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AN EVANGELICAL CRITIQUE OF THE GREEK ORTHODOX
DOCTRINE OF DEIFICATION

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APPROVAL SHEET

**AN EVANGELICAL CRITIQUE OF THE GREEK ORTHODOX
DOCTRINE OF DEIFICATION**

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You are my crown. Ruthy, I could not have completed this thesis without your support.

Your wisdom, care, and love remind me that “house and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the LORD” (Prov 19:14).

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>GOTR</i>	<i>Greek Orthodox Theological Review</i>
<i>IJOT</i>	<i>International Journal of Orthodox Theology</i>
<i>JES</i>	<i>Journal of Ecumenical Studies</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of Evangelical Theological Society</i>
LXX	The Septuagint
<i>TMSJ</i>	<i>The Master's Seminary Journal</i>
<i>TRINJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>

PREFACE

This thesis is the culmination of a number of factors. Jim Gibson was my first theology lecturer back in Brisbane, Australia. He taught me that the beginning and end of all theological studies was the Word written and the Word incarnate. When I think of Jim Gibson, one word keeps reverberating in my mind, “Gospel.” My lecturer became my friend and mentor. He taught about the gospel with passion, preached the gospel with veracity, and lived the gospel. It was back then, that I started to comprehend and embrace the wonders of systematic theology.

In 2011, my wife and I listened to a convocation address by Albert Mohler, and his handling of the Scriptures catalyzed our move to the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He is an example of a godly, unswerving, and unashamed worker who rightly handles the word of truth. The Lord has blessed the seminary with an army of such workers.

With much indebtedness, I would like to thank Michael Wilder because he helped me to navigate through unknown terrain. He is a gentleman and a scholar. I am thankful to the Lord for guiding Michael Wilder to come and sit next to me during orientation back in August 2011. I know which door to knock at if I need some help. I pray that I will be to others what he has been to me.

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friendship, guidance, and support. He always reminded me that the gospel is the heart and soul of true biblical spirituality.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Ruthy, from the bottom of my heart. I could write a dissertation about you, my love. You are far more precious than jewels. Thank you for loving me so much. If it were not for Christ, neither of us would be here today. “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6).

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Protestant Reformation did not affect the Eastern Church in any significant way. Greek Orthodoxy and the Eastern Church in general had at their disposal many centuries to arrange and develop in an intricate fashion dogma such as the doctrine of *theosis*. For the Eastern Orthodox Church, *theosis*, or deification, is a unique doctrine that encompasses the whole divine economy of salvation. Deification is the essence of human existence and Christian life. Orthodoxy postulates that God made a commitment to humanity at the moment of creation. God implanted the divine image and likeness into humans with the purpose of participatory union and deification.

The doctrine of *theosis* is the driving force of the theology and *praxis* of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The path of deification fuses the doctrines of justification, sanctification, and glorification into a mystifying amalgam. Such an approach leads the flock of the Eastern Orthodox Church away from identifying the glory of God as the chief end of all things. Eastern theologians ultimately resort to a positive anthropology rejecting the doctrines of complete depravity and total inability and propel a synergistic soteriology and sacramentalism as a main path to deification. An exposure to such man-centered distinctives explain the unbridgeable chasm that exists between Eastern Orthodox and evangelical theology.¹

A careful investigation of the doctrine of *theosis* and analysis of writings from certain Greek Fathers, as well as subsequent prominent theologians, coupled by careful

¹A number of evangelical theologians such as Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Robert V. Rakestraw, Joseph D. Driskill, Evan Howard, Thomas F. Torrance, and to some extent Robert Letham and Donald Fairbairn, have not seen the vast chasm between Eastern Orthodox and evangelical theology.

exegesis of relevant biblical texts, will reveal the true nature and ramifications of *theosis*.² An evangelical critique of the doctrine of deification will expose whether Eastern Orthodoxy has deviated from the saving gospel of the Scriptures by concealing truths central to salvation under the mystical theology of the Eastern Church.

Familiarity with the Literature

The increasing engagement of Western scholars with Eastern Orthodox spirituality has started to stimulate further dialogue between the two traditions. The surge in scholarly interaction is raising questions and stimulating interest in the central doctrines of Eastern soteriology. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, written by Vladimir Lossky, has been one of the greatest contemporary catalytic agents and promoters of the doctrine of *theosis*. Lossky perceives all theology to be somewhat mystical as it connects spirituality with doctrine, and thus affirms that the Eastern Orthodox Church has never made a sharp differentiation between mysticism and theology. Both are necessary for the ultimate end of humans, namely union with God via the synergism of the divine and human wills.³

Apophaticism is a fundamental constituent of the Eastern Church. It is “a contemplation of the mysteries of revelation.”⁴ The theology of the Eastern Church stipulates that the incomprehensibility of God demands an apophatic or mystical way of ascent toward the secret ineffable place of God.⁵ Humans can be freed from passions and

²Examples of writings would include those from Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, Vladimir Lossky, Dumitru Staniloae, John Meyendorff, Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, Giorgios I. Mantzaridis, Panayiotis Nellis and others.

³Eastern asceticism is a practical example demonstrating an exercise of human will in the quest of union of the heart and the spirit, the spiritual and the bodily, and the union of doctrine and experience.

⁴Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 42.

⁵Lossky argues that this apophatic thinking of the Greek Fathers differs from Platonism and Neoplatonism at the point of the impossibility of intellectually expressing the divine essence.

attain a state of serenity by partaking in the infinite life of the Trinity. This spiritual pursuit of the fullness of being is the end and meaning of human existence. Deification is the way one can partake of all the Trinity “possesses by nature.”⁶ Lossky suggests that the antinomy of the incommunicable and yet communicable nature of God is affirmed in the words of the apostle Peter as a mystery in the participation of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). God remains inaccessible to humans in his essence but accessible in his uncreated energies or divine operations that still are part of his existence.⁷

God created humanity with the objective of deification and a capacity of assimilation to him. Since the first humans failed to attain union with God, the Word of God descended to humanity. The incarnation of Jesus Christ thus corresponds to the *theosis* of humans achieved by the union of Christ’s two natures—human and divine. The Spirit communicated this achievement in making members of the church partakers of the divine nature by imparting to “human hypostases the fullness of deity.”⁸ Since the church is the center of the universe, no one can achieve union with God apart from those within the church who through their labors have become worthy of the deifying indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The attainment of deification is synergistic, a cooperation of grace and human free will. Conversion is a free continuous act of the will in which one turns toward God and renounces the world.⁹ This act of conversion is a second regeneration after baptism and leads to an ascent of purification and perfection. An upward ascent toward this

⁶Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 65.

⁷The participatory union of a human with God comes through the manifestation of God’s divine energies.

⁸Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 166. The mystery of the church’s resemblance to the image of the Trinity has its roots in Christology and pneumatology. Eastern Orthodoxy perceives the nature of the church as “theandric” mirrored in the hypostatic union of Christ. Additionally, the mystical center and perfection of the church has been realized in a prototype human person, deified, fully united, and entered into perfect union with God, namely Virgin Mary, the *theotokos*.

⁹*Ibid.*, 199.

mystical union with God has to include both awareness or gnosis and an act of the free will. God then grants his divine energies or uncreated light surpassing both sense and intellect in a measure according to one's worthiness. It is this uncreated divine light that causes illumination of the human being. Hence dogma and experience are dual operators in deification.

Lossky's contribution to the subject is multifaceted and catalytic to the resurfacing of the doctrine of *theosis*. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* identifies the core and disposition of Eastern dogmatic theology. In the course of his treatise there exists a transparent attempt to couple mystical spirituality with doctrine and theology. Lossky argues that apophatic theology ascribes to God the proper incomprehensibility and incommunicability of his being and explains the reason for the distinction between God's essence and divine energies. This distinction then paves the way for a link between anthropology, deification, and soteriology. Participatory union with God thus comes through God's communication of divine energies. Likewise, Lossky connects dogma with mysticism and *praxis* in the journey of deification.

When Eastern Orthodox theologians consider dogmatics, they think of the methodological value of Dumitru Staniloae, one of the greatest Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century. Staniloae's dogmatic theology in his *The World: Creation and Deification* presents the creation of the visible world as the domain of deification in which each person is a hypostasis of the entire cosmic nature in communion with other beings. The deification of humans takes place in the created domain. This world is a commitment and a gift from God for the advancement of humanity's spiritual formation, namely deification.¹⁰

¹⁰Dumitru Staniloae, *The World: Creation and Deification*, in vol. 2 of *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, ed. and trans. Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 1994), 21.

God created people with the capacity to reason, will, and act. Since human beings are created in the very image of God, the soul of man possesses immortality and is inherently endowed with a relational divine grace in the form of uncreated energy from God. The image imprint that humanity retains predestines them to the potential of *theosis*. Eastern theologians stress that this image can develop into “likeness” when humans exercise their powers for good toward their fellow humans, mimicking a trinitarian relationship. They then progress into eternal communion with God and move toward actualizing their meaning for existence.¹¹

Had Adam and Eve not sinned but persevered in obedience, the imprinted spiritual force and potency for immortality within them would have actualized into deification. The fall caused opacity and distortion of this ability, and, therefore, Christ’s incarnation became a necessary action for man’s restoration of the ability for deification and, by extension, the deification of the whole creation.¹² Staniloae asserts that sin will not thwart the plan of God for the deification of the cosmos. Through providence, God works synergistically with “the conscious creature” to guide the world in “perfection of life in union with him”¹³ in salvation and deification.

Staniloae’s dogmatic theology examines the purpose of creation in the context of human existence and spiritual formation en route to deification. Not only does he employ apophatic theology, but he also acknowledges the value of cataphatic epistemology in knowing God. Staniloae provides a wider view of anthropology by asserting that the human soul already possesses an ability of deification because God’s divine uncreated energies were in action during creation.

¹¹Staniloae, *The World*, 2:48–49.

¹²*Ibid.*, 2:132.

¹³Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 208.

Staniloae continues his treatise in Orthodox dogmatic theology by linking the role of the seven sacramental mysteries to deification. *The Sanctifying Mysteries* highlight the sacraments of baptism, chrismation, divine communion, repentance, priesthood, marriage, and holy unction.¹⁴ Staniloae criticizes Protestantism for failing to make the unifying connection of Christ and his mystical body, namely the church, through the bestowment and transmission of grace via the sacraments. The sacraments thus demonstrate and maintain the dynamics of matter and spirit where deified humans become a *syndesmos*¹⁵ within creation.

The hypostatic union of Christ has actualized the possibility of the human nature to be a link that connects God with his creation. The sacraments visibly and invisibly exhibit the supreme and eternal value of the human body, and this notion in turn influences the soul that exists within the domain of the body to move toward deification. Staniloae explains the pivotal role of all seven sacraments starting from the act of baptism as an act of enhypostasis in Christ and thus the restoration of God's image in the human.¹⁶ Following the absolute necessity of baptism for salvation, he then progresses with the remainder of "mysteries" as adjuvants in the activation of spiritual energies, sanctification, and deification.

The sacraments of the Eastern Orthodox Church function as progressive steps of receiving power, coming into a fuller union with the divinity of Christ, and hence inducing growth and appropriating *theosis* in the participants. Some sacraments¹⁷ have an initiating as well as continuous aspect while others have a strengthening of the union

¹⁴Dumitru Staniloae, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, in vol. 5 of *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, trans. Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2012).

¹⁵*Syndesmos* is a unifying bond or link. See Staniloae, *The Sanctifying Mysteries*, 4.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 1-55.

¹⁷Such as baptism, chrismation, ordination into priesthood and marriage.

or reestablishing of the communion with Christ and the church.¹⁸ According to Staniloae, the encounter of God and the movement toward deification only takes place through the dispensation of grace and sanctifying mysteries of the sacramental life of the church.

Staniloae augments the discussion of deification by indicating the extent and role of sacramentalism in Eastern Orthodoxy. The role of the sanctifying mysteries continues by the enhypostatic, restorative, and strengthening role of the sacraments. Deification only occurs through the church's role in bestowing and transmitting grace via the sacraments. Hence, Staniloae highlights a main difference in Protestant and Eastern Orthodox theology. It is clear that there is a vast difference between the definition and action of grace.

The apophatic theology of Orthodoxy demands an apophatic anthropology. Panayiotis Nellas has achieved this in his book *Deification in Christ*. Accordingly, to understand the nature of man one needs to comprehend the nature of Christ. Nellas proposes that according to the Greek Fathers, the image of God in man relates to Christ, who is the image of the incomprehensible God. In patristic literature, Christ, the perfect image of God, forms an anthropological link. This link of the "image" reveals the divine cosmological purpose for which God created man and the world. The second link of a human's communion with God is via the hypostatic union of Christ who becomes a prototype man. It becomes clear that God gave humans an inner power that can find and fulfill its anthropological potential in deification.

The postlapsarian (post fall) nature of humanity perverts the imprint of God's image in humans, and resists communication with him. By evoking the teaching of Maximus the Confessor, Nellas explains that humans in the prelapsarian (pre fall) state were ready to progress to full unity with God by the use of their unifying virtuous, noetic,

¹⁸Such as confession, holy unction, and the Eucharist.

and sensual faculties.¹⁹ Adam's transgression wounds and transforms his nature into a mortal one²⁰ but nevertheless God uses the new "unnatural" state of mankind to lead him to a hypostatic union through the incarnate Christ. In this manner, God aims to liberate humans from the results of the fall surpassing the prelapsarian state and restoring the righteousness-order-harmony of creation.²¹

Christ is not just the redeemer from sin but the one who unites the senses and functions of a human with his own in the vivifying sacramental "mysteries" of the church. Christ then enters into the human in a real manner, mixes and assimilates his life with the person's life without confusion as in a hypostatic union, and deifies the human. Communion with Christ thus leads to union with Christ. Meanwhile, the church transcends the mono-dimensional sense of time and can enter into real sacramental, liturgical worship with the deified saints of all time.²² The liturgical acts of the Orthodox Church purify and illumine the mind, thoughts, and functions of a person delivering them from their passions according to the degree of union, level of grace, and holiness they have achieved.

Deification in Christ bridges the theological, christological, cosmological and anthropological areas of life via the theme of uncreated divine energies. Nellas suggests that patristic anthropology presents the sacramental and liturgical nature of the church as a vehicle of divine ascent toward deification. This composition provides an anthropological and cosmological context of deification.

¹⁹Nellas admits that Platonic cosmology and Aristotelian anthropology influenced Maximus's thought patterns.

²⁰The Fathers develop the "garments of skin" phrase to express the irrational fleshly life of the postlapsarian state of humans.

²¹Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person*, Contemporary Greek Theologians, no. 5, trans. Norman Russell (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 61–62.

²²*Ibid.*, 166–70.

In his book *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, Norman Russell endeavors to trace the usage and understanding of divinization from a historical perspective with a strong emphasis on the development of the *theosis* doctrine in the Greek patristic era. The journey through the centuries begins with a quick overview of the concept of deified humanity in the Greco-Roman world. Russell contends that although there have been influences in the development of precursor ideas, “in the idea of deification and its distinctive vocabulary, it was Christianity that led the way.”²³ Although Russell identifies the idea of deification as a Christian offspring, he concedes the influence of Enochic and Hellenistic Judaism as fundamental in “shaping the Christian approach to deification.”²⁴

The historical trail takes the reader to the Alexandrian tradition of Platonic influenced intellectualism, and the central figures of deification found in Clement and Origen. Clement of Alexandria was the first theologian to develop and apply deification in technical and conceptual terms that Origen takes up, adopts, and incorporates it into his soteriological writings. Russell moves from the “titular and ethical”²⁵ uses of deification in Athanasian Christology to Cyril of Alexandria with a recovery of the Adamic divine image, incorruption, and attaining of transcendence by participation in the divine life of Christ.

In surveying the Cappadocian theologians, Russell contends that they concentrated upon the ethical recovery of the divine likeness with the cooperation of moral effort, asceticism, and sacramental assistance. The doctrine of deification lays dormant from A.D. 444 up to the beginning of the sixth century, and then Maximus the

²³Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, The Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 52.

²⁴Ibid., 77.

²⁵Ibid., 187.

Confessor reclaims and reworks it metaphorically as an ascent of the soul.²⁶ It was through the reinvigoration and reworking of the doctrine by Maximus the Confessor that deification entered the Byzantine theological and monastic tradition. After this entry point, the doctrine reappeared again and eventually became part of the Orthodox tradition with the support and refining efforts of Gregory Palamas.

Russell's work traces the doctrine of *theosis* from birth to maturity. Though written with an Eastern predisposition, the specialist work of Russell is extremely valuable in describing the roots, inception, synthesis, and progression of the doctrine. The doctrine of *theosis* has undergone a complex theological and historical progression. In part, one can observe how the doctrine evolved throughout the centuries and entered the Greek Orthodox tradition in its current form.

In 2009, Russell published another book on the topic, *Fellow Workers with God*. Russell proposes four principal reasons for the current emergence of *theosis*: the rediscovery of Gregory Palamas, Russian religious philosophy, re-engagement with the early Greek Fathers, and the spiritual text of *Philokalia*. The writer blends historical developments with theological themes and, along the way, synthesizes a definition for *theosis* that expresses the dualism of theological themes and spiritual teaching.²⁷ Russell meticulously distinguishes the realistic aspect of *theosis* achieved through sacramental participation and the ethical approach reached through moralism via ascetic struggle.²⁸

Russell continues by trying to establish the doctrine of *theosis* as a biblical and theological aspect of God's divine management of humanity. He acknowledges that though biblical writers do not use the vocabulary, it still expresses theological ideas interlinked with the incarnation "exchange formula." The next phase in Russell's

²⁶Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 237.

²⁷Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis*, Foundations Series 5 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), 25.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 26.

expounding of deification involves an attempt to present biblical proof from crucial texts such as Psalm 82:6, John 10:33-36, and 2 Peter 1:4 by evoking the interpretation of the early Greek Fathers, in particular that of Clement and Cyril of Alexandria. Eastern Orthodox theologians employ typological and symbolic methods of interpretation as well as looking at the overall line of God's divine economy.

In the last three chapters of Russell's work, there is an observable philosophical approach to *theosis* with an ascent from transcendence to participating in the divine energies, and finally an ultimate union with God.²⁹ Humans can transcend their fallen humanity through an intellectual, ascetic, and liturgical participation in Christ.³⁰ Mystical identification and participation with Christ makes it possible for humans to share in God's divine attributes and to attain transformation of their human nature. The participation aspect has been controversial and requires the development of the distinction between "the essence and the energies of God."³¹ Although the majority of modern Orthodox thinkers have mostly followed Palamas's distinction of participatory union, some like Zizioulas identify *theosis* not as a participatory union but as an adoption.³²

Russell's presentation explains the reason for the resurgence of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of deification. It is very enlightening to observe the hermeneutical methods of symbolism and allegory used conjointly with philosophical approaches. Deification encompasses mystical spirituality, religious-philosophical ideas, and certain aspects of patristic literature.

²⁹Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 31.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 120.

³¹*Ibid.*, 133.

³²*Ibid.*, 140.

The studies of contemporary Orthodox theologians on *theosis* are permeating other denominations and even catalyzing ecumenical conversations. For instance, the Lutheran scholar Kärkkäinen advocates for a common soteriological motif between the Eastern and Western church traditions that perceive “union with God” as the ultimate theme. Despite all the differences, he perceives the doctrine of deification to be a unifying symbol of salvation. Kärkkäinen introduces recent New Testament scholarship with a strong “new perspective” flavor and queries the traditional reformational understanding of Palestinian Judaism and justification. Furthermore, imputation takes on a secondary role, leading to a loss of the distinction between justification and sanctification.

In his book *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification*, Kärkkäinen attempts to review the “new quest for Luther’s theology.”³³ The discussion leads to a subsequent examination of Luther’s motifs, his theology of justification, and the provocative claim that Luther’s theology includes the doctrine of deification. Additionally, the Finnish school of Mannermaa offers the interpretive idea of ecumenical convergence that has its foundation in the “real-ontic” experience of God leading to the equivalence of justification and *theosis*.

The quest for finding elements of *theosis* in other Protestant movements takes the readers to the Anabaptists and Methodists. Kärkkäinen claims that apart from some methodological differences there is enough evidence to suggest a convergence in the doctrine of divinization between the former and Eastern Orthodoxy. Ecumenical dialogue between the Finnish Lutheran Church and Russian Orthodox Church presents the concept of participatory union and participation in the divine life as common ground between justification and deification. Kärkkäinen suggests that the deification

³³Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification*, Unitas Books (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 25.

pneumatology of Eastern Orthodoxy can converge with Protestant doctrinal aspects of sanctification.

Contrariwise, Archbishop Chrysostomos approaches the issue of ecumenism by highlighting the main disparities between Eastern and Western Christianity. In his book *God Made Man and Man Made God*, he repudiates the claim that suggests the Greek Fathers formulated the doctrine of deification using classical Greek philosophical and gnostic traditions. Chrysostomos contends that although the Greek Fathers “borrowed” some elements of truth from Greek philosophy, they maintained their biblical views of humanity and creation. In contradistinction, classical Greek philosophy held onto a metaphysical and dualistic ontology void of eternal qualities and permanence. The patristic view of divine revelation and the grace of the incarnation of Christ offer humans an ontological restoration towards deification.³⁴ Furthermore, the cosmology of the Greek Fathers sees history as meaningful and moving toward an eschatological restoration of all things.

Greek philosophy rejects any idea of human will in synergism with the Divine while the Greek Fathers maintain the idea of communion and synergism with God. Chrysostomos explains that the church fathers used the concept of “grace to relate the story of man’s creation, fall, and redemption.”³⁵ The grace of action is the rekindling and restoration of man’s desire and nostalgia to cooperate with God in order to activate deification. God gives humans the grace or power to attain and sustain spiritual communion with his divine energies.³⁶

The *hesychastic* teaching of the Eastern Orthodox highlights the relationship between Christian experience and spiritualism. Chrysostomos denies any notion that the

³⁴Chrysostomos, *God Made Man and Man Made God* (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 2010), 26.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 51.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 53.

*hesychasm*³⁷ of Gregory Palamas was a new theological innovation. The discipline of mystical, spiritual prayer emphasizes a contemplative repetitive prayer within one's heart and controlled breathing for the purpose of illumination and purification. Palamas solidified the spirituality of participatory union in the "Divine Energies" through the "Mysteries" of the Eastern Orthodox church. Thus, the synergistic *hesychastic* soteriology is an emphasis on the doctrine of *theosis* through the energies of God. It is a collision between the *hesychasm* of the Eastern Church with the Scholasticism of the Western Church.

Chrysostomos's work *God Made Man and Man Made God* contributes to the discussion of deification in four important ways. First, the author rejects any notion that the doctrine of *theosis* is a byproduct of Greek philosophy and gnostic traditions. Second, the Greek Orthodox concept of grace has a different definition and connotations from the Protestant one. Third, the mystical discipline of *hesychasm* plays a vital role in soteriology. Finally, Chrysostomos concludes that there are vast differences between the experiential and mystical spirituality of the Orthodox Church and the scholastic tendencies of Western Christianity inclusive of Protestantism.

The work of John Meyendorff on Gregory Palamas contributed to the expansion of *hesychasm* and the notion of deification. *A Study of Gregory Palamas* reflects the history, thoughts, and preeminent theology of *hesychasm*. Palamas displayed a deep understanding of Aristotelian logic, but his writings as a whole portray influence from sacramental spirituality and "the ascetic and mystical literature of the Greek Fathers."³⁸ Palamas synthesized all these components and became an impetus for the monastic revival and spread of *hesychasm*. Palamite theology emerged victorious during

³⁷*Hesychasm* comes from the word *hesychia*, which means "stillness" or "quiet." *Hesychasm* promotes a method of psychosomatic prayer of silence and contemplation that employs various postures in order to control the noetic abilities of the person.

³⁸John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, trans. George Lawrence (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1964), 31.

the *hesychast* controversy with Barlaam and finally gained total favor during the rule of the Cantacuzenes. The victory of Palamas over his dogmatic controversy with Barlaam cemented the distinction between the divine essence and energies of God.

Although Palamas stressed dependence upon divine grace, he contended that though fallen man needs God to attain likeness to his Creator, the effects of divine grace presuppose the synergy of man. Meyendorff remarks that the concept of “divine *logoi*” or the energies of God that Palamas employed are an adaptation of Stoic philosophy,³⁹ but he continues by stating that Palamas was a vehement critic of Greek philosophical notions. Palamas advocated purification of the soul via the participation of the soul and the body in the practice of continuous “monological prayer.” In contrast to Neo-Platonic dualism, the psychophysical method of prayer was thus an offering of the body and soul to God. The function of “holy *hesychia*” is to promote spiritual ascent, communion, and unity with Christ.

Meyendorff suggests that Palamas’s sacramental theology formed the basis for mystical prayer as well as deification. The accessibility of divine life comes as a gift via the sacrament of baptism. This gracious act of God via the sacrament has a redeeming, sanctifying, and deifying effect.⁴⁰ The *theosis* of the faithful is real in terms of life and existence as God and his people share of the same energy. Palamas defended his stance by evoking the hypostatic union of Christ, the distinction between essence and divine energies, and the concept of *communicatio idiomatum*. It was the influence of Palamas that consolidated the traditional Eastern Orthodox theology on deification.

Emil Bartos is one of the few theologians presenting a systematic critique of the conceptual basis and driving force of Eastern Orthodox theology. Bartos’s work, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology: An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology*

³⁹Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 119.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 161.

of *Dumitru Staniloae*, suggests that the Fathers constructed and used the metaphor of *theosis* as an aid to combat christological heresies. With precise methodology, Bartos first examines the epistemological aspects, next the anthropological and christological, and finally the pneumatological angles of deification.

Staniloae's anthropology allows for the "sharing" in the knowable, deifying divine energies of God as distinct from the unknowable and inaccessible *ousia* of God.⁴¹ Bartos exposes the inconsistencies and logical contradictions in Orthodox theology. Moreover, he questions whether the Palamite ontological distinction of energies and essence of God is a supra extrapolation of the Cappadocian views. Orthodoxy thus drives trinitarian theology into a composite conclusion based entirely on an antinomical model.⁴² Furthermore, deification through the communication of uncreated energies is impersonal and casts shadows extending into a biblical model of gospel proclamation.

Such distinctions obscure the nature of revelation and specifically the nature of the incarnation. Bartos identifies in Staniloae an explicit connection between deification and creation. Eastern Orthodoxy stipulates that the goal of creation and the purpose of man's existence is deification. Humans hold a unique and distinct role in this act as they were created bearing the divine image and with the ability to communicate with God. The differentiation between image and likeness is an essential mechanism in Orthodox anthropology. The fall affected the capacity of man to know and commune with God. However, man can still, by his own will and God's grace, achieve his likeness and moral perfection.⁴³

⁴¹Emil Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology: An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology of Dumitru Staniloae* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1999), 66.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 72.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 138.

The incarnation of the Logos was necessary because of the marred divine likeness in man and the weakened link between human reason and the Logos.⁴⁴ Bartos critiques the “transcendental Christology” of Staniloae and questions whether this methodology makes the heart of man the starting point of salvation. This type of Christology becomes anthropologically oriented or a “Christology from below.”⁴⁵ The second aspect of Staniloae’s Christology links the hypostatic union of Christ with the doctrines of *enhypostasia*, *communicatio idiomatum*, *kenosis*, and *perichoresis*. Staniloae then assumes the deification of Christ’s humanity is by the Logos. Consequently, Christ reestablishes the capacity of human nature for participatory deification.

Bartos identifies two problems with Staniloae’s christological aspect of deification. First, a contradiction between the participatory union of man and God from the extrapolations of the hypostatic union of Christ, and the notion that humans cannot encounter the *ousia* of God but only his uncreated energies. Second, Staniloae’s incarnation model blurs the Chalcedonian formula of without confusion, change, division and separation both in the divine and human domains.⁴⁶

In Staniloae’s theology, salvation is not an external act but a real union with the Trinity that has been “set up within the structure of a human being.”⁴⁷ First, such soteriology is more participatory than substitutionary, declarative, or forensic. Bartos observes that Staniloae’s redemptive model as an ontological connection between Christ and humanity is a philosophically inducted model that lacks biblical support. Second, Staniloae bases his concept of trinitarian participatory union on extrapolations from the doctrine of the hypostatic union. Third, Staniloae sees Christ’s life and work as

⁴⁴Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 165.

⁴⁵Ibid., 168.

⁴⁶Ibid., 190.

⁴⁷Ibid., 228.

sacramental and redemptive in nature and function.⁴⁸ Fourth, sin is an organic ontological reality causing sickness and disorder. Christ normalizes human nature by his solidarity with them and redeems man from inward corruption. For Staniloae, sin “is the personal act of man’s free will which deprives him of the means of fulfilling his destiny by overcoming the mortality of human race.”⁴⁹

The Orthodox Church assumes trinitarian, christological, and pneumatological character as the place where objective and subjective deification takes place. The Holy Spirit in the trinitarian function for deification is the person who brings forth the divine energies in creation and more particularly into the human soul.⁵⁰ God created humans through his divine uncreated energies, and the Spirit appropriates the work of Christ by awakening man’s response to God. Human synergy in the process of salvation is a subjective condition in justification and not a consequence of a judicial declaration.⁵¹ Bartos argues that Staniloae’s firm idea of ontological union with Christ obscures the nature and distinction of justification and sanctification in the *ordo salutis*.

Void in the Literature

In recent years, there has been an intensified interest in the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*. Have evangelicals rediscovered a tradition that will enhance and enrich their understanding of God and salvation or exactly the opposite? After all, a quick overview of *theosis* may lead one to conclude that it is almost identical with the doctrine of union and communion with Christ.

The majority of the works cited thus far emphasize that *theosis* or deification has always been a legitimate component of patristic thought and theology. Traditionally,

⁴⁸Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 228.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 232.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 259.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 291.

Eastern Orthodox theologians use typological, spiritual, and symbolic methods of hermeneutics. Greek Orthodox interpretations of verses such as Genesis 1:26-27 build an anthropological system that requires necessary distinctions between image and likeness for functionality.

Emil Bartos provides an extensive evaluation of *theosis* but it is necessary to address and critique the doctrine of *theosis* as held by the Eastern Orthodox Church in more particular ways. It is also essential to pay particular attention to the metaphysical apophaticism, mystical, and sacramental nature of the Eastern Church and question its biblical legitimacy of such doctrinal ideologies underpinning the doctrine of deification. Since the Eastern Church adheres to the semi-Pelagian view of synergism in deification, it is necessary to critique its anthropology, *hesychastic* ideology, and sacramental ecclesiology. A further problem that needs addressing is the definition and function of grace in the recovery of the path toward deification in Eastern Orthodox soteriology.

The Eastern view of union with Christ may share in aspects of the error of Andreas Osiander and a fusion of regeneration, sanctification, and glorification. Furthermore, one must pay attention to the overemphasis of the Eastern theology of human glory, coming from an extrapolation of the hypostatic interpenetration of Christ's human and divine natures via the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*. In view of this consideration, a part of this thesis will investigate whether the Eastern theology may be accentuating and blurring the Chalcedonian formula that upholds the "without confusion" aspect of the human and the divine domains. Finally, since the Eastern tradition concentrates entirely on the proposition of *theosis* as salvation, it is imperative to indicate the role of forensic and judicial aspects of justification by faith. Contrary to Kärkkäinen and the school of Mannermaa, justification is distinct from sanctification and in addition is not the same as deification.

Thesis

In this dissertation, I will argue that the Eastern Orthodox view of *theosis* overemphasizes and distorts the doctrine of glorification by making it the regulatory soteriological factor through semi-Pelagianism, mysticism, sacramentalism, and excessive apophatic theology. Although the Eastern Orthodox view of *theosis* as salvation and redemption appears to have historical foundation as well as some commonalities with the doctrine of union and communion with Christ, it misconstrues salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The Orthodox view falters because it fuses and confuses the *ordo salutis* and overstates the theology of human glory. In view of these considerations, this thesis will also define the biblical definition of grace, explore the function of *communicatio idiomatum*, utilize literal grammatical historical exegesis, and evaluate the biblical validity of *theosis*.

CHAPTER 2
THE COSMOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY OF
EASTERN ORTHODOXY

Cosmological and Anthropological Considerations

In the *Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky explores with vigor the philosophical question of humanity and seeks to uncover the perplexing questions about the prevailing state of humanity. Simultaneously, either with or without intention, Dostoevsky communicates succinctly one of the main foundational tenets of Eastern Orthodox theology, namely, anthropology. The Orthodox theological tradition places at the forefront of her vision an emphasis on human destiny, sin, and salvation.¹ God created the world *ex nihilo, ex ouk onton* (“out of nothing”), by the power of his word. The physical universe exists and continues in dependence upon God but remains distinct from the Creator (Ps 19:1-6; Rom 1:20). Theological delineation between Eastern Orthodox and the Protestant traditions occurs almost at this point hereafter. The Greek Orthodox considers the creation of humanity a necessary outcome of God’s love. According to John of Damascus, concerning the creation, “God, Who is good and more than good, did not find satisfaction in self-contemplation, but in His exceeding goodness wished certain things to come into existence which would enjoy His benefits and share in His goodness.”²

¹Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 119.

²Hilary of Poitiers and John of Damascus, *John of Damascus: Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 9 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1898), 457.

The Greek Father, Maximus the Confessor, developed the Pseudo-Dionysian elements of vision of being into a cosmological thought that perceives man as an important mechanism in the deification of the whole world.³ Maximus's doctrine of "the *logoi* of things"⁴ or "the Uncreated inner principles of created things,"⁵ epitomizes the cosmological and anthropological thinking of the Orthodox Church. The *logoi* of all things unite with the Logos of the Father and become a medium by which the Logos is present in all creatures and brings unity in the created order. Maximus strives to identify clear distinctions between the Creator and the work of creation, and he therefore speaks of deification in everything apart from participating in the essence of God. The ontology of Maximus "presupposes a distinction in God between 'nature' (or 'essence') and 'energy.'"⁶ God has a personal as well as a dynamic aspect and creation has a dynamic or energetic conception.⁷

Essence and Uncreated Divine Energies

In the fourteenth century, Gregory Palamas furthered the distinction of Creator and creation in order to avoid cosmological deification lapsing into pantheism by the precise theological structure of essence and uncreated divine energies.⁸ Palamas argued

³Dumitru Staniloae, *The World: Creation and Deification*, in vol. 2 of *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, ed. and trans. Ioan Ionita and Robert Barringer (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 1994), 21.

⁴The *logoi* of things—words, rationales, and intelligible principles—express the creative will of God, his immanent presence within creation, his providence, and the ultimate destination. See Elizabeth Theokritoff, "Creator and Creation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, Cambridge Companions to Religion, ed. Mary Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 66.

⁵Seraphim Rose, *Genesis, Creation, and Early Man: The Orthodox Christian Vision*, 2nd ed. (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2011), 86.

⁶John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 132.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Theokritoff, "Creator and Creation," 67.

that the restoration of divine likeness occurs by means of the divine illumination or divine uncreated and endless energies issuing from God. Since God is uncreated, and he possesses pre-eternal operations and powers, it follows that his indivisibly divided energies are also uncreated. According to Pseudo-Dionysius, divine illuminations are distinct but also indivisible from God's essence. God's divine essence is one, but God's uncreated grace and divine energies are numberless.⁹ The uncreated energies proceed from God and are the "predeterminations and divine sacred volitions that determine and create existent things."¹⁰

The distinction occurring between God's energies and his essence is that the processing energies are common providences to all members of the tri-hypostatic differentiated Trinity, but the essence is one and indivisible. All creation participates in the divine sustaining energy of God as non-creative life but does not have the capacity to sustain itself in life. Only the energies of God that are uncreated and creative can sustain life. God is everywhere in the universe because he is omnipresent, and God's energies are sustaining all creation seen and unseen. Divine omnipresence is thus a divine energy, otherwise all creation could in theory participate in some sense in the imparticipable essence of God. All creation owes its existence, purpose, and proper movement in striving after God to the action and function of the uncreated energies. According to this logic, Meyendorff argues that "the true purpose of creation is therefore not contemplation of divine essence (which is inaccessible), but communion in divine energy, transfiguration and transparency to divine action in the world."¹¹

⁹Gregory Palamas, *The Philokalia*, in vol. 4 of *The Complete Text: Compiled by St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth*, ed. and trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 378.

¹⁰Ibid., 387.

¹¹Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 133.

When Eastern theologians employ the distinction of God's essence and uncreated energies in a more extensive way they reach the conclusion that because God is "everywhere in creation, because everything comes immediately from the hand of God, it is possible to encounter God in his energies."¹² The continuous paradoxes of unity in the created order via the concept of the *logoi* influences theologians such as Vladimir Soloviev, Pavel Florensky, and Sergei Bulgakov to develop a system of Sophiological¹³ thought. Sophiology obscures the element of creation in time and develops a gnostic and Origenistic idea of a hypostatic type unity between the world and God.¹⁴ Remnants of Sophiology have thus carried through to contemporary Eastern Orthodox thought. Theokritoff asserts that in Orthodoxy, the "underlying longing to reclaim a vision of cosmic unity, of a world shot through with God's presence has defined the agenda for modern thought."¹⁵ Soloviev gave "new life to the doctrine of *theosis* for a philosophical perspective of 'repair, reconciliation, and harmonization.'"¹⁶

Cosmology in Eastern Orthodoxy

The cosmic effects of Adam and Eve's disobedience are "a failure to take creation forward to its appointed goal."¹⁷ Orthodox theology thus perceives deification

¹²Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 41. Andrew Louth mentions that "some Orthodox theologians have been happy to use the word 'panen-theism' ('all-in-God'-ness), in contradistinction from pantheism (in which everything is identified with God)" (ibid).

¹³Sophiology is derived from *Sophia* and expresses the idea of divine wisdom.

¹⁴John Meyendorff, "Creation in the History of Orthodox Theology," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 27 (1983): 30-34.

¹⁵Theokritoff, "Creator and Creation," 68.

¹⁶Stephen Finlan, "The Comedy of Divinization in Soloviev," in *Theosis. Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, ed., *Theosis. Deification in Christian Theology / Edited by Vladimir Kharlamov*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 156 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 170.

¹⁷Theokritoff, "Creator and Creation," 66.

as the propulsive purpose of creation. It is a type of cosmology that is evolving toward deification. Humanity's fall into sin was just a disruption of the whole *theosis* movement. The incarnation of Christ "fulfills the energetic presence of God,"¹⁸ "undoes the fall and restores the human race to its intended path."¹⁹ Meyendorff proposes that the Orthodox tradition views cosmology as anthropocentric and anthropology as theocentric.²⁰ The world serves as a domain in which man can attain *theosis* and, therefore, as the "mediating agency,"²¹ he returns the gift of the rational creation back to God. Man has a special mediatory role between nature and God. By reason of man's special creation from the dust and the living breath of God, Eastern Orthodoxy postulates that mankind has a special relation to nature and God (Gen 2:7). Staniloae explains this by stating that "man may be mediator of the Spirit of God to nature as a whole and priest of the entire cosmos."²² The process of deification is therefore a work of synergy between humanity and God²³ made possible by the interpenetration or *perichoresis* of God and humanity in the Spirit through the Son.²⁴

The vision of Eastern Christendom places humanity at the center of the transfiguration or deification of the whole creation in synergy with God.²⁵ Clendenin

¹⁸Theokritoff, "Creator and Creation," 71.

¹⁹Ibid., 69.

²⁰Meyendorff, "Creation in the History of Orthodox Theology," 34.

²¹Theokritoff, "Creator and Creation," 73.

²²Dumitru Staniloae, "Image, Likeness, and Deification in the Human Person," *Communio* 13, no. 1 (1986): 66.

²³Theokritoff, "Creator and Creation," 70-73.

²⁴Sigurd Bergmann, "In the Spirit through the Son to the Father: Four Considerations about the Trinity's Space and Movement in a Creation to Be Liberated from Its Bondage to Decay," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 1, no. 2 (2010): 18-23.

