

Children of God
1 John 3:1-3, The Message
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What marvelous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it—we're called children of God! That's who we really are. But that's also why the world doesn't recognize us or take us seriously, because it has no idea who he is or what he's up to.

But friends, that's exactly who we are: children of God. And that's only the beginning. Who knows how we'll end up! What we know is that when Christ is openly revealed, we'll see him—and in seeing him, become like him. All of us who look forward to his Coming stay ready, with the glistening purity of Jesus' life as a model for our own.

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So, I want to tell you about an old theological idea that used to be the dominant, orthodox view, but that we've pretty much abandoned, at least in the west. There are two fancy words for it: *theosis*, and divinization. They mean the same thing. You can choose whichever you like more. I like theosis because it's easier to pronounce. Here's the idea in a nutshell: God became human, that humans might become God. Or, in the classic formulation, "God became man, that man might become God."

Growing up Baptist and then Presbyterian, I never heard of that. What I heard was more like, God became human, so that us bad humans who are otherwise in big trouble might become acceptable to God. There was definitely no talk of us becoming divine. I never heard about it in seminary, and I'm pretty sure if I'd put it on an ordination exam, I would have flunked.

It's so foreign, it feels like heresy, doesn't it? But for the majority of Christian history, and around most of the world, and even today in the Orthodox church, *theosis* has been a central theological concept. It stretches all the way back to a guy named Athanasius who lived in the 300s. Athanasius was a serious guy, so serious that in his own time, he was called "Father of Orthodoxy." He was part of the council that wrote the Nicene Creed, which has pretty much defined official belief ever since. He, and a whole lot of other early theologians, believed this idea that God became human, so that humans might become God.

Now, you don't have to believe this. The breadth of Christian theology is far wider than most of us were led to believe. But I think we ought to know about it, and this is one of the passages that contributed to the doctrine. You can just try it on today, rent it. You don't have to buy it.

We might have some objections. For one thing, it seems like we might be getting a little over-confident. Mostly, good things do not happen when people start walking around thinking of themselves as God.

That's not what this is about, though. For one thing, we see over and over in Christ, God's way is not to have power over, but to join with, take on flesh, pour out love. If we're becoming like that, then the point is not to get all high and mighty. You might say that as we become like God, we aren't becoming upwardly mobile, we're downwardly mobile.

The other thing is that becoming like God is not rooted in anything exceptional about us. This is where it connects with our Reformed concepts of divine sovereignty (which is just the fancy way of saying God's in charge) and grace. We are not saved by anything we do or don't do. We're saved by God's grace. Our fundamental nature is to be children of God. No more. No less.

The world gives us lots of secondary identities. And the world assigns value to a lot of those identities. Some are definitely considered better than others. And we judge ourselves on how well we fulfill some of those identities.

But not a single one of them is fundamental or essential or ultimately true.

This is: you are a child of God. You are not what the world says, but what God says. Not because of anything you do, but because God says so. God made you that way. You, us, and everybody else. Child of God.

Then, as 1 John says, that's only the beginning! We're becoming even more. We will be like God. We are growing into God.

Like a seed growing into an oak, we are growing into something we can scarcely imagine.

Our source is the Source of all life, and our destination is the same, to return to the divine source, to grow up into the image of Christ. To be bearers of love, beacons of healing and forgiveness, to embody God as Christ did, that's our true nature.

It's not something we accomplish—any more than an acorn works really hard to become an oak. It's just the nature of a seed to grow.

That's deeply counter-intuitive for many of us. We don't become like God by gritting our teeth and working really hard and getting everything right.

No. If there's a task at all, it's trust, which is, after all, what faith means. It's trust.

I love swimming. I wouldn't win any awards for form, but one of the best feelings in the world to me is moving through the water, letting it hold me. I don't really remember what it felt like before I knew how to swim. So, it was a revelation to me when I got older and became the person on the side of the pool watching others learn to swim. I discovered that it doesn't usually come naturally. I don't think it did for me, either, but I'd forgotten what it felt like to learn. Watching others I realized maybe the hardest thing is just learning to float.

Watching a group swim lesson, with all the little kids lined up on the edge of the pool, the instructor would take a kid off of the side, bring them out into the water, and help them practice their float. They'd say, put your head on my shoulder, look up, lean back, stretch out your legs. And every single child, as they were first learning would try to sit up, hold themselves up. Because what sense does it make to lay down on water? Some part of us says, there's no way that's going to work.

The instructor would say patiently, again and again, tilt your head back, there, rest it on my shoulder, that's right, look up. And the kid might tilt their head back an inch, lift their belly for a second. The teacher would say, Good job. That's great. You're going to be floating in no time.

I think that's what faith is like. That's what the work of God's love in our lives is like, like water that miraculously holds us, and our task is to stop working so hard to hold ourselves up. We lean back, trust, and relax into our identity as children of God. When we do that, we stop judging ourselves so harshly, and we stop judging others, too. We're more able to love.

Here's the good news: We are children of God—we, and everybody else. This is not our doing. It's God's. God-initiated, God sustained. It's the power of love at work within us. That love became like us, that we might become that love. Until, by grace, we're changed from glory into glory 'till we're lost in wonder, love, and praise.

- Sarah W. Wiles, 2024