Romans: 
The First Christian Treatise on Theosis

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Abstract — Building on renewed interest in theosis generally, and particularly with respect to Paul, this essay argues that Romans is the first Christian treatise on theosis, an elaboration of the embryonic passages about theosis, including the “interchange” (Morna Hooker) texts, found in 2 Corinthians. Earlier work on theosis in Paul suggests that it means transformative participation in the kenotic, cruciform character of God through Spirit-enabled conformity to the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected/glorified Christ. This essay traces Paul’s soteriology of restoring human dikaiosynê and doxa—fundamental elements of theosis—in Romans. For Paul, this restoration is accomplished by participation in the death and resurrection of the obedient and faithful Son. It is manifested in “righteoused,” cruciform communities of Christlike Godlikeness in which Gentiles and Jews glorify God together as a partial and proleptic foreshadowing of the final glory of God and, at least implicitly, as a counterpoint to the pseudo-glory of Rome.

Key Words — Christosis, cruciformity, glory, image of God, interchange, participation, Pauline soteriology, Romans, 2 Corinthians, theosis

“Christ became what we are—’adam—in order that we might share in what he is—namely the true image of God.” Christ “became like human beings, so that we would be like him.” “Christ becomes what we are, that we through his death may become what he is.” These three quotations do not come from the Church Fathers Irenaeus or Athanasius, nor are they modern statements of the Eastern Christian doctrine of salvation. Rather, each one is a summary of Paul’s soteriology from three great interpreters.

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of Paul: Morna Hooker, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Wilhelm Wrede, respectively. The quotation from Morna Hooker is specifically her summary of Rom 5–8. The heart of Romans, in other words, is about what the Eastern church (especially) calls theosis. Additionally, in The Deliverance of God, largely a study of Romans, Douglas Campbell implies on two occasions that “theosis” may well describe Paul’s soteriology.

In an essay published in 1990, Frances Young argued that Romans needs to be read in light of 2 Corinthians, for Romans develops some of the core themes of Paul’s defense of his ministry sent to Corinth. For those interested in theosis, this insight is particularly significant, because 2 Corinthians includes two explicitly “theotic” texts. 2 Corinthians 3:18 has been called the “the most frankly theotic passage in Paul”: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” And 2 Cor 5:21—“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”—was identified by Morna Hooker as a key to Paul’s soteriology of “interchange,” which corresponds to the pattern of theosis as it has been historically understood in the Christian tradition. (I am aware that N. T. Wright and others read the “we” of 5:21b as an apostolic reference, but that would almost require the impossible restriction of God’s salvific action mentioned in 5:21a to Paul and colleagues. This text is also highly significant because it contains the language of both transformation (“so that . . . we might become,” bina hèmeis

1. “Christ became what we are . . . image of God” is from Morna D. Hooker, From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 19. On the previous page, she writes, in reference to Rom 8, “Christ became what we are; in order that (in him) we might become what he is.” Hooker finds the same soteriological pattern throughout Paul, especially also in Galatians and 2 Corinthians. Christ “became like human beings . . . like him” is from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Discipleship (trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss; Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 4; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 285. “Christ becomes what we are . . . what he is” is from Wilhem Wrede, Paul (trans. Edward Lummis; London: Green, 1907), 110.


5. I mean this in two senses: that interchange is the fundamental semantic and theological pattern of theosis and that the resulting human transformation into the image of Christ (“Christosis”) is transformation into the image of God (“theosis”).

ginōmetha) and justification (nrsv: "righteousness," dikaiosynē), seamlessly interwoven. Another similar text is 2 Cor 8:9 ("For you know the generous act [charin, "grace"] of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich"), which shows how practical this "doctrine" of interchange is for Paul, as he uses it to promote generosity, specifically as a sign of Gentile-Jewish harmony (that is, for the Jerusalem collection) at Corinth.

In this essay, I will argue that Romans is the first Christian treatise on theosis, a theological extension of the embryonic theotic, or transformational, themes of justification and glorification found in 2 Corinthians. The subject of Romans is sōtēria: God's restoration of righteousness and glory to unrighteous and glory-less humanity. Paul's soteriology of human dikaiosynē and doxa means participation in the divine dikaiosynē and doxa by participation in the death and resurrection of the Messiah Jesus, God's righteous and now glorified Son. Paul offers this interpretation of sōtēria explicitly as the fulfillment of Israel's hope for sōtēria, dikaiosynē, and doxa, extended now to the Gentiles, and, at least implicitly, as the true gospel of God in contrast to the pseudo-gospel of Rome's sōtēria, dikaiosynē, and doxa.

This argument extends the work of Wrede, Bonhoeffer, Hooker, and Campbell already noted, plus that of Ann Jervis. Jervis argues that the purpose of discipleship in antiquity, for both Jews and Gentiles, was "to achieve likeness to God." More recently, Richard Hays has said that the study of Paul's participationist soteriology needs to look East, in the direction of theosis, though he does not use that word. In addition, there is great interest in Paul and theosis in emerging scholars such as Ben Blackwell and David Litwa. Blackwell, for instance, has written an essay, independently, with a thesis that is quite compatible with the claim of this paper.

8. Jervis, "Becoming Like God," 144. She shows how in Paul this desire for Godlikeness merges the "mystical" (her term, meaning participationist) and the juridical dimensions of Paul's theology. Similar language, though less developed, can also be found in Udo Schnelle, Theology of the New Testament (trans. M. Eugene Boring; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 261-62, 342-44.
9. Writes Hays: "My own guess is that {E. P.] Sanders's insights [about participation in Paul] would be supported and clarified by careful study of participation motifs in patristic theology, particularly the thought of the Eastern Fathers" (The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Gal 3:1-4:11 [2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], xxii). In the same context (p. xxix), Hays also expresses his attraction to the Eastern theological interest in "recapitulation" (starting with Irenaeus), over against most Western atonement theories.
11. Ben C. Blackwell, "Righteousness and Glory: New Creation as Immortality in Romans" (delivered at the International SBL meeting, summer 2009). We differ on whether
In spite of such significant established and emerging voices, the title and thesis of this article may concern certain readers, and that on two counts. First, some may say something like, “Romans is an occasional letter, not a theological treatise. This interpretation is backtracking several decades, if not centuries—perhaps to Melanchthon.”

