

Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad
UAV Arad Interdisciplinary Doctoral School
Doctoral Program: Evangelical Theology
Doctoral candidate: Goran Medved
Mentor: Prof. univ. dr. habil. Marcel V. Măcelaru
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Abstract of the doctoral thesis:

Paul's theological contribution to an evangelical perspective on theosis

The dissertation starts by explaining what is meant by theosis in general and what is meant by theosis in Paul, providing a number of definitions by contemporary theologians. This is followed by a section on how the concept of theosis fares in evangelical circles. The intended audience are evangelical Christians who should come to understand the concept of theosis, particularly through the elements of theosis in the Pauline corpus, and through major salvation doctrines of justification, sanctification and glorification, which also largely come from the Pauline corpus, and are part of the process of theosis.

Since the research deals with the three major areas (theosis, Paul's writings, and evangelical Christianity), the following research question is asked: How do elements of theosis in Paul's writings contribute to an evangelical perspective on theosis? After much researching and discovering the correlations between the three areas, the following thesis statement emerged: Paul's theology contains enough significant elements of theosis to decisively contribute to the development and acceptance of an evangelical perspective on theosis in evangelical circles.

The main research methodology consists of biblical studies, biblical theology and systematic theology. The author engages in exegesis of Pauline letters and specific texts within those letters related to theosis, delineates the elements of theosis in Pauline writings and evangelical teachings, and discusses common tenets of evangelical theology and main doctrines of salvation in relation to Pauline theosis.

This thesis contributes to evangelical theology by investigating Paul's letters to churches through the lens of theosis, by identifying elements of theosis in Pauline corpus, by exposing elements of theosis in current evangelical teachings, by articulating congruity of Pauline theosis and evangelical theology, by establishing correlation between Pauline theosis and evangelical salvation doctrines, and by proposing benefits of Pauline theosis for evangelical thought and practice.

Chapter one reviews the literature relevant to the thesis. The research question being “How do elements of theosis in Paul’s writings contribute to an evangelical perspective on theosis?,” there are no written works that would precisely cover this question in the sense of writing about theosis from exclusively Pauline perspective *and* about how that influences an evangelical perspective and acceptance of theosis. However, there are a number of works that engage in Paul’s theology and theosis. These works are placed in the following categories: Pauline theosis and the scriptural background, Pauline theosis and the Greco-Roman and Jewish background, Pauline theosis and the patristic background, Pauline theosis and the wider historical background (from Patristic to Modern Era), and Pauline theosis as a potentially evangelical doctrine. In some authors, there is a combination of categories, such as Pauline theosis and its scriptural and patristic background.

Chapter two analyzes Paul’s letters to churches through the lens of theosis. It examines each of Paul’s nine letters to churches, from the perspective of being changed into the likeness of Christ who is God (Pauline version of theosis). These letters range from Romans to Second Thessalonians in the New Testament book order. They are: Romans, First Corinthians, Second Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, First Thessalonians, and Second Thessalonians. A fundamental proposition is made that the idea of being transformed into the likeness of Christ was on Paul’s mind as he was writing to specific situations in churches, commending them or rebuking them, addressing problems, answering their questions, correcting wrong theology and wrong behavior, and explaining the gospel. In other words, a suggestion is made that transformation into Christlikeness was the center of Paul’s thought. Therefore, Paul’s letters to churches are surveyed as they are situated in the New Testament canon, asking the following questions: “How does the main theme or themes of the whole letter relate to Christlikeness?”, “What instructions does Paul give that will make the original recipients more Christlike, and therefore Godlike?” and “What does he identify as obstacles to transformation into Christlikeness?” In other words, what will contribute to participation and union with Christ, and therefore theosis, and what will hinder it? After examining each letter, a short conclusion is given regarding the findings related to theosis in that letter.

Chapter three deals with elements of theosis in Paul’s writings. This chapter is the key to this dissertation, because it extracts and exposes a number of significant elements of theosis in Paul’s corpus. Each subsection identifies and analyzes one significant element of theosis in Paul’s thought: thinking kenotically like Christ, sharing in the identity and destiny with Christ, restoration of God’s image through Christ, living an exchanged life with Christ, being

a new creation in Christ, putting on Christ, being children of God through Christ, being imitators of God and Christ, reflecting God's glory, restoration of our bodies according to Christ's glorious body, and union with Christ and participation in Christ. In terms of its significance for biblical and Pauline studies, this chapter aims to expose and expound all of Pauline theological concepts in one research. The intent is to show that the concept of theosis is significantly present in Paul's writings. Evangelicals hold the apostle Paul in high regard because of his revelations regarding our salvation in Christ, which he so insightfully expounds in his letters, and because of his major influence on evangelical theology. By showing that Paul's teachings are filled with theological concepts, the desire is to persuade evangelical Christians to think positively in terms of theosis, to learn more about it, and to see potential benefits for evangelical theology and Christianity.

