

# THE DOCTRINE OF *THEOSIS*: A TRANSFORMATIONAL UNION WITH CHRIST



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*Abstract.* The doctrine of theosis is receiving increased attention from contemporary evangelicals. In this paper, I explore theosis and its importance for our understanding and practice of the Christian moral and spiritual life. I discuss the connection between theosis and how we understand the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, and conclude with some practical applications related to this doctrine.

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Many Christians outside of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, upon hearing of some of the ways in which the doctrine of *theosis* is described, are wary of it. Claims like, “God became man so that men might become gods,” create concern, and rightly so on some interpretations of such a statement. However, rightly understood, I believe that a revival of theotic language would be beneficial to the church at large, and especially the evangelical church given its turn towards Christ’s call to discipleship as a part of what it means to be a Christian.

Contrary to what many think, *theosis* is not just a doctrine of the Eastern Orthodox Church, though it plays a more central role in the thought and practice of that tradition. Carl Mosser, in a paper arguing that Calvin’s theology includes a doctrine of *theosis*, observes that “no major Western theologian has ever repudiated the doctrine of deification.”<sup>1</sup> Mosser alludes to others who have shown the presence of the doctrine in the thought of Protestants including Luther, Jonathan Edwards, Augustus Hopkins Strong, C. S. Lewis, and several evangelicals, as well as early Anglicanism and Methodism.<sup>2</sup> The doctrine is also receiving increased attention from contemporary evangelicals.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Mosser, “The Greatest Possible Blessing: Calvin and Deification,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002): 38. I use *theosis* interchangeably with “deification” and “divinization.”

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 38–39.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); J. Todd Billings, “United to God Through Christ: Calvin on the Question of Deification,” *Harvard Theological Review* 98 (2005): 315–334; and Robert Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis,” *JETS* 40 (1997): 257–269.

I am interested in exploring *theosis* because I think it is important for our understanding and practice of the Christian moral and spiritual life. It also raises interesting philosophical issues concerning spiritual formation, as we will see. In what follows, I will not seek to articulate a comprehensive doctrine of *theosis*, but rather discuss issues related to the concept and their practical significance for spiritual formation.

### THEOSIS: A VERY BRIEF INTRODUCTION

In a paper entitled “The Vanity of God,” contemporary Christian philosopher Charles Taliaferro discusses and responds to the claim that the Christian God is vain, a claim that is based in part on the fact that God commands creatures made in his own image to worship him.<sup>4</sup> According to Taliaferro, one of the replies that undermines this charge of improper divine egoism has to do with the notion of divinization, or *theosis*. Taliaferro contends that divinization does not mean that the human is absorbed by the divine, but rather that the divine-human relationship is one of such deep unity that in action God and human beings are “inextricably bound together.”<sup>5</sup> In this relationship, narrow self-interest is ruled out, as God desires the flourishing of all of his creatures. We share in his life, but he also in some sense shares in ours. This sharing of God in our lives includes our joys and our sorrows. A vain God would not share in our lives in this way, nor allow us to share in his.

I make this brief allusion to Taliaferro’s paper, because it inspired what is to follow. Specifically, as an aside in the paper, Taliaferro notes that “[t]he early Christian notion of divinization has received scant attention in Anglo-American philosophy.”<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I slightly increase the level of such attention given to *theosis* by reflecting upon it in conjunction with some contemporary philosophical concepts and considering some problems related to it. In so doing, I ignore the advice of Augustine, who writes, “That he should make men gods is to be understood in divine silence.”<sup>7</sup> However, by considering some ways of understanding this transformative union between human beings and God, we can see its relevance for the process of spiritual formation in Christ.

The doctrine of *theosis* receives important biblical justification in 2 Peter 1:3–11 (ESV), which states:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Taliaferro, “The Vanity of God,” *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 140–154.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Daniel Keating, *Deification and Grace* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2007), 113.

glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Controversy and difficulty arise when we seek a fuller understanding of the notion of *theosis*. Even descriptions given by prominent Christian thinkers leave important questions unanswered, at least initially. For example, Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies*, claims that “God the Logos became what we are, in order that we may become what he himself is.”<sup>9</sup> This is rephrased by Athanasius, who says, “[T]he Word of God Himself...assumed humanity that we might become God. He manifested Himself by means of a body in order that we might perceive the Mind of the unseen Father. He endured shame from men that we might inherit immortality.”<sup>10</sup> In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas defends the claim that it was necessary that the Word of God become incarnate in part for reasons related to *theosis*.<sup>11</sup> For Aquinas, the Incarnation was *necessary* for our salvation (i.e., “the restoration of human nature”) not because it was the only means to this end, but rather because it accomplished this end in a superior manner. Specifically, Aquinas discusses how the Incarnation restores human nature for “our ‘furtherance in good.’” The Incarnation bestows on us “full participation of the Divinity, which is the true bliss of [humanity] and end of human life.” He goes on to quote one of Augustine’s sermons, where he states that “God was made man, that man might be made God.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, the *kenosis* of Christ was the means chosen by God to achieve the *theosis* of humanity.

I will argue below that *theosis* can be thought of as a *progressively transformational union with Christ*, but what more should be said about

<sup>8</sup> All Scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>9</sup> *Against Heresies* 5, pref.; ANF 1:526.

<sup>10</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 54, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/athanasius/incarnation.ix.html>

<sup>11</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, [http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.TP\\_Q1\\_A2.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.TP_Q1_A2.html)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

this concept? The foregoing quick historical summary yields more questions than answers. The idea that humans might *become* divine can raise numerous red flags, both theological and philosophical, depending upon how this becoming is spelled out. *Theosis*, however, need not include the idea that humans become God in some objectionable way. It does not require that we literally become God, or are absorbed into God, or are equal with God. Rather, it is consistent with important distinctions that exist between human beings and God. We are creatures, God is the Creator. We are finite, God is infinite. God is essentially and eternally morally perfect, we are not. As we will see, if it is interpreted in a particular way, the doctrine of *theosis* ought to be embraced and integrated into a flourishing Christian life. In fact, it is arguably a significant way of understanding what such a life entails.

## PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS

In *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, Michael Christensen discusses deification in three categories: the promise, process, and problem of *theosis*.<sup>13</sup> The *promise* of *theosis* as a way of understanding the promise of salvation in its fullness is found not only in 2 Peter 1, but also Romans 8:29, 1 John 3:2, and 2 Corinthians 3:18. According to Christensen, Origen understands the *process* of *theosis* as one in which the soul is educated, one's nature is transformed, and the person is united with God. Cyril of Alexandria describes it as follows: "Just as if someone were to entwine two pieces of wax together and melt them with a fire, so that both are made one, so too through participation in the Body of Christ and in His Precious Blood, He is united in us and we too in Him."<sup>14</sup> Many other images are used in the Eastern and Western traditions to represent deification: "Likeness to God as far as possible, climbing the ladder of divine ascent, crossing the chasm that divides, learning to fly, putting on the robe, interweaving threads of God and humanity, interpenetration...the polished human mirror reflecting its divine source, the red-hot iron receiving heat from the divine fire, [and] fusion into a new Divine-humanity."<sup>15</sup> Whatever different nuances and images are used, there is common agreement that "human beings are creatures called, in some way, to become god."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Christensen, "The Problem, Promise, and Process of *Theosis*," in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, ed. Michael Christensen and Jeffrey Wittung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 23–31.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Christensen, "The Problem, Promise, and Process of *Theosis*," 27.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

This leads us naturally to my focus in what follows, namely, the *problem of theosis*. One problem that has already been briefly discussed is that sometimes the language employed to describe *theosis* could lead one to reject the concept because it includes the claim that human beings *become*, in an objectionable *ontological* sense, divine. A note on what deification is not in the Orthodox Study Bible offers a basic reply to this problem: “to be more like God...does not mean that human beings then become divine. We do not become like God in his nature. That would not only be heresy, it would be impossible. For we are human, always have been human, and always will be human. We cannot take on the nature of God.”<sup>17</sup> But we can and should participate, partake, or share in, that nature. In the remainder of this paper, I consider problems raised by *theosis* for concerns related to human nature and moral development in order to develop a deeper understanding of this doctrine. To that end, I first make use of and extend some key points made by Christian philosopher William Alston in a discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in sanctification. I conclude the paper with several points related to the practice of *theosis*.

## ALSTON ON THE INDWELLING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In a paper entitled “The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit,” Alston explores the role of the Holy Spirit in the moral transformation of the believer.<sup>18</sup> He contends that both God and the individual human have roles to play in the process of moral growth. We are not left on our own, but neither does God simply do it on our behalf. We are not mere patients; we are also agents involved in the process.

