

Everyday theosis

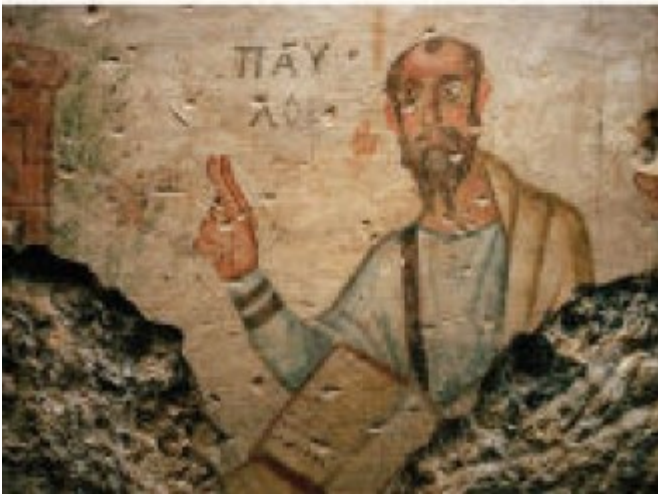
by [Greg Carey](#) in the [April 13, 2016](#) issue

In Review

MICHAEL J. GORMAN

Becoming the Gospel

Paul, Participation,
and Mission



Becoming the Gospel

By Michael J. Gorman
Eerdmans

In a study of mission in the Pauline letters, one might simply ask what kinds of things Paul calls believers to do. By cataloging and arranging those behaviors, one could then claim to have described Paul's understanding of mission.

But Michael J. Gorman has something different to say. He explores mission as an expression of participation in the gospel, a theme that has sustained his career.

Theosis—Spirit-enabled transformative participation in the life and character of God revealed in the crucified and resurrected Messiah Jesus—is the starting point of mission and . . . its proper theological framework.

Believers are called to “become” the gospel through participation in the divine life. Building on his close studies of key Pauline texts, Gorman articulates several dimensions of such participation.

Gorman is part of the “theological interpretation of scripture” movement, which presents an array of perspectives that are diverse in outlook but are all committed to reading the Bible in ways that inform and form the church. Although he is interested in doctrine, Gorman focuses on the question of mission: how the Bible informs our approach to living the gospel. For Gorman, mission is not merely part of the church’s identity; it is its essence. And the church’s mission ultimately derives from its missional God.

Gorman also commits himself to submissive interpretation. He does not primarily value what Paul says about mission. His interests lie with how we appropriate Paul’s witness in our own context. But make no mistake: Gorman also affirms that “Paul was *right* in his understanding of that mission.”

Gorman’s contributions are incisive. Not only will this book fuel sermons and educational sessions, it could be especially useful for groups trying to articulate a congregation’s sense of identity and mission. For example, Gorman shows how the values of faith, hope, and love frame 1 Thessalonians, and he demonstrates how that epistle grounds those virtues in the character of God. As those values incarnate themselves among the Thessalonians, they also manifest themselves in believers’ interactions beyond the church. Gorman’s exploration of Philippians centers on the Christ Hymn of 2:6–11. The high Christology celebrated there also provides the master story for Christian life in the world as cruciform love.

Following the lead of Willard Swartley (*Covenant of Peace*), as we all should, Gorman’s most lengthy exploration involves peace as a constitutive element of Paul’s message in general and of the letters to the Romans and the Ephesians in particular. Gorman makes much of peace as part of Paul’s greeting formula and of the many references to peace and reconciliation in his letters. Romans counters the

empire's peace-through-intimidation message with the proclamation of peace achieved through cruciform love. Indeed, gospel peace is inherently apocalyptic: it requires the revelation of God's true nature in an otherwise violent world. Ephesians announces the peace God has already accomplished in Christ, then calls believers to live into Christ's peaceful nature.

Acknowledging that many interpreters reduce Paul's justice language to justification, Gorman finds a very different message in the Corinthian correspondence. Like most Jews, Paul saw justice in relational rather than abstract terms. Relational justice plays out in 1 Corinthians 8, where Paul calls the Corinthians to look out for one another instead of exercising their theoretical rights. In exhorting the Corinthians to treat one another with dignity, Paul calls them to incarnate the justice and peace that are consonant with God's character.

Interpreters frequently debate how to understand Paul's language of participation in Christ. Through an extended study of Romans, Gorman brings forth theosis—participation in the divine life—as central to Paul's argument. Joining interpreters who believe that Paul refers to the faith *of* Jesus rather than faith *in* Jesus, Gorman interprets the important phrase “obedience of faith” as participation in Jesus' faithful obedience. Chapters 12–15, often treated as an epilogue to Romans, show us what theosis looks like in everyday life. This includes relations with outsiders, or mission. The counterculture of regard for the other stands in conflict with the Roman competition for honor.

In a final chapter Gorman presents his readings as overcoming the either-or thinking that too often limits Christian imagination: spirituality versus justice; evangelism versus peacemaking; pastoral care versus mission; and worship versus outreach.

Gorman's commitment to submissive interpretation opens space for some of his most creative readings. It can also prove a limitation. For example, in his emphasis on peace, Gorman never engages Paul's threat to take a stick to the Corinthians or his cursing of the Galatians, and he explains away the militaristic imagery of Ephesians 6:10–17 as secondary to Ephesians' proclamation of peace.

May not theological interpretation ask about the tension between authority and coercion or about the advantages and dangers of applying conflict metaphors to the gospel? How does God's mission of peace inform an understanding of divine wrath, a theme prominent in Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians? Alterna-

tively, a rhetorical reading of 1 Thessalonians and Philippians might see Paul's affectionate language as a strategic rhetorical move rather than a straightforward description of his relationship with those congregations.

One subtheme involves the public witness of the Pauline congregations and the persecution they suffered. The resistance the congregations experienced would have resulted not from the sacrificial love they practiced but from their refusal to participate in the many religious observances that marked ancient life, especially devotion to the emperor and homage to the gods of household and society. Gorman repeatedly engages those interpreters who argue that Paul did not call his congregations to the work of evangelism. That position, Gorman argues, answers the wrong question. Instead, Gorman reasons, the way the believers treated one another and their neighbors required public articulation.

As a seminary professor who serves a local congregation on a part-time basis, I'm often asked what congregations must do to enhance the vitality of their ministries. Gorman offers the most helpful answer I can imagine. Whereas folks often worry about marketing, staffing, programming, and worship styles, Gorman identifies the challenge primarily in spiritual terms: by grace and through the Spirit, we're called to become Christlike. If at first that answer sounds pietistic, read the book. At the end of every chapter Gorman presents case studies of missional projects ranging from Christian Peacemaker Teams to environmental stewardship activities to the residential communities identified with the new monasticism.