Second, others may say that, even if Romans is considered to be, in certain respects, a theological essay, how does one justify using the term “theosis” to characterize it? Why not justification or rectification by faith, salvation more generally, Gentile and Jewish harmony in Christ, the apocalyptic deliverance of God, hope, or resurrection? These all make sense and sound very Pauline. Others have argued that the theme of Romans is one or the other of these. But theosis? That sounds, at the very least, anachronistic, better used of a treatise by Irenaeus or Athanasius or the Ecumenical Patriarch.

Thus, the title and, therefore, the implicit thesis of my article may seem both inaccurate and anachronistic, with respect to both the term treatise and the term theosis. So we will begin by addressing these concerns.

Treatise and Theosis: The Form and Theme of Romans

Even an introductory treatment of the complex issues involved in identifying the interrelated subjects of the form and purpose, and thus also the theme, of Romans is beyond the scope of this essay. Regarding the form of Romans, it must suffice to say that the overreaction to Melanchthon has caused the pendulum to swing too far. Romans may not be a “compendium of Christian doctrine,” but neither is it your everyday letter, not even an everyday Pauline pastoral letter. After the formal address in 1:1–15, for eleven chapters there are few if any undisputed explicit references to the community/ies at Rome—a marked difference from every other Pauline letter. Thus, Robert Jewett, in his commentary, keeps reminding us to make connections between each section of Romans and the overall purpose of the letter in light of the situation in Rome as he (Jewett) understands it. 12 Strategies such as these are needed because Paul himself does not make those explicit connections. And why not? In part, at least, because his letter—for whatever reason(s)—has the marks of a sustained treatise. Hans-Josef Klauck rightly notes that Romans “can be compared with the doctrinal letters of Epicurus or with the long pieces in the later

12. Robert Jewett, Romans (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), e.g., pp. 203–4, 218, 235.

“glory” is only future (so Blackwell), meaning immortality, and whether “the story of glory” ends in ch. 8 (so Blackwell) or ch. 15. “The story of glory” is from ms. p. 12.
books of Seneca’s *Moral Epistles*. Yet over against these works Romans still remains more anchored to a particular situation.”

In other words, Romans is a peculiar kind of treatise. It is indeed a sustained, coherent treatment of a subject, both argumentative and narrative (with a plot and a variety of characters) in form. But ultimately, of course, the content of the treatise is intended for and applied to the Roman house churches. The question is, What is the subject matter of this “treatise”?

Some will surely respond that they know what the theme of Romans is because Paul himself tells us, either in 1:16–17 (the gospel as the power of God for salvation, or the righteousness of God), or in 1:3–4 (Jesus the resurrected and royal Son of God), or, in bookend-fashion, in 1:5 and 16:26 (if this verse is from Paul)—“the obedience of faith.” Whichever of these is identified as the theme of Romans, one might argue, we do not need to import a foreign and anachronistic term such as *theosis* to replace Paul’s own words.

Theosis is a theological term, largely Eastern-Christian in its usage, that is increasingly in vogue among Western theologians and even a few biblical scholars. So what is theosis, known also as theopoiesis, deification, and divinization? The short answer is “becoming like God by participating in the life of God,” with the caveat that the term and the reality it describes always maintain the creature-Creator distinction, even when a phrase like “becoming gods” is used to describe theosis. Theosis, then, means taking on certain divine attributes. The seventh-century Byzantine theologian Maximus the Confessor illustrated theosis by comparing it to the placing of an iron sword in a fire, such that it remains an iron sword but also takes on certain properties of the fire—light and heat—by “participating” in it. Less metaphorically, but more famously, Irenaeus summarizes the doctrine of theosis in his oft-quoted words: “He became what we are, so that we might become what he is.”

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14. I am not here distinguishing, as some do, between theosis and divinization or deification. Nor am I suggesting that we need to define these terms in precisely the same way that particular theologians and spiritual writers, past or present, have done. Instead, I am starting with a rather generic understanding of theosis and will then demonstrate its specifically Pauline formulation.


16. This is something of a compilation of various specific quotations. In *Against Heresies* 5.preface.1, Irenaeus says that the “Lord Jesus Christ . . . did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that he might bring us to be even what he is himself.” See also Athanasius, *Incarnation of the Word* 54. The two authors express the same basic theological conviction in various ways.
Three further brief points about theosis are needed before we consider Romans. First, there is debate about which divine attributes humans can take on, but it is generally agreed that these include holiness and immortality. Second, theosis is normally seen as a continuous process from earthly inception to eschatological completion, but it clearly has two stages, or dimensions: the temporal and the eschatological. Third, because Christians believe in the incarnation, theosis or deification can also be called Christification, or even Christosis. For Paul in particular, I have argued in *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, theosis should be defined as “transformative participation in the kenotic, cruciform character of God through Spirit-enabled conformity to the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected/glorified Christ.”

Though *theosis* is not a specifically Pauline term, using it to describe this transformative participation is no less appropriate than using other “foreign” terms to describe Pauline theology, such as participatory, narrative, or even apocalyptic. As Bakhtin wisely said, “semantic phenomena can exist in concealed form, potentially, and be revealed only in semantic cultural contexts of subsequent epochs that are favourable for such disclosure.”

*Theosis*, then, should be seen not as anachronistic but as retrospectively appropriate. Now, I would add that it should also be seen as retrospectively accurate.

