Cruciformity, Differentiation, and Christian Spiritual Formation

David Hooper
Abilene Christian University, drh15a@acu.edu

Recommended Citation

Cruciformity, Differentiation, and Christian Spiritual Formation

David Hooper

Abstract: *This paper is an examination of two seemingly counterintuitive concepts in Christian spiritual formation. The concept of cruciformity presents the goal of spiritual formation as kenosis, or "emptying oneself of self." The differentiation of self, as presented in Systems Theory, defines maturity as possessing a clear sense of self. Cruciformity, with its call to kenosis, does not seem to value individuality, making it susceptible to the trappings of enmeshment that emerge from an unbalanced focus on others. Cruciformity seems to judge differentiation as being too balanced, reserving for itself a degree of self-focus that would be deemed inappropriate. It is the thesis of this paper that the kind of spiritual maturity called for by Christ is by necessity kenotic, but that cruciformity and kenosis are only truly possible when a healthy degree of differentiation is present. Therefore, a pursuit of differentiation must be simultaneous with, if not prerequisite to, a commitment to a life of cruciformity. This paper will explore and synthesize cruciformity and differentiation, examining how they complement one another and provide a well-rounded foundation for Christian spiritual formation.*

All Christian leaders desire to lead and build congregations toward spiritual maturity, an objective as elusive as it is difficult to articulate. What does Christian maturity look like? What role does the Christian leader play in the maturation of the congregation? The Bible clearly presents maturation as a work of the Holy Spirit, yet on the human side, Ephesians 4:11-13 describes how Christ gave various leadership roles so that the church might become mature.

To articulate a possible framework for Christian maturity, this paper will first examine the theological construct of cruciformity. Through developing an understanding of *theosis* and *kenosis*, this discussion will demonstrate cruciformity to be foundational for Christian maturity and spiritual leadership. Second, I will examine the concept of differentiation as

a social construct. I will then explore a synthesis of the two concepts, examining how they complement one another and provide a well-rounded foundation for Christian maturity and leadership. Finally, I will offer practical proposals for this work for congregational leaders.

Christian Maturity and Leadership as Cruciformity

In the Gospel of Mark, two of Jesus's disciples asked for primary leadership positions in the kingdom, a request that stoked the competitive fires of the other ten. Jesus responded with clarification as to the very nature and understanding of leadership:

> You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all (Mark 10:42-44, NIV).

Leadership in Jesus's day focused on production, power and achievement. The leader was the one who could "lord it over" others, the one who was in control and could get things done. It is doubtless Jesus's disciples shared this contemporary "lording it over" paradigm of leadership as seems apparent by both the request of the two and the angry response of the others. Jesus, however, turns the idea of leadership on its ear by claiming that greatness in kingdom is achieved, not through leadership in its commonly understood form, but rather through service to others. In his use of the Greek word *doulos*, meaning "slave," the gospel writer increases the shocking impact of the recorded words of Jesus. Jesus claimed the greatest leader would be slave of all.

Jesus's description of servant leadership, or slave leadership, is not simply another leadership method but rather part of a larger soteriological "upside down" paradigm shift that must occur for all disciples of Christ. The apostle Paul develops this "upside down" paradigm shift in what Michael Gorman describes as "cruciformity." Cruciformity is "being formed into the image of the crucified Lord." Gorman posits that cruciformity is actually "theoformity," also known in Christian tradition as *theosis*.[1] Becoming like God means to become like his Son, the perfect image

---

[1] Michael Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 2.

of God, who poured himself out for humankind. The Apostle Paul describes Christ's incarnation and subsequent sacrifice in Philippians 2:7 (NASB), stating that he "emptied himself." Known as *kenosis,* this "emptying of oneself" is at the core of Pauline soteriology.

Jesus's words to his ambitious disciples in Mark 10 reveal a deeper paradigm shift that reaches beyond an alternative view of leadership, striking deeper to the core of Christian maturity. Greatness in any capacity, leadership or otherwise, comes from pouring out oneself for others. Jesus was not peddling leadership techniques to his disciples; rather he was describing a different worldview. Cruciformity, as understood through *theosis* and *kenosis,* is the foundation of discipleship and Christian maturity. Because *theosis* is not a theological concept familiar to many Christians in the West, consideration of the historical and biblical development of the concept of *theosis* is helpful.