In order to understand Alston’s view, consider two models of the moral work of the Holy Spirit, which he rejects. In *the divine fiat model*, God simply acts upon the believer to effect moral change in the way that he acts on the rest of creation. If God desires some change to occur in the believer, he wills it, and it occurs. One problem according to Alston is that there is no place for divine-human intimacy within this particular account of Christian moral growth. Whatever intimacy does exist is unrelated to the moral improvement of the believer, and for Alston this is sufficient for rejecting the account. Presumably this is because our moral formation is very important, and should be a significant aspect of our relationship to and intimacy with God.

The second model of the moral work of the Spirit that Alston discusses is *the interpersonal model*. Here, the idea is that the Holy Spirit seeks to

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 28, quoting p. 561.

<sup>18</sup> William Alston, “The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit,” in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 121–150.

morally influence us in ways that another human being might, including speech, being a role model, and through emotional connections. So the Spirit might encourage us to change via bringing a passage of Scripture to our minds, or by simply being an exemplar of moral goodness, or we may be moved to change by our emotional ties to the Spirit. Alston thinks this model is lacking in part because it “leaves the parties involved external to each other in a fundamental way.”<sup>19</sup> Since the Holy Spirit is thought to fill the believer, permeating her life, there is a deeper internality present that the analogy of the interpersonal model does not capture.

The model Alston favors is *the sharing model* of sanctification, which is based in part on the aforementioned passage in 2 Peter 1. Alston favors a deep and more literal construal of sharing, beyond simply knowing and loving some of what God knows and loves. This sharing will include “a literal merging or mutual interpenetration of the life of the individual and the divine life, a breaking down of the barriers that normally separate one life from another.”<sup>20</sup> Normally, when two people have shared interests, attitudes, and reactions, even in cases where there is a close relationship, they are still insulated from each other in significant ways, both physical and psychological. Alston wants us to imagine a breakdown of these barriers, so that the attitudes, interests, and reactions of God which we share as we participate in his nature *are as immediately available to us as our own*, and can influence us in the same way that our own do. More specifically, when we participate in the divine nature, we will share God’s feelings, attitudes, tendencies, values, and beliefs. They will still be *God’s*, and if we respond appropriately, they will also become *ours*.

In my view, a fourth model is the best way to think about sanctification, *the union with Christ model*. This model is related to the above discussion from Alston, insofar as it subsumes his sharing model of sanctification within the interpersonal model. It is a hybrid view, but takes the sharing discussed by Alston to be a central element of the interpersonal relationship that exists between the believer and Christ.

One reason for adopting the union with Christ model is there is a flaw in Alston’s construal of the interpersonal model. He argues that it should be rejected because the physical and psychological barriers that exist in a relationship between two human persons differs from the deep unity that is part of the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the believer’s life. In one sense, Alston is correct. Even in the closest of human interpersonal relationships, the marriage relationship, there are physical and psychological barriers with respect to the transparent sort of sharing that Alston describes in the sharing model. Yet some of these limitations do not arise when one of the parties in the relationship is God. God is fully aware of our thoughts, feelings, desires, and dispositions, even those that are opaque to us. And

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<sup>19</sup> Alston, “The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit,” 137.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

as we open our lives up to God via certain spiritual disciplines and the work of the Holy Spirit, we become more directly aware of his mind and nature as well. But what is crucial at present is that this mutual awareness and sharing of thoughts occurs in the context of an interpersonal relationship between the human person and the divine persons who make up the Trinity. There is a depth of unity that is possible between the believer and God that is unmatched by any merely human relationship. Because of this, and perhaps for other reasons as well, I contend that we should think of the moral work of the Spirit as an aspect of union with Christ, a model of sanctification that includes elements from both the interpersonal model and the sharing model Alston discusses. This union with Christ model, then, also captures what many proponents of the doctrine of *theosis* mean by the term. It is a transformational and deep relationship with God.

