

## Reformed *Theosis*?

**Abstract:** Theologians in the classical Reformed tradition have not always recognized the elements in their own theologies that bear striking similarity to the doctrine of *theosis* principally advocated in Greek patristic and Byzantine theology and carried onward by historic and contemporary Eastern Orthodox thought. After a brief review of the classical Reformed doctrine of *Christus in nobis* (“Christ in us”), I propose a reconsideration and reformulation of the viability of *theosis* within classical Reformed theology, positing not only its fidelity to the biblical soteriology that Reformed theology seeks to guard but its suitability within Reformed theological and ecclesiastical contexts. It is indeed possible to conceive of a “Reformed *theosis*,” provided it enjoins a certain substructural transmutation from that of its Eastern theological forebears.

The Reformers are particularly notable for their commendation and construction of the *Christus in nobis* (“Christ in us”) principle, the principle that speaks so richly of the mystical union (*unio mystica*) into which all the faithful are translated following a unilateral pneumatological regeneration. What are not often considered among Reformed theologians both past and present, however, are the surprising elements of developed Reformed theological constructions that bear striking similarities to the concept of *theosis*, principally advocated in Greek patristic and Byzantine theology and, of course, within historic and current Eastern Orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> After a brief review of the classic

---

Gannon Murphy is general editor of *American Theological Inquiry* and tutor in the Centre for Faith, Reason, and Ethics at the University of Wales. He is author of *Consuming Glory: A Classical Defense of Divine-Human Relationality Against Open Theism*.

1. A notable exception is the work of Reformed theologian T. F. Torrance, who has enthusiastically embraced *theosis* in his concept of the mystical union. Accordingly, Torrance urges the Reformed community to reconsider earnestly the doctrine [*Theology in Reconciliation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 243]. See also the recent work of Reformed theologian Myk Habets, who favorably adopts *theosis* in critical interaction with Torrance [“Reforming Theosis,” *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, eds. Stephen Finlan, Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 146–66].

Reformed doctrine of *Christus in nobis*, I propose a reconsideration of the scriptural warrants of *theosis* and posit not only that it is biblically sound but that it is *best* appropriated within a Reformed theological framework.

## Christ in Us

*Christus in nobis* and *unio mystica* are closely allied terms. I will use both where appropriate, though I prefer the former term in that it appears better in communicating the operative principle at work in which the latter is established. At times, I will use them almost synonymously, but I nevertheless deliberately choose one term over the other in order to bring out a nuanced difference between the “mechanism” and the “fruit.” Union with Christ is the basis for genuine divine-human relationality; *Christus in nobis* is the theologically centered, unilateral principle that *produces* that reality in accord with the meticulous divine Providence classically advocated in historic Reformed theology.

The reality of genuine union with Christ, the Reformers well knew, was hardly a tangential idea to the New Testament writers. Indeed, it is *thematic* in no less a fashion than the doctrine of justification. John Murray writes of the mystical union as actually being “the *central* truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> He adds that “the whole process of salvation has its origin in one phase of union with Christ and salvation has in view the realization of other phases of union with Christ. . . . Union with Christ is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”<sup>3</sup>

The concept of *Christus in nobis* is certainly mysterious and exceedingly difficult to systematize. Indeed, Calvin wrote, “this mystery of the secret union of Christ with believers is incomprehensible by nature.”<sup>4</sup> Naturally, given the already problematic nature of philosophical anthropology, the ease with which it can be misunderstood and therefore misconstrued is a present danger even at its most basic levels. Yet the Reformation forebears of modern evangelicalism, notably Luther and Calvin, placed a tremendous premium upon the importance of recognizing Christ’s personal activity in the mystical union. Luther so emphasized the vitality of this union that he spoke of those adopted into God’s family as being

2. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 161; emphasis added.

3. *Ibid.*, 161, 170.

4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.17.1, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 2:557.

so intimately with Christ, that He and you become *as it were one person*. As such you may boldly say: “I am now one with Christ. Therefore Christ’s righteousness, victory, and life are mine.” On the other hand, Christ may say: “I am that big sinner. His sins and his death are mine, because he is joined to me, and I to him.”<sup>5</sup>

Calvin, perhaps even more so than Luther, placed critical emphasis on the believer’s union and *oneness* with Christ. I find it both strange and unfortunate that this emphasis of Calvin seems so often unnoticed even by those who thoroughly espouse his theology.<sup>6</sup> Abraham Kuyper remarked that “although Calvin may have been the most rigid among the reformers, yet not one of them has presented this, *unio mystica*, this spiritual union with Christ, so incessantly, so tenderly, and with such holy fire as he.”<sup>7</sup> Calvin writes that “to that union of the head and members, the residence of Christ in our hearts, in fine, the mystical union, *we assign the highest rank*, Christ when he becomes ours making us partners with him in the gifts with which he was endued. Hence we do not view him as at a distance and without us, but as we have put him on, and been ingrafted into his body, he deigns *to make us one with himself*, and, therefore, we glory in having a fellowship of righteousness with him.”<sup>8</sup> Calvin further draws upon this oneness language saying, “Christ does not so much come to us as become encumbered with our nature to make us one with him.”<sup>9</sup> He elaborates on this by drawing a distinction between the unitive and legal aspects of Christ’s indwelling:

The phrase *in ipso* (in him) I have preferred to retain, rather than render it *per ipsum* (by him) because it has in my opinion more expressiveness and force. For we are enriched in Christ, inasmuch as we are members of his body, and are engrafted into him: nay more, being made one with him, he makes us share with him in every thing that he has received from the Father.<sup>10</sup>

5. Martin Luther, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1939), 77.

6. No less a Calvinist than B. B. Warfield, while correctly stating that “the doctrine of predestination is not the formative principle of Calvinism” but only “its logical implication” stemming from “God in His majesty,” nevertheless makes no mention of Calvin’s stress upon our mystical union with God. See Warfield, “The Theology of John Calvin,” [http://www.the-highway.com/theocal\\_Warfield.html](http://www.the-highway.com/theocal_Warfield.html).

7. Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 325.

8. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.10, 1:46.

9. Calvin, *Commentaries*, ed. Joseph Haroutunian (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), 598.

10. John Calvin, *Commentary on Corinthians*, vol. 1, [http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/comment3/comm\\_vol39/htm/viii.ii.htm](http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/comment3/comm_vol39/htm/viii.ii.htm).

As evangelicals and their predecessors have attempted to systematize biblical doctrine since the sixteenth century, the *Christus in nobis* principle has generally been eclipsed theologically by the more justificatory principle of *Christus pro nobis* (“Christ for us”). *Christus pro nobis* speaks to those doctrines more specifically concerned with satisfaction, atonement, and justification. These are obviously vital concerns to Reformation and post-Reformation theology, yet in explicating them, the resultant *unitive* aspect of soteriology has not received nearly as much attention as it deserves. Mention is made here and there (often in sermons), but substantial scholarly treatments are noticeably lacking. This deficiency may, in part, be why current-day “open theists” and several quasi-immanentist, open-theistic-sounding theologians of the recent past find recourse in a radically different construction of the divine complexion in order to save divine-human relationality.<sup>11</sup> They do not grasp that a fuller-orbed understanding of the mystical union, as well as elements of *theosis*, have been on hand for centuries without compromising the broader Vincentian understanding of the incommunicable divine attributes (including exhaustive foreknowledge). Ironically, they have attempted to recast nearly the entire doctrine of God in order to rescue what was never in jeopardy.

Among the key biblical passages giving rise to the doctrine of the union of Christ and believers are those that speak of believers being “in” Christ and Christ “in” believers. We are “in Christ” (*en Christô*), “in him” (*en autos*) (alternatively “in him,” that is, Christ in the believer), “into Christ” (*eis Christon*), “in the Lord” (*en kuriô*), and “in me” (*en emoi*). For example, “if anyone is in Christ [*en Christô*] he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Cor 5:17).<sup>12</sup> Jesus declares, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me [*en emoi*], and I in him [*en autos*]” (John 6:56). Ephesians declares, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in him [*en autos*] before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before him” (Eph 1:3–4). Also, “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus [*en Christos Iesous*] for good works, which

11. Other works of the recent past that *sound* open theistic include W. Norris Clarke, “A New Look at the Immutability Of God,” in *God Knowable and Unknowable*, ed. Robert J. Roth (New York: Fordham University Press, 1973), 43–73; Roy Elseth, *Did God Know? A Study of the Nature of God* (St. Paul: Calvary United Church, 1977); Lorenzo McCabe, *Divine Nescience of Future Contingencies*, rev. ed. (1882; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and John Polkinghorne, ed., *The Work of Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

12. Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible® (La Habra, CA: Lockman Foundation, 1995).

God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (Eph 2:10). Colossians speaks of “the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to his saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you [*Christos en humin*], the hope of glory” (Eph 1:26). The very mystery (*mysterion*; literally, “secret”) that has been revealed is the *Christus in nobis* principle itself. Paul writes to the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20). In other places, we read of Christ and the church as the head and body (Eph 1:22–23; 4:12–16; 5:23–32). This “in” language has enormous implications for the manner in which the believer carries out God’s work. Paul says, “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil 2:12–13). Jesus uses horticultural metaphors such as the vine and the branches to describe the mystical union: “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:4–5). Jesus also speaks of dwelling within the believer: “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him (John 14:23).

Thus, the *Christus in nobis* principle, if difficult to grasp, is essential for a fully biblical theology. So deeply mysterious is it that a conscious limit to the parameters of analogy and even an apophatic approach often seem warranted. What is it really to be made *one* with God? Kuyper observed that the mystical union by which Christ dwells in us

has a nature peculiar to itself; it may be compared to other unions, but it can never be fully explained by them. Wonderful is the bond between body and soul; more wonderful still the sacramental bond of holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper; equally wonderful the vital union between mother and child in her blood, like that of the vine and its growing branches; wonderful the bond of wedlock; and much more wonderful the union with the Holy Spirit, established by His indwelling. But the union with Immanuel is distinct from all these. . . . It is a union invisible and intangible; the ear fails to perceive it, and it eludes all investigation; yet it is very real union and communion, by which the life of the Lord Jesus directly affects and controls us. As the unborn babe lives on the mother-blood, which has its heartbeat outside of him, so we also live on the

Christ-life, which has its heartbeat not in our soul, but outside of us, in heaven above, in Christ Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

Kuyper's comparisons are quite useful. Especially poignant is the metaphor of mother and child. When a child, a baby for example, is left crying to itself, it is unconnected and, in a sense, *inauthentic*, to use a Heideggerian term.<sup>14</sup> It is not as though the baby has either ceased to exist or that it lacks distinct personhood. Rather, it is ungrounded in estrangement. Its world is one of unrelated aloneness. Yet when the mother arrives and the baby beholds her face, the child's world is transformed. The child is enveloped in the world of the mother and is "authenticated" in the sense of being grounded and relationally contextualized, as the child "subsists" in its life source or sustainer. Similarly, our unitive bond with Christ transforms our world of disconnected aloneness into one in which *the Lord is our world*. This unspeakable bond is incomplete in this life, though it is progressively increased through sanctification (and *theotic* in nature, as I will soon argue). As such, God's elect are caught between two worlds: the world of man, which is ultimately marked by unceasing estrangement, and the world of the Lord, which is our true home.

