

# Theosis in the Thought of Herman Bavinck?: Thomas F. Torrance’s Reconstruction of the Doctrine and its Promise for Bavinck’s Theology

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## KEY WORDS

| Herman Bavinck | Thomas F. Torrance | *Theosis* |  
| Nature and Grace | Union with Christ |

## ABSTRACT

Central to understanding Herman Bavinck’s creation ontology is the dictum “grace restores and perfects nature.” The second half of this, namely that God’s work of grace aims to lead creation towards its perfection, is often neglected in articulations of Bavinck’s theology. To help underscore the importance of this perfecting work, with its soteriological and eschatological dimensions, this essay proposes that there is a fundamental similarity between this element of Bavinck’s thought and the doctrine of *theosis*. To that end, this essay examines Thomas F. Torrance’s doctrine of *theosis*, as a facet of his broader trinitarian theology, to highlight that not only do Bavinck and Torrance bear some surprising similarities, but also Torrance provides language helpful to reexamine Bavinck’s eschatological anthropology in light of the category of *theosis*.

## INTRODUCTION

Central to Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck’s theological system is the formula that “grace restores nature.” This is Bavinck’s shorthand for understanding the unity of the biblical narrative and drawing out its implications for understanding the Creator-creature relationship. Given the fact of sin in God’s creation, God does not abandon what he has made, but rather works throughout history to restore it. This leads Bavinck to affirm the enduring goodness of creation and God’s care for it. Additionally, because it is in the scope of God’s redemptive work through Christ, Christians too ought to be concerned with facets of life in this world, and not merely their spiritual lives or heavenly future.

However, as several authors have pointed out, to conclude that grace merely restores nature to its original integrity misses Bavinck’s

emphasis on the way the economy of grace leads to a unique development of creation not otherwise possible. As Bavinck stresses, one must affirm that “grace repairs and *perfects* nature.”<sup>1</sup> Bavinck’s understanding of the relation of God’s work of redemption from sin to the material creation includes the notion that the cosmos from the beginning was always designed to be developed beyond its protological state into higher forms of glorification and revelation of God. Such a goal for creation was not meant to be attained by some *donum superadditum* of grace in the Roman Catholic sense. That is, through the provision of something external to nature’s ontology which serves to elevate it into something new. Rather, grace leads creation

1 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MN: Baker Academic, 2006), III:226. Emphasis added.

forward and upward towards its goal by working in organic relation with creation's already-present latencies.<sup>2</sup> God does this through the economy of supernatural grace, by providing special revelation, filling human beings with his Spirit to be equipped for their task, and also in light of the fall providing redemption from sin. For Bavinck, it is the role of grace, to lead creation to its eschatological *telos*.<sup>3</sup>

As Brian Mattson argues, this has important implications for Bavinck's anthropology, and specifically his understanding of the nature of the eschatological destiny of humanity.<sup>4</sup> The *imago Dei* restored in humanity by the supreme image of God, the Person of Christ, and is elevated in the eschaton through unity with Christ. Through this union between God and man, human nature in its perfected and glorified state to fulfill the functions for which God made humanity in the first place: knowing and loving God in the entirety of one's being. It is important to stress, however, that this takes place only on the basis of being united to God through spiritual participation in life, death, resurrection, and glorification of the incarnate Son.<sup>5</sup> Hielema rightly recognizes the central role this union with Christ plays in Bavinck's thought. This also has important implications for Bavinck's Christology, for union with Christ purpose for which the whole creation was prepared.<sup>6</sup>

2 Bavinck, *RD*, III:577; cf. Sydney Jacob Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption" (Th.D. Thesis, Wycliffe College, 1998), 255.

3 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), IV:685. Cf. Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," 222.

4 For a summary of Mattson's argument, see his conclusion in *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 237–43.

5 Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 201.

6 Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption," 201.

These themes of perfection, union with Christ, and the necessity of the incarnation point to the fact that Bavinck's theology is profoundly ripe for the incorporation of the summative theme of *theosis*. This is the notion that humanity is meant to be united to and participate in the trinitarian life of God. Bavinck is admittedly antagonistic towards the doctrine of *theosis* in the Eastern tradition, and even faults inroads of such a doctrine into the Western tradition in Roman Catholic and Lutheran theology as a source of dualistic mysticism.<sup>7</sup> This essay will argue, however, that despite his protestations, Bavinck articulates something of a mature Reformed doctrine of *theosis*, and that the category of *theosis* is helpful for understanding Bavinck's foundational construal of the nature-grace relationship. As a basic axiom for Bavinck's theological system, this relationship in turn forms an important framework for his anthropology, Christology, and eschatology. In line with Bavinck, the Reformed tradition has been quite hesitant to utilize the notion of *theosis*, opting instead to emphasize union with Christ as the goal of redemption. However, several authors have recently conducted efforts in reclaiming *theosis* in the Reformed tradition.<sup>8</sup> This essay sees fruit especially in the clarity provided by Scottish Presbyterian Thomas F. Torrance, particularly as examined by Myk Habets.

