



KEYS

to the Gospel Tradition

A Wisdom Curriculum —Lesson Five

THEOSIS

*Through
his divine
power,
Yeshua the
Anointed has
bestowed
on us
everything ...
so that we
might come
to share in
the divine
nature.*

II Peter 1:3-4

DEIFICATION

A characteristic feature of the early Christianity was its high regard for what it means to be a human being. According to early teachings from the masters of Yeshua's wisdom way, we are not simply to be mortal beings with a destiny confined to the material universe, we are also the offspring of Divinity, possessing a clear spiritual destiny transcendent to space-time.

Created in the image of God, we clearly have a psychological and physical identity, but spiritually we transcend both the psychic and physical realms and the laws that apply to them. We are inhabitants of eternity as well as time, and our destiny is not confined to the fate and necessity that rules human history alone.

That destiny, however, can only be fully known as it is manifested in a tangible form having undergone deification or divinization, called *theosis*. This is the supreme realization of what it means to be fully human. A fully deified human being is the goal of our pilgrimage and it was said to be the focus of the awakening that Yeshua proclaimed. It is also the result of the full emergence of his Light appearing in the deepest part of a human being.

DIVINIZED HUMANITY

Out of the collected insights from Yeshua's wisdom's teaching, there arises an astounding summation about human destiny. All of the early terms we have been exploring (Gospel, *metanoia*, *metamorphosis*, *teleios*) point toward two more important terms that are for us almost unimaginable conclusions in the early Gospel tradition. Human beings are moving toward deification; that is, human destiny will only be realized when human beings become fully and finally divinized. The first of the terms they used to describe this was *theosis*, which very rapidly found its way into the early teachings of Christianity. The second term was *epektasis* (meaning infinite growth) which came later. We will describe this term in the next lesson.

In a letter attributed to the Apostle Peter we are told that we are to become "*partakers of the divine nature.*" The writer understands this to be where the transformation of humanity is leading—what the destiny of completion is really all about. Almost all of the teachers who follow him do the same.

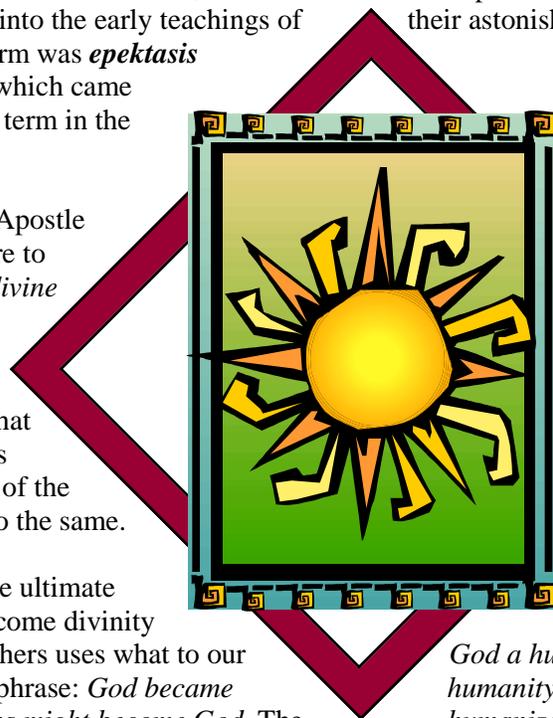
They say, strangely, that the ultimate future of humanity is to become divinity itself. One of the early teachers uses what to our ears perhaps is a shocking phrase: *God became human in order that humans might become God.* The spiritual evolution (or transformation) of human beings would be complete (that is, perfected) only when at last human beings were transformed into God (or gods)—when they became fully deified (or divinized).

For us this idea is almost unimaginable, and certainly the process is very mysterious, but it is inexorable, they say—it will happen. Everything has been set into motion by God for this to happen. It is the goal or destiny toward which everything is moving. This is, as Paul says, an aspect of "the plan of the ages."

In the Christian Tradition the prototype for a fully deified being is, of course, manifested in the final figure of the divine-humanity (*theanthropos*) displayed by Yeshua following his resurrection. As a being of

earth he suffered in the flesh, and yet through his death and resurrection he achieves the fullness of divinity which he opens to us as the wellspring of eternal life. Through the transformative process of death and resurrection he embodied the divine nature, and now acts to transform all of humanity itself.

It was this vision that was seen by the early teachers. In their view we too share this same trajectory with him. The purpose of the Christian path was to accomplish this supreme realization (*theosis*). Here are examples of their astonishing teachings,



"Not from the beginning were we made gods," said St. Irenaeus, "but first indeed humans, and then finally gods."