For the moment, let us suppose that each of the texts named above (1:16–17; 1:3–4; 1:5; and 16:26) contributes to the theme of Romans, but let us also focus on the one that Paul seems to underscore by virtue of its place in the letter: at the beginning (1:5) and possibly also the end (16:26) of the letter: “the obedience of faith.” Interpreters of Paul have differed significantly on the translation and meaning of this phrase. Does it signify the obedience that comes from faith, the obedience that is inseparable from

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20. Space does not permit a discussion of the broader theological question of concern to some, namely, the appropriateness of speaking of theosis at all. When I have used this term in reference to Paul—or even more generally—I have on occasion received private or public responses ranging from disinterest to scorn to opposition, the last on the grounds that the word and concept can generate dangerous feelings of idolatrous self-aggrandizement, especially among the politically powerful. I would contend that the solution for such legitimate concerns is to define and explain theosis properly, not to do away with the concept or term.
faith, faithful obedience, believing fidelity or allegiance, or something else? No matter how we translate it, we must certainly recognize its connection to Christ, whom Paul characterizes as the obedient one (5:19) in contrast to disobedient Adam. And if we who argue for the subjective-genitive reading of pistis Christou are correct, then Paul also characterizes Christ as the faithful one, both here in Romans (3:22, 26) and elsewhere.\(^21\) I would submit that “the obedience of faith” is a soteriological term coined by Paul from his Christological convictions: life in Christ means fundamentally sharing in the obedience and faithfulness of Christ.

That is to say, “the obedience of faith” is, essentially, Christlikeness. Paul’s mission was to bring about “the obedience of faith,” resemblance to the obedient and faithful Son of God, among the nations. But as we will shortly see more fully, this Christlikeness is simultaneously Godlikeness. Thus enters, appropriately and accurately, the term theosis. But of course for Paul (as I have just noted), God, and thus theosis, can only be understood Christologically; Paul’s theosis is cruciform theosis, and it is corporate, or communal, because it is by common incorporation into Christ.

Thus, we can describe Paul’s mission by paraphrasing John Wesley’s stated goal: to “spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.” Paul’s mission, I suggest, was to spread communal cruciform theosis, the divine dikaiosynē and doxa, throughout the world, meaning the empire.\(^22\) In the case of Rome itself, his goal was to expand the presence of that dikaiosynē and doxa throughout the existing Roman house churches. The fullness of this sōtēria awaits the (imminent) arrival of the eschatological age, but it is realized partially and proleptically now in “righteoused”\(^23\) communities of Gentiles and Jews who glorify God and practice cruciform faith, hope, and love together with a spirit of harmony in the midst of diversity. They are communities of Spirit-enabled Christlike Godlikeness, of righteousness and (cruciform) glory in anticipation of God’s final glory.

Finally, a brief note on “glory” is also in order before we proceed to Romans itself. Ben Blackwell has surveyed various studies of glory in Paul and suggests that there are two related kinds, “social or relational status” (“honor”), part of Paul’s honor-discourse; and “ontological experience,” or “state of being,” which is “related to the divine presence.”\(^24\) When Paul connects humans with divine glory, he “denotes the [human] experience of

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22. Paul almost certainly saw his mission as part of the fulfillment of the prophetic promises that God’s glory would one day be universally spread and recognized.
23. Although I do not like neologisms and apologize for this one and its upcoming cognates, this approach is one way to keep the dik- family of words together in English and stress the moral or transformative side of the dik- language.
divine life,” specifically (at least according to Blackwell) as immortality.\textsuperscript{25} Blackwell cites C. F. Evans in support of this claim: glory is “an eschatological term which comes nearest to denoting the divine life itself,” the foretaste of which, says Evans, is life in the Spirit.\textsuperscript{26}

The “glory” of God, then, refers to the eternal splendor and honor that God has and that God deserves simply by virtue of being God. It is a central conviction of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures that God already shares this glory in limited ways with human beings, while the eschatological hope of both Testaments is for humans to share in this divine glory in ways hitherto unexperienced and even unimagined.

**Rereading Romans as a Treatise on Theosis**

The remainder of this article will offer a rereading of Romans from the perspective of theosis, highlighting some parts more than others. Will this sound like an old perspective, a new perspective, or a fresh perspective? Yes—and no. Among other things, reading Paul with the question of theosis in mind will transcend, and perhaps even break down, certain categories.

**The Human Condition: Lacking Righteousness and Glory**

*(Romans 1:18—3:20)*

Romans 1:18—3:20 is a creative rereading of Gen 3, Wis 12–14, Exod 32, Ps 89, and several other psalms, plus additional texts, through the prism of salvation, righteousness, and glory in Christ. Despite the protestations of Douglas Campbell,\textsuperscript{27} it constitutes Paul's depiction of the human condition outside of Christ, which is one of “frustration” or “futility” (emataiôthesan, 1:21)\textsuperscript{28}—not fulfilling the purpose God intended.\textsuperscript{29} That purpose can be described, implicitly, as harmony and proper relations between humanity and God, within humanity itself, and between humanity and the rest of creation. The language of “image of God” is at least in the background (*homoiómati eikonos*, 1:23).

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., passim (quotation from ms. p. 2).

\textsuperscript{26} C. F. Evans, *Resurrection and the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1970), 160, cited in Blackwell, “Righteousness and Glory,” ms. p. 4 n.8. According to Blackwell, Evans says that “[T]he present possession of spirit, which is all there is, is a foretaste and promise of something further, which is the full life of ‘glory.’”

\textsuperscript{27} In *The Deliverance of God* (esp. pp. 519–600), Campbell argues that the bulk of this section of Romans represents the perspective of Paul's opponent, the Teacher, not Paul.

\textsuperscript{28} A condition now shared by the rest of creation (8:20).