Jewish thought preceding the Christian era expressed no concept of divinization, due in large part to its strict monotheism and extreme regard for divine eminence. The Greeks were some of the first to articulate the concept of divinization, though they considered attainment beyond reach for the masses but reserved for the privileged few. The Jewish philosopher, Philo, was the first to integrate Jewish and Greek thought. Philo drew from the creation account that humankind was created in "the image of God" (Gen. 1:27). Philo argued for a duality of body and soul based on the language of Genesis 1:27, seeing the image and likeness of God as two different things. The soul was that part of humanity created in the image of God; the body was that part created in God's likeness. Because the *nous*—that is, the mind—was the "pilot of the soul," humankind could through intellect "penetrate the invisible region, even God Himself."[2] While Philo cannot be connected directly to early Christian thought, he does articulate concepts that were part of the environment in which Christianity took shape.

In the early church and through the second and third centuries, *theosis* was more of a paradigm for understanding Christian salvation and sanctification rather than a specific doctrine. In fact, the explicit language of *theosis* does not emerge until Clement of Alexandria in the late second or early third century.[3] What the Apostolic Fathers did write about *theosis* was

---

[2] Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers* (Anaheim: A & C Press, 2002), 77.

[3] Vladimir Kharlamov, "Theosis in Patristic Thought," *Theology Today* 65 2 (2008): 161.

generally in response to the various challenges presented by Gnosticism. Clarifying the Fathers' use of *theosis*, Jules Gross writes, the "defenders of orthodoxy were obliged to develop and clarify the traditional doctrine, a task facilitated by a considerably enriched vocabulary."[4] The "vocabulary" to which Gross refers is the vocabulary of divinization borrowed from the Greeks. *Theosis* began as a general understanding of Christian transformation (the language of which was provided by the Hellenistic culture in which Christianity arose), eventually evolving into church doctrine in later centuries. Christian apologists quoted five primary passages in defense of the concept of divinization: Genesis 1:26, 2 Peter 1:4, Romans 8:29, 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 1 John 3:2.

In Genesis 1:26, God says, "Let us make mankind *in our image, in our likeness*, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (NIV, emphasis added). Following the precedent of Philo, the Greek fathers saw in this passage the duality of God's image and likeness. In the fall, humanity lost its "likeness" to God while at the same time, retaining the "image" of God. Therefore, central to an understanding of *theosis* is the restoration of humanity to the lost "likeness" God. In other words, *theosis* is the way in which humankind is reintegrated into the life of God.[5]

Peter states, "Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may *participate in the divine nature*, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Pet. 1:4, NIV, emphasis added). Peter's words provide an added dimension to the concept of *theosis* by illustrating the opportunity afforded by Christ to be restored to that which was lost in the beginning. If God created humankind in the image and likeness of the divine, the opportunity to "participate in the divine nature" is the equivalent of returning to humanity's originally intended state. This does not mean that humankind becomes like God in nature but rather is being restored to the likeness that was destroyed by the Fall.[6] In keeping with the restoration theme, the rest of the 2 Peter 1 passage outlines specific ways in which believers can grow into the likeness of God.

---

[4] Gross, 111

[5] Robert V. Rakestraw, "Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis," *JETS* 40 2 (June 1997): 258.

[6] Cited in, Michael W. Austin, "The Doctrine of Theosis: A Transformational Union with Christ," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 8 2 (2015): 180.

Along the same lines, Romans 8:29 reads, "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters" (NIV). Sin is the reason for falling out of a likeness to God and the solution to sin is a new life of participation in Christ. "This participation effects the ethical and eschatological transformation that human beings need. In Christ, humans begin sharing in the righteousness of God and even begin the process of sharing God's glory."[7] Often times, contemporary theologies of salvation focus on the eschatological (end of time) transformation of humans. However, a proper understanding of *theosis* means that transformation is both ethical and eschatological. Repentance and ethical change in this life are part of a greater transformation that straddles two ages: the current age and the one to come.