7 Bavinck, *RD*, III:255–56.

8 See for example, Joanna Leidenhag, "Demarcating Deification and the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Reformed Theology," *Perichoresis* 18.1 (2020): 77–98; Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011), 91–102; Michael McClymond, "Salvation as Divinization: Jonathan Edwards, Gregory Palamas and the Theological Uses of Neoplatonism," in *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian*, ed. Oliver Crisp and Paul Helm (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004) 142–55; Carl Mosser, "Recovering the Reformation's Ecumenical Vision of Redemption as Deification and Beatific Vision," *Perichoresis* 18.1 (2020): 3–24; and Kyle Strobel, "Jonathan Edwards's Reformed Doctrine of Theosis," *Harvard Theological Review* 109, no. 3 (July 2016): 371–99.

This essay will argue that Torrance’s clarity on how we should understand *theosis*, especially in light of the Creator-creature distinction, provides a way to revisit the relationship between union with Christ and the notion of grace perfecting nature in Bavinck’s thought. These clarifications regarding *theosis* then provide a way to overcome Bavinck’s hesitations towards theotic language in order to show how his thought is actually quite friendly to it. The benefit in such reexamination of Bavinck’s theology in light of Torrance’s contribution is that it helps hold together both the restorative and developmental-teleological works of grace in nature. Though grace perfecting nature is too often neglected in contemporary articulations of Bavinck’s theology, the full picture of Bavinck’s nature-grace dialectic is arguably incomplete without it. It will be posed therefore that *theosis* provides a helpful category to hold together what many have seen forms the heart of Bavinck’s entire system.<sup>9</sup>

### THEOSIS IN THE PATRISTIC FATHERS AND THE REFORMED TRADITION

Ever careful to guard against the mysticism he believed was inherent in the Eastern notion of *theosis* in which the finite participates or is united to the infinite, Bavinck rejects *theosis*. And to be fair, he has good reason in doing so. Much of the discussion surrounding *theosis* through the ages has been mired in

9 John Bolt, Brian Mattson, and Sydney Hielema all see the “plus” in the work of Christ in relation to creation as pivotal in Bavinck’s thought. That is, what grace brings to nature is certainly a restoration of its integrity, but also an organic development beyond its initial form. See John A. Bolt, *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck’s Two Essays on the Imitatio Christi* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2013), 182; Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 4–9; Hielema, “Herman Bavinck’s Eschatological Understanding of Redemption,” 215–16.

imprecise language, misunderstandings, and even misconstruals of the Creator-creature relationship. As Zorgdrager points out, most contemporary Protestants hold that the term, and its associated English translation of “divinization,” implies humans having the ability to “become the sort of being that the one true God is”—a claim the early church fathers never intended to make.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the early church fathers rarely used the term *theosis*, and its cognate *theopoiesis*, which literally mean “becoming god,” and “making into a god” respectively.<sup>11</sup> Even though the ideas inherent in the category of *theosis* play an important but not definitive role for the patristic fathers<sup>12</sup>, it was not until the 6th and 7th centuries with the works of Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor that *theosis* received more systematic treatment.<sup>13</sup> Despite this, for the early church fathers, *theosis* was never meant in a literal sense, that is, human beings were never understood to undergo *ontological* union with the divine, as the term implies.<sup>14</sup> Much contemporary hesitance towards the term, especially in the Reformed tradition, owes more to the central role *theosis* plays in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which can be oriented towards dualistic mysticism, and difficulties in translating the term, than the actual legacy of the patristic fathers who are said

10 Heleen E. Zorgdrager, “On the Fullness of Salvation: Tracking *Theosis* in Reformed Theology,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 8.4 (2014): 358.

11 Myk Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies (New York: Routledge, 2016), 5.

12 Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, “Introduction,” in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006), 4.

13 Vladimir Kharlamov, “*Theosis* in Patristic Thought,” *Theology Today* 65.2 (2008): 163–65.

14 Kharlamov, “*Theosis* in Patristic Thought,” 165–66.

to have laid the foundations for the doctrine.<sup>15</sup>

The classic biblical text which utilizes language reminiscent of the notion of *theosis* is 2 Peter 1:4: “By these he has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may share [*koinōnoi*] in the divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world because of evil desire” (CSB).<sup>16</sup> Many non-Eastern Orthodox theologians see this text as referring not to participation in the divine nature as implied by the term “divinization,” becoming God-like in one’s being, but rather as sharing in God’s immortality, characterized by eschatological life-unending.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, such was the regard or understanding/interpretation in the writings of the first century Apostolic Fathers such as Clement of Rome, Epistle of Barnabas, Didache, and Ignatius of Antioch: “The Apostolic Fathers saw immortality as a gift of God, not a natural property of the human soul. . . Their language of deification is metaphoric,

not metaphysical.”<sup>18</sup> Despite this, however, the Apostolic Fathers did lay groundwork for the close association of deification themes such as identification with Christ and imitation of him with soteriological categories. Indeed, Ignatius of Antioch writes of union with Christ in his passion and resurrection,<sup>19</sup> and of receiving a “union of flesh and spirit that comes from Jesus Christ.”<sup>20</sup> Ignatius produces the most mature theology of “deification as christification” among the Apostolic Fathers, anticipating the developments which would be made in the second, third, and fourth centuries.<sup>21</sup>

Among the second century Apologists, the soteriological implications of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ feature prominently in Justin Martyr’s thought.<sup>22</sup> For Justin, the human soul is not naturally immortal, for it lives “not as being life, but as partaker of life,” for if it were immortal by nature it would be equal to God.<sup>23</sup> To gain immortality, one must be made immortal by God who will “raise us up by His Christ and will make us incorruptible, and undisturbed, and immortal.”<sup>24</sup> These two notions, namely that participation cannot equal “identical status” with the object of participation, and that humans are reliant upon God to make them immortal through Christ,