More specifically, this section of Romans either asserts or implies that humans are to give thanks and glory/honor to God (1:21), do good (2:7) by acting justly and righteously toward their fellow humans, and (at the very least) not glorify the creature instead of the creator (1:22, 25). Furthermore, according to 2:7–10, humanity is intended ultimately for glory (doxa, twice), honor (time, twice), peace, immortality, and eternal life, this being the intended and natural result of the normal human life of doing good, rather than unrighteousness/injustice (adikia) and evil, that God intended. Thus, dikaiosynē and doxa, meaning present righteousness/justice and future glory (doxa), are two key terms that summarize Paul's understanding of humanity's raison d'être.

Humanity is currently characterized, however, by the opposite of these divine intentions. Paul supplies us with numerous terms and phrases to describe this condition, some perhaps geared primarily toward Gentiles and others toward Jews. Among them are:

- 1:18: ungodliness and unrighteousness/injustice (asebeia and adikia, the latter mentioned twice30)
- 1:21: failing to glorify (edoxasan, from doxazō31) and thank God
- 1:21–22: futile thinking, darkened minds, foolishness
- 1:23, 25, 28: “exchanging the glory (doxan) of the immortal God for images (homoiōmati eikonos) resembling a mortal human being” or animals; “exchange[ing] the truth about God for a lie and worship[ing] and serv[ing] the creature rather than the Creator”; not “acknowledg[ing] God”
- 1:24, 26: “impurity” and “degrading passions”
- 1:29–31: every kind of unrighteousness/injustice [adikia; NRSV “wickedness”], evil
- 1:32: the just divine decree (dikaiōma; NRSV “decree”) that practitioners of these things (all the forms of asebeia and adikia) deserve death
- 3:3: faithless (cf. 1:31)
- 3:9: “under the power of sin”
- 3:10–11: “There is no one who is righteous [dikaios], not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God”
- 3:23: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory (doxēs) of God.”

Despite the frequent failure of the NRSV, especially in 1:18–32, to show the interconnections among key phrases and between those phrases and 1:17

30. The NRSV, NIV, and NAB unfortunately obscure a key linguistic and theological link in Paul generally, and in Romans particularly, by translating adikia as “wickedness” rather than as “unrighteousness” or “injustice.”

31. The NRSV (though not the NIV or NAB) once again obscures an important linguistic and theological connection in Romans by translating the verb “glorify” as “honor.”
(dikaiosynē), Paul insists that the common human problem revolves around the referents of the words dikaiosynē and doxa. Adikia leads not to doxa, to glorious life, but to death. Human beings have become something other than what they were intended to become, and their fate is something other than their intended telos. “Exchange”—of right relations with God, with one another, and with all creation—has become the order of the day (1:23, 25, 26).

In such a situation, humans do not need merely a word of forgiveness with the chance for a new start, much less a legal fiction; they need a means of undoing the exchange, a means of becoming the righteousness of God that God intended, a means of attaining the glory they lack. Paul, of course, believes that this happens in Christ. The West's fixation on sin and guilt has sometimes hampered us from seeing how central to Paul's anthropology and soteriology are the themes of glory, life, and immortality—both their absence in Adam and their restored presence in Christ.

Christopher Bryan writes that when Paul says humanity falls short of the glory of God, he is speaking of “that very [divine] glory which, by being what it is, would also be our glory.” If we return to Rom 1, we learn more specifically what losing or lacking the glory of God now means. Humanity was created to glorify God and to live honorably with other human beings; instead, the human race has failed to glorify God, has descended into shame in relations with others, has expressed its enmity toward God and others in all sorts of creative but tragic ways, and has learned that death is the ultimate and natural consequence of this downward spiral (its “wages,” according to 6:23). It is a story of sin and shame and death.

The solution to the human predicament, as many Jews of Paul's day thought, is restoration to glory. For Paul specifically, that will mean to reverse the headlong, sin-filled descent into death by means of something that liberates from both Sin and Death, that restores humanity to a place of glorifying God and honoring others, that creates a community of pistis and dikaiosynē rather than apistia/asebeia and adikia. What humanity needs is a present Godly and Godlike life free of sin and a future, eternal life free of death. In other words, humanity needs to share in the divine moral character and the divine eternal character. That is, humans are in need of righteousness and immortality, the chief characteristics of God associated with theosis.

32. Christopher Bryan, A Preface to Romans: Notes on the Epistle in Its Literary and Cultural Setting (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 84. Dunn suggests that Paul means that humans have both lost (because of Adam) and now fail to attain God's glory (Romans 1–8, 108).

33. See Blackwell, “Immortal Glory.” Blackwell argues that in Romans “glory denotes not only elevated honour but also incorruption. Thus, the lack of glory in 3:23 refers to mortality and shame as the result of sin” (abstract, 285).

34. Dunn, Romans 1–8, 168.
The Divine Solution: The Gifts of Righteousness and Glory (Romans 3:21–8:39)

For Paul, the solution to the human condition of sin and death, of unrighteousness and un-glory, is new and eternal life by participation in Christ. This participation effects the ethical and eschatological transformation that human beings need. In Christ, humans begin sharing in the righteousness of God and even begin the process of sharing in God's glory. This is because God's righteousness and glory are found in Christ, and those who are in Christ are being transformed (12:1–2) and conformed into the image of Christ (8:29; cf. 2 Cor 3:18), who is the true image of God (2 Cor 4:4), both as divine Son and as last and true Adam. In Morna Hooker's words quoted earlier: “Christ became what we are—'adam—in order that we might share in what he is—namely the true image of God.”

Faith and Participation (3:21–4:25)

In Rom 3:21–26 Paul explains that God has provided the solution to the human crisis of sin and death: forgiveness (3:25, “expiation”) and liberation (3:24, “redemption”) for those who share in the faith of Christ (3:26; cf. 3:22). God's gracious gift is explicitly described as the “righteous” of humans (3:24, 26) and implicitly described as their restoration to the glory they have lost (3:23). The human role in this is pisteuein/pistis (3:24, 26) traditionally translated “believe” and “faith,” but Paul's notion of faith is much more participatory than is often thought. In fact, 3:21–26 should be read in connection with ch. 6, which does not describe a supplement to “justification by faith” but rather depicts justification as an experience of death and resurrection.