In another of the core passages on *theosis*, Paul states, "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being *transformed into his image* with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18, NIV, emphasis added). Once again, the language and emphasis in this passage echoes Genesis 1. Christians are being transformed into the image of God, that is, they are being restored to the image in which humankind was originally created. This passage confirms two points. First, Christian transformation involves being formed into the image of God. Secondly, Christian transformation is an ongoing process that has already begun.

The final biblical author cited regarding the concept of *theosis* is the apostle John. John writes, "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2, NIV). John also alludes to a transformation that is taking place with the disciples of Christ, a process that ends with disciples being "like him." While John appears to be speaking eschatologically, the implication is that of an ongoing process, a process of becoming "like him."

If transformation into the image of God is the purpose of the Christian life, the next questions become, "What does that image look like, and how does it work?" The essence of *theosis* according to Augustine is that "God was made man that man might be made God."[8] Irenaeus put it

---

[7] Michael Gorman, "Romans: The First Christian Treatise on Theosis," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 5 1 (2011): 23.

[8] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, accessed November 13, 2016, http://ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.TP_Q1_A2.html.

in slightly different terms, "He became what we are, so that we might become what he is." This insight adds a distinctive and important nuance to the application of *theosis* in the life of the Christian. God being made man is the method by which God chose to divinize humankind. *Kenosis*, or "emptying," is descriptive of the divine Christ becoming human. Michael Austin states, "The kenosis of Christ was the means chosen by God to achieve the theosis of humanity."[9]

Michael Gorman defines *theosis* as the "transformative participation in the kenotic, cruciform character of God through Spirit-enabled conformity to the incarnate, crucified and resurrected/glorified Christ."[10] Perhaps the best description of the kenotic nature of Christ is found in the "Christ Hymn" of Philippians 2:6-11. Presumably quoting from an early Christian hymn, Paul writes about Christ:

> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! (Phil. 2:6-9, NIV).

Paul describes the downward mobility of Christ as he proceeded from God's side to becoming human to becoming a servant and ultimately humbling himself further in death.

One key to this passage is found in the definition of *hyparchon*, translated "being" in verse 6. Gorman deepens insight into the nature of *kenosis* pointing out that *hyparchon* carries with it the connotation of both "although" and "because."[11] The significance of this fact for Gorman is that by "making himself nothing," Christ was acting *in character* rather than out of character. "Although" would indicate that despite being deity, Jesus nonetheless made a sacrifice. While this would still indicate an incredibly noble action, the word "because" is a paradigm changer. Translating *hyparchon* as "because" connotes that Jesus humbled himself *because* he was equal with God, thus revealing God's true nature. "In this reading, Christ *exercised* his deity. What is *out of* character for normal divinity in our misguided perception of the form of God is actually *in* character for *this*

---

[9] Austin, 174.

[10] Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God*, 7.

[11] Ibid., 22-23.

form of God."[12] In other words, through Christ's kenotic act, humanity gains a glimpse of who God really is and how God intends for humankind to live.

The "upside-down" nature of God's ways are confirmed by Paul in 1 Corinthians when he writes that the crucified Christ is "a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles . . . . For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Cor. 1:23, 25, NIV). Gorman concludes that the lordship of Jesus is paradoxical at its core since lordship is exercised through servanthood.[13] The context of *kenosis* in the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 is relationships within the community of believers. Therefore, building on Christ's example, his followers are expected to imitate the same kenotic spirit and behavior. This transformation into the kenotic image of Christ is in essence—*theosis*. By living a kenotic life, believers "participate in the divine nature."

Building on the participatory nature of Christ, Paul writes to the Colossians, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ" (Col. 2:9-10, NIV). Often people perceive that participation in the life and death of Christ is the *means* to the fullness of Christ. However, Paul seems to be saying that participation in the life and death of Christ *is* the fullness of Him. Blackwell summarizes, "Through a variety of images, Paul returns again and again to the embodiment of Christ's death and life . . . embodying the Christ narrative is the central soteriological experience for believers." He goes on to state, "This participating embodiment is not merely for the sake of the individual; it also reorients believers to a reconstituted community. There is no simplistic separation between theology and practice or between individual and community."[14] In other words, *kenosis* is not simply an individual pursuit, it is a communal activity.

