

The Mystery of Union With Christ

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“He became what we are so that we might become what He is.”

I. Introduction

This phrase “*He became what we are so that we might become what He is in Himself*” expresses a profound theological truth that runs through the entire Christian tradition. Rooted in the mystery of the Incarnation, it affirms that Christ assumed human nature not merely as the divine solution to a divine dilemma regarding sin, but rather to restore, glorify, and elevate humanity into communion with God.

This idea, variously called *theosis*, *divine adoption*, or *participation in the divine nature*, has been voiced in distinctive ways by the early Church Fathers, medieval scholastics, and modern theologians across both Eastern and Western traditions.

II. Patristic Voices: The Foundation of the Divine Exchange

1. St. Irenaeus of Lyons (2nd century)

“[Christ] became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.” — *Against Heresies*, Book V

- **Key Insight:** Salvation is not merely legal or moral but ontological (what it means to be human)—Christ recapitulates humanity and restores the image of God.
- **Theme:** Restoration through participation in Christ’s humanity and divinity.

2. St. Athanasius of Alexandria (4th century)

“He became man, that we might become god.” — *On the Incarnation*, §54

- **Key Insight:** A clear and succinct summary of the doctrine of theosis.

- **Theme:** God shares in our nature so that we might share in His by grace, not by nature.

3. St. Gregory of Nazianzus (4th century)

“That which He has not assumed He has not healed.” — Epistle 101 (same idea stated from the opposite perspective)

- **Key Insight:** Full salvation requires full assumption of human nature.
- **Theme:** Christ’s complete solidarity with humanity is the basis for our transformation.

4. St. Cyril of Alexandria (5th century)

“The Word... became man... so that we too might be united to the divine nature.” — Against Nestorius

- **Key Insight:** The hypostatic union (fully God and fully man in one person) enables human deification.
- **Theme:** Union with Christ enables union with God.

5. St. Maximus the Confessor (7th century)

- **Key Insight:** Humanity is destined for divinization through Christ, who unites all things in Himself.
- **Theme:** The Incarnation is part of a cosmic process of restoring all creation through participation in divine life.

6. St. Augustine of Hippo (4th–5th century)

“God became man so that man might become God.” — Sermon 192

- **Key Insight:** While careful to preserve Creator-creature distinction, Augustine affirms transformation into divine likeness.
- **Theme:** Emphasis on divine adoption and union with Christ.

III. Medieval and Reformation Voices

While this theme was less emphasized during this period of history (with shifts toward a legal framework for understanding salvation), thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin (who by the way was studying to be a lawyer) all maintained some understanding of union with Christ or participation in divine life, though reframed through their particular ways of thinking.

IV. Modern Theological Voices

1. Karl Barth (1886–1968)

“In the incarnation, the eternal Word of God has taken our place, shared our being, and reconciled us to Himself.” — Church Dogmatics, IV/1

- **Key Insight:** The Incarnation itself is reconciliation; humanity is included in Christ’s life.
- **Theme:** Participation in Christ through covenantal grace and divine initiative.

2. Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988)

“God does not merely act upon man; He becomes man so that man may be drawn into the inner life of God.” — Theodrama, Vol. 3

- **Key Insight:** The Incarnation is a drama of divine love into which humans are invited.
- **Theme:** Trinitarian participation through Christ’s obedience and self-gift.

3. T.F. Torrance (1913–2007)

“He came as one of us, taking our place, that we might take our place in Him.” — The Mediation of Christ

- **Key Insight:** Christ lived a vicarious human life, sanctifying every stage of our existence.
- **Theme:** Ontological healing of humanity through participation in Christ.

4. Kallistos Ware (1934–2022)

“Christ shared our poverty, so that we might share the riches of His divinity.”
— *The Orthodox Way*

- **Key Insight:** Theosis is the purpose of the Christian life.
- **Theme:** Full participation in divine grace and glory, rooted in the Incarnation.

5. Sarah Coakley (b. 1951)

“The Incarnation is not simply an event of substitution, but an opening up of divine vulnerability in which we are invited to participate.” — *God, Sexuality, and the Self*

- **Key Insight:** Transformation comes through surrender into divine vulnerability.
- **Theme:** Union with God through contemplation, *gendered humility, and Trinitarian love. (*Coakley means embracing a humble openness that allows for the reconfiguration of gender identities through deep spiritual engagement with the triune God)

6. Jürgen Moltmann (b. 1926)

“God becomes man in order that man may become truly human in God’s image.”
— *The Crucified God*

- **Key Insight:** The Incarnation and Cross show God’s solidarity with suffering humanity.
- **Theme:** Becoming fully human in Christ means becoming truly image-bearers of God.

7. N.T. Wright (b. 1948)

“Jesus is the place where God’s future has arrived in the present, so that humans may be transformed in the present in anticipation of the future.”
— *Surprised by Hope*

- **Key Insight:** Christ inaugurates new creation in which believers are reshaped.
- **Theme:** Transformation into Christ’s risen humanity as restored image-bearers.

8. C.S. Lewis (1898–1963)

“The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God.”
— *Mere Christianity*

- **Key Insight:** Salvation is relational and transformational, not just legal.
- **Theme:** We are to become “little Christs,” sharing in His divine life by grace.

V. Conclusion

From the early Fathers to modern thinkers, the phrase *“He became what we are so that we might become what He is”* expresses a deeply rooted and enduring theological conviction: the **Incarnation is not simply a step towards the Cross, but the very means by which humanity is elevated into union with God.**

While language and emphases vary, from the mystical and metaphysical in the East to the covenantal and historical in the West, the theological core remains consistent:

Christ became human to glorify humanity through communion with God.