Chapter 4, I want to suggest, offers Abraham as a prototype of this death and resurrection with Christ. If this is correct, then Abraham serves as an exemplum of Paul's unique participatory understanding of justification by faith as co-crucifixion and co-resurrection with Christ (4:16–17). The basic argument here is rather simple: because Abraham himself was functionally dead (4:19a)—along with his wife's womb (4:19b)—his faith was that God could bring life out of his death, could transform his deadness into life. In other words, his faith was completely self-involving and participatory. That he was justified by faith means not that he was fictitiously justified but rather that he was in Christ.

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35. Hooker, From Adam to Christ, 19, summarizing Rom 5–8.
36. I will develop this thesis more fully in a forthcoming article, “Abraham: Our Prototype of Participation in Romans 4.”
37. “Prototype” and “exemplum” are not quite sufficient to describe Abraham's role; he is the parent, the source, but of course he is this without displacing Christ, God the Father, or the Spirit.
considered just or righteous but that he was granted the gracious gift of new life out of death, which was concretely fulfilled in the birth of a descendant—a very Jewish notion of life and resurrection rooted in biblical stories like the one to which Paul appeals in Rom 4.38 This resurrection life is actualized, not merely in the birth of Isaac, but in the subsequent reality of many descendants (4:16–18). This foreshadows and signals the reality of new and eternal resurrection life provided by God in the resurrection of Jesus, which took place for our justification (4:24–25), that is, our resurrection to life. In retrospect, from Paul’s own position of having died and been resurrected in Christ, Abraham’s experience is prospectively analogous to what Paul says about all baptized believers in Rom 6: their justification by faith means a participatory experience of resurrection out of death. Thus, Abraham’s righteousness and his eternal life—his glory, so to speak39—are inseparable.

The Present and Future of Theosis (5:1–8:39)

Chapters 5 through 8 of Romans present not a narrative sequence of the believer’s life in Christ but a set of various explanations of the meaning of participating in the narrative of Christ, that is, salvation as Christlike dikaiosynē and doxa, or cruciform theosis. Douglas Campbell rightly insists in The Deliverance of God that the material content of Rom 5–8 is transformation or sanctification or “ontological reconstitution” and that it is not supplemental to the gospel or to justification but constitutive of them.40 And Richard Hays rightly argues that “[u]ltimately, being united with Christ is salvific because to share his life is to share in the life of God.”41 Following an overview in 5:1–11 that depicts salvation in all its dimensions (justification, reconciliation, hope, final glory), Paul presents life in Christ in terms of three pairs of antitheses.

In 5:12–21, the first antithesis, Paul contrasts the righteousness and life that come from Christ with the unrighteousness and death that proceed...
from Adam. In 5:18–19, he describes Christ’s death as an act of obedience and righteousness that effects righteousness, justification, and life for all who are in him. This act is juxtaposed to that of Adam, an act of disobedience and unrighteousness that effected condemnation and death for all who are in him. Implicitly, the contrast is between those who do, and will, share in God’s glory (righteousness and eternal life) noted in 5:2, and those who do not and will not share in it.

In 6:1–7:6, the second antithesis, Paul contrasts slavery to sin with slavery to righteousness. He explains that participation in Christ’s death (his act of obedience and righteousness) and resurrection bring new life and therefore righteousness and obedience in the present, plus eternal life in the future. As I have argued at length elsewhere, this should be understood as justification/righteousness/life by means of co-crucifixion. As Daniel Kirk has persuasively argued, Paul sees new life in Christ as present participation in Christ’s resurrection, with eternal life, obviously, as future participation in his resurrection. We should therefore see present newness of life and future eternal life with more continuity than discontinuity; they are two dimensions of one participatory soteriological reality, theosis.

In the early part of ch. 6, Paul affirms that we are baptized into Christ’s death and raised to new life. Three important things emerge here:

- Baptism is transfer into Christ.
- Baptism is participation in Christ’s death, that is, his act of obedience and righteousness (linking ch. 6 back to 5:12–21).
- Baptism is participation in Christ’s resurrection, both now (as new life; 6:4, 6–7, 11) and later (as eternal life; 6:8).

In the rest of ch. 6, Paul describes more fully how this participation in Christ means taking on the qualities of Christ’s death and resurrection, that is, life and eternal life.

Thus, in Rom 6 Paul presents the divine goal for humanity: that in Christ, we might become like Christ in embodying both his righteousness—“the obedience of faith”—and his resurrection life. Furthermore, because Christ embodied the righteousness and faithfulness of God and because his life-out-of-death was effected by “the glory of the Father” (6:4) so too our current walking in newness of life is a proleptic and partial, but very real, participation in that divine glory, a sharing in the very life of God. It is glory regained, glorification now. The hope of final and full glory is still precisely that—a hope. Moreover, as Paul will indicate especially in

43. Gorman, Inhabiting the Cruciform God, 40–104.
44. J. R. Daniel Kirk, Unlocking Romans: Resurrection and the Justification of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 107–17. See also my Inhabiting the Cruciform God, 40–104.
45. Similar is Paul’s claim in 2 Cor 5:17 that new creation is (partially and proleptically) now.
chs. 8 and 12–15, any present resurrection or glory is always and necessarily cruciform.

In 7:7–8:9, the third antithesis, Paul contrasts life in the flesh with life in Christ and the Spirit, the former characterized by sin and death, the latter by righteousness (8:4) and life (8:2, 6). Paul summarizes this contrast nicely in 8:10 and then indicates in 8:11 that the present and future dimensions of salvation are closely related as two aspects of participation in the life of the Spirit: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you [present], he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you [future]."