²⁵Stavros S. Fotiou "The Human Being as 'Creator of Love' according to Saint John Chrysostom," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 3, no. 3 (2012): 159-72.

reiterates the anthropocentric emphasis of the Orthodox Church and its differences with the Western tradition by evoking the spiritual writings in the *Philokalia*.²⁶ Undeniably, the idea of *theosis* dominates all aspects of Orthodox cosmology and anthropology. Since understanding human nature and destiny influences the relational aspect between God and humanity, then it is imperative to have a correct biblical perspective of cosmology and anthropology. The Bible places God as the chief end of all things and not man. Displacing or even limiting God's absolute and ultimate significance for all that is seen or unseen creates a distorted purpose for existence.

The Eastern Orthodox hyper-emphasis on the centrality of human purpose and glory misrepresents and blurs the central theme of the Bible and the purpose of all existence in *solī Deo gloria*. In sharp variance to the Orthodox emphasis on human glory, the Westminster Shorter Catechism upholds that “man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”²⁷ God’s glory is the chief purpose for which humanity was created (Isa 42:8; 43:6-7). Instead of viewing the world as a domain of deification, it would be more appropriate to describe the world as “the theater of God’s glory.”²⁸ The starting, sustaining, and most emphatic point throughout all of life is *Deus creator* and not *homo creatus*.²⁹ James Hamilton puts it this way:

The created realm (*creation*) is a spectacular theater that serves as the cosmic matrix in which God’s saving and judging glory can be revealed. God’s glory is so grand

²⁶Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 119. The *Philokalia* is a compilation of spiritual writings of the Orthodox tradition written between the fourth and the fifteenth centuries. Clendenin quotes the following truncated section from the *Theoritekon* section of the *Philokalia*: “Now the purpose of our life is blessedness . . . not only to behold the Trinity, supreme in Kingship, but also to receive an influx of the divine and, as it were, to suffer deification” (ibid).

²⁷This is the answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

²⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.8; 1.6.2; 1.14.20; 2.6.1. Michael Horton comments that “creation is the result of a free decision and activity of intratrinitarian love, the product of an extravagant exchange of gift giving between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011], 327).

²⁹William W. Schumacher, *Who Do I Say That You Are? Anthropology and the Theology of the Theosis in the Finnish School of Tuoma Mannerman* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 150.

that no less a stage than the universe—all that is or was and will be, across space and through time—is necessary for the unfolding of all this encompassing drama. The psalmist sings, “The heavens are recounting the glory of God, and the skies are proclaiming the work of his hands” (Ps. 19:1). Similarly, Paul exclaims, “From him and through him and to him are all things; to him be the glory forever! Amen” (Rom. 11:36). *Creation* is for the glory of God.³⁰

In line with John of Damascus’s theology, Eastern Orthodoxy reduces the self-sufficiency of God by suggesting implicitly, an inadequacy of God’s absolute completeness in his glory. The assumption that God “did not find satisfaction on self-contemplation”³¹ renders the God who always existed eternally deficient because his self-contemplations and dissatisfaction must have occurred from eternity past. There exists an immense difference between not finding satisfaction in self-contemplations and delighting in creating as an expression of God’s immeasurable goodness. God does not need man to complete his satisfactions. If God needs to find satisfaction in otherness apart from “self-contemplation,” he becomes deficient and thus subordinate to a higher principle.³²

The intra-trinitarian relationship and communion has always existed in perfection, satisfaction, and completeness in everything. Eastern Orthodox theological assumptions hyper-elevate the existence, purpose, and direction of humanity toward deification as a required event in God’s existence. The doctrine of deification assumes the necessity of God’s act in creating humanity as a means of expressing his goodness and finding further satisfaction. Colin Gunton maintains that recognizing the distinction between the immanent Trinity (in intra-trinitarian communion) and the economic Trinity (in the revelation of the trinitarian God in creation and redemption) is necessary for

³⁰James M. Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 53.

³¹Hilary of Poitiers and John of Damascus, *John of Damascus*, 457.

³²Samuel M. Powell, *Participating in God: Creation and Trinity*, Theology and the Sciences (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 23.

understanding that “creation is contingent rather than necessary, yet the divine persons are freely involved in worldly action.”³³

God had no necessity or need to create, and his creation of humanity was free from implications of necessity. The eternal existence and internal consubstantial aspect of God reveals the eternal and complete relations within the Trinity. According to the doctrine of the immanent Trinity, God is complete in all aspects of his existence, and being in an internal trinitarian relation, there is no commitment or “need for him to create what is other than himself. He does not need to create because he is already a *taxis*, order, of loving relations.”³⁴ God had no need or commitment to create and he has no commitment in the deification of humanity. The doctrine of creation in relation to the Trinity both economic and immanent clearly defines the boundaries of differentiation between God and the world. Moreover, God, in creating, acted freely and continues to be free in relatedness.³⁵

If God created the world through his uncreated energies and with a commitment to man in deification, then this love commitment may demand that his creation does not perish but be redeemed. Since the world is the domain of deification it is imperative that “in the end it does not perish but will rather be transfigured, a fact which reveals the sacredness of being.”³⁶ Such a postulation may cause confusion in the meaning of creation *ex ouk onton, ex nihilo*,³⁷ with the idea of the immortality of the soul and the concept of *apokatastasis panton* (“restoration of all things”).

³³Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 330.

³⁴Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 142.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 203.

³⁶Stylianios Harkianakis, “The Kenotic Character of Theology as Ultimate Glorification of God and Man,” *Phronema* 2 (1987): 5.

³⁷The specifics of creation *ex ouk onton, ex nihilo* is still causing some misunderstandings amongst Orthodox theologians. For an example of such a misunderstanding, refer to the dialogue of John

In speaking about God bringing the world into existence *ex ouk onto*n through the Son and the Spirit (Gen 1:2; Job 26:13; Ps 33:6; John 1:3; Col 1:16-17; Heb 1:2) there must exist a clear qualitative differentiation between the two acts of the “Father who eternally speaks forth his hypostatic Word in the Spirit” and the speaking of the world into being through the Son and the Spirit. Moreover, as Horton states, “Biblical faith does not evidence nostalgia for a lost home beyond creation or long for a ‘sacred cosmos’ from which our soul has been estranged in temporal history and bodily transience. The world need not be *sacred* in order for it to be *good*. It need not be *ultimate* in order for it to be *real*.”³⁸

Eastern theology characterizes the speaking of the world into existence as an act of God’s uncreated divine energies. The intention of such a distinction between God’s essence and energies is to avoid seeing the created order as an emanation of God’s essence. Yet, there still remain problem areas with such a Palamite articulation of divine essence-energies distinction. An ontological difference between *ousia* and *energeiai* suggest an obscure theory stemming from a Dionysian Neo-platonic thought.³⁹ Even the distinction of essence energies cannot totally disconnect from the precursor idea of Pseudo-Dionysius. The Dionysian model regards God as a supra-essential being of Goodness, the causing of all things, transcending and underpinning all things. Pseudo-Dionysius plants the seeds of deification by movements of lower to higher stages and perceives God as a “Cause than as a Creator.”⁴⁰ The Neoplatonism of Pseudo-

Zizioulas and Philip Sherrard in John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 270-85.

³⁸Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 336.

³⁹Emil Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology: An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology of Dumitru Staniloae* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1999), 71–72.

⁴⁰Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 334.

Dionysius⁴¹ guides him to say the following:

And yet, since it is the underpinning of goodness, and by merely being there is the cause of everything, to praise this divinely beneficent Providence you must turn to all of creation. It is there at the center of everything and everything has it for a destiny. It is there “before all things and in it all things hold together.” Because it is there the world has come to be and exist. All things long for it. The intelligent and rational long for it by way of knowledge, the lower strata by way of perception, the remainder by way of the stirrings of being alive and in whatever fashion befits their condition.⁴²

In line with the precursor ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus, and Palamas, Staniloae affirms an “ontological unity between humanity and nature.”⁴³ Since the creation is also “destined for deification and has a personal character”⁴⁴ it presupposes that the domain of creation is enclosed as a place where communication, revelation, and deification occur. In a sense, the creation of God correlates much closer to the communication of uncreated energies in the process of deification. This idea poses a difficulty as it creates an almost ontological dimension or personality to the creation. Humanity should only relate to the world as just “the environment to which human beings themselves belong in their spiritual as well as material existence.”⁴⁵ Byzantine cosmology certainly differs from Florensky’s Sophiology in the domain of terminology, the impersonal, idealistic conceptuality, and creation in time.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the reflection of the divine, the sacredness and personality of the cosmos, the metaphysical

⁴¹Kharlamov comments that the philosophy of Plotinus was fundamental in influencing Pseudo-Dionysius to adopt a Christian Neoplatonism. See Vladimir Kharlamov, *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 18.

⁴²Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 54.

⁴³Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 330.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 334.

⁴⁶Meyendorff, “Creation in the History of Orthodox Theology,” 30-34.

ideology of being, originating from a Pseudo-Dionysian Neoplatonism⁴⁷ finds an extrapolating conclusion in Sophiology.

While the first chapters of Genesis portray the immanence of God, they also describe and establish the grounds of God's transcendence. Reiss asserts that the opening chapters of Genesis "have at one and the same time freed God from bondage to the world-order by asserting the creaturehood of all that is not God, and have ensured that the statement about the immanence of God firmly excludes any possibility of man's divinization, for man too is explicitly said to be a creature of God."⁴⁸ Deification as a theme in Eastern cosmology suffers from a Neo-Platonic and Origenistic connection with strong ontological and partly metaphysical connotations.⁴⁹

The Pseudo-Dionysian structure of deification provides the best representation of Eastern deification theology.⁵⁰ The Pseudo-Dionysian *theosis* diminishes the transcendence of God as "it constitutes an 'eternal circle' of divine creating, sustaining and salvific manifestations. The Thearchy, in its paradoxical hiddenness and immanence, serves both as a blueprint of the universe and as the center of the circle, which is shared by 'the surrounding radii.'"⁵¹ The problem with deification is that it explains life and existence in a circular fashion, one that aims to return back to the unifying principle and provide harmony to the whole of creation: "However, biblical revelation generates a sense of linear history punctuated by single events in history. This history and its

⁴⁷Meyendorff admits the Neoplatonism of the Pseudo-Dionysian system. See Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 1974, 136.

⁴⁸In Isa 6:3, the Hebrew word for the thrice repetition of "Holy" (*kadosh* in Hebrew) also carries the idea of the separateness of God. See Moshe Reiss, "Adam: Created in the Image and Likeness of God," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2011): 185.

⁴⁹Pseudo-Dionysian deification draws heavily on Origenistic and Neoplatonic ideas of the attainment of *gnosis* and participation. See Kharlamov, *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole*, 32–33.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 182.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

revelation lead from *promise* to *fulfilment* rather than from *lower* stages of being to *higher*.”⁵² The cosmos assumes the ontology of a metaphysical personality that seeks with inherent propensity to unify with God. Deification at its core is this exact representation of seeking to unify with God.⁵³

The Anthropology of *Theosis*

The doctrine of deification interconnects with the creation of the human person. Timothy Ware maintains that “behind the doctrine of deification there lies the idea of the human person made according to the image and likeness of God the Holy Trinity.”⁵⁴ Such an idea is not alien to historical Eastern Orthodoxy. In Maximus’s and Palamas’s theology the human being exists ontologically as a physical entity and, in a mysterious way, is meta-ontologically called to realize “hypostatically” his unity of nature according to his created capacity in the image and likeness of God.⁵⁵

Thus, Eastern Orthodox theology predominantly expresses personhood from God’s own perspective on the basis of trinitarian relationships and full participation in him via deification. Boingeanu describes this Eastern perspective as “an epistemological search ‘from above’ which, in turn, develops a proper understanding of the human being as an ‘image of God.’”⁵⁶ The theological anthropology of the East conveys a tension between the physical and the metaphysical aspects of humanity. Human personhood finds its definition in a dynamic relationship between God and other human beings.⁵⁷

⁵²Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 335.

⁵³Kharlamov, *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole*, 183–84.

⁵⁴Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin, 1993), 231.

⁵⁵Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird (London: Mowbrays, 1975), 122-23.

⁵⁶Corneliu Boingeanu, “Personhood in Its Protological and Eschatological Patterns: An Eastern Orthodox View of the Ontology of Personality,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 78, no. 1 (January 2006): 4.

⁵⁷Eastern Orthodoxy stresses the perichoretic relationship of the Trinity. The three

The Eastern tradition places a high emphasis on the theology of the image in revelatory and relational ways. Lossky contends that patristic thinking encompasses the theology of the *imago Dei* as “the principle of God’s self-manifestation and . . . as the foundation of a particular relationship of man to God.”⁵⁸ Essentially, human existence portrays the divine attributes of God and constitutes a *microtheos*.⁵⁹ The interpretation of the image of God in man governs the anthropology of the Greek Fathers, with an emphasis on a *kinesis* towards *theosis*. Irenaeus suggested that while God endowed man with free independent will from the beginning, God did not “grant perfection to man; but as the later was only recently created, he could not possibly have received it, or even if he had received it, could he have contained it, or containing it, could he have retained it.”⁶⁰

Irenaeus reacted against the determinism and fatalism of Gnosticism, but later Orthodox dogma developed the idea of freedom and the withholding of God’s final plan for immortality and glorification⁶¹ to a theology of predestinarian deification.⁶² In

hypostases of God share one divine Nature, but each divine person projects his personality via perichoresis to the other. Therefore, according to Eastern Orthodoxy, it is not adequate to describe the Trinity only in terms of an ontological existence, but also in a dynamic relational perichoresis of trinitarian personhood. Since humanity carries the stamp of the *imago Dei*, Eastern theologians argue that humanity should also be understood in terms of ontology and relationality: “The human being is an existential fact of relationship and the person is the *hypostasis* of the human essence or nature” (Boingeanu, “Personhood in Its Protological and Eschatological Patterns,” 9).

⁵⁸Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 126.

⁵⁹Boingeanu, “Personhood in Its Protological and Eschatological Patterns,” 5.

⁶⁰Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.38.2, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:521.

⁶¹Ireneaus explains that the plan of God was for man to receive immortality and glorification: “[A]nd having recovered, should be glorified, should see his Lord. For God is He who is yet to be seen, and the beholding of God is productive of immortality, but immortality renders one nigh unto God” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.38.2).

⁶²According to Symeon the New Theologian, God foreordained for humanity a new birth and recreation through baptismal regeneration by virtue of the economy of the Incarnation. See Symeon the New Theologian, *The First-Created Man: Seven Homilies by St. Symeon the New Theologian*, trans. Seraphim Rose, Orthodox Theological Texts, 2nd ed. (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2001), 94.

alignment with Pseudo-Dionysian rationale, Lossky stipulates the initial and deliberate “unstable perfection”⁶³ of the whole cosmos as an opportunity to achieve a union of perfection in deification via the synergy activated in the freedom of man’s will. Lossky goes as far to say, “For creatures, from the moment of their first condition, are separate from God; and their end and final fulfilment lies in union with Him in deification. Thus the primitive beatitude was not a state of deification, but a condition of order, a perfection of the creature which was ordained and tending towards the end.”⁶⁴

Humanity was not formed in a state of divinization or in a perfect participatory union with God so as to avoid coercion. Nonetheless, God implanted in humanity by initial creative design the capacity towards *theosis*.⁶⁵ Deification is a process or objective that penetrates and transfigures the created order in synergy with human freedom. This predestinarian deification exists as the ability and the choice of every human creature to attain and fulfill in synergy with God the purpose of creation. Theologically then, the ever-present idea of human ability to know God by creative design, paves the way for synergism in deification.⁶⁶ In this dynamic process of synergy, Christ is the “deifying educator”⁶⁷ and the source of all true knowledge. Inversely, John 17:1-2, 9 proclaims two vital truths. First, the primary reason for Jesus’ incarnation, life, and crucifixion was to glorify the Father and not to deify man. Second, the sovereign grace of God alone is the determining factor of salvation and not the synergy of man with God.

⁶³Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 97.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 99.

⁶⁵Donald Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 66.

⁶⁶Kharlamov, *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole*, 27.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 29.

A Theology of Image and Likeness

Genesis 1:26-27 provides one of the most descriptive and fundamental textual evidences for the creation of human beings after the image of God. The Eastern church adheres to a strong ontological perspective of what it means to bear the image of God.⁶⁸ As such, the ontology of the image was always there from the moment of creation, and it will always remain as a stamp of God in humanity.⁶⁹ According to Staniloae, the inbreathing of God implanted in man's soul the image and likeness of God with rational and mental capacities. Moreover, God implanted in humanity his grace as the divine, uncreated energy of the Holy Spirit. It is this uncreated energy or grace that operates as an active relational or communal capacity between God and man.⁷⁰

Pomazansky asserts that a patristic outlook of the *imago Dei* includes a synthesis of the idea of freedom of the will, immortality, and reason occurring only in the domain of the soul.⁷¹ The tripartite composition of a man as body, soul, and spirit (*nous*) allows for a further theological notion designating the spirit of man as a sphere where the uncreated grace of God operates in deification. The *nous* as the "highest and purest part of the soul"⁷² is thus the place renewed by the Spirit through virtues. Such renewal leads

⁶⁸The dissimilarities of an image to the person or thing that it images do not diminish the value of it. In their theology of image, the Orthodox consider the image not only as plain likeness but as a "pattern and an impression (*homoioma, paradeigma, ektupoma*) of the thing that is imaged." Humans are "an imitation or copy of God," mirroring the trinitarian existence of God. See Robert Letham, *Through Western Eyes: Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2007), 148-49.

⁶⁹Nicolae Razvan Stan, "Human Person as a Being Created in the Image of God and as the Image of the Son: The Orthodox Christian Perspective," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 2, no. 3 (2011): 120.

⁷⁰Dumitru Staniloae, "Image, Likeness, and Deification in the Human Person," *Communio* 13, no. 1 (1986): 67.

⁷¹Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, and Ephiphanius of Cyprus saw the image of God as pertaining to both soul and body. See Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition*, trans. Seraphim Rose, 3rd ed. (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2006), 137-38.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 137.

to a “discovery within itself the imprint of the divine image, and perceives the spiritual and ineffable beauty of the divine likeness.”⁷³

The fundamental structure of Orthodox anthropology upholds the absolute capacity, ability, and innate endowment of the deiform nature of mankind from the very beginning of creation. Humanity has the ability to receive God and be all that God is apart from his essence.⁷⁴ Even the fall cannot erase that particular and direct relationship between God and man, and, even though sinful, man is still capable of having an awareness of the existence of God.⁷⁵ Communion of God with man can spring out of the deepest parts of the soul. The communion that was implanted in man with the inbreathing of his image is identical to the grace of God.⁷⁶

The inconsistency that exists among Orthodox scholars regarding the meaning of the image of God in man causes a weakening in the argumentation of distinction between image and likeness. Nicolae Răzvan Stan argues that the image of God in humanity is an ontological attribute involving psychosomatic elements and psychophysical existence: “Taking into consideration the notion of the image in patristic tradition, we observe that is not only the soul that possesses the image, but also the body.”⁷⁷ Moreover, Stan insists that most modern Orthodox theologians see the image of God in man as involving both body and soul.⁷⁸ Conversely, Pomazansky follows a

⁷³Mark the Ascetic. *The Philokalia*, in vol. 1 of *The Complete Text: Compiled by St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth*, ed. and trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 153-54.

⁷⁴Stan, “Human Person as a Being Created in the Image of God and as the Image of the Son,” 121.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 123.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 126.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 128.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 133.

general patristic outlook that argues for an imprint of the image just in the domain of the soul. It then follows that deification operates in that part of the soul.

The theology of the image and the creation of mankind in the image of God, especially as a psychophysical entity, pose a significant question. What does it really mean to be created in God's image and after his likeness? If an image is something that one can see, then why did God prohibit the absolute use of any kind of images or likeness "of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exod 20:4). This question is particularly significant when one considers the psychophysical aspect of the *imago Dei* according to the "unanimous" view of contemporary Orthodox theologians.

The specificity of the prohibition of making images increases even more by God's stipulation in Deuteronomy 4:16. God emphasizes here that not even one person saw "any form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb," and it then provides an extensive and detailed list of examples to avoid.⁷⁹ Likewise, Paul develops the theme of the image in Romans 1:23 by condemning the idolatry of people in their exchange of "the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things."⁸⁰ Whatever the case may be, Eastern Orthodoxy cannot escape from the creation of significant problems resulting from an ontological and psychophysical view of the *imago Dei*. The overstatement of the ontological aspect of "the image" causes a loss in the dynamics of the personal and relational aspects of life. Michael Williams writes, "Our very being consists in the calling to image God in the world. It is the bearing of God's own name that distinguishes and explains the essence and destiny of

⁷⁹In the context of images and idol worship, Isa 46:5-9 portrays the one true God as one that cannot be "likened" to anyone or anything.

⁸⁰The Greek expression in Rom 1:23, "ἐν ὁμοιώματι εἰκόνας," carries the idea of "likeness and icon."

human beings in the world.”⁸¹ From the call to dominion in Genesis 1:26-28 and the call to image God’s rule on earth from Psalm 8:6-8, man was to functionally model and imitate God’s rule on earth.⁸²

The New Testament asserts unquestionably the identity of Jesus Christ as the *eikon* of God the Father (John 14:9; 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:25; Heb 1:3). The intention of Jesus Christ was not to reveal a physical visible image of God the Father, for God is Spirit. Nobody has seen or can see God (John 1:18; 4:24; 6:46; 1 Tim 6:16).⁸³ If the incarnate Word representing humanity is also the exact image of the Father in a psychophysical or psychosomatic way, then such an image would distort the unchanging image of the Father, hence the unchanging image of the Son. “But if the Father is unalterable, and what He is that He continues, necessarily does the Image also continue what He is, and will not alter.”⁸⁴ Therefore, the divine image cannot be a psychophysical ontology.

Since the Son is “the ontological underpinning”⁸⁵ of the image of God in man, the image has to be something other than a psychophysical manifestation. More importantly, there has to exist an essential acute distinction between the theology of “in the image and after the likeness of God” existing in humanity in the broader sense, the renewal of the image of God in Christians in a more narrow sense (Col 3:10), and “the image of God” in Christ in an individual way.⁸⁶

⁸¹Michael D. Williams, “First Calling: The Imago Dei and the Order of Creation-Part II,” *Presbyterion* 39, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 77.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 78–79.

⁸³The kenosis veils the glory of the incarnate Word (Phil 2:6-7).

⁸⁴Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, *Against the Arians, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), 4:319.

⁸⁵Stan, “Human Person as a Being Created in the Image of God and as the Image of the Son,” 137.

⁸⁶Robert Letham, *Through Western Eyes: Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2007), 244.

Eastern Orthodox theologians attempt to resolve this dilemma by explaining the creation of man as “an image of the Image.”⁸⁷ By creating a man in the image of the Son, as a living but limited image, God demonstrates his parental love to godlike human beings.⁸⁸ Creation thus demonstrates the communal and relational aspect of God to humanity. It is a filial potential and “it means that man is offered the ability to work on his own filiation by cooperating with the divine grace.”⁸⁹ Thus, man as the image of the Son was, and still is, a *theandric* entity that can and should partake of the energies of God in deification.

The doctrine of *theosis* dominates every part of Eastern Orthodox anthropology and, as a result, reinterprets many other doctrines of the Christian faith. Deification rudders the doctrine of the *imago Dei* to an extreme ontology and understates the value of Christological teleology.⁹⁰ The lens of extreme anthropological ontology dims the doctrine of sin and results in a diminished importance of the unveiling of the work of Christ. While *theosis* becomes enclosed in an anthropocentric anthropology and finds its *telos* in the *theandric* perfection of man, it deviates from a God-centered christological fulfilment of the divine plan. As such, because Christ alone is the *eikon* of God, anthropology should yield and find its *telos* in redemptive Christology and not in deification. Orthodoxy is wrong to emphasize man as “the glory” of God.⁹¹ Instead, theology must always emphasize Christ as the glory of God.

⁸⁷Orthodox theologians use Col 1:15-17 as biblical support.

⁸⁸Stan, “Human Person as a Being Created in the Image of God and as the Image of the Son,” 134.

⁸⁹Ibid., 139.

⁹⁰Jason S. Sexton, “The Imago Dei Once Again: Stanley Grenz’s Journey toward a Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1:26-27,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4, no. 2 (2010): 193.

⁹¹Timothy Kallistos Ware highlights how Orthodox theology considers the expression of the glory of God in man. See Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (London: Mowbrays, 1979), 64.

Deification entails a deployment of the inner potential already given to mankind in the form of the “image.” The evangelical perspective of grace is the free and unmerited act and favor of God in the salvation of unworthy sinners. Instead, Eastern Orthodoxy portrays grace as an implanted ontological operative in the salvation or deification of man. In light of such theology, grace is an uncreated energy of God, an already preexistent internal potential that needs to be activated as an operating factor in deification. The discovery of the *microtheos* within oneself is an unbiblical presentation of grace and salvation. The grace of God appears bringing salvation to all people without distinction by the appearing of the glorious Son of the Father who is full of grace and truth (John 1:24; Titus 2:11).

For Orthodox theology, communion with God springs up from an internal operation of preexisting but inactive uncreated grace. Naturally, such activity becomes a merited favor and a commitment of God toward a human who seeks to approach him through sacramentalism and morality. This is precisely why the Byzantine Palamas maintains that modes of virtue illumine and raise the soul to a higher level of spirituality. Such modes of virtue are means of regaining eternal life.⁹² The Greek Orthodox view of grace as an internal preexistent implant of uncreated energy makes the acts of God in salvation history as less than totally sovereign. The electing, calling, justifying, and sanctifying grace of God through Jesus Christ depends on the expression of the implanted capacity of an individual as well as a merit rather than as a total and utter undeserved grace of God. Grace is an unmerited gift “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24).

Finally, Eastern Christendom argues that the incarnation of Christ “realizes in history *the very reality of the person* and makes it the basis and ‘hypostasis’ of the person

⁹²Palamas, *The Philokalia*, 4:330, 363.

of every man.”⁹³ A human is thus a “real person” by the restoration of the ability toward divinization and a right standing before God. The Greek Orthodox views of image, likeness, and personhood are in danger to collapse “creation into redemption and common grace into saving grace.”⁹⁴ In this respect, the doctrine of deification reinterprets the status of personhood, the doctrine of the fall, the sovereign purposes of God, the definition of grace, and, as a consequence, compromises and distorts the gospel.⁹⁵

A Necessary Distinction between Image and Likeness for Deification

The doctrine of *theosis* necessitates a critical distinction between the “image” and “likeness” in Genesis 1:26-27. The Greek Fathers sometimes defined the image of God in man as the totality of the tripartite nature of man and other times with just the soul.⁹⁶ Basil of Caesarea, in his earlier writings, treats the “image” and “likeness” as synonyms, but, in subsequent years, he advanced the philosophical distinction between image and likeness according to the initial ideology of Irenaeus and Origen.⁹⁷

The image of God in man was given at the moment of his creation and the likeness “though that is, similarities to God, is something man must reach as a result of moral perfection and good works.”⁹⁸ According to Basil the Great, humans, by design,

⁹³John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Contemporary Greek Theologians 4 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 54.

⁹⁴Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 434.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 64–65.

⁹⁷The distinction of image and likeness in Basil’s writings may mimic an Aristotelian structure of power and action. See Maximus Aghiorgoussis, “Applications of the Theme ‘Eikon Theou’ (Image of God) According to Saint Basil the Great,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 21, no. 3 (1976): 271–75.

⁹⁸Hilarion Alfeyev, *Orthodox Christianity: Doctrine and Teaching of the Orthodox Church*, trans. Andrew Smith (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2012), 2:224.

can exercise free choice and be conformed to the likeness of God in becoming a Christian. What is according to free choice is a power existing in us, but this power “we bring about by our activity.”⁹⁹ Although Basil holds on to the ability of free choice, at least in his first discourse *On the Origin of Humanity*, he emphasizes Christlikeness without dwelling on deification.¹⁰⁰

The *imago Dei* imprinted in the soul always remains as a spiritual power denoting a potentiality whereas the likeness of God is the actualization of the potential that arises through virtuous actions. God graces humanity with the potential for deification via the *imago Dei*, and man must, in synergy with God, attain *theosis*. This distinction of image and likeness means that however corrupt one may be, the inward God-given potential for likeness and *theosis* will never be lost. The journey toward deification becomes an ascent toward a unity with God and participation in his glory.

So the distinction of image and likeness is the foundational stone of an ontological structure for a dynamic human-God interaction. It is the basis for “our relationship with God with its dynamic realization in divine likeness.”¹⁰¹ Orthodoxy considers the aspect of free choice as a fundamental tenet in understanding humanity in relation to God. Timothy Ware writes, “As God is free, so likewise man is free. And being free, each human being realizes the divine image within himself in his own distinctive fashion.”¹⁰² Herein one perceives the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of humanity.

⁹⁹Basil, *On the Human Condition*, trans. Nonna Verna Harrison, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2005), 44.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 44–45.

¹⁰¹Vladimir Kharlamov, ed., *Theosis. Deification in Christian Theology*, vol. 2, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 156 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 6.

¹⁰²Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 65.

A Biblical Interpretation of Genesis 1:26-27

Following a pattern set by many Greek Fathers, Eastern Christendom insists in making a distinction between the ideas of the image and likeness and then relating them in the process of divinization.¹⁰³ Among the Greek Fathers, Cyril of Alexandria refused to accept any distinction in meaning between image and likeness. Cyril could not find any significant biblical evidence that detaches the synonymous meaning of the two words as the Hebrew text offers no proof for the discrimination between the words “image” and “likeness” (*selem* and *demut*). It is a matter of synonymous expressions but with deferring emphasis.¹⁰⁴

Similarly, Stanley Grenz notes,

Contrary to the exegetical tradition that predominated from the patristic era through the Middle Ages, contemporary exegetes are nearly unanimous in concluding that *selem* and *demut* are synonymous or at most offer only a slight difference in meaning. Their synonymous character is evidenced by the presence of the two terms in a ninth-century Aramaic inscription from Tell Fakhariyeh in which the words are used to denote the statue of King Haddu-yisi.¹⁰⁵

Three areas collaborating against the distinction of image and likeness pertain to the meaning of the terms “image” and “likeness” in the Hebrew language, the origin of the words, and their contextual meaning. The synonymous parallelism amplifies, qualifies, and, at the same time, restricts the meaning of the anchor word, namely, “the image.”¹⁰⁶ In explaining the evil of cursing people, James 3:9 argues that such acts are precisely evil because people are made in the likeness of God. The wording used here

¹⁰³Walter J. Burghardt states that distinctions between image and likeness carry overtones from Gnosticism: “In Gnosticism, ὁμοίωσις is a divine seed which forms the essence of the ‘pneumatic’ man; it is a gift of nature and consequently inadmissible” (Walter J. Burghardt, *The Image of God in Man According to Cyril of Alexandria*, Studies in Christian Antiquity 14 [Woodstock, MD: Woodstock College Press, 1957], 1).

¹⁰⁴Walter J. Burghardt, *The Image of God in Man According to Cyril of Alexandria*, Studies in Christian Antiquity 14 (Woodstock, MD: Woodstock College Press, 1957), 8.

¹⁰⁵Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 187.

¹⁰⁶Frederick J. Mcleod, *The Image of God in the Antiochene Tradition* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 44–45.

(καθ' ὁμοίωσιν) is exactly the same as the translation of Genesis 1:26 in the Septuagint. The New Testament book of James uses the idea of “image” and “likeness” in an interchangeable fashion.

The common view that “image” was a reference to reason while “likeness” referred to a relational aspect of corresponding with God may have been influenced from the addition of the LXX (*kai*) “and” as a conjunction between “image and likeness.”¹⁰⁷ In the Hebrew, there is no conjunction between the two words; the text simply says, “let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, “the LXX translation distinguished between *selem* (*eikon*) and *demut* (*homoiosis*) at both 1:26 and 5:3, where the tandem term occurs, but used the same term “image” (*eikon*) for both Hebrew words at 1:27 (*selem*), 5:1 (*demut*), and 9:6 (*selem*) indicating that the words have the same force.”¹⁰⁹ Hoekema argues that if *selem* and *demut* were different descriptions of human aspects then they would not be used with such free interchangeability.¹¹⁰

Eastern Orthodoxy has to insist on a sharp distinction between “image” and “likeness” in order to support the doctrine of deification. The image of God in man can never be lost, but the likeness can be lost. In disobeying God, Adam and Eve lost only their likeness to God. The grace of God functioning through the “image” still gives one the ability through the incarnation of Christ, to act synergistically, repossess the divine likeness, and, finally, to become all that God is by nature apart from his essence. It is therefore textually mistaken to draw a distinction between the chiasmic emphasis of “image” (as a “protological endowment”) and “likeness” (as an “eschatological

¹⁰⁷Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis*, The New American Commentary, vols. 1A and 1B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 164.

¹⁰⁸Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 13.

¹⁰⁹Mathews, *Genesis*, 126–27.

¹¹⁰The word *demut* or *demuth* in Gen 1 “indicates that the image is also a likeness” (Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 13).

vocation”) of “humanity in the recapitulation and deification of the cosmos.”¹¹¹

Moreover, it is unsubstantiated to connect human likeness to God toward deification.

Sin, Synergism and Semi-Pelagianism

The Fall and Sin

Considering the static and indestructible nature of the *imago Dei* according to Eastern anthropology, Adam’s sin could not have devastated this innate, God-given gift. For “the image” indicates not only a gift but a goal, a possession, a destiny, a pledge from God, and a constitution of true humanity.¹¹² A devastation or obliteration of “the image” would have destroyed God’s ultimate goal of union with humanity and, by extension, caused the thwarting of God’s plan for the deification of the cosmos. In Eastern terms, the divine uncreated energies creating the imprint of the *imago Dei* forms the very core of the human being in a metaphysical-ontological way.¹¹³ So, Nellas says: “In fact man, having been created ‘in the image’ of the infinite God, is called by his own nature—and this is precisely the sense of ‘in the image’ from this point of view—to transcend the limited boundaries of creation and become infinite.”¹¹⁴ For Eastern Christendom, the fall cannot, therefore, be total but rather a deformity that effected a change in the human nature.

Eastern Orthodox dogma advocates for a distorted nature, a sickness that Adam and Eve introduced to future generations. Symeon the New Theologian insisted

¹¹¹Daniel Haynes, “The Transgression of Adam and Christ the New Adam: St Augustine and St Maximus the Confessor on the Doctrine of Original Sin,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2011): 296.

¹¹²Nellas suggests that “the ‘in the image’ is a real power, a pledge which should lead to marriage, that is, to a hypostatic union, the unconfused but real and fulfilling mixture and commingling of the divine and human natures. Only does then the iconic or potential being of man become real *authentic* being” (Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, 37).

¹¹³Jonathan D. Jacobs, “An Eastern Orthodox Conception of Theosis and Human Nature,” *Faith and Philosophy* 26, no. 5 (2009): 623.

¹¹⁴Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, 28.

that even after the fall, “Adam as a creature was subject to change, but could not fall into complete apostasy from God.”¹¹⁵ By reason of the fall, man carries an infirmity and chastisement from God because of the “ancestral sin.”¹¹⁶ Since there is no original guilt or depravity, nor a separation of enmity between God and man as such, no real and essential need to link the incarnation with atonement exists since there is also no legal debt to be paid. Rather, the language of exchange becomes one where Christ’s incarnation becomes a saving interchange and hypostatic union of humanity and divinity as well as a fusion of sanctification with justification.¹¹⁷ This is why Orthodoxy places more emphasis on the incarnation of Christ.

The fall rendered human nature deformed and incapable of deification. Therefore, the only way of restoration, according to Greek Orthodoxy, was the recreation of human ability for deification via the hypostatic union of the human and divine nature at the incarnation of Christ.¹¹⁸ Eastern Orthodox theology argues that a theology of incarnation presents the economy of salvation in a more positive way than a mere negative theology of liberation from the dreadful state of sin.¹¹⁹

The absence of need for redemption after the fall becomes even more evident in the idea that Adam had an opportunity to repent and receive the forgiveness of his sin during his encounter with God post fall. Symeon the New Theologian argues that if Adam and Eve “had repented, they would not have been banished from Paradise and

¹¹⁵Symeon the New Theologian, *The First-Created Man*, 59.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 61.

¹¹⁷Myk Habets, “Reforming Theosis,” in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006); Kharlamov, *Theosis, Deification in Christian Theology*, 163–64.

¹¹⁸Jacobs, “An Eastern Orthodox Conception of Theosis and Human Nature,” 620.

¹¹⁹Panagiotes K. Chrestou, *Partakers of God*, Patriarch Athenagoras Memorial Lectures (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1984), 43.

condemned to return to the earth from which they had been taken.”¹²⁰ The foreordained incarnation of Jesus Christ came as a result of God the Father foreseeing that Adam and Eve would grieve, weep, and call upon his compassion in humble repentance.¹²¹ Thus, the most crucial concern for the East is a restoration of a deprived fellowship and communion between mankind and God.¹²² The Word incarnate “assumes the whole legacy of human fallenness while not wavering from the divine initiative towards the deification of creation.”¹²³

The Eastern church denies the inherited transmission of Adamic sin. Orthodox theologians reject the doctrine of original sin and propose that humanity suffered the consequences of the generic sin of Adam and Eve, that is, possibility, corruptibility, and mortality.¹²⁴ Consequently, Lossky argues,

Evil is not a nature, but a state of nature, as the Fathers would say most profoundly. It thus appears as an illness, as a parasite existing only by virtue of the nature he lives off. More precisely, it is a state of the will of this nature; it is a fallen will with regard to God. Evil is revolt against God, that is to say a personal attitude. The exact vision of evil is thus not essentialist but personalist.¹²⁵

Present day Orthodoxy accepts the doctrine of “ancestral sin” and argues that Adam and Eve alone bear full responsibility for their sinful actions. Quoting Deuteronomy 24:16, Jeremiah 31:29-30 and Ezekiel 18:20, they argue for an individual and thus personal aspect of sin without the passing on of guilt on to their progeny. The transmission of sin

¹²⁰Symeon the New Theologian, *The First-Created Man*, 111.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 112.

¹²²Demetrios J. Constantelos, *Understanding the Greek Orthodox Church: Its Faith, History, and Life*, 3rd ed., rev. and enlarged (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1998), 74.

¹²³Maximus, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 33.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, 31–32.

¹²⁵John Witte and Frank S. Alexander, eds., *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity on Law, Politics, and Human Nature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 229.

is an inheritance of a general status of a condition or disease. The failure of Adam and Eve to obey God by employing their freedom of will was a rejection to realize their full potential and fullness of existence in deification.¹²⁶ According to Orthodox dogma, sin is personal and not a code of behavior. Fallen human life is, above all else, a failure to realize the potential of partaking in divine life and receive the vocation to become god.¹²⁷

Semi-Pelagianism and Freedom of the Will

The “love” theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church advocates a longing of humanity for liberation from the effects of ancestral sin, death, suffering, and corruption. The initial death of the soul took place with Adam’s disobedience. The Greek Father Palamas contends that death for the soul is an unharnessing from divine grace and yoking to sin.¹²⁸ Such a condition can be reversed by obedience to the commandments of God. Consequently, obedience to the divine commandments renders a person worthy of bodily resurrection.¹²⁹ God has given humans the power of free will to choose through their actions a life of obedience or a life of disobedience.¹³⁰

According to Ware, “the Orthodox Church rejects any doctrine of grace which might seem to infringe upon human freedom.”¹³¹ All humans possess free will and are capable to enter into a synergistic relation with God in order to achieve deification. Even though God’s contribution in salvation is of vastly greater importance than the human

¹²⁶Antony Hughes, “Ancestral Versus Original Sin: An Overview with Implications for Psychotherapy,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23, no. 3 (2004): 271.

¹²⁷Ibid., 272.

¹²⁸Palamas. *The Philokalia*, 4:296.

¹²⁹Ibid., 297.

¹³⁰Eastern Orthodoxy also believes that the image of God in man signifies our human free will, reason and moral ability. Because the image of God in man remains even after the fall, man still retains the capacity of free will and moral choice. See Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 219.