To see how this works, consider the case of divine love. When *theosis* is occurring with respect to such love, the follower of Christ does not merely exemplify a trait common to both her and God, but rather she has an *immediate awareness* of God's love that is like the immediate awareness she has of her own feelings, attitudes, and tendencies. And the reason she has this awareness is that she is in a deep interpersonal relationship with God. Within this relationship, she is aware of and feels the love of Christ directed towards her. This transforms her as her thoughts, emotions, and dispositions change in a relational response to the love of God. If she is directly aware of God's love in this way, this can lead her own heart and mind to become more like the heart and mind of Christ. Her desires, dispositions, and actions will, over time, be changed. She will become more like Christ. As Alston puts it,

Why shouldn't we think of participation in the divine life as consisting, in part, in the introduction into my conative system of initially weak, isolated, and fragile tendencies...as well as consisting, in part, of my immediate awareness of God's tendencies of the same sorts? This would be a foot in the conative as well as the cognitive door; it would be a foothold, a beachhead from which the progressive conquest of the individual's motivational system could get a start.<sup>21</sup>

This is very similar, and perhaps is one way of interpreting, Athanasius' comment on *theosis* and the Incarnation: "He manifested Himself by means of a body in order that we might perceive the mind of the unseen Father."<sup>22</sup> With Christ as our mediator, we are able to have an awareness of the heart and mind of God the Father, and if we respond to it properly, our hearts

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>22</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 54. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/athanasius/incarnation.ix.html>

and minds are transformed. But again, this happens as the believer is more deeply united in relationship with Christ.

*Theosis* involves more than merely perceiving God's thoughts. It includes moral and spiritual growth as well. It changes who we are, in a normative sense, as well as how we live. A concept from contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor is useful here. In his *Sources of the Self*, Taylor introduces the concept of strong evaluations. These "strong evaluations... involve discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged."<sup>23</sup> Taylor's strong evaluations also partially constitute our identity; they define for us who we are, normatively speaking.<sup>24</sup> When someone's identity is defined in this way "they are saying that were they to lose this commitment or identification, they would be at sea, as it were; they would not know anymore, for an important range of questions, what the significance of things was for them."<sup>25</sup> Examples of a set of such evaluations offered by Taylor include anarchism and Roman Catholicism. For our present concerns, we can say that *theosis* involves the perception, progressive adoption, and ultimately the application of God's strong evaluations, which partially constitute our normative identity as children of God. The direct awareness of these tendencies and other mental states, of divine strong evaluations, can lead to the transformation of character alluded to in 2 Peter and the doctrine of *theosis*. We grow in virtue, knowledge, and love as we become aware of the mind of God and then rightly respond to that awareness, which occurs in the context of a growing relationship with Christ. Crucially, it is not by mere effort that such change occurs, but rather this change is empowered by the presence of God's Spirit within the believer and motivated by divine love and grace.

For example, we can come to share God's view of the value and proper place of material wealth in our lives, as we are directly aware of his thoughts on the matter and are motivated by his love to adopt them as our own and implement them in our lives. A Christian living in contemporary America may face the perennial temptation to make money his main pursuit in life. In order to undermine this, he may meditate for a time on Matthew 6:24, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." As he becomes more devoted to God in response to his love and grace, he begins to view money as God does. His

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 4.

<sup>24</sup> This is distinct from *metaphysical* personal identity, which endures through time.

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27.



values, desires, and dispositions change. His experience of the love of God and the transformative work of the Spirit help him to value God more than money. In this way, he can come to share God's strong evaluations with respect to wealth, and be transformed towards Christlikeness in the process. This also reveals the aptness of *theosis* for evangelicalism, insofar as it is strongly centered on the word of God and the activity of the Spirit of God within the believer. In the next section of this paper, I will consider certain philosophical and theological problems raised by the *theosis*.

## BECOMING DIVINE?

As we have seen, one problem that arises with respect to *theosis* is the idea that a human being could literally become divine. This would be problematic, because each one of us is essentially a mere human being, which precludes the possibility of becoming divine in a strictly literal sense. We are creatures, not the Creator. As such, we cannot become God. Evangelical sensibilities are especially wary of the some of the language that is used to describe deification, and rightly so given certain readings of this language. However, there are ways of understanding *theosis* that do not include philosophically and theologically objectionable ideas such as "equality with God," "elevation to divine status," or "absorption into God's essence."<sup>26</sup> Alston, for example, states that *partaking in the divine* does not equate to *is identical to the divine*. *Theosis* does not include the notion that human persons somehow become God, strictly speaking. Nor does it mean that we become divine, on par with God. This is also true for proponents of *theosis*, even though the language employed sometimes obscures this fact. The biblical authors, the church fathers, and other prominent Christian thinkers such as Gregory Palamas, Aquinas, Luther, Wesley, and Calvin who discuss deification do not make the mistake of claiming that human beings become divine or are absorbed into the divine in an ontological sense, blurring the distinction between the Creator and his creation. God's transcendence and our creaturely status are preserved by this doctrine.