Speaking of Yeshua's work, St. Athanasius said, "He became human in order to divinize us."

"God united himself to human nature," said St. Gregory of Nazianus, "so that I, too might be made God."

"The Incarnation," said St. Maximus the Confessor, "makes God a human through the deification of humanity, and humans gods through the humanization of God."

The deified person, while remaining completely human in nature, both in body and soul, becomes wholly God in both body and soul, through grace and the divine Light of the beatifying glory that permeates the whole person.

— Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* (91, 1088)

In their view, these statements expressed the meaning of Yeshua's summons to be "born again," and were the supreme sign of his triumph over death. His was an invitation into the process of transformation itself so that we might be recreated in the image of God, which lies in our depths (however obscured) and by which we were originally brought into being.

We are summoned to recover our original identity. In this recovery God is born in us and we are born in God—humanity dwells within divinity, and divinity within humanity. We are not, however, asked to abandon our created human nature. We are asked to restore it by freeing it from foreign accretions (psychic and physical), but not to destroy it or eliminate it. Our deepest desires are not to be eradicated. They are to be reoriented and redirected.

Even the human body has a spiritual disposition. It too is capable of experiencing transformative change (of being deified along with the soul) as was manifest on the Mountain of Transfiguration. Nothing of the living person, of the unique creature divinely made, is to be sacrificed.

By a gradual process of refinement and illumination—an initiation which in many ways resembles that of the old Mysteries—humankind is to become as God. It is this idea of divine-human collaboration, of a real effective partnership between the free creature and the Creator that is at the heart of the Christian mystery.

We shall be joined in intimacy to God, for the One is made many (though paradoxically remaining undivided), but each part is one with the whole. This is the supreme realization of the Christian faith expressing the consummate triumph of life over death of which the Resurrection is the symbol.

IMAGE AND LIKENESS

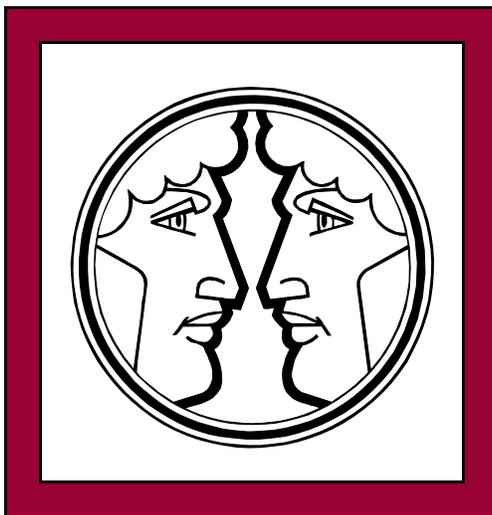
It is clear that the early vision of Christianity is a tapestry of paradoxes at whose heart is the most profound paradox of all, the divine-humanity lived by Yeshua. Was he fully human? Was he God incarnate appearing in flesh? Was he a creature who is both fully human and yet divine?

What is this divine-humanity, which is said to be shared with us as a gift? How do we understand the conundrum of two completely different realities living together in harmony in one being?

The ancient formulation is that “we are made in the **image** and **likeness** of God.” These two words are critical to a complete understanding. Image means to look like someone or something. For example, a son looks like (or is “the spitting image” of) his father. **Likeness**, on the other hand, is different in nature. It means that someone does not simply look like someone but manifests their characteristics in every other way.

Another example would be gold verses galena or brass. “Fool’s Gold” looks like the real thing, but it is not. It

appears to be gold, but only gold is the reality. Humans, then, are not simply to look like the real thing. They are to be the real thing.



The paradox is this. I am not God. I am not the Origin of things, nor am I the Creator. I am not the Infinite, Absolute and Eternal Source. I am a creature. Yet, I am to partake of the divine nature in its fullness—to become fully divine. You must not collapse one side of the paradox into the other.

The two sides remain ontologically distinct, but they belong together—they form the whole that is called the complete (or completed) human being.

In a similar way, it is accounted wrong in Christian theology to collapse both natures into the other. They remain distinct. There is said to be no confusion between them, but also no separation. Again, this is logically paradoxical, but they exist together in a new and living unity in one human being. A human being must take on the characteristics and qualities of the divine.