¹³¹Ibid., 221.

contribution, union with God requires “the cooperation of two unequal, but equally necessary forces: divine grace and human will.”¹³² Thus, the grace of God is inviting but resistible and non-compelling. Ware asserts that the “Orthodox, however, do not hold that the fall deprived humanity entirely of God’s grace, though they would say that after the fall grace acts on humanity from the outside, not from within.”¹³³

The dogma of the Orthodox Church identifies at least with semi-Pelagianism. It agrees that people are corrupted by the consequences of sin but denies any liability of Adamic guilt.¹³⁴ The emphasis on the freedom of the will in choosing good or evil, an individualistic responsibility for sin, and a synergistic path between the grace of God and humans places the Eastern Christendom at the fringe of semi-Pelagianism and Pelagianism. The Greek Orthodox emphasis on synergism in salvation reduces the function of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and elevates the moral ability and freedom of the will in salvation.

In referring to Maximus the Confessor, Meyendorff states,

Human nature, as God’s creature, always exercises its dynamic properties (which together constitute the “natural will”—a created dynamism) in accordance with the divine will which created it. But when the human person, or hypostasis, by rebelling against God and nature misuses its freedom, it can distort the “natural will” and thus corrupt nature itself. It is able to do so because it possesses freedom or “gnomic will,” which is capable of orienting man toward the good and of “imitating God” (“God alone is good by nature,” writes Maximus, “and only God’s imitator is good by his *gnome*”); it is also capable of sin, because our salvation depends on our will.”¹³⁵

Importantly, the freedom of morality and choice deny the doctrine of predestination according to the sovereign will and purpose of God. The formula of moral freedom and dependence on God describe the overall ideology of Greek Orthodoxy. Sin is always the

¹³²Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 222.

¹³³*Ibid.*, 223.

¹³⁴Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 342.

¹³⁵Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 1974, 143.

result of personal choice due to freedom of the will and not an act of nature.

While Greek Orthodoxy does not claim that a man can attain justification purely by himself, it nevertheless regards human effort or synergy as an imperative part of salvation or deification. The Pseudo-Dionysian trajectory of Eastern thought necessitates the involvement of effort “on the part of intelligent beings to imitate God to the best of their ability, in order for deification to take place.”¹³⁶ Though free will does not suffice by itself, it is a necessary aspect of regeneration, renunciation of worldliness, and deification. The oscillation between grace and free will, human effort and divine grace, concludes to a point of receiving God’s grace and mercy as a result of “human toil and labor.”¹³⁷ For God is “ready, so long as we have offered him our good will, to grant all these things, inasmuch as he desires and longs for our perfection and salvation more than we do ourselves.”¹³⁸ In Cassian’s phraseology, “[T]he main share in our salvation is to be ascribed not to the merit of our own works but to heavenly grace.”¹³⁹ The Orthodox scheme of deification or salvation then allows for a share or merit in the overall process.

Synergy with God is a fundamental component in the “working out of salvation.”¹⁴⁰ Salvation or *theosis* as a process requires faith, freedom, and personal effort in coming to completion. Synergism in salvation becomes even more apparent in Palamas’s theology of salvation. According to Palamas, “[W]hen the soul renounces its attachment to inferior things and cleaves through love to God and submits itself to him

¹³⁶Kharlamov, *The Beauty of the Unity and the Harmony of the Whole*, 184.

¹³⁷John Cassian, *John Cassian, The Institutes*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, Ancient Christian Writers, vol. 58 (New York: Newman Press, 2000), 261.

¹³⁸*Ibid.*

¹³⁹John Cassian, *The Conferences, Conference XVIII, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 11 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), 434.

¹⁴⁰Antony Hughes employs the phrase of “fellow workers with God” from 1 Cor 3:9 and “the working out of salvation” from Phil 2:12 to support a synergistic action. See Hughes, “Ancestral Versus Original Sin,” 272.

through acts and modes of virtue, it is illumined and made beautiful by God and is raised to a higher level, obeying his counsels and exhortations; and by these means it regains the truly eternal life.”¹⁴¹

Further Critique of the Perils of Deification

The precarious theology of Eastern Orthodoxy emphasizes an ontological and metaphysical deification according to synergistic collaboration of God and man.

According to Pseudo-Dionysian Orthodoxy then, rational beings are ontologically good and nothing can obliterate the ability of a person to choose goodness freely over evil.

The New Testament portrays sin not as plainly a deformity or even in Lossky’s terms as “personalist,” but rather as a condition that causes total enslavement. Sin influences all aspects of human nature, gains total control, and manifests itself in acts of rebellion against God.¹⁴² The Johannine works provide abundant support against the Eastern Orthodox interpretation of man’s condition after the fall. Multiple times the Apostle John “uses the singular form of ἁμαρτία (“sin”) to signify that sin is a *singular and cosmic condition* rather than merely *multiple individual actions* (see John 1:29; 15:22; 16:8).”¹⁴³ For example, the singular use of τὴν ἁμαρτίαν, “as well as the inclusive genitive modifier that indicates universal scope (τοῦ κόσμου),”¹⁴⁴ signify sin as a condition that enslaves everyone and everything. Likewise, John 8:34-36, 44-47; 12:31, and 1 John 3:4-18 present a universal enslavement to sin. The presentation of sin in the

¹⁴¹Palamas, *The Philokalia*, 4:363.

¹⁴²Charles A. Gieschen, “Original Sin in the New Testament,” *Concordia* 31, no. 4 (October 2005): 359.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*, 363.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*

Bible is both a “condition of enslavement from which we cannot free ourselves and as a condition inherited from the fall.”¹⁴⁵

The semi-Pelagian view of Greek Orthodoxy disdains the doctrine of original sin and, therefore, the transmission of guilt from Adam to the rest of humanity. Furthermore, Orthodoxy uplifts the freedom of the will, softens the real enmity existing between man and God, and instead places man and God on the same side against sin and the devil. Romans 5:12-21 and Ephesians 2:3 position humanity to be as guilty as Adam was and naturally an object of wrath.¹⁴⁶ Though not all humanity was present as individuals when Adam sinned, all humanity was present “as parts of an undifferentiated total human nature.”¹⁴⁷ An obvious illustration of such an argument is clear in Hebrews 7:9-10 when Levi still paid tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham: “[F]or he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.” Hoekema states that “[o]ur involvement in and identification with Adam’s sin carries with it the perversity apart from which sin does not exist. We are born in a state of corruption because we are in solidarity with Adam in his sin.”¹⁴⁸

The corruption of human nature is so pervasive that Jesus, in Mark 10:18, encloses all humanity under the corrupting nature of sin. The expression, “no one is good,” defies any idea of an intrinsic, inherent, or remaining goodness in mankind. The corruption of humanity is thorough, complete, and inescapable. No man can exercise free will synergistically to draw near to God. In John 3:44 and John 6:65 Jesus declares the

¹⁴⁵Gieschen, “Original Sin in the New Testament,” 364.

¹⁴⁶Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 155.

¹⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 161.

impossibility of synergism in salvation.¹⁴⁹ Slavery to sin implies that nobody has freedom of the will (Rom 6:17).¹⁵⁰

Even what appear to be acts of kindness do not render one good. Jesus Christ presents the exhaustive dominion of sin over man by categorizing humanity as intrinsically and continuously evil. In Matthew 7:11, for example, human depravity is on display. The outcome of man's internal condition or nature manifests itself in evil behavior and bad fruit. The teaching of the New Testament indicates without a doubt that after the fall of Genesis, sin becomes a state of nature and thus an inward condition for all humanity (Matt 7:16; 12:33; 15:19-20; 23:27; Mark 7:21-23).¹⁵¹ Romans 7:18-19 describes the spiritual inability of humanity to follow God and do good. There is none who does good and there is none who seeks God (Rom 3:10). The inner root of sinful deeds lies in the sinfulness of human nature.

Genesis 6:5 demonstrates the accentuation of humanity's wickedness: "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Man's wickedness is great, his every inclination or intention is evil, and the heart as the center of thinking, desiring, feeling and acting exists in a state of continuous and utter evil.¹⁵² At the heart of deification theology, there exists a wrong propulsion that guides the Eastern church to view man as inherently good and sin as just a deformity or disease. Evangelicalism, on the other hand, contends that the term "original sin" is much more appropriate than "ancestral sin."

¹⁴⁹John 6:44 reads, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" and John 6:65 reads, "And he said, 'This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.'"

¹⁵⁰Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 572.

¹⁵¹Gieschen, "Original Sin in the New Testament," 363.

¹⁵²Mathews, *Genesis*, 340.

Classifying sin as plainly a deformity and infirmity diminishes the work of Christ “as the one who *became sin, bore sin, paid for sin, and conquered sin.*”¹⁵³

The death of Christ on the cross is of such an eternal and unfathomable proportion that it in itself speaks of the extreme seriousness of sin.¹⁵⁴ Underestimating the power, nature, and extent of sin as the doctrine of deification does, diminishes the impact of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Sin as a state of nature corrupts totally, enslaves utterly, and takes the will of every man and woman under complete bondage. The incarnation of Christ is presupposed wrongly as an event caused by this divine Eros that desires to reactivate “the otherness of the human hypostasis.”¹⁵⁵ The “otherness” involves the “realization of exercise of the free will—an existential necessity for the relational existence between man and God.”¹⁵⁶

Orthodoxy is wrong to assume that after man’s fall into sin, man the sinner did not totally lose the freedom of his will and reason capable of understanding and seeking God.¹⁵⁷ The sin, along with the guilt of Adam, was imputed to his descendants and not just the consequences of his sin. The parallel of Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-21 presents the correlation between them as covenant heads:¹⁵⁸ “For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will

¹⁵³Gieschen, “Original Sin in the New Testament,” 360.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 374.

¹⁵⁵Christos Yannaras, *The Enigma of Evil*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 2012), 33.

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷Pomazansky argues that after the fall man could still exercise the freedom of his will. Pomazansky asserts that God did not take away man’s reason or capacity of understanding spiritual truths. “God acted towards him as does a physician and educator: He covered his nakedness with clothing, moderated his self-esteem and pride, his fleshly desires and passions, by means of healing measure—labor and diseases—giving to them an educational significance. We ourselves can see the educational effect of labor, and the cleansing effect of disease on the soul.” See Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, 161-62.

¹⁵⁸Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 116.

be made righteous” (Rom 5:19). Sin and Satan did not just weaken the will of man but rather subdued and enslaved it under complete bondage. The Eastern Christian tradition prefers the doctrine of “ancestral sin” over that of “original sin” and thus situates human fallenness in a restrictive “narrative of cosmic recapitulation and divinization.”¹⁵⁹

The “love theology” and “sin as a deformity or disease” model of the Eastern tradition portrays humanity as a victim, denying Adamic guilt.¹⁶⁰ Logically then, since there is no imputation of sin from Adam to the rest of humanity, it follows that forensic justification is not needed.¹⁶¹ This rejection is another fundamental error underpinning the doctrine of *theosis*. Evil human behavior stems more from “moral evil” due to the free will of a person than “natural inherited evil.” The origin of evil arises at the level of freedom.¹⁶² If the relational elements lie within the orbit of free choice, then a break between man and God could be classified as relational damage, an existential event.

For Yannaras and Greek Orthodoxy, evil would cause death not because of a break in regulative, moral or law stipulations but because of a break in relation. A difficulty with such restrictive thinking is that one cannot only define a relationship between God and man just as an existential event. The “love or relational” theology of the Eastern tradition must also see the importance of actual parameters defining, expressing, and vindicating a relational event. In Malachi 1:6, Matthew 7:21-23, Luke 6:46, and James 1:21-23, for instance, the importance of actual adherence to set relational parameters set the tone of a relationship. God is holy, and his holiness demands

¹⁵⁹Haynes, “The Transgression of Adam and Christ the New Adam,” 293.

¹⁶⁰The “love theology” of Eastern Orthodoxy does not regard hell as the just condemnation of God for guilty sinners but as a refusal of persons to love God. Eastern Orthodoxy views hell “through the prism of communion” (Dumitru Staniloae, *The Fulfilment of Creation*, in vol. 6 of *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, ed. and trans. Ioan Ionita (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 2013), 39-40.

¹⁶¹William Baldwin, *Another Christ? Another Gospel? Is the True Gospel in Greek Orthodoxy?* (Longwood, FL: Xulon, 2012), 78.

¹⁶²Yannaras, *The Enigma of Evil*, 18.

obedience. Obedience is an important indicator of love. God is the one who defines what sin is. It is a “falling short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23-24). Deification theology once again endeavors to set the tone and define the terms of evil and morality in terms of a relational event.¹⁶³ In the final analysis, the Word of God must define the basis of human experience and anthropology. Only the Bible can determine “man’s being as man.”¹⁶⁴

For Orthodoxy, man has the potential within him. According to Scripture, man is dead in sins and trespasses (Luke 15:24; Eph 2:1, 5; 5:14; Col 2:13). Spiritually dead people who are at enmity with God have no desire or capacity to contribute to the process of regeneration. There exists a fundamental difference between simply recognizing good and bad through the law of God and having the capacity to will and do good. Paul, in Romans 7-9, lays out a theology of total human inability toward good.¹⁶⁵ God alone with no human cooperation frees the will of man by his sovereign grace alone. Deification theology presupposes the freedom of the will in the restoration of true humanity in divine likeness and thus undermines the biblical definition of grace. The image of God in man is not an ontological determination of human salvation. The doctrine of *theosis* places too much emphasis on this ontology. Furthermore, it wishes to bind the freedom of God in a single creative act and as a commitment that has to come to fruition. The doctrine of deification endeavors to bind the freedom of God and uplift the freedom of man.

¹⁶³Such an approach is evident by diminishing the historicity of the Genesis account as an important element of revelation. Instead the Orthodox elevate its symbolic account and the experience of the Church as more important in the interpretation of the origin of evil. Second, Yannaras along with Orthodoxy, downplays the importance of textual interpretation and renders the adoption and juridical language of the gospel as a formulation that is non-binding for all time. Third, “the freedom of createdness” is more important than the textual interpretation of the first three chapters of Genesis. Fourth, Yannaras argues that the “juridical scheme of the interpretation of the origin of evil (commandment/transgression, guilt/punishment) reflects the language of archetypical religious theories of the relation between humanity and the transcendent” (Yannaras, *The Enigma of Evil*, 51-54).

¹⁶⁴Schumacher, *Who Do I Say That You Are?* 15.

¹⁶⁵Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy*, Patristic Monograph Series 15 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 7.

Humanity stands before God with inherited guilt because in Adam all have sinned. Humanity has broken the laws and commandments of God and stands guilty and condemned before a holy God. Sin is not just a break in a relationship and an existential event. Moreover, humanity is guilty in Adam and deserves condemnation not because all were personally involved in the guilt of Adam's sin, but "because he acted as our representative when he committed the first sin."¹⁶⁶ As a result of the fall, sin and guilt are transmitted to everyone. The universality of sin and the severely perverted human nature cause a tendency to love and do evil (Gen 6:5; 1 Kgs 8:46; Job 14:4; Ps 143:2; Prov 20:9; Eccl 7:20; Rom 3:19-20; 3:23; Eph 2:3; 1 John 1:8, 10).¹⁶⁷

Concluding Remarks

The Orthodox point of view concerning cosmology and anthropology is quite distinct from the Protestant doctrine. Orthodox tradition rationalizes continuity between God and the creation with necessary caveats so as to avoid pantheism. The Pseudo-Dionysian elements lead Orthodox theology to a controlling influence of a dynamic almost personal cosmos with a circulating existence. Orthodoxy holds on to a strong ontological dependence of the *imago Dei* and a distinction between likeness that is necessary for the foundation and process of deification.¹⁶⁸ Eastern Orthodoxy veers toward a strong "personalism and existential reductionism" and therefore an excessive emphasis upon the freedom of the human will.¹⁶⁹

The doctrine of deification underpins the cosmology and anthropology of the Eastern church, leading her to a hyper-optimistic anthropology and, consequently, a theology of human glory. Evil is reinterpreted, original sin rejected, and man's inherent

¹⁶⁶Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 148.

¹⁶⁷Ibid., 141-43.

¹⁶⁸Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 137.

¹⁶⁹Ibid., 143.

goodness highlighted. The story of Creation is taken to be the story of salvation. Thus deification becomes a very defective and severely distorted model of understanding salvation. *Theosis* has a defective cosmological and anthropological foundation as well as an inadequate view of sin.

The doctrine of deification relies upon a distinction between “the image” and “the likeness” but there is no textual evidence to support such a distinction. On the contrary, biblical evidence points to the synonymous use of the terms. As a result, the theological idea of the recovery and advancement of “the likeness” in *theosis* is invalid.

Theosis causes a distinction and promotes spiritual elitism through personal effort. Salvation becomes conditioned upon the freedom of the will and a virtuous life.¹⁷⁰ The denial of original sin and the emphasis of an inherent capacity of goodness due to the *imago Dei* lead the Eastern tradition to a very optimistic view of anthropology. The Bible asserts that the theological truth that a person devoid of the Spirit of God will never turn toward good but always be inclined toward evil.¹⁷¹ Since Eastern Orthodoxy uses the Maximian system of sin and guilt as hypostatic rather than essential (as an inheritance of death and corruption and not culpability), it fails to take seriously the doctrine of original sin and the transmission of guilt due to the fall.¹⁷² Consequently, deification theology becomes a synergistic effort between God and man in order to realize the inherent potential of man.

¹⁷⁰Gregory F. Scholtz, “Samuel Johnson on Human Nature: Natural Depravity and the Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Word & World* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 137.

¹⁷¹*Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁷²John Boojamra, “Original Sin According to St. Maximus the Confessor,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 20 (1976): 27.

CHAPTER 3

THE EASTERN ORTHODOX VIEW OF REVELATION AND INTERPRETATION

Theosis and Apophaticism

Every hypothesis, theory, or doctrine must have and does have an epistemological basis of some sort. The theological foundation of *theosis* as a whole lays emphasis on the importance of the mystical, ineffable, and personal encounter between the Creator and the creature—a complex, mystical, progressive, and all-embracing spiritual relationship. Whether one assumes the radical apophaticism of Lossky or the apophatic-cataphatic synthesis of Staniloae, the epistemological basis of deification is essentially a prevailing treatment of apophatic or negative theology.¹ Such an emphasis of apophasis intertwines motifs of revelation and interpretation, the knowability and nature of God, ineffability, and mysticism.

It is no secret that the theology of the East in its most essential aspect is mystical.² Orthodox theologians do not apologize for the intricate mystical connection between dogma and spirituality. On the contrary, for the East, when theology encounters the unutterable mystery of God, it needs a personal subjective encounter or spiritual contemplation of the divine. The Eastern church merges the “realm of common faith and that of mystical theology.”³ Orthodox theology and mysticism are mutually

¹Emil Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology: An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology of Dumitru Staniloae* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 1999), 20–22.

²Winfried Corduan, *Mysticism: An Evangelical Option?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 98.

³Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St.

interdependent and cannot exist apart from each other. Thus, Orthodox theology is a means toward attaining a mystical union with God, namely *theosis*.⁴

Apophatic Theology

The core axiom of *theosis* theology is a marker against the rationalistic approach of Western theology.⁵ The Orthodox divine-human communion entails a precondition of apophaticism.⁶ Thus, it is unavoidable to bypass the derivative question of the knowledge of God and all that it encompasses. Apophatic discourses in philosophy and theology underscore the limitations of language to describe that which is indescribable, beyond the limits of language and human knowability.

Apophasis, then, is the use of negation “not just of a certain content or proposition but of discourse as such. It entails precisely the confrontation with Nothing through the removal of all content of discourse whatsoever.”⁷ Negation in the Eastern church is more than a negation of all affirmative statements about God. Ware comments that for the Greek Fathers,

the process of negating is not just a verbal exercise but the basis or springboard for a leap beyond all language and discursive thinking. Through their negations they seek to surpass words and concepts, to reach out towards the transcendent, and so to attain an unmediated, supra-rational experience of the Divine. On this deeper, or ‘mystical’ level, the apophatic way is no mere philosophical theory, but is inseparable from the practice of ‘imageless’ prayer. Though negative in its outward form, the apophatic approach—interpreted in this deeper sense—is supremely

Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 14.

⁴Ibid., 8–9.

⁵According to Yannaras, the drift of the West away from the “Greek apophaticism and the ontology of the Church” started to transpire as a result of the barbarian take over and their subsequent population of the Hellenized Roman culture. See Christos Yannaras, *The Enigma of Evil*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 2012), 67.

⁶Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 2–3.

⁷William Franke, “Apophatic Paths: Modern and Contemporary Poetics and Aesthetics of Nothing,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 17, no. 3 (September 2012): 7.

affirmative in its ultimate aim. The way of negation is in reality the way of super-affirmation.⁸

Sections of Greek philosophy embraced the concept of negation in order to speculate and stretch the limits of expression. Heraclitus, a fine example of pre-Socratic philosophers, considered negation to be not only a turn but also an intrinsic condition “towards the unsayable One (*hen*), which is also All (*panta*), beyond the *Logos* (considered sacred).”⁹ The “oneness beyond thought and consciousness” of Plotinus¹⁰ and the luminous divine darkness of Pseudo-Dionysius, also provides a lineage into the formation of undercurrents in theological apophaticism.¹¹

Lossky attests to the similarities in elements of negation between Neo-Platonic mystical philosophy and Eastern theology, but he is careful to point out the extensive delineation of negation within Christianity. Lossky argues that “outside of Christianity, it [apophatic way] only ends in the depersonalization of God, and of the man who seeks God.”¹² Eastern apophaticism does not end up in a void that absorbs and dissolves the subject and the object in the process of deification. It is a “receptacle of revelation” that gives access “to a face to face encounter with God, a union without confusion according to grace.”¹³ In further explaining the exact mechanism of apophatic theology, Lossky writes,

⁸Kalistos Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed: The Apophatic Way and the Essence-Energies Distinction,” *Eastern Churches Review* 7, no. 2 (1975): 128.

⁹Franke, “Apophatic Paths,” 7.

¹⁰Plotinus was a Platonic–Neo-Platonic ancient philosopher. Trostyanskiy observes many connections between Pseudo-Dionysian negation and the philosophical notions of Plotinus. See Sergey Trostyanskiy, “The Property of Simplicity in Affirmative (Kataphatic) and Negative (Apophatic) Theological Approaches,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 62, nos. 3–4 (2010): 108–9.

¹¹Franke, “Apophatic Paths,” 13–14.

¹²Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Ian Kesarcodi-Watson and Ihita Kesarcodi-Watson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), 33.

¹³*Ibid.*, 32.

Apophaticism consists in negating that which God is not; one eliminates firstly all creation, even the cosmic glory of the starry heavens and the intelligible light of the angels in the sky. Then one excludes the most lofty attributes, goodness, love wisdom. One finally excludes being itself. God is none of all this; in His own nature He is the unknowable. He “is not.” But here is the Christian paradox; He is the God to Whom I say “Thou,” Who calls me, Who reveals Himself as personal, as living.¹⁴

Eastern apophatic thought deviates profoundly into areas of the unsayable, silence, contemplation into nothing, and deep darkness. It is not difficult to determine, then, how apophatic thought can connect with mystical methodology in exploring the unsayable in the realm of the unknowable. Furthermore, unknowability can advance into darkness with a modality of abstraction.¹⁵ Lossky proposes that negation is more an attitude of the mind that rejects any formation of concepts about God. Concepts shackle the mind into a finite understanding of God while negation guides the mind into a contemplative, experiential, and personal relationship with God.¹⁶

Apophaticism and the Essence-Energies Distinction

The Orthodox Church stipulates that God’s being and nature are totally incomprehensible and unknowable. As a result of such a foundation, nobody can understand or explain the essence of God in positive terms. All that the Orthodox Church affirms about God’s nature is in terms of what God is not. John of Damascus suggests that when one speaks of God, he can only speak of the qualities that pertain to his nature.¹⁷ Though the Eastern Orthodox Church maintains the view of God’s unknowability, the doctrine of *theosis* creates a contradiction. God is unknowable in his

¹⁴Lossky, *Orthodox Theology*, 32.

¹⁵Franke, “Apophatic Paths,” 11–12.

¹⁶Verna E. F. Harrison, “The Relationship between Apophatic and Kataphatic Theology,” *Pro Ecclesia* 4, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 318.

¹⁷John of Damascus uses synonymously the terms essence (*ousia*), nature (*physis*), and form (*morphe*). See Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, The Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38.

essence and “yet the saints can know him personally.”¹⁸ The personal or experiential knowledge comes via participation in God’s divine and uncreated energies.

Kalistos Ware asserts that the “antinomy” of God’s nearness and otherness, hiddenness and yet self-disclosure through the incarnate Son, maintains the mystery of God’s radical unknowability. Even in man’s deification and unity to God, “man remains man, and so there is still an all-important sense in which the inner essence of the Deity is forever unknown to him even in the Age to Come.”¹⁹ Thus, the function of apophatic theology in the Eastern church, rightly or wrongly, endeavors to safeguard the divine mystery.

The *via negativa*²⁰ of the Eastern Orthodox Church includes both negations and affirmations, attempting to resolve the tension between the transcendence and immanence of God in *theosis*. Eastern Christendom views apophaticism as the key to all divine knowledge. Moreover, Orthodoxy employs the distinction between God’s essence and energies in order to deal with the tension between God’s radical unknowability and “the possibility of an encounter face to face with this unknowable God, of an unmediated union with the Inaccessible.”²¹

Since God’s essence or nature is not only hidden but incomprehensible and imparticipable, *theosis* necessitates that participation and union with God occur through the divine uncreated energies of God. The distinction of God’s essence and God’s divine

¹⁸Kallistos Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed,” 125.

¹⁹Ibid., 126.

²⁰Though closely related and sometimes used in a synonymous way, *via negativa* and negative theology are not exactly the same. Apophatic theology “often refers to a theory about how the divine predicates signify in the discipline of theology” while the *via negativa* can also refer to the spiritual way or method by which one arrives at union with God. See Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 4.

²¹Kallistos Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed,” 128.

uncreated energies still maintains that God's energies are "God himself."²² The essence or nature of God always remains transcendent and inaccessible, but the energies of God can manifest immanently. Since deification is partaking in God's energies, and knowledge of God comes through participation in divine energies, the doctrine of revelation thus centers upon the doctrine of *theosis*.²³

The *energeia* (energy) of God is uncreated and proceeds consubstantially from the essence of the triune God. The *energima* is the consequence of the *energeia* and is therefore a created effect.²⁴ The *henosis kat' energeian* (union according to energy) of man and God is a full "energetic" participation and true mystical union with God but not an essential union with the essence of God. The doctrine of the divine energies allows for a dynamic relationship and ontological participation between the essentially inaccessible God and humanity. "The God who is 'essentially' unknowable is thus 'existentially' or 'energetically' revealed."²⁵ However, Bartos notes that the idea of a particular, personal, ontological and energetical communion of God and man is a departure from the Cappadocian restrained notion of divine energies.²⁶

Orthodox theology emphasizes the unknowable and thus apophatic character of the immanent Trinity.²⁷ While there is a "fundamental identity" between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, the later becomes synonymous with the actions of God

²²Kallistos Ware, "God Hidden and Revealed," 129–30. The Eastern Orthodox Council of 1351 asserts that the term "deity" can be applied to the divine energies as well. However, "The essence enjoys a certain priority or superiority in relation to the energies, in the sense that the energies proceed from the essence."

²³Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 74.

²⁴Kallistos Ware, "God Hidden and Revealed," 131.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 129.

²⁶Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 62.

²⁷The phrase "Immanent Trinity" designates God in Godself, in the mystery of intra-trinitarian relationships or what the Orthodox call "theology." See Sorin Selaru, "Eternal Intra-Trinitarian Relations and their Economic Consequences," *IJOT* 2, no. 1 (2011): 85.

in history and consequently becomes a revelation of the “Salvific Trinity.” In this way, the essence of God (immanent Trinity) remains unknowable and incommunicable.²⁸ Communication with humanity only takes place economically via the uncreated energies of God while the grand axiom between the immanent and the economic Trinity finds an ontological continuity via the incarnation of Christ.²⁹

Principally, deification, which includes an experiential knowledge of God, can only be a partaking and an essential union with the energies of God or economic aspect of the Trinity. Even so, Zavershinsky loyal to Orthodox apophaticism, argues that “humanity can never fully comprehend the mystery of the economic Trinity, nor the dynamic of the immanent Trinity.”³⁰ At the end, humanity stands before an absolute mystery. Deification is a call to participate in this mystery of abstraction.

Since deification entails a real participation in the uncreated divine energies of God, then sharing in God’s energies makes one a possessor of the energies and “in a certain sense uncreated.”³¹ Hence, even with a distinction between the essence and divine energies of God, the doctrine of *theosis* still presents a problem with functional “pantheism.” For, if a human via deification can fully partake of the “deity,”³² then he becomes “uncreated” and an ontological as well as a functional deity himself.

Meanwhile, an acute and forceful distinction between the divine energies and essence of God blurs the doctrine of the simplicity of God and causes the triune God to appear as composite. Following Lossky, Zavershinsky comments,

²⁸Ibid., 86.

²⁹Ibid., 85.

³⁰George Zavershinsky, “The Trinitarian ‘Trace’ and the Divine Energies,” *IJOT* 2, no. 2 (2011): 106.

³¹Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 63.

³²In Eastern Orthodoxy, the term “deity” can also apply to the divine energies.

The energies are not the effects foreign to the divine essence; they are not acts exterior to God, depending on His will, like the creation of the world or acts of providence. They are the natural processions of God Himself, a mode of existence which is proper to Him and according to which God exists not only in His essence, but also outside His essence. God is not bounded even by His essence and the divine energies do not exist only as a function of God's relation to what is external to Him. If the world were not created, God would be both within His essence and outside it, overflowing the essence in His energies. He is never diminished in His natural processions outside the essence.³³

The effects of such a distinction are clear. Orthodoxy, according to the Palamite tradition, postulates multiple modes of existence in which God remains the same. The divine energies are a mode of existence in the same manner as his essence is a mode of existence.³⁴

Eastern Orthodox thought perceives God as being above his essence. Contrary to this insinuation, Frame affirms that "since God has no accidents, everything in him is essential to his being; so he is in a sense, his essence."³⁵ God is complex and at the same time simple. He is not divided and he is not a composed Being. God's attributes are not a distinct part of his being or an emanation of his being but descriptions of his divine essence from different perspectives.³⁶ God's attributes refer to his complex essence: "God's essence is not some dark, unrevealed entity behind God's revealed character. Rather God's revelation tells us his essence. It tells us what he really and truly is."³⁷

Gregory Palamas goes as far as to describe the inaccessible essence of God as "superior divinity" and the uncreated energies as "inferior divinity."³⁸ Additionally,

³³Zavershinsky, "The Trinitarian 'Trace' and the Divine Energies," 108.

³⁴Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird (London: Mowbrays, 1975), 54–55.

³⁵John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 429.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 431.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸These terms can be found in his second letter to Akindynos. As cited in Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 55.

Lossky states that the “essence can be said to be superior to the energies in the same sense that the Father, the source of all divinity, is said to be superior to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.”³⁹ *Theosis* distorts the doctrine of God’s simplicity and forms a multi-mode and composite God with gradations of superiority. Eastern Orthodoxy repudiates the charge of a *synthetos* (composite) God and insists that “the divine essence and the divine energies while distinct, are altogether inseparable. There is between them ‘a union without confusion, a distinction without division.’ The energies remain always inseparable from the divine essence, coexisting with it from all eternity and indivisibly united to it.”⁴⁰

Palamas remarks that the essence-energies distinction does not impede or contradict God’s simplicity, in the same way the tri-hypostatic nature of God does not impede upon the same doctrine of God’s simplicity. Orthodoxy explains that “the energies of God are “God himself.””⁴¹ God is present and active on the level of *ousia*, on the level of *hypostases*, and on the level of *energeia*.⁴² Yet, at the level of *energeia*, an important difference exists. While the three persons in the godhead share the same properties of the essence and thus exhibit no differences in essence, the *energeia* exhibits essential differences with the *ousia* in the manifestation, know-ability, and share-ability.

Regardless of Eastern articulations pertaining to the essence-energies distinction, if God is to have within him a greater and a lesser existence, then he would appear as compounded and lose his simplicity and perfection. First, any distinction between superior and inferior levels, “modes,” or operations would cause God to lose his infinite perfection. Second, if the movements and operations of God are energies in

³⁹Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 55.

⁴⁰Kallistos Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed,” 135.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²*Ibid.*, 136.

operation, then, according to Origen, such function negates God's simplicity. Third, if God has superior and inferior divinity, then a *theotic* participation in God's divine energies would be an inferior knowledge of God because full knowledge of God by implication can only be found in God's essence.

A distinction in the being of God causes compositeness in the being of God.⁴³ The energies of God cannot be spoken of as eternally generated from the essence of God because God in his existence is "spoken of as simple, while in that He was not generated, He is spoken of as ungenerate."⁴⁴ Additionally, how can one speak of the energies of God as eternally generated when, according to Palamas, "there are however energies of God which have a beginning and an end."⁴⁵ And again: "We for our part know that while all the energies of God are uncreated, not all are without beginning."⁴⁶

The suggestion that the essence exceeds his energies and that the energy or energies of God is inferior divinity establishes God as a composite being. According to Aquinas, "Every composite is posterior to its component parts, and is dependent on them."⁴⁷ Moreover, if the essence of God is the cause of the energies of God, then God is composite for "every composite has a cause, for things in themselves diverse cannot unite unless something causes them to unite."⁴⁸ Since the energies of God depend on the essence of God, God loses his infinite simplicity. But since God is without all

⁴³Fathers of the Third Century: *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second, Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1885), 373–74.

⁴⁴Gregory of Nyssa, *Dogmatic Treatises, Etc., Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1892), 350.

⁴⁵Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, trans. Nicholas Gendle, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1983), 96.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.3.7.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

composition his essence has no such exact distinction.⁴⁹ God has a simple essence without composition.

Mantzaridis admits that the early church fathers did not have the same systematic teaching on the essence-energies distinction but rather spoke and wrote about the topic in general terms.⁵⁰ Mantzaridis identifies that the essence-energies distinction conflicts with “the philosophical view of the divine simplicity”⁵¹ but contends that the tri-hypostatic nature of God causes the same conflict. For the Eastern Church, lack of divine energies defines nonexistence for “the natural energy is the power which manifests every essence, and only nonbeing is deprived of this power.”⁵² However, issues remain with the subordination of the energies to the essence and the inferiority of the energies in terms of divinity or deity.⁵³

Nevertheless, even with precise articulations, *theosis* still causes a problem of foremost importance. If the energies of God are God himself and humans can fully partake of them, then human beings can actually become fully God. A full encounter with the energies of God becomes a complete personal and mystical participation of God. Therefore, in deification, the deified penetrates into the divine mystery via participation

⁴⁹Stephen Charnock, *Discourses upon the Existence and Attributes of God* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853), 1:333.

⁵⁰Mantzaridis goes on to say that Gregory Palamas took the general form of the patristic essence-energies scheme to “its furthest conclusions—with some inevitable exaggerations or carelessly phrased formulations in the heat of his polemical writings and activities” (Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, trans. Liadain Sherrard, Contemporary Greek Theologians [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984], 105.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 106.

⁵²Palamas, *The Triads*, 95.

⁵³If the energy or energies of God are uncreated, this in itself presupposes Deity, for only God can be uncreated. But if the uncreated energies of God are “inferior divinity,” according to the Eastern distinction, then does this not create mutability in God? Also, if God is perfect in all his ways, then does not such a differentiation cause a “less perfect” mode of the Deity and necessarily imperfection in the essential nature of God?

in the eternal divine energies.⁵⁴ Thus, the logical inconsistencies of how the finite penetrate into the eternal remain.

Zizioulas distances himself from such an issue by denoting that a better way to understand deification is not in the participation of energies of God but in the *hypostasis* of Christ.⁵⁵ Thus, for Zizioulas, deification happens at the level of ontological communion of personhood.⁵⁶ Either way, deification is still an ontological participation in the godhead. The main difference is that Lossky maintains that apophaticism is the only way to affirm the trinitarian God while Zizioulas speaks in terms of ontology of personhood.⁵⁷

Evangelical theology espouses the incomprehensibility of the Trinity but without the problems of deification theology. Mysteries in the Trinity far exceed human reason, knowledge, and comprehension. Yet, God has been pleased to reveal himself to humanity through the incarnate Son and his inspired Word. Orthodox Areopagitic—pertaining to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite—tradition insists that one can know God “through ignorance, denying to Him as subject everything that pertains to the realm of being.”⁵⁸ The doctrine of deification modifies the doctrine of divine immanence in terms of a mode of being and not in terms of pure relatedness to the creation.

⁵⁴Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood: Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas on Conceiving the Transcendent and Immanent God,” *Modern Theology* 19, no. 3 (July 2003): 363.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 358.

⁵⁶Zizioulas stresses that deification occurs at the level of ontology of personhood rather than at the level of divine substance. According to Zizioulas, trinitarian existence is better understood in terms of *koinonia* and *prosopon* (personhood), rather than *hypostasis* and *ousia*. Zizioulas sees that a “Cappadocian preference for *aitia* (cause) over *pege* (source) indicates further their affirmation of the priority of a personal over a substantial ontology” (*ibid.*, 367).

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 371.

⁵⁸Zavershinsky, “The Trinitarian ‘Trace’ and the Divine Energies,” 106.

Inversely, Protestant theology adheres to the view that revelation is “an act of divine self-communication in which the triune God reveals Himself through the medium of created reality.”⁵⁹ Evangelical theologians would certainly agree with the patristic formula of *finitum non capax infiniti* (the finite cannot enclose the infinite).⁶⁰ Horton, for example, accepts that there is much value in the model of essence/energies distinction. While Horton states that “God reveals his attributes (i.e., characteristics) rather than his hidden essence,”⁶¹ the evangelical theologian does not end up in elevating apophaticism as the way to experience God by *theotic* negation. The revelation of God’s attributes or characteristics can still guide one to a positive affirmation of what God is like

Further Problems of Apophaticism

In defining the theological term of “antinomy,” Packer steers away from labeling it as an apparent contradiction or even a paradox.⁶² Packer explains that an antinomy is “an *apparent* incompatibility between two apparent truths. An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stands side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable.”⁶³ Certainly, an element of mystery as to how God’s immanence stands together with his transcendence still exists, though clear evidence for both can be found in Scripture. Theological antinomies should always function within the context of Deuteronomy 29:29.⁶⁴ The handling of antinomies should remain within a sphere of reality and evidence and refrain from turning into negation and mysticism.

⁵⁹Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 74.

⁶⁰Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 131.

⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁶²Packer defines “paradox” as “a figure of speech, a play of words” (J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* [Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1961], 19).

⁶³*Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁴“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us

Theosis theology employs apophatic epistemology to transform what humans do not know into a mystical system that promotes “formless contemplation” and “abstraction from all things”.⁶⁵ “God’s uncreated, eternal energies can be contemplated, or participated in as ineffable, suprasensible light—God’s glory experienced as Divine grace.”⁶⁶ In the process of mystical ascent and union with God the intellectual faculties become redundant and unnecessary. Consequently, Orthodox apophaticism leads one away from the importance of meditation upon the solid and understandable Word of God and into ignorance, a cloud of abstraction, and ineffable contemplation.⁶⁷

Though Kalistos Ware uses the terms “paradox” and even “antinomy” to explain how apophaticism works with God’s immanence and transcendence, technically speaking, Orthodox apophaticism does not comply with neither.⁶⁸ Following an Eastern negation model, Ware presents a series of contradictory statements: God manifests himself, and he does not. Humans can grasp God with their intellect, and they cannot. One can participate in all of who God is via *theosis* and yet God remains imparticipable.⁶⁹ The mystical *theosis* of the Eastern church does not present paradoxes or antinomies, but a system of *via negativa*.

In the final analysis, for Orthodoxy, “God is not only beyond knowledge, but also beyond unknowing; His revelation itself is also truly a mystery of a most divine and an extraordinary kind, since the divine manifestations, even if symbolic, remain

and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

⁶⁵Palamas, *The Triads*, 36.

⁶⁶Zavershinsky, “The Trinitarian ‘Trace’ and the Divine Energies,” 101.

⁶⁷Palamas, *The Triads*, 20, 21.

⁶⁸For examples of Ware’s use of the terms “paradox” and “antinomy,” see Kallistos Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed,” 125–26.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 133.

unknowable by reason of their transcendence.”⁷⁰ The doctrine of deification ascribes the least revelatory importance to words. Words are inferior to negation and negation itself is inferior to divine vision or divine light in deification.