Metaphors and analogies abound in descriptions of the *union mystica*. The Puritan Thomas Watson referred to the mystical union as "a marital union between Christ and believers" and suggested that its composition was twofold.<sup>15</sup> First, it forms a natural union that all human beings share, believers and unbelievers alike. This natural union is present due to Christ's having taken on human nature, whereas the same was not done of the angelic realm (Heb 2:16). For Watson, however, this union was merely incidental and bears no significance to being *relationally* united with Christ.

The second, however, is what Watson called the "sacred union." By this, Watson believed, we are mystically united to Christ. He admits that "it is hard to describe the manner of it. . . . It is hard to show how the soul is united to the body, and how Christ is united to the soul. But though this union is spiritual, it is real."<sup>16</sup> Oddly, Watson adds the statement that this "union with Christ is not personal."<sup>17</sup> Watson was apparently concerned that if we spoke of Christ

13. Kuyper, *Work of the Holy Spirit*, 337.

14. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 232.

15. Thomas Watson, "Mystical Union between Christ and the Saints," in *The Godly Man's Picture* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 35.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 2.

as being personally united with us, it would be tantamount to Christ's essence being transfused into the person of a believer such that all the person did would become meritorious.<sup>18</sup> Watson preferred, then, to think of the mystical union in more objective terms. First, the union is *federal*, or covenantal, in the sense that believers are represented by Christ. Second, it is *effectual*, in the sense that Christ becomes *conjugal*ly united to the faithful. In this sense, believers become "one" with him.

Much of what Watson says concerning the union is helpful. The conjugal metaphor is certainly scriptural (e.g., Matt 9:15; Luke 5:35; John 3:29; Rev 21:2) and speaks well to the *positional* nature of the union. I fear, however, that Watson's treatment of the mystical union reduces it merely to objective elements (indeed, *forensic*) instead of including both the objective and subjective. Watson calls the union spiritual but denies that it is *personal*. When considering the union, it is difficult to see what the operative difference is between the spiritual and the personal or what Watson's statement really accomplishes. Is Christ's Spirit *nonpersonal*? Even on the purely conjugal understanding, why cannot the union still be thought of as a personal one, indeed, a *deeply* personal one? Watson may actually be trying to avoid pantheism with this statement, by which the person of Christ and person of the human being become so amalgamated as to be nearly indistinguishable.

Watson is also not clear about what problem may be presented by the idea of meritorious works being performed by the Christian as they issue from the mystical union. If, for example, those very works were actually *given* to the believer by God (Eph 2:10) and it is God that works in the believer to do them (Phil 2:12–13), then they are the fruit, not the cause, of the unitive work of the Trinity made manifest in the life of the believer. Further, such meritorious works could be conceived as rewards, in that such rewards and their basis were both given as gifts of grace from God. I hold Watson to be a wonderful expositor of the Christian faith, but these issues underscore the manner in which wrestling with an understanding of the mystical union has been difficult in the forensic-dominated Western theological climate.

Augustus Strong may have struck a better balance between the objective and subjective elements of our union with Christ in his statement that "as the Holy Spirit is the principle of union between the Father and the Son, so he is the principle of union between God and man. Only through the Holy Spirit

---

18. Ibid.

does Christ secure for himself those who will love him as distinct and free personalities.”<sup>19</sup> He further underscores the subjective aspects in tandem with the concept of “mutual interpenetration”:

The Scriptures declare that, through the operation of God, there is constituted a union of the soul with Christ different in kind from God’s natural and providential concursus with all spirits, as well as from all unions of mere association or sympathy, moral likeness, or moral influence, a union of life, in which the human spirit, while then most truly possessing its own individuality and personal distinctness, is interpenetrated and energized by the Spirit of Christ, is made inscrutably but indissolubly one with him, and so becomes a member and partaker of that regenerated, believing, and justified humanity of which he is the head.<sup>20</sup>

For Strong, to be a Christian at all is literally to be *indwelt* by Christ. It is more than “mere juxtaposition or external influence.”<sup>21</sup> Christ’s work is performed not by an *external* agent but as one conjoined *within* the very nature of the redeemed. Loving God and obeying his commands are granted by the Spirit of God himself, inclining and motivating the secondary agent to do so.

Louis Berkhof recognized two equal and opposite dangers when considering the subjective union. One is to understand the union as “a union of essence, in which the personality of the one is simply merged into that of the other, so that Christ and the believer do not remain distinct persons.”<sup>22</sup> The other is to

represent the mystical union as a mere moral union, or a union of love and sympathy, like that existing between a teacher and his pupils or between a friend and friend. Such a union does not involve an interpenetration of the life of Christ and that of believers. It would involve no more than a loving adherence to Christ, friendly service freely rendered to him, and ready acceptance of the message of the Kingdom of God.<sup>23</sup>

This latter error is built on the philosophy of libertarianism and is the unavoidable deduction of it. Thus, human love of God on most Arminian-Wesleyan, and certainly on open-theistic, constructs is chosen autonomously and voluntarily according to the random vicissitudes of the will. Such love has no *theologically* grounded explanation, but in fact it becomes completely anthropocentric and quasi-deistic.

19. Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), 793.

20. *Ibid.*, 794.

21. *Ibid.*, 800.

22. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 451.

23. *Ibid.*

From a Reformed standpoint, elect believers most certainly do “invite” Christ into union with them as distinct individuals, but this act of the will is shot through with the providence and purposes of God as first cause in which he *inclines* the whole person toward the fruits of their own proximate causation. Human agents are not the sufficient cause of the *unio mystica* in either an initial or ongoing sense but exhibit cause as the fruit of God’s first working the miracle of regeneration in them and continuously in their sanctification. The will itself is liberated as its former, wicked inclinations are given a wholly new direction.

