

**JOHN WESLEY AND T. F. TORRANCE ON PNEUMATOLOGY,  
THEOSIS, AND A BREATH OF LIFE FOR DYING DENOMINATIONS**

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**Abstract:** *Although John Wesley and Thomas F. Torrance are rarely put into conversation, they both develop creative theologies of theosis that have much to offer Christians, especially those in declining Wesleyan and Reformed communities. Both accounts of theosis combine the traditionally Eastern doctrine with Western Protestant concerns, both affirm the created world while speaking of its fulfillment, and both suggest humans become more fully human as they participate in the Spirit. This intersection in Torrance's and Wesley's theologies complicates their otherwise stark differences on matters of justification, sanctification, and human participation in the gracious work of God. Forming a theology of human participation in the Spirit with the guidance of Wesley, Torrance, and key contemporary interpreters of their work is more than an engaging academic exercise. Claiming such a theology compels Christians to embrace the New Creation here and now, and in the process, it might breathe new life into dying denominations that carry Reformed or Wesleyan banners.*

What might we gain from a conversation between John Wesley and Thomas F. Torrance? At first blush, Torrance and Wesley offer seemingly incommensurate theologies, the former representing Reformed theology in a Barthian key and the latter advocating Arminianism, progressive sanctification, holiness, and ultimate "perfection." Putting the two in conversation can feel like jamming a square peg into a round hole. Yet this volume of *Participatio* proves that the heretofore rare Torrance-Wesleyanism conversation is not only possible but productive.

When focusing narrowly on these theologians' pneumatologies through the lens provided by key interpreters, we discover how they both develop theologies of *theosis* that entail our "humanization" in the Spirit. According to both theologians, the Spirit moves in creation in a way that both affirms creatureliness and offers creaturely fulfillment, so that humans who participate in the Spirit are made more fully human. This intersection in Torrance's and Wesley's theologies complicates their otherwise stark differences on matters of justification, sanctification, and human participation in the gracious work of God. Although both Wesley and Torrance have attracted diverse interpretations, the work of Wesley scholars like Randy Maddox and Theodore Runyon and Torrance scholars like Myk Habets make this convergence startlingly clear when their interpretations are held side by side.

To make these arguments, this essay moves in three parts, considering the theologies of Wesley and Torrance in turn and then concluding with a direct comparison of the two. Forming a theology of human participation in the Spirit with the guidance of Wesley, Torrance, and these contemporary interpreters is more than an engaging academic exercise. Rather, claiming such a theology compels Christians to embrace the New Creation here and now, and in the process, it might breathe new life into dying denominations that carry Reformed or Wesleyan banners.

### **John Wesley on "Becoming" the New Creation**

John Wesley's qualified version of *theosis* results from a creative combination of Eastern and Western theology; it entails humanization; it fully affirms the whole of God's creation; and it places this "process" squarely within the work of the Spirit. Although Wesley never uses the language of "becoming human" or "humanization" in the Spirit as Torrance does, both theologians affirm created reality so that "divinization" is *not* a rejection or dismissal of the created world's value but rather its fulfillment as the New Creation. Moreover, they both make sense of this mysterious process by appealing to creaturely "participation" in the Spirit, or human participation in divine activity and eschatological realities by way of the Spirit.

### ***Theosis* in a Western context**

*Theosis*, often translated as “divinization” or “deification,” is a theological concept most associated with Eastern Orthodoxy and its ancient antecedents, with an origin most accurately found in the Greek patristics.<sup>1</sup> Although contemporary Wesley scholars debate the extent to which John Wesley was directly influenced by Greek or Eastern thought,<sup>2</sup> one cannot deny the resemblances between the stereotypically Eastern theology of *theosis* and Wesley’s distinctive theology of sanctification. In *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today*, Theodore Runyon explains that for both the traditional Eastern formulation and Wesley’s own variant, *theosis* “should not be understood as becoming a god, but becoming more fully human, that is, becoming what God created humanity to be, the image reflecting God as that creature whose spiritual senses are enabled to participate in, to be a partner, and to share in (*koinonia*) the divine life.”<sup>3</sup>

John Wesley did not uncritically appropriate a purely Greek, patristic, or Eastern approach to *theosis* but instead combined elements typical of both East and West to create a unique and ultimately influential soteriology that hangs upon the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit. And as this essay explores in the next section,

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<sup>1</sup> For simplicity’s sake, I will refer to these ancient antecedents as “Eastern” even though the label is somewhat anachronistic. These ancient antecedents include the works of the Greek patristics and those subsequent figures whose geographical and linguistic contexts — and whose stronger influence upon later Eastern Orthodoxy — merits the retroactive label of “Eastern.” As S. T. Kimbrough explains, although *theosis* predates and does not belong to Eastern Christianity, “the Eastern Church has been the primary harbinger of the doctrine of deification from the patristic era to the present.” In S. T. Kimbrough and Peter Bouteneff, *Partakers in the Life Divine: Participation in the Divine Nature in the Writings of Charles Wesley* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 4. See also Vladimir Kharlamov, “*Theosis* in Patristic Thought” in *Theology Today* 65.2 (2008): 158-168 for his tracing of the concept through the first several centuries of Christianity, fleshing out its complex origins.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Kenneth Collins suggests that Randy Maddox’s interpretation of Wesley’s *via salutis* overemphasizes a Catholic-styled cooperation between humanity and God, whereas Maddox considers Wesley’s notion of co-operant grace to be fully resonant with early Christian theologians, East and West. See Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 4, 14; and Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 19, 23, 220.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 81.

Torrance likewise draws upon patristic thought to craft a unique and compelling theology of *theosis* that likewise highlights the Spirit's sustaining presence.

As with Greek patristic theology, Wesley contends that humans need God to heal or restore the human "image" or "likeness" of God, defining salvation as "the renewal of our souls after the image of God."<sup>4</sup> In Christ, the Creator "provides a means of being renewed" in that originally created image of God<sup>5</sup> to the point that, in the eschatological kingdom, one's "state of holiness and happiness" far exceeds "that which Adam enjoyed in paradise."<sup>6</sup>

Wesley never sheds his Western belief that the atonement entails a juridical transaction — hence his soteriology that includes both human *justification* (by Christ in the atonement to pay for sins) and *sanctification* (driven by the Spirit as a process of restoration), considering these as sequential even if inextricably intertwined.<sup>7</sup> As Randy Maddox puts it, "Wesley's understanding of human nature and the human problem gives primacy of place to therapeutic concerns like those more characteristic of Eastern Christianity, and integrates the more typically Western juridical concerns into this orientation."<sup>8</sup> Runyon similarly argues that "Wesley places the encounter with divine grace and love in Christ, testified to in the Lutheran doctrine of justification, within the context of the Eastern understanding of the transforming power of the Spirit both *within* us and *through* us, making us participants in God's redeeming of all creation."<sup>9</sup> According to Wesley, Christ came to restore "the image of God" by way of a "faith" working by "love" for all "inward and outward holiness" and the corresponding "destruction . . . of all sin," including

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<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, "A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," Pt. I, 3, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* [henceforth *Works*], ed. Frank Baker, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984—), 11:106. See also Wesley's Letter to Richard Morgan (15 Jan. 1734), *Works*, 25:369; Sermon 12, "The Witness of Our Spirit," 15, *Works*, 1:309; and Sermon 44, "Original Sin," III.5, *Works*, 2:185; as compiled by Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 286n11.

