

“Reformed *Theosis*?”

A Response to Gannon Murphy

MYK HABETS

Any attempt to reclaim Orthodox aspects of the “great tradition” for contemporary theology is to be applauded. In this light, Gannon Murphy has done the church a real service in stimulating discussion surrounding the compatibility of an Orthodox notion of *theosis* with contemporary Reformed theology.¹ Having argued the same thing previously, I stand beside Murphy as a brother in arms.² There are, however, differing views on how best to incorporate *theosis* and Reformed thought. In this essay, I point out areas of agreement between Murphy and myself, discuss a number of areas in which I disagree with Murphy’s proposal, and finally offer a brief reflection on how I think Reformed theology and a doctrine of *theosis* are compatible. At the outset I wish to affirm my agreement with Murphy and make it clear that we share much in common despite our disagreements.³

Points of Agreement

Doctrines of *theosis* have a well-rehearsed history, from the ancient world, through Scripture, the early church, medieval disputes, Byzantine theology, to contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy. Less well-rehearsed but no less present is the history of *theosis* in Western theology from the early church to the present day.⁴

Myk Habets is lecturer in systematic theology, Carey Baptist College, Auckland, New Zealand.

1. Gannon Murphy, “Reformed *Theosis*?” *Theology Today* 65 (2008): 191–212. Further quotations from this article appear in parentheses in the text.

2. See my “Reforming *Theosis*,” in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 146–67.

3. I am grateful to Gannon Murphy for his personal comments on my article and for allowing me to read and comment on his article in advance of its publication. In this he models the sort of collegiality that marks the best of Reformed theology.

4. For a brief history, see Habets, “Reforming *Theosis*,” 146–51.

Within a specifically Reformed context, doctrines of *theosis* have more typically been subsumed under such rubrics as participation, union with Christ, communion, sanctification, and the language of exchange. In these guises a concept of *theosis* has been far more acceptable. Only more recently, as the language of “participation” and “*theosis*” has become more prominent, have Reformed theologians turned their attention to this latter term as signaling a distinctive doctrine. They are now starting to take sides over whether *theosis* in this sense is compatible with Reformed perspectives.

Murphy makes a compelling case that a doctrine of *theosis* “is best appropriated within a Reformed theological framework” (192). I could not agree more. To bolster this claim he examines the *Christus in nobis* and the *unio mystica* doctrines as traditionally conceived. Many Reformed theologians consider union with Christ to be the centerpiece of a Reformed theology, from Calvin to the present day. Throughout Calvin’s theology three distinct but interrelated “unions” are presented. The first is the incarnational union; the second, the *unio mystica*; and the third, a spiritual union.⁵ While we need not follow Calvin’s strict vocabulary, his attempt to express the depth of the reality of the union with Christ is a hallmark of Reformed thought. Clearly sympathetic to this view, Murphy argues that a doctrine of *theosis* can naturally be understood as an aspect of the *unio mystica*.

While Murphy helpfully presents various aspects of the *unio mystica* that have been examined in the past by such figures as Watson, Berkhof, and Strong, he does not discuss the role of the hypostatic union, although I am sure he would agree with what follows. Union with Christ is the soteriological correlate to the christological notion of the hypostatic union. This makes the hypostatic union commensurate (distinct but inseparable) with the *unio mystica*. Only by means of the Incarnation does God join men and women to his Son in order for them to enjoy the benefits of salvation in Christ. The sole access to the Father is through Christ the Son, made possible by faith, which is the operation of the Spirit. Calvin specifically cuts out any exclusively extrinsic notions of justification or reconciliation by positing justification as a benefit of union with Christ. Through participation in Christ we receive all the benefits of salvation, including Christ’s righteousness. Calvin insists on the forensic nature of justification but equally insists that we are justified as a result of our union with Christ. This is affirmed when he writes, “You see that our righteousness is not

5. See John Calvin, “Letter to Martyr, Geneva, August 8, 1555,” in *Gleanings of a Few Scattered Ears*, ed. G. C. Gorham (London: Bell & Daldy, 1857).

in us but in Christ, that we possess it only because we are partakers in Christ; indeed, with him we possess all its riches."⁶ In this way *theosis* and a Reformed doctrine of justification may be considered compatible. I would urge Murphy to extend his understanding of the locus of *theosis* to all three aspects of "union" outlined by Calvin. I will comment more on this below.