15 As Habets explains, Eastern Orthodoxy has “consistently asserted the doctrine of ‘deification.’ With Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, Symeon the New Theologian, Nicholas Cabasilas, and finally Gregory Palamas, the Eastern Orthodox understanding of *theosis* came to mature expression.” Habets, *Theosis in The Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 7. As Finlan and Kharlamov point out, much contemporary animosity towards *theosis* perhaps comes from latent holdovers of Adolf von Harnack’s Hellenization thesis, which held that *theosis* were pagan credal accretions which corrupted the pure “living faith” of the early church. Finlan and Kharlamov, “Introduction,” 8–9.

16 Other texts used to develop a doctrine of *theosis* include Jn. 10:34, Ps. 82:6, Jn. 17:20-23, and Acts 17:28.

17 Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37 of *New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2003), 294–95; Richard Bauckham, *Jude-2 Peter*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 50 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1983), 193.

Green is indicative of another take on the “participation” language, arguing that rather than immortality, the context indicates what Peter has in mind is the acquisition of moral character. Gene L. Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert Stein, *Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 186–87.

18 Vladimir Kharlamov, “Emergence of the Deification Theme in the Apostolic Fathers,” in *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006), 52–53.

19 *Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyreans*, 5.1 (ANF I:88).

20 *Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians*, 1.2 (ANF I:59).

21 Kharlamov, “Emergence of the Deification Theme in the Apostolic Fathers,” 65.

22 Vladimir Kharlamov, “Deification in the Apologists of the Second Century,” in *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006), 68.

23 *Dialogue with Trypho*, 6.1 (ANF 1:198).

24 *Dialogue with Trypho*, 46.7 (ANF 1:218).

highlight that for Justin, participation in God for immortality “implies a unity-in-diversity” in which humans remain ontologically distinct in such deification.<sup>25</sup>

Later in the second century Irenaeus introduces his famous dictum which would undergird any notion of *theosis* henceforth: “following the only true and steadfast Teacher, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”<sup>26</sup> As Finch points out, though Irenaeus never explicitly uses the language of *theosis*, all the characteristic elements are present in his theology.<sup>27</sup> Pivotal in this is Irenaeus’ soteriology and eschatology in which divine-human communion figures prominently. He argues that Jesus was made human in order to “join the end to the beginning, that is, man to God.”<sup>28</sup> Such a union as envisioned by Irenaeus, however, was bordered by a strict Creator-creature distinction on the one hand, owing to his conflict with Gnosticism, and his insistence on the other that God’s essence and activities are not separable, but rather God is his perfections.<sup>29</sup> Bridging the ontological gulf between God and man is the divine Son-made-man in the incarnation, in order that the Son might unite humanity to God. Human participation in the divine life in light of the fact that Irenaeus makes no firm distinction between the ontological and economic Trinity highlights

the fact that for Irenaeus, those who “are in God, and receive his splendor,” share in the internal life of God through being united to the Son.<sup>30</sup> This is far more than simply the possession of salvific immortality, as earlier writers held, and it is possible, Irenaeus holds, because God has given himself in the incarnation of the Son:

For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God. For by no other means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality.<sup>31</sup>

While Irenaeus never fully works out how it is that God’s eternality and infinity are rendered communicable to humanity through the mediation of the Son, Athanasius’ assertion of humanity’s partaking of the divine Son, and not properties of divinity external to the being of God, makes some advance in explaining what is communicated to human beings in *theosis*. Similar to Irenaeus, Athanasius makes the famous statement that Christ “...has become Man that He might deify us in Himself.”<sup>32</sup> This deification is to be understood in light of his conflict with the Arians in which Athanasius argues that the Son is partaker of fullness of the divine essence—were he not, he could not save us—and accordingly, in becoming united to humanity, he is the “mediator of divinity” whereby human nature is capable of sharing in life eternal once again.<sup>33</sup> When the Son, who is consubstantial with the Father and Spirit in their divinity, is made partaker of a human

25 Kharlamov, “Deification in the Apologists of the Second Century,” 70.

26 *Against Heresies*, 5.pref (ANF 1:526).

27 Jeffrey Finch, “Irenaeus on the Christological Basis of Human Divinization,” in *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006), 86.

28 *Against Heresies* 4.20.4 (ANF 1:488).

29 Finch, “Irenaeus on the Christological Basis of Human Divinization,” 91, 94.

30 *Against Heresies* 4.20.5 (ANF 1:489).

31 *Against Heresies* 3.19.1 (ANF 1:448). Cf. Finch, 98-99.

32 *Letter to Adolphus*, 4 (NPNF2 4:576).

