

LUTHERAN THEOSIS? KEY SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE  
MYSTICAL UNION AND EASTERN ORTHODOX THEOSIS

BY

MALACHI MORTENSEN

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

PROF. JOHN BRENNER, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

MEQUON, WI

FEBRUARY 21, 2025

## CONTENTS

CONTENTS .....	II
ABSTRACT .....	IV
INTRODUCTION .....	1
LITERARY REVIEW .....	5
MYSTICAL UNION .....	8
A Simple Definition.....	8
Expanded Definition.....	10
What Type of Union is the Mystical Union?.....	10
Blessings of the Mystical Union.....	13
Summary.....	21
EASTERN ORTHODOX THEOSIS .....	22
A Simple Definition.....	22
Expanded Definition.....	24
Becoming Like God.....	24
Essence and Energies.....	28
Image and Likeness .....	31
Theosis: The Ultimate Purpose of Man .....	33
Transfiguration and Divine Light .....	35
Summary.....	40
OTHER SCRIPTURE REFERENCES TO THE MYSTICAL UNION AND THEOSIS .....	41
Scriptural References.....	41
Psalm 82:6 and John 10:34-36.....	41

John 17:20–23.....	42
2 Peter 1:3–4.....	43
<b>KEY SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE MYSTICAL UNION AND THEOSIS .....</b>	<b>46</b>
Union with God .....	46
Incarnation.....	47
Baptism and the Lord’s Supper .....	49
<b>KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE MYSTICAL UNION AND THEOSIS .....</b>	<b>52</b>
Union with God: Objective Reality or Dynamic Process? .....	52
Salvation through Theosis .....	54
Osiandrianism: The Danger of Over-emphasizing the Mystical Union .....	54
Theosis: The Process of Salvation.....	55
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>59</b>

## ABSTRACT

In the Eastern Orthodox Church salvation is not a judicial decree. Rather salvation is a synergistic process known as theosis. Through this process of theosis, a believer is made to be more and more like God through the sanctified life. Theosis might sound strange to Western Christians, including Lutherans. However, there is a biblical teaching that uses similar terminology and many of the same scriptural verses as proof. This teaching is the mystical union. The mystical union is the special and intimate indwelling of the Triune God within believers through faith. Due to the similarities between the mystical union and theosis, one might wonder if these two teachings are referring to essentially the same thing.

This paper explores both the mystical union and theosis. The purpose of doing so is to determine whether the mystical union is simply another way of understanding theosis or if it is something different. This paper will compare and contrast these two teachings in order to show that the mystical union is not a Lutheran understanding of Eastern Orthodox theosis. Rather, the mystical union is a comforting reality for all believers who have been justified through faith alone.

## INTRODUCTION

Why did God become man? How would a Christian in the West answer this question? Perhaps he would say: “For the salvation of mankind.” Maybe he would argue: “So that God would justify sinners.” How would a Christian in the East answer this question? St. Athanasius famously answered: “God became human that we might become divine.”<sup>1</sup> Clendenin notes that Athanasius wasn’t the first theologian to talk like that. There were others such as Irenaeus and Origen who wrote that men “would become gods.”<sup>2</sup> These were the seeds of what would later develop into the Eastern Orthodox teaching of theosis.<sup>3</sup> The teaching of theosis or deification isn’t just common in Eastern Orthodoxy; it’s central.<sup>4</sup> To the Orthodox, theosis is the goal of human existence.<sup>5</sup> Instead of talking about salvation, the Eastern Orthodox emphasize theosis.

Theosis probably sounds strange to Western Christians. It might even sound wrong. However, Western Christianity is not completely devoid of theosis sounding language. A biblical teaching that sounds like theosis is the mystical union. In the mystical union, the Triune God mysteriously dwells in the hearts of believers. Dr. Jordan Cooper puts it this way in his book

---

1. Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 2009), 23–24.

2. Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 127.

3. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 22.

4. Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*, 120.

5. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, (New York: Fordham, 1974), 163.

*Christification*: “There is a true union with the divine nature that a believer receives through faith. This is a Trinitarian reality, wherein the believer is indwelt by the Trinitarian persons, who act within the believer.”<sup>6</sup> This union is biblical. I will go through several passages pertaining to the mystical union later in this paper. The mystical union is also attested to in the Formula of Concord. There was even a controversy that occurred due to an overemphasis on the indwelling of Christ in us.<sup>7</sup>

Why a thesis on the mystical union and theosis, though? There are a couple reasons why I decided to explore this topic. First, a personal bias on my end. This writer finds Eastern Orthodox theology and history very interesting. I’ve had a fascination with the Orthodox ever since observing an Orthodox worship service in the winter of 2023. Observing an Orthodox service is almost like walking into a different world. Clendenin similarly expresses: “Most of those Western people who have in some way encountered Orthodoxy experience its religious life as strange and peculiar, even awesome and exotic, something totally foreign to and different from almost all other expressions of Christianity they have known in the West.”<sup>8</sup> Clendenin writes that Westerners, particularly Americans, don’t know a whole lot about Orthodoxy.<sup>9</sup> I hope that this thesis moves the reader to explore the rich historical, cultural, and theological gold-mine which is Eastern Orthodoxy.

---

6. Jordan Cooper, *Christification: A Lutheran Approach to Theosis*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 34.

7. John F. Brug, “Osiandrianism—Then and Now: Justification through Christ Dwelling in Us,” (Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 2015), 5.

8. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*, 16.

9. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*, 13.

Second, the Orthodox teaching of theosis stuck out as something unique and foreign to the ears of this Western Christian. I would be willing to bet that many Western Christians have probably never heard of it. Clendenin's point backs up my presumption: "The West lacks any developed notion of theosis and tends to express the idea of salvation in juridical categories."<sup>10</sup> This lack of understanding is intensified by the different approaches that Eastern Orthodoxy takes in expressing its theology. Dr. John Brenner notes several differences which led up to the Great Schism between Eastern and Western Christianity of 1054 which still ring true today.<sup>11</sup> These include differences in intellectual approach, church polity, language, ethnic make-up, geography, religious practices, religious approach, and emphases.

Third, the Orthodox argue that theosis is biblical. Bishop Kallistos (Timothy) Ware writes: "The Orthodox doctrine of deification, so far from being unscriptural (as is sometimes thought), has a solid biblical basis, not only in 2 Peter, but in Paul and the Fourth Gospel."<sup>12</sup> Gregory Glazov writes: "Theosis is not only a major principle in Eastern Orthodox theology, it has roots in both the Old Testament and New Testament and in Jewish theology."<sup>13</sup> They point to many of the same passages which Lutherans use for the mystical union. Therefore, I was curious if there were some similarities between the mystical union and Eastern Orthodox theosis. In fact,

---

10. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*, 125.

11. John Brenner, "Eastern Orthodoxy," (Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 2015), 10.

12. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity* (UK: Penguin Random House UK, 2015), 225.