Reformed soteriologies avoid the enervative doctrines of human independence, stressing rather a “soft” omnicausalism that generates the divine-human relationship according to the purposes and good pleasure of the Deity. They attempt to bring together a teleology of God’s own creational glory with a doctrine of providence that thereby translates the believer *into Christ* so that the perichoretic Trinity delights in himself and his own glory—in *us*. Blaise Pascal rightly said:

[T]he God of Christians is not a God who is simply the author of mathematical truths, or of the order of the elements. . . . He is not merely a God who exercises His providence over the life and fortunes of men. [in order] to bestow on those who worship Him a long and happy life. . . . The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of Christians, is a God . . . who fills the soul and heart of *those whom He possesses*, a God who makes them conscious of their inward wretchedness, and His infinite mercy, who *unites Himself to their inmost soul*, who fills it with humility and joy, with confidence and love, who *renders them incapable of any other end than Himself*.<sup>24</sup>

There is no love that humans can render unto God other than *God’s own love* relationally given to them. Relationality is reciprocally given, returned, and received as believers are brought into the very being of God himself as creatures who mutually benefit from enjoying their own subjective experience of this union, a union that nevertheless begins, obtains, and subsists in God’s own being.

### Toward a Reformed Doctrine of *Theosis*

The foregoing excursus of *Christus in nobis* thus prepares us to consider the viability of *theosis*, indeed, a decidedly *Reformed theosis*. I argue that elements of *theosis* further elucidate the *Christus in nobis* principle as one in

24. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, 556 (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2002), 90.

which Christians truly become divinized. *Theosis* relates to *Christus in nobis* in speaking of *operation*. God's very being shared with and in his elect effects the oneness that is salvation itself.

The manifold risks of appropriating a theotic component into the broader framework of a Reformed model of divine-human relationality have not escaped my attention. Chief among these risks is the possibility for ambiguity and misunderstanding, especially that which results in a gross, nay heretical, overstatement of the doctrine. My intention is to unpack an understanding of *theosis* that provides the substructure for divine-human relationality but that nevertheless remains in fidelity with Reformed theology and in which the Creator-creature distinction is upheld to avoid pantheism or panentheism. No doubt, *any* Christian formulation of the doctrine of *theosis* must set an impassable limit on its elucidation that guards against the idea of created humanity ever being construed to become, ontologically, either God or a god.

Thus, my understanding of the doctrine acknowledges that God's elect do literally share or become "partakers" in the divine, but their creaturely status and individual personality are not distorted or erased. On the contrary, the theotic aspect of *Christus in nobis* and *unio mystica* does not entail the erasure of the human person but the *actualization* of it. Our entire person—mind, body, soul—is designed to be in communion with the Trinity, to be totally embraced by God and enveloped by the glory of the Lord.

Moreover, the "glory" that God's elect are to reflect in the eschaton is always theologically centered and, in this sense, not an autonomously generated phenomenon but a *finite* reflection and enjoyment of *infinite* glory. A classical Reformed doctrine of *theosis* must also be consistent with a monergistic soteriology. It is this that distinguishes a uniquely Reformed *theosis* from others in which the engagement of *autonomous praxis* is often thought to be necessary in order to appropriate or attain *theosis* as a kind of reward for holy behavior. A Reformed understanding must ground *theosis* and its fruits in the unilateral operation of God in the believer in both ends and means. As such, *theosis* is certainly in a sense "acquired" through praxis but never autonomously. It is rather the processive product of God working in, through, and for the believer to his own eternal glory.

*Theosis* (literally, "deification") and the cognate *theopoiesis* ("being made God") are terms that tend to mean very different things to varying ecclesiastical bodies. In Roman Catholic theology, *theosis* has not typically been thought of as either primarily eschatological or as a universal phenomenon applicable to *all* Christians. Rather, it is entirely a here-and-now phenomenon capable of realization among a select few people of saintly stature. Further, unlike some

other versions of *theosis*, it is not thought of as a state of sinless perfection or completed sanctification. Rather it is “a more perfect knowledge of God possible in this life, beyond the attainments of reason even enlightened by faith, through which the soul contemplates directly the mysteries of divine light. The contemplation in the present life is possible only to a few privileged souls, through a very special grace of God: it is the *theosis* of a mystic union.”<sup>25</sup> *Theosis* in much of Western Catholicism is a rarely attained temporal enlightenment and is more experiential than ontological.

*Theosis* has also been used within the Wesleyan tradition, influenced by the Pietist movement, to describe the possibility of realized sanctification in the course of this life. Wesley himself referred to realized sanctification as “the highest state of grace,” or as being “perfected in love,” and said that those who claim to have “attained” it in this life should be “exhort[ed] . . . to pray fervently, that God would show them all that is in their hearts” in order to be sure that the attainment is true.<sup>26</sup> Roman, Lutheran, and Reformed bodies have uniformly rejected this Wesleyan interpretation. Indeed, some four centuries earlier at the Council of Vienne (1311), the Roman General Council declared heretical the doctrine that “a person in this present life can acquire a degree of perfection which renders him utterly impeccable and unable to make further progress in grace.”<sup>27</sup> The Westminster Divines also opposed the idea of realized sanctification, saying, “Sanctification is throughout, in the whole man; yet imperfect in this life, there abiding still some remnants of corruption in every part; whence arises a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.”<sup>28</sup> Lutherans stressed Luther’s forensic concept *simul iustus et peccator* (“at the same time just and sinner”) and taught that the struggle with sin is never fully conquered in this life but that we must *continually* “engage in callings which are commanded, render obedience, avoid evil lusts, and the like.”<sup>29</sup>

What then does it mean to be or to become “divinized” or “deified” if not that humans become gods? Athanasius himself penned some of the strongest

25. George Sauvage, “Mysticism,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. K. Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10663b.htm>.

26. John Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 11, ed. Thomas Jackson (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), accessed at <http://www.ccel.org/w/wesley/perfection/perfection.html>.

27. Council of Vienne (1311), 28.1, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), accessed at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/councils/vienne.htm>.

28. Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), 13.2.