33 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 7.

nature ontologically, the possibility of human individuals being made partakers of divinity in the Person of the Son is likewise made available.<sup>34</sup> Rather than humanity partaking of the divine essence as a generality, individuals partake of divinity by partaking of the Person of the Son.<sup>35</sup> The Son is consubstantial with the Father and the Spirit in the fullness of deity, and has united human nature in its fullness to himself.<sup>36</sup> In such condescension by God, the Son unites transcendence with finitude, and in so doing renders communicable the divine ousia itself, albeit only in the *hypostasis* of the Son.<sup>37</sup> Were this not the case—that is, were the Son incapable of communicating that which is his in his being, he would be considered less than equal to the Father, giving credence to Arian claims.<sup>38</sup> The hypostatic union, therefore, whereby Christ takes to the divine life a human nature, provides to the way for humans to take to themselves divine life in which immortality and incorruptibility become theirs—though without them ceasing to be fully human, just as the Son in the incarnation never lacks the fullness of divinity.<sup>39</sup>

While the doctrine of *theosis* would grow in maturity in Eastern thought in important ways, what concerns us in this study is its relation

to Reformed theology.<sup>40</sup> While the Eastern Orthodox tradition follows the Palamite distinction between God's energies and essence, whereby *theosis* means a partaking only of the divine energies external to God's being, the Reformed tradition following Athanasius and Irenaeus posits such a distinction as unhelpful: "God in his actions *ad extra* is the God who is *in se*," as Habets argues.<sup>41</sup> The Son as consubstantial with the Father and the Spirit partakes of the divine ousia; he is autotheotic, as John Calvin holds.<sup>42</sup> Subsequently, as Calvin's foundational understanding of the divine work of redemption is the *unio mystica*, union with Christ, Calvin's theology is subsequently friendly to theosis as articulated in the Nicene tradition.<sup>43</sup> For Calvin, union with Christ is mediated by the Spirit, who causes elect humans to be united to Christ—Calvin's union with Christ is more than humans being united to the impersonal energies of God's communicable attributes, but with the person himself.<sup>44</sup> The Reformed distinction between the immanent-economic and the transcendent-ontologic Trinity is crucial here,

34 Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 184.

35 John Behr, *The Nicene Faith: Part One: True God of True God*, vol. 2 of *Formation of Christian Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 232–34.

36 *Defense of the Nicene Definition*, 9-10 (NPNF2 4:156). Cf. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 181.

37 Cf. Myk Habets, "Reformed *Theosis*?": A Response to Gannon Murphy," *Theology Today* 65.4 (2009): 493.

38 Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 104.

39 *Defense of the Nicene Definition*, 14 (NPNF2 4:159). Cf. Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 7.

40 This study recognizes that recent advances in Luther studies, specifically by the Finnish School, argue that *theosis* plays a pivotal role in Luther's understanding of justification, which in turn pushes back against the reception of Luther in much of Protestant thought. While not insignificant, Luther's thought on the subject is beyond the scope of this study. Myk Habets, "Reforming *Theōsis*," in *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006), 147–48.

41 Habets, "Reformed *Theosis*?," 493.

42 Calvin holds that the hypostasis of the Son is consubstantial with the hypostases of the Father and the Spirit, and each communicates the fullness of God. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 1.13.2, 122–23; Cf. John McClean, "Perichoresis, *Theosis* and Union with Christ in the Thought of John Calvin," *The Reformed Theological Review* 68.2 (2009): 163.

43 Carl Mosser, "The Greatest Possible Blessing: Calvin and Deification," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55.1 (2002): 42–43.

44 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.17.2, 1362.

for humans in their union with Christ are not united to God in his transcendence, yet still in the fullness of his deity in the Person of the Son.<sup>45</sup> Habets summarizes the significance of this for Reformed thought well:

A Reformed doctrine of *theosis* posits an ontological, not a metaphysical union. A metaphysical union is the underlying idea of a pan(en)theistic concept of union in which the believer becomes dissolved into the essence of the divine nature so that he or she ceases to exist as a distinct entity. Working within a Reformed understanding of *theosis*, we may say that humans can participate in the divine nature, but this is a thoroughly personal and relational experiencing of the triune relations. So the distinction between the economic and ontological aspects of the Trinity is employed with a different nuance than in the Eastern Orthodox use of the *theologia* and *oikonomia*.<sup>46</sup>

### THOMAS F. TORRANCE’S CONTRIBUTION

Building on the Patristic doctrinal points outlined above and Calvin’s union with Christ theme, Scottish Presbyterian theologian Thomas F. Torrance’s corpus provides important clarification for articulating a Reformed doctrine of *theosis*. As Habets mentions, Torrance rarely uses the terms *theosis* or *theopoiesis*, and he rejects the languages of divinization outright.<sup>47</sup> The overarching focus throughout his thought, however, on re-articulating an understanding of the atoning work of Christ in light of a proper understanding of the Incarnation and the ensuing union between God and man in the

45 Habets, “Reformed *Theosis*?” 494–95.

46 Habets, “Reformed *Theosis*?” 494.

47 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 2, 14; Zоргdrager, “On the Fullness of Salvation: Tracking *Theosis* in Reformed Theology,” 368.

Person of the Son, renders the concept of *theosis* a “controlling metaphor” for his theological project.<sup>48</sup> The contribution Torrance makes to this study is greater clarity regarding what is meant by participation in the divine life, which in turn lays the groundwork for understanding how Torrance’s soteriological-eschatological understanding of *theosis* intersects with Bavinck’s theology. Because Torrance nowhere devotes extended focus to the doctrine of *theosis*, with it rather hovering in the background across most of his thought, Habets’ study on *theosis* in Torrance’s corpus will provide a helpful summary of Torrance’s contribution, which will be explored in the following three points.