Murphy also mounts a strong case for a monergistic view of salvation understood within a compatibilist lens. In this way, he writes, "Reformed soteriologies avoid the enervative doctrines of human independence" (199). Murphy thus safeguards a doctrine of *theosis* from the familiar synergistic conceptions of salvation characteristic within Eastern Orthodoxy. Once again I wholeheartedly agree. However, to bolster this argument one should, I submit, appeal to the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ. As a direct consequence of the doctrines of the *homoousion* and the hypostatic union flows the concept of the vicarious humanity of Christ whereby Christ becomes the last Adam and New Man to whom all humanity is ontologically related and in whom all humanity must participate for communion with God to be realized. The work of *theosis* is first of all a work of God in Jesus Christ—literally a *theopoiesis*—and only then a reality applied to specific human beings. This approach is a consistent application of one of Karl Barth's central axioms, namely, God's original choice never to be except to be for us in Jesus Christ.⁷

A more concentrated focus on the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ would also support Murphy's fine attempt to defend a Reformed doctrine of *theosis* from any hint of pan(en)theism (200). Murphy correctly points out that in *theosis* the human is not transformed into a divine person but remains human. A Reformed doctrine of *theosis* can posit an immediate divine presence in creation and creation's real participation in God; however, God and humanity are never confused or mixed together. This allows a distinction between a Reformed doctrine of *theosis* conceived in terms of *koinonia* (communion) and a Greek philosophical conception of "divinization" in terms of *methexis* (mixture of being).

Theosis is not so much the "divinization" or "deification" of humanity, as popularly (mis)understood, but the re-creation of our lost humanity in the dynamic, atoning interaction between the divine and human natures within the one person of Jesus Christ, through whom we enter into the triune communion of God's intra-trinitarian life. As one Reformed theologian states, "Our

6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.11.23.

7. Karl Barth, *Table Talk*, ed. John D. Godsey (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1963), 62.

‘deification’ in Christ is the obverse of his ‘inhominization.’”⁸ This is what distinguishes *theosis* in Reformed thought from other expressions of deification or divinization.

In this way we are able to affirm the eternal distinction between God and creation both in the incarnate Christ (hypostatic union) and in our participation in Christ through the reconciling exchange. *Theosis* is the work of the triune God in graciously allowing human persons to participate or partake of the divine nature. It is technically understood as participation in the triune communion, or *perichoresis*. Through being united to Jesus Christ, the God-man, we are united to his divinized humanity, and through that relationship we enjoy fellowship with God. The goal of the Incarnation is that we may be gathered up in Christ Jesus and included in his own self-presentation before the Father and, in that relationship, to partake of the divine nature.

A final area of agreement between Murphy and myself is in his discussion of the “means of theotic relationality.” By means of the Word primarily, as well as the sacraments and prayer, the blessings of *theosis* are realized. I think it important in any discussion of *theosis* also to comment on how *theosis* is worked out in ministry and worship now and more fully in the eschaton at the final resurrection. This is not to agree or disagree with Murphy but rather to observe that in his presentation these latter aspects of *theosis* were passed over. So with respect to the *unio mystica*, a monergistic understanding of salvation, and the “means of theotic relationality,” I am fully in accord with Murphy’s attempt at outlining a Reformed doctrine of *theosis*, even though more needs to be said by way of its content.

Points of Disagreement

While I agree with Murphy’s general argument, there are important points with which I disagree. Two aspects in particular call for some attention: Murphy’s acceptance of the Eastern Orthodox notion of the divine essence and energies, and his decision to locate *theosis* primarily within the locus of sanctification. The first of these issues I take to be thoroughly incompatible with Reformed theology; the second I consider to be a grave mistake in any construction of *theosis*. I shall briefly seek to explain why.