29. The Augsburg Confession (1530), 20.11, accessed at <http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/div/academics/courses/johnson/augsburg.html>.

theotic language used in the ancient church, yet it was also he who furiously defended a *homoousios* christology in which Christ is “of one substance” with God the Father, as opposed to “of similar substance” (*homioousios*) as held by Arius and his followers. While Arius believed that Christ is a *created* being of the highest order, Athanasius defended a christology in which Christ is uniquely and fully divine. Interestingly, it is this very christology upon which Athanasius built his understanding of *theosis*. Beginning christologically, Athanasius argued that in order for humans to be ushered into a divine state, God first needed to descend to earth, take on the nature of a man, represent humanity as a man, become glorified, and thus pass this glory onto all humans as they become partakers in divinity. Jesus Christ, he writes,

is thus become the Deliverer of all flesh and of all creation. And if God sent His Son brought forth from a woman, the fact causes us no shame but contrariwise glory and great grace. For He has become Man, that He might deify us in himself, and He has been born of a woman, and begotten of a Virgin, in order to transfer to himself our erring generation, and that we may become henceforth a holy race, and “partakers of the Divine Nature,” as blessed Peter wrote.<sup>30</sup>

Athanasius’s soteriology was inextricably bound up with his christology. God’s intention from the beginning of the world was to make his church and those men and women in it genuine partakers of the divine. Christ’s assuming human flesh was the practical means to realize this objective. In *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius writes that “the Word Incarnate, as is the case with the Invisible God, is known to us by His works,” and “by them we recognise His deifying mission.”<sup>31</sup> He continues:

If a man should wish to see God, Who is invisible by nature and not seen at all, he may know and apprehend Him from His works . . . [and] let him marvel that by so ordinary a means things divine have been manifested to us, and that by death immortality has reached to all, and that by the Word becoming man, the universal Providence has been known. . . . For He was made man that we might be made God.<sup>32</sup>

---

30. Athanasius, Letter 60 [to Adelphius], in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 2, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), para. 4, accessed at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-04/Npnf2-04-114.htm> P10078\_3609272.

31. Athanasius, “On the Incarnation of the Word,” in *ibid.*, 54, accessed at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-04/Npnf2-04-16.htm> P1830\_678055.

32. *Ibid.*

Vladimir Lossky, perhaps the most preeminent Eastern theotic theologian of the twentieth century, calls these writings of Athanasius, and those similar among the Cappodocians, to be nothing less than “the very essence of Christianity.” God descends to the nadir of existence—fallen humanity, marked by death—so that a pathway of ascent can be made for humans to the divine. Lossky calls this the “descent (*katabasis*) of the divine person of Christ mak[ing] human persons capable of ascent (*anabasis*) in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>33</sup>

It is baffling to me that such a central concept has been so ill pursued in Western theology—especially within the Reformed context. This is a soteriology that is entirely God-centered, focused on the unilateral purpose and plan of God’s becoming realized among his creation. Indeed, I maintain that it is a soteriology *best* explained through the monergistic initiative so axiomatic in Reformed thought. It focuses on what God is doing, as opposed to the autonomous powers of humanity. Further, it grounds the *unio mystica* and, in turn, genuine love and relationality between the human and the divine by emphasizing true love’s having always a divine rather than human etiology. Humans do not choose to love God unless God’s love is first put in them.

Two scriptural texts are crucial to the study of *theosis*: Genesis 1:26 and 2 Peter 1:4. The first of these illustrates the creational uniqueness of humanity. God declares, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.” Robert Rakestraw observes that “the Greek Fathers taught that, in the fall, humanity lost the likeness but retained the image.”<sup>34</sup> Rakestraw quotes Gerald Bray:

The Christian life is best conceived as the restoration of the lost likeness to those who have been redeemed in Christ. This is a work of the Holy Spirit, who communicates to us the energies of God himself, so that we may become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). The energies of God radiate from his essence and share its nature; but it must be understood that the deified person retains his personal identity and is not absorbed into the essence of God, which remains for ever [*sic*] hidden from his eyes.<sup>35</sup>

---

33. Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 97.

34. Robert Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of *Theosis*,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theology Society* 40, no.2 (1997), 257.

35. *Ibid.*, quoting Gerald Bray, “Deification,” in *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 189.

The issue at hand is not whether it is the image or likeness that is restored (or whether these are a kind of hendiadys in which they have essentially the same referent) but with “the Christian’s reintegration into the life of God.”<sup>36</sup>

The Second Epistle of Peter breathes new life into this reintegration, locating its realization in the advent of Christ. This letter claims “that his [God’s] divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us his precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust” (1:3–4). Here the church is reminded, on the basis of Christ’s own commitment and work, that believers become genuine participants in the life of God. This new life is engendered *en Christô* and translates the redeemed from both physical and spiritual death unto new life. Moreover, John 17 and the “in Christ” scriptural texts, already noted in my discussion of the mystical union, are also key in theotic theology.

The Byzantine monk Gregory Palamas (1335) called *theosis* “God [setting] before us all His riches and truly beneficial gifts to share. . . . ‘The person who has been deified by grace will be in every respect as God is, except for His very essence.’”<sup>37</sup> That Palamas and the Greek Fathers made a careful distinction between *theosis* as participation in the divine “energies” as opposed to God’s essence is widely known among students of Eastern Orthodoxy and should serve to placate the fears of the theological West that theotic soteriology somehow implies either pantheism or humanity as attaining to substantial godhood. George Mantzaridis, commenting on Palamas, writes,

Man’s deification is not realized through participation in God’s essence, but through communion in His divine energy. Man may share in God’s glory and brightness, but the divine essence remains inaccessible and nonparticipable. Thus, the deified man is made god in all things, but he neither is identified with the divine essence nor shares it.<sup>38</sup>

The distinction made by the Eastern theologians between God’s energies and essence, knowability and unknowability, is remarkably similar to points raised by the Scholastics and Reformers in which created humans cannot

36. *Ibid.*

37. Gregory Palamas, “Homily Eight,” in *The Homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas*, vol. 1 (South Canaan, PA: Saint Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2002), 90–91, quoting Maximus the Confessor, *Letters to Thalassius*, 22.