But what does *theosis* mean, if not a literal becoming divine or being absorbed into the divine? Robert Rakestraw claims that *theosis* can be thought of as "the restoration and reintegration of the 'image' or... 'likeness' of God, seriously distorted by the fall, in the children of God." Moreover, "this is more than the customary Protestant concept of sanctification...In theosis, while there is no ontological change of humanity into

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<sup>26</sup> James Starr, "Does 2 Peter 1:4 Speak of Deification?" in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, ed. Michael Christensen and Jeffrey Wittung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 90.

deity there is a very real impartation of the divine life to the whole human being,” which includes a realization of “the potential for ontological sharing in the life of God.”<sup>27</sup> What does it mean to participate, partake, or share in God’s nature? There are two primary senses of participation, philosophically speaking.<sup>28</sup> One sense, which can broadly be referred to as the Platonic sense of participation, has to do with how many individual particulars share some common property. For example, all human beings share or participate in a common human nature. All red objects participate in redness, and so on. We do not participate in the divine nature in this sense, as this would lead to a blurring between God the Creator and human beings as creatures.

But there is a second sense of participation that informed how many of the Fathers understood this term. Daniel Keating makes this explicit, stating that the “concept of participation was used to describe the unequal relationship between what is essential and what is derivative.”<sup>29</sup> For example, God is the source of all being, and as creatures we participate in his being. He has being essentially, we have it derivatively. God necessarily exists, we contingently exist. Applying this distinction to *theosis* is helpful. We *participate in* God’s knowledge, virtue, and love; we do not *become* God’s knowledge, virtue, and love. Our nature is distinct from God’s nature, but when deification is a reality in our lives we possess such qualities in part from God and in dependence on God, who possesses them fully and essentially by his nature. Participating in the divine nature involves personal, not Platonic, participation.<sup>30</sup>

This also underscores the aptness of the *union with Christ model* compared to Alston’s sharing model. We do not become God, strictly speaking, but as *theosis* becomes a greater reality in our lives we become directly aware of more of the mind of God, sharing in the divine mind and experiencing divine love and grace. Then, over time, our character is transformed as we grow in the Christian virtues. We have a direct awareness of God’s strong evaluations, and as we are empowered by the Spirit we adopt them as our own and progressively live them out in our everyday lives. In this limited and particular sense, we become divine, practicing and progressively growing in qualities like those listed in 2 Peter 1: faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love. All of this occurs in the context of relationship with God in which his love and grace, as we receive them, play essential roles in transforming our whole being. In the next section, I consider *theosis* and its connections to moral development in more detail.

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<sup>27</sup> Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God,” 261.

<sup>28</sup> Keating, *Deification and Grace*, 97–98.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>30</sup> See Keating, *Deification and Grace*, 100, 109.

## MORAL DEVELOPMENT

In contemporary philosophy, Aristotle's emulation-habituation model of moral development is often employed as a foil or resource in discussions of such development. For Aristotle, virtues are settled dispositions—states of character—that concern belief, desire, feeling, and action. Virtues are habitual and excellent ways of being and acting in the world. To *become* virtuous we should acquire the right sort of habits and desires in childhood; but more generally to become more virtuous, we must do virtuous acts (employing the virtue of prudence). As Aristotle puts it, “We become builders...by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.”<sup>31</sup> We do this in part by emulating a moral exemplar, by observing how she lives and then seeking to do likewise.

For an action to be fully virtuous, it is not just that the act has particular qualities, but also that the agent who performs the act does as well. He must know that he is doing the virtuous action, he must decide for himself to do it, and he must do the act from a stable character. The latter two conditions can be achieved, according to Aristotle, by frequently performing virtuous actions, in imitation of some moral exemplar.

It seems to me that from a Christian perspective, there is much to be said for this view of moral development. A Christian may see that she falls short in generosity, recognize the generosity present in the character of Christ or someone who exemplifies this trait, and then choose to give more liberally to a church, missions organization, charity, or directly to a person in need. Over time, it is plausible that when she does so she will grow in the virtue of generosity. There is empirical evidence that supports this: If we form an intention, including both a specific goal and a means for implementing it, then the chances for success significantly increase.<sup>32</sup> This is consistent with what Dallas Willard has argued is important for actually putting on the character of Christ.<sup>33</sup> There is a standard pattern of personal change, according to Willard. First and foremost, there is an essential place in Christian transformation for the grace and activity of God (which is not a component of the Aristotelian model). In addition, we need vision, intention, and means for such change to reliably occur. We need a vision of life in the kingdom of God, we must decide to be like Christ and live in the kingdom as he did, and we also need to find and implement the means for becoming such a person. *Theosis* is related to all of these elements. Union

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<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b.