### ***Theosis* is Personal Participation in the Divine Life**

An important caveat for Torrance which must be mentioned at the outset is that *theosis* cannot be taken literally. That is, if by *theosis* one means being “‘made divine’ in some non-human way” not in accord with the essence of human nature, then this must be rejected.<sup>49</sup> For, as Torrance views the foundation of any sense of *theosis* as grounded in the hypostatic union of God and man in the Person of Christ, any understanding of *theosis* must parallel, though in reverse, the nature of such a union. As the divine Son is united with humanity without ceasing to be divine, any union of humans to God must be conceived in like manner. Humans must not be understood to become something other than fully human, nor lose their individual personhood. Torrance summarizes this in a lengthy statement:

The participation [of believers] in Christ must be construed in terms of *koinonia* governed by the Chalcedonian doctrine of

48 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, ix.

49 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 44.

the union of two natures in Christ. This is a participation in which the human nature of the participant is not deified but reaffirmed and recreated in its essence as human nature, yet one in which the participant is really united to the Incarnate Son of God partaking in him in his own appropriate mode of the oneness of the Son and the Father and the Father and the Son, through the Holy Spirit.<sup>50</sup>

Torrance goes on to say that the nature of this union cannot be “described in positive language,” similar to the mystery of the hypostatic union.<sup>51</sup> However, what can be said is that such a union formed by the partaking of the divine nature at its core involves a personal knowing of God: “Knowing God requires a cognitive union with him in which our whole being is affected by his love and holiness.”<sup>52</sup> As Habets summarizes, “This seeing or knowing [God] is a personal participation in the triune relationship of the Father’s love for the Son by the Holy Spirit and the Son’s love for the Father by the Holy Spirit. Knowledge is fundamentally relational, not merely cognitive; it is a *personal* knowing that comes only by *personal* participation.”<sup>53</sup> Thus for Torrance, *theosis* at its core is being united to the Son by the work of the Holy Spirit in a personal knowing of the Son *as the Son* through faith, in order that one may know God as he is in himself, which the Son reveals through the hypostatic union with human nature. Knowing God in *theosis* is not just knowing God in his economic relations, but in an ontological sense as he is in himself. However, this is still revelational and accommodated to us in a

50 Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 185–86.

51 Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 186.

52 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, Revised ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard Publishers, 1992), 26. This citation comes from Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 96.

53 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 96.

creaturely way, which leads to the next point.<sup>54</sup>

### ***Theosis* is Possible on Account of Humanity’s Ontology**

For Torrance *theosis* is coming to know God personally as he is through knowing and being united to the Son in love through the Spirit. The question arises, how can one know personally God as he is in his being? Torrance answers this in his language of the ‘onto-relations’ within the Godhead and as constitutive of humanity. “Onto-relations,” says Torrance, “are being-constituting relations,” that is, they are relations “which have to do with what [the parties to the relations] really are.”<sup>55</sup> Each person of the Godhead “is in himself whole God,” and the distinctions between them are relational: the Son is the Son by being ‘of the Father,’ while the Father is the Father by virtue of his relation to the Son, and the Spirit is the Spirit of God who proceeds from Father and the Son as the bond of love given by each.<sup>56</sup> These relations are “relations of love inherent to God which allow us to know this God as he is in his inherent relations (onto-relations).”<sup>57</sup> That is, though humans may not know God in his hidden transcendence, they can know God truly as he is in knowing personally God in his trinitarian relations. Specifically, through knowing the Son, we know God in his fullness, even if we do not know God fully.

Grounding this is the fact that not only does Torrance view the Trinity as onto-relational, but

54 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 155.

55 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 47.

56 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons, Cornerstones* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 157. It should be stressed that for Torrance, the bonds between the persons of the Godhead are not reduced merely to relations. They are relations-in-being which constitute the very “whatness” of what they each are.

57 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 64.



he also sees humanity as onto-relational beings as well. As creatures made *imago Dei*, human beings are what they are by virtue of being the image of God (in addition to being in relation to other persons as well).<sup>58</sup> It is part of human ontology to be in relation with God, to know him, worship him, and to make him known—such relations are natural in the sense of being part of what it means to be human. In the work of grace at the incarnation, the hypostatic union in the Person of Christ unites divinity with human nature, and in so doing allows for human relations to God to become *personal*, that is knowing God as he is in his internal relations. There is a natural correspondence according to the *analogia relationis* between human and divine onto-relations, and knowledge of the divine onto-relations become personally accessible through the incarnation.<sup>59</sup> As Habets summarizes, “Torrance believes that the creation can know God personally, not through any *analogia entis* but rather by a ‘created correspondence’ between the creature and Creator.”<sup>60</sup> This natural correspondence allows for both the incarnation and God’s resulting work of *theosis*, though in crucially different ways: “In the person of Jesus Christ we see true humanity partaking of true Divinity *by nature* in such a way that by union, communion, and *theosis* with Christ by the Spirit we too, *by grace*, can participate in the divine nature... [Christ’s union with humanity] is by nature and substantial; [humanity’s union with God] is by grace and relational.”<sup>61</sup>

### **Theosis is the Eschatological Goal of Humanity**

58 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 40–41.

59 Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2004), 210.

60 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 42.

61 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 62.