A fundamental axiom of Reformed theology is that to know God we must know his being in his act. God is in his own being what he is as God’s reveal-

8. T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 189.

ing word and saving act toward us. Through Christ and the Spirit we are given access to God as he is in himself. This access to God includes the form of knowledge of God as he is in himself, in his internal relations as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Accordingly, Jesus Christ is *homoousios* with God in being and in act. The logical step beyond this assertion of Christ's oneness with God is to apply the *homoousion* to the Trinity as a whole and to see this heuristic device as stating the ontological relation between the economic and the immanent Trinity. What God reveals to us in Jesus Christ is nothing other than a *self-revelation* of his own being. The Holy Spirit is the *other Paraclete* whom Christ sends to act in his place. In his *homoousion* with Christ, in being and act the Spirit is Christ's *other self* through whose presence in us Christ makes himself present to us. The God who acts *ad extra* is the God who is *in se*. This is in accordance with the concept of *perichoresis*.

Because of the oneness in being and act between Christ and God, salvation, knowledge, and *theosis* are possible. Before these benefits can be applied to human persons, they first of all become a reality in the person of the Mediator, Jesus Christ. The *homoousion* thus necessitates the hypostatic union, the distinct instantiation of communion between God and humanity in the person of the Son. Despite the radical distinction between divine and human being in the Reformed tradition, we have seen that room is still left for a real communion between the two. This is effected through *theosis*, the participation of human being in the divine being through the Son and by the Holy Spirit.

Murphy turns to Athanasius in support of his proposal, as do I. Athanasius saw the distinction between the *enousios logos* and *enousios energeia*. *Enousios logos* refers to the Word/Reason inherent in the *ousia*, or being, of God; *enousios energeia* refers to the activity or movement of power inherent in the *ousia*, or being, of God.⁹ God's *logos* inheres in his own being eternally, and that *logos* has become incarnate in Jesus Christ. Through Jesus Christ we have access into the being of God, into his divine intelligibility, or *logos*. Likewise, if God's *energeia*, or "act," inheres in his being, and that act has taken the form of Jesus Christ in the Incarnation so that he is identical with the action of God, then we know God in accord with the acts of his being, consistent with his activity in disclosing himself to us. For this reason we must reject the Eastern Orthodox distinction between the essence and energies of God. The identity of the being and act of God in Christ Jesus will not allow this.

9. See the discussion in T. F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1980), 151.

Two important implications follow: First, God's being as *logos* means that God's being is speaking being. Hence, there can be no thought of knowing God in his mute being, for apart from his Word there is no such God (thus rejecting a tenet of Latin mysticism). Second, God's *energeia* inheres in his being, and this means that God's being is in his act and his act is in his being (thus rejecting a tenet of Eastern apophaticism). It naturally follows that what the Greek patristic theologians termed *theosis* is essentially the consubstantial self-giving of God to humankind through Christ and in his Spirit.

Thus, we can see a basic difference between Reformed theology and Eastern Orthodoxy. The *homoousion* means that God reveals himself not simply through his impersonal *energies* but in a very real way through his personal *essence*: in the Incarnation God gives *himself* in grace.¹⁰ Unlike Palamite divinization, *theosis* in the Nicene theologians represents communion through Jesus Christ in the Spirit. We must continue to insist that in Jesus Christ we can participate in God. While this participation in God has creaturely limitations and goes beyond anything we may comprehend, and thus there is an apophatic character about it, this does not necessitate the distinction, as in Eastern Orthodoxy, between God's unknowable *essentia*, understood as God's being, and his impersonal *energeia*, understood as God's act. In fact, it positively denies it. Such an Orthodox understanding actually undermines a doctrine of *theosis*. It also reduces the act of God to something other than a revelation of his being, thus demoting Christ and the Holy Spirit to intermediaries of God, not God himself.