<sup>32</sup> On this evidence, see Peter Gollwitzer, “Implementation Intentions: Strong Effects of Simple Plans,” *American Psychologist* 54 (1999): 493–503.

<sup>33</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), chap. 5.

with God in Christ as described by the doctrine helps provide a vision for life in God's kingdom, and it is a significant aspect of the means of Christian transformation. Other means are relevant here as well; I will discuss them in the final section of this paper. Of course, the vision and means are only effective if there is a deliberate choice to pursue the vision and implement the means, as Willard notes.

There are issues here, however, that must be resolved. First, as Steve Porter points out in a discussion of moral development as it relates to contentment, we can perform virtuous actions for non-virtuous reasons, which can then habituate or reinforce moral vice rather than virtue.<sup>34</sup> For example, a husband might perform kind acts toward his wife, and habitually respond to her in kind ways, and yet all the while he is thinking about how she now owes him kindness in return. This will not yield the virtue of kindness, but rather will reveal and reinforce self-centeredness. Moreover, Aristotle's emulation-habituation model seems to *presuppose* the presence of virtue, at least to some degree. The virtuous person not only does virtuous acts, but does them in the right way and with the right emotions, taking pleasure in performing such acts. But how can emulation-habituation produce a virtue where it is not yet present, especially given the fact that performing virtuous acts is, at least in the earlier stages of the process, painful? As Porter rightly puts it, "[U]ndertaking virtuous behavior in order to bring about virtuous character puts the cart before the horse."<sup>35</sup>

The solution offered by Porter begins with the observation that we need to develop *the psychological states and dispositions* of our exemplar that give rise to the relevant virtuous acts. In order to achieve this, rather than practicing the virtuous acts of our chosen exemplar in order to become like him, we should instead practice the overall way of life that made the exemplar the kind of person that he is. The result of this will be a virtuous character that exemplifies the thoughts, beliefs, desires, and dispositions of one's exemplar, and then as a result this character will tend to yield virtuous actions. What role might *theosis* play here, i.e., how might it fit within and clarify a Christian theory of moral development?

*Theosis*, as it has been interpreted here, offers us a way of understanding the development in us of the psychological states and dispositions of our exemplar, Jesus Christ. The Scriptures present the reality of a deep union between Jesus and God the Father, and surely a significant part of this union is the direct awareness that Jesus possessed of the thoughts, interests, and values of the Father. What Jesus had by nature as the Son of God, we as creatures are able to access by grace as sons and daughters of God. Upon becoming indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we now have direct access

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<sup>34</sup> Steve L. Porter, "Contentment," in *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Life*, ed. Michael W. Austin and R. Douglas Geivett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 126–144.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

to the mind and heart of God. Our role, in part, is to cultivate our own awareness of God's mind and heart. This is foundational for both the unitive and characterological aspects of *theosis*. If something like the union with Christ model of sanctification is correct, then we can come to have the psychological states and dispositions of our exemplar because his states and dispositions are also ours, as we grow in loving union with God. We participate in God's nature, and then by grace we are enabled to become more like Christ.

## THE PRACTICE OF *THEOSIS*

Our exemplar, Jesus, cultivated an awareness of God the Father in many ways, including the practices of prayer, solitude, and meditation upon the Scriptures. He assumed that his disciples fasted and encouraged them to do so in a particular way in the Sermon on the Mount. In many Christian traditions, these and other spiritual disciplines (that are oft-discussed in the pages of this journal), along with various sacraments of the church, have been alluded to as means of response to the loving presence of God that can foster *theosis*. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the human means of *theosis* can be summarized with the Greek term *nepsis*, i.e., intensity, zeal, watchfulness, spiritual wariness, and vigilance.<sup>36</sup> *Nepsis* can be expressed in a variety of ways, e.g., through contemplation, prayer, stillness, and detachment from worldliness. Certain ascetic practices such as fasting are also important as a way of overcoming vice and sinful passions as well as fostering virtue.