13. Gregory Glazov, "Theosis, Judaism, and Old Testament Anthropology," in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Valdimir Kharlamov, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006), 16–31, 16.

there are some Lutherans, such as Tuomo Mannermaa and the Finnish Lutherans, who argue that Luther's writings about the mystical union are compatible with theosis.<sup>14</sup>

Is the mystical union a Lutheran, hence biblical, way of understanding Eastern Orthodox theosis? This thesis will investigate that question by exploring the key similarities and differences between the mystical union and Orthodox theosis. First, I will present a thorough explanation of the mystical union and its impact on the life of a believer. Second, I will present theosis from the Eastern Orthodox perspective. Both of these presentations will include a simple definition, a detailed expansion of the teaching, and key teachers. Third, I will show the reader the various scriptural references used by both Lutherans and Orthodox Christians to back up their respective teachings. Finally, I will go through both the key similarities and differences between the mystical union and theosis. At the end of this thesis, the reader will see that the mystical union is not a biblical understanding of the Eastern Orthodox teaching of theosis.

---

14. Kurt Marquart, "Luther and Theosis," *CTQ* 64, no. 3 (July 2000): 182–205, 186.

## LITERARY REVIEW

There were four sources in particular that were extremely beneficial when it came to understanding the mystical union and its relation to theosis. The source that was most helpful was Dr. Timothy Schmeling's Master of Divinity Thesis, "Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and its Relation to Theosis." Schmeling's thesis provided a thorough explanation of both the mystical union and theosis. Schmeling's thesis was helpful in distinguishing some of the commonalities between the mystical union and theosis. It was also helpful in showing the ways in which these two teachings differ. Schmeling's thesis was the most thorough source I had that dealt specifically with the subject I was researching.

Schmeling gave several examples of how the Lutheran fathers talked about the mystical union as well as how the Eastern fathers talked about theosis. He explained many of the key developments in both teachings to show how both Lutherans and the Orthodox came to the conclusions that they have today. I especially appreciated how Schmeling always made sure that the Scripture and true doctrine had the final say. He provided several scriptural references and quotes from the Lutheran Confessions which guided me in understanding the Lutheran perspective on both the mystical union and theosis. He also made it very clear that the mystical union is a gift from God and not something that mankind is to attain through works. He stressed that the confusion of the mystical union with justification can lead to many false teachings.

The second source that helped me greatly in understanding both of these teachings was Dr. Jordan Cooper's book, *Christification: A Lutheran Approach to Theosis.* Dr. Cooper's book demonstrated how Lutherans could understand the concept of theosis in a Lutheran way. He was not advocating for some sort of Lutheran theosis, but explained how union with God and participation in sanctification relate to theosis from Scripture, the Patristic fathers, and the

Confessions. Cooper even pointed out how the theosis language of early church fathers such as Irenaeus and Athanasius is more compatible with the Lutheran understanding of the mystic union and sanctification than it is with the Eastern Orthodox teaching of theosis. This book also provided several scriptural references which both Lutherans and the Orthodox use for their respective teachings.

The third Lutheran source that proved especially beneficial was Prof. Gifford Grobien's article, "Mystical Union as Unifying Biblical Theme." This was specifically on the mystical union and didn't touch on theosis. However, this source was useful in providing several biblical references and pictures of the mystical union. Grobien's article showed how the mystical union is evident in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. His article also made it clear that the mystical union is something that God graciously gives to believers through faith, not something that is attained by our works.

The fourth and final source that was essential for my research was *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* by Norman Russell. Dr. Cooper's book directed me to Russell's excellent book which explains how theosis developed in Eastern Orthodoxy. Russell has written much on the Orthodox and is an expert on early Greek patristics. Theosis is a bit difficult to understand, especially for those who aren't familiar with Orthodox theology. Russell explains how early Orthodox theologians and modern theologians talked about theosis. His book clarified misconceptions about theosis and explained very clearly what the Orthodox mean when they speak of it. He showed several scriptural references and explained how the Orthodox see theosis in them.

Those four sources were especially useful; however, all the sources were beneficial in shaping my understanding of these two teachings. I naturally used both Lutheran and Orthodox

sources. However, I used more Orthodox sources than Lutheran sources so that I could understand theosis from their point of view as well as possible. Among my sources are several books that are about Eastern Orthodoxy in general rather than just specifically theosis. It's difficult for one to understand theosis without an understanding of Eastern Orthodoxy. I wanted to understand Orthodox history, theology, and culture first so that I could properly understand what theosis is and why the Orthodox emphasize it.

There were two books that were particularly useful in helping me understand what Eastern Orthodox Christianity was. The first book is *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy* by Bishop Kallistos (Timothy) Ware. This book explained both the history and theology of Eastern Orthodoxy. Ware also explained the liturgy, customs, and distinct way of speaking about theology which the Orthodox Church is known for. Understanding these helped me understand why the Orthodox view salvation as theosis. The second book that helped me understand Orthodoxy more was *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* by Daniel Clendenin. Clendenin's book is meant to help Western Christians understand Eastern Orthodoxy. Eastern Orthodox sources can be a bit hard for Western readers to understand, so Clendenin's book was very useful in understanding key teachings, traditions, and customs of Eastern Orthodoxy. One of the chapters in Clendenin's book is dedicated specifically to theosis. This chapter serves as a good introduction to theosis, especially to Western readers who may be unfamiliar with it.

## MYSTICAL UNION

### A Simple Definition

How do Lutheran theologians define the mystical union? Adolf Hoenecke defines it like this: “The mystical union of the believers with God consists in that the triune God through the Holy Spirit essentially is graciously present in believers.”<sup>15</sup> This is an intimate and close union between the persons of the Trinity and the believer. It is so close that the substance of God and the substance of man are both involved in this union. Quenstedt writes: “The mystical union is the real and most intimate conjunction of the substance of the Holy Trinity and the God-man Christ with the substance of believers.”<sup>16</sup> Calov describes the union like this: “The mystical union of Christ with the believer is a true and real and most intimate conjunction of the divine and human nature theanthropic Christ and the regenerated man.”<sup>17</sup> There is a lot to unpack in these definitions, however, that will be covered later in this thesis. For now, our definition of the mystical union is something like this: “The mystical union is a special and intimate union between the Triune God and the believer.”

How and when does this union come into being? God is the one who initiates this union. He initiates it through means. Schmeling puts it this way: “The means on the part of God are the means of grace: the Word, Baptism, and the Eucharist. The means on the part of man so to speak

---

15. Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Volume III, Translated by James Langebartels, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1999), 385.

16. Timothy Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” (Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 2016), 7.

17. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 37.

is faith yet this is also imparted by God.<sup>18</sup> Hoenecke writes: “The mystical union originates when the Holy Spirit teaches us the gospel and thus teaches us to believe in Christ and to love him, which occurs simultaneously; for where it occurs, we are the dwellings of God. Where faith is present, the mystical union occurs.”<sup>19</sup> Our definition expands: “The mystical union is a special and intimate union between the Triune God and the believer which God initiates through the means of grace.”

The mystical union is distinct from the other unions theologians have classified: The general union, personal union, and the glorious union.<sup>20</sup> The general union is God’s presence in creation by virtue of his omnipresence. The personal union is the union between Christ’s divine and human nature (Also known as the *genus maiestaticum*). The glorious union is the union that believers will have with God on the Last Day. According to Schmeling, the mystical union (also known as the gracious union) is a foretaste of the glorious union where man will experience the fullness of God’s grace.<sup>21</sup>

---

18. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 7–8.

19. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 391.

20. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 4–5.

21. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 6.

## Expanded Definition

### What Type of Union is the Mystical Union?

In the simple definition, the mystical union is identified as “intimate and close.” It is so intimately close that the substance of God dwells in believers. However, the mystical union should not be described as a substantial union. Schmeling explains that a substantial union can be understood in two different ways.<sup>22</sup> Either one substance changes into the other substance or the union creates a new substance. In the first understanding, the human substance would be completely transformed into God’s substance. In the second, the human substance and the divine substance would combine to form a completely new substance. Schmeling notes that both of these understandings would be incorrect because it would result in the destruction of the human substance and inevitably, pantheism.<sup>23</sup>

A better way of understanding the union is to understand it as a union of substances (plural).<sup>24</sup> Two substances are uniting with each other in such a way that neither of them is destroyed. In the case of the mystical union, the substance of God and the substance of man do not mix with each other or effect the other. They both remain distinct. Hoenecke describes it like this: “God and the believers are in each other. The substance of both touches each other most closely; indeed, the divine permeates the human. But self-evidently, every thought of an essential

---

22. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 21.

23. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 21.

24. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 25.

partaking of the believers in the substance of God, every mixing of God and man, every pantheistic notion of deification is far from this.”<sup>25</sup> Hoenecke quotes Quenstedt who writes:

The mystical union does not consist only in the harmony and mixture of the feelings...but in true, real, permanent, and very close union. This union does not consist only in the gracious working of the Holy Spirit in believers. Nor does this union consist in the transubstantiation or conversion of our substance into the substance of God and Christ, or vice versa. Nor does it consist in consubstantiation, so that two essences are united to form one essence.<sup>26</sup>

To summarize Quenstedt: The human essence and the divine essence remain distinctly intact while uniting in a close and personal way.

Quenstedt explained what the mystical union wasn't by using a eucharistic metaphor.<sup>27</sup>

The mystical union is not a substantial union like transubstantiation or consubstantiation.

However, the eucharistic metaphor can be used to describe what the mystical union is.

Understanding that the mystical union is a union of substances, Schmeling explains it with the Greek word *κοινωνία* or communion.<sup>28</sup> In the mystical union there is a communion between the substance of God and the substance of man. It's similar to the real presence in the Lord's Supper. In the Lord's Supper, there is a communion between the earthly elements and the body and blood of Christ. A person who takes the Lord's Supper receives bread, wine, Christ's body, and Christ's blood. There is no transformation or mixture of the elements. All four are present. Schmeling notes that one should not confuse the mystical union with the sacramental union, however, it is useful in helping us understand the union of substances in the mystical union.<sup>29</sup>

---

25. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 386.

26. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 387.

27. Cooper, *Christification*, 38.

28. Schmeling, "Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis," 22.

29. Schmeling, "Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis," 32.

Gifford Grobien also describes the mystical union as *κοινωνία* or communion. He writes: “*κοινωνία* most simply has to do with the sharing of something with one another.”<sup>30</sup> Jesus shares himself with us in the Lord’s Supper. Grobien continues: “*κοινωνία* requires that two distinct persons or things share together while remaining distinct. The mystical union is a union in which both the believers and God himself remain with their personal substances, not one in which one substance is dissolved, or a third substance is formed.”<sup>31</sup> God remains God. The human believer remains a human. Neither God nor the human being lose their unique substantial identity.<sup>32</sup>

There are still many other ways of describing the mystical union between God and believers. Hoenecke lists several scriptural descriptions:

Scripture describes the mystical union of the believers with God as being the dwelling of God with humans (John 14:23), Christ’s indwelling in the hearts (Eph 3:17), betrothal of the believers with Christ (Hos 2:19–20), spiritual-mystical marriage (Eph 5:32), implanting of the branches into the vine (John 15:4ff), binding of the head and members (Eph 1:22–23) and the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16).<sup>33</sup>

Some of these passages will be addressed in more detail later in this thesis. However, I will briefly expand on the marriage picture since it shows the closeness of this union.

Grobien focuses on Eph 5:32. In this verse, Paul makes a connection between the union of Christ and the church with the marital union between a man and a woman. Grobien explains: “Christ further loves the church as his own body, just as husbands are called to love their wives, and his loving union accomplishes his work of sanctifying, purifying, and glorifying the church,

---

30. Gifford A. Grobien, “Mystical Union as Unifying Biblical Theme,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (January 2023): 60.

31. Grobien, “Mystical Union as Unifying Biblical Theme,” 61.

32. Grobien, “Mystical Union as Unifying Biblical Theme,” 61.

33. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 386.

so that she is holy and without blemish.”<sup>34</sup> Ephesians 5 is emphasizing the deep love that Christ had for the church. This love led him to give up his life for the church (Eph 5:25–27). Grobien expands on that deep love by comparing the intimacy of that love to the intimacy between the lover and the beloved in Song of Songs.<sup>35</sup> This love is expressed both in this mystical union itself and in the ultimate aim of the mystical union.

The intimate joy of marriage can be described as ecstatic in that each spouse finds love in the other. Their union is the aim of their love, yet their union also endues their love with greater love, joy, and bliss, symbolized by the fruitfulness referred to in the passage. This ecstasy is not the false mysticism which imagines that a person loses himself or his concrete experience in the ineffable divine nature. Rather, this ecstasy is to act in love with the other, and to receive the fruits and blessings of this love. So, we receive blessing and goodness from God’s love for us, and also act in love toward him, and his whole body.<sup>36</sup>

This beautiful union between God and believers is initiated by God out of love. It is an act of God’s love for us. However, it’s more than just that. The blessings that are associated with the mystical union are as much a part of that love as the union itself.