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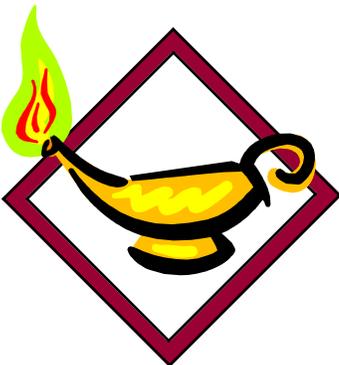
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THE FORM OF THE FUTURE

*The fact of being created in the image of God means that humanity right from the moment of creation was endowed with a royal character....The Godhead is wisdom and **logos**; in yourself too you see intelligence and thought, image of the original intelligence and thought...God is love and source of love: the divine Creator has drawn this feature on our faces too.*

*Gregory of Nyssa, **On the Creation of Man** (PG 44, 136-7)*

The creature, having by deification become God, no longer displays any energy other than the divine, so that in everything from now on there is only one energy belonging to God and to his elect, or rather, henceforward there is only god, because the whole of his being, as is proper to love, enters into the whole of the being of the elect.

*Maximus the Confessor **Ambigua**, 7 (PG 91, 1076).*

The word comes to dwell in the saints by imprinting on them in advance, in a mystery, the form of his future advent, as an icon.

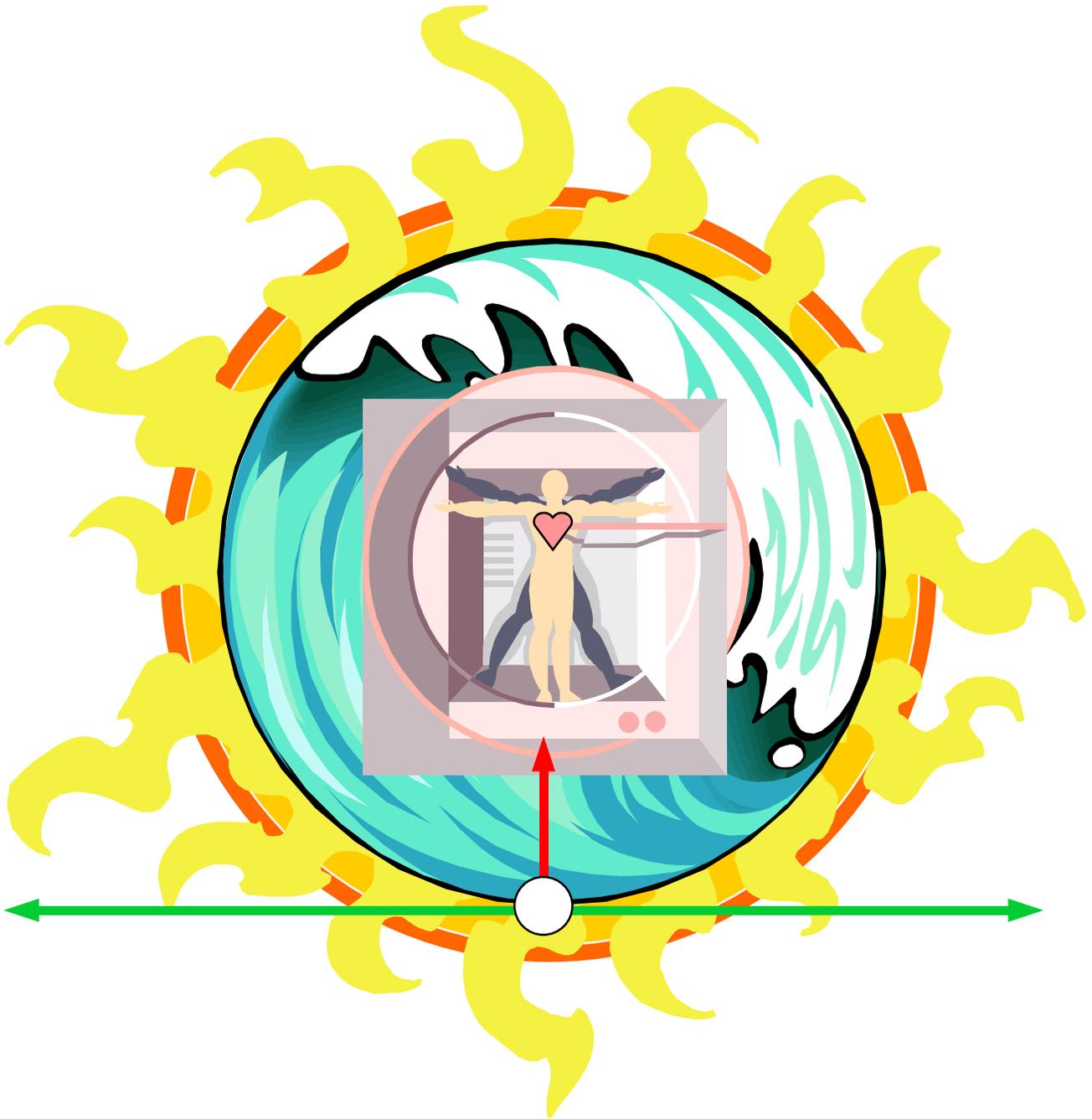
*Maximus the Confessor **Gnostic Centuries II**, 28 (PG 90, 1092)*