One discipline that emerges from the foregoing discussion as being of particular importance is the memorization of Scripture. This is a, or perhaps the, primary means by which God's thoughts can become our thoughts. As we memorize and integrate passages of Scripture into our lives, we become directly aware of more of the mind of God. We come to share in the divine mind. When we have memorized Scripture, and take the proper attitude towards it, we not only know what God knows, but we know God via a direct awareness of some of his mental states. There are significant limits here, given the moral and metaphysical gap between creatures and the Creator. Nevertheless, memorization of Scripture can foster a deep union of the human and divine, which is a central aspect of the doctrine of *theosis*. This should motivate us to be persistent in our practice of memorizing Scripture. The amount memorized is less important than the depth of acquaintance and integration into one's life, as well as the grasping of and yielding to the love of God that should infuse this practice. Moreover, as we share in God's

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<sup>36</sup> Daniel Clendenin, "Partakers of Divinity: The Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis," *JETS* 37 (1994): 378.

thoughts in these ways, we will progressively come to have the same strong evaluations that God has. We will begin to value what God values, becoming one in heart and mind with him. In this way our intellectual and moral character will mirror God's as we integrate divine truth into our everyday lives. We will mirror the virtues of Christ and experience the love of Christ as a result of our deep union with Christ.

The virtues play an essential role as well. To see why, consider Calvin's discussion of 1 John 3:2, "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." For Calvin, it is not the eschatological vision of God that yields a transformation in us, but rather it is this transformation that enables us to have this vision of God. As Mosser puts it, "Once transformed and fitted for the vision of God we will then be like Christ—dazzlingly radiant, glorious, immortal beings."<sup>37</sup> We must intentionally cultivate virtue as a way to enable us to see God in part now, more fully. Over time and via our union with God, we can come to possess by grace some of the attributes that God has by nature.<sup>38</sup> Our human nature can be restored. We can, in this limited sense, become divine.

Virtues are of course closely tied to interpersonal relationships, which are another context in which *theosis* is cultivated and expressed. As Francis Caponi argues, "[T]hese theological virtues are supernatural capacities bestowed in justification. They are developed into habitual faculties through concrete exercise, through existential engagement of elevated nature with the whole scope of human life."<sup>39</sup> A crucial area for cultivating such virtues is the realm of interpersonal relationships. This is another way that commitment to others, including the context of the local church, is important. We should see these relationships in part as opportunities for individual and corporate *theosis*: most if not all of the virtues in the New Testament virtue lists are other-regarding, or at least have other-regarding aspects and implications. This is significant. We have further justification it would seem, for practicing the spiritual disciplines both alone and in community with others, namely, as a means of *theosis*, of growing in union with and fostering a likeness to God in Christ. The spiritual disciplines are not just about seeking some special experience of God. There is nothing wrong with longing for God's presence, but many of us are seeking a particular kind of emotional experience without realizing the relevance of transformed character for the spiritual life. The doctrine of *theosis* can act as a corrective here, as it includes a deep union with Christ coupled with the cultivation of intellectual and moral virtue in Christ.

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<sup>37</sup> Mosser, "The Greatest Possible Blessing," 51–52.

<sup>38</sup> See *Ibid.*, 37, n. 2.

<sup>39</sup> In Christensen and Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 272.

## CONCLUSION

The doctrine of *theosis* and the union between Christ and the believer that is central to it are aptly described by the prayer of Paul for the church at Ephesus:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Eph. 3:14–21)

At its heart, *theosis* is best understood as a transformative union with Christ, made possible by God's grace and power in the life of the cooperative believer. In other words, *theosis* is a *progressively transformational and loving union between the believer and Christ*. This relationship includes a shared mind and heart, but it is also an empowering union that is grounded in God's love and its transformative effects on the heart and mind of the believer who seeks him via a variety of spiritual disciplines.

Christians should embrace and emphasize this concept in theory and practice, both individually and corporately. *Theosis*, properly understood, adds important elements to both our understanding and pursuit of the aims of the Christian life. It emphasizes the importance of union with Christ and the depth and extent of transformation that is possible in Christ. My aim here has not been to provide a comprehensive description or defense of the doctrine, but rather to show that some of the common theological and philosophical worries surrounding it are flawed, and to argue that it has something important—even essential—to contribute to both the theory and practice of Christian spirituality.<sup>40</sup>

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