<sup>5</sup> John Wesley, "The Image of God," [4], *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. by Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 14.

<sup>6</sup> John Wesley, "The New Creation," 18, *Works*, 2:510.

<sup>7</sup> See especially John Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation" in *Sermons*, 372-380.

<sup>8</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 67.

<sup>9</sup> Runyon, *The New Creation*, 214.

that original sin of “pride” and “self-will” that caused Eve and Adam to see God as “an angry judge.”<sup>10</sup>

Was Wesley as influenced by Eastern thought or its ancient antecedents as Runyon and Maddox imply? After all, Wesley rarely if ever uses the word “*theosis*,” in favor of highly characteristic keywords like “sanctification” and “perfection.” However, Wesley was familiar with the Syrian theologian Macarius whose *Homilies* include relevant material on *theosis*, and in the translations Wesley read and passed along to his followers, *theosis* was typically translated as “sanctification” and “perfection.”<sup>11</sup> Runyon identifies this connection and, familiar with both Eastern theologies of *theosis* and Wesley’s own, forcefully argues that “the core idea of *theosis* — participation in, and transformation by, the creative energy of the Spirit — was central to Wesley’s understanding of regeneration and sanctification.”<sup>12</sup> In light of Wesley’s exposure to texts on *theosis* and the parallels between those accounts and his own, it makes sense to posit with Maddox and Runyon (and

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<sup>10</sup> John Wesley, “The End of Christ’s Coming,” I.8-10 and III.5-6 in *Sermons*, 445-446, 449-450.

<sup>11</sup> See “An Extract from the Homilies of Macarius” in John Wesley’s *A Christian Library: Consisting of Extracts from and Abridgements of the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity which have been Published in the English Tongue*, vol.1 of 30, (London: Methodist Book Room, n.d.), 69-131. For more, see Ted A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1991), 66; Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences, and Differences,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 45, (1990): 29-53 in conversation with Howard Snyder, “John Wesley and Macarius the Egyptian,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 45, (1990): 55-60; John Cammel English, “The Path to Perfection in Pseudo-Macarius and John Wesley,” *Pacifica* 11 (1998): 54-62; David C. Ford, “Saint Makarios of Egypt and John Wesley: Variations on the Theme of Sanctification,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 33 (1988): 285-312; Mark T. Kurowski, “The First Step Toward Grace: John Wesley’s Use of the Spiritual Homilies of Macarius the Great,” *Methodist History* 36.2 (1998): 113-24; Hoo-Jung Lee, “Experiencing the Spirit in Wesley and Macarius” in *Rethinking Wesley’s Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood, 1998), 197-212.

For more on Wesley as influenced by Eastern thought, see Arthur MacDonald Allchin, “Our Life in Christ, in John Wesley and the Eastern Fathers,” in *We Belong to One Another: Methodist, Anglican, and Orthodox*, ed. Arthur MacDonald Allchin (London: Epworth, 1965), 62-78; Luke L. Keefer, “John Wesley: Disciple of Early Christianity,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 19 (1984): 23-32; Albert C. Outler, “John Wesley’s Interests in the Early Fathers of the Church,” in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 55-74.

<sup>12</sup> Runyon, *The New Creation*, 245n35.

others'<sup>13</sup>) that Wesley's theology of sanctification and Christian perfection was influenced — whether directly or indirectly — by early Eastern accounts of *theosis* as the restoration of humanity's reflection of the image of God in Christ by the power of the Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

### **Creation affirmed in “divinization” and “humanization”**

Wesley's affirmation of created reality may be missed by casual readers. For example, at times Wesley seems to undervalue the full humanity of Christ, resembling an almost gnostic or Manichean unease with physical, material realities that might reflect his cultural context in eighteenth-century England.<sup>15</sup> This in turn may obscure the extent to which he affirms creation and our “humanization” by way of sanctification. That said, he holds fast to the creeds and orthodox doctrine on Christ's humanity as prescribed by his Anglican Church. Furthermore, his brother Charles not only embraced the theology of *theosis*,<sup>16</sup> but Charles promotes a remarkable appreciation of the hypostatic union in his hymns (as in his *Nativity Hymns* and *Hymns on the Incarnation*), thereby balancing any potential lack in his

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<sup>13</sup> Wesley scholars debate how to interpret Wesley's inclusion of Macarius in his *Christian Library*, yet many admit the possible influence of such texts concerning *theosis* on Wesley's theology even if some prefer to downplay the presence or significance of *theosis* in Wesleyan theology. For more, see Matthew Friedman, *Union with God in Christ: Early Christian and Wesleyan Spirituality as an Approach to Islamic Mysticism* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick [Wipf & Stock], 2017), especially 114-116, where Friedman thoughtfully engages Collins, Campbell, and Howard Snyder on the question of Wesley's inclusion of Macarius as well as other potential influences on Wesley's version of *theosis* embedded within his soteriology and doctrine of Christian perfection. See also footnote 7 above.

<sup>14</sup> For his part, Maddox posits that Wesley's theology displays these “Eastern” qualities in part because he was an Anglican, and early Anglican theologians concerned themselves with the recovery of the church tradition as found in early Church fathers. See Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 30.

<sup>15</sup> Collins notes several ways in which John Wesley showed discomfort with the full humanity of Jesus, including removing the language of being the same “substance” as Mary from the *Thirty-Nine Articles* and criticizing familiar language of Christ, to avoid detracting from Christ's divinity (*The Theology of John Wesley*, 94-95). Maddox describes the same phenomenon and worries, with Collins, that Wesley here moves too far in the direction of monophysitism in Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 116. See also Donald Davie, “The Carnality of Charles Wesley” in *The Eighteenth-Century Hymn in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 57-70.

<sup>16</sup> As argued by S. T. Kimbrough and Peter Bouteneff in *Partakers in the Life Divine*.

brother's approach as they together set the course for centuries of Methodism and its offshoots.<sup>17</sup>

Wesley bore an unmistakable love of the created world. This love shines forth in *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation; or, A Compendium of Natural Philosophy*, in which we find Wesley not so much offering "evidentialist natural theologies"<sup>18</sup> as glorying in the perspective one gets of God's creation when seen in relationship to its loving creator, sustainer, and perfecter. Wesley proclaims, "The pure in heart see all things full of God," including the whole of creation, because from Jesus Christ we learn "that God is in all things, and that we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature; that we should use and look upon nothing as separate from God."<sup>19</sup> All of creation is "contained by God in the hollow of his hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the soul of the universe."<sup>20</sup> For Maddox, as for Runyon, this high view of creation as based on God's love for it, intentions for it, and actual presence *within* it is a resource for contemporary Wesleyans to appropriate (critically) for environmental stewardship.<sup>21</sup>

If Wesley thinks so highly of creation, then what do we make of his appeals to the New Creation? Wesley's theology of the New Creation evolved over time, transitioning from the amillennial and premillennial sympathies common in his context to a postmillennial perspective that values the present creation and its

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<sup>17</sup> E.g. see Charles Wesley, *Nativity Hymns* (1745), #5, reprinted in S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. as hymn 23, *The Lyrical Theology of Charles Wesley*, 134-35.