### Blessings of the Mystical Union

There are a couple things to explain before diving into the numerous blessings associated with the mystical union. First, the mystical union is not the cause of salvation, but rather a result of faith in Christ. Schmeling writes: “The mystical union is preceded by justification and followed by sanctification in the Lutheran *ordo salutis* (order of salvation). It also cannot be stressed enough that both the mystical union and sanctification are always the effect or consequence of

---

34. Grobien, “Mystical Union as Unifying Biblical Theme,” 64.

35. Grobien, “Mystical Union as Unifying Biblical Theme,” 64–66.

36. Grobien, “Mystical Union as Unifying Biblical Theme,” 65–66.

justification and never its cause.<sup>37</sup> The mystical union is a blessing which takes place when a believer is brought to faith. Justification occurs first. Without justification, there is no mystical union. A confusion between the mystical union and justification can result in a confusion between sanctification and justification.<sup>38</sup>

Second, there is a difference between imputed grace (*gratia imputata*) and infused grace (*gratia infusa*). Schmeling defined both of them in his thesis.<sup>39</sup> Imputed grace is saving grace which is forensic in nature. Infused grace is sanctifying grace which is operative in the mystical union. The mystical union is relevant when it comes to the Christian's life of sanctification. Hence why this distinction is necessary to make. Imputed grace is the grace which moved God to declare people as not guilty. Infused grace, however, is the desire and ability that God creates in Christians to live sanctified lives. Schmeling puts it this way: "Infused grace is not an attitude but that through which God allows man to cooperate in his sanctification."<sup>40</sup>

Schmeling mentions three purposes of the mystical union: "To comfort, strengthen, and preserve us in Christ so that we can image Christ to all around us as we partake of this glorious union in heaven."<sup>41</sup> How does the mystical union comfort the believer? Schmeling quotes Hollaz who mentions the certainty of faith as one of the blessings of the mystical union.<sup>42</sup> Paul writes in Rom 8:10–11: "But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life

---

37. Schmeling, "Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis," 49.

38. Schmeling, "Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis," 64.

39. Schmeling, "Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis," 52–53.

40. Schmeling, "Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis," 53.

41. Schmeling, "Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis," 63.

42. Schmeling, "Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis," 8.

because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you” (ESV). The indwelling of the living Christ in us gives us certainty that we have been connected to Christ and his saving work. The Christian is connected to a living Savior who rose from the dead. This indwelling assures us that we too will rise from the dead as well. This is an incredible comfort!

Grobien describes the comfort of the mystical union like this: “The mystical union blesses Christians by uniting them through faith to Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension, so that they also participate in death to sin, resurrection to immortal life, and reigning together with Christ. Although this is hidden in the natural experience, the promises of these blessing are assured because of our union with him.”<sup>43</sup> Grobien is saying that the mystical union guarantees believers that they possess all of the blessings which Christ won for us through his saving work. Cooper adds to this by saying: “Through this union, that which belongs properly to Christ—namely divine incorruptibility and immortality—is transferred to the believer by faith.”<sup>44</sup>

Galatians 2:20 is a popular verse for the mystical union. Paul writes: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” This verse serves both as a source of our comfort and as an encouragement to our new man to live a sanctified life. I will address this verse in more detail later in this thesis, however, I wanted to note how this verse is a comfort for us. Regarding this verse, Luther writes: “Living in me as he does, Christ abolishes the Law, damns sin and kills death; for at this presence all these cannot

---

43. Grobien, “Mystical Union as Unifying Biblical Theme,” 69.

44. Cooper, *Christification*, 19.

help disappearing. Christ is eternal peace, comfort, righteousness, and life to which terror of the law, sadness of mind, sin, hell, and death have to yield.”<sup>45</sup>

Luther is not saying that assurance of our salvation is in this indwelling Christ as Osiander will say. These are the blessings that belong to the Christian through saving faith. The indwelling of Christ in us serves as an assurance of that. Saving faith is never separated from the indwelling of Christ. Luther makes that clear when he says: “In this way Paul seeks to withdraw us completely from ourselves, from the Law, and from works, and to transplant us into Christ and faith in Christ, so that in the area of justification we look only at grace, and separate it far from Law and from works, which belong far away.”<sup>46</sup> Luther is stressing here that the mystical union causes us to look towards Christ who is the object of our faith. Faith grasps hold of Christ through whom God declared us not guilty. The mystical union is not a replacement for objective justification, but rather it is emphasizing it.

How does the mystical union strengthen a believer? The mystical union strengthens the believer in living a sanctified life. Cooper describes the mystical union and sanctification as intimately related realities.<sup>47</sup> In other words, they are closely linked to each other. The Holy Spirit dwells in the believer and moves him to do good works. Sanctification is progressive; however, the Christian will never reach perfection in this life since he is both a sinner and saint at the same time.<sup>48</sup> The believer is saved because God has declared him not guilty. The life of sanctification, however, is still a wonderful blessing which cannot be separated from our justification.

---

45. *LW* 26, 167.

46. *LW* 26, 167.

47. Cooper, *Christification*, 46.

48. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 62.

I quoted Gal 2:20 earlier in which Paul describes the Christian as living by faith in the Son of God who dwells in him. Cooper explains what this means for sanctification: “Justification also initiates a mystical union between the believer and Christ, wherein the believer participates in Christ’s death and resurrection. This union subsequently manifests itself through the believer’s self-giving love.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Jesus says in John 15:5: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” If Christ is dwelling in someone, then that person will produce good fruit. The Triune God moves the believer to do good works in this life which demonstrate his faith in Jesus. This is a sign of saving faith as Jas 2:17 says: “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

God gives Christians the privilege of participating in their sanctification. Sanctification can be described in both a broad and narrow sense.<sup>50</sup> Sanctification in the broad sense refers to the entire work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This includes conversion, making us holy, and preserving us in faith until we die. That was God’s work, not ours. However, the Holy Spirit also enables us to live holy lives. This would be sanctification in the narrow sense. Cooper describes sanctification in the narrow sense as a process. He writes: “Sanctification (in the narrow sense) is a process that occurs through the indwelling of God, particularly the Holy Spirit. This is a process wherein people are gradually made holier.”<sup>51</sup> Cooper is not saying that salvation is a process or that the believer is responsible for making himself holier. He explains that this is something that the Holy Spirit is accomplishing through us.<sup>52</sup>

---

49. Cooper, *Christification*, 60.

50. Cooper, *Christification*, 41.

51. Cooper, *Christification*, 32.

52. Cooper, *Christification*, 32.

One might be a bit uneasy at Cooper's usage of the word "process," however, it can be rightly understood. Article II of the Formula of Concord says: "By it (the Word) he (the Spirit) creates and increases holiness, causing it daily to grow and become strong in the faith and in the fruits which the Spirit produces."<sup>53</sup> All credit belongs to the Holy Spirit who is responsible for the good works that are done. This was Cooper's intention. He wasn't mixing growth in good works and holiness with objective justification and the assurance of our salvation. His whole point was to show how one purpose of the mystical union is to strengthen us in our sanctified lives.