The communal and corporate nature of *theosis* is also seen in the creation account as God created all humans to be his image-bearers, emphasizing plurality in creation.[15] When speaking about the human reflection of God's holiness, the author of 1 Peter speaks of God's people

---

[12] Ibid., 27.

[13] Ibid., 32.

[14] Ben C. Blackwell, "You Are Filled in Him: Theosis and Colossians 2-3" *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8 1 (2014): 117.

[15] Clifford A. Barbarick, "'You Shall Be Holy, For I Am Holy': Theosis in I Peter," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 9 2 (2015): 297.

collectively, rather than individually. "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet. 2:9, NIV). For Peter, their calling and holiness were collective, not individual. *Theosis*, therefore, is the end game of Christian spiritual formation, occurring in the context of a community of believers.

To summarize, the goal of the Christian life is *theosis*, that is, to become like God. *Theosis* necessitates *kenosis*, as seen in the life and death of Christ. The objective therefore, of all Christians is to live in such a way as to empty themselves of themselves in order to become like God. *Theosis* and *kenosis* are bound together in the term "cruciformity." Cruciformity is not only the end game of Christian maturity, it is also the operative paradigm for Christian leadership as Jesus states in Mark 10.

However, cruciformity is a difficult concept, particularly for today's American Christian, as it flies in the face of a deep-rooted culture of individualism. Fully emptying oneself is not a concept that Americans easily embrace. Many Christians find themselves in a cycle of immaturity, caught in one of two extremes – either refusing to strive for the type of self-emptying life to which Christ calls them or embracing it to the extent of burning out. Living a cruciform life requires a more robust framework for understanding the self. After all, the second greatest commandment is to "love your neighbor *as yourself*." Systems theory provides Christians with a lens from the social sciences that enriches one's understanding of cruciformity.

Differentiation of Self

Differentiation of self is a construct that refers to a personal level of maturity capable of balancing thoughts with feelings, and connection with independence in relationships. Derived from Systems Theory as conceived by Murray Bowen, differentiation is the ability to self-regulate anxiety and to maintain one's sense of self whether in close proximity to, or great distance from others.[16] According to Bowen, all families and organizations are emotional systems, with influence occurring in a circular pattern of mutual influence rather than a linear pattern of "cause and effect."[17]

---

[16] Brian D. Majerus and Steven J. Sandage, "Differentiation of Self and Christian Spiritual Maturity: Social Science and Theological Integration," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 38 1 (2010): 42.

[17] Peter Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute: 2006), 4.

Systems Theory considers the interrelatedness of the parts in families and organizations.

While this paper does not focus on the details of Systems Theory, it is informative at this point to review some of its salient points to put the concept of differentiation in its proper setting. Emotional systems, as exhibited in families and organizations, are built on interlocking three-person relationships, or triangles. The presence of anxiety in a relationship between two people in a triangle leads to the involvement of a third. When anxiety reaches a critical point within that triangle, the anxiety spreads to other triangles in the family or organization.

The level of differentiation an individual possesses will determine how one responds in the presence of anxiety. Low levels of differentiation in an individual lead to one of several anxious reactions: conflict, distance, cutoff, overfunctioning/underfunctioning reciprocity and triangling.[18] A response of conflict in the presence of anxiety in the system could be described as the reciprocal blaming and accusing that comes from failure to take personal responsibility. Distancing is a response pattern whereby in times of anxiety, individuals tend to withdraw. Cut-off is an extreme version of distancing, and, as a response to anxiety, entails a complete severing of a relationship. An overfunctioning/underfunctioning reciprocity response to anxiety in a system means that in the given relationship, there will be a dominant partner and a submissive partner. The dominant partner creates additional anxiety by leaving no room in the relationship for the submissive partner to have a healthy sense of self. Essentially, the dominant partner does too much and the submissive partner does too little. In the context of church, this pattern can occur when leaders take on too much responsibility – responsibility that should rest in the hands of others in the congregation. Triangulation is a final pattern of reactivity to anxiety. Triangulation occurs when two parties in conflict do not deal directly with one another, choosing instead to bring a third party into the conflict. As noted above, all relationships in families and organizations are in triangles. When the anxiety between two parties travels to a third party it alleviates the pressure for a time.[19] However, when anxiety is passed to a third party, despite the momentary lessening of anxiety, it often spreads to others in the family and organization through additional triangulation.