<sup>18</sup> Maddox, "John Wesley's Precedent for Theological Engagement with the Natural Sciences," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 44, no. 1 (March 1, 2009): 43.

<sup>19</sup> John Wesley, Sermon 23, "Sermon on the Mount, III," I.6, *Works*, 1:513. John B. Cobb considers these claims of Wesley's in *Cobb's Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 50.

<sup>20</sup> Wesley, Sermon 23, "Sermon on the Mount III," I.11, *Works*, 1:516-17.

<sup>21</sup> Maddox, "Anticipating the New Creation: Wesleyan Foundations for Holistic Mission" in *Asbury Journal* 62, no. 1 (March 1, 2007): 62-63 and "Nurturing the New Creation: Reflections on a Wesleyan Trajectory" in *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation*, ed. by M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood, 2004), 51. In both essays, Maddox further argues that we cannot simply rely on John Wesley's thoughts and attitudes, but that we must appropriate them for our current context.

ultimate fulfillment, inspiring Christians to share in creation's redemption in the here and now.<sup>22</sup> Maddox calls Wesley's eschatology a "processive eschatology."<sup>23</sup> In this processive account, God's kingdom is already present as the "Kingdom of Grace," which is its "incipient expression in believers' lives" by the work of the Spirit; yet the "Kingdom of Glory" — or the kingdom's "eternal fullness in God's Presence" — still awaits us in the eschaton. As Maddox explains, it is "a *growing* reality, spurred on by the expectation of a penultimate fulfillment of that Reign prior to the New Creation."<sup>24</sup> In his mature theology, as in his sermon "The New Creation," Wesley preaches that God's redemption of the world is holistic, a "universal restoration" including animals, plants, and even the elements.<sup>25</sup> Wesley's theology suggests that God by the Spirit lovingly works in all of creation presently and eschatologically such that the New Creation does not replace humans, animals, plants, and elements, but represents their ultimate regeneration and fulfillment in God.

### **Participation via the Holy Spirit**

According to Wesley, humans participate in the process of the New Creation — including our human recreation or creaturely restoration — by way of the Spirit. Wesley often quotes 2 Peter 1:3-4 on this point, stressing that, by God's grace, we may be "participants in the divine nature."<sup>26</sup> When God works in someone, that work

immediately and necessarily implies the continual inspiration of God's Holy Spirit: God's breathing into the soul, and the soul's breathing back what it first receives from God; a continual action of God upon

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<sup>22</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 238-239; 287-288. See also Collins, *Theology of John Wesley*, 316.

<sup>23</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 235.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>25</sup> Wesley, Sermon 64, "The New Creation," 7, *Works*, 2:502-3. See also Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 326, and Maddox, "Nurturing the New Creation," 47.

<sup>26</sup> Wesley, *Works* 1:149, 150, 153, 320, 347, 435, 554, 658; 3:241, 597; 4:259. See also Runyon, *The New Creation*, 81, 245n34.



the soul, the re-action of the soul upon God; an unceasing presence of God, the loving, pardoning God, manifested to the heart, and perceived by faith; and an unceasing return of love, praise, and prayer, offering up all the thoughts of our hearts, all the words of our tongues, all the works of our hands, all our body, soul, and spirit, to be a holy sacrifice, acceptable unto God in Christ Jesus. . . . And hence we may infer the absolute necessity of this re-action of the soul (whatsoever it be called) in order to the continuance to the divine life therein [sic].<sup>27</sup>

This respiratory metaphor — which sketches the contours of Wesley’s understanding of sanctification — extends beyond the relationship between the believer and God as the believer is renewed to participate in the divine life. For Wesley, humans are made for perfect love, reflecting God while remaining fully human as God redeems creation. In his 1734 sermon on “The One Thing Needful,” he declares that humans were created “to love God; and to this end alone,” to love God with all one’s “heart, and soul, and mind, and strength.” And “love is the very image of God,” so that “by love” we are “not only made like God, but in some sense one” with God.<sup>28</sup> Love, then, is the essence of “divinization,” the way in which we are like God and made one with God. This is the heart of “sanctification,” that “ye may become partakers of the divine nature — Being renewed in the image of God, and having communion with [God], so as to dwell in God and God in you”<sup>29</sup> and thereby develop inward and outward holiness, or fruits of the Spirit that improve how we relate to the world around us.<sup>30</sup>

The point bears repeating: the respiratory action of love by the Spirit flows and grows so that it reaches outward to include other humans and all of creation.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Wesley, Sermon 19, “The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God,” III.2-3, *Works*, 1:442.

<sup>28</sup> Wesley, Sermon 146, “The One Thing Needful,” II.2, *Works*, 4:355.

<sup>29</sup> As discussed by Joseph William Cunningham, “John Wesley’s Moral Pneumatology: The Fruits of the Spirit as Theological Virtues,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 24, no. 3 (2011): 276n4.

<sup>30</sup> Wesley, “The Signs of the Times,” *Works*, 2: 527. See also Cunningham, “John Wesley’s Moral Pneumatology,” 278.

<sup>31</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 242.

When Wesley speaks of outward holiness, he has in mind works of mercy, for example, for fellow creatures in need. As we receive and return God's love by the Spirit, the Kingdom of Grace is spread in "individual lives, social structures, and creation at large"<sup>32</sup>: believers do less harm and more good for the world, they engage social institutions for achieving God's purposes,<sup>33</sup> and they likewise adopt an ecological ethic.<sup>34</sup>

According to Wesley, sharing in God's love of creation and our participation in its loving renewal is integral to our *telos*. Because we were made to share in this love, because we are to grow in love through sanctification by the Spirit, and because we are made to *reflect* God rather than *be* God, we can interpret the Wesleyan notion of sanctification or *theosis* as a form of *humanization*. In Runyon's words, in such sanctification by the Spirit we become "more fully human, that is, . . . what God created humanity to be."<sup>35</sup> Cunningham summarizes thusly: "The entirety of the Spirit's mission within the economy of salvation tends towards this end. Human beings are created to participate in the life of God, whose economic operation, by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, fosters loving reciprocity and habitual devotion,"<sup>36</sup> enabling us to share in the New Creation as God makes all things new.

To summarize, Wesley's version of *theosis*, or becoming more human as part of the New Creation, takes singular shape in his theology of sanctification — a theology that emphasizes the ongoing, essential activity of the Spirit. By combining Western and patristic soteriologies, anthropologies, and theories of the atonement, Wesley at once imagines our need for Christ to redeem our sin-broken relationship with

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 247. His theology in general and his thoughts on animals in particular point in this direction.

<sup>35</sup> Runyon, *The New Creation*, 81.

<sup>36</sup> Cunningham, "John Wesley's Moral Pneumatology," 281. "To the same end are all the internal dispensations of God, all the influences of his Holy Spirit." Wesley, Sermon 146, "The One Thing Needful," II.5, *Works*, 4:357.

God and our need for the Spirit to restore us back to our *telos* as creatures meant to image, reflect, and share God's perfect love. As those justified by Christ, we may participate in the work of the Spirit, thereby participating in a love that renews all creation here and now even if we still await its perfect fulfillment.