Participatory union with Christ seems to encompass everything written in this chapter: following the kenotic pattern of Christ, shared identity and destiny with Christ, restoration of God's image by being conformed to Christ's image, exchanged life with Christ, being a new creation in Christ, putting on Christ, being sons of God by faith in Christ, being imitators of God and Christ, reflecting God's glory through the experience of Christ's love and fullness, and the restoration of our bodies according to Christ's glorious body. Just considering the chapter subtitles one can see that every single concept necessitates Christ. Each concept is possible because of our union with Christ (being in him) and our participation in Christ (sharing in his nature and attributes). This is what some other authors have already recognized: christosis is theosis, that is, being transformed into Christlikeness equals being transformed into Godlikeness. Christ is in us and we are in Christ, united with him and sharing in his divine nature and attributes. That is what Pauline theosis is about.

Chapter four deals with Pauline elements of theosis in evangelical teachings. A number of popular teachings today, found in evangelical circles, speak about theosis without using the word "theosis." They utilize Pauline elements of theosis described in the previous chapter. These teachings can be classified under the following headings: Exchanged life; Spirit, soul and body; Identity in Christ (who we are in Christ); Proclamation of the Word (the power of speaking God's word); Little Christs; Spiritual formation through spiritual disciplines; Little gods; and Return to Eden (restoration of all things). In my opinion, these teachings are widespread in evangelical Christian circles today, although not evenly, because of the great diversity of evangelical Christianity. However, through these teachings the concept of theosis is very much present in evangelical Christianity. The teachings have reached a certain level of popularity in different evangelical circles, in the sense that many

Christians have heard them and accepted them, and in the sense that some of these teachings are taught by popular teachers who are followed by evangelical Christians of different denominations. They all emphasize significant elements of theosis found in Pauline corpus.

The conclusion of this chapter is that major elements of theosis have found their way into some of the popular contemporary teachings in evangelical circles. Those teachings are not marginal. To the contrary, they are received and taught by a number of evangelicals as the basic teachings of Christian faith. Their common denominator is that they contain strong elements of theosis found in Paul's writings and described in the previous chapter, such as our union with Christ and participation in Christ, who is God. The majority of these teaching are biblically sound and edifying for the church. However, some of them cross the limits of what the Bible teaches. Even though all of them teach Christosis (transformation into the image of Christ) and therefore theosis, they never use the word "theosis" nor try to present theosis as a concept or doctrine. A more complete understanding of the elements of theosis in Pauline corpus would benefit these teachers and disciples, and strengthen evangelical theology.

Chapter five deals with Pauline elements of theosis and evangelical theology. It starts with a brief survey of the evangelical movement in general and of the evangelical movement in Croatia. The conclusion is that the evangelical movement in Croatia does not have its specific theology, but shares the six common tenets or emphases of evangelical theology in general: the supreme authority of the Bible, the majesty of Jesus Christ, the lordship of the Holy Spirit, the necessity of conversion, the priority of evangelism, and the importance of fellowship. The major part of the chapter examines how Pauline theosis is compatible with each one of these evangelical beliefs.

Basic evangelical beliefs largely come from the Pauline corpus, so it might not be a surprise that Pauline version of theosis is in agreement with the six basic tenets of evangelical theology. This is important for evangelical scholars and Christians to consider, because it might lead to acceptance of the concept of theosis, at least the concept of theosis as implied by Paul, into evangelical thought and theology. The greatest obstacle so far has been the ignorance of this concept. Hopefully, the realization that there are elements of theosis in the letters of Paul, and that they are perfectly compatible with evangelical theology, will lead to more interest, study and acceptance.

Chapter six deals with evangelical salvation doctrines and Pauline theosis. Another crucial and common element of evangelical theology are the main evangelical doctrines that pertain to salvation: justification, sanctification, and glorification. These come mainly from the Pauline corpus and the author shows how they are part of theosis. The doctrine of

justification is specifically ascribed to Paul, so under the entry for “justification,” theological dictionaries usually have a subsection titled “Paul’s Doctrine of Justification.” Sanctification and glorification are also largely Pauline doctrines, but not exclusively, as we find those concepts also in Peter and John. So, when looking at all three of the doctrines, much material can be found in the Pauline corpus. This chapter explains how these three doctrines relate to the concept of Pauline theosis.

Regarding the doctrine of justification the author discusses the traditional evangelical emphasis (God acquits and accepts sinners) and the new evangelical emphasis (God shares his life with believers), and also the issue of imputed or infused righteousness, and how those relate to viewing justification as crucial part of theosis. Regarding the doctrine of sanctification, the author claims that most evangelicals think of sanctification as growing in holiness, but specifically by resisting sin and by separating themselves from worldliness. So, there is an apophatic focus in sanctification in the sense of the things one should not do in order to be more holy. Generally speaking, becoming like God is not the primary matter associated with sanctification in evangelical circles. This is where Pauline theosis in the form of becoming like Christ could provide a positive orientation for sanctification from an evangelical standpoint.