---

[18] Roberta Gilbert, *Extraordinary Leadership: Thinking Systems, Making a Difference* (Lake Frederick, VA: Leading Systems Press, 2006), 9-14.

[19] Ibid., 14.

Scripture contains examples of self-differentiation. The relationships within the Godhead, known as the Trinity, provide an example of what perfectly differentiated individuals would look like in relationship with one another. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct entities who always exist in an intimate and cooperative relationship.[20] As such, they provide a perfect example of the balance of separateness and togetherness. Differentiation, therefore, articulates an aspect of the Trinity that is essential for Christians and leaders as they strive toward *theosis.*

Differentiation in relationships is articulated in Galatians 6:2-5:

> Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load (Gal. 6:2-5, NIV).

In what seems like an apparent contradiction, Paul describes a maturity that "allows for taking responsibility for one's own self, but not at the expense of the other person or in a way that seeks to chronically rescue others from their maturity process of growth in Christ."[21] Paul's words echo the principles of differentiation, or perhaps, differentiation echoes the words of Paul. A healthy balance of individuality and togetherness is essential to Christians and leaders.

While not naming differentiation, Timothy Gibson equates differentiation with Christian maturity. In an article on Christian spiritual maturity, Gibson proposes levels of Christian spiritual maturity based on Kohlberg's theory that moral development requires a prerequisite increase in cognitive capacity. While Gibson is critical of Kohlberg for failing to include experience as a critical component to moral development, Gibson utilizes Kohlberg's work to frame a proposal for four levels of Christian spiritual maturity.[22] Gibson describes the first level of spiritual maturity as simple obedience or accommodation to God's law. Equivalent to early childhood development, motivation for the level one Christian is driven by self-interest and accommodation by reward and punishment. At level one,

---

[20] Majerus and Sandage, 42.

[21] Ibid., 45.

[22] Timothy J Gibson, "Proposed Levels of Christian Spiritual Maturity," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32 4 (2004): 297.

the desire to go to heaven or the desire to avoid hell are common motivators.

When Christians move on to level two maturity, motivation driven by self-interest gives way to motivation driven by respect for, and obedience to, God's law. Level two Christians are generally more concerned with pleasing God and pleasing other godly people or mentors in their lives. However, for those at level two maturity, righteousness remains a matter of right action. Gibson posits that most Christians stop at level two.[23]

When Christians mature to level three, righteousness is no longer a simple matter of right action but rather becomes a "principle-centered commitment to a Christian world-view." Christians grow from a state whereby they are dependent on the convictions of others, to a place where they possess independent convictions. The process of maturity at level three is powered by soul-searching and questioning that can be unsettling. The internalization process demands that individuals challenge their beliefs. These Christians consider answers that were once clear in a new light and mature to a place where their individual convictions stand alone, without oversight or enforcement. Biblically, the apostles before and after the resurrection provide a useful example. Prior to the resurrection, they were highly dependent upon Jesus for their faith. However, following the resurrection, God transformed them into powerful prophets undeterred by opposition, possessing and acting on their own convictions.

If individual convictions develop at level three, level four maturity is the development of interdependence, or what Gibson calls a "kingdom-centered commitment to God's glory."[24] Described another way, it is the move from individual piety to corporate piety. At level four, the Christian has no longer internalized the gospel for personal means, but rather for the good of others. Armed with a kingdom-centered worldview, Christians are committed to the point of personal sacrifice. Though he does not use the term differentiation, Gibson's framework for Christian spiritual formation, the pinnacle of which describes the perfect balance between autonomy and dependence, essentially outlines the move toward differentiation that must take place in the lives of believers.