Torrance’s articulation of *theosis* as onto-relational rather than metaphysical highlights the fact that *theosis* is the goal for humanity set at their creation. Their “created correspondence” for knowing God and making him known underlies creational intent. The *imago Dei* for Torrance involves both relational and substantial qualities, which reveal not only humanity’s capacities, but also their destiny.<sup>62</sup> The fall disrupts the attainment of such destiny, and while the *imago Dei* is not entirely obscured in humanity, it “continues to hang over man as a destiny which he can realise no longer, and as a judgment upon his actual state of perversity.”<sup>63</sup> Thus the *imago Dei* “lies ahead of each human person,” as their destiny, though unattainable because of sin, and “can only be realized in the person of the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.”<sup>64</sup> Union with Christ, the true image of God, therefore sets creation back on its course again in order to reach its final *telos*. However, this involves more than simply being justified from sin or regenerated by the Spirit, but in being united to Christ, it involves the personal, participatory knowledge of God by grace for which humanity was always intended to achieve.<sup>65</sup> *Theosis* was therefore the perfection towards which creation was oriented at the beginning, with the incarnation always the intended means of accomplishing the *telos*.

### SIMILARITIES WITH BAVINCK

The preceding section on *theosis* as the eschatological goal of humanity, more than

62 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 31.

63 Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 107; cited in Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 32.

64 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 34.

65 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 22.

anything else, gives warrant to this study's aim of considering Torrance for the purpose of arguing for benefits of incorporating *theosis* into the thought of Herman Bavinck. The similarities are stark between Bavinck and Torrance on creation bearing an eschatological goal set at the beginning which requires the perfecting work of grace without reference to sin. Before transitioning to considering Bavinck, therefore, and by way of summing up what has been said, it would be helpful to point out these similarities in more detail.

First, Bavinck shares affinity for Torrance's Trinitarian theology which undergirds a Reformed doctrine of *theosis*. Despite the fact that Bavinck embraces the *analogia entis* as the grounds for asserting knowledge of God in nature via his general revelation, in contrast to Torrance's embrace of the *analogia relationis*, Bavinck shares with Torrance the notion that all knowledge of God is possible on the basis of a correspondence between God and humanity whereby humanity can receive that which God reveals about himself in condescension.<sup>66</sup> Such knowledge of God is exclusively Christological in its foundation, and for its content, it receives personal knowledge of God as he is.<sup>67</sup> The

ground for this is the Nicene affirmation that each person of the Godhead is in himself "identical with the entire being [of God]..."<sup>68</sup> By knowing the Son, one knows God as he is, and not merely properties of God external to his being: "The divine nature cannot be conceived as an abstract generic concept, nor does it exist as a substance outside of, above, and behind the divine persons. It exists *in* the divine persons and is totally and quantitatively the same in each person."<sup>69</sup> Finally, the distinctions between the persons of the Godhead cannot be rooted in the possession of different substances or properties, but only in the mutual relations shared between each person, similar to Torrance's idea of onto-relations.<sup>70</sup>

Second, both Bavinck and Torrance hold that creation is "proleptically conditioned by redemption."<sup>71</sup> Habets quotes Colyer at length to summarize this point: "...God's ultimate *telos* for creation from the beginning is revealed and actualized in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, a *telos* in which all creation comes to share in the eternal communion of love that God is. This is the ultimate goal of both redemption and creation. It is actually realized in redemption after the fall, and it is a *telos* that

66 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), II:135. Despite this important difference between Bavinck and Torrance, the common ground shared between them is substantial. Accounting for this, perhaps, is a mediating link found in the theology of Karl Barth. As is well-known, Torrance was heavily inspired by Barth's thought, and worked to strengthen, albeit critically at times, his theological project. Barth, in turn, engaged in his theological project of rearticulating Christian theology for a modern context in the shadow of both theological liberalism and Reformed and Catholic scholasticism. As Vissers demonstrates, Barth draws favorably upon Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* in an effort to transcend the limitations of the scholastic traditions. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Torrance and Bavinck can find common ground on several pivotal elements of their respective theologies. John A Vissers, "Karl Barth's Appreciative Use of Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45.1 (2010): 79–86.

67 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic,

2003), I:321.

68 Bavinck, *RD*, II:304.

69 Bavinck, *RD*, II:300; cf., *RD*, III:275.

70 Bavinck, *RD*, II:304–5. One could argue that Bavinck's "organic" theme corresponds very closely to Torrance's "onto-relations." That is, for Bavinck, all things share ontologically in the rest of the cosmos in a way that is mutually influencing, or, one could say, being-determining. Mattson sheds some light on this: "Ontologically, the particulars that make up the whole of the cosmos are diverse, distinct and independent, yet are connected and mutually influencing. This unity and diversity is 'ectypal' and therefore analogous to the intratrinitarian unity and diversity; created things do not enjoy perichoretic union, they do not 'mutually indwell' each other. Nonetheless, they do, each together, form an 'organic' whole." Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 45.

71 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 16, 25ff.

proleptically conditions creation.”<sup>72</sup> In such an understanding, creation was so crafted by God as to anticipate the achievement of its final goal only through the work of Christ, thus anchoring the unity between creation and redemption not in connection to sin, but posteriorly in the perfection of nature by God’s further work of grace. Creation, and humanity in particular, was designed from the beginning for personal union with God which is accomplished in the person and work of Christ.