Indeed, Rom 8 as a whole concerns the present and future dimensions of salvation. Each is inseparable from cruciform existence. Present righteousness, which receives more attention early in the chapter, requires "put[ting] to death the deeds of the body" (8:13), while future co-glorification, the focus of the later part of the chapter, requires prior co-suffering (8:17). The two dimensions of the narrative of salvation are still closely related, even in the second half of the chapter, as the phrase "we were saved in hope" (8:24) clearly demonstrates.

Paul in this context also tells us the ultimate telos of human existence: experiencing the "freedom of the glory (doxa) of the children of God" (8:21) and conformity to Christ the Son of God (8:29; symmorphous tēs eikonos tou huion autou). Is the conformity mentioned in 8:29 — "those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" — an ethical (present) or an eschatological conformity, or both? The emphasis here is probably on the eschatological, though the somewhat similar language of 2 Cor 3:18 (metamorphoumetha) and Rom 12:2 (metamorphousthe) will not permit us to rule out an ethical transformation. The question, however, presents a false dichotomy; conformity to Christ is both present and future. Romans 8:29 is the eschatological counterpart of 8:3–4: "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." This

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46. Sin: 7:8–9, 11, 13, 14, 17, 20, 23, 25; 8:2; death: 7:10, 11, 13, 24; 8:2, 6.
47. See also 8:12–13, which shows the same continuity, as well as its converse: the continuity between present life according to the flesh and future death.
48. Cf. Blackwell, "Righteousness and Glory," ms. p. 4: "In chapter 8 the death-life dialectic is central . . . and my contention is that the glory-suffering dialectic in the second half of the chapter repeats that death-life contrast through different terms."
49. So also, e.g., Jewett, Romans, 528–30. Even if 2 Cor 3:18 is referring only to apostolic transformation (which is unlikely), then Frances Young is right to say that in Romans Paul is "generalising his own sense of vocation" ("Understanding Romans," 438).
passage, in turn, is an echo of 2 Cor 5:21, that fundamental text of interchange or, as we have suggested, theosis.  

There is a sense, of course, in which ethical conformity precedes and is the prerequisite for eschatological conformity, but the two are related, indeed, inseparable: two dimensions of the same reality, the same narrative, participatory salvation. Paul has already clearly indicated this inseparable connection in 8:17: “and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” The narrative pattern of Christ, from suffering to glory, from death to resurrection, becomes our pattern. In other words, Christlikeness now—faithful obedience even to the point of suffering and death—becomes Christlikeness later—glory. The process is seamless and may be termed “Christosis.”

But that term, though accurate, is insufficient. Paul avers that God’s eternal plan is to create a family of siblings who resemble the firstborn and definitive Son, namely, Jesus. What Paul does not state explicitly is the obvious: that the Son is like the Father and that the siblings will ultimately be like the Father because they are like the Son. Christosis, therefore, is ultimately theosis.

This divine purpose indicated in 8:29—predestination to conformity to Christ, meaning ultimately to God—is further elaborated in 8:30. In this verse, a series of verbs, presented in stairstep fashion, narrates the saving activity of God: predestined, called, justified, glorified. This series is often taken as a reference to the ordo salutis, the order of God’s saving acts toward the individual. But, in context, the last three verbs are more precisely an elaboration of what God has done to create a family of Christlike (which is to say Godlike) siblings. Paul’s point is not to define an order so much as to stress the effectiveness and totality of God’s saving action. More than a desire (predestination/election), more even than a summons (call), God’s salvation means “righteousification” and restoration to right covenant relations (justification) and participation in the glory of God (glorification). The absence of “sanctification” between “justification” and “glorification” has sometimes puzzled interpreters. It now becomes clear why it is not there: Paul does not conceive of sanctification as a stage of salvation between justification and glorification. Rather, righteousnessification and glorification, new life and eternal life, dikaiosynê and doxa, are two inseparable dimensions of God’s overall salvation project.

This brings us to the use of the aorist verb glorified in 8:30. Many commentators argue that it does not refer literally to a past event or experience.

50. Young says that 2 Cor 5:21 “surely explains” Rom 8:3 (“Understanding Romans,” 440).
51. Blackwell’s preferred—or at least cautious—term (“Glory and Death,” 305).
52. See my Inhabiting the Cruciform God, 9–39.
They stand on an apparently firm foundation of texts such as 5:2 ("our hope of sharing the glory of God") and 8:17–18 ("so that we may also be glorified with him . . . the glory about to be revealed to us"). Thus, they offer several different interpretations of the aorist:

- a proleptic, futuristic, or prophetic aorist: a future action is so certain that it may be narrated in the past tense
- a properly theological use of the aorist: a future action is already complete from the timeless, eternal perspective of God
- an ahistorical use of the aorist: like "predestined," "glorified" expresses a view of salvation events that occur outside of time as we know it, unlike "called" and "justified," which refer to events within time
- a punctiliar/nontemporal aorist: an action is perceived and described with respect to its aspect (one-time or completed character), not its temporality
- a liturgical aorist: an act celebrated in baptism or worship, the language for which is borrowed by Paul but not representative of his theology.

While each of these interpretations could make sense of the text in isolation or in connection only with texts that clearly refer to the future experience of glory, there are at least five reasons to think that Paul believes that the glorification of humanity in Christ has already begun.

First, this is the implicit argument of Romans to this point. Because resurrection and glory are inseparable, the partial and proleptic resurrection experience described in ch. 6 implies that believers already have a foretaste of the coming glory.

Second, and similarly, there exists in Rom 8 a "dialectic" of "present/hidden—future/revealed" that is articulated in terms of both "sonship [being "children of God"; NRSV] and glory." Because of the Spirit, being God's children is both a present reality (8:14–15) and a reality still to be revealed and expanded (8:19–21). The situation is the same with glory (8:18, 21 versus 8:30). The certainty of future glorification is not only that Christ has been glorified but also that our glorification has already been "set in motion."