Revelation and the Unknowability of God

In chapter 1 of *The Orthodox Way*, Timothy Ware, quoting from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, tells the following story:

One day some of the brethren came to see Abba Antony, and among them was Abba Joseph. Wishing to test them, the old man mentioned a text from Scripture, and starting with the youngest, he asked them what it meant. Each explained as best he could. But to each one the old man said, “You have not yet found the answer.” Last of all he said to Abba Joseph, “And what do you think the text means?” He replied, “I do not know.” Then Abba Antony said, “Truly, Abba Joseph has found the way, for he said: I do not know.”⁷¹

The Greek Orthodox Church does not reject the immanence of God. In the Orthodox tradition God is “inconceivable, radically transcendent, beyond all words, beyond all understanding,”⁷² but yet a person upon a spiritual way can still know the “nearness of the Eternal.”⁷³ The journey of knowing God is spiritual and progresses from light into darkness: “We go forward from the light of partial knowledge into a greater knowledge into a greater knowledge which is so much more profound that it can only be described as the ‘darkness of unknowing.’”⁷⁴

Evangelicals would agree with Ware’s assertions that nobody can understand God exhaustively through logic and reason. Protestant theology concurs with Orthodoxy

⁷⁰Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, 4.

⁷¹Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (London: Mowbrays, 1979), 11.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid. Furthermore, Ware along with the thought process of Lossky, would reason that any “iconic” representation or conceptual reduction of God becomes an idol. Lossky tries to disconnect certain elements of apophaticism from iconoclasm. However, the representation of the trinitarian God in iconography presents contradictory issues with apophatic thinking. See Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 14.

⁷⁴Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 14.

against any Anomoean rationalism⁷⁵ in that nobody can have perfect knowledge of God.⁷⁶ Divergence starts to arise at the point where Orthodox thinking has a human entering into the mystery of God as in a dark cloud of unknowing⁷⁷ in order to be filled by genuine love.⁷⁸ Spiritual experience becomes the marker of genuine Christianity and theology becomes a fruit of contemplation.⁷⁹ According to Lossky, the discipline of theology can only be effective when it is identified with contemplation: “[The] knowledge of God is not knowledge as we usually understand it, but rather total ignorance. It is not intellectual knowledge at all, but mystical ecstasy.”⁸⁰

The Eastern Orthodox Church does not separate between natural revelation and supernatural revelation. Orthodoxy places the supernatural revelation within the context of natural revelation with the overarching purpose of the deification of the world.⁸¹ Thus, the goal of supernatural or biblical revelation is to make it evident that the goal of rational creatures is to advance toward union with God.⁸² Natural revelation is an objective revealing of God through conscience and nature; it is an “indirect utterance.”⁸³

⁷⁵The Arian sect of the Anomoeans treated the whole idea of God’s unknowability with extreme rationalistic tendencies. See Ware, “God Hidden and Revealed,” 126.

⁷⁶Špidlík suggests that the anti-Eunomian reaction of the East led them to a more mystical approach. See Tomáš Špidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1986), 329.

⁷⁷Chapter 4 will address further issues regarding the practice of *hesychasm* as a contemplative method.

⁷⁸Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 15, 17.

⁷⁹Mark Allen McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology, Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 12–14.

⁸⁰Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 339.

⁸¹Dumitru Staniloae, *The Experience of God: Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God*, trans. Ioan Ionița and Robert Barringer (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 1994), 1:1.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 1:16, 18–19.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 1:23.

Correspondingly, supernatural revelation is a plain and direct utterance “[that] makes more obvious the presence of his Person as he guides man towards union with that Personal reality as his final goal.”⁸⁴ Hence, the function of revelation is to clarify, confirm, and sustain the believer’s advance toward *theosis*.⁸⁵

Staniloae alleges that supernatural or biblical revelation mediates to humans the knowledge of God as an existent person.⁸⁶ In order to progress in knowing God, one needs apophaticism and contemplation. Growth in the knowledge of God requires an ascent that transcends all knowledge. Thus, supernatural revelation becomes just a medium to eject and maintain one into the domain of experiencing God mystically. Furthermore, if one accepts that the written Word of God overwhelmingly contains cataphatic of positive affirmations about God, then, by direct implication, Eastern Orthodoxy elevates the mystical, ineffable, and apophatic approach over and above that of the Scriptures.⁸⁷

Knowledge of God by participation in the divine energies of God has priority over biblical revelation.⁸⁸ On the contrary, John 20:31 affirms that the purpose of written revelation is to bring one into faith and salvation: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). The sacred writings are able to give wisdom “that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:15). This is precisely the reason why Paul was not ashamed to preach the gospel; for the gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16). Orthodoxy is wrong to perceive the

⁸⁴Staniloae, *The Experience of God*, 1:23.

⁸⁵Ibid., 1:27.

⁸⁶Ibid., 1:97.

⁸⁷Staniloae asserts that “through apophatic knowledge the human subject not only knows that God is infinite, omnipotent, or loving, but also experiences this. Yet within this experience, the infinity of God appears so overwhelmingly that man realizes that this infinity is wholly other than the one he can conceive in his mind that is ineffable” (ibid., 1:95).

⁸⁸The Eastern Orthodox believe that God reveals himself wholly in his energies.

written Word of God as just a means toward an apophatic mystical ascent, namely *theosis*.

Jesus Christ makes himself known objectively through the inspired Word. The Scriptures testify about Christ (Luke 24:25, 27; John 5:39, 46). Corresponding to this objective revelation the Holy Spirit of God who inspired the written Word, illumines the heart, intellect, and conscience so that one can understand the objective general and special revelation of God (John 1:9; 14:26; 16:13-16; Eph 1:8, 17-18; Heb 6:4). The subjective illumination of the Holy Spirit uses the objective revelation that he has inspired (Ps 119) to bring people into the light of the gospel of Christ.⁸⁹ The Holy Spirit shines into human hearts, not just the intellect, in order to reveal Christ: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6).⁹⁰ The special revelation of God unveils the hidden mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations (Col 1:26).

The East views theology and revelation as experiential realities, as “contemplation or vision.” In this view, “*theologia* and *theoria* (contemplation) are inseparable. In the *Philokalia*, for example, theology is a level of spiritual experience reached by only a precious few ascetics, not intellectual discourse.”⁹¹ In trying to distance itself from a certain type of ancient Greek intellectualism, the apophatic tradition of the Eastern Church rejects theological rationalism and instead promotes the ignorant contemplation of the unknown. Thus, for the East, knowledge comes from an existential

⁸⁹Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 350.

⁹⁰Arthur Walkington Pink, *The Attributes of God*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 13.

⁹¹Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 54.

and immediate union with God.⁹² Hence, the mystical doctrine of apophatic *theosis* opposes, weakens, and diminishes the sufficiency and revelatory value of the Holy Scriptures.

Bavinck asserts that “revelation, after all, is based on the same idea as the incarnation: on the communicability of God, both in his being to the Son (generation) and outside his being to creatures (creation).”⁹³ Evangelical theology acknowledges the tension between the view of God as personal and absolute: “But though God is thus beyond our full comprehension and description, we do confess to having the knowledge of God. This knowledge is analogical⁹⁴ and the gift of revelation. We know God through his works and in his relation to us, his creatures.”⁹⁵ Bavinck exclaims,

If we cannot speak of God analogically, then we cannot speak of him at all. If God cannot be known, neither can he be felt or experienced in any way. All religion is then empty By reducing God to “inexpressible” depth and “eternal silence,” they make the universe godless, in the most absolute sense of the word. What it all comes down to is whether God has willed and found a way to reveal himself in the domain of creatures. This, the Christian church and Christian theology affirm, has indeed occurred. Thanks to revelation, we have true knowledge of God, knowledge that is relative and finite rather than comprehensive. Incomprehensibility does not imply agnosticism but an ingredient of the Christian claim to have received by revelation a specific, limited, yet well-defined and true knowledge of God. In the words of Basil, “True knowledge of God consists in the perception of his incomprehensibility.”⁹⁶

Evangelical theology emphasizes the saving acts of God via the scheme of salvation history. Apophatic theology should not dictate one’s saving knowledge or experience of God; rather, God is to be known “by the revelation of his historical acts in

⁹²Eugene Webb, *In Search of the Triune God: The Christian Paths of East and West* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2014), 201.

⁹³Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 281.

⁹⁴Analogical knowledge is “a knowledge of being who is unknowable in himself; yet able to make something of himself known in the being he created” (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003], 48).

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 2:28.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 2:28–29.

Christ.”⁹⁷ Knowing Christ is knowing God (John 17:3). God makes himself known through his Son (John 8:19; 14:7-9). The New Testament teaching on mystery is dissimilar to the mysticism of deification theology. God’s self-disclosure has come particularly through his Son in the form of personal, objective, and historical divine revelation.⁹⁸

The inextricable link of theology and worship should serve as a reminder that God has revealed himself so that his people can understand him and worship him faithfully.⁹⁹ The main issue is not a total rejection of apophatic theology but a proper function and place for apophatic theology. Apophatic theology that highlights the grandeur and eternity of God is good and useful. It stands as a reminder that no one can know God exhaustively. All human language, perception, and knowledge have severe limitations in describing the eternal God.¹⁰⁰

Nonetheless, Christian theology must not end in mystical silence but should adhere to the proclamation of what one can know from the specific Christological revelation of God.¹⁰¹ God is not totally unknowable but he is “knowable to the degree and in the way that is sufficient for human beings to have a personal relationship with him during their earthly lives.”¹⁰² Orthodox Pseudo-Dionysian apophaticism suffers

⁹⁷Jordan Cooper, *Christification: A Lutheran Approach to Theosis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 118.

⁹⁸T. Desmond Alexander et al., eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), s.v. "God," by G. L. Bray.

⁹⁹R. Albert Mohler, *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 24.

¹⁰⁰Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 190–91.

¹⁰¹Steven D. Paulson, “Luther on the Hidden God,” *Word & World* 19, no. 4 (Fall 1999): 365.

¹⁰²Allison, *Historical Theology*, 187.

from a pervasive Christological deficiency.¹⁰³ Eastern apophaticism is excessive and veers towards mystical speculation that is unnecessary and dangerous.

The Knowability of God and *Theosis*

Augustine reiterated that God's method of communication to humans is through speech "and speech incarnate in the written Scriptures."¹⁰⁴ Eastern Christendom would not deny this assertion but instead includes this affirmation in their theology. God is ineffable and incomprehensible, but he can make himself known to humanity. John the Damascene upholds both God's incomprehensibility and knowledge of God through general revelation, the Scriptures, and the incarnate Son.¹⁰⁵ A quick review of the doctrine of human knowledge of God could lead one to conclude the equivalence of the aforementioned. However, the difference is not in the way of inclusions and affirmations, but in the distinctions.

Orthodox theologians maintain that nobody has knowledge of the divine being himself. The adequacy of conceptualizing God comes from negation. The essence of God is inaccessible to human knowledge or understanding but humans can know God in his energies. One can therefore only know God through his economic activity. That is, "Knowledge of God's revelation of himself through the *oikonomia*, his activity with regard to human kind in and through creation, including his presence among us in the Incarnation."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³Piotr J. Malysz, "Luther and Dionysius: Beyond Mere Negations," *Modern Theology* 24, no. 4 (October 2008): 680.

¹⁰⁴David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 142.

¹⁰⁵Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, The Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 90.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 91.

The knowledge of God via deification is apophatic and is an entrance into the “divine darkness”¹⁰⁷ necessitating a “renunciation of all rational and discursive knowledge.”¹⁰⁸ The mystical ecstatic ignorance provides an exit from the sphere of reason and an entrance into incomprehensibility¹⁰⁹: “In the end, having reached the highest level possible of putting off thought and ignorance, reason enters the place where rational ideas cease their functioning, as man, going beyond the limits of specific names, words and understandings, is united with him.”¹¹⁰

Olivier Clément stipulates,

And to know him is to be taken into the *perichoresis*, the Trinity’s continuous movement of love The true knowledge of God appears then as an unknowing, because it takes place beyond the frontiers of any human capacity to understand or rationalize, and because it is communion with Another whose otherness remains irreducible. The person, going beyond the borders of the intellect, meets the living God who also, in his love, ‘goes out’ of himself, leaves his inaccessible transcendence. By this interweaving, in Christ, of the two “ecstasies” the uncreated light sets the soul ablaze and draws it into the depths of the Trinity.¹¹¹

The doctrine of *theosis* does not do justice “both to the reality of human knowledge of God and to the limitations of that knowledge.”¹¹² The Eastern notion of God’s transcendence disconnects from his immanence and the human domain. It thus becomes an unknowable, ineffable absolute.¹¹³ Scripture never suggests that humans can never know God at all. John 17:3 declares that “this is eternal life, that they know you the only

¹⁰⁷Hilarion Alfeyev, *Orthodox Christianity: The History and Canonical Structure of the Orthodox Church*, trans. Basil Bush (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 1:77.

¹⁰⁸Hilarion Alfeyev, *Orthodox Christianity: Doctrine and Teaching of the Orthodox Church*, trans. Andrew Smith (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2012), 2:58.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 2:59.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 2:60.

¹¹¹The Eastern encounter (or ecstasy [*en-stasy*]) with the absolute bears elements of Plotinian philosophy. See Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary*, 2nd ed. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press of the Focolare, 2013), 231.

¹¹²Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 703.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 44–45.

true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” The biblical idea of God’s incomprehensibility will refer to the limitations of human knowledge, not to some general mystery and not resorting to a mystical theology of Eastern apophaticism.¹¹⁴

When one thinks of God’s incomprehensibility (Isa 55:8-9; Rom 11:33-36) and knowability (John 17:3) he must always take into account both God’s transcendence and immanence in a balanced way. Thus, “God’s incomprehensibility follows from his transcendence over us, and his knowability follows from his immanence.”¹¹⁵ In revealing himself, God “accommodates” himself to humanity.¹¹⁶ Frame states it well:

We do not believe that God is so far removed from us that he cannot be known or that we know him at all by autonomous reasoning. We believe, rather, that although we cannot know God as he knows himself, as ultimate controller and authority, we do know him as he has chosen to reveal himself to us, in a way appropriate to creatures.¹¹⁷

Deification as an Apophatic, Revelatory, and Mystical Ascent toward the Ineffable God

The Eastern Neo-Platonic influenced approach clusters the metaphors of “ascent,” “darkness and light,” and “oneness” with God in order to form a predominantly apophatic approach to knowing God.¹¹⁸ The Pseudo-Dionysian mystical vocabulary upholds not only the absolute transcendence and incomprehensibility of God but also God’s utter inexpressibility and ineffability. Given this, what counts most for the East is

¹¹⁴Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 703.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 704.

¹¹⁶“Because of the asymmetry of God’s knowledge of himself and human knowledge of God, all human knowledge of God is partial, incomplete, and accommodated to human weakness.” God’s condescension to human capacity for the purpose of divine-human communion is a demonstration of God’s incomprehensibility. Therefore, there is no need for a mystical ecstatic ascent on the human part because God has descended and accommodated to our weakness in order to raise us up toward himself. See J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 71, 73.

¹¹⁷Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 704.

¹¹⁸Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Western Christian Mysticism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1–8.

an ineffable and personal experiential encounter with God rather than propositional truth.¹¹⁹ Yannaras affirms the Pseudo-Dionysian apophysis and indicts Augustine along with the Protestant tradition for idolizing the letter of the expression and the objectivity of linguistic expression.¹²⁰

Ultimately, Pseudo-Dionysian apophaticism along with mysticism negate the distinction between incomprehensibility with ineffability. The abandonment of conceptual necessities and the embracing of ignorance conclude in agnosticism. Byzantine theology claims that one can only speak *about* the qualities of God's nature and not *of* God's nature. Concerning this central premise, Letham sees a diversion from the views of Athanasius, which introduce "a deep agnosticism about our knowledge of God, which will echo down the centuries in the Eastern church."¹²¹

Apophatic theology that disconnects itself from mysticism and ineffability can be useful in expressing the incomprehensible magnitude of God's greatness and divine transcendence.¹²² Eastern negative theology tries to bypass the problem of agnosticism by the unification of excessive apophysis with positive affirmations and mysticism.¹²³

¹¹⁹Paul L. Gavrilyuk, "The Reception of Dionysius in Twentieth-Century Eastern Orthodoxy," *Modern Theology* 24, no. 4 (October 2008): 713.

¹²⁰Yannaras contends that Augustine laid the foundations for the objectification of truth and its constitution as a kind of legal mentality. For the East, truth takes on a dynamic form intertwined with the dynamic of life. Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, trans. Keith Schram (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 154–55.

¹²¹Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 238.

¹²²The mystery of God's transcendence should be separated from the concept and practice of mysticism. It is acceptable to speak of God's attributes by using *apophysis* ("as a saying from") in order to magnify God's transcendent incomprehensibility. For example, theologians speak of God as *aoratos* ("invisible"; Rom 1:10), *akataleptos* ("incomprehensible"), *agenetos* ("uncreated"), *anarchos* ("without beginning") and so forth. In contrast, it is not acceptable to speak of God by using *aphairesis* ("removal" or "taking away") as a means of abstraction and ignorance. See Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, 3–6.

¹²³*Ibid.*, 17.

Still, the dialectical interplay between a dominant apophasis¹²⁴ and a subversive kataphasis or affirmative theology climaxes in a mystical ascent of ineffability, total ignorance, surrender, and union to the inarticulate mystery of God.¹²⁵

The mystical negation of *theosis* presupposes successive *aphairesis* (removals, subtractions) and a transfer of the deified from the physical sensible sense to a darkness beyond mind.¹²⁶ In this state of union, “there is complete lack of reason and intelligibility (*alogia, anoesia*).¹²⁷ After the ascent, reason will be totally soundless and totally united to the unsayable.”¹²⁸ Thus, Eastern ineffability synthesizes components of negation, mysticism, an ascent into the darkness of God toward a union with the energies of God. Orthodox theology employs the personal experientialism of *theosis* as a defense against charges of theological agnosticism. However, Eastern theology is more contemplative and “spiritual” than propositional.¹²⁹

In this case, the Eastern Orthodox understanding of God’s transcendence implies non-biblical type ineffability: “For how can God be both ineffable and identical

¹²⁴“It is hard to escape the conclusion that to some degree Dionysius recognizes two types of negative theology; one is exoteric and forms a dialectic with the assertions of affirmative theology, while the other is an esoteric mystical unknowing based on dark ascents” (Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004], 21).

¹²⁵Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 65.

¹²⁶Pseudo-Dionysius compares the method of *aphairesis* to the Plotinian metaphor of removal by sculpting. See Timothy D. Knepper, *Negating Negation: Against the Apophatic Abandonment of the Dionysian Corpus* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 40–41; Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.9; Plotinus, *Great Books of the Western World: Plotinus*, in vol. 17 of *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, ed. Robert Maynard (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1955), 25.

¹²⁷On the other hand, Knepper argues that the *Corpus Areopagiticus* does not necessarily imply total ineffability and unknowability but qualifies the apophatic abandonments by “that which can be known *hyper*-mind and said *hyper*-speech.” He suggests that Pseudo-Dionysius implies relative ineffability. See Knepper, *Negating Negation*, 106–7, 135.

¹²⁸Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, 20.

¹²⁹Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 150.

with the world, as in Gnosticism? How can he be wholly hidden and wholly revealed, as in Barth?”¹³⁰ There is no denying that human knowledge of God due to the self-revelation of God is not exhaustive; but, as Frame asserts, “The God of the Bible is not a nameless, unknowable absolute removed from the course of human history.”¹³¹

An evangelical view of an acceptable theological meaning of ineffability refers to “the transcendent characteristics of God that cannot be adequately expressed in human language.”¹³² Evangelical theology in general would be hesitant in equating ineffability with ignorance. Geisler contends,

It is important to note, however that *ineffable*, does not mean that we cannot understand God’s attributes at all; this is a self-defeating statement. Nor can we know that we cannot know God (how can we know that God cannot be expressed at all?)—this, too, is self-defeating. There is no way to express, of God, that He cannot be expressed in any way for this very statement is an expression about God. This is not to say that God can be expressed perfectly, completely, and comprehensively; He cannot. This is what is meant by “ineffable.” Although God can be *apprehended*, He cannot be *comprehended*, for again. “We know in part and we prophecy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:9–10, 12).¹³³

To ascribe incomprehensibility to God is not the same as total ignorance. No one should confuse incomprehensibility with ineffability. One can be committed to the incomprehensibility of God without necessarily adhering to the concept of ineffability specifically as it relates to mystical theology.¹³⁴ God has made himself known to humans via literal propositions, namely his written Word. The Word of God is “living and active” (Heb 4:12), and able to make the simple wise as well as enlighten the eyes of the

¹³⁰Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 45.

¹³¹*Ibid.*, 46.

¹³²Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2011), 528.

¹³³*Ibid.*, 529.

¹³⁴Keith Yandell, “On Not Confusing Incomprehensibility and Ineffability: Carl Henry on Literal Propositional Revelation,” *Trinity Journal* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 73.

blind (Ps 19:7-9). The written revelation of God has the ability to make one wise unto salvation (2 Tim 3:15).

Paul states, “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (1 Cor 1:21). God in his wisdom has ordained that salvation comes *via positiva*, that is, one can come to know God in a salvific way via the preaching of the gospel message about a crucified and risen Savior.¹³⁵ Yandell explains:

The important point is that there are literal propositions about God that are accessible to us and suffice as information for our salvation. To know that God is incomprehensible is to know something literal about God. Incomprehensibility is thus not a possible justification for ineffability. It is a sufficient reason for rejecting it.¹³⁶

Propositions of faith dispel ignorance about God and an encounter with God requires objective propositional truth and thought.¹³⁷ Experiential knowledge must always proceed and flow out from the objective truths of biblical revelation.

Not even an iota of the literal propositional statements about God is useless. Although the essential essence of God is incomprehensible, God in his self-revelation presents to humanity particular aspects of his divine nature.¹³⁸ Jesus Christ has made the Father known (John 1:18). The exegesis¹³⁹ of the Father is Christ. The incarnate Word is

¹³⁵Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 45.

¹³⁶Yandell, “On Not Confusing Incomprehensibility and Ineffability,” 73.

¹³⁷John Witte and Frank S. Alexander, eds., *The Teachings of Modern Orthodox Christianity on Law, Politics, and Human Nature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 176.

¹³⁸According to Maspero, Gregory of Nyssa “excludes only the capacity to comprehend, that is to fully embrace with the human mind and language, the inexhaustible ontological profundity of the essence itself” (Giulio Maspero, *Trinity and Man: Gregory of Nyssa’s Ad Ablabium*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 86 [Boston: Brill, 2007], 28).

¹³⁹The Greek “exegeted” (*exegoumai*) means “to ‘expound’ or ‘interpret’ or ‘reveal a mystery’” (R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction and Commentary* [Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1983], 49).

the salvific exposition of the hidden reality of God.¹⁴⁰ The doctrine of deification in its current form tends to advocate for a more absolute form of apophaticism with emphatic elements of Pseudo-Dionysian and Palamite theology. Luther was adamant that the mystical speculations of Pseudo-Dionysian thought must give way to objective biblical truth.¹⁴¹

The mystery of faith and godliness has (Eph 5:32; 1 Tim 3:9, 16) been manifested in the revelatory event of Christ's incarnation (Ps 67:2; 98:2; Isa 49:6; 52:10). God's salvation has been disclosed in the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁴² Therefore, nobody needs to seek a mystical, ecstatic, existential union with God via apophaticism. To know Christ is to know God salvifically. The knowledge of God's mystery is Christ and in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3). God still remains incomprehensible, but, at the same time, he has disclosed himself as the source of salvific knowledge and life.

Paul the apostle, as the steward of God's mysteries (1 Cor 4:1-2), does not advocate an esoteric apophatic ascent toward the ineffable place of God. Rather, he proclaims Christ as the revelation of God's mystery (Acts 9:20; 1 Cor 1:23; 2:2; 2 Cor 4:5; Col 1:18). The biblical conception of mystery is unlike the Eastern conception of mystical theology. The hermeneutical model of the Bible in terms of revelation progresses from hidden to interpreted revelation, from partial to fuller (Eph 3:3-6).¹⁴³ Jesus Christ is the supreme, permanent, and personal revelation of God to humanity.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 50.

¹⁴¹Paul Rorem, "Martin Luther's Christocentric Critique of Pseudo-Dionysian Spirituality," *Lutheran Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (August 1997): 293.

¹⁴²G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden but Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 20, 242–52.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*, 334.

¹⁴⁴Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:27.

Orthodox Apophatic Theology and Hermeneutics

Literary Devices in Apophaticism

Eastern apophaticism appears to suggest that essentially all language about God can never affirm anything that is absolutely true about the nature or essence of God. Negation then favors a metaphorical, non-absolute language about God. The “boundless horizons” of experientialism, contemplation and an awareness of the presence of God become ways of freeing the mind from finite conceptions of God.¹⁴⁵

Eastern coalescence of apophatic and cataphatic thinking affect the ways of knowing and, subsequently, the ways of interpreting Scripture. What emerges is a hermeneutic of multiple levels of meaning and spiritual exegesis that undermines the scheme of unified biblical theology.¹⁴⁶ The multifold meaning becomes a controller to hermeneutical guidelines and religious language. Not all Christian theological discourse loses its values, but metaphorical expressions gain a more prominent role in theological thinking as a literary device. Apophatic language leads Christian theology in dependence upon poetic morphology, imagery, and symbolisms as a way to exhibit “a sense from within the words and beyond the words, a concept which corresponds more to common experience of life and less to cerebral conceptions.”¹⁴⁷

The metaphorical inclination of negation also finds a concluding expression in the discussion by the Orthodox scholar Susan Ashbrook Harvey. Harvey attempts to demonstrate the connection of metaphors and imagistic expressions as a literary form in early Syriac poetry and its relation to theological language in expressing¹⁴⁸ ineffability.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵Harrison, “The Relationship between Apophatic and Kataphatic Theology,” 319.

¹⁴⁶Eastern Christendom prefers a multiple layer hermeneutic and a homiletic rather than a purely exegetical approach to the Word of God. See John Breck, *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and Its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), x, xi.

¹⁴⁷Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, trans. Keith Schram (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 17.

¹⁴⁸Society of Biblical Literature, *Exegesis and Hermeneutics in the Churches of the East: Select Papers from the SBL Meeting in San Diego, 2007*, ed. Vahan Hovhannessian (New York: Peter Lang,

The idea that metaphors can be useful in negation stems from the concept that such literary forms have the capacity to open one's perception to deeper realities.¹⁵⁰ Harvey suggests that metaphors have the power of suggestion and, because of their intrinsic properties, metaphors can

speaking without strictly limiting the content of its sense. When used in religious language, metaphors function as a verbal icon: the revelatory efficacy and power of a religious metaphor depends upon its essential participation in the truth to which it points. The image is fundamentally related to its prototype, which is both its source and beyond the capacity of the image to contain. Thus a religious metaphor is meaningful to the extent that it is grounded in its divine prototype, but by its nature it cannot reduce the divine to a simple definition of identity.¹⁵¹

Here, one can observe the hazards of metaphors in precise theological articulations. Negative theology refrains from solid theological articulations because of issues in ineffability and unknowability.¹⁵² When apophatic theology employs literary devices in such a way it runs the danger of conveying vague religiosity and unbiblical meanings concerning the divine. The flaw of metaphors and imagery in apophatic

2009), 44.

¹⁴⁹The well-known fourth century theologian, Ephrem the Syrian, described Scripture as a repository of symbols and metaphors. Ephrem's apophatic thinking forced him to say that God's "true being" remains hidden from humanity. See Michael C. Legaspi, "Hearing the Scriptures with St. Ephrem: Notes on a Non-Western Biblical Interpreter," in *Exegesis and Hermeneutics in the Churches of the East: Select Papers from the SBL Meeting in San Diego, 2007*, ed. Vahan Hovhannessian (New York: Peter Lang, 2009). Furthermore, Ephrem "believed that poetry was the only way to teach and talk about God—that expositions, in their attempts to be rational, were a sort of blasphemy" (Karen S. Winslow, "The Exegesis of Exodus by Ephrem the Syrian," in *Exegesis and Hermeneutics in the Churches of the East: Select Papers from the SBL Meeting in San Diego, 2007*, ed. Vahan Hovhannessian [New York: Peter Lang, 2009]).

¹⁵⁰Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Feminine Imagery for the Divine: The Holy Spirit, The Odes of Solomon, and Early Syriac Tradition," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37 (1993): 112–13.

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁵²Yannaras states that "the apophatic attitude leads Christian theology to use the language of poetry and images for the interpretation of dogmas much more than the language of conventional logic and schematic concepts. The conventional logic of everyday understanding can very easily give man a false sense of a sure knowledge which, being won by the intellect, is already exhausted by it, completely possessed by it. While poetry, with the symbolisms and images which it uses, always exhibits a sense from within the words and beyond the words, a concept which corresponds more to common experience of life and less to cerebral conceptions" (Yannaras, *Elements of Faith*, 17).

thinking is not their usage as such but the deviation into abstraction and meanings that diverge from an accurate knowledge of God as revealed in the Word of God. The generation and application of unsubstantiated meanings and application of metaphors reduce theological precision to vagueness and generalities.

The proper functioning of literary devices such as metaphors and imagery should not deviate from the actual meaning of revealed revelation, namely the actual text of Scripture. Dionysian apophaticism promotes hidden symbolisms that guide the soul into darkness beyond intellectual abilities.¹⁵³ In hermeneutics, the interpreter of such textual devices must make necessary comparative mental leaps and visualizations while still taking into account historical and theological elements.¹⁵⁴ The use of biblical figurative language does not rival propositional truth but, in conveying literal truth, it becomes part of literal interpretation.¹⁵⁵ However, Orthodox apophatic deification leaps into abstraction, goes beyond the boundaries of correct biblical contextualization, and gives improper theological conclusions.

The problem, then, is not the actual use of figurative language, literary devices, and figures of speech in talking about the inexpressible. The correct employment of literary devices helps one to understand something about the infinite and transcendent God.¹⁵⁶ The way biblical languages work in a historical-grammatical context is central in biblical interpretation. For instance, Goldsworthy points out that “there is nothing inherently unreasonable or unbelievable about the proposition that God communicates

¹⁵³McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 55.

¹⁵⁴Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 57, 78, 275.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 666.

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 669–71.

with the authorial intent that humans who are created in his image can receive and understand his communication.”¹⁵⁷

Mysticism and Eastern Orthodox Hermeneutics

Language is the communication medium that God has gifted humanity with for the purpose of human-to-human and divine-to-human communication: “Human language, then, can be seen as reflecting the divine language of the intra-trinitarian communication.”¹⁵⁸ Orthodox apophatic reduction of exegetical theology lessens the importance of inscripturation and “God’s self-revelation deposited in the Bible.”¹⁵⁹

It is of no surprise, then, to observe a noticeable absence and lack of emphasis in multiple exegetical and hermeneutical disciplines in the post-Byzantine Eastern Orthodox Church.¹⁶⁰ The Orthodox monastic tradition serves as a vivid reminder that the Eastern Orthodox Church does not prioritize the practice of exegesis or its methods.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centred Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2012), 50.

¹⁵⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁶⁰Eugen J. Pentiuc, *The Old Testament in Eastern Orthodox Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), x. The Orthodox would counteract this statement by appealing to the exegetical tradition of the Fathers. However, I think that it is a bold act to lump together all the ancient exegetes of the past under the banner of the Byzantine expression of the Orthodox Church. Furthermore, the exegetical precision of Fathers like Athanasios and Basil highlight the need for accurate and detailed exegetical disciplines. Accurate discourse and descriptions of God were paramount in the trinitarian discussions in which Athanasios and Basil were involved. See Theodore G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 1997), 86. Chrysostom is another prime example of an exegete who drew much insight from grammatical and literal exegesis of the Scripture. See Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 114–15.

¹⁶¹Orthodox apophaticism and mysticism is evident in the poetry and symbolisms of the liturgical practices of the Orthodox Church. See Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 41.

Instead, the Orthodox tradition is more interested in hidden mysteries and contemplation of spiritual meanings.¹⁶²

The Orthodox hermeneutic perspective holds onto a circular approach in the relationship of Scripture and tradition. This means that “rather than see Scripture as the original and primary medium of revelation, and tradition as mere human reflection upon its witness,”¹⁶³ the Eastern Church sees Scripture as a text that is born in tradition. Since Eastern Orthodoxy sees the Bible as part of the tradition, the conclusion is that both of these sources have the same value and authority¹⁶⁴: “Consequently, tradition provides the hermeneutics perspective by which any biblical writing is to be properly interpreted.”¹⁶⁵

Exhibiting an apophatic mystical tradition, John Breck maintains that “the Bible is written in human language and exhibits the limits of human perception and understanding. It contains the Word of God and gives expression to it. But the Word of God can never be reduced to the biblical text.”¹⁶⁶ Similarly, Yannaras turns away from the text of Scripture as an infallible and inspired source with absolute validity. The apophatic thrust of the Eastern Orthodox Church “assures the Church of a manifest freedom with regard to the necessarily relative and conventional nature of linguistic semantics.”¹⁶⁷ Orthodox apophaticism and thus *theosis*, causes a chasm and disconnect between propositions and truth.

An important characteristic of hermeneutics of the East is the concept of an “inspired vision” of divine Truth that enables one to comprehend deep spiritual meanings

¹⁶²Alfeyev, *Orthodox Christianity*, 2:27–28.

¹⁶³Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, 10.

¹⁶⁴Alexios Panagopoulos, *Grammatology of Our East Region* (Thessaloniki, Greece: Polisma, 2013), 144–45.

¹⁶⁵Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, 10.

¹⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶⁷Yannaras, *The Enigma of Evil*, 95.

in the biblical text. The biblical interpreter must possess this God-given deeper mystical vision or *theoria* in order to be able to unite “typology and a certain allegorical perspective in a single hermeneutic program.”¹⁶⁸ The path from the literal to the deep spiritual meaning requires a “contemplative vision of divine truth and reality communicated by the inspiration activity of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶⁹ The anagogical method of scriptural interpretation is thus “an ascent from letter to breath.”¹⁷⁰ Accordingly, Alfeyev states that “the typological, allegorical, and the anagogical interpretation of Scripture is characteristic of divine worship in the Orthodox Church.”¹⁷¹

Maximus the Confessor suggests that “just as God in His essence cannot be the object of man’s spiritual knowledge, so not even His teaching can be fully embraced by our understanding.”¹⁷² The contemplation and meditation of Scripture becomes a mystical illumination of the intellect.¹⁷³ Orthodox hermeneutics supports a “double” sense of Scripture, containing the literal and mystical with the latter taking a primary role in interpretation. Thus, the Bible, in Orthodox terms, acquires the metaphor of an image or icon of truth.¹⁷⁴ This belief is one of the reasons why Orthodox hermeneutics allow the use of allegory to guide the reader into deeper spiritual and mystical meanings in the text.

¹⁶⁸Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, 24.

¹⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁷⁰Alfeyev, *Orthodox Christianity*, 2:27.

¹⁷¹*Ibid.*

¹⁷²Maximus the Confessor, *The Philokalia*, in vol. 2 of *The Complete Text: Compiled by St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth*, ed. and trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 207.

¹⁷³Breck, *Scripture in Tradition*, 76.

¹⁷⁴Stanley N. Gundry and James J. Stamoolis, eds., *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 175.

The fact that God is eternal does not negate scriptural knowability. God himself has provided for humanity through general revelation and more specifically through special revelation a witness about himself. To suggest that a mysterious transcendent construction is required in order to really know God is to reduce the function, perspicuity, and sufficiency of the written revelation of God.¹⁷⁵ Orthodox apophatic theology and mystical hermeneutics moderate the use and function of Scripture.¹⁷⁶

Scripture as the revelation of God is “functional and accommodated to human capacities and circumstances.”¹⁷⁷ Voicing an apophatic Orthodox view, Stylianopoulos dares to state that Scripture is not equally God-breathed “because of the variability of human receptivity.”¹⁷⁸ Eastern Orthodoxy asserts that scriptural inspiration “can never be properly defined—there is a mystery therein. It a mystery of divine-human encounter.”¹⁷⁹ Given such an approach by the Orthodox tradition, what matters most are not definitive propositions but spiritual and transcendent “truths.”

Apophatic constructions that intertwine mysticism with the acquisition of true knowledge opens a gateway to dangerous interpretations of divine–human communion. The spiritual message of the text must always have a foundation upon a correct

¹⁷⁵Stylianopoulos states that “those who emphasize the literal authority of Scripture, often conservative and fundamentalist Protestants, debate the concept of inerrancy. They advocate essentially a Bible without error and are thus compelled to provide artificial defense justifications.” He continues, “Orthodox theology holds to a personal and dynamic, rather than mechanistic and verbal, concept of inspiration.” He then concludes, “The concept of the Bible as the word of God pertains primarily to the saving message of Scripture and cannot be applied literally to the exact words of each biblical verse” (Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament*, 39–40).

¹⁷⁶Ibid., 39.

¹⁷⁷Ibid.

¹⁷⁸Ibid., 40.

¹⁷⁹Pentiu, *The Old Testament in Eastern Orthodox Tradition*, 174.

grammatical-literal exegetical method. God has revealed himself via written revelation. It is the Scriptures that bear precise witness about Christ (Luke 24:27; John 5:39).

The hermeneutical and communal commitments of Eastern Orthodox scholars are inseparable. For the Eastern tradition, then, the ultimate aim and essence of the Scriptures is the deification of man. Orthodox mystical hermeneutics become a means toward the primary end of all Christian life, namely *theosis*. The trajectory of Orthodox hermeneutics is over spiritualized, overly liable to mystical interpretation, prone to apophatic abstraction, and diminishes the real meaning of the text.

Evangelicals affirm that the Bible in its entirety is a revelation and not merely a witness to revelation. The conjunction of *theosis* and apophaticism diminishes the value of the objective revelation and knowledge of truth that comes to humanity. Eastern apophaticism and mysticism causes a “disjunction between the revelation that is given to us in the person of Christ objectively and the revelation that comes to us in equally objective terms in the Word inscripturated.”¹⁸⁰

Apophatic and Mystical Hermeneutics that Negate the Bible

Eastern spirituality disconnects from the riches of biblical theology of literal and historical-grammatical interpretation and attaches itself to mystical contemplative methods. Scriptural content begins to appear more hidden and requires one to “uncrack” the inner and deeper spiritual meaning.¹⁸¹ Eastern apophatic theology encourages a dichotomy between contemplative worship and proper understanding of the biblical text.

¹⁸⁰R. C. Sproul, *Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005), 128.

¹⁸¹Vincent Pizzuto, “The Deus Absconditus of Scripture: An Apophatic Hermeneutic for Christian Contemplatives,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 44, no. 2 (May 2014): 100.

Likewise, apophaticism subverts the perspicuity of Scripture, namely that the Bible is a plain book and anyone is able to understand it.¹⁸²

The text of Scripture appears to be anachronistic and distanced from the reader. Instead of seeking to understand the actual literal text of the Bible, Pizzuto maintains that the apophatic underpinnings of Scripture can free the scriptural text from archaic worldviews as well as the literal array of conflicting images that it contains.¹⁸³ The negation of Pseudo-Dionysius “invites a whole new way of seeing, indeed a way of ‘unknowing,’ thus yielding to a great spiritual expanse which to the intellect can often seem like darkness.”¹⁸⁴

Liberal criticism reduces the text of the Scripture to mythology and emphasizes an existential approach to understanding the “inner kernel” of the Bible. Eastern theology despises liberalism and has accused Protestantism of nurturing such tendencies. Interestingly, the mystical theology of Orthodoxy can lead to a liberal inference that hidden realities are more important than revealed truths. Ecstatic participatory ignorance becomes the goal of spiritual life and subdues theology and exegesis under a dark cloud of unknowing. The actual meaning of the text takes a secondary position and the experience of a participatory event takes the leading role.¹⁸⁵

Concluding Remarks

Apophatic theology is appropriate and useful when it acts as a boundary and not as a guide, as a warning and not as an interpreter. There is certainly a place for

¹⁸²Larry D. Pettegrew, “The Perspicuity of Scripture,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 209.