Grobien also expands on the strengthening aspect of the mystical union. He notes:

The mystical union is a central doctrine of theology because it teaches and communicates this very difference between an external natural morality and true Christian holiness. The mystical union properly integrates truly good works with Christology and justification, so that Christians will not fall into the error of confusing works with justification. In other words, to neglect the mystical union allows a deficiency in theological understanding to creep into one's confession and may tempt a Christian either into a dead faith with no fruits or into a legalism detached from faith.<sup>54</sup>

Grobien is stating that a proper understanding of the mystical union aids us in putting works in their proper place in the Christian life. One could argue that a proper understanding of the mystical union keeps us on the narrow Lutheran middle road. In this case, the two ditches are faith as mere head knowledge or works righteousness.

A proper understanding of the mystical union reminds the believer of who dwells in him. The Holy Spirit dwells in the believer, moving him to produce good works. These good works don't merit salvation, but rather they are the natural fruits of someone in whom the Spirit dwells.

---

53. FC II 37. All quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

54. Grobien, "Mystical Union as Unifying Biblical Theme," 71.

How can someone with God himself dwelling in him not produce good works!? The answer to that rhetorical question is naturally: “It is impossible for him not to do good works”. Yet, the confidence for salvation is solely in saving faith in Christ. The mystical union and the good works which it strengthens us to do in faith are as Article IV in the Apology describes:

“Characteristics of the righteousness after they have already been justified and regenerated.”<sup>55</sup>

Finally, how does the mystical union preserve a believer? What is the believer being preserved for? Hoenecke writes that believers are preserved for eternal life through the mystical union.<sup>56</sup> Eternal life is the goal of the mystical union according to Hollaz<sup>57</sup> and the seal of the glory of our heavenly inheritance according to Calov.<sup>58</sup> Grobien writes: “The mystical union is Christ’s spiritual work preparing and keeping us for everlasting life. Κοινωνία grants us new spiritual life, communicating to us immortality in Christ.<sup>59</sup> What belongs to Christ also belongs to us. One of those attributes is the eternal life and immortality that we have in Christ. As Christ rose from the dead, so too will we rise from the dead. The living Christ who dwells in us gives us that assurance as Paul tells us in 1 Cor 15:20–23: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.”

---

55. Ap IV 251.

56. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 385.

57. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 8.

58. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 392.

59. Grobien, “Mystical Union as Unifying Biblical Theme,” 71.

One more blessing that I want to mention is the restoration of the image of God. Schmeling writes that the restoration of the image of God is linked to the mystical union.<sup>60</sup> Paul says in Rom 8:29: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” By declaring us not guilty, God restored the image of God in us. In our lives of sanctification, the Holy Spirit continues to renew that image of God in us as Paul tells us in 2 Cor 3:18: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” Grobrien comments on this verse saying: “The glory of the Lord is unveiled to us by the Holy Spirit, received through faith, who transforms us into this image of God in Christ.”<sup>61</sup>

This image of God will be completely restored when we are in heaven. Here on earth, we are still battling with the old man which wages war against the new man. However, through the mystical union the holy and perfect Christ dwells in us. We might not feel it when we are burdened by our various sins. However, this objective fact of justification and the mystical union which resulted from it assure us of a wonderful day when the old man will be gone forever. The image of God will be totally restored for all eternity. Luther, commenting on 2 Pet 1:3–4 says: “If we know him as God, then, through faith, we have eternal life and the divine power with which we overcome death and the devil. But we do not see and feel this. Nevertheless, it has been promised to us. To be sure, all this is ours; but it is not yet manifest. On the Last Day, however, we shall see it revealed.”<sup>62</sup>

---

60. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 64.

61. Grobrien, “Mystical Union as Unifying Biblical Theme,” 63.

62. *LW* 30, 154.

### **Summary**

The mystical union is the intimate communion between the Triune God and a believer in which the Triune God dwells in the believer through faith. The best way to describe this union is as a “union of substances” in which the substance of God dwells with the substance of the believer. These substances do not mix together or transform each other. They remain distinct. Through the mystical union, the believer is comforted by the fact that God dwells within him. The Triune God who dwells in the believer assures him that he is connected to the saving work of Christ. The believer is also strengthened by God in the mystical union to live the sanctified life that the Holy Spirit set him apart to live. Finally, in the mystical union God preserves the believer for eternal life in heaven where the image of God will be completely restored for all eternity.

## EASTERN ORTHODOX THEOSIS

### A Simple Definition

Theosis (deification) is a bit difficult to define, especially for Western Christians. One reason is that theosis can be easily misunderstood without prior knowledge of Eastern Orthodox theology. Clendenin writes: “Because theosis is ultimately a mystery, we need to use discretion when trying to define it. In some sense theosis defies analysis.”<sup>63</sup> Another reason is that the Orthodox approach theology differently than Western Christians. The Orthodox approach to theology—particularly when it comes to explaining God—is apophatic rather than cataphatic.<sup>64</sup> To explain God apophatically means to explain him in the negative rather than in the positive. Ware provides the justification behind this: “Since God cannot be properly comprehended by the human mind, all language that is applied to Him is inevitably inexact. It is therefore less misleading to use negative language about God rather than positive—to refuse to say what God is, and to state simply what He is not.”<sup>65</sup> Ware’s point is that God’s transcendence cannot be comprehended using human language. Therefore, an apophatic approach to God’s transcendence is much more honest.

I find Pseudo-Dionysius’ definition (also known as Dionysius the Areopagite) to be the best definition of theosis. Norman Russell provides that definition: “The attaining of the likeness

---

63. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*, 130.

64. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 60.

65. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 60.

to God and union with him so far as possible.”<sup>66</sup> There are three key things in that definition: Likeness of God, union with God, and so far as possible. These three things are useful in comprehending the Orthodox understanding of theosis. All of them will be explored later in this thesis. First one needs to know what is meant by the likeness of God. Second, one also needs to know what this union with God is and how it is attained. Third, what is Pseudo-Dionysius implying by saying “so far as possible?” This means that theosis isn’t something which happens instantaneously. It is a process which takes place throughout a Christian’s entire life. Bartos describes it as dynamic process rather than a static state of being.<sup>67</sup> Through a life of sanctification, the Christian is deified.

Theosis is the main way of speaking about salvation in the Orthodox Church. Eve Tibbs writes: “Due to its rich Patristic and biblical heritage, theosis has become the main way of speaking about salvation in the Orthodox Church, as the process of growing in holiness and increasing in communion with God.”<sup>68</sup> This shows that salvation is a process for the Eastern Orthodox. This belief that salvation is a process will be addressed later in the paper. As the reader has noticed, theosis is key to Orthodox theology. John Meyendorff even describes it as “the goal of human existence.”<sup>69</sup> The Orthodox do make it very clear, however, that no human being is able to achieve theosis without the help of God. An Orthodox theologian, Christoforos Stavropoulos says:

Our union with God, the theosis which is objectively offered to us by the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, and ascended God, can be realized only in the Holy Spirit. Only with the Holy Spirit will we be able to receive and taste redemption and theosis. Only in

---

66. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 21–22.

