness of God. God wanted to share his life, character, and rule, so he created human beings. First, he created us to be like him ontologically, in certain aspects and to a certain degree, and that is why we possess consciousness, intelligence,

creativity, morality, etc. Second, he created us to be relational beings like him, the triune God, so that we would live in a relationship with him, with other humans, and with the creation. Third, he created us to be like him functionally, because he is the supreme ruler, so he made us be servant rulers who spread the blessings of the righteous rule to others. This module would therefore mostly deal with the doctrine of *Imago Dei*.

2.2. Module Two: Godlikeness Lost

We continue with the first part of Genesis (chapters 3-11) to show how humankind fell away from God and lost the original Godlikeness which was instilled in them. Starting from the sin in the Garden of Eden to becoming mortal, to becoming so evil that every thought in the human mind was evil (Gen 6:5). Even after the flood wiped out the evil human race, even after the righteous Noah and the beginning of new humanity, evil remained as the ruling power in human hearts. These biblical truths can be used for discussion about the state of human nature today, and the state of the world today, with so many problems stemming from corrupt human nature that they simply cannot be solved by any human means. Besides the first part of Genesis, many other biblical stories indicate the sin and evil which replaced Godlikeness in human nature. Pauline exposition in Romans 1:18-32 is another text which vividly describes the downward spiral of the human race which rejected God and ended up utterly evil. This module would therefore mostly deal with the doctrine of the Fall of humankind.

2.3. Module Three: Restoring Godlikeness

God had a plan for rescuing humanity. He started by creating a nation of Israel to bring the Messiah into this world through their lineage. In the story of Israel, we see that obedience to God always brought blessings to people, while disobedience brought curses. However, the essential problem of the sinfulness of human nature remained unsolved and continued to create many other problems, even among God's chosen people and their rulers.

When Messiah came into the world, he showed what perfect union with God and perfect likeness to God looked like. His death and resurrection enabled others, through baptism in his name, to put to death the old nature and receive a new heart, enter into union with God, and engage in the process of restoration of Godlikeness. He enabled people to restore their relationship with God and to be one with him again. He enabled people to restore relationships with one another, forgiving one another as God forgave them, doing good to one another, bringing blessings to one another, and building up a new community of God's people to show what Godlikeness looks like. And he enabled people to be servant rulers like

him, who rule righteously over every area of life, and over the Earth which was originally given to them to rule, to show what Godlikeness looks like.

According to Paul, God is bringing about restoration by transforming believers into Christlikeness (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18), which is the same as Godlikeness. Gorman (2009, Kindle location 1625) states that "...Paul's soteriology is best described as theosis, or transformation into the image of the *kenotic, cruciform* God revealed in the faithful and loving cross of Christ...[emphases mine]." If we take Gorman's definition of theosis in Paul, becoming like Christ, and therefore like God, means to think and behave kenotically like Christ (practice self-emptying) and to accept the way of the cross (practice self-sacrificing) for the sake of others. In his volume on evangelical theology, Bird (2013, 511) states, "Christian discipleship is cruciformity, being conformed to the pattern of the cross, dying to self in service to God. That is what it means to take up your cross and follow Jesus daily (Luke 9:23) and to be crucified to the world (Gal 6:14)." Kopic (2017, 237) argues that the cross is not only a symbol of what Christ has done but also "a key symbol of Christian discipleship in which believers are called to imitate Jesus's self-denying love (e.g., Mk 8:34; Jn 15:12-13; Eph. 5:1-2; Phil. 2:1-18; 1 Pt. 2:21; 1 Jn 3:16)." In other words, discipleship would mean to continue emptying ourselves of sinful desires and ambitions so that we can be filled with the desires and plans of God to accomplish his purposes for our lives, for his church, and the world. Discipleship would also mean to continue being self-sacrificing to be able to help others and serve others as Jesus did. This module, therefore, would mostly deal with the doctrines of justification, and even more so, sanctification.