Bavinck wholeheartedly agrees, holding to an organic relation between creation and redemption whereby the contours of what redemption accomplishes are set by God’s work of creation.<sup>73</sup> Likewise, redemption itself, understood as the eschatological attainment of creation’s perfection, is seen to highlight the interrelations of nature and grace: grace proceeds on the basis of nature, while at the same time nature belies a need for the elevating work of grace in order to achieve its *telos*.<sup>74</sup> This is seen most clearly in Bavinck’s anthropology, in which humanity is created in a provisional state of integrity and subject to God’s covenant of works, which, if they were to have proceeded in obedience, they would achieve the eschatological blessedness of life everlasting before God.<sup>75</sup> Humanity failed, but such a failing was not unforeseen, for “[in] Adam’s creation Christ was already in view” as the true *imago Dei* who would lead humanity to its perfection in fulfillment of

God’s covenant demands and eschatological expectations.<sup>76</sup> Thus, “the creation of humanity in God’s image is a supposition and preparation for the incarnation of God.”<sup>77</sup> In this, nature and grace are organically linked and mutually dependent; redemption cannot be conceived of atomistically and solely in juridical terms, but rather also and more foundationally in cosmic and relational categories: “The Son is not only the mediator of reconciliation...on account of sin, but even apart from sin he is the mediator of union...between God and his creation.”<sup>78</sup> It is this sense which can be brought to the surface of Bavinck’s thought clearer in the notion of *theosis* as articulated by Torrance.

#### ADDRESSING BAVINCK’S OBSTACLES TO *THEOSIS*

Several of Bavinck’s interpreters have argued that a controlling theme in Bavinck’s thought is union with Christ. Gleason argues that the “*unio mystica* forms an integral part of the whole of Bavinck’s theology.”<sup>79</sup> When understood in light of Bavinck’s stress on the unity between creation and redemption, Bolt states that for Bavinck, therefore, “The incarnation...is not a rescue operation, decided upon only after sin had entered into the world. Rather, the coming of Christ fulfills the purpose of God in creating the world. Sanctification, not redemption,

72 Quoted in Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 26; cf. Elmer M. Colyer, *How To Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 164n34.

73 Hielema, “Herman Bavinck’s Eschatological Understanding of Redemption,” 201.

74 This is a central claim of Mattson’s study of Bavinck’s eschatological anthropology. See especially Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 106.

75 Bavinck, *RD*, II:570–74.

76 Bavinck, *RD*, II:564, 573; cf. Hielema, “Herman Bavinck’s Eschatological Understanding of Redemption,” 201: “...the creation was made through him, the creation prepares for and leads to his Incarnation, and the resurrected Christ leads the entire creation to the fullness of the Kingdom of God.” Cf. Hielema, “Herman Bavinck’s Eschatological Understanding of Redemption,” 202.

77 Bavinck, *RD*, III:277.

78 Bavinck, *RD*, IV:685; cf. *RD*, II:423.

79 Ronald Nelson Gleason, “The Centrality of the *Unio Mystica* in the Theology of Herman Bavinck” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2001), 117.

is the chief work of Jesus Christ...<sup>80</sup> As this study has aimed to trace, this theme of union with Christ should be assumed as nothing less than a doctrine of *theosis*. For this to qualify as *theosis* in the way Torrance frames the doctrine there must be an onto-relational union brought about by the Spirit in which the believer is united to God as he is through the Person of Christ. Bavinck employs such language in places, arguing that, “There is after all no participation in the benefits of Christ apart from communion with his person.”<sup>81</sup> At the same time, however, Bavinck is explicitly antagonistic towards the notion of *theosis*.<sup>82</sup> If progress is to be made in arguing that Bavinck’s eschatological anthropology (and soteriology) are best summed up in the category of *theosis*, two objections he raises must be addressed.

### The Creator-Creature Distinction

Both of the following points surround the claim that the incarnation was in any way necessary apart from sin.<sup>83</sup> Despite the inevitability of the incarnation in order to achieve the eschatological goals of creation, which Bavinck decidedly holds, he repudiates the claim that the incarnation was necessary in the sense that it implies the logical necessity of the incarnation from the divine perspective. Such

a view, equated by Bavinck with Gnosticism and pantheism regnant in his day in German Idealism, reads the economy of the incarnation of Christ back into the divine *ousia*, resulting in the idea that the incarnation was required for God to achieve the full expression of his being.<sup>84</sup> Says Bavinck, “Ultimately, this train of thought culminates in the theory that the creation is necessary for God himself.”<sup>85</sup>

Such a view finds support in the notion that the incarnation unites a human person (becoming) to the divine essence (being), which carries with it the idea that by adding something to his being not there previously, God attains perfection for both human nature and himself.<sup>86</sup> This, however, gets it entirely the wrong way around. In the incarnation, the Person of the Son is united to an impersonal human nature, adding not a human *person* to the divine community, but a human *nature* as such. Were this the reverse, as God became man, so individual persons may become God, partaking of divine transcendence, and in so doing, blurring the distinction between Creator and creation.<sup>87</sup> Bavinck’s making clear that a proper conception of the incarnation whereby it is strictly the person of the Son and not the divine essence, conceived of apart from the Son, which assumes a human nature, is entirely consonant with Torrance’s foundation for a proper understanding of *theosis* as highlighted above. For Bavinck, as for Torrance, while *theosis* is made possible by the incarnation in the Son, establishing an ontological link between God and man, *theosis* is not entirely symmetrical with the incarnation in that it is strictly a personal union, the Son with the

80 Bolt, *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck’s Two Essays on the Imitatio Christi*, 197.

81 Bavinck, *RD*, IV:250.

82 Bavinck, *RD*, III:277–80, 255–56; cf. Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 238: “...all forms of theology that view the *telos* of humanity as an ontic fusion of the divine and human necessarily, in principle, depart from the biblical picture of the God-world relation and move inexorably in the direction of pantheism.”