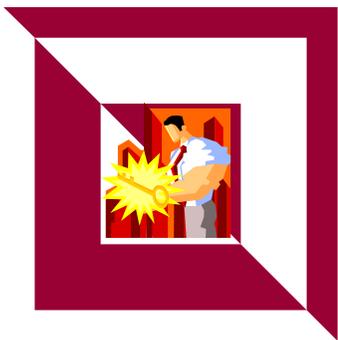
*This capacity for transcendence that 'distances' us from the world, and makes us responsible for it, gives us the dignity of kings, or more precisely priest-kings, since our sovereignty is inseparable from the offering. The image of God is revealed in us by our intelligence, by our vocation to express meaning, and by love, since God is wisdom, **logos**, and love. These...conceptions are not irrational, but belong to a rationality which goes beyond the 'horizontal' connection of causes and effect, being enriched and broadened by a 'vertical' contemplation of the mystery and meaning of creatures and things, and their transparency to the divine **logoi**.*

*Olivier Clement, **The Roots of Christian Mysticism**, 79-80*

THEOSIS

The Divinization of Humanity





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A Study Guide — Lesson Five

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is your reaction or response to the idea of *theosis*?
2. Does the idea of becoming “a god” upset you?
3. Would the phrase “becoming like God” sound better to you? What is the difference between these two?
4. How would you describe a divinized human being? What examples would you use?
5. Which of the quotes on page 26 from the early teachers makes most sense to you? How would you explain that concept to another person?
6. What would a deified human body be like? How would divinization change the human soul?
7. How might you “practice for divinization” each day?
8. Choose one of the quotes on page 28. Rewrite it in your own language and share it with others participating in a class with you if possible.

READINGS FOR INSIGHT

*The Messenger comes, then again and again.
A lighted lamp kisses an unlit one,
a flaming up and a moving on.
That's enough,
the light has done its work after all.
The lightbringer is not some handsome shape
who casts a shadow.
That is his steed.
The real form of God's messenger
is vast love and affection that spreads and endures
unto the end of days.*
—Michael Green, **One Song**, 48



C.S. Lewis comments that “... some people think that ... human souls will be ‘absorbed’ into God. But ... human souls can be taken into the life of God and yet remain themselves—in fact, be very much more themselves than they were before.
—Gregory R. Huth, **Awakening**, 42

*Every movement of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us, aims at ... ‘deifying’ us. In spite of the serious liabilities attached to it, the terminology of ‘deification’ and ‘divinization’ (**theosis**, **theopoeisis**) was to impose itself upon the Fathers as capable of expressing the newness of the condition to which man had been restored ... The deification of man corresponds to the ‘man-becoming’ of God. It deals with a mysterious exchange by which ‘each takes on the qualities of the other’.*

—Tomas Spidlik, **The Spirituality of the Christian East**, 45-46

PRAXIS AND MEDITATION

1 The diagram included in this lesson is designed to show the many dimensions of *theosis*. Look at the diagram carefully. Make a list of its many elements. After each element write out a description of what the symbol may mean spiritually. What is its spiritual significance? How does it describe one aspect of the process of deification? Compare your descriptions and analysis with others who have also explored the meaning of the diagram. Find where your descriptions and understandings are similar. How do they differ?

2 Examine two passages from the Pauline writings in the Christian Scriptures: Ephesians 1:9-10 and 6:13-14. Note that a more correct way of translating 6:13 might be ‘... *everything that is visible becomes light*,’ meaning that light turns whatever it touches into itself.

3 In the Readings for Insight above, notice how the first two readings relate to each other. In a period of meditation, using the visual image of a lamp, ponder how the illustration of a lamp clarifies what it means to become fully human and, therefore, deified. Journal your insights and share these with others.

4 The seventh Question for Reflection suggests that on a daily basis there are practical ways that one can move toward the process of *theosis*. This means there must be forms of experimentation. Keep track of your practices. Ask others what they have discovered in their practice.