¹⁸³Pizzuto, “The Deus Absconditus of Scripture,” 100–101.

¹⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁸⁵If the actual meaning of the text takes a secondary role, then the preaching of the Word would suffer from a loss of confidence in the power of the Word as well as the communication of the specific truth of a specific canonical context. See Mohler, *He Is Not Silent*, 16, 19.

negative theology but not of the same kind as Pseudo-Dionysian apophaticism with abstractions and speculations.¹⁸⁶ The apophatic theology of *theosis* is more a mystical and participatory union with a strong ontological and experiential emphasis.

Eastern Orthodoxy argues that true knowledge of God arises from an ontological and experiential deifying participation with the divine energies of God. *Theosis* is an ecstatic participation in the energies of God leading to true knowledge of God through an “unknowing” that is beyond mind and speech.¹⁸⁷ The doctrine of deification involves an ascent, and, at the terminus of the journey, one becomes totally ineffable and unites with God.¹⁸⁸ Deification thus requires an ecstatic stage or “‘out-passing’ of the mind in order to approach the transcendent divinity.”¹⁸⁹ Participation in God is true illumination and is therefore the pinnacle of all true knowledge.

Eastern Christendom concentrates and elevates existential, ecstatic type knowledge. Through negation, Orthodox faith moves away from the objective propositions of the Bible and moves towards “the privatization and internalization of religion, whereby faith is translated into transcendence or ‘religious experience.’”¹⁹⁰ Eastern apophaticism veers heavily into mysticism as it aims to reach a state of cessation of all knowing and a type of knowledge beyond the mind by knowing nothing.¹⁹¹ Evangelical theology, on the other hand, upholds the incomprehensibility of God not as ignorance, but as partial and imperfect knowledge (1 Cor 13:12) that is true and salvific.

¹⁸⁶Rorem, “Martin Luther’s Christocentric Critique of Pseudo-Dionysian Spirituality,” 294.

¹⁸⁷Alexander Golitzin, *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita*, Cistercian Studies Series 250 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian, 2013), 29.

¹⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁹⁰Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, eds., *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.

¹⁹¹Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 137.

Thus, incomprehensibility does not imply utter ineffability. In the words of Bavinck,

If indeed religion consistently implies a relation to God, it follows that this deity must exist to the mind of the believer, must reveal himself, and hence to some extent be knowable. Religion is either an illusion or it must be based on belief in the existence, revelation and knowability of God. In every one of its three components, a representation or idea of God, as religious affection, and as religious act, religion implies that we believe in God's existence and consider him knowable from his revelation. Agnosticism is diametrically opposed to the essence of religion and, like skepticism, is built on the truth of what it denies. But the deity to which a given religion connects a human is a supernatural invisible power If we are to know something about God, he must come forward out of his hiddenness, in some way make himself perceivable, and hence reveal himself.¹⁹²

The doctrine of deifying divine energies confuses the doctrine of God's transcendence and immanence and "fails to speak of the simplicity of God."¹⁹³ The apophatic foundation of *theosis* as a whole is excessive and inevitably leads one away from the supremacy, sufficiency, clarity, and function of the written revelation as a pure act and demonstration of God's sovereign grace. The epistemological basis of *theosis* is problematic, inconsistent, and defective.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is what "constitutes the organic unity between God's revelation of himself in redemptive-historical, Christological, and experiential modes."¹⁹⁴ The transcendent God has disclosed himself immanently through his Son, Jesus Christ. In the gospel of Jesus Christ, one sees the perfect unity of God's transcendence and immanence: "The gospel is *historically referential* in its testimony to Jesus, clearly *propositional* in its affirmation about Jesus, and intensely personal in bringing us to *experience* Jesus."¹⁹⁵

Let everyone marvel and give glory to God: "Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the

¹⁹²Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:285–86.

¹⁹³Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 74.

¹⁹⁴Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 164.

¹⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 170.

revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen” (Rom 16:25-27).

CHAPTER 4
THE PLACE AND FUNCTION OF SYNERGISM IN
DEIFICATION

Deifying Grace in Eastern Orthodoxy

The Eastern doctrine of deification perceives the image of God in mankind as an inner potentiality toward God. In the Orthodox doctrine of salvation, God has already implanted a preexistent principle that is capable of being rekindled in synergism with God.¹ According to the anthropology of Maximus and Palamas, since humans were created in “the image and likeness” of God, they have a rich potentiality within themselves. In Maximian terms, since humans are a combination of *logoi* or inner spiritual principles they are capable of being united with God’s divine energies.² All humans can be deified and thus achieve the internal “god” potentiality in becoming the real them by becoming like God in all he is apart from his essence.

The definition of grace was articulated precisely in a polemical environment during the *hesychast* controversy.³ Gregory Palamas was the codifier and definer of

¹Chrysostomos, *God Made Man and Man Made God* (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 2010), 53.

²Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis*, Foundations Series 5 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), 25.

³It was around AD 1335 that the controversy with Barlaam the Calabrian erupted over the practice and ideology of the *hesychast* prayer. Barlaam was a Calabrian Greek who was a famous scholar and philosopher. Barlaam attacked the “mystical realism of the Eastern monks” and their methods of psychosomatic prayer. In a very unstable political, social, and ecclesiastical Byzantine environment, Gregory Palamas went through excommunication, charges of heresy, and even imprisonment. With the ascension to power of the Cantacuzene family, the Palamite theology gained favor, and became part of the official doctrine. The ecclesiastical councils of Constantinople in AD 1347 and in AD 1351 ended the controversy by affirming Palamas’s position. In a general sense, the development of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of grace was influenced by Christological controversies and monastic spirituality. See John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, trans. Adele Fiske (Crestwood, NY: St.

“Grace” as a deifying uncreated eternal divine energy or uncreated operation of God.⁴

The results of the *hesychast* controversy led to the doctrinal “pronouncements of the Constantinople Councils of 1341 and 1351 that the Orthodox theology of grace was firmly grounded in the crucial distinction between divine essence and divine energies.”⁵

In typical Orthodox fashion, the definition of grace follows the ontological path of *theosis*. Timothy Ware explicates that “in relation to us humans, the divine energy is in fact nothing else than the *grace of God*; grace is not just a ‘gift’ of God, not just an object which God bestows on humans, but a direct manifestation of God Himself, a personal encounter between creature and Creator.”⁶

Ware argues that “each of us is a ‘living theology’, and because we are God’s icon, we can find God by looking within our own heart, by ‘returning within ourselves.’”⁷ This understanding of humanity is precisely why the Orthodox view hell more as a place of where people remain locked into a self-contained individuality. The tormented ones are unable to go out of themselves in ecstatic union, relation, and communion with God. In deification, grace makes it possible to personally commune with God.

The two-fold understanding of grace includes the definition of grace as an uncreated divine energy actualised by the Spirit and “grace as an energy imprinted in the believer, making him capable of collaboration with the Spirit.”⁸ Eastern Orthodox

Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 288; idem, “Doctrine of Grace in St. Gregory Palamas,” *St Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1954): 17.

⁴John Anthony McGuckin, ed., *The Concise Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), s.v. “Grace” by Stephen Thomas.

⁵Vladimir Lossky, “The Doctrine of Grace in the Orthodox Church,” trans. Paul Ladouceur, *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2014): 71.

⁶Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin, 1993), 68.

⁷*Ibid.*, 220.

⁸Emil Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology: An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology of Dumitru Staniloae* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 1999), 297.

religious thought understands the function of grace as synergistic. The will of man is weakened but not bound by sin.

The Nature of Grace

Reflecting on historical discussion and disputes, Lossky insists that the approach of Eastern Orthodoxy to the question of grace differs from other traditions. The interconnection and disputes of free will, grace, and predestination did not trouble the Eastern church.⁹ The “Palamite” dogmatic expression of grace focuses on the nature of grace instead of the function of grace. The nature of grace is connected to the nature of God. Instead of being an act of God external to his nature the “Palamite” expression explains grace as a procession or overflowing of the divine nature. Grace is an energy, operation or mode of existence of God.¹⁰

The Holy Spirit communicates the deifying grace or energy that is common to the three persons of the Trinity. Lossky argues that what Jesus meant when he said, “He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14) is nothing else than the Holy Spirit appropriating a participation into the common divine energy of God.¹¹ This deifying grace is a participation or partaking in the divine nature. The “what is mine” in John 16:14 is in essence to “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4).

A person in a state of grace is a God-participant. Deification is a dynamic relationship and state of the penetration of the uncreated into the created. Palamas maintains that God dwells entirely in an individual by “His superessential power”¹²

⁹Lossky, “The Doctrine of Grace in the Orthodox Church,” 75.

¹⁰Ibid., 76.

¹¹Ibid., 77.

¹²Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, trans. Nicholas Gendle, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1983), 39.

communicating his glory and splendor. Grace is a “deifying gift that proceeds from God.”¹³ In Lossky’s words, “For Orthodox theology the inhabitation of God in us (our adoption or “sanctification” in the Roman Catholic sense), would be rather a means, and the acquisition of uncreated grace, transforming our nature, the end.”¹⁴

Becoming Partakers of the Divine Nature

A Historical Synopsis of 2 Peter 1:3-4

Along with Genesis 1:26, the other text that is most often cited in support of the doctrine of *theosis* is 2 Peter 1:3-4, which reads as follows:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

According to Russell, the idea that 2 Peter 1:3-4 taught deification gained momentum in the writings of Cyril of Alexandria.¹⁵ Before Cyril, “Origen seems to have equated participation in the divine nature with the “fellowship of the Holy Spirit,” which Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 13:14. Other early church writers are similarly ambiguous.”¹⁶

Cyril takes the phrase “partakers of divine nature” and uses it in a dynamic sense where “participation in the divine nature implies our regaining of the divine image or likeness, which in turn finds expression in our sanctification, our filiation, and our

¹³Palamas, *The Triads*, 40.

¹⁴Lossky, “The Doctrine of Grace in the Orthodox Church,” 83.

¹⁵Prior to Cyril, the use of 2 Pet 1:3-4 was almost negligent in the terminology of deification. Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, The Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13.

¹⁶Gerald Bray, *God Has Spoken: A History of Christian Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 815.

attainment of incorruptibility.”¹⁷ Although Cyril does not argue for a distinction between divine “image” and “likeness,” he advances the doctrine of deification and participation in the divine nature not in an ontological way but rather in a moral way.¹⁸ Cyril still insisted that “we are justified by faith and are proved to be partakers of the divine nature by participation in the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹

Throughout the centuries, the interpretation of 2 Peter 1:3-4 developed stronger ontological and sacramental dimensions. John of Damascus intensified the sacramental participation in Christ on the basis of the hypostatic union. In commenting about 2 Peter 1:4, Russell remarks that John Damascene argued that “our partaking of Christ’s divinity through the Eucharist makes us superior to angels (*Imag.* 3. 26). They participate in divine energy and grace, but are not, as we are through the reception of Christ’s body and blood, ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4).”²⁰

Bray comes to the conclusion that the doctrinal development of *theosis* in the East affected the interpretation of 2 Peter 1:3-4:

In fact, most of the discussion surrounding 2 Peter 1:3-4 and other texts like it seems to have focused on the eschatological fulfillment of the promises made to believers in Christ. As Paul said: “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” If that is what is understood by *theosis*, then obviously the New Testament is full of that idea, but here the enthusiasts for the doctrine are faced with enormous difficulties in attempting to impose their interpretation of theological developments. First, the word *theosis*, is nowhere found in Scriptures, nor is its near-synonym *theopoeisis*, which was more frequently used in the early church periods to describe the concept. Second, even when *theosis* came into Christian use, as it did (apparently for the first time) in the orations of Gregory of Nazianzus, it was used in many different senses and cannot be regarded as a technical theological term before the time of Maximus the Confessor, at the earliest. Third, *theosis*, implies a transformation of our human nature by an indwelling presence of the divine that its advocates insist is quite different from the traditional (Western) understanding of sanctification, but the

¹⁷Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 13.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 187–88, 201.

¹⁹Cyril of Alexandria, *In Jo.* 9. 766b, quoted in Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 201.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 300.

patristic quotes they use to support their position make no distinction between deification and sanctification, and can just as easily—and probably more naturally—be interpreted in favour of the later.²¹

The trajectory of the technical term *theosis* as understood today developed over time and, in the process, absorbed much of the Byzantine theological intricacies.²²

An Eastern Orthodox Notion of 2 Peter 1:3-4

Eastern Orthodox theologians maintain that 2 Peter 1:3-4 is the cornerstone of the doctrine of *theosis*. Metropolitan Alfeyev asserts without any equivocation that “the theme of deification grows from the roots of the New Testament teaching that people are called to become ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Pet 1:4).”²³ Alfeyev represents many in the Eastern tradition who rely heavily upon certain strands of patristic tradition to support connections between Scripture texts and theological ideas. Yet, the Eastern theologian does not provide any solid exegesis for the excessive claims he makes.

Russell undertakes the interpretation of the Petrine passage by using the Jerusalem Bible translation to highlight the synergistic component in divinization.²⁴ Without any strong exegetical support, Russell reasons that “our admission to the eternal kingdom depends on the moral effort we make. In other words, our sharing in the attributes of divinity is conditional on our fully acquiring the attributes of humanity.”²⁵

²¹Bray, *God Has Spoken*, 816.

²²Russell accepts that the technical use of the word *theosis* has shown great variation throughout its development. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 214–15, 237.

²³Hilarion Alfeyev, *Orthodox Christianity: Doctrine and Teaching of the Orthodox Church*, trans. Andrew Smith (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2012), 2:372.

²⁴Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 65.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 65–66.

The process of deification is a synergistic one where the deified share “God’s attributes of glory (*doxa*) and goodness (*arete*).”²⁶

Pomazansky asserts that the term “Grace” in the sense of “power” given from above for holy life is found in many places in the Apostolic epistle of which 2 Peter 1:3 is one.²⁷ Hence, 2 Peter 1:3b evolves from “through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence” (ESV)²⁸ to sharing or participating in God’s attributes of glory and goodness in an ontological way through participating in God’s uncreated divine grace or energies.²⁹ However, the words “divine power” are an example of “Hebrew fondness for using a circumlocution to avoid mentioning the name God.”³⁰ In fact, an analysis of 2 Peter shows that even in the first chapter of the epistle “there are no fewer than eight examples of periphrasis.”³¹ Green also agrees that the phrase is “simply a periphrasis of the term God.”³²

Peter indicates that Christ calls sinners exclusively by his own glory and goodness. Moo reiterates that “for sinners to be put into right relationship with a holy God required an act of redemption, an act that could be accomplished only by one who was himself morally perfect. Hence, Peter notes that Christ called us also ‘by his own . . .

²⁶Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 65.

²⁷Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition*, trans. Seraphim Rose, 3rd ed. (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2006), 263.

²⁸I quoted the ESV translation for consistency, but no translation supports Russell’s exegetical leap.

²⁹Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, 353.

³⁰Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of James, Epistles of John, Peter, and Jude*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 246.

³¹Al Wolters, “‘Partners of the Deity’: A Covenantal Reading of 2 Peter 1:4,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 25, no. 1 (April 1990): 38.

³²Gene L. Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 181.

goodness.”³³ No moral effort is involved in obtaining salvation. Rather, Christ’s “glory” and “excellence” demonstrate his sinless life and perfect obedience to the Father. “It was through this ‘active’ and ‘passive’ obedience . . . that he was qualified to offer himself as a sacrifice on our behalf.”³⁴

In like manner to Alfeyev, Russell does not proceed any further with exegetical analysis but launches into how certain church fathers interpreted the passage.³⁵ Even such endeavors do not provide any clear interpretation for supporting the Byzantine form of deification from 2 Peter 1:3-4 due to varied and sparse references. For modern Orthodox theologians, the doctrine of *theosis* is “implied not so much by specific texts as by the overall structure of the Bible.”³⁶ Such an approach is akin to the overall hermeneutics of the Orthodox Church that tend to spiritualize, and to use anagogical methods and allegorical readings of the text.³⁷

A pertinent demonstration of Orthodox exegesis of 2 Peter 1:3-4 comes from the *Orthodox Study Bible*. It reads as follows:

Peter assures us we have no need for anything other than what we have received. For God has given us His energy (life) and his personal presence (godliness, or piety, devotion), both of which we may grow in. Virtue (Gr. *arete*) may also be translated as “excellence” or “power.” It is spiritual and moral excellence attained by vigorous and courageous faith. Being renewed by God’s power, we become partakers of the divine nature. This does not mean we become divine by nature. If we participated in God’s essence, the distinction between God and man would be abolished. What this does mean is that we participate in God’s energy, described by a number of terms in Scripture, such as glory, life, virtue, and power. We are to become like God by his grace, and truly his adopted children, but never become God by nature. According to some church fathers, this especially occurs through

³³Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter, and Jude*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 42–43.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 43.

³⁵Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 65–71.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 69.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 69–71.

the Eucharist, for when Christ's Body and Blood become one with ours, we become Christ-bearers and partakers of *the divine nature*.³⁸

2 Peter 1:3-4 does not give any indication at all of a participation in God via the interpenetration of divine uncreated energies or uncreated grace, nor does it give a definition of deification as "becoming gods by grace," as the Orthodox suggest. The Orthodox interpretation of 2 Peter 1:3-4 leads to metaphysical conclusions and is quite obscure and dangerous, as we shall see below.³⁹

Exegetical Interpretation of 2 Peter 1:3-4

The apostle Peter confronts Christians with a remarkable reminder of what God has done for them. The exhortation of verses 3 and 4 follow a clear indication of God's gracious act on the recipients of the epistle.⁴⁰ The gracious promises of verses 3-4 are addressed to "those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet 1:1). The faith that the recipients of the epistle have received was neither transmitted or "handed down" as in a body of doctrine but rather obtained from God. Schreiner comments that "faith, which is necessary for salvation, is a divine gift. It cannot be produced by the mere will of human beings but must be received from God himself."⁴¹

The emphasis of faith in verse 1 is clearly in the context of faith "rooted in God's saving righteousness, his free gift of salvation, which is in accord with his

³⁸Athanasius Academy of Orthodox Theology, ed., *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 1691. After a brief attempt to exegete, the Orthodox writers revert once again in quoting patristics in order to cement their position.

³⁹John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 1012.

⁴⁰D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Expository Sermons on 2 Peter* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 13.

⁴¹Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, The New American Commentary, vol. 37 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 285.

steadfast love and mercy.”⁴² Hence, the grace of God in Christ Jesus is the foundation for the Christian life. Through knowing God, Christians have abundant resources for life and godliness: “The eschatological gift of life has been inaugurated in the present age through the death and resurrection of Christ.”⁴³ God’s promises are the means by which those who have been effectively called by God can become partakers in the divine nature. The efficacious call of God erases all possibilities for the synergistic approach of the Greek Orthodox Church.

The first clause of verse 3 gives the provision that a life of godliness does not come from moral effort or inherent ability.⁴⁴ The moral transformation is not the reason for their participation in the divine nature. On the contrary, the foundation of the moral transformation is God’s grace in Christ.⁴⁵ Peter makes it abundantly clear to his readers that moral effort and synergism have absolutely no role in justification. Green strongly argues that Peter “is making their divine call the ground for his appeal for holy living. Christ has taken the initiative in calling them to himself (c.f. Eph. 2:8).”⁴⁶ Schreiner also notes that “the prepositional connector of “δι’ ὧν” (through these) in verse 4 joins thematically with the previous verse, indicating that ‘believers inherit God’s promises as they come to know Christ, as they experience his moral excellence and glorious radiance in conversion.”⁴⁷

Becoming partakers of the divine nature is not an ontological divinization but
a participation in the supreme virtues of the Chief Benefactor, with emphasis on

⁴²Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 286.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 290.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 292.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 293.

⁴⁶E. Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 81.

⁴⁷Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 293.

righteousness and victory in the face of all that pronounces impermanence for humanity. Peter underscores the moral aspect of participation in the divine nature in the following clause, and in verses 5–7 he outlines the type of character that is exhibited by those who are partakers of the divine nature. Peter understands this moral transformation into godlike character to be an escape from moral corruption.⁴⁸

The East finds the terminology of participation in the divine nature (θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως) in verse 4 as strong support for the doctrine of *theosis*. Schreiner argues that this expression means that “believers will share in the divine nature in that they will be morally perfected; they will share in the moral excellence that belongs to God (1:3). Believers will ‘participate’ (*koinonoi*) in the divine nature, but they will not become gods.”⁴⁹ Rather, Peter uses language familiar to the Greek culture to explain that believers will share in the moral qualities and excellences of Christ.⁵⁰

Peter’s phrase, θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως, may sound unique, but the idea is not. The Pauline letters speak of the believers’ gracious adoption as sons apart from any human merit (John 1:12; Rom 8:15; 9:4; Eph 1:5-7). The New Testament is replete with the idea of conformity to the likeness of Christ both presently and eschatologically (2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:28-29; 12:2; Col 3:4; 1 John 3:2).⁵¹ Consequently, the Eastern notion of deification is not only a gross mistake of over-realized eschatology but confuses justification, sanctification, and glorification.

An ontological participation in the divine energies, which equates to participation in the Trinity exclusive of essence, is not the same as conformity in the likeness of Christ. Frame argues that

in 2 Peter 1:3-11 the writer’s interest is not man’s metaphysical nature, but the ethical qualities fulfilling God’s promises to us, by which we can “make [our] calling and election sure.” (v.10). The reference to the divine nature in verse 4 should therefore be seen as God’s ethical attributes, reflected in us as we are

⁴⁸Gene L. Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 187.

⁴⁹Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 294.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 295.

⁵¹Dick Lucas and Christopher Green, *The Message of 2 Peter & Jude: The Promise of His Coming*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 51–52.

renewed in the image of Christ. It is in that way that we can “partake” of the divine nature. We share it as we reflect God’s glory and do the things he does.⁵²

This kind of process into godliness or God-likeness is sanctification.

A Social/Contextual Overview of 2 Peter 1:3-4

In the development of the technical use of deification, Finlan explores the connection of the passage in question with Hellenistic concepts regarding divinization.⁵³

The immediate presupposition of connectivity between Platonic instincts and levels of life according to the imitation of God frames the lens by which 2 Peter could be interpreted. Finlan makes it abundantly clear that Hellenistic philosophy influenced Second Peter’s vocabulary and concepts:

There can be little doubt that Second Peter was living in “a pervasively Hellenistic environment.” Even his use of φύσις *fysis* in our key verse (1:4), like his use of φυσικός *fysikos* in 2:12, “employs the vocabulary of Hellenistic piety,” specifically the Stoic variety. To be “in agreement with Nature (φύσις *fysis*) was the supreme virtue for a Stoic, because nature is ruled by reason, and reason is God, more or less.⁵⁴

However, when Finlan compares Peter’s phraseology of participating in the divine nature with Greek concepts of assimilation to the Divine, he rejects the idea altogether. Finlan argues that “Second Peter is not assimilationist, nor does he speak of becoming gods or God, but of partaking of the divine nature, which seems to mean divine character, knowledge of the Savior, and proper self-controlled and ethical behavior.”⁵⁵

Second Peter is concerned with Christlikeness, and becoming partaker of the divine

⁵²Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1012.

⁵³Finlan starts his interpretation of 2 Pet by presupposing that “in reality, there is probably not a strict dividing line between the respectable philosophies (Platonism and Stoicism) and the popular religions” and that “Second Peter has no hesitancy about using Middle Platonic and Stoic religious concepts and terms to express his biblical monotheism.” See Stephen Finlan, “Second Peter’s Notion of Divine Participation,” in *Theosis Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 32–33.

⁵⁴Ibid., 36.

⁵⁵Ibid., 42.

nature, according to Finlan, thus means to escape from the corruption of the world through the knowledge of Christ and the taking on of godly character.

2 Peter 1:4 builds on a Christological foundation without any hints of Orthodox ideas of spiritual ecstasies, contemplative approaches, or visions that elevate one into otherness. In matters of knowing Christ—through faith as the cornerstone of participating in the divine nature—Peter resembles Paul in stating that knowing the love of Christ causes one to be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph 3:19). In fact, Finlan explains that in 2 Peter, Colossians, and Ephesians deification means to grow in the image of Christ without the involvement of any ontological participation in divine energies. Deification is essentially “spiritual growth directed by the Saviour toward the inculcation of ‘the divine nature,’ which seems to mean character values. So what is divinized is one’s character, but also one’s “knowledge of God and of Jesus.””⁵⁶

Active and Passive *Theosis*

The process of deification, in a broad sense, starts at baptism and continues as a spiritual ascent. Cooperation with the divine power is necessary for the restoration and even exceeding of the true natural state of humanity. Human will, action, and power are active “during the purification from passions, the winning of the virtues, and illumination. In this ascent the natural powers of man are in continual growth, and reach their apogee the moment they become capable of seeing the divine light—the seeing power is the working of the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁷

In addition, deification, in a strict sense, is an unending development and ontological realization “beyond the ultimate limits of the powers of human nature, to the

⁵⁶Finlan, “Second Peter’s Notion of Divine Participation,” 47–48.

⁵⁷Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, trans. Archimandrite Jerome and Otilia Kloos (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2002), 362–63.

infinite.”⁵⁸ The first broad kind of deification involves a synergism between God’s grace and human effort, while the second stage⁵⁹ is purely passive in terms of receptivity. This means that the deified are only active in the reception of unending grace or divine energies.

The second development or stage of deification occurs when one reaches a complete development in his or her natural powers and reaches the capacity to see the divine light.⁶⁰ Deification, in this strict sense, continues to work via the monergistic and passive reception of divine energy. In the East, divine grace re-establishes the natural powers of a human according to the image of God and then, in the second stage, allows for a continuous growth and a greater reception of energies.⁶¹ Although the second stage of deification sometimes interpenetrates into the first and provides brief supernatural glimpses of the things to come, in a strict sense, it belongs in the afterlife.⁶²

The passive stage of deification that is eternally continuous poses a serious problem. How can a human being, albeit in glory, be eternally in a state of becoming? Is it possible that a human has the capacity to be infinitely becoming deified? Certainly, there is nothing in Scripture to indicate that this is a possibility. Nevertheless, the Greek Orthodox doctrine of deification demands for such a state due to its exalted anthropology,

⁵⁸Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 362-63. Staniloae justifies the distinction in definition between the broad sense of deification and the strict sense of deification by using Jesus Christ as an example. He argues that the deification of Jesus’ humanity in a strict sense begins after the crucifixion and by the resurrection when the divine attributes and energies overwhelm his human nature. Jesus’ ascension perfects the deification of Jesus. Therefore, Christ’s deification renders possible the deification of humanity “understood as an elevation above human attributes and energies to the divine” (ibid).

⁵⁹The two stages of deification exist without any interruption. The leap from the first to the second stage is an exit “from the laws of nature in general.” Ibid., 366.

⁶⁰According to Staniloae, eternal growth “has as a base the receptive potential planted in man’s nature.” Ibid., 363, 365.

⁶¹Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 364.

⁶²Ibid., 367.

distorted soteriology, a fusion of justification and sanctification, and an unbiblical doctrine of glorification.

Further Critique of Eastern Orthodox Views

The interpretation of “partaking in the divine nature” for the Eastern Church does not exactly align with a Hellenistic ideology, but nevertheless borrows heavily from mystical and philosophical notions. Certainly, the Eastern Orthodox take the notion of partaking in the divine nature too far through various theological and interpretive assumptions. The Petrine passages never imply an ontological partaking in the divine nature, especially of the type that Gregory Palamas advocated in connection with the hypostatic union of Christ.⁶³ Second Peter is devoid of any assertions that sharing in the divine nature is a reward to the virtuous or worthy ones.

Peter does envision a sharing in the divine nature that is present and future. Concurring with Finlan, Starr affirms this kind of participation has elements of progressive assimilation to Christ’s character.⁶⁴ Starr proposes that ““sharers in divine nature” should be read as theological shorthand for a constellation of ideas: knowledge of Christ producing escape from passion and decay to divine moral excellence and divine immortality, both of which are in the process of being realized already now.”⁶⁵ Even with Starr’s affirmations of partaking in specific divine attributes and qualities of God,⁶⁶ this kind of divinization is far from being all who God is apart from his essence.

⁶³Robert V. Rakestraw, “Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis,” *JETS* 40, no. 2 (June 1997): 262.

⁶⁴Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 41.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 84.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 90.

Thus, salvation is a synergistic effort between Christ who has opened the way and made the union of God and man possible, and man who needs to thirst, find, respond and maintain personal spiritual purity. Timothy Ware writes that in order to be deified one must follow certain methods. He explains,

If someone asks, “How can I become god?” the answer is very simple: go to church, receive the sacraments regularly, pray to God “in spirit and in truth”, read the Gospels, follow the commandments. The last of these items—“follow the commandments”—must never be forgotten. Orthodoxy, no less that western Christianity, firmly rejects the kind of mysticism that seeks to dispense with moral rules.⁶⁷

In Eastern Christendom, saving grace is not monergistic because deification/salvation requires the mutual action of two principles. Pomazansky elaborates, “One of these is the Grace of the Holy Spirit; the other, man’s opening of his heart for the reception of it, a thirst for it, the desire to receive it, as the thirsty, dry earth receives the moisture of rain—in other words, personal effort for the reception, preservation, and activity in the soul of the Divine gifts.”⁶⁸ Justification by grace through faith alone is not enough. One needs to work his salvation, and labor by the mercy of God, with the aim to keep on receiving the “Grace of God.”⁶⁹

Both the Old and New Testaments portray an understanding of grace as a favor connected with God’s lovingkindness.⁷⁰ Grace is an outpouring of God’s unmerited favor on whom he wills and is never grounded on obligation or deserved favor.⁷¹ “The vocabulary of ‘grace’ thus connotes spontaneous kindness and acts of generosity grounded in dispositions of compassion towards those in need. ‘Grace’ as a characteristic

⁶⁷Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 236.

⁶⁸Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, 264.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 264–65.

⁷⁰T. Desmond Alexander et al., eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), s.v. "Grace," by J. B. Green.

⁷¹Exod 33:19; Jonah 4:2, 11; Rom 4:4; 5:15, 17; 11:6; 1 Cor 15:10; Gal 2:21; Eph 2:8-9; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 3:5.

of God grounds divine-human relations in God's generous initiative and sustaining faithfulness."⁷²

Deification disconnects grace from the giving of salvation as a gift through faith in Christ.⁷³ The lack of emphasis of this fundamental aspect of grace eliminates God's sovereignty in salvation, undermines the biblical view of grace, and fails to distinguish between justification as God's free acceptance of unworthy sinners without synergy, and sanctification as the continuous progression of becoming more like Christ requiring synergy.⁷⁴ Orthodoxy's positive view of human capacity and the asserting that fallen people are morally weak rather than dead in their sins and trespasses⁷⁵ leads them to synergism in salvation. The uncreated grace of deification elevates the importance of the restoration of humanity but eliminates the reconciliation of a sinful human by *sola gratia* through *sola fide* in Christ.

A Sacerdotal/Sacramental and Moralistic Salvation

Gregory Palamas is an exemplary figure and representative of Eastern sacramentalism⁷⁶ and synergism in salvation. Synergism in salvation becomes apparent in the way Palamas explains in what manner humans have the ability to approach God and regain eternal life. According to Palamas, "When the soul renounces its attachment

⁷²Thomas, s.v. "Grace."

⁷³Eph 2:8-9.

⁷⁴Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology: An Evaluation and Critique of the Theology of Dumitru Staniloae*, 311. According to Phil 2:13, one must never disconnect sanctification from the sovereign work of the Spirit of God.

⁷⁵Eph 2:1; Col 2:13.

⁷⁶Louth explains that the preferred term in Greek Orthodoxy is *mysterion* or "mystery." Louth continues, writing that "the mysteries are the ways in which the mystery of Christ is made manifest in the Church for the world." A mystery is not a matter of information but of participation, and it entails deification. Louth evokes the Pseudo-Dionysian concept that "the visible is truly the plain image of the invisible." Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 98–99, 100.

to inferior things and cleaves through love to God and submits itself to him through acts and modes of virtue, it is illumined and made beautiful by God and is raised to a higher level, obeying his counsels and exhortations; and by these means it regains the truly eternal life.”⁷⁷ Humans can gain salvation or deification via the realistic aspect through sacramental participation and the ethical approach through moralism, with asceticism being an exemplary mode of this avenue.⁷⁸

Deification is intertwined with the sacramental doctrine of the Orthodox Church bridging even the divide between the uncreated and the created in human deification.⁷⁹ The movement to *theosis* begins in a sacramental and mysterious fashion “through incorporation into Christ by baptism.”⁸⁰ The restoration of true humanity starts with reunification and a “mingling” of the baptized with God.⁸¹ According to Orthodoxy, this gracious act of God via the sacrament has redeeming, sanctifying, and deifying effects.⁸²

Russell asserts that baptism is an adoption into the family of God.⁸³ Those whom God has adopted through baptism become “gods” and continue to grow through a Eucharistic nourishment.⁸⁴ The sacramental act provides a participatory and nourishing

⁷⁷Gregory Palamas, *The Philokalia*, in vol. 4 of *The Complete Text: Compiled by St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth*, ed. and trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 285–425.

⁷⁸Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 25.

⁷⁹Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 102.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*

⁸¹*Ibid.*

⁸²John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1964), 31.

⁸³Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 25.

⁸⁴The Orthodox believe that the deified flesh of Christ nourishes the faithful through the sacrament of the Eucharist. As a result of the hypostatic union of Christ, the partakers of the Eucharist enter the Holy of Holies by the pure offering of the divine body of Christ and thus raised into heaven where

dynamic in the act of the sacrament. Ecclesial participation achieves a real ontological participation into Christ by a sacramental sharing into his divinity.⁸⁵

However, the “mystery” of Holy Baptism is not enough. According to the Orthodox Church, even if one has been baptised and has been reborn by the Spirit, the faith is inactive until one finds the activity of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit descends upon each member of the Church in the sacrament of confirmation, conferring the gift of uncreated grace, which can transfigure the human nature back into a likeness of God.⁸⁶ Although there are two fundamental sacraments—baptism and the Eucharist—all sacraments are important in the process of deification.⁸⁷

Meyendorff explains the two ways by which one can find the activity or energy of the Spirit received by the sacrament of baptism and conferred at confirmation.⁸⁸ The first is the longer way and requires a struggle to observe God’s commandments, and the second is shorter and involves a “methodic and continual calling upon the Lord Jesus.”⁸⁹

Lossky further states,

Thus the human person in the Church, despite all his or her sins, despite all or his failings brought about by the rebellious nature, in the slow and painful ascent toward God, bears within himself or herself two natures, created and uncreated, and two wills, our will still blinded and feeble, and that of God. By following God’s will, the person transforms nature by grace, “acquires” grace. The two wills, divine

Christ dwells. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 183.

⁸⁵Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 26.

⁸⁶Lossky, “The Doctrine of Grace in the Orthodox Church,” 83.

⁸⁷Orthodox theologians dislike the idea of limiting the sacraments/mysteries to a list of seven—baptism, chrism or *myron*, the Eucharist, confession, anointing, marriage and ordination. Louth, like others, understands sacraments in a broader way as “manifestations of the mystery of Christ revealed in a sacramental universe.” Ordination, monastic consecration, the funeral rites, are also treated sacramentally. Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 103–4, 106, 112.

⁸⁸Once an Orthodox Christian has received baptism and confirmation, the presence of God in them cannot be destroyed or depart regardless of any sin or sinful state. Sinning just darkens human nature or man’s likeness to God, making one unreceptive to the divine energies. Lossky, “The Doctrine of Grace in the Orthodox Church,” 84.

⁸⁹Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 66.

and human, are the two wings which carry us towards perfect union with God, says Maximus the Confessor.⁹⁰

Therefore, another avenue running parallel with the sacramental approach is the moralistic or ethical way to *theosis*. The ethical approach to deification involves asceticism or an ascetic-like struggle with the aim of separating the will from the passions, attaining an impassionate state and a god-like perfection.⁹¹ Russell states that the “attainment of a final god-like perfection, may be the gift of divine grace but must be accompanied by moral effort.”⁹²

A Sacramental Chasm

Orthodox theology does not consider the mysteries or sacraments to be mere symbols of transcendent realities. The sacraments transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. Placing such a change in broader perspective, Louth maintains that the change cannot be detected by human methods of assessment.⁹³ The Holy Spirit changes the sacramental elements— water, bread, wine, oil—as well as the recipients of the elements.

According to the East, the incarnation of Christ made possible the appropriation of deification. Louth comments,

For the wider context of the change is the change that Christ came to effect through his Incarnation—in which God paradoxically accepted change, remaining what he was, God, and assuming what he was not, humanity: the change of all human kind into the image and likeness of God in which and for which we were created. Thus is one of the fundamental reasons why we Orthodox talk about deification; for what is offered to us by the Incarnate Christ, through the Eucharist and through our being faithful in our discipleship, is a change that will reach to the roots of our being—not some change simply in how we are regarded, nor even a change in our behaviour (though that will certainly take place), but a fundamental change so that the roots

⁹⁰Lossky, “The Doctrine of Grace in the Orthodox Church,” 83.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 110–11.

from which our actions flow are transformed, deified, and what others experience at our hands is the cherishing love of God himself.⁹⁴

Regeneration and deification are accessible to all through the sacraments of the Orthodox Church. Mantzaridis asserts that “the sacraments are created media which transmit the uncreated grace of God.”⁹⁵ In order to partake of the incorruptibility of the divine life through participation in the divine energies or uncreated grace, one must enter freely into this communion of love. When this happens, the uncreated and unoriginated divine grace will render one a partaker of the unoriginated God. The deified will become imperishable, eternal, and unoriginated.⁹⁶ The sacraments form the foundation of the life in Christ and a sacramental bond. Mantzaridis states that “without communion in Christ’s sacraments man’s salvation is impossible.”⁹⁷

Although the sacraments are a reception of divine uncreated grace, deification still requires a moral life for sustenance, and assurance of salvation.⁹⁸ Morality and sacramentalism are interdependent. The sacraments of the Church may regenerate one and place him or her in union with Christ, but moral life is still essential in deification. The dynamic nature of deification means that once the worthy ones receive the gift of deification through the sacramental life of the Church, they retain it by further participation, nourishment, and with morality.

A moral life being the “active acceptance of God’s high summons to ‘cooperate,’ is fundamental to man’s deification, although obviously it does not entitle

⁹⁴Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 111.

⁹⁵Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, trans. Liadain Sherrard, Contemporary Greek Theologians, no. 2 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 41.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 42.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 64.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 43.

him to claim it as a right.”⁹⁹ Deification needs the deified to hold fast to communion with God and, as a result, to remain unacquainted with sin.¹⁰⁰ Humans are incapable of overcoming temptations in and of themselves. Mantzaridis is clear in saying that in deification one needs to strive and cooperate continually with God:

Released from the power of sin by the grace of God and his own personal assent, and dissolving all his links with Satan, he conforms to God’s plan through the practice of virtue, which is the natural energy of the man created in God’s image and likeness and regenerate in Christ; and he offers himself to “undergo” deification.¹⁰¹

At the heart of the Orthodox theology of the sacraments lies the theology of deification. Participation in the sacraments interrelates with the idea of the unity of human nature with Christ’s deified humanity, drawing from an extrapolated incarnational understanding.¹⁰² Despite the fact that Orthodox sacramentalism endeavors to have a Christological character, it limits grace as an event and eliminates the need for repentance and conversion.¹⁰³

Regeneration occurs in infant baptism independently from repentance and faith in Christ. Though the Orthodox would argue that regeneration is an act of God, the sacramental nature of Orthodox baptismal regeneration makes the Church an administrator and dispenser of sacramental salvation. Orthodox regeneration takes place by the “will of man and the will of the flesh” (John 1:13; Rom 9:16; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet 1:3; 1 John 5:1). Essentially, it contradicts Scripture and the exclusivity of the Spirit’s regenerating act in illuminating the darkened minds of sinners, so they turn to Christ in repentance and faith.

⁹⁹Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man*, 61.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 62.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Nicholas Denysenko, “The Life in Christ by Nicholas Cabasilas: A Mystagogical Work,” *Studia Liturgica* 38, no. 2 (2008): 243–44.

¹⁰³Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 311.