A Reformed doctrine of *theosis* posits an ontological, not a metaphysical union. A metaphysical union is the underlying idea of a pan(en)theistic concept of union in which the believer becomes dissolved into the essence of the divine nature so that he or she ceases to exist as a distinct entity. Working within a Reformed understanding of *theosis*, we may say that humans can participate in the divine nature, but this is a thoroughly personal and relational experiencing of the triune relations. So the distinction between the economic and ontological aspects of the Trinity is employed with a different nuance than in the Eastern Orthodox use of the *theologia* and *oikonomia*. We may affirm

10. A more thorough discussion of what constitutes the "essence" of God is required in order to substantiate the claim that what the Reformers meant by the essence of God differs substantially (mind the pun) from what Byzantine and Eastern Orthodoxy may mean by this term. This discussion may also reveal that Murphy and I are actually much closer to each other on this point than our respective essays may suggest.

that in the Son and Holy Spirit one comes to see, hear, and know God as he is in himself, but one does so in a creaturely way that is at once a revelation of the hiddenness of God. This maintains the ancient adage that *Deus semper maior* ("God is always greater"). Rejecting the Orthodox essence-energies distinction in favor of a Reformed economic-immanent one thus allows us to affirm simultaneously the knowability of God in the incarnate Son through the Holy Spirit and at the same time to stand with our hands over our mouths and fall on our knees to worship and adore that which will forever be beyond our comprehension.¹¹

The second point of disagreement is over the correct context *theosis* should occupy in the *ordo salutis*. Many times in the West, theologians have sought to restrict a doctrine of *theosis* to an aspect of sanctification, and in so doing they have attempted to safeguard somehow a doctrine of justification. While Murphy sees *theosis* as a holistic transformation, his apparent restriction of the doctrine to the subjective aspects of the *ordo*—regeneration (*inaugural theosis*),¹² sanctification (*progressive theosis*), and glorification (*consummative theosis*) (13)—he appears to tread the same path. Throughout its historical development in all traditions, *theosis* has been understood to encompass the entirety of the *ordo salutis* so that it becomes one of a number of ways to speak of salvation in its entirety. Restricting *theosis* to the subjective aspects of the *ordo* risks undermining the full-orbed biblical notion of salvation in which justification and sanctification are held together. It also threatens to separate the person and work of Christ, and thus falls into an all too familiar concept in much Reformed thought that justification is only a forensic act resulting from a legal pronouncement of the Father Almighty. Even Reformation theologians such as Calvin did not separate justification from sanctification in a way that made the former external and forensic and the latter internal and progressive. This is not to suggest this is Murphy's intent but rather to indicate a potential risk in this approach.

More consistent with what has been said above about the *unio mystica* is to understand forgiveness not just as a word of pardon but a word translated into our existence by crucifixion and resurrection, by judgment and re-creation; it means the sinner is now given a right standing before God and is holy—that is, justified. The believer is even now holy *in Christ*. Forgiveness, which is

11. See T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 110–11.

12. Regeneration in a Reformed *ordo salutis* may fit within objective aspects rather than subjective ones, but this is a debatable point within the tradition.

intimately associated with justification, is experienced by us believers united to Christ in a perichoretic bond in which we partake of all Christ's saving benefits precisely because we partake of Christ. Justification is a continuing act in Christ, in whom we are continuously being cleansed, forgiven, sanctified, renewed, and made righteous.¹³ This is not to imply that the process is fully completed in the present. This would be to deny the reality of the *eschaton* and of humanity's bodily resurrection at the *parousia*. There is a time lag, in the context of space-time reality, between the resurrection of Christ, the head of the body, and the resurrection of those who are members of his body.¹⁴ Yet in the power of the Spirit we have real communion with God through the risen Christ in the present, a taste of the age to come. When related to justification, *theosis* is the effective or prospective aspect of justification. This allows us to affirm the forensic imputation of righteousness, so crucial to a Reformed understanding of justification, and simultaneously respect the breadth the doctrine of justification has in Scripture. The introduction of *theosis* to Reformed soteriology removes the doctrine of the *articulus iustificationis* from a central position and affords this place instead to union with Christ, from which flow all the blessings of salvation, including justification and sanctification.¹⁵

A result of including *theosis* in a Reformed soteriology is that salvation is no longer thought of as exclusively salvation from sin, alienation, and hostility, although those themes are clearly part of any biblical soteriology. Instead, union, communion, and participation are more meaningfully incorporated. A retrospective focus is replaced with a prospective one without losing the strengths of the former. The ultimate goal of salvation is no longer to appease the wrath of an angry God but to attain to participation in the divine life through the Son by the Holy Spirit. This still necessitates judgment on sin and justification of the sinner, but it does not end there. Salvation in a

13. This point is made strongly by G. Vandervelde, "Justification and Deification—Problematic Synthesis: A Response to Lucian Turcescu," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 38 (2001): 74: "Justification is neither a foundation buried underground nor an initial stage left behind. Justification is the dynamic suspension of Christian life that shapes all that it carries."