The author discusses positional and progressive sanctification, the relation between sanctification and justification, and how certain evangelical dictionaries and systematic theologies indicate strong elements of theosis in their descriptions of sanctification. When hearing about theosis, many evangelical Christians think that it is the same as sanctification. However, sanctification does not equal theosis, but it is a major part of theosis. Theosis is much broader, covering not only the concept of sanctification, but the whole story of creation, salvation and re-creation. Finally, for evangelicals, the process of sanctification (which is part of theosis) mostly happens through individual change into the likeness of Christ, as opposed to sacraments administered by the ordained clergy.

In the section on the doctrine of glorification and Pauline theosis, the author explains the term glory as used by the apostle Paul and as defined by contemporary theologians. God’s desire to share his glory with humans, so that they will possess his glory to some extent and manifest his glory to some extent, implies theosis. Paul clearly explains in many of his letters that the way to sharing in the glory is through suffering and hardship. This means that Christ is the pattern of glorification, because he went through suffering in order to achieve glory. Paul followed that pattern in his life, and instructed other Christians to walk the same way. Thus, the theologians who argue that being conformed to Christ primarily means being

conformed to the way of the cross are in the right. Paul indicates that one of the main purposes of God for Christians is to bring them to glory, which entails a lifelong process of transformative glorification. If ‘glory’ is defined as a set of attributes of God, being changed from one degree of glory to another, can also be interpreted as continually appropriating the shareable attributes of God, in this phase of Christian life, to an extent, as we grow in likeness to him. Possessing the attributes of God is another way to define the process of theosis. Paul clearly confirms God’s promise of glorification to include the transformation of our bodies into the glorious body of Christ. Paul asserts that man “is the image and glory of God” (1 Cor 11:7, NIV), which carries strong implications for theosis.

There are many contact points between theosis and glorification: humankind was created to bear God’s image and glory; the image and likeness of God in humans was corrupted by the fall, that is, humans fell short of the glory of God; the work of Christ enabled restoration of the image and likeness to God, which includes restoration of the glory; the final work of Christ in regard to believers will be our glorification, that is, we will be made like him; glorification is sometimes defined as the restoration of the image of God in Christians, while theosis is defined the same way. However, the concept of theosis is larger than glorification, because it includes all the phases in the *ordo salutis*, including the final phase that is glorification. In other words, glorification is the completion of theosis, of Christian transformation into Godlikeness by the way of being molded into the image of Christ. The qualities that are otherwise exclusively divine (imperishability and immortality) will be attributed to Christians at the parousia. The conclusion of the chapter summarizes how the major evangelical doctrines of justification, sanctification and glorification are part of theosis.

In the last chapter, in conclusion to the whole thesis, the author hopes for a possibility for evangelical Christians to learn about Pauline theosis, and how it contributes to an evangelical perspective on theosis. The author expects evangelical readers will be able to perceive that there are significant elements of theosis in Paul’s writings, that some of those elements are already being taught in evangelical circles (but not recognized as part of theosis), that Pauline theosis is thoroughly compatible with common evangelical beliefs, and that evangelical salvation doctrines, which are largely found in Paul, are part of theosis. The author examines the potential advantages of Pauline theosis for evangelical Christianity, and claims that understanding Pauline theosis offers benefits for reading and understanding Paul. Reading Paul’s letters with the concept of Pauline theosis in mind provides the best framework for understanding Paul, that is, by perceiving that Christosis is the central thought in the mind of the Apostle. In other words, God’s main plan for a believer’s life is to

transform them into the image and likeness of Christ. This is what Paul wrote about, practiced in his life, and called other Christians to emulate.

Evangelicals can be enriched by deeper understanding of the cross and resurrection in Pauline theosis in the sense that we become image bearers of God and sharers in the glory of God, in order to represent God to others. It gives us the most powerful focus and motivation for all of our Christian life; the vision of becoming Godlike. There are possible missional benefits of Pauline theosis as God is calling us and others into the process of change and restoration to his image and glory. Presenting to people the Gospel from the viewpoint of theosis may prove to be a higher calling which will attract those who are called by God. Instead of placing an emphasis on sinners saved by grace, the shift to sinners transformed by grace into Christlikeness/Godlikeness, to bear the image and glory of God, to serve the purposes of God, seems to be a better calling, more in line with Pauline thought.

Pauline theosis emphasizes that through union with Christ and participation in Christ believers are molded into the likeness of Christ who is God. It is a powerful insight into the truth of progressive transformation which makes Christians more like God. This whole research confirms the thesis statement: Paul's theology contains enough significant elements of theosis to decisively contribute to the development and acceptance of an evangelical perspective on theosis in evangelical circles.