With this outline of Wesley's theology of *theosis* in hand, those familiar with Torrance may already begin to see how the Wesley-Torrance theological convergence on *theosis* nevertheless contains within it a fault line between the two theologians and their traditions. As Runyon explains,

Wesley saw perfection in terms of love, and love cannot be encountered without transforming the person who receives it. While righteousness can be legally 'imputed' without being 'imparted,' love can only be received as it is imparted and participated in. Therefore, the perfect love of God inevitably changes the person who receives it.<sup>37</sup>

Maddox makes the distinction yet clearer: Wesleyan sanctification does not entail a mere forensic imputation, and neither does it involve a direct infusion of virtues, but rather it is "a process of character-formation that is made possible by a restored participation of fallen humanity in the Divine life and power."<sup>38</sup> In short, the Wesleyan doctrine assumes growth and change on this side of eternity, so much so that living in perfect love — or "Christian perfection" — is assumed a real possibility. In this way, Wesleyan theology can lend itself to virtue theology.<sup>39</sup> Even if he never used the word, Wesley certainly offers a model of what it means to "become" more of what we are meant to be.

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<sup>37</sup> Runyon, *The New Creation*, 228.

<sup>38</sup> Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 112.

<sup>39</sup> As evident in the works by Randy Maddox and Stephen Long, e.g. Stephen Long's *John Wesley's Moral Theology: The Quest for God and Goodness* (Nashville: Kingswood, 2005). Long's thesis connects Wesley's theology both to virtue theology (e.g. as stemming in part from Thomas Aquinas's work on virtue formation as habit formation) *and* to an emphasis on the primacy of union with Christ as foundational to all Christian ethical activity. In so doing, Long reveals a Wesleyan kinship with both Torrance and Dietrich Bonhoeffer when it comes to the centrality of union with Christ above all other ethical considerations, and, in the process, he might make "virtue theology" more palatable to those who follow Torrance on questions Christian ethics.

## Torrance on “Becoming” the New Creation

### ***Theosis* in a Western context**

Like Wesley, Torrance draws upon early Eastern theology to formulate a unique and compelling account of *theosis* in a Western context. Greek patristic ideas influence Torrance’s own theology so explicitly that their indelible fingerprints do not engender the same degree of debate as they do for Wesley. It is telling that the section on the Holy Spirit in Torrance’s *Theology in Reconstruction* devotes one of its four chapters to the teachings of St. Athanasius and St. Basil in a volume that otherwise frequently frames its discourse in relation to Calvin and Reformed theology.<sup>40</sup> His undeniable fondness for Athanasius reappears in the companion volume *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West*,<sup>41</sup> whose apt subtitle alludes to the ways in which Torrance locates resources for contemporary ecumenism in early Eastern theologians and especially in the work of Athanasius.

Torrance longs for the Reformed tradition to incorporate an Eastern-inspired doctrine of *theosis*. He writes passionately and at length:

Let me plead for a reconsideration by the Reformed Church of what the Greek fathers called *theosis*. This is usually unfortunately translated *deification*, but it has nothing to do with the *divinization* of [humanity] any more than the Incarnation has to do with the humanization of God. *Theosis* was the term the Fathers used to emphasize the fact that through the Spirit we have to do with God in utter sublimity, his sheer Godness or holiness; creatures though we are, . . . in the Spirit we are made to participate in saving acts that are abruptly and absolutely divine, election, adoption, regeneration or sanctification and we participate in them by grace alone.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996).

<sup>41</sup> *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Eugene, OR: Eerdmans, Wipf & Stock, 1996).

<sup>42</sup> Torrance, “Come, Creator Spirit, for the Renewal of Worship,” in *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 243.

Torrance continues his appeal by describing the ways in which such a doctrine functions as an antidote to human-centered and self-centered approaches to Christian existence that focus on our own abilities, capabilities, “creative spirituality,” “existential decisions,” and experience of divinization. Instead, *theosis* indicates how the Spirit frees humans from “imprisonment” to ourselves and lifts us “up to partake of the living presence and saving acts of God.” He concludes: “Is there anything we need to regain more than this faith in the utter Godness of God the Holy Spirit?”<sup>43</sup>

Thus, Torrance is not only self-consciously influenced by early Eastern conceptions of *theosis*, but he brings them into a Western theological tradition known more for its distinctive emphases on election, justification, and adoption by “grace alone” than for patristic perspectives on “regeneration” and “sanctification.” Here we also see Torrance’s affirmation of “creaturehood” in his denial of its “divinization” *per se* in favor of explaining how human creatures instead are “lifted up” by the Spirit to “participate” in the divine triune life.<sup>44</sup>

### **Creation affirmed in “divinization” and “humanization”**

Torrance believes that those in Christ undergo “humanization” or “personalization” by the work of the Spirit. Like Wesley, Torrance combines typically Western concerns about human sin and the resulting alienation from God with the early Eastern concept of *theosis*. Because of our sin-induced alienation, human beings need *humanization* and *personalization* by the one true Human and Person: Christ.<sup>45</sup> “For us to be really human” and “really personal, therefore, is to be in Christ.”<sup>46</sup> As Myk Habets summarizes, those in Christ move from “human being, a

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 243-244.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 67-72.

<sup>46</sup> Torrance, “The Goodness and Dignity of Man in the Christian Tradition,” *Modern Theology* 4, no. 4 (1988): 318. Note that being human and personal are mutually implicated in Torrance’s thought: “To be truly human is to be truly personal, and to be truly personal is to be truly human — that is the kind of human nature that God has embodied in Jesus Christ” (318).

biological fact, to human person, a moral, theological fact," which is "true personhood."<sup>47</sup> Therefore "men and women are persons-in-becoming."<sup>48</sup>

Does this concept of "humanization" or "personalization" insult our humanity? Does it constitute a denial of humanity's creaturely goodness? Torrance is, after all, a Reformed theologian, and one could interpret Reformed theology's insistence on a clear distinction between Creator and creation as disdain for creation. Torrance refers to human creatures as lowly and limited,<sup>49</sup> befitting a tradition that famously likens human beings to worms. Yet maintaining the Creator-creation distinction does not require an all-consuming creaturely self-loathing — in fact, Torrance's concern in such passages is to ensure that our focus is *not* on the "self" at all, but on the Creator and the great goodness that the Creator bestows upon us as God's creatures. Torrance argues, "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 . . . through the Holy Spirit."<sup>50</sup>

God's plans for creation do not spell its utter rejection but its ultimate fulfillment in the New Creation. For Torrance, "the resurrection is the redemption of the old order of things, and is already the irruption of the new creation into the midst of the old."<sup>51</sup> God's redemption does not destroy creation, but embraces it to transform it. Torrance writes:

In fulfilment of his eternal design God has acted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead in such a way that, far from setting aside or infringing or interfering with the spatio-temporal order of the universe which he created (and which we try to formulate in what we

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<sup>47</sup> Myk Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 40.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>49</sup> Torrance, "Come, Creator Spirit, for the Renewal of Worship," 243-244.

<sup>50</sup> Torrance, "The Roman Doctrine of Grace," in *Theology in Reconstruction*, 186.