A couple of Old Testament passages regarding sin illustrate how a pair of leaders demonstrated healthy differentiation. In each case leaders accepted responsibility for corporate sin. Daniel, for instance, grieved Israel's sin but personally fasted and prayed, "We have sinned and done

---

[23] Ibid., 300.
[24] Ibid., 302.

wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws" (Dan. 9:5, NIV). Similarly, Nehemiah prayed, "I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house have committed against you" (Neh. 1:6, NIV). These two biblical leaders demonstrated differentiation by their ability to accept responsibility for the sins of their people while maintaining a strong enough sense of self to act appropriately and righteously.

Christian spiritual maturity is the equivalent to an attainment of a healthy measure of self-differentiation. Speaking of Christian leaders, Leroy Howe describes the differentiated as possessing a "self-awareness and self-confidence . . . . They confront disagreements, criticisms, and even rejection without the kind of anxiety which generates either rigid defensiveness or concessions of principle for the sake of specious harmony and goodwill."[25] Congregational life is an environment rich with the possibilities of conflict and misunderstanding. Differentiated Christians and leaders provide the type of non-anxious presence necessary to bring about peace and healing. A lack of differentiation perpetuates anxiety throughout the congregation and becomes a stumbling block to Christians seeking to grow into Christian maturity.

Differentiated leaders are required to create the type of environment that fosters differentiation in the lives of the members in the congregation. Howe describes self-differentiation as a concept that "articulates with special clarity and effectiveness the central importance of family members' developing their own individuality and of families creating a supportive environment for that development to flourish."[26] Congregations must build a spirit of acceptance and discovery into their social fabric in the same manner that healthy families do. Often, congregations lack particular practices, programs and beliefs that limit the freedom with which believers can discover their own God-given gifts. The absence of such an environment perpetuates immaturity in a congregation.

The two concepts of cruciformity and self-differentiation emerge as fundamental to Christian spiritual formation and maturity yet they seem to differ fundamentally on the role of self. Cruciformity seems to imply that self is something negative, to be denied. Differentiation casts self as good, something to be authentically understood and embraced. How do these concepts work together?

---

[25] Leroy T. Howe, "Self-Differentiation in Christian Perspective," *Pastoral Psychology* 46 5 (1998): 353.

[26] Ibid., 347.

Cruciformity, Differentiation, and Faith in Action

The concept of self-differentiation offers a useful conversation partner for understanding a healthy application of cruciformity. Cruciformity carries an expectation of living a selfless life, a life "poured out" for others. A somewhat negative view of self emerges if cruciformity is not correctly understood. Such a misunderstanding perceives the "self" as something to be denied, to be ignored as if it is somehow ignoble. Even Jesus's admonition to "deny yourself" (Luke 9:23, NIV) takes on a negative connotation if viewed through an unhealthy lens.

Edwin Friedman articulates this negative misconception of self, arguing that self is often associated with "autocracy and narcissism rather than with integrity and individuality."[27] For Friedman, the negative orientation of self leads to a failure of nerve, that is, the failure to lead, to dream, to risk, to confront--all of which are necessary for formation into the image of Christ. Simply put, without a strong sense of self, leadership weakens as it takes on the anxiety of others. Friedman argues that a lack of differentiation in organizations leads to dysfunction rather than too much "self."[28]

Peter Steinke articulates the dysfunction Friedman sees by describing the problems that occur when disciples attempt to live a cruciform life without the maturity of differentiation. Steinke writes,

> Undifferentiation is promoted by the emotional system that encourages people to give up themselves on behalf of the group. In such a system, much thinking and decision making is emotionally based and designed to allay anxiety of the moment. Such adaptation gives power to those who take least responsibility for their lives.[29]

In other words, undifferentiated sacrifice for the good of the group is actually harmful to the group because anxiety ends up driving decision-making.

When leaders with low levels of differentiation attempt to live out the mandate for cruciformity, the requisite anxiety and reactivity manifests

---

[27] Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), 161.