Third, Paul will indicate in chs. 14 and 15 that the renewed community of Gentiles and Jews in Christ embodies (or should embody) the glory of God, as we will see below.

53. For example, Dunn (Romans 1–8, 485–86) leans toward the first and the third; Leander Keck (Romans [ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2005], 217–18, prefers the second. The terms for the types of aorists are partly my own.

54. So also, with some similar arguments, Jewett, Romans, 530.


56. The phrase is from the heading of Gieniusz's discussion (ibid., 278–81).
Fourth, moving outside Romans, in 2 Cor 3:7–11, 18 we see Paul speaking of a present glory, though he does so, as in Rom 8, only in connection with cruciform existence (2 Cor 4:8–12) and the future “eternal weight of glory beyond all measure” (2 Cor 4:17).

Finally, looking behind Romans, we note that Isa 55 describes the people’s glorification, in the past tense (edoxasen), as follows:

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.... See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified [edoxasen] you. Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (Isa 55:3, 5–7, emphasis added)\(^57\)

Here glorification is linked specifically to themes we see in Romans: God’s love, witnessing to the nations, forgiveness of sin, and the transformation of the unrighteous. I would suggest that this text has influenced Paul’s understanding of glory.

This present reality of glorification does not, of course, eliminate the future fullness of glory. Present glory is partial, proleptic, and—paradoxically—cruciform. Glory is God’s redemptive purpose for humanity. As Dunn puts it, referring back to Rom 1: “It is a finely conceived reversal that the doxazein [glorifying] that man failed to give to his Creator in the beginning is finally resolved in God’s doxazein [glorifying] of man.”\(^58\)

**Righteousness and Glory for Israel (Romans 9–11)**

At the risk of being accused of underestimating the role and importance of Rom 9–11 in the letter, we will need, for reasons of space, to treat it very briefly. This is not inappropriate, because Paul does not substantially develop his view of the content of righteousness and glory in these chapters. Rather, Paul argues primarily that God’s irrevocable gift and promise to Israel (11:29) will mean their ultimate receipt of the righteousness they previously lacked (9:31; 10:3; cf. 11:31) and the glory that was their own heritage (9:4). For this reason, Paul in turn gives glory to the God of inscrutable, universal riches and mercy (11:33–36). This act of praise anticipates

\(^57\) Cf. also the universal summons to salvation and the promise of Israel’s glorification in the context (Isa 45:20–25) of a text (Isa 45:23) that Paul uses in Rom 14:11; Isa 45:23 reads, “In the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall triumph and glory.” See also Isa 46:12–13.

\(^58\) Dunn, Romans 1–8, 485.
the description of Gentiles and Jews united in Christ to glorify God that follows in chs. 12–15.

Communities of Righteousness and Glory: Spirit-Enabled Christlike Godlikeness (Romans 12–15)

Romans 12–15 answers this question: What does theosis look like in everyday life? What does the “Daybreak Ethos” look like on the ground? What does it mean to be a community of dikaiosynē and doxa that participates in the life of the Triune God, the life of Father, Son, and Spirit whose activity has been narrated in chs. 5–8 and extended explicitly to both Jews and Gentiles in chs. 9–11?

The overarching answer is provided in the introductory exhortation of 12:1–2. The echoes of Rom 1 (“bodies,” somata; cf. 1:21; “worship,” latreian; cf. 1:25, elatreusan) and Rom 6 (“present,” parastēsai; cf. 6:13, 16, 19) reveal that Paul wants the Roman communities in Christ to become the antithesis of Adamic humanity depicted in chs. 1–3 and to embody concretely the “en-Chrised,” righteouslyed humanity he says in ch. 6 that they have become. The language of nonconformity (me syschematizesthe) and transformation (metamorphousthe) are key aspects of theosis. Paul implies that there is a standard, a pattern, other than “the world” or (better) “this age.” Although Paul does not specifically name Christ, the use of the verb conformed (syschematizesthe), which is similar to “conformed (symmorphous) to the image of his Son” in 8:29, makes it clear that the transformation he has in mind is increasing conformity to Christ. The passive voice suggests that this is the work of God, probably specifically the Spirit, and is reminiscent of the several occurrences of the passive voice in ch. 6 (6:3–6), confirming the suspicion that this transformation is the result of the ongoing participation in Christ that begins in baptism. The goal of the transformation, discerning and doing “the will of God,” means that Spirit-enabled conformity to Christ is in fact the will of God. Because God’s will must be in line with God’s own character, Paul implies once again that conformity to Christ is conformity to God.

There are several ways in which Paul wants “becoming like God/Christ” to be manifested in the Roman house churches.

• As “one body in Christ” (12:5), they manifest their confession that God is one (3:30).

• As practitioners of love and the good who show honor to others (12:9–10), they embody the image of Christ the new Adam, reversing the consequences of life in Adam depicted in Rom 1–2.
• As those who are prayerful, hopeful, and patient in suffering (12:12), they renarrate the pattern of Jesus, who suffered prior to glorification.
• Inasmuch as they are hospitable to strangers and strive to live in peace without practicing evil or revenge (12:13–21), they express the character of the One who graciously loved and righteously us while we were still sinners and enemies of God (5:1–11), allowing us to participate in the peace (5:1; 14:7) of “the God of peace” (15:33).
• As those who practice humility in the service of unity, they put on the mind of Christ (12:16, echoing Phil 2:1–5 and anticipating 15:1–5).

There is, of course, more, all summarized in the great admonition to participation: to be clothed in the Lord Jesus Christ (13:14). These practices of participation, of Christosis/theosis, come together in the issue to which Paul devotes the most attention at the end of Romans: harmony in the midst of diversity. Certainly one (and perhaps the chief) pastoral and rhetorical goal of Romans comes to expression in chs. 14 and 15. Paul wants the Roman believers to share in Christ’s love for the weak, which is simultaneously God’s impartiality, love, and hospitality—all of which Paul has touched on briefly in the two preceding chapters.