14. This is also what distinguishes a Reformed doctrine of sanctification from a Wesleyan one. An undisputed point of Reformed "orthodoxy" is that sanctification is a process never complete in this life. Beardslee stresses this point: "The doctrine is typical of Reformed teaching . . . without which one has left the Reformed fold." J. W. Beardslee III, "Sanctification in Reformed Theology," in *The New Man: An Orthodox and Reformed Dialogue*, ed. J. Meyendorff and J. McLelland (New Brunswick, NJ: Agora Books, 1973), 140.

15. A. E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 219–40, convincingly shows that in the Reformed theologians, justification never functioned in this central way at all. It was, rather, a post-Reformation development associated with Protestant scholasticism, both Lutheran and Reformed.

theosis-centered soteriology is accomplished by the Incarnation in the hypostatic union. It is this perspective that should be emphasized by a Reformed soteriology.

Widening the Dialogue

Several prominent Reformed thinkers have made their rejection of a doctrine of *theosis* known.¹⁶ In his spiritual memoir, Lewis Smedes states, “[Athanasius] had one argument to support his view and he hammered on it repeatedly: Jesus had to be God *in order to make us gods*. Tell that to a Calvinist! Nothing we could say about ourselves could be more scandalous to a Calvinist than that we could get to be gods.”¹⁷ By contrast, others have favorably adopted a doctrine of *theosis* and sought to situate it within a Reformed context.¹⁸ What distinguishes a Reformed use of *theosis* from Greek philosophy and Eastern Orthodoxy is the combination of the essential features of sacramental and transactional christologies, such as one finds in the works of Calvin and Barth. As long as such sacramental and transactional christologies remain separate, then doctrines of *theosis* will suffer from misinterpretation and will be rejected by those of the Reformed tradition. However, when these two christologies are brought together into a coherent unity, *theosis* is seen for what it is, namely, a biblical ideal with considerable theological weight and usefulness for presenting the gospel. If we can redirect Reformed theology to speak of human participation in the divine nature as union *and* communion with Christ in his human nature, as participation in his incarnate Sonship, and so as sharing in him the divine life and love, false notions of *theosis* may be avoided.

16. Notably Lewis B. Smedes, *Union with Christ: A Biblical View of the New Life in Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); and Bruce L. McCormack, “Participation in God, Yes, Deification, No: Two Modern Protestant Responses to an Ancient Question,” in *Denkwürdiges Geheimnis: Beiträge zur Gotteslehre: Festschrift für Eberhard Jüngel zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. I. U. Dalferth, J. Fischer, and H-P. Grosshans (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 347–74.

17. Lewis B. Smedes, *My God and I: A Spiritual Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 71–72. Smedes rejects doctrines of *theosis* in favor of a doctrine of union with Christ (see further, Smedes, *Union with Christ*). Smedes believes doctrines of *theosis* fall under what he terms a “sacramental christology,” which looks to a finite life lifted by God to the level of God as the source of our salvation. Obviously Smedes is equating doctrines of *theosis* with what both Murphy and I reject—the “divinization” of human nature that results in the loss of the self in the divine, and thus a purely physical and mystical theory of atonement. Transactional christologies look to what Christ has achieved for the believer and argue that from his work all the benefits of salvation follow.

18. Besides Gannon Murphy and myself, there are notably J. Canlis, “Calvin, Osiander, and Participation in God,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6 (2004): 169–84; and C. Mosser, “The Greatest Possible Blessing: Calvin and Deification,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002): 36–57.

A staple principle of Reformed theology remains *reformata sed semper reformanda*. Murphy has sought to nudge the tradition forward by reclaiming aspects of orthodoxy from the past that have been overlooked or misrepresented, in this instance the doctrine of *theosis*. With Murphy, I want to see this venerable doctrine incorporated into Reformed theology in such a way that the benefits of Christ in all their grand design can be more clearly considered and proclaimed.