<sup>51</sup> Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 177.

call 'laws of nature'), he accepts and affirms its reality, but he introduces into the situation a transcendently new factor which brings about an utterly astonishing transformation of it which is quite inexplicable in terms of anything we are able to conceive merely within the intelligible structures of the world.<sup>52</sup>

God "accepts and affirms" creation while transforming it, and this transformation is the eruption of the new creation in the midst of the old. Through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Christ of Israel, God blesses, redeems, and transforms all humankind<sup>53</sup> and, indeed, the entire cosmos.<sup>54</sup>

### **Participation via the Holy Spirit**

Like Wesley, Torrance relies upon the language of "participation" in or by way of the Holy Spirit to describe how we relate to the New Creation in the midst of the old. By participating in the Spirit, we share in God's life and activity, which is God's teleological, eschatological will for us even in the here and now. By the Spirit, who makes all unity possible, our nature is "really united to the Incarnate Son of God," so that we share (in our "own appropriate mode") in the "oneness of the Son and the Father."<sup>55</sup> As he puts it elsewhere, "it is through the Incarnation and Atonement effected by the conjoint activity of Christ and the Holy Spirit that God has opened the door for us to enter into his holy presence and know him as he really is . . . in his triune being." The triune God enables us "to participate, creaturely beings though we are, in the eternal communion . . . of knowing and loving . . . him there

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>53</sup> Torrance describes this as Israel's "destiny," as he does throughout "The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History," in *Witness of the Jews to God*, ed. David W. Torrance (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011), e.g. 101. See also Ray S. Anderson, "Reading T. F. Torrance as a Practical Theologian," in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance*, ed. Elmer M. Colyer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 165.

<sup>54</sup> Torrance worries that Barth speaks too much of the redemption of just "man" and not enough on the cosmos itself. Torrance, "My Interaction with Karl Barth," in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 61. See also Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 8.

<sup>55</sup> Torrance, "The Roman Doctrine of Grace," in *Theology in Reconstruction*, 186.

as one God in three Persons.”<sup>56</sup> Or again, “creatures though we are, . . . in the Spirit we are made to participate in saving acts that are abruptly and absolutely divine, election, adoption, regeneration or sanctification and we participate in them by grace alone.”<sup>57</sup>

### **The question of sanctification**

In the quote above, Torrance speaks of “regeneration” and “sanctification,” terms one might associate more with Wesleyan parlance than Reformed. He does not shy from their use, arguing that we witness “the sanctification of our human life in Jesus Christ, an elevating and fulfilling of it that far surpasses creation,” for Christ raises “up” people to “have their being in the very life of God”<sup>58</sup> as they are “raised into union and communion with God.”<sup>59</sup> Note that such sanctification is due to Christ’s work, takes place “in” Christ, and consists of an elevation into the life of God for the sake of communion with God. Torrance’s account of sanctification emphasizes Christ’s efficacious agency on our behalf — so much so that our sanctification (a.k.a. humanization and personalization) is a sharing in Christ’s perfect sanctification, humanization, and personalization — and it echoes Calvin’s description of what takes place during the sacrament of Communion, thereby taking on a distinctively Reformed flavor. This theology is decidedly christocentric, faithfully affirming Christ’s vicarious accomplishments at every turn.

Indeed, despite the many commonalities between Wesleyan theology and Torrance’s on the matter of *theosis*, “sanctification” marks a major point of departure when it comes to the role of human agency in the process. As seen above, a Wesleyan account of *theosis* lends itself to virtue theology in the form of “character formation.” Humans can and should pursue holiness by habituating their affections as wholly responsive to and part of God’s perfect love. The Wesley brothers, and countless Wesleyans after them, have devoted themselves to a long

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<sup>56</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 118-119.

<sup>57</sup> Torrance, “Come, Creator Spirit, for the Renewal of Worship,” 243.

<sup>58</sup> Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 66.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 223. See also Molnar, *Theologian of the Trinity*, 159.



list of “means of grace” for just such a purpose. Although contemporary Wesleyans debate the extent to which we are “cooperating” with God and “responding” to God, and what the proper terminology and metaphors should be, it remains the case that human involvement, will, decision, response, reaction, or what Torrance might call our “subjective” response remain essential to a Wesleyan account of *theosis* in the form of sanctification by the Spirit.

In practice, this difference between Wesleyan and Reformed emphases has made the two traditions seem incommensurate. Yet the distinction on the level of theology can be more subtle. First, both take the “grace alone” or “by God alone” stance often considered a hallmark or keystone of the Reformed tradition. Wesley, too, stresses that sanctification can only take place in the Spirit, who enables our response to God’s prevenient grace in the first place. Second, both pioneering theologians acknowledge that humans participate in this process, *by the Spirit*, when *by the Spirit* does not deny our human agency but rather enables it to take proper form. To understand this, we must adopt a model of non-competitive agency. For Torrance, God enables humans to respond, to share in Christ’s obedience and sanctification, because “the fullness of grace creatively includes the fullness and completeness of our human response.” As Torrance often puts it, “All of grace really does mean all of [the human].” For “how could the unconditional grace of the Lord Jesus Christ . . . ever mean a depreciating of the very humanity he came to save?!”<sup>60</sup>

The distinction, then, is uncomfortably subtle in theology even if marked in practice. When Wesley is willing to move from “grace alone” and “only by the Spirit” on to a litany of behaviors that humans should perform in response as they pursue holiness, share in God’s perfect love, and participate in the eruption of the New Creation, Torrance prefers to deflect our focus back to Christ alone. For Torrance, our “participation in grace” in Christ can only be understood eschatologically. It means “the real participation here and now in the new creation through the Spirit, and within the time of waiting for the redemption of the body at the *Parousia* of the Lord. [It] involves a real having of grace within our creaturely being and existence, but a having that is yet to be fulfilled or completed when Christ comes to make all

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<sup>60</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, xii-xiii.

things new.”<sup>61</sup> Habets calls this an “eschatological mystery.”<sup>62</sup> We do not activate or achieve our union with God, our humanization, or our sanctification by any human effort. Instead, the Spirit “realizes in us the recreative power of the risen and glorified Humanity of Christ” and unites us to Jesus’s obedience and faith so that, in our worship, the Spirit also raises “us up in Jesus to participate in the worship of heaven and in the eternal communion of the Holy Trinity.”<sup>63</sup> We are humanized — *sanctified* — by the Spirit as the Spirit unites us to Christ, the True Human, and we thereby enter more deeply into the triune communion.

Perhaps these differing impulses on behalf of the two theologians reflect their different concerns. Wesley scholars often dub him a “practical theologian,” whereas Torrance far more deserves the title of “systematic theologian.” More concerned with our human practices and “methods,” Wesley would naturally want to prescribe activities for his followers as he sought to renew the nigh-dead religion of eighteenth-century Anglicanism. Torrance, on the other hand, did not set out to spearhead a renewal movement, but made his lasting contribution to the church universal through his stunning insight as an intellectual, even if he engaged this calling in a pastoral, priestly, and even practical manner. Therefore, we are not surprised that Torrance develops a more thoroughly trinitarian theology with vast intricacies that seek to expound upon and weave together our creedal affirmations, including the hypostatic union and triune relations, whereas Wesley engages creedal theology on a far more *ad hoc* basis. Even if their differences as a “practical theologian” and “systematic theologian,” respectively, carries explanatory power, their divergence on an otherwise remarkable convergence of creative theology merits closer examination.