The sacraments, being mysteries, mute the proclamation of the gospel and elevate a mystical ontological participation in God, albeit through Christ. In line with mystical theology, the sacraments lose their symbolic function of the communication of Christ's substitutionary death and his eschatological promises. The divinely authorized dramatic images lose their fullness because they are not accompanied by a proper interpretation of the Word of God.¹⁰⁴

The performance of these mysteries must take place through a priestly system. The sacerdotal system ensures that the Church supervises and performs the means of deification. The extensive sacramental outlook of the Orthodox Church does not find support in the Scriptures. Only baptism and the Lord's Supper were ordained by Christ, and only these two have tangible signs associated with them.¹⁰⁵ In line with Byzantine theology, the sacraments become synergistic elements by which one fulfills his destiny in deification.¹⁰⁶

The Orthodox theology of mystery and sacrament is interconnected to the incarnation of Christ, the view of salvation as deification, a theology of image and likeness, an exalted anthropology, the doctrine of divine energies, and a Maximian view of cosmic restoration.¹⁰⁷ Thus, the incarnation of Christ in one sense makes the material world more sacred in the process of redeeming all matter.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1061.

¹⁰⁵Gregg R. Allison, *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 242.

¹⁰⁶Myron Tataryn, "The Theological Anthropology of the Byzantine Rites of Christian Initiation," *Diakonia* 17, no. 2 (1982): 148–49.

¹⁰⁷John Anthony McGuckin, ed., *The Concise Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), s.v. "Mystery (Sacrament)," by Maria G. McDowell.

¹⁰⁸McDowell states that "all actions and material things which signify the presence of Christ in the world are sacramental. Through the incarnation, the most mundane of material things—water, bread, wine, oil – become vehicles of the Spirit, underscoring the impact of the incarnation as redeeming all matter." Ibid.

Deification and *Hesychasm*

Maximus the Confessor may have re-established *theosis* as the goal of spirituality in a monastic context, but Palamas defended and cemented Maximus's connection.¹⁰⁹ The bishop's successful defense of *hesychasm* over the charges of Barlaam, Akindynos and Gregoras, and his distinction of divine uncreated energies cemented the association between *hesychasm* and *theosis*.¹¹⁰ In correlation with the thoughts of Maximus the Confessor, Palamas reasoned that only the knowledge of God can restore the natural faculties to their original state and allow for the "natural contemplation of God."¹¹¹

Palamas makes a distinction between created and uncreated grace and connects his main theme of deification with the gift of communing with the uncreated grace of God.¹¹² The saints participate, communicate, and manifest the presence of God in the world via their participation in the divine energies. Palamas defended his theological stance by evoking the hypostatic union of Christ, the notion of *communicatio idiomatum*, and the distinction between essence and divine energies.

Meyendorff remarks that the concept of "divine *logoi*" or the energies of God that Palamas employed in his distinction are an adaptation of Stoic philosophy. Meyendorff then states that Gregory was a vehement critic of Greek philosophical notions.¹¹³ *Hesychasm* was a way to participate in the divine energies of God. Therefore,

¹⁰⁹Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 28.

¹¹⁰Palamas, *The Philokalia*, 4:287. It was around 1335 that the controversy with Barlaam the Calabrian erupted over the practice and ideology of the *hesychast* prayer. Barlaam attacked the "mystical realism of the Eastern monks" and their methods of psychosomatic prayer. See Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 84–85.

¹¹¹Palamas, *The Triads*, 13.

¹¹²Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 175.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 119.

Palamas advocates purification of the soul via the use of continuous “monological prayer” and bodily postures in which the body took part as well as the soul.

In contrast to the Neo-Platonic dualism, the psychophysical or psychosomatic method of prayer was thus an offering of the body and soul to God.¹¹⁴ Barlaam attacks the *hesychast* method of prayer and refers to the people practicing it as “navel-psychics.”¹¹⁵ Palamas turns to the Virgin Mary to demonstrate the function of “holy *hesychia*” as a means of spiritual ascent, communion, and unity with the “Holy Body” of Christ.¹¹⁶

Methods and Theology of *Hesychasm*

The prayer of stillness is a psychosomatic technique that strives to “enclose the intellect within the body”¹¹⁷ by means of breathing and posture. Palamas does not regard the body as inherently evil. The exercises of stillness promotes self-control and watchfulness. If believers chose to discipline their intellect via *hesychasm*, they would place themselves on a spiritual ascent of cleansing and further purification of the soul and body.

Since one of the powers the soul possesses is that of the intellect, the *hesychast* harnesses and controls this noetic power from being dispersed towards bad and brings it back within self.¹¹⁸ According to St. Dionysius, the intellect has the capacity to return

¹¹⁴Monastic spirituality has close links and parallels to Neo Platonic ideology. Meyendorff states that “the most prominent leaders of Eastern monasticism succeeded in providing an antidote to the ‘platonizing’ temptation. This antidote was found in a biblical theology of the body and sacramentalism. The condition and basis for an authentic Christian experience was seen in baptism and the eucharistic communion.” See John Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1982), 160.

¹¹⁵Palamas, *The Philokalia*, 4:288.

¹¹⁶Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 151.

¹¹⁷Palamas, *The Philokalia*, 4:332.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 334.

and operate within itself in a “circular movement” and then ascent to God. The nature of the intellect is very significant since it is nothing else than a reference to the image of God in humans.¹¹⁹ Renewal of the noetic nature equates to a renewal of the image of God in humans.

Adopting a life of bodily control aids the controlling of the intellect. Beginner *hesychasts* should employ controlled breathing and fixation of gaze to achieve unified concentration and circular movement of the mind. The *hesychast* must free him or herself from any distractions in order to reach the point of unceasing prayer.¹²⁰

Hesychasm is a method of synergism toward salvation or *theosis*. Meyendorff maintains that

by constantly recalling the Name of Jesus the *hesychast* makes the grace of redemption live within him. That this grace may be truly efficacious, he must make “his spirit return into his heart,” that is, give it once more the place that was its own, the center of the psycho-physical organism, and thus reconstitute the original harmony between the parts of this organism.¹²¹

Even curling bodily positions are good methods for watching over one’s body with the overall aim of subduing the rebellious unregenerate self to the Spirit.¹²² Palamas maintains that the fixating gaze on the navel is a legitimate bodily symbol “to represent, name and search out things noetic, divine, and spiritual.”¹²³

Prayer becomes a bond in the process of ascent and participatory union with the divine triadic God. For this union to occur, the intellect must be freed from the infestation and dominance of passions and surpass them by the use of compunction,

¹¹⁹Palamas, *The Philokalia*, 357.

¹²⁰Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 55.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 54.

¹²²Palamas, *The Philokalia*, 4:339.

¹²³*Ibid.*, 340. This sub practice of watchfulness in *hesychasm* was a tradition passed from important Eastern figures such as Symeon the New Theologian, Theoliptos of Philadelphia, Athanasios I, and St. Nikiphoros.

inward grief, and humility. Contemplation is a tool for the purification of the moral aspects of the heart.¹²⁴ Palamas observes that

contemplation, then, is not simply abstraction and negation; it is a union and a divinization which occurs mystically and ineffably by the grace of God, after the stripping away of everything here below which imprints itself on the mind, or rather after the cessation of all intellectual activity; it is something which goes beyond abstraction (which is only the outward mark of the cessation).¹²⁵

Therefore, the practice of stillness via asceticism is an undistracted way of devotion to God. Through *hesychasm*, one can come into union with the coeternal energy of God, “and by establishing themselves in God through their mystical and supra-intellectual union with Him they have been initiated into what surpasses the intellect.”¹²⁶ Accordingly, for the Orthodox, *hesychasm* is a fitting way to abandon the impurities and carnality of the world, and, undistracted, seek the purification of the intellect residing in the heart. In this manner, one may progress and attain deification.

Neo-Platonic Remnants and Influences

Greek Orthodox scholars cannot escape from the Origenistic and Evagrian influences of the eremitic life and doctrine. *Hesychast* spirituality evolved from metaphysical Neo-Platonic stimuli but later adopted a more sacramental Christocentric and incarnational focus.¹²⁷ According to Meyendorff, Evagrius’s prayer of the mind is a means by which “man becomes truly himself by reestablishing the right and ‘natural’ relationship with God.”¹²⁸ Meyendorff elaborates,

The mystical theme of “the return to the soul to its inside,” of which the *hesychast* spirituality was an elaboration, can be traced back to Neoplatonism, according to

¹²⁴Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1987), 109, 150.

¹²⁵Palamas, *The Triads*, 34–35.

¹²⁶Palamas, *The Philokalia*, 4:419.

¹²⁷Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church*, 169.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 168.

which the soul, being itself of a divine origin, can know the Divine by knowing itself. This idea has been largely exploited by Christian Platonists and brought in connection with the biblical conception of the Divine image in man, which has been obscured by sin but was restored by Christ, and now can be contemplated in a mystical concentration.¹²⁹

Later Eastern theologians kept the framework of the “prayer of the mind” or “mental prayer” and disconnected it from the Neo-Platonic dualism of the spirit and body. Pseudo-Macarius rotated the Evagrian Neoplatonism from the disincarnation of the mind to a “transfiguration of the entire person—soul and body—through the presence of the incarnate God, who is accessible to the conscious ‘certitude of the heart.’”¹³⁰

Hesychast Spirituality, Theosis and Communicatio Idiomatum

Palamas supported the method of *hesychasm* by evoking the theology of the hypostatic union. When Jesus took on flesh, he did not only unite his divine hypostasis to the human nature but he united himself to “each of the faithful by communion in his holy Body.”¹³¹ Since the body of the faithful is made holy through a sacramental and Eucharistic participation with the body of Christ, “God is now to be found within; He is no longer exterior to us. Therefore, we find the light of Mount Tabor within ourselves.”¹³² Meyendorff confirms that Palamas played a historic role in creating a dogmatic foundation for the spiritual practices of the East.

Deification then is a participation in God through the body of Christ by means of a second flow of “communication of idioms” and a penetration of divine energy.¹³³

Palamas reasons,

¹²⁹Meyendorff, “Doctrine of Grace in St. Gregory Palamas,” 20.

¹³⁰Meyendorff asserts that the “Jesus prayer” maintained a Christocentric and sacramental focus through the teachings of St. Diadochus of Photice and St. John Climacus. See Meyendorff, *The Byzantine Legacy in the Orthodox Church*, 170.

¹³¹Palamas, *The Triads*, 96.

¹³²Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality*, 107.

¹³³Palamas, *The Triads*, 18–19.

Since the Son of God, in his incomparable love for man, did not only unite His divine Hypostasis with our nature, by clothing Himself in a living body and a soul gifted with intelligence . . . but also united himself . . . with the human hypostases themselves, in mingling himself with each of the faithful by communion with his Holy Body, and since he becomes one single body with us (cf. Eph. 3:6), and makes us a temple of the undivided Divinity, for in the very body of Christ dwelleth the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Col. 2:9), how should he not illuminate those who commune worthily with the divine rays of His Body which is within us, lightening their souls, as He illumined the very bodies of the disciples on Mount Thabor? For, on the day of the Transfiguration, that Body, source of the light of grace, was not yet united with our bodies; it illuminated from outside those who worthily approached it, and sent the illumination into the soul by the intermediary of the physical eyes; but now, since it is mingled with us and exists in us, it illuminates the soul from within.¹³⁴

In a hypostatic manner, the divine energies flowing through Christ's divine nature penetrate his humanity to illuminate, transfigure, and deify it. Meyendorff evokes the essence/energies distinction to argue that "Christ's humanity itself, enhypostasized as it is in the Logos and thus having become truly God's humanity, did not become 'God by essence'; it was penetrated with the divine energy—through the *circumincessio idiomatum*—and, in it, our own humanity finds access to God in his energies."¹³⁵ Lossky, along with other Orthodox theologians, attests that the Transfiguration of Christ at Mount Tabor is a pertinent example of such a hypostatic penetration.¹³⁶

Since Greek Orthodox anthropology makes a distinction between the nature and the person of a human being, it is easier to bypass the problem of "Platonizing pantheism and annihilation of the creature in the Divine Being"¹³⁷ through participation in God. Lossky argues that just as there is a distinction in God's three persons and common nature, so there is a distinction in "human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, the person—image of the divine hypostasis—and the nature in and by

¹³⁴Tr. I, 3, 38, quoted in Palamas, *The Triads*, 19.

¹³⁵John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 77.

¹³⁶Lossky, "The Doctrine of Grace in the Orthodox Church," 80–81.

¹³⁷Ibid., 81.

which the created person lives.”¹³⁸ The distinction between person and nature correlates with the Eastern Orthodox distinction between that of the image and the likeness of a human.¹³⁹ Therefore, according to Orthodoxy, Christ assumed the fallen human nature of man to bestow on it the possibility of divinization and bring a person back to communion with God.¹⁴⁰

Theosis as an Extrapolation of the Chalcedonian Definition

Palamas builds a connection between deification and *hesychast* spirituality upon a dangerous extreme and extrapolation of the Chalcedonian definition. Indeed, Orthodox spirituality and soteriology in general hinge on the question of the hypostatic interpenetration of Christ’s human and divine natures via the principle of *communicatio idiomatum*.

The Protestant, as well as the Eastern Orthodox denominations, affirm the Chalcedonian distinction between the two natures of Christ, namely the human and the divine. The incarnate Christ is both *homoousios* (consubstantial) with humanity and *homoousios* with God.¹⁴¹ However, the Orthodox understand the hypostatic union in a way that means the divinity of Christ deifies his humanity and then unites himself with the faithful through the divine energies.¹⁴² Thus, the divinization of the human nature of

¹³⁸Lossky, “The Doctrine of Grace in the Orthodox Church,” 81.

¹³⁹*Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁴⁰Incidentally, Meyendorff argues that because the humanization of Christ came about through Mary, it makes her “inseparable from the person and work of her Son.” Since in Jesus there is no human hypostasis, and since a mother can be mother only of “someone,” not of something, Mary is indeed the mother of the incarnate Logos, the “Mother of God.” And since the deification of man takes place “in Christ,” she is also—in a sense, just as real as man’s participation “in Christ”—the mother of the whole body of the Church. See Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 165.

¹⁴¹Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 337.

¹⁴²Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 182.

the man Jesus by the divine nature of the Logos makes it possible for any human to participate in the divinity of God.

According to Staniloae, the deification of Christ's humanity began after his death and resurrection and was perfected upon his ascension.¹⁴³ Staniloae argues that this type of deification in the strict sense justifies the two-fold deification of humanity. The broad sense involves "the elevation of man to the highest level of his natural powers, or to the full realization of man, because all during this time the divine power of grace is active in him."¹⁴⁴ He continues that the strict sense of deification involving progress beyond natural human powers and into the divine and supernatural levels follows Christ's divinity overwhelming and perfecting his humanity with his ascension.¹⁴⁵

Certainly, the twofold distinction in Christ's deification poses a problem. The Eastern church calls for a paradigm of human deification. This twofold paradigm is according to a twofold model of the deification of the humanity of Christ. However, this twofold distinction employs a faulty theology and exegesis of "image and likeness" as well as unfounded correspondence between person and nature with image and likeness. Christ did not need to restore a fallen likeness in deification because his assumed human nature did not carry the seed of sinful corruption nor the inherited guilt of Adam.

Furthermore, how can the Eastern church correlate Christ's deification with the deification of a human in a broad and a strict sense? Why would Christ's deification of his humanity (broad sense) start in his earthly life and be perfected with his ascension (strict or narrow sense)? Does the correlation stop with his ascension, or does it need to continue eternally in a passive state as is with the rest of humanity? If the Orthodox Church believes that God has created humanity with an inherent and implanted divine

¹⁴³Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 363.

¹⁴⁴Ibid.

¹⁴⁵Ibid.

energy or grace that needs to be rekindled in synergism with God, then how is this envisaged in the humanity of Christ?

If one interprets the Chalcedonian definition exactly the way the Greek Orthodox do, then Christ's deification should not need a twofold continuum. According to the Orthodox interpretation of the hypostatic union, the deification of Christ's humanity should be perfect at the moment of his incarnation.¹⁴⁶ K. P. Aleaz brings to attention once again the idea that Christ being fully God exhibited the fullness of the divine energies or grace on the Mount of Transfiguration.¹⁴⁷ Lossky, in contradistinction with Staniloae's comments, writes,

At the moment of the incarnation the divine light was concentrated, so to speak, in Christ, the God-man, "in whom dwelleth the whole fullness of the Godhead bodily". That is to say that the humanity of Christ was deified by hypostatic union with the divine nature; that Christ during his earthly life always shed forth the divine light—which, however, remained invisible to most men. The Transfiguration was not a phenomenon circumscribed in time and space; Christ underwent no change at that moment, even in His human nature, but a change occurred in the awareness of the apostles, who for a time received the power to see their Master as He was, resplendent in the eternal light of His Godhead.¹⁴⁸

Although Lossky does not exactly define the level of deification, he observes that the divine light was concentrated in Christ at the moment of the incarnation. Lossky also equates the event of the Transfiguration as a phenomenon where Christ underwent no change at that moment, even in his human nature. The change occurred in the awareness of the apostles. The reference to no change, even in his human nature, can only refer to the measure of deification. Perhaps, then, one should be talking about the

¹⁴⁶In line with Maximus the Confessor, Staniloae perceives the deification of Christ in degrees to the point of being progressive even in heaven. Although the deification of Christ's humanity is complete after his ascension, in another sense it is also continuous and progressive. Danut Manastireanu, "Perichoresis and the Early Christian Doctrine of God," *Studies in the History of Religions*, nos. 11-12 (2008): 68.

¹⁴⁷K. P. Aleaz, "Some Distinctive Features of Eastern Christian Spirituality," *IJT* 42, no. 2 (2000): 179–80.

¹⁴⁸Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 223.

glorification and exaltation of his humanity after the resurrection and not the perfection of his deification at his ascension. In conclusion, it becomes clear that one cannot transfer the principles of the hypostatic union and communication of idioms from the God-human to the human-human domain.¹⁴⁹

If, according to the Scriptures, the Son is the image of the invisible God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15), the incarnate Word (John 1:1-5), and the exact imprint of God's nature (Heb 1:3), then why is he in need of restoring the lost likeness of his humanity? Christ's humanity does not need to be restored in wholeness or integrity because it is not fallen. Furthermore, does the incarnate Word need to come in synergy with God so that his humanity's *logoi* of things be activated? Does the Creator of all need grace or uncreated divine energies to assist him in the process of deification? Is not, according to the Orthodox, divine energy a common possession of the godhead anyway? Does the incarnate Christ need to come into synergy with his own common possession of energy?¹⁵⁰ Without any uncertainty, one can discern that the correlation of Christ's deification with a human deification does not make any sense.

The Orthodox theology of redemption focuses strongly on the incarnation of Christ. In his assumption and deification of the human nature, God has renewed and reestablished the human race's capacity for deification and thus reconciliation to himself.¹⁵¹ The consequences of the doctrines of communication of divine and human properties and the *perichoresis* of the human and divine natures reflect the Christological aspect of *theosis* and the possibility for deification to all who want to commune worthily

¹⁴⁹Bruce Ware argues that some of the works of Jesus including his transfiguration displayed his deity. Therefore, one can conclude that there is no necessity or valid argumentation that the transfiguration of Christ was a display of another state of his humanity, namely the *theotic* one. Bruce A. Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 32–33.

¹⁵⁰Since the Orthodox adhere to a two-willed (*dythelite*) incarnate Christ then the logical answer should be "Yes."

¹⁵¹Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 171.

with Christ. Therefore, in Christ, the *theandric* or human-divine union between the two natures means that “in a certain way, all human beings are united through their nature in the hypostasis of the Logos.”¹⁵² The incarnational redemption of the Orthodox Church starts to come closer to conclusions that can lead to universalism.

Any interpretation of the hypostatic union must retain a union of natures without confusion. The incarnate Logos assumed a human nature and enhypostasised it with his person. In his incarnation, Christ took on flesh and blood because he assumed a human nature that is common to man.¹⁵³ The purpose of the incarnation, according to Hebrews 2:14-18, is for Christ “to make propitiation for the sins of the people” and not for the deification of the people. The incarnation looks forward to the substitutionary atonement. The gospel is inclusive of the incarnation, but it is not the incarnation. The gospel that the apostles received by the Lord proclaims the death and resurrection of Christ (Isa 53:5; Luke 24:25; John 1:29; Rom 4:25; 1 Cor 15:3-4; 1 Pet 2:24; 1 John 2:2).

The Chalcedonian definition stresses that the two natures of Christ—human and divine—unite in one hypostasis but still retain in full all true characteristics of each distinct nature.¹⁵⁴ The Orthodox concept of deification forces Meyendorff to express that despite the balance of the Chalcedonian definition, there was still a deficiency in its soteriological component. Meyendorff notes that “the Chalcedonian definition, balanced and positive as it was, lacked the soteriological, charismatic impact which had made the positions of Athanasius and Cyril so appealing.”¹⁵⁵

If one is to have a proper interpretation of the Chalcedonian definition, then the two natures of Christ must retain in full their distinct characteristics in the hypostatic

¹⁵²Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 174.

¹⁵³William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 629–32.

¹⁵⁴Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 33.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*

union of the person of the incarnate Christ. But, how can the Orthodox formulation of *theosis* retain this distinction properly if the divine attributes of Christ permeate and deify the human nature of Christ fully? Moreover, a participation of humanity in the divine nature via the principle of the hypostatic union, amongst other issues, encourages a unilateral infusion and permeation of properties. In some sense, then, it comes closer to Monophysitism.

If humanity can participate in an ontological manner with divinity, then why would the human nature of Christ not be able to permeate and participate in the divine nature of Christ? In a strict sense, then, a unidirectional flow of properties would have one of the Holy Trinity experience passions in the flesh as well as alter the nature of the Trinity. Moreover, the human nature of Christ could not possibly be in a true state of humiliation as compared to its future exaltation and thus cease to be truly human.¹⁵⁶

If Christ's human nature was deified through the divine energies, then how could the Son of God live and die as a true human and not as a rare species of a deified human? Is not the deification of the humanity of Jesus a reduction of the doctrine of kenosis? Did Jesus empty himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man so that he could deify his humbled humanity by overwhelming it with his divinity?

Moreover, did Jesus live his life out of his intrinsic divine nature deifying his human nature or as one who was empowered by the Spirit of God?¹⁵⁷ Thus, there is a real danger of diminishing Christ's humanity and even abolishing it altogether. Deification risks changing Christ's human nature into his divine nature, or violating the integrity of the human nature of Jesus in a way that he cannot truly and fully experience

¹⁵⁶There is considerable debate as to the Maximian use and degree of *perichoresis* and reciprocal interpenetration of the two natures of Christ. In contrast, Manastireanu suggests that Gregory of Nazianzus emphasizes an asymmetrical perichoresis (from the divine to the human). Manastireanu, "Perichoresis and the Early Christian Doctrine of God," 69.

¹⁵⁷For further reflections on this topic, see Bruce Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus*, 31.

temptations and limitations of a true human nature because deification entails dispassion.¹⁵⁸ Contrary to Greek Orthodox formulations, “Reformed theologians, however, have so construed the communication of the gifts as to make possible a human development in Jesus.”¹⁵⁹ Therefore, the full and real humanity of Christ should be affirmed in the same way as the full deity of Christ.

Consequently, what the principle of *communicatio idiomatum* should imply is an expression of the communion of human and divine properties and not an infusion, confusion, or commingling of properties that promotes mutability in the human nature of Christ. If indeed, the union of God and man in Christ is asymmetrical, then correlating and extrapolating the possibility of a *theotic* union of humanity with God reverses the asymmetry of the hypostatic union.

Thus, Eastern Orthodoxy presents an overemphasis and extrapolation of the Chalcedonian definition in that “through Christ’s humanity, deified according to its hypostatic union with the Logos, all members of the Body of Christ have access to ‘deification’ by grace through the operation of the Spirit in Christ’s Church.”¹⁶⁰ Since God’s being is different to man’s, the doctrine of the incarnation must also retain the fundamental Creator-creature distinction.¹⁶¹

A Rebuttal of the Orthodox Endeavor to Bypass the Problems

The theology of the East attempts to bypass this difficulty by evoking the principles of the essence/energies distinction, *enhypostasis*, *communicatio idiomatum*,

¹⁵⁸“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). See also Heb 2:17-18; 5:2.

¹⁵⁹Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 309.

¹⁶⁰Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 39.

¹⁶¹Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 191.

and *circumincessio idiomatum* (perichoresis).¹⁶² Staniloae contends that the communication of properties between the divine and human natures of Christ is accomplished through the unity of the person of the Logos, and thus neither do the properties merge nor do the two natures.¹⁶³ Bartos writes that “the interpenetration of these natures results in the communication of the energies from one to the other.”¹⁶⁴

However, the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum* should never distort or confuse the absolute distinction of the union of the two natures of Christ. Additionally, as Crisp proposes, to address the doctrine of the hypostatic union in Christology “*perichoresis* in the incarnation must be distinguished from the communication of attributes and from the way in which it is applied to the persons of the Godhead.”¹⁶⁵

Eastern Orthodoxy fails to take into account Christ’s communication of operations (*communicatio operationum*) along with the *communicatio idiomatum* and thus blurs the distinction of natures in the incarnation and transfiguration of Christ.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, because the communication of operations or actions is a dynamic reality in the life of Christ “that which is proper to one nature is sometimes, in Scripture, attributed to the person denominated by the other nature.”¹⁶⁷ The concept of communication of acts

¹⁶²Manastireanu distinguishes “between a static sense of *perichoresis*, which could be better translated as ‘coinherence’ or ‘mutual indwelling’ (Lat. *circuminsessio*, from *circum-in-sedere*, meaning ‘to sit around’) and a dynamic sense of the word that would be better rendered as ‘interpenetration’ (Lat. *circumincessio*, from *circum-incedere*, meaning ‘to move around’) or as ‘moving in and through the other’, a sense preferred by Bonaventure and other western theologians.” Manastireanu, “Perichoresis and the Early Christian Doctrine of God,” 62.

¹⁶³As cited in Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 175.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 177.

¹⁶⁵*Perichoretic* unity in the Trinity exists and takes place in co-substantial Persons. One must take into account the distinction of nature-*perichoresis*, as in the hypostatic union, and person-*perichoresis*, as in the Trinity. Oliver D. Crisp, “Problems with Perichoresis,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 56, no. 1 (2005): 119.

¹⁶⁶Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 339.

¹⁶⁷The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), 8.7. Acts 20:28 demonstrates this truth by speaking of God obtaining the church with his own blood. In contrast, Russell argues that Cyril of

of the divine and human natures of Christ protects against metaphysical and extrapolated assertions.¹⁶⁸

In like manner, when Calvin speaks on the communication of properties he reasons that the Scriptures speak of Christ in a manner that “sometimes attribute to him qualities applicable peculiarly to his divinity, and sometimes qualities which embrace both natures, and do not apply specially to either.”¹⁶⁹ *Theosis* concentrates on the communication of divine energies from the divine to the human in an unclear way and, as a result, neglects the Holy Spirit’s role in the earthly life of Christ.¹⁷⁰

The Eastern doctrine of the redemption of humanity is a mono-lateral fixation on the doctrine of the incarnation. The Reformation doctrine of redemption upholds a proper balance in the Chalcedonian definition of the hypostatic union. Evangelicals give great emphasis to the whole work and life of Christ, from birth to resurrection, and explain Christ’s saving work in more dynamic than metaphysical terms.¹⁷¹ The Eastern extrapolation of the hypostatic union along with the doctrine of deification are in great danger of rendering the incarnation of Christ as a saving and sanctifying act in itself.

Eastern theology does not define reconciliation and redemption as a granting of forensic justification purely by grace through faith or salvation from the wrath of God.

Alexandria believes that “in virtue of this mutual interpenetration of humanity and divinity, the acts of Christ as recorded in the Gospels cannot be assigned separately to his humanity (i.e., those which arise from fear or ignorance) or to his divinity (i.e., those which manifest divine power). Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 198.

¹⁶⁸Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 85.

¹⁶⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.14.1.

¹⁷⁰Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 341. A deified humanity cannot account for a full, unmixed, and integral human Jesus who obeyed the Father and resisting temptation by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Bruce Ware contends that the Spirit contributed “everything of supernatural power and enablement that he [Jesus], in his human nature would lack.” See Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus*, 33.

¹⁷¹Torrance, *Incarnation*, 197.

According to the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia, it would be a great oversight to define redemption by employing merely judicial or substitutionary ideas:

In the East, the fact that the Word became flesh and died for us has not meant that humankind has been simply justified from God's anger, but rather has assumed an intimate and hypostatical unity with divinity itself. The essence of our redemption lies in the lifting up of human nature into the everlasting communion with the divine life which was realized by Christ's redeeming work. The whole emphasis of the Greek fathers centered around this foundational conception: the Incarnation of the Word as Redemption. The whole destiny and history of humankind was completed in the Incarnation.¹⁷²

Theological confusion and extrapolation is always present when making the hypostatic union of Christ become a hypostatic union of Christ and the whole of human nature. Consequently, deified humanity can ontologically participate in God.¹⁷³ This ontological participation is yet another type of *perichoresis* where the participant penetrates into the divine life.¹⁷⁴ The whole destiny and history of humankind was not completed in the incarnation. Such an unclarified statement flirts with the theory of universal redemption. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia fails to clarify the distinction that in the incarnation the Logos did not unite himself with the whole human nature in general but that he united himself with a human nature.¹⁷⁵

Much of the doctrine of *theosis* relies heavily on questionable and distorted anthropological presuppositions and wrong exegetical models. Bartos maintains that "there seems to be a contradiction in drawing extrapolations from the fact of the hypostatic union to include mankind in God, and a statement that mankind does not encounter all of God as He is in Himself."¹⁷⁶ The doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*

¹⁷²Philip Kariatlis, "Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia: Theosis," accessed October 30, 2015, http://www.greekorthodox.org.au/?page_id=7184.

¹⁷³Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 190.

¹⁷⁴Manastireanu, "Perichoresis and the Early Christian Doctrine of God," 90.

¹⁷⁵Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 633.

¹⁷⁶Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 190.

by virtue of the interpenetration does not have to lead to deification, with intermingling and commingling of the two natures.¹⁷⁷

For if the two natures “share all the same properties and only the same properties, having no properties that they do not hold in common, then they are the same thing.”¹⁷⁸ Similar problems are encountered when one states that the divine nature of Christ overwhelms the human nature as in deification.¹⁷⁹ The doctrine of *communicatio*, as Frame makes clear, “is not primarily about how one nature affects the other, but about how each nature, and both natures, affects the person of Christ.”¹⁸⁰

The Eastern Orthodox doctrine of deification extrapolates, misuses, and takes out of context the Chalcedonian definition. It is difficult to see how one can accept the doctrine of deification with participatory assimilation to all that God is while, at the same time, avoid the ever-present danger of ontological or functional pantheism. The Orthodox blurring of the hypostatic union poses a danger “not only of Christ’s human nature being subsumed into the divine, but also of human nature in general being assimilated to God’s nature.”¹⁸¹

The predominant way of soteriology for the Eastern Church has its center in the doctrine of deification and is based on the presupposition of an interpenetration of divine and human life through divine energies.¹⁸² For the Orthodox, the incarnation of

¹⁷⁷If one nature overwhelms the other, then the apparent danger is the generation of a “*tertium quid*”—that is, a third sort of thing made up of the fusion of the two natures, or parts of the two natures thereof.” Crisp, “Problems with Perichoresis,” 123.

¹⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁷⁹This logic is precisely the reason leading Greek Orthodoxy to connect sacramentalism with the doctrine of the incarnation. Therefore, the Orthodox hold onto the doctrine of transubstantiation in their sacramental theology of Holy Communion.

¹⁸⁰Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 893.

¹⁸¹Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 190.

¹⁸²*Ibid.*, 179.

Christ becomes a correlative to man's deification. However, the work of Christ cannot be segmented and separated. It is impossible to think of the incarnation of Christ without the atoning substitutionary atonement of Christ. Deification overshadows other fundamental doctrines of salvation such as justification and penal substitutionary atonement.¹⁸³

As it stands, the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* blurs the absolute and sharp distinction between the human and divine natures of Christ and thus increases intensely the danger of overwhelming the humanity of Christ.¹⁸⁴ The locus of deification and incarnation theology becomes the deified humanity and not the humanized deity.¹⁸⁵ In turn, the overwhelming of Christ's humanity risks diminishing the state of his development as a true human as well as his state of humiliation.¹⁸⁶

Christ's incarnation is a mystery, but the Eastern Orthodox formulations of deification extrapolate outside the biblical parameters and thus pose some dangerous problems that ought to be avoided. The Eastern doctrinal formulations about this topic do not rest on clear and sound deductions from Scripture. The hypostatic union of the divine and human natures of Christ must uphold the distinction and integrity of both natures without intermingling, confusing, undermining, or overturning either nature.¹⁸⁷ The union of a believer with Christ does not denature or deify humanity as if humanity

¹⁸³Referring to the doctrine of the atonement, Staniloae maintains that the path of communication or access to God is not through "the later theory of satisfaction" but rather communion that is accessible with God through Christ's incarnation. Dumitru Staniloae, *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, in vol. 3 of *The Person of Jesus Christ as God and Savior*, ed. and trans. Ioan Ionita (Brookline, MA.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011), 17, 21.

¹⁸⁴Manastireanu, "Perichoresis and the Early Christian Doctrine of God," 92.

¹⁸⁵Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 618.

¹⁸⁶Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:309.

¹⁸⁷John C. Clark and Marcus Peter Johnson, *The Incarnation of God: The Mystery of the Gospel as the Foundation of Evangelical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 84.

“were mixed or intermingled with Christ’s deity. One with us, Christ also remains utterly and uniquely himself.”¹⁸⁸

Concluding Remarks

The Greek Orthodox doctrine of salvation or *theosis* places a great deal of emphasis on synergism. The doctrine of *sola fide* was a vital concept in the divide between Protestantism and the Roman Catholic Church, but it also constitutes a fundamental divide between the Greek Orthodox Church. Eastern Orthodoxy does not affirm that salvation is solely by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone; rather, it collapses justification into sanctification along with elements of glorification.¹⁸⁹ Classic Reformation teaching affirms the doctrine of sanctification but “has opposed every tendency to confuse justification and sanctification, rendering the former the goal of the latter rather than its basis.”¹⁹⁰

It is an oversimplification to say that the evangelical doctrine of sanctification is similar to the Eastern doctrine of *theosis*. Godliness or one’s conforming to the image of God’s Son is not the same as becoming united with God’s uncreated divine energies and thus becoming all who God is apart from his essence.¹⁹¹ While Orthodox theologians insist that the participatory union with God is not ontological, it is hard to escape the ontological aspect because God’s divine energies are God himself and not just a metaphysical idea.

Salvation is a progressive path in which the deified is continually being saved and continually faces the risk of losing his or her salvation. Eastern Orthodoxy does not

¹⁸⁸Clark and Johnson, *The Incarnation of God*, 84.

¹⁸⁹Stanley N. Gundry and James J. Stamoolis, eds., *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 91.

¹⁹⁰Ibid., 139.

¹⁹¹Donald Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 71.

recognize the reception of eternal life by grace through faith as a gift in a moment of time.¹⁹² The uncertainty of salvation is an ever-present reality in the life of an Orthodox Christian. In Ephesian 2:8-9, Paul states, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Paul affirms that salvation can be possessed here and now.¹⁹³ Whoever hears Jesus’ word and believes in him has eternal life now, he does not come into judgment now and has passed from death to life at the moment of his or her conversion (John 5:24). “This salvation is God’s work entirely, the bestowal of his infinite love,”¹⁹⁴ and a human can receive it through faith alone in Christ alone. Paul emphasizes the crystal clear nature of faith and the nature of grace by using the qualifying phrases of verses 8 and 9 and excluding any possibility of synergy. The additional phrase in verse 8—“and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God”—along with the parallel phrases in verse 9, cement the emphasis that salvation is by grace. Paul reinforces the positive statement of “been saved by grace” with two negatives—“not your own doing; not a result of works.”¹⁹⁵

Simply stated, salvation is a gift; it is not earned.¹⁹⁶ Synergy allows for boasting, but grace excludes synergy along with boasting. Good works then “are indispensable to salvation—not as its ground or means, however, but as its consequence

¹⁹²William Baldwin, *Another Christ? Another Gospel? Is the True Gospel in Greek Orthodoxy?* (Longwood, FL: Xulon, 2012), 102.

¹⁹³Salvation is instantaneous, continuous, and future. *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁹⁴Francis Foulkes, *The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 2nd ed. (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989), 83.

¹⁹⁵John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God’s New Society*, The Bible Speaks Today, 2nd ed. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989), 83.

¹⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 84. Salvation is not because of works (cf. Rom 3:20, 28; 4:1-5; Gal 2:16; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 3:5).

and evidence. We are not saved *because of works* (verses 8-9), but we are created in Christ Jesus *for good works* (verse 10), good works *which God prepared beforehand.*”¹⁹⁷

Additionally, Greek Orthodoxy overemphasizes the incarnational and the exemplary views of the atonement while reducing the forensic and substitutionary ones. Therefore, the doctrine of deification defines grace predominantly and almost exclusively as the divine uncreated energy of God. The activity of the Holy Spirit is connected to the sacraments and his role moderated to the giver of God’s divine energies.¹⁹⁸ Fairbairn notes that “to the Orthodox, the locus or sphere in which *theosis* takes place is the Church, and the primary means by which the Holy Spirit works to give grace and to deify people are the sacraments and human effort to cooperate with God’s gracious actions.”¹⁹⁹

Deification or the path of salvation requires synergism. Holy works are a necessary means in the path of salvation.²⁰⁰ Lossky states,

Grace will remain inactive, though always present, united to the person who has received the Holy Spirit. The sacramental life—“the life in Christ”—is thus, seen to be an unceasing struggle for the acquisition of that grace which must transfigure nature; a struggle in which victories alternate with falls, without man ever being deprived of the objective conditions of salvation. In Eastern spirituality ‘a state of grace’ has no absolute or static sense. It is a dynamic and shifting reality which varies according to the fluctuations of the infirmities of the human will. All members of the Church who aspire to union with God are more or less in grace; all are more or less deprived. As Ephrem the Syrian says: “the whole Church is the Church of the penitent; the whole Church is the Church of those who are perishing.”²⁰¹

The unbridgeable chasm between Greek Orthodoxy and evangelicalism is that Orthodoxy has no true dichotomy between grace and works. Grace is not an expression of the undeserved nature of salvation, but grace is the energy of God communicated to

¹⁹⁷Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 85.

¹⁹⁸Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes*, 86–87.

¹⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 88.

²⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 90.

²⁰¹Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 180.

people. God's will becomes powerless before human freedom. According to Orthodoxy, the plan of redemption is fundamentally incarnational, synergistic, and participatory.²⁰²

²⁰²Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes*, 91.

CHAPTER 5
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE BROADER CHURCH

Is *Theosis* a Legitimate Motif of Salvation?

There are many ways by which one can reject the gospel message, and it does not necessarily involve an attitude of outright denial of biblical truths. On the contrary, many uphold crucial doctrines and truths of the Christian faith while denying others. Rejecting the gospel can encompass the acts of substitution, addition, subtraction, confusion, misrepresentation, disproportion, absorption, and fusion. The Eastern Orthodox view *theosis* as a primary structure for understanding salvation. However, the Eastern formulation of the doctrine of *theosis* is disproportionately excessive in viewing the incarnation almost as equivalent to redemption.

Eastern Orthodoxy absorbs the doctrines of justification, sanctification, and glorification in its mystical dogmatic conundrum. The Orthodox view falters because it fuses and confuses the *ordo salutis* and, consequently, misconstrues salvation to be a synergistic path. Despite all the differences between Protestantism and the Eastern Church, a number of Protestant theologians perceive the doctrine of deification as a unifying and comprehensive understanding for salvation.

The Finnish theologian Kärkkäinen argues, for example, that deification and justification are not mutually exclusive but rather can form the foundation for compatibility and unity between Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism. In this track of thought, the Finnish school of Mannermaa is a strong advocate for ecumenical convergence. Such a convergence has its foundation upon an ontological understanding of “union with Christ,” leading to equating *theosis* as an all-inclusive understanding of justification, sanctification, and glorification.