[28] Ibid., 176.

[29] Steinke, 103.

themselves in overfunctioning, underfunctioning and conflict. Lacking a clear view of self, overfunctioning leaders take too much responsibility for the group, either becoming tyrants or overworking by not delegating enough and eventually suffering from burnout.[30] From the outside, overfunctioning leaders may appear to be great spiritual examples of the cruciform life and therefore, most are shocked when overfunctioning finally takes its toll.

While overfunctioning leaders carry the appearance of a kenotic lifestyle, underfunctioning leaders lack the confidence and understanding necessary to truly pour themselves out for others. A low view of self creates a lack of confidence that in the presence of anxiety and immaturity leads to a weak posture that acts out of an "I can't do this" spirit.[31] A kenotic lifestyle is not possible for underfunctioning leaders because they hold back their true self and are unwilling to make decisions, lacking the confidence that they have something to pour out and offer. Cruciformity thus requires healthy differentiation.

Another manifestation of anxiety in leaders with low levels of differentiation is conflict. While conflict is natural in any healthy relationship, when it comes from a place of internal anxiety, leadership will be characterized by an unending flow of problems. In this situation, problems are always someone else's fault and the leader is unable to take responsibility in a healthy manner. Reflexive opposition, constant competition, criticizing and blame are all examples of anxious behavior.[32] In this case, a lack of differentiation will make it impossible for leaders to live a kenotic lifestyle. They will find themselves constantly drawn into conflict, regardless of its origin.

Cruciformity is not founded on a negative view of self. It is based, in fact, on a supremely positive view of self. The night before his crucifixion, Jesus washed his disciples' feet as a demonstration of his love for them and of the love they were to show toward one another. It was a superb example of living in a cruciform manner. John provides an important insight when he records the event.

> Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power,
> and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so
> he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and

---

[30] Gilbert, 94.

[31] Ibid., 95.

[32] Ibid., 96.

wrapped a town around his waist. After that, he poured water
into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet (John 13:3-5,
NIV).

John reveals that Jesus's self-knowledge was the basis for his
decision to serve, to "empty himself." Jesus knew who his Father was and
the power he had been given. With a clear understanding of himself, he
chose to serve his disciples. This passage demonstrates that, in fact,
differentiation does not stand in opposition to cruciformity, but rather is
the foundation for cruciformity. Without a healthy understanding of self,
one is unable to "empty oneself of self." In fact, attempting to live in
cruciformity without healthy differentiation is wrought with peril.

Therefore, understanding cruciformity without a requisite high level
of self-differentiation is a recipe for trouble and heightens the dysfunction
of anxious reactivity. Anyone wishing to grow into the image of Christ and
live into a cruciform life must by necessity work from a foundation of self-
differentiation. While certainly not a prerequisite for becoming a follower
of Christ, any discussion of Christian spiritual formation must consider
differentiation, especially when it comes to congregational leadership.
Likewise, the concept of differentiation reminds leaders that a healthy self
is essential to the integrity of a community.

If one understands differentiation to be part of the foundation for
cruciformity, cruciformity likewise, provides clarity and direction for
differentiation. Friedman defines a well-differentiated leader as "someone
who has clarity about his or her own life goals, and therefore, someone who
is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling
about."[33] In the context of Christian spiritual formation and congregational
leadership, cruciformity provides the goal, motivation and perspective for
leaders to avoid being lost in emotional processes. While differentiation
may require a healthy understanding of oneself, it also necessitates a vision
and purpose beyond oneself. Cruciformity, living into the image of God
experienced in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, provides
Christians with a purpose that transcends all others.

Proposals for Congregational Leadership

The present study suggests several ways cruciformity and self-
differentiation might encourage healthy congregational life. The first
proposal for congregational leaders is to start with oneself. Cruciformity is

---

[33] Friedman, 14.

both the goal of, and a frame for Christian spiritual formation and differentiation is also a growth area for leaders. Roberta Gilbert asserts, "Differentiation becomes a life-long project for those that take it on."[34] Gilbert and others conceptualize differentiation on a continuum, upon which no one is perfectly differentiated.[35] A commitment to continued growth will ensure that leaders do not become blind to their own shortcomings in cruciformity and differentiation. There is a growing amount of material on systems theory in general and differentiation specifically. Deeper understanding of differentiation would serve congregational leaders well as they dedicate their lives to emptying themselves for others.