38. George Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 122.

know God *as he is in himself*, nor can they share in his essence. Basil writes, “The operations [of deification] are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His operations, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach.”<sup>39</sup>

Deification, our nexus of union with Christ, occurs through participation in God’s energies (which are nevertheless *truly* God) but not through sharing in God’s essence. This is vitally important both in understanding the theotic dynamic and in preserving an Orthodox biblical theology. Timothy Ware (Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia) notes:

[T]his distinction between God’s essence (*ousia*) and His energies goes back to the Cappadocian Fathers. . . . However remote from us in His essence, yet in His energies God has revealed Himself to men. These energies are not something that exist apart from God, not a gift which God confers upon men: they are God Himself in His action and revelation to the world. God exists complete and entire in each of His divine energies. . . . It is through these energies that God enters into a direct and immediate relationship with mankind. In relation to man, the divine energy is in fact nothing else than the grace of God; grace is not just a “gift” of God, not just an object which God bestows on men, but a direct manifestation of the living God Himself, a personal confrontation between creature and Creator. . . . When we say that the saints have been transformed . . . by the grace of God, what we mean is that they have a direct experience of God Himself. They know God—that is to say, God in His energies, not in His essence.<sup>40</sup>

This deification through God’s energies is, first and last, a work of God’s grace. Palamas (in part defending the Hesychastic disciplines) wrote that “union with God” is accomplished only through the “deifying grace of the Spirit.”<sup>41</sup> Further,

if deification is accomplished according to a capacity inherent in human nature and if it is encompassed within the bounds of nature, then of necessity the person deified is by nature God. Whoever thinks like this should not attempt, therefore, to foist his own delusion upon those who stand on

39. Basil, “Letter CCXXXIV,” in *Basil: Letters and Select Works*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2003), 525.

40. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin, 1964), 77–78.

41. Gregory Palamas, “The Declaration of the Holy Mountain,” in *The Philokalia*, ed. G. E. H. Palmer et al. (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 420.

secure ground and to impose a defiled creed upon those whose faith is undefiled; rather he should lay aside his presumption and learn from persons of experience or from their disciples that the grace of deification is entirely unconditional, and there is no faculty whatever in nature capable of achieving it since, if there were, this grace would no longer be grace but merely the manifestation of the operation of a natural capacity.<sup>42</sup>

*Theosis* through God's energies is by grace. This theotic grace speaks to God's intentions and work in making genuine relations possible between himself and created humanity. This very thing is itself the mystery of the Christian faith. Colossians teaches that it is God's purpose to "reconcile all things to himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross" and that Christ "has now reconciled you in his fleshly body through death, in order to present you before him holy and blameless and beyond reproach" (1:20, 22). This is the "mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to his saints" (1:26).

*Theosis*, in part, may be thought of as a summary term for the subjective, relational nature of salvation. Whereas justification and satisfaction refer to the forensic appeasement of God such that created humans might be positionally "clean" in God's eyes, *theosis* encompasses the subjective aspects of the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*)—regeneration, sanctification, and glorification—and explains each of them as the sole work of God. Each of these I construe as subspecies of *theosis* such that we might even rename them, respectively: inaugural *theosis*, progressive *theosis*, and consummative *theosis*.

Rakestraw refers to the anthropological reception of this gift as "Christification," preferring this to deific terminology.<sup>43</sup> Another theologian uses the term "Trinification."<sup>44</sup> These terms may be helpful in Western circles to avoid possible misunderstandings of deification. Nevertheless, the principle is essentially the same. Relationality is possible as humans are brought progressively into the relational being of God by his grace or energies. Whatever humans render unto God that is pleasing to him is that which was sovereignly given. This work is theologically centered in God's own purpose but is graciously extended to his church for their mutual fulfillment, that the church may become "one" with him, and that the glory of God may shine forth in all that God does.

This model of relationality also precludes the necessity of the open theistic remedy of divine nescience of future contingencies. It grounds vital relational-

42. Ibid.

43. Rakestraw, "Becoming Like God," 265.

44. James Beilby, lecture on the Doctrine of God, Bethel Theological Seminary (October 9, 2000).

ity in God himself and establishes it in humans according to the purposes of the divine will. Exhaustive divine foreknowledge presents no obstacle to the view, as theotic relationality and the *Christus in nobis* principle at once ground genuine relationality while simultaneously unfolding it according to the movement and sovereign predilection of the triune God. As with creation, it is a triune activity, never “adding” to the divine nature but expressing the eternal perfections. This view similarly avoids fatalism because it is always the glorious purposes of God at work accomplishing his ends through means that concurrently infuse humanity with its creational significance. This is quite opposed to the purposeless machinations of the “Fates,” which fundamentally lack telos. Basil writes:

Through His aid hearts are lifted up, the weak are held by the hand, and they who are advancing are brought to perfection. Shining upon those that are cleansed from every spot, He makes them spiritual by fellowship with Himself. Just as when a sunbeam falls on bright and transparent bodies, they themselves become brilliant too, and shed forth a fresh brightness from themselves, so souls wherein the Spirit dwells, illuminated by the Spirit, themselves become spiritual.<sup>45</sup>

### The Means of Theotic Relationality

The preceding, of course, raises the question of how the benefits of inaugural, progressive, and consummative *theosis* are communicated to us. Consummative *theosis* (or glorification) is an eschatological realization—an eternity of perfected fellowship and communion between recipient and Trinity. But inaugural and progressive *theosis* (or regeneration and sanctification) relate to experiences in the present life of the believer. How then are they normatively mediated such that we enjoy the unitive fruits of God’s grace? What are the God-ordained means of grace whereby the sanctifying influences of the Spirit are communicated to humans? I advance three primary means: the Word, the sacraments, and prayer.