83 See his discussion on the necessity of the incarnation in Bavinck, *RD*, III:278–79. Bavinck argues that “These considerations [on the necessity of the incarnation] contain so much truth that the agreement elicited by the hypothesis of the incarnation of God apart from sin is not surprising.” Ultimately, however, Bavinck wants to frame the way we speak of the incarnation in terms of “certainty,” and not “necessity” (279).

84 Bavinck, *RD*, III:277, 279–80.

85 Bavinck, *RD*, II:424.

86 Bavinck, *RD*, III:277.

87 Bavinck, *RD*, III:274–77.

believer in relationship in which neither distinct individuals are dissolved.<sup>88</sup>

### The Nature-Grace Distinction

Second, Bavinck argues that the Latin understanding of *theosis*, inherited by Roman Catholics in what he sees as the mysticism inherent in Eastern Orthodoxy, presupposes a faulty nature-grace relationship which comes to expression in the notion that the incarnation was necessary in order to elevate nature beyond itself.<sup>89</sup> In such a framing, human nature is understood to be ontologically complete, yet open to the reception of the *imago Dei*, which involves a superadded gift of grace as a mechanical insertion into nature—rather than an organic work from within nature—that leads nature into a higher metaphysical status.<sup>90</sup>

The result of this is the affirmation that grace is required without reference to sin, which is in a certain sense what has been argued regarding Torrance’s understanding of *theosis*, except that this view holds that grace is an infused substance which leads to the attainment of a different human nature not present previously. In contrast to this, Bavinck argues that redemption and God’s work of grace adds no new substance to nature, but rather works within the bounds of the nature of its existence. Any notion therefore of what the incarnation and redemption through union with Christ adds to humanity must be conceived solely in restorative and relational terms.<sup>91</sup> Insistence on grace as a *donum superadditum* results only in a mysticism whereby the heavenly is valued above the earthly. Against this vision of *theosis*,

however, stands Torrance’s affirmation that *theosis* understood in onto-relational terms is fundamentally a *personalizing* work which results not in infusion of divine nature into humans, but rather the work of leading human nature to the full revelation of its identity as *imago Dei*.<sup>92</sup> Says Torrance, *theosis* “is not the process of transcending the confines of human nature but the process and means by which the human can achieve true personhood.”<sup>93</sup> Bavinck agrees, arguing that though humans possess the image of God at creation, this is not the full sense of the *imago Dei*, which can only be understood in its proper sense in connection with human destiny, which is nothing less than being mystically united to Christ.<sup>94</sup> Grace for Bavinck leads nature to its restoration and perfection, for the two must be intimately linked. Destiny, that is, eschatology, must be in organic relation with protology.

### CONCLUSION: THE PROMISE OF *THEOSIS* IN BAVINCK’S THOUGHT

Union with Christ is a central theme in Bavinck’s theology, and coupled with the notion of humanity’s eschatological destiny attained through the perfection of nature by God’s work of grace in the person and work of Christ, provides a robust and innovative theology of the nexus of creation and redemption which continues to bear fruit. This essay has argued that in light of these themes, and especially given the centrality they play in Bavinck’s thought, that the category of *theosis* appears to be not only a helpful summation of all these various interrelated

88 Bavinck, *RD*, III:305.

89 Bavinck, *RD*, III:255–56.

90 Bavinck, *RD*, III:576–77; II:553–554. Cf. Bolt, *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck’s Two Essays on the Imitatio Christi*, 191.

91 Bavinck, *RD*, IV:92–93.

92 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 39.

93 Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*, 44.

94 Bavinck, *RD*, II:564. Cf. Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny*, 219.

themes, but also one entirely consistent with Bavinck's theological oeuvre. Bavinck clearly is hesitant to use the term, with its association in his context with both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic mysticism and with modernist pantheism. However, recent developments by Thomas F. Torrance in how one can understand *theosis* within the boundaries of Reformed theology trace an approach to the doctrine entirely consistent with Bavinck's theology despite his protestations. *Theosis* captures what Bavinck means by the eschatological perfection brought to nature by grace.

Why not remain content with the language of "union with Christ," one might ask? Because latent in Bavinck's nature-grace relationship is an eschatological vision for which humanity was created. This latency figures in God's work of creation, and yet is dependent upon God's work of grace for its full consummation, regardless of any consideration of the need for redemption. The economy of grace was always meant to lead to such a vision. *Theosis* conveys this perfection of God's creation unto its completed goal much more clearly than merely the theme of union with Christ, which can be seen as pursued only in light of sin and the fall.

No doubt this notion will remain controversial in Bavinck scholarship, especially from within the Reformed tradition. The aim of this essay has been to propose a reimagining of *theosis* in a way fully consonant with Bavinck's theology, and in so doing open a pathway to consideration of Bavinck's nature-grace relationship in all its fullness.

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