A New Perspective Combining Justification and *Theosis*

Nobody can deny the differences between the Eastern understanding of *theosis* and the Protestant doctrine of justification. For the East, deification is the very definition of the gospel.¹ Salvation is to suffer deification by receiving an influx of the divine.² Kärkkäinen acknowledges that “in the history of Orthodox theology there is almost a total absence of any mention of the idea of justification by faith.”³ Similarly, Clendenin contends that the doctrine of justification is “almost totally absent in eastern thought.”⁴

Clendenin continues,

In the history of Orthodox theology, on the other hand, it is startling to observe the near total absence of any mention of the idea of justification by faith. Justification by faith has received short shrift in Orthodoxy, and the most important text of Orthodox theology, John of Damascus’ *The Orthodox Faith*, never even mentions the idea.⁵

Yet again, Clendenin joins the camp of the theologians who assert that such dissimilarities are differences of emphasis in the perspective of salvation. The East emphasizes mystical union through *theosis* while the West emphasizes the forensic elements of salvation. Christendom must accept all motifs of salvation, inclusive of *theosis*. Clendenin goes as far as to say that believers need to affirm all motifs of salvation—*theosis*, adoption, reconciliation, redemption, ransom, sacrifice, forgiveness,

¹Daniel B. Clendenin, “Partakers of Divinity: The Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis,” *JETS* 37, no. 3 (September 1994): 366.

²Theodoros the Great Ascetic, *The Philokalia*, in vol. 2 of *The Complete Text: Compiled by St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth*, ed. and trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 38.

³Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *One with God: Salvation as Deification and Justification*, Unitas Books (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 6.

⁴Clendenin, “Partakers of Divinity,” 367.

⁵*Ibid.*, 368.

Christus victor, propitiation, and deliverance—“in order to begin to understand the wonder of God’s salvation in Christ.”⁶

What makes *theosis* more palatable is a barrage of quotations from multiple Eastern Fathers projecting *theosis* as a doctrine that has long been accepted by the East and one that has strong historical foundations.⁷ The vocabulary of deification, however, is very technical, and, according to Russell, the early Fathers used the language of deification in varied ways and with a broad range in meaning.⁸ Moreover, the historical development of the doctrine of deification demands a distinction between the sparse usage of deification terms from its early stages to the full blown doctrine of deification in the Byzantine era.

Suffice it is to say, the current form of the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* is by no means identical to the prototype language of the early Fathers. Russell acknowledges that the almost final form of deification was handed on to the Orthodox Church of today during the Palamite controversies.⁹ Cooper goes even further by identifying two kinds of *theosis*—Irenaeus/Athanasian and philosophical: “[The] philosophical [is] taken from Neoplatonism as represented in Pseudo-Dionysius, Clement of Alexandria and Gregory Palamas.”¹⁰ Finally, when one attempts to handle the question of the means of *theosis* and Orthodox spirituality the rift of Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism becomes even wider. As previously explored, the definition and function of grace in the East takes on another trajectory. Hence, one must take particular care to avoid the catastrophic error of

⁶Clendenin, “Partakers of Divinity,” 368.

⁷Ibid., 369–75.

⁸Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, The Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1–2, 6.

⁹Ibid., 15.

¹⁰Jordan Cooper, *Christification: A Lutheran Approach to Theosis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 13.

assuming that the Orthodox view *theosis* as purely a gift coming from God by grace through faith alone.¹¹ Gavriilyuk attests that “‘deification by grace alone through faith alone’ has very little purchase in Eastern Orthodoxy.”¹²

Even Kärkkäinen submits that “Eastern soteriology entertains problematic notions of the freedom of the will, too positive an anthropology, and worst of all, the idea of human-divine *synergia* in salvation.”¹³ Incredibly, after such an admission, Kärkkäinen continues his quest of convergence between the doctrines of deification and justification. For the solidification of this quest, Kärkkäinen engages with the “new perspective” on the doctrine of justification by faith. The issue is not whether the doctrine of justification by faith is wrong but that it may be one-sided, lacking a fuller aspect of salvation and leading to questionable assumptions.¹⁴

An Assault on the Doctrine of Justification

The startling reality is that at this point, Eastern Orthodox doctrine has remained immovable. The reinterpretations, additions, and subtractions in doctrine come from Protestant theologians who desire to find common ground between justification by faith and *theosis*. Accordingly, the Lutheran theologian Käsemann disconnects the concept of forensic imputation from justification and explains it in ontological terms.

Regarding justification by faith, Kärkkäinen states,

On other questions regarding justification recent New Testament scholarship has reached a virtual consensus. Hardly anybody would support the claim that justification/righteousness is the center of Paul’s theology. It can be central to Paul,

¹¹Clendenin oversimplifies the dynamic between the means of deification and human synergism in deification. Since deification is an amalgam that fuses justification and sanctification it is easy to mistake synergism in deification as just the process of sanctification. See Clendenin, “Partakers of Divinity,” 378.

¹²Paul L. Gavriilyuk, “The Retrieval of Deification: How a Once-Despised Archaism Became an Ecumenical Desideratum,” *Modern Theology* 25, no. 4 (October 2009): 653.

¹³Kärkkäinen, *One with God*, 6

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 11.

but it is highly questionable whether justification or any other single theme would qualify as a center of Paul's thought. Furthermore, contemporary scholarship in general agrees with the proposal of Ernst Käsemann that justification and sanctification cannot be separated as they have been in Reformation theology, and even in the Lutheran confessions (though not in Luther's own writings as will become evident in the course of the present investigation).¹⁵

The ramifications of such an outlook are wide and variant: justification loses the key forensic element; justification becomes a relational aspect between God and man without the element of imputation; it becomes another motif of salvation alongside *theosis*; justification and sanctification become an indistinguishable amalgam more like the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic theological perspective; and, finally, justification starts to approach the ontology of the Eastern doctrine of *theotic* union.¹⁶

Tuomo Mannermaa, an initiator of the "new quest for Luther's theology," rejects the specific distinction of justification and sanctification.¹⁷ The Finnish school of Mannermaa claims that Luther did not view justification in forensic terms but rather as a "real-ontic" union of Christ and the believer.¹⁸ The new paradigm of Mannermaa makes justification appear very similar to the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*.¹⁹ Mannermaa's key idea is that "in faith itself Christ is really present,"²⁰ and thus

¹⁵Kärkkäinen, *One with God*, 13.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷In a similar manner, Michael Gorman equates justification as participation and thus as a form of *theosis*. Gorman understands that the implications of his view on justification cause a comingling of justification and sanctification. Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009), 40.

¹⁸Mannermaa claims that Luther's view and writings on justification differ significantly from the official Lutheran confession of faith. Kärkkäinen, *One with God*, 37.

¹⁹Schumacher asserts that Mannermaa's exploration of the convergence of *theosis* with Luther's theology comes from a "starting point of ecumenical engagement with the Orthodox Church in Finland and Russia." William W. Schumacher, *Who Do I Say That You Are? Anthropology and the Theology of the Theosis in the Finnish School of Tuomo Mannermaa* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 13.

²⁰Carl E. Braaten, "The Finnish Breakthrough in Luther Research," *Pro Ecclesia* 5, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 142.

justification and the righteousness of faith is the presence of Christ in the believer, which is analogous to the doctrine of *theosis*.²¹ In other words,

This view, traditionally called “justification,” can also be called *theosis* according to the ancient doctrine of the fathers with whom Luther agreed. Justification and deification, then, mean “participation” of the believer in Christ, which, because Christ is God, is also a participation in God himself . . . This participation, following Athanasius and others, is a participation in the very *ousia* of God. There is, then, what the Mannermaa School calls a “real-ontic” unity between Christ and the Christian, though the substances themselves do not change into something else.²²

The fundamental and basic mistake of such a statement is threefold. First, Eastern Orthodox *theosis* does not call for a participation in the *ousia* of God but rather the divine uncreated energies. Second, Athanasius never defined or understood justification as a participatory union with the *ousia* of God. Finally, the assumption that Luther’s theology and doctrine converges with the traditional Greek Orthodox metaphysical doctrine of *theosis* is a narrow and unsubstantiated idea in light of the whole of Luther’s theology. Schumacher contends that the Mannermaa school diverges from Luther and Lutheranism in anthropology, “its neglect of creation, its failure to grasp Luther’s theology of the word, and its inadequate appreciation of the role of Christ’s humanity in our justification.”²³

Florovsky is clear about how Eastern Orthodoxy assesses Luther’s view of justification:

For Luther “justification by faith” meant an extrinsic justification, a justification totally independent from any inner change within the depths of the spiritual life of a person. For Luther “to justify”—δικαιουν—meant to declare one righteous or just, not to “make” righteous or just—it is an appeal to an extrinsic justice which in

²¹Kärkkäinen, *One with God*, 46.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Schumacher argues that Mannermaa’s mistakes are multiple. Mannermaa constructs a reading of Luther from specific sections and not from the totality of Luther’s theological writings and sermons. The school of Mannermaa misreads Luther’s Christology and “completely changes the meaning of Luther’s comments from a statement of the reality of imputation (which is “real” even though hidden from reason and the senses) to an ontological description.” Schumacher, *Who Do I Say That You Are?* 17, 38, 42.

reality is a spiritual fiction. Luther has created a legalism far more serious than the legalism he detected in the Roman Catholic thought and practice of his time. Moreover, Luther's legalistic doctrine of extrinsic justification is spiritually serious, for it is a legal transaction which in reality does not and cannot exist.²⁴

Orthodox theologians understand clearly the disparities between *theosis* and the forensic element of justification by faith alone.²⁵ The soteriological notion of *theosis* and the doctrine of forensic imputed righteousness cannot coexist.

When justification converges with *theosis*, the element of the forensic aspect diminishes and the element of the effective aspect of righteousness takes its place. Since grace is a divine energy, participation in the divine grace of God means that Christ in the believer, according to the doctrine of *theosis*, is an effective participation in the righteousness of Christ.²⁶ Although the Orthodox view of grace as divine energy is more participatory than infused as in Roman Catholic theology, such a view of justification appears to come perilously close to that of Andreas Osiander, who taught that Christ is our righteousness according to his divine nature.²⁷ Horton refutes the Osiander tendencies of the Mannermaa school by stating that "God's essential righteousness is never said to be imputed or transferred to believers. Rather, it is Christ's active and passive obedience that are imputed, on the basis of which he then personally indwells believers by his Spirit. Christ is indeed present *in* faith, but not *as* faith."²⁸

²⁴Georges Florovsky, *The Byzantine Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers*, ed. Richard S. Haugh, trans. Raymond Miller, Anne-Marie Döllinger-Labriolle, and Helmut Wilhelm Schmiedel (Belmont, MA: Notable & Academic/Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), 30.

²⁵Lucian Turcescu, "Soteriological Issues in the 1999 Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on Justification: An Orthodox Perspective," *JES* 38, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 65.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 52–53.

²⁷Osiander's view was one of an "essential indwelling of the righteousness of Christ in the believer." Carl E. Braaten, "Response to Simon Peura, 'Christ as Favor and Gift,'" in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 72–75.

²⁸Michael Scott Horton, *Covenant and Salvation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 177.

Greek Orthodox theology in general, along with the current doctrine of *theosis*, in particular rejects outright the doctrine of justification by faith alone. *The Orthodox Study Bible* notes on “justification by faith” include the following quote:

Justification by faith, though not the major New Testament doctrine for Orthodox as it is for Protestants, poses no problem. But justification by faith *alone* brings up an objection. It contradicts Scripture, which says, “You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only” (Jam 2:24). We are “justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (Rom 3:28), but nowhere does the Bible say we are justified by faith “alone.” On the contrary, “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (Jam 2:17).²⁹

Such statements are not surprising at all considering the weak Orthodox doctrine on original sin and the subsequent emphasis on free will and synergism in salvation.

Where the Greek Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* gains widespread acceptance, then the simplicity of the gospel will be lost.³⁰ One of the most fundamental elements of the Reformation was a return to the biblical teaching on justification by faith alone apart from any works. Articles 11 and 12 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1563) express succinctly the truth that

11. We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by faith only, is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort.
12. Albeit that good works, which are fruits of faith, and follow after justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God’s judgement; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do not spring out necessarily of a true and lively faith insomuch that by them a lively faith may be evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.³¹

Though *sola fide* is not the gospel itself, it is a fundamental component of the gospel. Salvation by faith alone ultimately reminds people of their absolute need and

²⁹Athanasius Academy of Orthodox Theology, ed., *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), loc. 93528, Kindle.

³⁰Schreiner has written a fascinating chapter accounting for *sola fide* in the early church. See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification*, The Five Solas Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 21–63.

³¹As quoted in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, rev. ed. (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2013), 351.

dependence upon the grace of God manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.³² Salvation is a gift from God apart from any human works. Evangelicals do not deny that works are important but instead affirm that works are a necessary consequence of genuine faith in Christ.

Orthodox theology creates a false distinction and dichotomy between works and deeds of the law by limiting the interpretation of the “works of the law.” However, as Schreiner observes, in Romans 1:18–3:20, “Paul indicts both Jews and Gentiles.”³³ The law in its entirety uncovers the sinfulness of humanity (Rom 3:20; 7:7) and demonstrates that all humans are transgressors and guilty before God. As a consequence, boasting is excluded since no one is justified from the works of the law (Rom 3:27–28).³⁴ Paul’s argument is not only that “the works of the law” do not justify but that “‘works’ (*erga*) don’t justify either.”³⁵

Expounding on the doctrine of justification by faith alone through the examples of Abraham and David (Rom 4), “Paul speaks of “works” in general instead of ‘works of the law.’”³⁶ Schreiner affirms that

this utter polarity between faith and works is evident in Romans 9:30–10:21. Once again Paul uses the word “works” (*erga*) instead of works of law, and he speaks of “the one who does these things” (10:5). Where “these things” refers to the works mandated in the mosaic law. Nothing is said in this context about boundary markers like circumcision, Sabbath or purity laws. Nor is anything said about excluding Gentiles. Instead, Paul says that Israel didn’t obtain righteousness because they pursued it by works instead of faith (9:31–31). The fundamental opposition between righteousness by faith and righteousness by works again surfaces.³⁷

³²Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, 17.

³³*Ibid.*, 100.

³⁴Paul makes the same point in Gal 2:16; 3, 5, 10. *Ibid.*, 101–3.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 104.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 105.

³⁷*Ibid.*

Righteousness is solely reckoned through faith alone in Christ alone “apart from any actions done on the part of those made righteous”³⁸ (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:18–25). Human works always fall short of God’s perfect holiness and, thus, justified believers must continually look unto Christ in faith. The righteous live by faith (Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38). Believers are accepted by God solely because of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness on them and not because of a works-type righteousness (Phil 3).

In this light, Turretin argues,

It is one thing for love and works to be required in the person who is justified (which we grant); another in the act itself or causality of justification (which we deny). If works are required as concomitants of faith, they are not on that account determined to be the causes of justification with faith or do the very thing which faith does in this matter.³⁹

Virtues contribute nothing to the act of justification. In justification, faith in the person of Christ is always alone, but, for the Christian, faith is never alone. Works vindicate and accompany true faith as an effect *a posteriori* but are not the cause of justification *a priori*.⁴⁰ One needs to hear the gospel, repent of sin, and simply believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation (Matt 9:22; 17:20; Mark 5:34, 36; Luke 8:48, 50; 18:35–43; John 3:16; 6:29, 69; 16:19; 11:27; Acts 4:4; 8:12; 9:42; 11:17; 13:48; 14:1, 23; 15:7; 16:31, 34; 17:12, 34; 18:8, 27; 19:4; 21:20, 25; Rom 1:16; 4:17; 10:14; 1 Cor 1:21; 15:2, 4; Eph 2:8).⁴¹

As Trueman comments, “Faith in God’s Word unites the believer to Christ and thus provides the context for what Luther calls the *joyful exchange*, whereby the

³⁸Brian Vickers, *Justification by Grace through Faith*, Explorations in Biblical Theology (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub, 2013), 4, 49–50.

³⁹Francis Turretin, *Justification*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publications, 2004), 93.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 93–94.

⁴¹Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, 112–21.

believer's sins are passed to Christ and Christ's righteousness is passed to the believer."⁴²

Finally, faith is not merely a mental acceptance or an intellectual assent;⁴³ it is a living faith, an active faith that obeys God's Word and produces fruit. Schreiner explains the interaction between faith and works in the epistle of James:

James criticizes a notional faith, a faith that endorses doctrines, a faith that consists of mental assent . . . [a] faith that saves, in other words, has vitality and energy, so that works necessarily follow . . . True faith is completed by works 2:22, and it should never be confused with mere mental assent. Abraham and Rahab were justified because their faith expressed itself in works, which showed that their faith was genuine.⁴⁴

Confusing Salvation as Both Justification and Deification

The minimization and rejection of the forensic elements of justification and imputed righteousness lead inevitably to confusing salvation as justification and deification. The deadly compromise from the Finnish Lutherans as well as other segments of Lutheranism accepts the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* as an important all-encompassing aspect of salvation.⁴⁵

Following the comparison of justification and deification, Mannermaa also veers toward a semi-Pelagian view of synergism in salvation, elevating the role of human will power in salvation.⁴⁶ In agreement with Eastern anthropology, there is thus an elevation of the freedom of the human person. Humanity has an inherent capacity toward deification, an autonomy in choosing right or wrong, and an ability to draw close to God.

⁴²Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom*, Theologians on the Christian Life (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 69.

⁴³Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, 191.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 205–6.

⁴⁵Risto Saarinen, "Salvation in the Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue: A Comparative Perspective," *Pro Ecclesia* 5, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 202–3.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 204.

The high anthropology of the Eastern Church poses a grave danger and a major departure from the biblical view of salvation. Every human creature born in this world carries the corruption and the condemnation of original sin and is in a willing state of rebellion against God. “The condition of fallen humanity is not mere ignorance or spiritual neutrality, but rebellion and hostility towards God; the human being has not only turned away from God but has also become God’s enemy.”⁴⁷ The theology of deification rejects the radical corruption of humanity. According to Nassif, “The fall into sin was not a drastic withdrawal from a perfected state. Instead, it was a failure to achieve the original purpose God had set for humanity. It is a departure from the path of deification.”⁴⁸

Accepting the anthropology of Orthodoxy will cause a minimizing of what biblical Christianity teaches about sin. If one accepts the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of salvation, then one must consent to synergism in salvation. Inversely, if one understands that humanity is “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1), that it is “sold under sin” (Rom 7:14), that all are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3), and that all are in “captivity to the law of sin” (Rom 7:23),⁴⁹ then one will reject the doctrine of *theosis*. *Theosis* obscures the nature of justification by rendering it an event that just happens at the level of “being” as a result of an ontological union with God. An assimilation or convergence of the Orthodox doctrine of deification with justification will have catastrophic results for the church. Additional repercussions that follow the identification of an edited form of justification with deification come from Heinz Joachim Held. Following a logical path

⁴⁷Schumacher, *Who Do I Say That You Are?* 167.

⁴⁸Bradley Nassif, “Orthodox Spirituality: A Quest for Transfigured Humanity,” in *Four Views on Christian Spirituality*, Counterpoints Bible and Theology, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Bruce Demarest (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 54.

⁴⁹R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1998), 154–55.

from the identification of justification and deification, he alleges that justification could be, as deification, a continuous process.⁵⁰

Theosis not only fuses and confuses justification with sanctification but also glorification. In *theosis*, distinct theological categories or realities for justification, sanctification, and glorification do not exist. Horton argues for a clearer understanding of the *ordo salutis* in relation to the forensic element of justification:

That we view each item in the Pauline *ordo* as constituting one train, running on the same track, with justification as the engine that pulls adoption, new birth, sanctification, and glorification in tow. In the person of Christ as the “engine,” the train has arrived at its destination. “Those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom 8:30). This means that we never leave the forensic domain even when we are addressing other topics in the *ordo* besides justification proper. Although there is more to the new birth, sanctification, and glorification than the forensic, all of it is forensically charged.⁵¹

The Eastern paradigm of salvation is a restorative process leading to *theosis* comprehending both sacramentalism and striving for moralistic perfection.⁵² Russell’s explanation of deification describes *theosis* as “our restoration as persons to integrity and wholeness by participation in Christ through the Holy Spirit, in a process which is initiated in this world through our life of ecclesial communion and moral striving and finds ultimate fulfilment in our union with the Father—all within the context of the divine economy.”⁵³ Essentially, *theosis* encompasses faith and good deeds. In Orthodoxy, justification and sanctification are one divine action of transformation due to

⁵⁰Schumacher, *Who Do I Say That You Are?* 205.

⁵¹Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, 300.

⁵²Kärkkäinen, *One with God*, 89.

⁵³Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis*, Foundations Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), 21.

participatory union with God⁵⁴ and since there is no distinction of justification from sanctification, synergism is inclusive of both.⁵⁵

Nellas upholds the truth of synergy when he writes,

But the work of salvation is not accomplished exclusively by the grace of God. The co-operation of man is also required, a co-operation which is undertaken responsibly and is definite and decisive. The sinner who wishes to be saved is invited to bring about within himself, through a progressive healing and reconstitution of his psychosomatic functions, a specific “return” (*anadromi*) to his iconic and Godlike integrity and health, and at the same time effect “movement” (*prosagogi*) of his whole being towards God.⁵⁶

Confusing Communion and Union with Christ

Palamas insists that a human can only be truly human by entering into unlimited communion with God and thus sharing fellowship with the transcendent God.⁵⁷ This unlimited communion and union with God is the attainment of the fullness of grace.⁵⁸ Eastern Orthodox thinking insists that as people live in communion with God and contemplate him, they receive grace or a Divine energy, which is the life of God, and, as a result, become uncreated in one sense by “Grace or Divine energy.”⁵⁹ Maximus

⁵⁴Paul R. Hinlicky, “Theological Anthropology: Toward Integrating Theosis and Justification by Faith,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 56.

⁵⁵Kärkkäinen, *One with God*, 92–93.

⁵⁶Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person*, Contemporary Greek Theologians 5, trans. Norman Russell (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987), 187.

⁵⁷Gregory Palamas, *The Triads*, trans. Nicholas Gendle, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1983), 18.

⁵⁸Eastern Orthodoxy distinguishes between four degrees of the presence and experience of God’s grace in the world. Lossky explains that “if we wanted to make a diagram of the different degrees of the presence of grace in the created world, according to the increasing fullness of union, we would make four concentric circles, of which the center would represent the fullness of the teaching as well as of the experience of grace. The four circles would be the pagan or “lay” world; the world living in accordance with the revealed Law or natural law; the Christian world in general; and finally, the mystical center of the universe where the saints can attain the fullness of grace, perfect union with God.” Vladimir Lossky, “The Doctrine of Grace in the Orthodox Church,” trans. Paul Ladouceur, *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2014): 85.

⁵⁹John Meyendorff, “Doctrine of Grace in St. Gregory Palamas,” *St Vladimir’s Seminary*

the Confessor illustrates this pertinently by stating that the Holy Spirit is fully present as the author of wisdom “except in those who have understanding, and who by their holy way of life have made themselves fit to receive His indwelling and deifying presence.”⁶⁰

The similarities between the evangelical doctrine of union with God and the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* are only very few. In some mysterious sense, believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and united with Christ. Before this organic aspect of the union of Christ and a person can take place, they must enter into a peaceful relationship.⁶¹ Romans 5:10 and Colossians 1:21 provide the context of the relationship between every human that has been born of God. A real reconciliation between the two enemies, namely God and man, must occur first through the substitutionary atonement of Christ.

Reconciliation presupposes alienation and hostility. Paul describes the life of a non-believer as alienated and hostile toward God (Col 1:21). Therefore, to insist upon a logical priority of legal justification is simply to recognize that the legal status, that is, the real status of enmity between God and man, must take place first before the establishment of a relationship or union.⁶²

Equating the current form of Orthodox *theosis* to the evangelical doctrine of union with Christ moves evangelicalism to a sacramental understanding of the world and a synergistic anthropology.⁶³ It is impossible to maintain the current form of the doctrine

Quarterly 2, no. 2 (Winter 1954): 24.

⁶⁰Maximus the Confessor, *The Philokalia*, in vol. 2 of *The Complete Text: Compiled by St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth*, ed. and trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 180; Nicodemus et al., *The Philokalia*, 2:207.

⁶¹Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, 248.

⁶²*Ibid.*

⁶³Gavrilyuk, “The Retrieval of Deification,” 647, 657.

of *theosis* while maintaining a monergistic foundation.⁶⁴ Bird realizes the slippery concept of deification:

Union with Christ is, through the Holy Spirit, union with God. All the same, rather than speak in terms of *theosis* or deification, I think that *participation* and *transformation* are the most appropriate categories to describe how believers enter into the messianic glory of a consummated salvation. Because believers are united with Christ, co-crucified and co-resurrected with him, they participate in the benefits of his life as the faithful one, his death as the crucified one, his resurrection as the vindicated one, and his ascension as the exalted one. That involves a participation in Jesus' humanity, which transforms them into the body of Christ; a participation in the benefits of Jesus' death, which transfers them from alienation to reconciliation; and a participation in Jesus' divine life, which transmutes their state from death to immortality.⁶⁵

The Byzantine doctrine of *theosis* fails to make adequate biblical distinctions between union and communion with Christ. In deification, communion and union with Christ become indistinguishable. Finally, another question that remains cloudy is this: "Is deification about union and participation in the person of Christ or in the divine energies?"⁶⁶

Theosis, Holy Tradition, and Revelation

True Christian faith always turns to *sola Scriptura* for divine direction. The *ad fontes* of Christianity is Scripture alone. On the contrary, the Eastern Orthodox Church

⁶⁴Ganon Murphy attempts to construct a reformed doctrine of *theosis* by evoking the principle idea of *Christus in nobis*, a concept that seeks to explain the mystical union of Christ with the faithful. Murphy proposes that both Calvin and Luther placed a great emphasis upon the mystical union of Christ with the believer. Systematic theologians since the sixteenth century paid much more attention to the principle of "Christ for us" rather than "Christ in us." The author goes through multiple passages of Scripture as well as comments from notable theologians of the past in order to evaluate the place of *Christus in nobis* in Reformed soteriology. Subsequently, Murphy argues for a Reformed appropriation of *theosis* whilst maintaining a monergistic foundation. Murphy proposes a doctrine of deification that differs in many areas from the Greek Orthodox counterpart. Murphy's considerations only highlight the similarities of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*. However, it is dangerous to adopt the same name for doctrines that are not quite the same. For Eastern Orthodox theologians, *theosis* encompasses the primary structure of salvation. Therefore, what Murphy proposes is another doctrine of *theosis*. See Ganon Murphy, "Reformed Theosis?" *Theology Today* 65 (2008): 191–212.

⁶⁵Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 577.

⁶⁶Eduard Borysov, "The Doctrine of Deification in the Works of Pavel Florensky and John Meyendorff: A Critical Evaluation," *GOTR* 57, nos. 1–4 (Spring-Winter 2012): 129.

subscribes to a Scripture born in the tradition of the church. The church and tradition are the guiding principles for understanding the Word of God. Holy Tradition is the source of the Orthodox faith.⁶⁷ Hereby, one comes to the Reformation stance regarding Scripture being the sole authority for all matters pertaining to doctrine and life. However, the integrating of *theosis* with the “solus” of Protestantism can only occur via compromise. Lossky insists that “there is a deep and indissoluble bond between theology and mysticism, between doctrinal tradition and spirituality.”⁶⁸

The path of deification is predominantly and excessively apophatic. Any type of convergence or integration of justification, grace, and faith with deification can occur only in the context of the Eastern Orthodox view of revelation and tradition. Lossky explains,

Doctrinal tradition—beacons set up by the Church along the channel of the knowledge of God—cannot be separated from or opposed to mystical tradition: acquired experience of the mysteries of the faith. Dogma cannot be understood apart from experience; the fullness of experience cannot be had apart from true doctrine. It is for this reason that in the present work we have sought to present the tradition of the Eastern Church as a mystical theology—doctrine and experience mutually conditioning each other.⁶⁹

The doctrine of *theosis* operates within a mystical tradition and context. Deification cannot exist apart from an existential theology. The Agreed Statement on Revelation of the Lutheran-Orthodox international’s joint commission demonstrates amply this compromise:

The revelation of God, even as contained in Scripture, transcends all verbal expressions. It is hidden from all creatures, especially from sinful human beings (*palaios anthropos*). Its true meaning is revealed only through, the Holy Spirit in the living experience of salvation, which is accomplished in the Church through the

⁶⁷Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin, 1993), 195.

⁶⁸Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 236.

⁶⁹Ibid.

Christian life. This catholic experience of salvation in the Church is at the same time the only authentic expression of the true understanding of the Word of God.⁷⁰

To integrate *theosis* with evangelicalism is to assume that divine revelation, “even as contained in Scripture,” disconnects transcendently from the written Word of God and takes on a mystical-experiential perspective in the context of ecclesiastical tradition.⁷¹ Regarding the further interaction between Scripture, revelation, and tradition, the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission affirmed in 1987 that

the holy Tradition is the authentic expression of divine revelation in the living experience of the church, the body of the Word incarnate. The church in its sacraments and spiritual life transmits this “euangelion” of our salvation through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, apostolic faith is not only a matter of proclamation but an incarnate faith (Heb. 11:1; *enhypostatos pistis*, Maximus Confessor, *Quaestiones* 25, PG 90, 336D) in the church.⁷²

The joint statements of the fourth plenary of the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission session statements 11, 12, and the seventh plenary session statement 3, reinterpret *sola Scriptura* as pointing to the “Holy Tradition.” Moreover, the Tradition of the Church is an “ongoing action” of the Holy Spirit. The apophatic and mystical structures of *theosis* disconnects the preaching of the Word from salvation. The inscripturated revelation of God loses its decisiveness in salvation and is replaced by sacramentalism, mysticism, and contemplation. For the Eastern Church, the Holy Tradition, which forms the faith, is expressed not only through words but through prayer, gestures, actions, symbolisms, mysticism, and icons.⁷³

⁷⁰“Resource: Agreed Lutheran–Orthodox Statements, 1985–2011, The Lutheran World Federation,” accessed December 18, 2015, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-agreed-lutheran%E2%80%93orthodox-statements-1985-2011>, 7.

⁷¹Hinlicky, “Theological Anthropology,” 40.

⁷²“Resource: Agreed Lutheran–Orthodox Statements, 1985–2011, The Lutheran World Federation,” 3.

⁷³Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 195–207.

Theosis and Eastern Spirituality

A Resurrection of Eastern Orthodox Spiritual Practices

The Pseudo-Dionysian path of *theosis* includes “not only the mystical union, but all stages of the process leading to such a union as a part of *theosis*.”⁷⁴ Accepting the current Greek-Eastern Orthodox doctrine of deification is to accept all the means and constituents of deification. For the Orthodox, it is unimaginable not to identify deification with the Pseudo-Dionysian divine ascent or mystical union.⁷⁵ Salvation is deification, and deification involves a real participation in divinity. Thus, in the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition, *theosis* is “expounded upon the realm of participationist ontology.”⁷⁶ Cooper alleges that Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas popularized the Pseudo-Dionysian speculative and philosophical approach to *theosis*, which is nothing else apart from a revision of Neoplatonic philosophy.⁷⁷

God’s acts in redemption history become negligent when compared to the main event of unification with the divine Being. Mysticism matters more than actual cataphatic affirmations of God as seen in redemptive history. *Hesychasm* provides for a mystical practice that aids in the experience-communion of “uncreated light”⁷⁸ as a second regeneration. The heart of *hesychasm* is communion with God through stillness and “the Jesus Prayer,” with the goal to achieve unification of intellect and the heart.⁷⁹

⁷⁴Gavrilyuk, “The Retrieval of Deification,” 651.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Cooper, *Christification*, 106.

⁷⁷Ibid., 110.

⁷⁸Mantzaridis states that “the *hesychast* monks of Mount Athos, in receiving the radiance of uncreated light, were experiencing direct communion with God, together with all regenerative and deifying consequences of this.” Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, trans. Liadain Sherrard, Contemporary Greek Theologians (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 99.

⁷⁹Ibid., 112.

Mystical union with God cannot occur outside of prayer because, for the Orthodox, prayer is a fulfillment of the sacrament of union with God.⁸⁰ Lossky argues that in prayer,

the synergy, the harmony of two co-operating wills, continues throughout all the stages of the ascent towards God; but at a certain level when one leaves the psychic realm, in which the spirit is active, all movement is at an end, and even prayer itself ceases. This is the perfecting of prayer, and is called spiritual prayer or contemplation. “The mind has ascended here above prayer, and, having found what is more excellent, it desists from prayer.” It is absolute peace and rest—*ησυχία*.⁸¹

Building on this foundation, Veniamin argues that Christ’s example and the attestation of the Scriptures point to the fact that stillness and prayer always “precede the clear vision of God.”⁸² The hiddenness of God requires extreme apophaticism and extreme apophaticism requires *hesychasm*.⁸³

The doctrine of *theosis* carries the spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy. The “Jesus Prayer” is a fundamental element of Eastern contemplation and ascent toward *theosis*; it is a spiritual discipline. Mathewes-Green explains that “practising the Jesus Prayer helps you sharpen your ability to ‘tune in’ to his [God’s] presence, just as you

⁸⁰Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 207.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 207–8.

⁸²Veniamin remarks that “what the Transfiguration and all these other great events in the history of our salvation show us is that if we truly desire to meet God, and have a face to face vision of Him, we need to prepare ourselves for that encounter through prayer and stillness— through *hesychia*.” Christopher Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation: Theosis in Scripture and Tradition* (Dalton, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2013), 190.

⁸³Davies recognizes that “the proximity of Christian apophysis to Neoplatonism is apparent also in the predominance of terms such as *hesychia* and *apatheia* in the spiritual writings of the early monks. And Plotinus, who is the greatest of Neoplatonist thinkers, is emphasizing the place of silence in his own transcendental metaphysics of the One just at the moment when the Church is attempting to think the new Christianity within the terminology of the Greek philosophical systems. It is only in silence, for Plotinus, that we can approach the One, imitating within ourselves the same transcendence beyond language and being which is the very essence of the Ineffable and the Alone.” Plotinus’s apophatic illumination sounds very similar to Pseudo-Dionysian mysticism. See Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, eds., *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 210.

would practice scales to hone your ability to identify musical pitch.”⁸⁴ As part of the *hesychast* tradition, the goal of the Jesus Prayer is “a listening silence.”⁸⁵ The aim of the prayer is to descend into the heart and to bring the mind or *nous*⁸⁶ into the heart.⁸⁷ The continuous repetition of the Jesus Prayer is a spiritual practice whereby one makes him or herself available to the “blessing of *theosis*.”⁸⁸

The best way to learn how to pray is in the context of a community and more particularly with the aid of a “spiritual mother or father.”⁸⁹ In preparing to start practising the Jesus Prayer, one should receive the sacrament, go to confession, and practice charity. In order to say the prayer properly, one must prepare his or her heart and purify it of all sinful passions through various disciplines.⁹⁰ Most Orthodox have a special prayer place at home typically with at least two icons, one of Jesus on the right side and one of the Virgin Mary on the left.⁹¹ The Jesus Prayer exists in a sacramental and ascetic⁹² framework and it is “a means whereby we rediscover the grace received in baptism.”⁹³

⁸⁴Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Jesus Prayer: The Ancient Desert Prayer That Tunes the Heart to God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009), xi.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 157.

⁸⁶*Nous* in Evagrian terms does not refer to “the reasoning brain (*dianoia*), but the faculty whereby we apprehend the truth intuitively, through an act of inner vision, a sudden flash of insight . . . the nous is regarded as dwelling within the heart.” Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia, “Hesychasm,” ed. John Anthony McGuckin, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 242.

⁸⁷Mathewes-Green, *The Jesus Prayer*, 97.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 14.

⁹⁰George Dokos, ed., *The Watchful Mind: Teachings on the Prayer of the Heart* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014), 21.

⁹¹Mathewes-Green, *The Jesus Prayer*, 50–51, 64–65.

⁹²An anonymous *hesychast* of Mt. Athos writes, “The preparation of the heart consists of the following: constant fasting, countless hardships of the body, and extreme humility. Constant fasting

Calian points out the connection between *hesychasm* and the practice of interiority: “*Hesychasm*, is an internalised method of theologizing through prayer, associated with Byzantine monasticism. The ultimate aim is a mystical union with God in the context of silence.”⁹⁴ The doctrine of *theosis* travels through the road of *hesychasm* and leads necessarily to a new method of theology. Eastern spiritual practises inescapably lead people to new methods of theologizing that have experience at the center.⁹⁵

Dokos asserts that, “For man to be liberated from the passions and uproot them from his heart, it is necessary for him to acquire noetic prayer within his heart. For if noetic prayer is not established in the place from where the passions arise, they will not be eradicated.”⁹⁶ Thus, the Jesus Prayer and the “centering prayer” are a rebirth of the Eastern contemplative monastic and mystical tradition.⁹⁷ Orthodox spirituality invites one into an anthropology based upon existential spirituality in order to achieve a real union with God through the stages of purification and illumination.⁹⁸

The example of Finnish and ecumenical Lutherans who wished to converge the doctrine of justification and *theosis* demonstrates that accepting *theosis* requires an

cleanses the body of the faster workings and substance of evil desire, while bodily hardships mortify and deaden the unruly surges of the flesh . . . and when the prayer comes, it illumines the soul, the heart and the intellect with its luminous and bright rays, which spiritually come forth from the names of Jesus.” Dokos, *The Watchful Mind*, 36.

⁹³John Anthony McGuckin, ed., *The Concise Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), s.v. “Hesychast Controversy,” by Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia.

⁹⁴Carnegie Samuel Calian, *Theology without Boundaries: Encounters of Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 53.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*

⁹⁶Dokos, *The Watchful Mind*, 49.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 61–62.

⁹⁸Curtis Elliott, “Mission as Ascetic Experience: Hesychasm and the Anthropology of Sergei Horujy for Mission Theology,” *Mission Studies* 28, no. 2 (2011): 229.

acceptance of all other constituent parts. The 9th Plenary of the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission that took place in 1998, Sweden, is a pertinent demonstration of such an acceptance. Article 6 regarding “Salvation: Grace, Justification and Synergy” reads,

Lutherans, together with the Orthodox, affirm that salvation is real participation by grace in the nature of God as St. Peter writes: “that we may be partakers of the divine nature.” (II Pet. 1:4) That happens through our participation in the death and resurrection of the Lord in His body, in Whom all the fullness of God dwells (cf. Col. 2:9). This is the way in which salvation is realized as purification, illumination and glorification, also referred to as deification (theosis). This terminology has not been central in Lutheran tradition. Lutherans prefer to speak of the sanctification in the body of Christ who is Himself present in the faith of the believers. Lutherans, together with the Orthodox, affirm the reality of the believers’ participation in the divine life, in which they grow by the grace of God.⁹⁹

An assimilation of the Orthodox view of *theosis* with salvation will distort the gospel.

A Ladder of Divine Ascent

According to the Evagrian tradition, “The practice of virtues and the purification (*katharsis*) of mind or consciousness (*nous*) prepares the soul for a certain illumination (*theoria*).”¹⁰⁰ The journey toward *theosis* is a ladder of divine ascent, and the Jesus Prayer is a part of it. John of Climacus was instrumental in the development of the Jesus Prayer. Chryssavgis alleges that “with the exception of the Scriptures and the liturgical books, no other writing in Eastern Christendom has been studied, copied and translated to the same extent as John’s *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. It has shaped not only Eastern Orthodoxy, and especially its monastic tradition, but also the entire Christian world.”¹⁰¹

While John Climacus wrote *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* for a specific monastic audience, the writings had an impact upon all those seeking to have a

⁹⁹“Z1, Risto Saarinen,” accessed December 23, 2015, <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/ristosaarinen/lutheran-orthodox-dialogue/>.

¹⁰⁰Bruce Foltz, “Byzantine Theology and Spirituality,” ed. John Anthony McGuckin, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 161.