A strong “therefore” (dio) indicates a rhetorical climax in 15:7–13:

Welcome one another, therefore (dio), just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. . . . May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This admonition is, in turn, predicated on the story of Christ renarrated in 15:1–6, which summons the strong to exhibit regard for the weak (vv. 1–4) as a theological and practical requirement for the fulfillment of God’s purpose: that all live in harmony and glorify God with one voice (vv. 5–6). Paradoxically, because humans always remain creatures, they share in the glory of God only when they give glory to God.

60. In all three passages, a form of the phrase to auto phronein appears: Rom 12:16; 15:5; Phil 2:2.
61. The one way believers are not to resemble God is in the practice of punishing evildoers, which is a divine, eschatological “reserved power” (12:19–21).
62. See also Hays, “What Is ‘Real Participation in Christ’?”
63. See especially Philip F. Esler, Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).
This powerful embodiment of welcome and worship, this community of Gentiles and Jews in mutual hospitality and in common glorification of God, is said, in effect, to be the very mission of Christ as the agent of God (vv. 8–9). That is, what God wanted Christ effected. At the same time, however, Paul implies that Christlike regard for others (v. 7; cf. v. 3) can be replicated in the churches (vv. 1–2, 5) only by the grace and action of God, so Paul makes that his prayer (vv. 5–6. 13). In other words, what God wanted is what Christ did, and what Christ did is what God now does. If we wish to confuse things still further, we can go back to ch. 8 and see that what God now does must somehow be related to what Christ does, which is what the Spirit does.

All of this is to say that the Christological imperative and paradigm of ch. 15 is ultimately a theological (divine) imperative and paradigm. The cruciform hospitality to which Paul summons the church is ultimately willed and effected by the Father who sent his Son into the world. To be like Christ is to be like God: to share God’s desires and to do God’s will.

This is neither theologically incoherent nor unexpected in Romans. For one thing, Paul can tell us that believers experience both the love of God (5:5, 8) and the love of Christ (8:35), and that these loves are in fact one divine love, “the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:39), poured into our hearts in the presence of the Holy Spirit (5:5). For another, Christ is the Son of God, whose Sonship means his sharing in the royal character of the Father, which for Paul will mean also in God’s justice—his restorative, reconciling action. Third, if we accept the subjective-genitive reading of \( \text{pistis Christou} \) in Rom 3:21–26, then Paul associates the faithfulness of God with its manifestation in the faithfulness of Christ. That is, there is a close association in Romans between God’s love, righteousness, and faithfulness and Christ’s love, righteousness, and faithfulness.

Paul will not allow us to interpret the experience of this divine life individualistically. What will make the Roman community truly the antithesis of Rom 1–2, and a credible exemplum of what God intended for humanity, is the community’s gathering together to glorify God.

**Theosis in Romans and the Politics of Rome**

Space permits only a brief mention of the importance for theosis vis-à-vis the politics of Rome that may be addressed by Paul, whether implicitly or explicitly, in Romans. Rome made certain claims that are clearly (even if only implicitly) challenged, and indeed made void, by the vision of theosis—salvation, righteousness, and glory—in Paul’s letter:

1. that the Roman Empire is the source of salvation and the locus of glory
2. that emperors either are divine or can become divine by apotheosis and that they are worthy of titles such as lord, savior, and son of God
3. that the Roman value of seeking more and more honor for self is the most natural human pursuit
4. that Roman justice is true justice, indeed, the justice of God

Paul may not address these claims head-on, but it is clear that anyone who accepts his gospel will be unable to affirm the Roman pseudo-gospel and its claims. It is also clear, at least to me, that the Roman pseudo-gospel is not limited to first-century Rome.

CONCLUSION

Our study suggests that the various themes and purposes of Romans that have been traditionally identified work together to serve a larger theological agenda: the desire of God in Christ to save and shape a Spirit-empowered Christlike/Godlike people, a people of dikaiosynē and doxa. “Justification is God’s act of new creation.”64 Theosis, specifically cruciform communal theosis, constitutes the rhetorical, pastoral, and theological theme and purpose of Romans. Paul’s deeply theocentric—but also thereby Christocentric and anthropocentric—goal is that the Roman community of diverse communities would become more like the impartial God who justifies ungodly Jews and Gentiles alike and forms them into one covenant people. Romans narrates what God has been up to in “salvation history” so that his Roman auditors will know what God is up to in Rome itself, the heart of the Empire: the creation of a new humanity in Christ, empowered by the Spirit to treat others in Godlike ways and to glorify God together, with the hope that this will spread also now to Spain. This sort of community, as part of the new humanity, is on its way to being restored to the original glory for which it was created but that has been lost for a very long time. That glory will be finally realized only in the eschaton, but it is experienced partially and proleptically in communities that glorify God and love others as God has loved them.

Not long ago, I attended the dedication of Jubilee Arts Center, the most recent endeavor of Newborn Holistic Ministries in the Sandtown area of Baltimore. Newborn has reclaimed its urban corner from drug addicts, having first built a halfway house for women on one corner, then constructed long-term housing for them diagonally opposite, then renovated green space and a fountain, and now transforming a dilapidated building into a beautiful arts outreach center. After an hour of speeches, prayers, and enthusiastic renditions of “This Little Light of Mine” and “Amazing Grace,” the culturally and racially diverse crowd of 200 or so toured the new facility. As the final prayer ended, a woman said to me, “This is what the kingdom of God looks like.”

Paul would agree. This is a culturally diverse community of believers glorifying the Triune God, caring for one another, anticipating the liberation of creation, and reaching out to strangers, for

the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. (Rom 14:17–19)

A part of Sandtown has been transformed from Rom 1 to Rom 8 and 15. Theosis has been at work, a foretaste of the glory to come.