67. Emil Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 145.

68. Eve Tibbs, *A Basic Guide to Eastern Orthodox Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 114.

69. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 163.

the Holy Spirit will we be able to reach the point of becoming gods, the likenesses of God. Only the Holy Spirit will transmit to us that which the Son and Word of God has offered to us.<sup>70</sup>

Theosis, therefore, is a synergistic process in which the Holy Spirit and the believer work together to achieve union with God. This thesis will stick to this simple definition of theosis: “The process by which Christians are made to be like God.”

### Expanded Definition

#### Becoming Like God

It would be wise to discern what is meant and not meant by “becoming like God.” I imagine that some might hear that and think that theosis sounds like the Mormon teaching that people can become “gods” in the afterlife. This is not what the Orthodox are saying. The Orthodox are also not implying some sort of form of pantheism.<sup>71</sup> Clendenin writes: “All of the Eastern Orthodox theologians, both ancient and modern, uniformly and categorically repudiate any hint of pantheism. Whatever it means to ‘become god,’ the essence of human nature is not lost.”<sup>72</sup> Human beings are not transformed into God or “gods.” They remain distinctly human. It is not an identification with God’s divine essence.<sup>73</sup> If man were to actually become God or a

---

70. Christoforos Stavropoulos, “Partakers of Divine Nature,” in *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, ed. Daniel B. Clendenin, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 183–192, 188.

71. Brenner, “Eastern Orthodoxy,” 17.

72. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*, 130.

73. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 7.

“god” in essence than it would make God a creature. Bartos writes: “One cannot literally become God since that would be as absurd as if we were to state that God is a creature. If God is a creature, then he is, by definition, not God, for creatures have a beginning in time.”<sup>74</sup>

Through theosis the believer is transformed into the likeness of God.<sup>75</sup> The Orthodox believe that all people have the image of God and are yearning to be in the likeness of God.<sup>76</sup> To be like God means to share in divine qualities. They share in these divine qualities by participating in the energies of God.<sup>77</sup> They become participants in incorruption, immortality, and in a future resurrected life in heaven.<sup>78</sup> Through theosis, the believer is “Christified.” Ware writes: “So through and in him we are one with God, and the Father’s glory becomes our glory. God’s Incarnation opens the way to man’s deification. To be deified is, more specifically, to be ‘Christified:’ the divine likeness that we are called to attain is the likeness of Christ.”<sup>79</sup> Through theosis, the believe is made more like Christ.

The Incarnation of Christ plays a major role in theosis. Ware writes: “The Incarnation equally is a doctrine of sharing or participation. Christ shares to the full in what we are, and so he makes it possible for us to share in what he is, in his divine life and glory. He became what we are, so as to make us what he is.”<sup>80</sup> Ware is alluding to the famous Athanasian axiom that was

---

74. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 145.

75. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*, 133.

76. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 145.

77. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979), 125.

78. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 188.

79. Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 74.

80. Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 74.

mentioned earlier in this thesis: “God became man so that man would become God.” The incarnation makes theosis possible because it made God accessible to human beings.<sup>81</sup>

Stavropoulos states: “The divine incarnation brings us again to the Father and presents us with the potential of realizing the likeness of God in our lives. The incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension bridge the gap which separates us from God.”<sup>82</sup>

Norman Russell adds to the importance of the incarnation:

The critical event which has made this unification possible is the Incarnation. Through the Incarnation, Christ manifested God’s love, inaugurating a new age in which the corrupting principle introduced into our nature by the Fall was banished. The Incarnation took place to present nature pure again as from a new beginning, with an additional advantage through deification over the first creation. Christ did not simply restore human nature to its pristine state. He opened up new possibilities for it. By his natural enfleshing, he brought us a supernatural engodding.<sup>83</sup>

Russell is saying that theosis returns mankind to what he was like before the Fall and even better. The Incarnation makes this possible. Union with Christ allows for the believer to be like Christ through theosis which is even better than our pre-fall state. Russell describes it as transcending our fallen humanity.<sup>84</sup>

God and man are united in theosis in a similar manner as was described with the mystical union. Bartos actually uses the word mystical union in describing our union with God: “It is a true mystical union between God and man, not a blending of natures into a single being. In this process of deification, man still retains his full personal identity and integrity and becomes more

---

81. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 152.

82. Stavropoulos, “Partakers of Divine Nature,” 188.

83. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 45.

84. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 120.

truly human.”<sup>85</sup> The human being remains a human being. God remains God. There is no mixture between the substances. Bartos describes this union of substances as a “genuine symbiosis.”<sup>86</sup> Ware even describes the union as a communion: “It is above all through communion that the Christian is made one with and in Christ.”<sup>87</sup>

According to Ware, it is a union “neither according to essence or hypostasis,” but rather a “union according to energy.”<sup>88</sup> Clendenin also expresses how this union deals with God’s energy rather than his essence. He writes:

Human theosis is a relative rather than an absolute transformation. There is a real and genuine union of the believer with God, but it is not a literal fusion or confusion in which the integrity of human nature is compromised. Orthodoxy consistently rejects the idea that humans participate in the essence or nature of God. Rather, we remain distinctly human by nature but participate in God by the divine energies or grace. At no point, even when deified, is our humanity diminished or destroyed.<sup>89</sup>

A key thing to understand when it comes to the Orthodox teaching of theosis is the differences between God’s essence and energies. Understanding God’s energies helps one comprehend what type of union is taking place between God and man in theosis.

---

85. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 10.

86. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 295.

87. Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 109.

88. Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 125.

89. Clendenin, Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*, 130.

### Essence and Energies

In theosis, the believer is participating with the energies of God rather than his essence. God's essence is his nature or inner being while his energies are his operations or acts of power.<sup>90</sup> Ware puts it another way: "The essence signifies the whole God as he is in himself; the energies signify the whole God as he is in action."<sup>91</sup> Simply put, God's essence is God in his "being" and his energies are God in his "actions." God's essence is who he is, and his energies are what he does. Human beings cannot comprehend God's essence; however, they can comprehend God in his energies. It is through his energies that God reveals himself to people. Veniamin writes: "God comes or reveals Himself not by His divine essence, but through his divine energy; by his revelatory action, which, being nothing less than the operation of God Himself."<sup>92</sup>

This distinction is important because union with God's essence would mean becoming God as he is. Timothy Ware writes: "Union with God means union with the divine energies, not the divine essence: the Orthodox Church, while speaking of deification and union, rejects all forms of pantheism."<sup>93</sup> Theosis is not an essential union between God and man because that would make the man "God" by virtue of being connected to his holy essence. The man credited for making this distinction between God's essence and energies is Gregory of Palamas (1296–1359).<sup>94</sup> Out of concern for preserving the integrity of the Holy Trinity, Gregory made it clear

---

90. Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 22.

91. Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 22.

92. Christopher Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation: Theosis in Scripture and Tradition* (Dalton, PA: Mount Tabor, 2013), 158.

93. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 226.

94. Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, 173.

that the nature of God is “invisible and unparticipable.”<sup>95</sup> Veniamin writes: “He (Gregory) refuses to accept a mode of union either according to essence or according to hypostasis because he sees the first as applying only to the unity of the Three Divine Hypostases, while he regards the second as unique to the prosopic or hypostatic union of the divine and human in Christ, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity.”<sup>96</sup> Only the persons of the Trinity enjoy an essential union with one another. Stating that man can have an essential union with God would undermine the mysterious and loving essential relationship of the three persons of the Trinity.

Yet, through God’s energies, man is united with God. Meyendorff writes: “The energies are inseparable from the essence, but not identical with it.”<sup>97</sup> Since these energies are inseparable from God, encountering God in his energies is akin to encountering God himself. According to Veniamin, participation in the triune divine energy is “nothing less than participation in God Himself.”<sup>98</sup> Meyendorff states: “Whatever name one gives them—grace, divine life, light, illumination—the energies or divine acts belong to the existence of God himself; they represent his existence for us.”<sup>99</sup>

Nobody can know God outside of his energies.<sup>100</sup> “Palamas stresses that the energies have neither hypostasis nor existence of their own but result from the divine hypostases and constitute for us signs of the existence of God. For it is impossible for us to prove that existence unless God

---

95. Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, 174.

96. Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, 174.

97. John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (London: The Faith Press, 1964), 225.

98. Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, 159.

99. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 218.

100. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 211.

manifests himself outside his unknowable essence.”<sup>101</sup> God must reveal himself to mankind in order for us to know him. He reveals himself through his energies. How do these energies reveal God to us? Norman Russell provides this analogy:

When we listen to a piece of music by a great composer, Mozart for example, even if we have not heard the piece before we can often identify it as his work. The piece is not simply in the style of Mozart, it is Mozart. In the listening to the music, we encounter the mind of the composer by participating in his creative act. We have a relationship with Mozart himself, with his personal uniqueness and otherness.<sup>102</sup>

Mozart’s music reveals something to us about Mozart. It might reveal his creativity, his passion, his joy, his sadness, etc. Similarly, God’s energies reveal something to us about God. Primarily, they reveal who God is. He is the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is the God who became flesh for us. He is the God who died and rose from the dead. He is the God who brings us salvation. The big difference between God’s energies and Mozart’s music, however, is that God’s energies reveal to us exactly what God wants us to know about him. There is certainly some subjectivity in what Mozart’s music might reveal to an individual listener.

Union with God’s energies means union with God himself. Russell quotes Symeon the New Theologian who stated: “I became totally God, not in essence but by participation.”<sup>103</sup> If Symeon were to say that he became God in essence, then he would be blaspheming. However, Symeon participated with God in his energies through theosis. By participating in God’s energies and thus encountering God, he could rightly say (according to the Orthodox) that he “became God.” Maximus the Confessor clarifies that in theosis we become *what* God is, not *who* God

---

101. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 216.

102. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 137.

103. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 132.

is.<sup>104</sup> “Theosis expresses a relation, not a thing. Through theosis we become one with God, not because we have become what God is in his essence, but because we have come to share in his attributes.”<sup>105</sup> A believer is made like God in theosis by being conformed to the likeness of God. Another important concept with theosis is the distinction between the image of God and the likeness of God.

### Image and Likeness

The Orthodox distinguish between the image and the likeness of God. “The image of God denotes a potential for life in God. The likeness of God is the calling of Christians to follow Christ toward the realization of that potential.”<sup>106</sup> The Orthodox believe that all people are born in the image of God.<sup>107</sup> However, the likeness of God is something that human beings need to attain. Stavropoulos writes: “Humanity was created in the image of God, and each and every human being is called to become like God.”<sup>108</sup> How does someone attain the likeness of God? The answer is through theosis. Through theosis, a believer participates with God’s energies. In this participation, he is made to be like God, thus attaining the likeness of God.

However, one cannot be like God if he doesn’t have the image of God. Hence why the Orthodox do not believe that human beings lost the image of God after the Fall.<sup>109</sup> Meyendorff

---

104. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 145.

105. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 137.

106. Tibbs, *A Basic Guide to Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 102.

107. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 134.

108. Stavropoulos, “Partakers of Divine Nature,” 185.

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

distinguishes between the image and likeness of God by describing them respectively as a “gift” and a “task.”<sup>110</sup> The image of God is God’s gift to mankind. Attaining the likeness of God is the task that God has given to mankind. Since man has the gift (image of God) he is able to accomplish the task (attain the likeness of God). In fact, by virtue of simply having the image of God, man is actually yearning for something more. Andrew Louth describes it like this: “To be created according of the image of God and according to his likeness suggests that we have been created with some kind of affinity for God which makes possible a process of assimilation to God, which is, presumably, the point of human existence.”<sup>111</sup> A human being, born in God’s image, wants to be like God.

The image of God makes it possible for a person to achieve theosis and thus become like God. According to the Orthodox, the image of God should be understood as natural affinity that people are born with. This affinity makes it possible for us to have some sort of relationship with God. Louth explains that by virtue of this affinity “we can know God” and “have some sort of communion with him.”<sup>112</sup> This communion with God is theosis by which we are conformed into God’s likeness. God’s likeness can be understood as the very highest “moral quality”<sup>113</sup> or “absolute”<sup>114</sup> that can be attained. This distinction between image and likeness is important to understand in Orthodox theology because it shows how important theosis is to them. Without the

---

110. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 139.

111. Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 84.

112. Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 88.

113. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 77.

114. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 134.

image of God, man could never attain the likeness of God via theosis. Therefore, according to the Orthodox, God purposely made man in the image of God so that he could be achieve theosis.

### Theosis: The Ultimate Purpose of Man

The Orthodox consider theosis the goal for which human beings were created.<sup>115</sup> Stavropoulos describes theosis as mankind's unique calling and destiny.<sup>116</sup> Mankind was destined to be like God. After the Fall, however, God's creation was ruined. Man was unable to achieve theosis on his own. He needs God's help. The purpose of Christ's incarnation was man's deification.

Veniamin writes: "The deification of man is thus the express purpose of the first Parousia of Christ. It is for the sake of us human beings, for the purpose of our deification, that the Son and Word of God - He "who is above all being" - was born of the Virgin."<sup>117</sup> In Christ's incarnation, true God and true man were in full communion with each other. Since Christ descended to us by taking on our flesh, now man can ascend to God by partaking in the divine nature.<sup>118</sup>

When it comes to the incarnation, the purpose of deification takes precedence over redemption. Bartos writes: "The incarnation has to be seen in terms of God's purpose for man rather than primarily in terms of what was necessary in order to save man from his sin. The immediate premise of the incarnation is not sin and redemption, but death and deification."<sup>119</sup>

---

115. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 266.