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<sup>61</sup> Torrance, “The Roman Doctrine of Grace,” 186.

<sup>62</sup> Habets, *Theosis*, 44.

<sup>63</sup> Torrance, “Come, Creator Spirit, for the Renewal of Worship,” 250. See also Molnar, *Theologian of the Trinity*, 201.

### **Productive Convergences and Divergences between Wesley and Torrance on Theosis: Receiving a Breath of Life for Dying Denominations**

This essay has so far argued that John Wesley and T. F. Torrance offer remarkably similar theologies of *theosis*, made all the more remarkable given the relative curiosity of finding such developed accounts of *theosis* among Protestant theologians of prior centuries. Both accept the Western theological precepts concerning sin, alienation, and humanity's need for God's intervention to overcome that alienation in Christ, and both combine this understanding with the Greek patristic theological precepts of regeneration, sanctification, and of the healing of creation by the Spirit such that the New Creation both affirms the old creation while representing its incomparable improvement and fulfillment. Both theologians imply or state that "divinization" entails a form of "humanization," so that humans become more of what they are meant to be by participating in the divine life and thereby sharing in God's loving redemption of the world. Moreover, they both make sense of this mysterious process by appealing to human "participation" in the Spirit, or our participation in divine activity and eschatological realities by way of the Spirit.

When exploring Wesley's and Torrance's explanations and uses of the term "sanctification," we detect the fractures in their accounts that anticipate the rift that currently divides Wesleyan and Reformed thought and practice. Speaking as a Wesleyan, I would argue that although we are a diverse family, we tend to cling to our methods, our "Discipline," and our rules. Wesleyanism's historically largest branch, the United Methodist Church of the USA, has for decades been associated with *works* — works of piety and mercy through Bible studies and mission trips and vocal stances on issues of social justice and political ethics. Since the 1920s, US Methodism's members and leaders represent "evangelical" as well as "liberal" or "modern" camps; it played well with the Social Gospel movement; and it established itself as a mainline institution in the 1950s and 1960s that is now associated — whether justly or not — with do-goodery and keeping up appearances. Traditional Reformed theology, on the other hand, continues to stress not so much *human* actions but God's actions, casting suspicion on Wesleyan practices as bordering on Pelagian attempts to earn salvation. That said, many

Reformed denominations and churches face a similar situation as their Wesleyan siblings, such as the PCUSA and PCA, which are experiencing plummeting membership and funds as Western mainline churches together drift toward extinction.

Might examining the fracture between Wesley and Torrance on the question of sanctification clarify our contemporary differences? Might it even offer resources for Wesleyan and Reformed Christians as we contemplate the possibility of denominational death? Perhaps. Let us return to the question of sanctification and our human participation in it by way of the Spirit as seen in Wesley's and Torrance's versions of *theosis*.

### **Productive divergences: practices, means of grace, and relocating the focus from self to God**

While Wesley is most certainly more of a "practical theologian" than a systematic one, Torrance is sometimes accused of being too impractical. That criticism has calcified into a bone of contention among Torrance scholars. For his part, Ray Anderson's "attempt at reading Torrance as a practical theologian" may take him far, yet he nevertheless concludes that Torrance "seldom ventures onto the turf where practical theologians ply their trade."<sup>64</sup> Torrance is not *wholly* impractical, and his theological offerings have many practical applications.<sup>65</sup> He contends that we are *eschatologically* empowered to serve, obey, and glorify the Father like the Son, by way of participation in the Spirit. Habets reads Torrance as further suggesting Christians undergo a progressive transformation as they are "continually bound to Christ by the Spirit" through "fellowship with the saints, corporate worship, the ministry of the Word, and partaking of the sacraments"<sup>66</sup> — all practical activities that subtly echo a few of the prominent Wesleyan means of grace that Wesleyans likewise believe aid one's progressive transformation. Nevertheless, there remains

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<sup>64</sup> Anderson, "Torrance as a Practical Theologian," 176.

<sup>65</sup> See Todd H. Speidell, "The Soteriological Suspension of the Ethical in the Theology of T. F. Torrance," *Participatio: Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship*, 5 (2015): 56-90.

<sup>66</sup> Habets, *Theosis*, 195.

in Torrance's work a tendency to eschew practical concerns right when they are about to come into view.

Why? Torrance's driving concern is to point away from us and focus instead on Christ. Salvation — and sanctification and redemption and the eruption of the New Creation — is affected by the triune God by way of Christ's life, death, and resurrection as one who was fully God and fully human. As Paul Molnar explains, Christ has done all that needs to be done

so that we do not need to do anything to complete this work or to enable it; we only have to receive it gratefully as the very gift of grace, that is, of God himself enabling our lives as part of the new creation inaugurated by Christ's own life, death, resurrection and ascension and thus as the fully human beings God intended us to be.<sup>67</sup>

Torrance answers Ray Anderson's gentle criticism directly, explaining that he repeatedly emphasizes Christ's vicarious humanity and unconditional grace because it is the truth of the Gospel and necessary for freeing us from our "deep seated bondage to the self."<sup>68</sup> We should hear in this both an Augustinian indictment of sinful humanity's *curvatus in se* and a diagnosis of modernity and its exaltation of the "Self" as the locus and arbiter of knowledge — a relationship to the self that prevents us from proper love and proper knowledge of that which necessarily lies beyond us. By God's grace alone are we freed from ourselves so that we are in turn

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<sup>67</sup> Molnar, *Theologian of the Trinity*, 292.

<sup>68</sup> In response to Ray Anderson's article, Torrance writes, "I often find the Gospel of salvation by grace alone to be so difficult for people to understand and believe. In preaching and speaking about it to good people in their homes I have sometimes found the sharpest reaction, for it is unconditional grace that cuts so deeply into our life, and unconditional grace which strangely upsets so many evangelical Christians, as I have found in their reaction to my book, *The Mediation of Christ*. It is sometimes the case that would-be evangelical Christians shy away from the sheer truth of salvation by grace alone, and yet it is there, as I have so often found in my pastoral ministry and theological writing, that people feel so 'liberated,' as they say . . . it cuts deeply into the very quick of the soul and frees it from deep seated bondage to the self. It is when people think of salvation through what [Jesus has done through his whole life, death, and resurrection] that they can really understand the deep truth of the vicarious humanity of Christ and his unconditional grace." Torrance, "Thomas Torrance Responds," in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance*, ed. Elmer M. Colyer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 323.

free *for* God. Only in such freedom can we love God, love others, and be who we are meant to be as creatures who participate in the divine life of love.