#### **The Word**

The Word, quite simply, is Christ himself—condescending to humankind in the *words* of the gospel message, *as they are believed by the Spirit*. Christ the Word is to be found in Scripture, which, Calvin wrote, is “effectually impressed on the heart by the Spirit; if it exhibits Christ, it is the word of life converting the

---

45. Basil, “On the Spirit,” in *Basil: Letters and Select Works*, 125.

soul, and making wise the simple.”<sup>46</sup> God calls us by his Word, Jesus Christ, the Logos known through the power of the Spirit operating in the simplicity and mundaneness of the gospel preached. By the hearing of the Word, the theotic blessings of God pour over to those in whom the Spirit inwardly inclines. This is true of both inaugural and progressive *theosis*; in the former instance as God works through his Word to “inlodge” faith, in the latter as God sustains those in whom he instills it.

### The Sacraments

In the sacraments, the same is true as of the Word but with a different mode of operation. The sacraments, that is, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, add to the theotic blessings of God a physical expression of the Word and an imbuing of empowering, unitive grace. None of this is to add a crass, magical component to the sacraments in which God has blindly bound himself to them such that the sacraments themselves, *ex opere operato*, communicate the theotic blessings of the Spirit. Rather, Calvin—echoing Augustine<sup>47</sup>—stressed that “the efficacy of the word is produced in the sacrament, not because it is [performed], but because it is believed.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Paul speaks of the Lord’s Supper heaping condemnation upon the recipient who takes of it in an “unworthy” manner (1 Cor 11:27–29), especially one in which the body of the crucified Lord is left unrecognized (11:29).

To the regenerate communicant, however, the sacraments are a principal means through which God “signs and seals” *himself*—his promises, his salvation, and our theotic communion with him. The sacraments are a constituent part not of inaugural *theosis* but of progressive *theosis* during the life of the believer. They are a spiritual picture and a spiritual food, intended for those already regenerated through the Spirit by his Word.

Calvin spoke of the sacraments as a symbol: “an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of goodwill toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety towards him, both before himself, and before angels as well as men.”<sup>49</sup> The sacraments visibly signify and seal the reality of *Christus in nobis*. B. A. Gerrish summa-

46. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.9.3, 1:86.

47. “This is what belongs to the virtue of the sacrament, not to the visible sacrament; he that eateth within, not without; who eateth in his heart, not who presses with his teeth.” Augustine, Tractate XXVI.12, in *Homilies on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2005), 218. See the longer discussion at 217–19.

48. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.7, 2:495.

49. *Ibid.*, 4.14.1, 2:492.

rizes Calvin's sacramentology by noting, "The very nature of the symbolism suggests to Calvin that the Supper is a matter of nourishing, sustaining, and increasing a communion with Christ to which the word and Baptism have initiated the children of God."<sup>50</sup> As such, the sacraments are a spiritual food, operating in a progressive *theosis*, binding us more and more to Christ, until such union is made perfect in heaven (consummative *theosis*).

Throughout ecclesiastical history, some wishing to emphasize more strongly the spiritual and noncorporeal over the earthly and mundane (notably the Anabaptists, Remonstrants, Zwinglians, Socinians, and others), have divested the sacraments (with particular attention to the Lord's Supper) of being actual means of objective divine grace as a physical seal, preferring instead to consider them merely commemorative or celebratory in nature.<sup>51</sup> It is interesting here to observe the quasi-Platonic undertones of the view, which is reluctant to connect the outworking of the Spirit of God to anything physical. Yet while commemoration and celebration are rightfully attached to the significance of the Eucharist (*promise* and *declaration* to baptism), it has largely been recognized by the Reformed—without recourse to what they deem an extremity of superstition in Roman sacramentology—that the sacraments are far more than mere external rites reminding the faithful of Christ's ministry. Rather, they are real spiritual sustenance bringing with them real spiritual presence. Gerrish observes that, for Calvin, the Lord's Supper is in fact the occasion for a double act of unitive self-giving: Christ giving himself to the church and the church reciprocally giving itself to God. "It is this double self-giving," Gerrish writes, "that makes the Supper both embody and represent the perpetual exchange of grace and gratitude that shapes Calvin's entire theology. The sacred banquet prepared by the Father's goodness is the actual giving, not merely the remembering, of a gift of grace, and precisely as such it demands and evokes the answering gratitude of God's children."<sup>52</sup>

With Calvin, though in the theotic language I have used, the sacraments are a means of progressive *theosis* in which they "[do] not so much confirm his word as *establish* us in the faith of it."<sup>53</sup> Moreover, in so ordaining the sacraments as a means of grace, "our merciful Lord, with boundless condescension,

---

50. B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 134.

51. See Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3.20.2 (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2005), 353–54; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 607–8.

52. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 156.

53. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.3, 2:492.

so accommodates himself to our capacity, that seeing how from our animal nature we are always creeping on the ground, and cleaving to the flesh, having no thought of what is spiritual, and not even forming an idea of it, he declines not by means of these earthly elements to lead us to himself, and even in the flesh to exhibit a mirror of spiritual blessings.”<sup>54</sup>

Contemporary pretensions may find themselves resistant to the notion that God has bound himself to something so “animal,” deeming it a crude throwback to antiquated, religious primitivism. Some may thus fear the doctrine as minimizing the Deity and tying God to something less powerful and or even less “spiritual.” Yet this fear should be abated and swiftly replaced with gratitude and thanksgiving when we recognize in the sacraments a tangible expression of the Deity’s having not neglected that we are sensuous beings. As such, both the body and soul are included among those means God uses to manifest and sustain us in the abundance of his theotic blessings—the communication of himself *to us*, holistically, *as we are*. God does not discard the corporeal nature of his children in his means of communion with them. Calvin quotes Chrysostom: “Were we incorporeal, he would give us these things in a naked and incorporeal form. Now because our souls are implanted in bodies, he delivers spiritual things under things visible. Not that the qualities which are set before us in the sacraments are inherent in the nature of the things, but God gives them this signification.”<sup>55</sup> The sacraments, then, are a principal means of theotic grace.

