

Christopher R. J. Holmes, *A Theology of the Christian Life: Imitating and Participating in God*

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), pp. xvii + 171. \$24.99.

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This book ‘unfold[s] a program of spiritual renewal founded on some of the essential names or attributes of the divine being’ (p. xii). The core idea is that the doctrine of God is the wellspring of Christian life. This core idea unpacks two essentially biblical motifs, namely that Christians are called to imitate God, and that they are called to participate in God’s manner of existence. As such, Holmes expands upon a wider contemporary retrieval of a pre-modern sensibility that casts theology as a spiritual exercise rather than as an abstracted, intellectual pursuit divorced from faithful practices aimed at human transformation. ‘Scripture and the premodern tradition’, Holmes writes, ‘remind us that Christian life is the setting for the doctrine of God’ (p. 45). The book forms a primer in how doctrine is ‘descriptive’ and ‘imperative’, shaping Christian practices and being shaped in turn by the goal of the Christian life as it seeks to live the life of God.

Holmes divides the book into two parts that develop its core idea and two motifs. The first part is comprised of five chapters that in turn address how five divine names or attributes – being, simplicity, perfection, infinity and immutability – shape the Christian life. Each chapter explores how each divine name both asserts a radical ontological distinction between God and creatures and yet also express attributes which believers are mysteriously called to imitate and participate in as they become ‘friends’ with God. The grammar of participation unlocks the intelligibility of this apparent paradox. While the divine names only belong essentially and properly to God, creatures enjoy a participated similitude because the divine nature is their underpinning first and final cause. The second part is comprised of three chapters that go on to consider how the divine names shape thinking about and imitating Christ, virtue as the ‘personal dimension’ of the doctrine of God (pp. 125, 142), and ecclesiology.

The first part of the book mines the pre-modern theological tradition deeply, drawing upon both eastern and western sources in equal measure. In effect, each chapter has an implicit premise, developed in one chapter in particular in relation to Maximus the Confessor’s distinction between ‘relative knowledge’ and ‘truly authentic knowledge’ (p. 38). The former revolves around understanding that is ‘staid, cerebral, and placid’, while the latter is gained through participative experience of God in a ‘spiritual pedagogy’ of prayer and contemplation that leads to transformative union with God (p. 41). Indeed, ‘the names described in this book are short-changed if the form of life they engender is ignored’ (pp. 59–60).

Working outwards from this basic framework, Holmes expertly renders the complexity of divine attributes across the first part of the book with a perspicacity that cuts through concepts that might at first seem abstract but which constitute the *sine qua non* of Christian living. Beginning with God’s existence, while maintaining that ‘the dissimilarity between

Creator and creature is always greater than the similarity', Holmes nevertheless avers that 'as we acknowledge God and begin to love and thank him for the gift of existence, we become like him' (p. 17). In the following four chapters, Holmes crafts how pre-modern theologies situate the doctrine of God in Christian lives and practices geared at becoming like God and sharing (or participating) in God's life. Speaking of divine simplicity, Holmes avers that 'when our manner of existence resembles God's, our identity is defined not by us as creatures but by God the Creator' (p. 42). Turning to divine perfection, Holmes turns to the biblical call to be 'perfect', cast as 'the God-loving life', as Gregory of Nyssa put it (p. 51). Here, prayer and instruction are how the soul is opened to heavenly treasure and God's indwelling. That indwelling is the immanent presence of the Holy Spirit, who 'nurtures participation in what is God's, essentially speaking' (p. 80) and through whom we obtain likeness to God. This participation and imitation take on an essentially moral character, according to Holmes. Friendship with God generates piety, and piety is proven by moral fitness, a virtuous permanency of character that imitates God's immutability. All in all, for Holmes 'the divine names...generate...[a] better understanding of the Christian life' (p. 99).

The second part puts more flesh on the bones of the central idea and key motifs of the book. Particularly impressive is the chapter on how the hypostatic union renders as possible and intelligible the Christian life as one that imitates and participates in God. The following chapter on virtue explicates with subtlety 'the kind of piety that consideration of God's name encourages' (p. 126), grounding the epistemic value of worshipful practices. The concluding chapter on ecclesiology works as a capstone that unites the contemplation of divine names and personal flourishing with the tradition-bound enquiry of communal practices and identity. The priority of grace in God's self-disclosure and unfolding in the messiness of human realities shows that 'the Christian life and the church as its home – these are God's doings' (p. 154).

This is a gem of a book. Holmes has a superlative ability to unite theological dexterity and complexity with attentiveness to the contours of ordinary Christian life. It will be valuable both for academic theologians as a reminder of their confessional vocation, and for Christian communities keen to explore how doctrine exhibits and fosters a life that draws individuals and communities into the heart of God. Although the basic idea becomes a little repetitive across the book, Holmes inhabits the spiritual tradition he draws upon, marrying together dogmatic and spiritual theology.

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Michele Miller Sigg, *Birthing Revival: Women and Mission in Nineteenth-Century France*

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The modern missionary movement allowed European and American women opportunities to challenge the cultural expectations of their own societies whilst, for good or ill,