Could Wesleyans learn from Torrance's quest for a singular focus on Christ and his concerns about our deep-seated bondage to the self? Perhaps it is time for us Wesleyans to re-examine the ways in which our gaze has slipped from God such that we too often remain self-absorbed, engaged in intense navel-gazing both individually and communally even as we nobly strive to be good Christians who do the right thing. If this description is at all true of Wesleyans, then we desperately need to hear the gospel message again, the good news that *God has done it for us in Christ by the Spirit*. While we are called to follow Christ and love our neighbors, which entails practical action on behalf of the world, we must first and always focus on the God of love who alone inspires and enables such activity to share in God's redemptive love. Wesley himself would affirm that works of mercy and works of piety are dead without the gracious Spirit, that they do more harm than good when not done in the right spirit.<sup>69</sup> We are called to love as God loves, yes, which requires our activity. But Jesus Christ — and not us — remains the one and only savior of ourselves and the world.<sup>70</sup>

What might Reformed Christians — especially those who take Torrance seriously — gain from Wesley's account of *theosis*? We already see an independent convergence taking place in the work of Reformed theologian James K. A. Smith, whose Cultural Liturgies series presents a form of virtue theology that very much aligns with the angles of Wesley interpretation that Maddox and Runyon have offered. That is, they all converge on a call to character formation through the habituation of our affections, the primary difference simply being that while Maddox and Runyon hear this call uttered on Wesley's lips, Smith draws heavily upon philosophers like Pierre Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty to make his case.<sup>71</sup> In both Torrance and Smith, then, we find Reformed intellectuals attracted to concepts that

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<sup>69</sup> Wesley, "The Means of Grace," I.4. in *Sermons*, 159.

<sup>70</sup> Based on Stephen Long, *John Wesley's Moral Theology*, Long would argue that such a shift in focus would in fact bring us closer to true Wesleyanism.

<sup>71</sup> As in James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

fall under the heading of *theosis*. Interestingly, Smith has not directly engaged his Reformed predecessor on *theosis* and formation. What would happen if he did? Bringing Torrance and Smith into conversation precisely on this question would be one fruitful line of inquiry going forward, especially for Reformed Christians. Likewise, Smith could also serve as an additional interlocutor as we explore this intriguing convergence of Wesleyan and Reformed scholarship on the topic of *theosis*.<sup>72</sup>

Yet Reformed Christians, I suspect, have something far more immediately practical to gain from engaging the Wesleyan account of *theosis*. Just as Wesleyans stand to benefit from an interrogation of their “works,” motivations, and focus (or lack thereof) on the person and work of Jesus Christ, so too might Reformed Christians — especially those who take Torrance seriously — stand to benefit from the Wesleyan means of grace. What are these means of grace? Habets himself mentions a few when summarizing the practical applications he sees in Torrance’s account: “fellowship with the saints, corporate worship, the ministry of the Word, and partaking of the sacraments.”<sup>73</sup> For Wesleyans, these are all “means of grace,” or God-given ways in which the Spirit regularly moves us to encounter and receive God’s grace. Through these, God can graciously reform us and our desires onward along the path of sanctification. As Wesley puts it, “By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels” that God uses to convey to us “preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.” For Wesley, the “chief” means include prayer (individual and communal), engaging the Scriptures, and receiving the Lord’s Supper.<sup>74</sup> Yet Wesleyans also regularly add many others, including “holy

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<sup>72</sup> For reflection on a Reformed engagement of *theosis* as inspired by T. F. Torrance and J. B. Torrance, see Heleen E. Zorgdrager, “On the Fullness of Salvation: Tracking *Theosis* in Reformed Theology,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 8, no. 4 (2014): 366-368.

<sup>73</sup> Habets, *Theosis*, 195.

<sup>74</sup> Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” II.1, *John Wesley’s Sermons*, 160.

conversations” with other Christians, and all works of mercy that are more outwardly directed in service to neighbor and the rest of creation.<sup>75</sup>

Just because these means of grace can be abused or approached in the wrong spirit does not nullify their proper place in quotidian Christian life as Christians look to Christ to find greater union with him. In fact, the traditionally Reformed emphasis on “grace alone” was shared by Wesley himself, so that Wesleyans hear in Torrance’s version of *theosis* a heady reminder to recover that part of Wesley’s own teachings. In his sermon “The Means of Grace,” Wesley explores the potential conundrum between outward acts and the need for a singular focus on God. Although he does not wish to dismiss all forms of “outward religion,” he admonishes his hearers:

“By grace are ye saved:” Ye are saved from your sins, from the guilt and power thereof, ye are restored to the favour and image of God, not for any works, merits, or deservings of yours, but by the free grace, the mere mercy of God, through the merits of his well-beloved Son: Ye are thus saved, not by any power, wisdom, or strength, which is in you, or in any other creature; but merely through the grace or power of the Holy Ghost, which worketh all in all.<sup>76</sup>

Wesley further affirms that “outward religion is nothing worth, without the religion of the heart; that . . . external worship is lost labour, without a heart devoted to God; that the outward ordinances of God then profit much, when they advance inward holiness, but, when they advance it not, are unprofitable and void, . . . an utter abomination to the Lord.”<sup>77</sup> Rather, the “value of the means depends on their actual subservience to the end of religion,”<sup>78</sup> and “all outward means whatever, if

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<sup>75</sup> For a thorough introduction to the Wesleyan means of grace, see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 192-228. Maddox walks readers through means like the Lord’s Supper, corporate worship and prayer, scripture lectionary, hymns, sermons, love feasts, special services, rules and measures for accountability, private devotions and prayers and readings of scripture, serving the needy and other works of mercy, catechesis, confirmation rites, and the Methodist Societies.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, II.6, 161.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, I.4, 159.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, II.2, 160.



separate from the Spirit of God, cannot profit at all, cannot conduce, in any degree, either to the knowledge or love of God.”<sup>79</sup> The means contain no “intrinsic” or “inherent power,” but rather “God alone” gives “every good gift.”<sup>80</sup> Moreover, God can give the gift of grace without such “means” should God choose. Lastly, “the use of all means whatever will never atone for one sin,” because “it is the blood of Christ alone, whereby any sinner can be reconciled to God.”<sup>81</sup>

Wesley is adamant, then, that the means are not ways for us to earn atonement or salvation or even sanctification — they have no intrinsic power, and we merit nothing through them — but instead they are secondary to our devotion to God and must take place within the Spirit for us to receive grace through them. As “ordinances” of God that God offers us, we receive them as ways to “wait” on God’s grace.<sup>82</sup> Just as we regularly celebrate the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper even though “it is finished” in Christ, so too may we attend these other ordinances in this time of the eschatological reserve. Therefore, Reformed Christians who seek practical applications of Torrance’s account of *theosis* need not fear a thorough exploration of the Wesleyan approach to the means of grace in the hopes of receiving God-given and Spirit-led growth in them.<sup>83</sup>

### **Productive convergences: creation, ecumenism, & experiencing the Spirit**

Both Reformed and Wesleyan Christians benefit from Wesley’s and Torrance’s accounts of *theosis* as the accounts converge on a few key themes. First, they together affirm the created world in ways that allow us to see both brokenness and promise, sin and healing, emboldening us to love ourselves and the rest of creation

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., II.3, 160.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., II.4, 161.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., IV.1, 166.