2.4. Module Four: Fully Godlike

To those who are in the process of the spiritual transformation of becoming like Christ, and therefore like God, a promise is given of final transformation: when Christ returns, their bodies will be changed according to his glorious body. They will receive immortality and imperishability, otherwise exclusive attributes of God. Paul writes, "For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality" (1 Cor 15:52b-53), and "He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself" (Phil 3:21). Disciples will become fully Godlike. Christ will finish what he started with them. They will be glorified. When this happens, the whole creation, which had also been corrupted because of the fall of humankind, will be restored (Rom 8:21).

Paul states that we are "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ if we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom 8:17). However, in

some contemporary evangelical circles, the New Testament texts on suffering and the sermons on the significance of suffering have been replaced with sermons on domineering life circumstances and being successful in worldly endeavors. Suffering is avoided as much as possible, while domination is pursued in all circumstances. This leads to false discipleship because it does not follow the proper teaching of the New Testament, but a desire to have things under control. Suffering with Christ is the way to glorification with Christ. Disciples follow the way of the Master. This module would therefore mostly deal with the doctrine of glorification.

Conclusion

Raising disciples of Christ is a crucial theme for evangelical Christianity. This article briefly describes how the concept of theosis could be used in discipleship, to make Godlike disciples. If we think of theosis as a process in which disciples become progressively Godlike, and of discipleship as a process in which disciples become progressively Christlike, the two are inextricably linked. We were created to be Godlike and saved to become Christlike. Module one teaches the truth that humans were created to be Godlike and therefore disciples engage in the doctrine of *Imago Dei*. In module two, which teaches how Godlikeness was lost, the disciples engage in the doctrine of the fall of humankind. Module three teaches about the restoration of Godlikeness in humans, enabled by Jesus Christ, and the disciples engage in the doctrines of justification and especially sanctification. Module four teaches about how humans become fully Godlike at eschaton and therefore the disciples engage in the doctrine of glorification. Using this model would bring together theosis and discipleship, and could provide a new and helpful approach for raising Christlike/Godlike disciples in evangelical circles.

References

- Bird, Michael F. 2013. *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. Ebook.
- Blackwell, Benjamin C. 2010. Christosis: Pauline Soteriology in Light of Deification in Irenaeus and Cyril of Alexandria. Durham E-Theses, Durham University. <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/219> (accessed on February 1, 2023).
- Bohall, Jeremy. 2019. Making Disciples in Croatia. *Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology* 13 (2): 187–191.
- Cho, Dongsun. 2019. Deification in the Baptist Tradition: Christification of the Human Nature through Adopted and Participatory Sonship without Becoming Another Christ. *Perichoresis* 17 (2): 51–73.

- Gorman, Michael J. 2009. *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. Kindle.
- Kapic, K. M. 2017. Atonement. In: Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 3rd edition, 232–241. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. Ebook.
- Lancaster, D. Thomas. 2006. *King of the Jews: Resurrecting the Jewish Jesus*. Littleton: First Fruits of Zion.
- Medved, Goran. 2019. Theosis (Deification) as a Biblical and Historical Doctrine. *Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology* 13 (1): 7–38.
- _____. 2019. Theosis (Deification) as a New Testament and Evangelical Doctrine. *Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology* 13 (2): 159–182.
- Onyinah, Opoku. 2017. The Meaning of Discipleship. *International Review of Mission* 106: 216–227.
- Russell, Norman. 2004. *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Kindle.

Goran Medved

Teoza u učenishvu: postajanje bogolichnim uchenicima

Sazetak

Ustanovimo li da je značenje teoze postati nalik Bogu procesom postajanja poput Krista te ako je cilj učenishva postati slicnima Kristu, bjelodano je da su ta dva koncepta blisko povezana. Članak ukratko pojašnjava koncepte učenishva i teoze, kao i najčešće evanđeosko okruženje odvijanja učenishva (sastanci udvoje ili u maloj grupi). Članak potom predlaže četiri modula za poučavanje teoze u okviru učenishva: stvoreni da budemo bogoliki, izgubljena bogolikost, obnovljena bogolikost i postajanje sasvim bogolichnima. Ovaj model združuje teozu i učenishvo čime pruža nov i koristan pristup podizanju kristolikh/bogolikh učenika.