¹⁰¹John Chryssavgis, “St. John Klimakos,” ed. John Anthony McGuckin, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 435–36.

disciplined and ascetic-like observance and practice of spirituality.¹⁰² In this respect, Climacus offers an inward aspect of Eastern spirituality. The “inward” spiritual journey in life has thirty steps. Monks are to struggle and labor so as to reach Christ at the top of the ascent and, in the process, avoid demons and temptations that try to pull them down to the abyss.¹⁰³ The three main sections of the ascent involve a break with the world, the active life with the practice of virtues and struggle against one’s passions, and then a transition to the contemplative life with the goal to come into union with God.¹⁰⁴

Climacus’s principle of achieving the highest form of *hesychia* is not done in isolation but is accomplished amidst the assaults of everyday outward living.¹⁰⁵ The discipline of controlling the intellect finds its fulfillment by the continuous unceasing worship of God and invocation of the simple Jesus Prayer.¹⁰⁶ Once again, Climacus’s expression of spirituality evokes the stages of purification of the heart leading to an illuminative experience and an ascent to rapturous and glorious radiance.¹⁰⁷

As Orthodox spirituality erases the element of justification by faith alone and combines justification and sanctification, salvation becomes a progressive reality dependent on one’s efforts. Salvation or deification becomes a step-by-step process of

¹⁰²John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibhéid and Norman Russell, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), xxi.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 12–13.

¹⁰⁵“The start of stillness is the rejection of all noisiness as something that will trouble the depths of the soul. The final point is when one has no longer a fear of noisy disturbance, when one is immune to it. He who when he goes out does not go out in his intellect is gentle and wholly a house of love, rarely moved to speech and never to anger. The opposite to all this is manifest. Strange as it may seem, the hesychast is a man who fights to keep his incorporeal self shut up in the house of the body.” Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 262.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁰⁷Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 54–55.

action, synergy, and progression. Constant and unceasing synergistic communion with God ensures that the soul is purified, illumined, and finally united to God in ecstasy.

Even sanctification becomes a continuous step-by-step struggle of acquisition and rejection of vices that is disconnected from justification by faith alone. Climacus advises monks to fight temptation by elimination and hardship. The specific advice entails that “when temptation comes, our best weapons are sackcloth and ashes, all-night vigils standing up, hunger, the merest touch of water when we are thirsty, time passed among the burial places of the dead, and most importantly of all, humility of the heart.”¹⁰⁸ The acts of man become purging and propitiative.

Climacus’s steps 27–30 transition into the contemplative life, demonstrating the function and importance of contemplative prayer in coming into union with God. Climacus explains that “prayer is by nature a dialog and a union of man with God. Its effect is to hold the world together. It achieves a reconciliation with God. Prayer is the mother and daughter of tears. It is an expiation of sin, a bridge across temptation, a bulwark against affliction.”¹⁰⁹

Steps 29–30 are the pinnacle of the ascent. First, the soul attains dispassion. Climacus explains,

By dispassion I mean a heaven of the mind within the heart, which regards the artifice of demons as a contemptible joke. A man is truly dispassionate—and is known to be such—when he has cleansed his flesh of all corruption; when he has lifted his mind above everything created, and has made it master of all the senses; when he keeps his soul continually in the presence of the Lord and reaches out beyond the borderline of strength to Him. And there are some who would claim that dispassion is resurrection of the soul prior to that of the body, while others would insist that it is a perfect knowledge of God, a knowledge second only to that of the angels.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸See reference from step 15 on chastity. *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 274.

¹¹⁰Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 282.

The dispassionate person, because of his worthiness, has God always within him.¹¹¹ The reception of illumination causes him to know the will of the Lord as “a sort of inner voice,”¹¹² and “all human teaching is beneath him.”¹¹³

In the final step, one is perfectly united with God in love. Love, dispassion, and adoption have the same activity and “are distinguished only by name.”¹¹⁴ As man comes into union with God, the love of God reveals the splendor of his soul. People who have attained this angelic state are even devoid of any physical desire of food. Indeed, “The bodies of these incorruptible men are immune to sickness, for their bodies have been sanctified and rendered incorruptible by the flame of the chastity which has put out the flame [of the passions].”¹¹⁵

A Contemporary Ladder

Monasticism was the prime mover of Orthodox spirituality and the Church in general. The ascetic principles of ascent are for everyone as they finally reflect the hidden life of Christ and his journey of deification. Nassif states that “even though monastic life is a calling that is not meant for all Christians, its path is one and the same for monks and laypeople alike.”¹¹⁶ The difference lies in that there are some steps that are specific to monastic life, but the heart of the spiritual journey applies to everyone. All Christians should be ascetic strugglers.¹¹⁷

¹¹¹Ibid., 284.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Ibid.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 287.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 288.

¹¹⁶Nassif, *Four Views on Christian Spirituality*, 47–48.

¹¹⁷Averky (Taushev), *The Struggle for Virtue: Asceticism in a Modern Secular Society* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Publications, 2014), xix.

Papavassiliou demonstrates this principle by patterning *Thirty Steps to Heaven: The Ladder of Divine Ascent for All Walks of Life* after Climacus's monastic text so as to apply the lessons and principles to everyone.¹¹⁸ The point is that renunciation is not exclusive to monasticism but is a constitutive part of Christianity.¹¹⁹ The same applies to the acquisition of virtues. Moreover, everyone should practice the Jesus Prayer as a means of mastering desires.¹²⁰

The step-like pattern and exclusively monolateral view of salvation as a journey means that there are different gradations of Christianity. Some Christians are purer than other Christians. Since there is no distinction of justification from sanctification, some Christians are more holy than others in a positional way. Some “achieve” pure prayer while others do not.¹²¹ Some achieve dispassion¹²² while others do not. Achieving dispassion requires the prior achievement of all the virtues, purified sense, subjection of the will to the Spirit, and mastering the art of ceaseless prayer.

To be dispassionate means to have totally pure motives and desires, sanctification of the mind, detachment from material things, and an unclouded perception

¹¹⁸Vassilios Papavassiliou, *Thirty Steps to Heaven: The Ladder of Divine Ascent for All Walks of Life* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2013), 11–15.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 19–20.

¹²⁰For the Orthodox prayer involves different levels. According to St. Theophan the Recluse, prayer can be a spoken prayer, a mental prayer or a prayer of the heart. In the Orthodox Church, icons, candles, and incense are useful modes of involving human sense. Other actions include making the sign of the cross, kissing the Bible and icons, using a prayer rope (*komboskini*), and makings prostrations. “Thus our prayer is not passive but active, and it involves our whole being—body and soul.” The prayer of the heart, which is not the same thing as the Jesus Prayer, cannot be achieved by anyone. “When one attains prayer of the heart, everything becomes prayer.” Papavassiliou states that “very few acquire the prayer of the heart; very few truly become prayer.” Pure prayer or prayer of the heart must involve ascetic struggle and virtue, purification from sin, and mastering of passions. *Ibid.*, 130–31, 221, 228–29, 230–31.

¹²¹*Ibid.*, 230.

¹²²Papavassiliou defines dispassion as “a state of being in which all the passions have been transformed into virtues.” *Ibid.*, 233.

of God's will.¹²³ For Palamas, impassibility is attainable and it "does not consist in mortifying the passionate part of the soul, but in removing it from evil to good, and directing its energies toward divine things . . . and the impassible man is one who no longer possesses any evil dispositions."¹²⁴ Only the few who achieve dispassion are able to truly know God's will.¹²⁵

Nassif explains succinctly that "Orthodox spirituality is caught more than it is taught."¹²⁶ Salvation is an experience along the journey. The Orthodox do not see the definitive aspect of salvation, only the progressive. For Orthodoxy, a person is not saved; he or she is *being* saved. If *theosis* is the ultimate end of the journey, then what is the point in achieving it in this life, according to the broad definition of *theosis*? Since the definition of *theosis* in a strict sense is for the afterlife and it involves a passive state of eternal becoming, then there is no real reason to attain it in this present life.

The overwhelming majority of laity in Eastern Christendom have very little awareness of the doctrinal complexity of *theosis*. Despite the claims of experiential life over doctrinal knowledge, the Orthodox Church presents salvation as a daunting, mystical, apophatic, and complex issue. Mathewes-Green observes aptly that "*theosis* is a vast and daunting goal even to imagine."¹²⁷ If salvation is just a process and one can lose his or her salvation and thus fail to attain deification, then what is the guarantee of

¹²³Papavassiliou, *Thirty Steps to Heaven*, 233.

¹²⁴Palamas, *The Triads*, 54.

¹²⁵Mantzaridis grants that the term of dispassion "entered Christian tradition from Stoic philosophy. According to the Stoic conception, he who is truly wise should free himself from passions and achieve spiritual tranquility, for the passions obstruct the supremacy of the reason in the human soul and do not permit any objective appraisal or evaluation of things. Later, Plotinus established a connection between dispassion and likeness to God: 'One will not be wrong in calling the state in which the soul is intellectual and dispassionate likeness to God.'" Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man*, 77.

¹²⁶Nassif, *Four Views on Christian Spirituality*, 28.

¹²⁷Mathewes-Green, *The Jesus Prayer*, 14.

salvation? None, apart from a continuous works struggle. Orthodox baptismal regeneration and sacramental participation accounts for nothing in the end.

Only the very few who have attained dispassion could have any real assurance of salvation. Even so, they could still lose their salvation because they are still “being saved.” The Orthodox contradiction is that one can participate in God’s deifying uncreated energies, become “god” by energies, and be rendered uncreated¹²⁸ on account of uncreated grace, and yet still not be saved in the end. A person can be initiated on the journey through sacramental regeneration and participation but eventually lose his or her way and perish. Mantzaridis states that “the process of man’s deification, begun in this life, becomes perfect and irreversible in the age to come The resurrection of the faithful, which is linked to Christ’s resurrection, brings them to their definitive adoption by God and deification.”¹²⁹

Theosis provides no real assurance for anybody in this life. Ultimately, the initiation, sustenance, continuation, and consummation of salvation is very much dependent on whether a person proves to be worthy of salvation by his works. The doctrine of deification is so mysterious and complex that essentially it is unutterable, and it is “impossible to express in logical forms.”¹³⁰ The Greek Byzantine Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* spoils the gospel of salvation by substitution, addition, interposition, and disproportion.

Further Remarks

The mystical theology and Eastern Orthodox spirituality of deification disconnect prayer from Scripture and ultimately leads people away from the sufficiency

¹²⁸Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man*, 112.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, 117.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, 127.

of the Scriptures. Contemplation becomes a cessation of intellectual activity and a means to a mysterious experience of divine light. On the contrary, Christians should practice the spiritual discipline of meditation as a deep thinking of biblical truths for the purpose of application. Biblical meditation should involve filling the mind with true thoughts about God and mental activity leading to obedience of God's Word.

Encountering Christ is not a mystical experience, but "an encounter with God's Word mediated through the Holy Spirit."¹³¹ The *scala* (ladder) of Orthodox spirituality presupposes a semi-Pelagian view of spirituality where the human will is the determining factor of deification. External ritualistic practice and monastic mediated mysticism do not create faith nor introduce genuine spiritual practices.¹³² Entrance into the kingdom of God is only by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The righteous live by faith alone (Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38). The key to true biblical spirituality is Spirit-mediated, Word-focused, and purely Christocentric.

Works in the life of a believer are never meritorious. In Luther's words, "Good and righteous works will never make a good and righteous person, but a good and righteous person does good and righteous works."¹³³ The theology of *theosis* causes a catastrophic fusion and confusion of the *ordo salutis*. The absence of the distinction between justification and sanctification causes confusion and misrepresentation of the role of faith and works in salvation. The Greek Orthodox doctrine of deification makes union with God a performance-based event.

A person's acceptance before God is based solely on the work of Christ apart from any works. In Orthodox theology there is no distinction between definitive or positional and progressive sanctification. Portraying *theosis* as a progressive

¹³¹Martin Luther, *Luther's Spirituality*, ed. and trans. Philip D. Krey and Peter D. S. Krey, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), xiv.

¹³²*Ibid.*, 57.

¹³³*Ibid.*, 83.

transformation or progressive sanctification is misguided, dangerous, and inconsiderate of the specifics and nuances of the *theosis* doctrine. The Greek Orthodox doctrine of deification will reinterpret theological, soteriological, ecclesiological, and spiritual doctrinal positions and aspects of Evangelicalism.¹³⁴ There is no middle ground.

The doctrine of *theosis* is now organically interconnected with all practices of Eastern Orthodoxy.¹³⁵ The acceptance of the current Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* is an acceptance of Eastern Orthodoxy. As Gavrilyuk states,

If I may venture a conditional forecast, deification, provided that its full implications are realized, will work like a time-bomb in due course producing a “creative destruction” of the soteriological visions developed by the Churches of the Reformation. Whether the idea will have the power to move these churches closer to the Christian East in other respects, say by developing a sacramental understanding of the world or synergistic anthropology, time will show.¹³⁶

I Said You Are Gods

An Overview

One of the biblical texts that has been used in support of deification is “I said, ‘You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you’” (Ps 82:6). Russell insists that the quotation from Psalm 82 “is not only the older text but also the more important.”¹³⁷ Mosser labels Psalm 82:6 as the “chief proof-text” for the doctrine of deification.¹³⁸ The Orthodox interpretation of Psalm 82:6 and the associated passage of John 10:33-36 has an important place in the understanding and support of the doctrine of deification.

¹³⁴For example, according to Borysov, “The means to deification are basically aspects of ecclesiological life.” Examples of means include holy fasts, holy relics, and holy sacraments. See Borysov, “The Doctrine of Deification in the Works of Pavel Florensky and John Meyendorff,” 124.

¹³⁵Perry T. Hamalis and Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Toward a Godly Mode of Being: Virtue as Embodied Deification,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 26, no. 3 (August 2013): 278.

¹³⁶Gavrilyuk, “The Retrieval of Deification,” 657.

¹³⁷Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 56.

¹³⁸Carl Mosser, “The Earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalm 82, Jewish Antecedents, and the Origin of Christian Deification,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 56, no. 1 (April 2005): 30.

Eastern Orthodoxy follows a patristic interpretation of Psalm 82, applying the terminology of “gods” to Christians. Nispel suggests that Psalm 82 was used frequently as an apologetic christological text against the Jews.¹³⁹ Moreover, the late Eastern fathers regularly interpreted the designation of “gods” in Psalm 82 as a proof text for deification.¹⁴⁰ Tertullian and Cyprian used Psalm 82 in connection to John 10:35–36 as a Christological argument for the deity of Christ. The premise from the Gospel of John was that if righteous people can be called gods then Jesus the righteous Messiah can certainly claim equality with God.¹⁴¹

Mosser explicates the proposition that the exegesis of Psalm 82:6 has its origins in the interpretive ideology of Second Temple Judaism.¹⁴² The exegetical methods of the Psalm was an adaptation of previous Rabbinic interpretive traditions.¹⁴³ According to Mosser, the main idea in Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Clement is the idea of divine sonship, the gift of adoption, immortality and then derivatively the designation of believers as “gods.”¹⁴⁴

The Orthodox Study Bible explains that Psalm 82 [81 LXX] portrays Christ as the judge. It is a prophetic Psalm that

calls church members gods, which is the same thing as calling them sons of the Most High (vv. 1, 6). For they were made gods and the sons of God by the new birth in baptism. However, these gods are warned by their God to take care of the

¹³⁹Nispel follows the early Christian *testimonia* collection hypothesis.

¹⁴⁰Mark D. Nispel, “Christian Deification and the Early Testimonia,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 53, no. 3 (August 1999): 290–91.

¹⁴¹*Ibid.*, 295–96.

¹⁴²Mosser, “The Earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalm 82, Jewish Antecedents, and the Origin of Christian Deification,” 35.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*, 30, 35, 46, 67–72.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 30, 46–47.

poor and needy (vv. 2–7). For Christ rose from the dead (v. 8), and “He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead” (Creed).¹⁴⁵

The Orthodox interpretation has strong patristic roots. Orthodoxy follows the methodology of Clement of Alexandria and other Fathers in connecting deification and Psalm 82. Clement explains, “‘God stood in the congregation of the gods; He judgeth in the midst of the gods.’ Who are they? Those that are superior to pleasure, who rise above the passions, who know what they do—the Gnostics, who are greater than the world. ‘I said, Ye are Gods; and all sons of the Highest.’”¹⁴⁶ For Clement, the Christian Gnostic¹⁴⁷ reaches the state of a “god” by controlling his passions and thus freeing himself from fleshly desires.¹⁴⁸ But for Clement and, by close connection, Orthodoxy, the use and interpretation of *theoi* (gods) is influenced from a combination of Gnostic and Platonic ideas that have been adapted or stripped from elements that are incompatible with Christianity.¹⁴⁹

Is It Not Written in Your Law?

In referring to the connection of Psalm 82:6 and John 10:34-36, Russell disputes that Jesus quoted Psalm 82:6 in order to prove his divinity but rather to highlight the divine potentiality of his hearers. It was an intent to “draw attention to the potential sonship of his hearers.”¹⁵⁰ Therefore, for Russell, the location of the context of Psalm 82

¹⁴⁵Athanasius Academy of Orthodox Theology, *The Orthodox Study Bible*, loc. 43203, Kindle.

¹⁴⁶Fathers of the Second Century: *Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1885), 535.

¹⁴⁷The Orthodox Study Bible gives the impression that the main difference between Gnosticism and Christianity is that the Gnostics tried to attain knowledge of God without becoming godlike. St. Athanasius Academy of Orthodox Theology, *The Orthodox Study Bible*, loc. 104036, Kindle.

¹⁴⁸Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 130.

¹⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁵⁰Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 57.

is the “sons of the Most High,” and hence the reference to “gods” in John 10:36 is to “those to whom the word of God came.”¹⁵¹

In support of the Orthodox position, Russell employs a line of thought similar to that of Mosser, which reads Psalm 82 as a summary of salvation history with an emphasis on divine sonship.¹⁵² In John 10, Jesus as the Word of God comes in the midst of “gods” and calls them to receive the word of God or perish like those people of Psalm 82:7.¹⁵³ If Jesus’ hearers receive the word, then they will become “gods,” if not then they relinquish the opportunity of deification. For that reason, Russell applies with synonymous parallelism the word “gods” to glorified believers via the idea of divine adopted sonship in Christ.¹⁵⁴

Russell fails to clarify whether the actual receiving of the word of God makes people gods or merely enables them to be gods. The confusion of making and enabling is evident when Russell states, “Receiving the word of God makes people gods, that is to say, enables them to share in immortality and incorruption.”¹⁵⁵ There is an enormous difference between “I am” and “I have been enabled.” If, according to Russell and Orthodoxy, receiving the word makes one a god, then sharing in immortality and incorruptibility becomes a current state. But how can this be when in Orthodoxy one “is being saved” but is not actually saved now?

According to the principles of deification and *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, there is a time gap between participating in Jesus sacramentally through baptism and the

¹⁵¹Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 57.

¹⁵²Ibid.; Mosser, “The Earliest Patristic Interpretations of Psalm 82, Jewish Antecedents, and The Origin of Christian Deification,” 30, 73. Russell conveniently adopts Mosser’s idea that has the Church fathers taking up antecedent Jewish interpretations and rabbinic exegesis of Psalm 82.

¹⁵³“Nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince.”

¹⁵⁴Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 59.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 58.

Eucharist and reaching the state of dispassion and *theotic* love. Essentially, what Russell's interpretation of John 10:34–36 suggests is that one can participate in the divine life now. One can become god and share in the divine life of Jesus and thus participate in immortality and incorruption now. In Russell's words, "We also possess the fullness of life here and now."¹⁵⁶

Does this not suggest unquestionably that a person can be saved now? How does this reconcile with the doctrine of salvation as deification and thus salvation as a work in progress? Obviously, the doctrine of deification adds a moral dimension to salvation. There is a potentiality to become "god," but one has to work at it in order to attain it. Russell's and Orthodoxy's oscillation causes great obscurity to the gospel. Does one become "god" by receiving Jesus? Or does one receive Jesus in order to start the journey of deification and strive to attain the likeness of God? Russell's quotation of Clement suggests the latter: "Thus only the Christian is the true philosopher, because it is only through baptism in combination with the pursuit of the moral life that likeness to God can be attained."¹⁵⁷

Revisiting Psalm 82

Indeed, Psalm 82 portrays God as the supreme Judge presiding over a council. Tate observes that the use of the word "council" in verse 1 is a reference to "the congregation of Israel (Num 27:17; 31:16; Josh 22:16-17; Ps 74:2)."¹⁵⁸ The second part of verse 1, "in the midst of gods," is very pertinent to the question of deification. The four most popular suggestions for the identity of the "gods" include heathen gods, angelic spirits, which are sometimes called "sons of God" (cf. Job 1:6; 38:7), human judges or

¹⁵⁶Papavassiliou, *Thirty Steps to Heaven*, 58.

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁵⁸Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 20 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 329.

rulers, and, finally, the people of Israel.¹⁵⁹ Kidner and Longman III interpret “god” to mean spiritual beings,¹⁶⁰ while Calvin reasons that “the name gods is to be understood of judges, on whom God has impressed special marks of his glory.”¹⁶¹

However, it is unlikely that God would be holding accountable angelic beings for showing partiality and judging unjustly (v. 2). Angelic beings are not responsible to give justice to the weak and the fatherless, to maintain the right of the afflicted and destitute, to rescue the weak and needy, and to deliver them from the hand of the wicked (vv. 3–4). Moreover, demonic spirits hate to do God’s will in any case.

The psalmist expresses that the “gods” have abandoned their God-given role to exercise justice under God’s righteous rule. Following such observations, it seems likely that “gods” were in general all of Israel who had a God-given responsibility of justice and obedience to the Law, and, more uniquely, those particular people—judges, officials, or rulers—who had been delegated divine prerogatives and responsibilities to exercise justice.

In verses 2–5, God the supreme Judge who holds judgement (v. 1) brings into question the unjust judges or people who have failed to carry out righteous judgement. The Old Testament repeatedly depicts God as the righteous judge who renders justice and punishes the wicked. Pentiuć argues that the Pentateuch describes Yahweh as the judge of the whole world who, in his capacity as a supreme Judge, “delegates to certain individuals the responsibility to administer justice.”¹⁶² Hence, the primary responsibility

¹⁵⁹Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Psalms 73-150: Songs for the People of God*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 40.

¹⁶⁰Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vols. 15-16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 305.

¹⁶¹John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 2:330.

¹⁶²T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), s.v. "Judge," by E. J. Pentiuć.

of the people addressed as gods in Psalm 82 was to be fair while presiding over cases, to render “justice,” and to punish the wicked.¹⁶³

God the righteous Judge who has ultimately delegated jurisdiction to human judges holds into account the unrighteous ones. God reprimands the “gods” for their injustice and failure to carry out their delegated authority.¹⁶⁴ Even if one does not hold the view that the “gods” in question are unrighteous judges, the final indictment against them does not shed any favourable light upon them. Consequently, regardless of which reading one assumes, the “gods” cannot be assimilated with those who trust the Lord or those who are or who could be deified.¹⁶⁵

The indictment upon the tyrant and unfair “gods” who have neither knowledge nor understanding and walk in darkness (v. 5) will come swiftly. Though the admonition has come to them (vv. 2–4), they refuse to listen and continue “thoughtless in the neglect of their duty.”¹⁶⁶ In verse 6, the word of God comes to the unrighteous rulers and this seems to be the most natural reading of the corresponding passage in John 10:34–35, where “Christ speaks of those as called gods to whom the word of God came.”¹⁶⁷ Tate’s observation that Psalm 82 has a structure similar to that of prophetic literature in the form

¹⁶³Pentiuc, s.v. “Judge.”

¹⁶⁴Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary on Books III-V of the Psalms*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 296.

¹⁶⁵Tate explores an alternative where he does not exclude a dual interpretation of the gods being related to patron deities and by extension unjust rulers. In the mind of the unfaithful people/nations “the gods as patrons of the various nations were responsible for the type of kings, judges and officials they appointed and empowered; however, the gods, not even Yahweh, do not act directly. Their will is administered by human agents, who are extensions of the divine presence of earthly affairs. Thus the judgment of the gods is at the same time a judgement of their human agents.” Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 20:341.

¹⁶⁶Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 2:333.

¹⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 334.

of “scribal prophecy”¹⁶⁸ connects the prophetic phraseology of “to whom the word of God came” with the unrighteous “gods.”

Doubtless, the main character of this psalm is God and not the “gods.” The Psalmist opens in verse 1 with God in a supreme position, continues with God’s speech in verses 2–7, and ends with an anticipation of hope and restoration and perfect justice by God himself.

Revisiting John 10:34–36

The question of the Jews about Jesus’ Messianic credentials in verse 24 brings the revelation of Jesus’ functional unity with the Father (v. 30). Jesus challenges their perception of God as “an undifferentiated monad.”¹⁶⁹ The Jews perceive unequivocally Jesus’ claim of “oneness with God” and in anger charge him of blasphemy for his violation of monotheism (vv. 31–33).¹⁷⁰ The specific charge of the Jews against Jesus was that he, being a mere man, made himself God (v. 33).

Jesus had already told the Jews (v. 25) that his works bear witness of his person. Nobody can convict him of sin (John 8:46), nobody can bring legitimate charges against him, and thus his works prove his union with the Father (John 5:36; 10:38; 14:10–11). In essence, Jesus’ works testify of his relationship with the Father. In John 10:38, Jesus explained to the Jews that even though they do not believe his words, his works still prove his claim to deity. No one could perform the signs that Jesus did if God were not with him (John 3:2).

¹⁶⁸Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 333.

¹⁶⁹Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 50.

¹⁷⁰D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 394–96.

According to Tasker, when Jesus quotes Psalm 82, he

points out to them [Jews] that even within their Scriptures, whose validity is permanent and beyond dispute, men in the persons of the judges receive from God Himself the title *gods* (Ps. LXXXII 6). They were entitled to be so designated, for they represented, however imperfectly, the divine will in so far as they were called upon to administer God's word. In the light of this verse from the Psalms, Jesus cannot therefore be legitimately denounced as blasphemer for calling Himself by what is *nominally* a lesser title *Son of God* (36). It is, to be sure only *nominally* a lesser title, for the judges as well as the lawgivers and prophets of the old dispensation, as is pointed out in verse 35, were those *unto whom the word of God came*, while Jesus is *Himself*, sent by God, the very Word of God made flesh. The Old Testament, nevertheless, here envisages the possibility of a very close association between the divine and the human in the execution of the divine will, such as is to be found to perfection in the man Christ Jesus.¹⁷¹

Hence, in defending his claims, Jesus presents the argument from Psalm 82:6–7 as a single line of argument. If Scripture addresses others as “gods” and “sons of the Most High” (i.e., equivalent of sons of God), there is no biblical objection to Jesus' claim that he is the Son of God.¹⁷² Köstenberger explains that Jesus argues in “typical rabbinic fashion, from the lesser to the greater”¹⁷³ to prove the illegitimacy of his opponents' arguments.¹⁷⁴

Jesus' reference of the term “gods” does not suggest that humans are deified or that they could be ontological partakers of the divine energies of God. The main thrust of the passage has nothing to do with the Byzantine Orthodox doctrine of deification. Rather, Jesus' point is that if the rulers or Israel can in some sense be called “gods” by the Scriptures, then it is much more appropriate for “him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world” (10:36)¹⁷⁵ to be called the Son of God.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 134–35.

¹⁷²Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, 397.

¹⁷³The overwhelming majority of scholars subscribe to this view. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 315.

¹⁷⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old*

Deification and Glorification

Indeed, the salvation that God offers freely to wretched, unworthy, and incapable sinners is much more than an escape from the fires of hell. The Lord of glory will glorify believers. The propitiatory work of Christ precedes and conditions salvation,¹⁷⁷ and believers can only receive such glory only on the merit of Christ. John, the beloved apostle, exclaims, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God. And so we are” (1 John 3:1). Salvation is a gift from God. “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12–13).

The apostle John grounds glorification in the saving act of God. The apostle first establishes that “we are God’s children now” and then, on that basis, he presents the eschatological hope of believers.¹⁷⁸ The repetition of “children of God” and John’s appeal to consider the greatness of God’s love in verses 1–2 “speaks of the Father ‘giving’ his love, as it were a gift to be received.”¹⁷⁹ God bestows his love on the elect—those who believe in Jesus’ name (John 1:12)—as a procreative act and thus adopts them into his family.¹⁸⁰ Therefore, the salvation of believers is a present reality along with

Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), s.v. “John,” by Andreas J. Köstenberger.

¹⁷⁶Köstenberger asserts that “Jesus’ a fortiori argument follows the lines of a syllogism that may be expressed as follows (Johnson 1908:33, citing Lenski 1942:765): *major premise*: Scripture cannot be broken; *minor premise*: Scripture calls human beings to whom God’s word came ‘gods’; *conclusion*: there is nothing inherently blasphemous in Jesus referring to himself as ‘Son of God.’” *Ibid.*, 466.

¹⁷⁷Archibald Alexander Hodge, “The Ordo Salutis,” *The Princeton Review*, June 1878, 304.

¹⁷⁸Ian H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 171.

¹⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁸⁰Robert W. Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 175.

eschatological elements of glorification.¹⁸¹ Jesus “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:21).

God’s will is to conform believers into the image of his Son (Rom 8:29). The tension of “already but not yet” is a daily reality in the life of believers. Akin states, “Romans 8:29 teaches us that we are being conformed to the image of Jesus, and 1 John 3:2 tells us it will reach that intended goal when we see Him as He is, as the resurrected and glorified King of glory.”¹⁸² God’s elect—the ones whom God has entered into a covenant with and has forgiven, justified, and sanctified—will one day be glorified.

Horton clarifies,

Even here, at the very end of the *ordo*, we see the inextricable connection of the forensic verdict of God’s Word that inaugurates the new creation with our progressive re-creation according to Christ’s image. These inseparable aspects actually converge in our glorification, when there will no longer be a “not yet” to our salvation; no longer a *simil iustus et peccator*. Rather, God’s declaration that we are righteous in Christ will correspond to the actual reality of our moral condition.¹⁸³

Believers will be raised in glory and partake by grace of God’s immortality (1 Cor 15:20–23; Phil 3:21; Col 3:4). The forensic element of justification weaves through the entire *ordo*. The renewal of the inner man (progressive sanctification) occurs on the basis of justification and through the union of the Christian with Christ.¹⁸⁴ Lastly, according to Bavinck, “The resurrection of the dead in general, therefore, is primarily a judicial act of God. But for believers this act is filled with abundant consolation.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹Ibid., 177–78.

¹⁸²Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in 1, 2, & 3 John*, Christ-Centered Exposition (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2014), 60–61.

¹⁸³Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 689.

¹⁸⁴Ibid., 706.

¹⁸⁵Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, And New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 693.

Evangelical theology and, more particularly, Reformed theology comes the closest to deification in discussing the doctrine of glorification as “both final vindication and restoration of the image.”¹⁸⁶ Even so, when one considers the totality of the current Greek Orthodox doctrine of deification, the differences, distortions, excess emphasis, and misrepresentations overshadow the similarities. In Protestant theology, the effects of justification are worked out in glorification and the distinctions in the *ordo salutis* ensure that there is no room at all for human boasting. God’s work of salvation in history comes through the summons of the gospel whereby people are called to God and are made right with God through faith in Christ.¹⁸⁷

Conclusion

The cosmology of Eastern Orthodox theology has a strong continuity between God and the creation and a strong Pseudo-Dionysian flavor of a personal cosmos with a circular existence resulting in the deification of humanity as an imperative. The overarching vision of *theosis* is a reclaiming of cosmic unity through the deification of humanity. The Greek Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* portrays salvation as a participatory union with God through the uncreated energies of God. For Orthodoxy, the creation of humanity entails a creative capacity of a potential toward *theosis*, and it requires a sharp distinction between “image and likeness.” However, the anthropological basis of deification draws upon a misinterpretation of Genesis 1:26–27, and, thus, the fall does not cause a distortion and loss of the *imago Dei* but of the likeness of man to God.

The restoration of humanity toward *theosis* entails a view of deprived fellowship and communion with God without original guilt, real enmity, or total inability on the part of mankind. In *theosis*, sin is more a disease, the integrity of human will is

¹⁸⁶Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 697.

¹⁸⁷Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 454.

intact, and humanity still has the ability to cooperate with God toward deification. In Orthodoxy, rational beings are ontologically good. *Theosis* employs a semi-Pelagian view of sin and freedom of the will. Consequently, the Greek Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* diminishes the value and impact of Jesus' substitutionary atonement. In contrast, the Bible presents sin and guilt as inherited, enslaving, entirely pervading, and causing a total alienation between humanity and God.

Eastern Orthodox theology is mystical. The theological foundation of *theosis* places great emphasis on an ineffable mystical encounter and is excessively apophatic. Though different from Neo-Platonic philosophy, Orthodoxy still maintains some methodological elements of mystical, contemplative and apophatic connections. Eastern Christendom makes a distinction between God's essence and divine energies to deal with the tension between God's immanence and transcendence. The divine energies are uncreated, eternal, and allow for an ontological participation in the Trinity. *Theosis* is a complete participatory union with God's divine energies.

Divine uncreated energies are a natural procession of God but create a mode of existence of God that is somewhat inferior to his essence. The current Orthodox distinctions in essence and energies are systematic and not as general as the distinctions of the early church fathers. The current systematic presentation of Orthodoxy is a requirement for a feasible ontological participatory union with God, namely the divine uncreated energies of God. Nevertheless, this distinction causes a loss in God's simplicity, and presents an impersonal union of humanity with God. Regardless of the essence/energies distinction, the current systematic presentation of the distinction does not avoid completely the problem of a full ontological participation in the Trinity.

The requirement of an excessive apophaticism in the maintenance of the doctrine of *theosis* impacts the importance of the knowledge of God through God's self-revelation. Still *theosis* encourages more abstract, contemplative and mystical union with God and diminishes the importance of the Bible as the objective, God-breathed,

infallible, inerrant Word of God that is sufficient for salvation, life, and godliness. The doctrine of deification promotes a mystical, ineffable, and contemplative experiential knowledge of God. The Byzantine systematic presentation of *theosis* is influenced fundamentally by Pseudo-Dionysian apophaticism. The mystical doctrine of *theosis* impacts Orthodox hermeneutics and depresses the value or emphasis of literal historical grammatical exegesis.

Instead, the Orthodox hermeneutic perspective emphasizes a circular approach in the relationship between tradition, mystical theology, and the Church. What characterizes the worship liturgy of Orthodoxy is mysticism and a typological, allegorical, and anagogical interpretation. Contemplative vision is more important than literal truth in the form of definite written propositions. What counts most is a transcendent participatory ascent leading to a vision of the divine and thus true knowledge of God. *Theosis* requires a mystical experience and an ecstatic participatory union with God beyond mind, speech, and knowing.

The Orthodox church employs 2 Peter 1:3–4 as strong support for *theosis*. However, once again, Orthodox interpretation relies heavily on certain patristic strands and connects synergistic, sacramental, and metaphysical ideas in a fashion that is not supported by the text itself. On the contrary, moralism and sacramentalism are not the driving forces of the divine promises of God. Participation in the divine nature is not ontological or metaphysical but a sharing of the moral qualities and excellences of Christ. The Petrine passage in question is an exposition of Christlikeness and not of an ontological participation in the divine energies.

Synergism, moral rules, sacramentalism, and mysticism comprise the heart of the doctrine of deification. *Theosis* undermines the biblical view of grace as God's unmerited favor and fails to make distinctions between justification, sanctification, and glorification. The sacramental acts of Orthodoxy represent the sacramental nature of deification and Orthodox soteriology. *Hesychast* spirituality aims to connect

sacramentalism with the incarnation of Christ, where the Lord assumes the nature of man in order to divinize it and thus make divinization possible for everyone. Palamite *hesychast* spirituality and deification assume an extrapolation of the Chalcedonian definition and make the incarnation of Christ redemptive. The Orthodox concept of deification violates the integrity of Christ's humanity and risks confusion and intermingling of the two natures of Christ. The current Orthodox doctrine of deification misuses, and extrapolates dangerously the Chalcedonian definition and the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum* bypassing the fundamental doctrines of justification and penal substitutionary atonement.

Since the doctrine of *theosis* absorbs and confuses the doctrines of justification, sanctification, and glorification in a mystical amalgam one may assimilate *theosis* with any of the former doctrines. Recently, Mannermaa and others have initiated a new quest for Luther's theology in an endeavour to present justification in participatory terms and thus make justification converge with *theosis*. Mannermaa's view of justification diminishes severely the forensic elements of justification, resembling Osiander's heresy, and also adopts a semi-Pelagian posture akin to sacramentalism and a synergistic view of salvation.

The Eastern paradigm of *theosis* shifts the center of salvation from monergism to synergism, sacramentalism, and mysticism. The Pseudo-Dionysian spirituality of the East promotes a mystical contemplative approach to union with God via divine ascent. The function of contemplative prayer with its Evagrian and monastic elements aims for a beatific vision, dispassion, and participation in the divine love. The spiritual struggles make sanctification look like justification and portray salvation to be a progressive journey toward *theosis*. Ultimately, the doctrine of deification spoils the gospel by misrepresentation, additions, and disproportions.

Psalm 82:6 has been used as a chief proof text for deification. The designation of "gods" in Psalm 82 does not suggest a participatory union with God, but it is an

indictment against unjust rulers and people. When Jesus quotes Psalm 82:6 in John 10:34–36, he does not suggest that people could be partakers of divine energies. Rather, Jesus makes an argument from the lesser to the greater to prove the biblical illegitimacy of his opponents' accusations against him.

The Eastern Orthodox doctrine of deification assaults justification by faith alone and elevates the role of works in salvation. *Theosis* causes confusion in the *ordo salutis* through an amalgamation of the elements of justification, sanctification, and glorification. The Eastern Orthodox view of *theosis* overemphasizes and misconceives while distorting the doctrine of glorification by making it the regulatory soteriological factor through semi-Pelagianism, mysticism, sacramentalism, and excessive apophatic theology. Although the Eastern Orthodox view of *theosis* as salvation and redemption appears to have some commonalities with the doctrine of union and communion with Christ, it misconstrues salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

The Orthodox view falters because it fuses and confuses the *ordo salutis*, overstating and ultimately misunderstanding a theology of human glory. The Eastern Orthodox view of *theosis* hyper-emphasizes the importance of human glory as the purpose of creation through an ontological union with God. The saving acts of the Lord Jesus Christ are not just an incarnational enablement to a metaphysical participatory *theotic* union with the Trinity through the divine uncreated energies. The final consummation of adoption and thus glorification of believers is not a mere glorification of themselves but a manifestation of God's own glory. God calls people by his Spirit into his own kingdom and glory in Christ (1 Thess 2:12; 1 Pet 5:10).¹⁸⁸ So, the glorification of believers is not the pinnacle and purpose of creation, but it is to marvel at the glory of

¹⁸⁸John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2013), 1012–13.

God manifested in all the acts of salvation history. Behold what manner of love the Father has given to us. Behold the glory of God. Worship God and enjoy him forever.

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ABSTRACT

AN EVANGELICAL CRITIQUE OF THE GREEK ORTHODOX DOCTRINE OF DEIFICATION

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This thesis examines and critiques from an evangelical perspective, the Greek Orthodox soteriological doctrine of *theosis*. In view of many exegetical and theological considerations, the thesis determines that the Eastern/Greek Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* overemphasizes and misconceives while distorting a doctrine of glorification by making it the regulatory soteriological factor through semi-Pelagianism, mysticism, sacramentalism, and excessive apophaticism. Chapter 1 presents an overview of the theological terrain of *theosis* and sets the context and direction of the paper. Chapter 2 traces the cosmological and anthropological foundations of *theosis* and the resulting ontological dependence, semi-Pelagianism, and synergism toward deification. Chapter 3 examines the excessive theological apophaticism of *theosis*, the essence/energies distinction, the germinating mystical approach, and the restraint of the role of the written revelation in the knowledge of God. Chapter 4 defines and explains the nature and function of defying grace in *theosis* in a context of *hesychast* spirituality, sacramentalism, and moralism. This chapter also emphasizes the foundation of *theosis* upon a dangerous extrapolation and misuse of the Chalcedonian definition regarding the union of the human and divine natures of Christ. Chapter 5 further questions *theosis* as a legitimate motif of salvation as it exposes its dangerous repercussions as well as how it confuses the *ordo salutis*.

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