### Prayer

Augustine refers to prayer as “a turning of the heart” and a “purification of the inner eye.” As a means of grace, it “purifies our heart, and makes it more capacious for receiving the divine gifts, which are poured into us spiritually.”<sup>56</sup> Calvin considered prayer to “draw as from an inexhaustible fountain.”<sup>57</sup> To neglect availing ourselves of this inestimable privilege “were just as if one told of a treasure were to allow it to remain buried in the ground.”<sup>58</sup>

Prayer might literally be considered “converse of the soul with God.”<sup>59</sup> Yet as with the indwelling of the Word in our hearts and the efficacy of the sacraments as the Spirit indwells the disposition of the communicant, genuine

54. *Ibid.*, 2:493.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Augustine, *On the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount*, 2.3.14 (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2000), 65.

57. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20, 2:146.

58. *Ibid.*

59. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3.20.2, 559.

prayer begins with the instigation of the Spirit unitively sanctifying the soul, urging it toward communion with God. Ephesians speaks of true prayer as prayer *en pneuma* (“in the Spirit”; 6:18). Calvin acknowledged the work of the Spirit in prayer, saying that to “pray aright is a special gift.”<sup>60</sup> As the Spirit literally *gives* us prayer, and inasmuch as that prayer fills our souls with the theotic blessings of God, it too is a powerful means of grace.

In this manner, prayer is an awesome expression of the unitive nature of progressive *theosis* in which we uniquely experience Jesus’ promise to the believer that he, the Father, and the Spirit “will come to him and make Our abode with him” (John 14:23). Prayer also brings out “all gracious affections: reverence, love, gratitude, submission, faith, joy, and devotion.”<sup>61</sup> Moreover, “When the soul thus draws near to God, God draws near to it, manifests his glory, sheds abroad his love, and imparts that peace which passes all understanding.”<sup>62</sup> Prayer, as with salvation itself, brings our focus upon the praises of God’s glory, which reciprocally fills our spirit.

### The Normativity of These Means

In a polemic against Pelagianism, Calvin wrote that “God works in his elect in two ways: inwardly, by his Spirit; outwardly, by his Word. By his Spirit illuminating their minds, and training their hearts to the practice of righteousness, he makes them new creatures, while, by his Word, he stimulates them to long and seek for this renovation.”<sup>63</sup> These “two ways” may seem to contradict Calvin’s later identification of Word *and sacrament* as the normative means of grace (and identification of the true church), but they do not.<sup>64</sup> Calvin consistently maintained, as I have, that regenerative grace (as well as preservation in faith) are the unmerited gifts of God bestowed upon the “elect” through a unilateral operation of the Spirit.<sup>65</sup> This salvation, in turn, follows normatively through the hearing of the Word. Yet further, the sacraments themselves “[consist] of the word and the external sign.”<sup>66</sup> Thus, salvation comes by faith in Christ, through God’s grace, normatively mediated through the Word and sustained by prayer, Word, and sacrament according to the power of the Holy

60. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.5, 2:150.

61. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3.20.20, 507.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.5.5, 1:277.

64. *Ibid.*, 2.1.9, 1:289. Calvin treats prayer in a separate place; see 3.20, 2:145–201.

65. Calvin writes that “the Lord both begins and perfects the good work in us.” *Ibid.*, 2.3.9, 1:260 (cf. 1.13.14, 2.5.2, 3.1.4, and 3.11.23).

66. *Ibid.*, 4.14.4, 2:493; emphasis added.

Spirit. Further, it is through Christ's holy church that the Spirit brings the Word and sacraments to those whom God the Father calls. Naturally, then, Scripture considers the temporal mission of the church to be both the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments (Matt 28:19; Luke 22:19). In this manner, the benefits of *theosis* are normatively communicated to the believer throughout the interadvental epoch.

It is important to stress the *normativity* of this operation. Reformed theologians in general (myself included) have often acknowledged the possibility that God can, and perhaps does, work in a special operation of grace upon those lacking access to the visible church and its ministry of Word and sacrament. No less an "arch-Calvinist" than Loraine Boettner, for example, confessed, "We do not deny that God can save some even of the adult heathen people if He chooses to do so, for His Spirit works when and where and how He pleases, with means or without means. . . . Certainly God's ordinary method is to gather His elect from the evangelized portion of mankind, although we must admit the possibility that by an extraordinary method some few of His elect may be gathered from the unevangelized portion."<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, such operation is not normative, nor is it admonished in Scripture as the commonplace means through which the Lord condescends spiritually to feed those whom he gathers and calls his own. In this sense, God has "bound" himself to Word and sacrament, not such that he is held captive to them, but insofar as the Lord has seen fit to offer himself to his church in mediate form of ordinary, altogether *human* means.

Neither is this to deny or derogate the general providence of God in directing human affairs, freely bestowing his grace according to his own sovereign predilection and enjoining communion with the created order through limitless means. Similarly, the gathering of the church in general as the company of the faithful (*coetus fidelium*)—that is, apart from its administration of the sacraments—is also a vital means of communion with the Lord. Participation and fellowship in the church is indeed a mediative ministry of the Word as the Spirit indwells the movement. But should we seek the prominent means, spoken of in Scripture and identified generically in the course of Reformed theological reflection, we come back to the normativity of Word, sacrament, and prayer. But first among these, unifying and directing the others, is the Word.

---

67. Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2004), 67.