



Gorman, Michael J.

Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology

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Michael Gorman's profound understanding of Paul's cruciform gospel is already well-known through his books *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (2001) and *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (2004). With the book *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology*, he develops his ideas further and delivers another stimulating contribution to the ongoing discussion regarding the center of Paul's theology. He argues that this center is theosis, understood as participation in the life of God.

The first chapter identifies Phil 2:6–11 as Paul's master story. Gorman argues that the translation of the first line should be both "although he was in the form of God" and "because he was in the form of God" (22–25). The upshot is that Christ's self-humiliation defines what it means to be God. "The form of God" is therefore cruciform.

The second chapter is the heart of the book. In this chapter Gorman proposes a new model for understanding justification in Paul. Rejecting the dichotomy between juridical (traditional) and participatory (Schweitzer, Sanders, Douglas Campbell) models, he opts for justification by co-crucifixion. For Gorman, justification is juridical in that it entails

the performative utterance of God, an utterance that restores right covenant relations (53, 85, 101). It also entails the certain hope of vindication on the day of judgment (53, 86). Justification is also participatory, as it means to be co-crucified with Christ (72, 85). A corollary of this comprehensive understanding of justification is a comprehensive understanding of faith. Faith is not merely trust; it is faithfulness expressed in love; it is co-crucifixion (81). Accordingly, co-crucifixion is not understood as purely objective but as a comprehensive subjective transformation (72). This transformation also has a social dimension. Justification eradicates social injustice and makes justice a reality. This happens when the justified suffer injustice without inflicting it (99).

The exegetical basis for this definition of justification is primarily found in Gal 2:15–21 and Rom 6:1–7:6. Regarding Gal 2:15–21, Gorman maintains that Paul’s reference to co-crucifixion with Christ in verses 19–20 forms another description of the justification he describes in verses 16, 21 (64). With respect to Rom 6:1–7:6, he rejects the traditional understanding that the passage describes the consequences of justification. Instead, he contends that the meaning of justification is further unpacked in this section of Romans (73–74). He also appeals to Rom 5:1–11 and 2 Cor 5:14–21, where justification and reconciliation language occur together (55–57).

Chapter 3 then proceeds to explain Paul’s concept of holiness in terms of cruciformity. Gorman discusses all the undisputed letters except Philemon, but the most illustrative is 1 Corinthians. The call to holiness is there seen to entail particular attention to the weaker members, respect for Christ-like apostles, and willingness to suffer injustice rather than to inflict it (110–11).

The fourth and final chapter is devoted to nonviolent reconciliation. Gorman understands Christ’s death as a demonstration of God’s choice to love his enemies rather than to destroy them. The apparent oxymoron “nonviolent cross” therefore refers to God’s willingness to suffer violence rather than to inflict it (143). Through the indwelling of the resurrected Christ, believers are also empowered to respond to evil in a nonviolent way (151–53). Accordingly, Paul himself was converted from violent persecutor to nonviolent apostle (138).

Although Gorman’s discussion is primarily exegetical, he is fully aware of the implications for dogmatic discussions and addresses these discussions head on. He affirms justification by faith alone, with the qualification that faith must be understood in a comprehensive sense, as participation in the faithfulness of Christ, or faithfulness expressed in love (83–84, 104). This comprehensive definition of justification in turn makes the traditional distinction between justification and sanctification “deeply problematic” (93).

Gorman is also outspoken about the contemporary implications of his interpretation. With an explicit reference to George W. Bush, Gorman explains that the idea of God-sanctioned violence is in its nature idolatrous (35, 128, 160).

With his focus on the importance of sacrificial suffering and power that works through weakness, Gorman builds on numerous recent studies of Pauline texts, not least his own *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). In *Inhabiting the Cruciform God* it becomes even clearer that Paul's central ideas are at their heart cruciform and that the image of God that is revealed by Christ is shaped as a cross.

However, the single-minded focus on this theme is also the weakness of the book. One keeps wondering what criteria Gorman has used when he has chosen one particular theme and given it such prominence. Gorman identifies the formal pattern of Phil 2:6–11 as “although [x] not [y] but [z],” and he spots this pattern in 1 Thess 2:6–8 and 1 Cor 9:1–23 as well (23). But are the formal parallels between these three passages sufficient warrant to conclude that Phil 2:6–11 is Paul's master story?

One must also wonder why Gorman chooses to define justification without giving any substantial treatment of Rom 3:21–4:25 or Gal 3. He focuses on Rom 5–8 but never discusses the grammar of Rom 5:1, where the structure seems to suggest that Paul now moves on to discuss the implications of his preceding discussion. When he discusses the relationship of Rom 5–8 to the rest of the letter, he appears to consider only two alternatives: either these chapters continue to unpack the meaning of justification, or they describe different stages in the life of the believer, an *ordo salutis*. (Here Gorman refers to his earlier work, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, for a more detailed argument, but the same dichotomy is reflected there.) He does not appear to consider the possibility that justification and transformation can be organically related without also being coterminous.

As a consequence of this limited view of the alternatives, he seems to have misrepresented some of the scholars to whom he appeals in support of his view: Charles Talbert, Thomas Schreiner, and Robert Tannehill (73–74). I do not have access to Tannehill's work as I am writing this, but Gorman provides a quotation where Tannehill maintains that Paul in Rom 5:1–7:6 “has not moved on from soteriology to a new topic” but is rather “explaining its [redemption's] implications” (74). Talbert comes close to Gorman's position, but Schreiner's view of Rom 5–8 is better described as “necessary consequences” than as “extended definition.” (Mark Seifrid is also mentioned in this context, but the cited work does not directly address this question.)

The tendency to ignore conflicting views is also seen in Gorman's treatment of the language of justification. Gorman understands Paul's justification language as covenant language that is essentially relational (52–53). But this previously predominant interpretation is now quite problematic in light of the thorough studies by Mark Seifrid, who sees creation as the basic framework and maintains that conformity to a norm is the overruling idea. Gorman does not interact with these studies.

What about Paul's antithesis between faith and works of the law? According to Gorman, the point is to emphasize that justification is available to all, not only to Jews, and to explain that justification is on the basis of God's initiative, not human initiative (81). But if that were Paul's point, against whom was his argument directed? Since the work of E. P. Sanders, there has been broad agreement that most Jews understood God's initiative in election to be foundational for salvation.

Gorman understands the cross as God's nonviolent act of love, and it is easy to understand that Jesus suffers like a lamb. But is there nothing more to say about the Father's role than that he lovingly gave his Son (145)? Why is there no discussion of Gal 3:13 and the implication that Jesus was suffering the curse of God?

In the same chapter Gorman forcefully makes the point that God is cruciform and therefore not a God of war, but is it unnecessary to discuss the Christian tradition of just war theory, the separation of church and state, or the implications of Rom 13:4?

In sum, this book presents a compelling vision. It becomes clear that cruciformity is at the heart of Paul's understanding of God and his view of the believer's life, but Gorman overstates his case when he finds cruciformity and theosis as the center of Paul's theology and when he defines justification as transformation through co-crucifixion.