<sup>83</sup> Heleen Zorgdrager explains, “a Reformed understanding of sanctification or deification can never be an individualistic pursuit,” but Christians can nevertheless experience (as Julie Canlis puts it) “transformation” through “deepened *koinonia* with God and others,” most obviously in the Eucharist. Zorgdrager, “Tracking *Theosis* in Reformed Theology,” 381. Quoting Julie Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 252.

as God does. Second, both accounts themselves embody a productive form of theological ecumenism that plays out in practical ecumenism as well, which further deepens the third and perhaps most urgent benefit for contemporary Christians: their insistence on the Spirit's active presence and our graciously given participation in the Spirit. After all, this essay's title not only references soteriology and anthropology, but *pneumatology* as well. What does it mean to participate in the Spirit? Perhaps it really is an "eschatological mystery"<sup>84</sup> that resists additional probing. Yet surely it is also a lived reality, something to be experienced. Torrance himself as well as Wesley scholars like Theodore Runyon and Lyle Dabney all advocate ecumenism precisely based on the doctrine and lived reality of the Holy Spirit, yet the contemporary mainline iterations of Wesleyan and Reformed traditions continue to struggle on this count.

Theodore Runyon finds that Wesleyan pneumatology naturally extends into Wesleyan ecumenism. Wesley not only draws upon a diverse, ecumenical heritage, but Wesley argues that we partake in Christian fellowship with others who, despite their different opinions and expressions, experience the same Spirit and "cleave to God through the Son of his love."<sup>85</sup> In his sermon on the "Catholic Spirit," Wesley could not be clearer: no matter a fellow Christian's theological opinions or modes of worship, if she believes in the triune God and seeks to love God and others, then he begs her, "give me thine hand."<sup>86</sup> As Runyon points out, Wesley's doctrinal emphases on prevenient grace as the wide-ranging activity of the Spirit likewise readily lend themselves to Christian ecumenism, and, indeed, a more gracious and humble engagement with diverse cultural contexts.<sup>87</sup>

Another Wesleyan scholar, Lyle Dabney, uses Wesley's pneumatology to launch a plea for ecumenism as a means of redressing contemporary struggles. In "Pneumatology and the Methodist Tradition," he argues that

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<sup>84</sup> Habets, *Theosis*, 44.

<sup>85</sup> Wesley, Sermon 20, "The Lord our Righteousness," II.2-3, *Works*, 1:454. Discussed in Runyon, *The New Creation*, 218.

<sup>86</sup> Wesley, Sermon 39, "Catholic Spirit," *John Wesley's Sermons*, 299-309.

<sup>87</sup> Runyon, *The New Creation*, 218.

Wesley's contribution to the Western theological tradition consists in his striving towards what can perhaps best be termed a 'theology of the third article' of the creed. This was a theology of the transforming redemption of God's human creature and all creation in and through the Holy Spirit that begins in forgiveness and ends in holiness of life.<sup>88</sup>

He concludes that Wesleyans must recover their "theology of the third article," which in turn demands a renewed commitment to the ecumenical movement. For Dabney, "Ecumenical theology, in this sense, would thus be best understood not simply as the task of resolving our 'internal' disputes concerning faith and practice, but rather as the common task of faithful living and thinking as disciples of Christ in the face of the challenge of the new 'external' situation in which we find ourselves called to pursue God's redemptive mission today."<sup>89</sup>

Torrance likewise finds that his pneumatology compels him toward ecumenism, and that the two are intimately related. In "The Relevance of the Doctrine of the Spirit for Ecumenical Theology,"<sup>90</sup> Torrance makes two connections between ecumenism and pneumatology. First, his presentation of the gospel, replete with its Torrancian version of *theosis* as inspired by both East and West, functions as a bridge for him to invite deeper communion and agreement between Eastern and Western Christianity. Second, he argues that Christians grieve the Spirit by way of endless, anti-ecumenical divisions.<sup>91</sup>

How might we take the invitation to ecumenism to heart precisely as we ask how to "wait" on or "participate in" the Spirit today in our dwindling congregations and denominations? First, we may receive a breath of life from the Spirit by succumbing to the outward, extrinsic, ecstatic orientation that ecumenism demands of us. Such an other-oriented stance reflects and shares in the movement of the Spirit of the triune God. This in turn aligns with Dabney's suggestion that the

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<sup>88</sup> D. Lyle Dabney, "Pneumatology in the Methodist Tradition," in *Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, ed. James E. Kirby and William J. Abraham, *Oxford Handbooks* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 577.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 583.

<sup>90</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 229-239.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

ecumenical movement should itself focus on the *mission Dei*, participating in God's love of the world through loving care and service.

Second, the essential role of the Spirit in Wesleyan and Torrance versions of *theosis* reveals yet another form of ecumenism, one that may likewise breathe a renewing breath of life into Wesleyan and Reformed communities. Namely, Wesleyan and Reformed Christians must learn from our Christian siblings about *experiencing the Spirit*. Torrance comes close to making just such a recommendation when he proclaims, "Is there anything we need to regain more than this faith in the utter Godness of God the Holy Spirit?"<sup>92</sup> He makes this cry as he indicts both Western Protestantism and Roman Catholicism for "domesticating" the Spirit, as if humans control the Spirit of God. He continues:

If our worship and witness are conspicuous for their lack of Holy Spirit, it is surely because we Protestants, whatever we may confess in our creeds, have diminished belief in the transcendent power and utter Godness of the Creator Spirit, and have become engrossed in our own subjectivities and the development of our own inherent potentialities. Hence the first thing that must happen to us is a glad subjection to the lordly freedom and majesty of God the Holy Spirit, and a humble readiness for miraculous divine acts that transcend all human possibilities and break through the limitations of anything we can conceive. *Come Creator Spirit*, is a prayer of open surrender to the absolute creativity of God.<sup>93</sup>

Those who bemoan the decline of "Christianity" from within the sanctuaries of mainline church properties fail to recognize the staggering growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic branches of the church universal. We can hear in both Torrance and Wesley a suggestion that we humble ourselves enough to *learn* from our siblings who actively and routinely welcome the Lordship of the Spirit in their spaces of worship and beyond, whether they be Pentecostal, Charismatic, or our Eastern Orthodox siblings from whom we have inherited much of the theological

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 245.

understanding of Spirit-led *theosis* in the first place. Perhaps we should imitate John Wesley, in the way he welcomed “enthusiasm” in his meetings and spaces of worship even if he himself felt uncomfortable with such emotional displays, admitting their plausible legitimacy in light of the Spirit’s activity within the otherwise highly methodical and structured organization of the Methodist movement.<sup>94</sup> Whatever our initial hesitations may be, surely we can learn from those who more readily embrace the experience of the Spirit, proclaim the Spirit’s utter Godness and Lordship, and cry, “Come, Creator Spirit” in open surrender.

Make no mistake: learning more from Eastern Orthodoxy and those branches of Christianity with growing numbers does not remotely guarantee that mainline congregations will ever rebound in popularity or avoid gradual extinction. Indeed, numerical count is not a measure of God’s work or will. And humble learning is but one step on a journey with no predictable path, as uncontrolled by humans as the wind that blows where it will. Yet what do we have to lose in giving ourselves to the Spirit? In our renewed attention to the one who first loved us, may we discover that all of our “means of grace” — including our denominational structures — are nothing when they do not serve their true end, edifying when they do, and always and everywhere contingent upon the Spirit who humanizes us, sanctifies us, and unites us to a loving God by any means necessary.

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<sup>94</sup> For more discussion of Wesley’s relationship to Charismatic expressions of Christianity and his relationship to displays of supposedly spiritual enthusiasm, see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 134-136, 320n128, and Howard A. Snyder and Daniel V. Runyon, *The Divided Flame: Wesleyans and Charismatic Renewal* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).