The second proposal for congregational leaders is to imagine ways to articulate differentiation in the context of a biblical mandate to cruciformity. Cruciformity, while clearly the objective of the Christian life, misses the mark for those that are still immature and possess a low level of differentiation. Teaching cruciformity to the immature may in fact, perpetuate a low level of differentiation. To this end, the four levels of spiritual maturity mentioned above are helpful. Those new to the faith, as well of those with low levels of differentiation, process the language of cruciformity differently. Therefore, leaders must give more careful consideration to teaching and maturing disciples. Practically speaking, this means that a clear explanation of the hearer's value to God would best accompany any teaching on self-sacrifice and discipleship. A believer must understand his or her enormous worth to God before making any real attempts at a cruciform life.

Teaching and maturing disciples leads to a final proposal for congregational leaders: build cruciformity and differentiation into the catechetical process of the congregation. As this work has demonstrated, cruciformity is essential to Christian spiritual maturity and differentiation is essential to cruciformity. When it comes to catechesis, in many congregations rightly place a great deal of emphasis on grace, forgiveness, and redemption. However, the absence of cruciformity as a teaching, and differentiation as a concept, is problematic. Though not always taught, cruciformity is the goal of the Christian life. Prospective Christians need to understand the direction the Christian life is to take, even if takes years to fully appreciate its depth.

---

[34] Gilbert, 66.

[35] Ibid., 67.

While nearly all churches teach some sort of understanding of cruciformity, it is quite possible the message falls short for a lack of teaching on differentiation. For example, Church A maintains a very strict stance toward sin. When new members go through the conversion process, the church thoroughly grounds them in the fact that they are sinful and in need of repentance. While repentance is certainly required for entrance into the Kingdom of God, some new believers walk away with a conviction that humanity is inherently bad. Combined with a lack of differentiation, this potentially sets them up for the dysfunction described above. Opposite of Church A, Church B maintains a very sunny view of humanity. It requires very little of perspective members and if it teaches repentance, it certainly does not expect it. Church B is happy enough to have new people. Sermons generally consist of hope-filled messages about how Christians can live their best lives now. With neither a clear view of self nor an adequate understanding of cruciformity, members at Church B float through life without experiencing the transformation God has planned.

Both examples fall short of a true vision of self, cruciformity and differentiation. Church A provides a very realistic view of self but fails to provide the full context of cruciformity. *Theosis* is predicated on the fact that God's initial creation was good. God poured Godself out to restore that goodness. Church B fails to adequately examine the self and thus falls far short of helping individuals be truly differentiated. Catechetical processes must thoroughly account for both cruciformity and differentiation to produce mature Christians.

Conclusion

Too many congregations are satisfied with nominal commitment by church members. The Bible presents a much more demanding view of Christian maturity, one that includes the process of becoming like God. If congregations take that goal seriously, their culture will be one where cruciformity is the expectation, even as it is exercised to varying degrees of success by members with varying degrees of maturity. Grace and love are still the operative postures for the congregation but cruciformity must be taught and expected. And, if cruciformity is to be taught and expected, churches must accompany them with teaching on differentiation. Both concepts lead to the type of Christian maturity that all congregational leaders desire for themselves and for the flock.

David Hooper currently serves as the Lead Evangelist for the Austin Christian Church. Prior to coming to Austin, David and his wife Angela spent four years in the Former Soviet Union (1992-1996) serving ministries in St. Petersburg, Moscow and Kiev. They led church plantings to Riga, Latvia and Odessa, Ukraine. David and Angela have three children, Stasya, Savannah and Callia. David graduated from California State University – Long Beach with a BA in Political Science. He received is MDiv from Lubbock Christian University in 2009 and is currently working toward his DMin at Abilene Christian University.