116. Stavropoulos, "Partakers of Divine Nature," 184.

117. Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, 44.

118. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 162.

119. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 236.

Some Orthodox theologians will even go so far as to say that deification is the purpose of the whole of creation too. Bartos notes: “To a large degree, Eastern theology conceives of deification as including both humanity and nature, due to their ontological unity.”<sup>120</sup>

Russell explains that there are two different approaches as to what the ultimate goal of deification is. The first approach is that theosis is the fulfillment for the entire created world.<sup>121</sup> Russell goes on: “The world was created with man as its articulate point of consciousness, its prophet and high priest, who was intended from the beginning to bring all created being to fulfillment in God.”<sup>122</sup> The whole of creation, both creatures and the cosmos, are somehow gathered together in this union between man and God.<sup>123</sup> Since creation was affected by man’s fall into sin, so it is also deified with man’s participation in God. Man is returning to what God intended him to be, and nature itself is also returning to what God intended it to.<sup>124</sup>

The second approach to theosis is more “Christ-centered.” Through the incarnation, Christ lived as the ideal image of God. Since man has the image of God, they are able to imitate that ultimate image. Russell writes: “Humankind is the image of the Image. Our fulfillment as human beings lie in making this image a living reality by becoming like God – by union with the Logos through the divine energies.”<sup>125</sup> Through theosis, man becomes more and more Christ-like and thus more truly human while simultaneously becoming more like God.<sup>126</sup> I’ll briefly

---

120. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 122.

121. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 47.

122. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 48.

123. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 48.

124. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 50.

125. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 51.

126. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 52.

summarize the differences between these two approaches. The first approach to theosis can be viewed as deification in a broad sense in that it's the *telos* or purpose of the entire creation. The second approach to theosis can be viewed as deification in a narrow sense in that it's more anthropocentric. The first approach to theosis also stresses union with the entire Trinity while the second approach stresses union with Christ.

Both approaches, however, emphasize this same point: Theosis is the ultimate goal for mankind. In fact, theosis is the culmination of the entire divine economy. Russell writes:

Theosis is not simply another word for salvation or sanctification. Whether we understand it in terms of our re-creation in the divine image through our acceptance of baptism and participation in the Eucharist, or whether we prefer to see it in broader terms as the fulfillment in God of the entire created order, theosis sums up the divine economy. If the incarnation is the mystery by which the Word makes humanity his own, theosis is the mystery by which, with our cooperation, he makes divinity our own.

Theosis is indeed the Orthodox understanding of salvation, but it's so much more than that.

According to the Orthodox, it is the ultimate *telos* of mankind. It is the reason that God created mankind. It may, according to some, be the ultimate *telos* for the whole created universe too.

### Transfiguration and Divine Light

There are many places in Scripture that the Orthodox believe refer to theosis. I will list many of these later in the next part of this thesis. However, one account from the Synoptic Gospels is very important to the Orthodox understanding of theosis. That account is the story of Christ's Transfiguration (Matt 17:1–13, Mark 9:2–13, and Luke 9:28–36). To the Orthodox, Christ's Transfiguration was more than just Jesus revealing a glimpse of his true glory to his disciples. It

was a revelation of what human beings are ultimately supposed to become through theosis.<sup>127</sup>

Christ was revealing to his disciples the very thing for which mankind was created:

Transfiguration of humanity with the divine.<sup>128</sup>

According to Veniamin, Gregory of Palamas was one of the key teachers on Transfiguration and its significance to theosis. He writes:

St. Gregory Palamas is, above all, the theologian of the Transfiguration: that great New Testament theophany, which gives us, in a graphic and concrete manner, the vision of God's purpose in creating man. In Christ's resplendent form, as it appeared before the three chosen disciples on Mount Tabor not long before His crucifixion, we see our future hope: Human nature filled with divine glory; human nature suffused with the grace of God, the very Life of the Most Holy Trinity.<sup>129</sup>

The Transfiguration wasn't just revealing something to the disciples about Christ, but it was also revealing something about themselves and the entire human race. Christ was revealing to them the ultimate *telos* of mankind.

Veniamin writes that this glory revealed on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mount Tabor) is the very same glory that the bodies of the righteous will receive on the Last Day. However, this light, which will be revealed on that Day, is not visible to the naked eye.<sup>130</sup> There are two references to this light in Matthew's take on this account. The first is in Matt 17:2: And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his *clothes became white as light*. The second is in Matt 17:5: He was still speaking when, behold, *a bright cloud overshadowed them*, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." The disciples were unable to bear both this light and the voice that came out of the

---

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

128. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 112.

129. Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, 61–62

130. Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, 95.

bright cloud. They fell on their faces in verse 6. Veniamin writes that they were unable to bear this light because the light itself was divine. Veniamin writes: “The reason why, then, the three disciples were unable to bear even the glory revealed at the Transfiguration was because the supranatural and immaterial nature of this light is fully perceptible only to incorruptible and immortal eyes.”<sup>131</sup> This supernatural light is known as the uncreated light or the light of Tabor.<sup>132</sup> According to Gregory of Palamas, this divine light has transformative qualities for both the body and soul.<sup>133</sup>

Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022) believed that it is possible for a human being to experience this divine light. He came up with methods of prayer and meditation which would allow someone to experience the divine light of God.<sup>134</sup> This divine life isn’t considered to be a part of God’s essence, but rather one of his energies.<sup>135</sup> Since the divine light is an energy of God, a person can participate in it. Symeon himself supposedly experienced this divine light. He describes it like this:

The light envelops me and appears to me like a star and is incomprehensible to all. It is radiant like the sun, and I perceive all creation encompassed by it. It shows me all that it contains and enjoins me to respect my own limits. I am hemmed in by roof and walls, yet it opens the heavens to me. I lift up my eyes sensibly to contemplate the things that are on high, and I see all things as they were before.<sup>136</sup>

---

131. Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, 95.

132. Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, 103.

133. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, 305.

134. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 107.

135. Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, 103.

136. Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*, trans. C.J. deCatanaro (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 202.

Symeon is describing some sort of ecstatic vision in which he experienced this divine light. It sounds as if it was an “out-of-body” experience. He describes the heavens being opened to him despite being inside a building. Symeon even mentions that the divine light expelled all “material denseness and bodily heaviness” from him.<sup>137</sup>

However, this experience with the divine light was a temporary one. Symeon even describes the departure of the divine light as emotionally painful. He writes:

I regained possession of myself and realized what its power had suddenly done to me. I reflected on its departure and considered how it had left me again to be alone in this life. So severe was the grief and pain that overcame me that I am at a loss properly to describe how great it was: A varied and most vehement pain was kindled like a fire in my heart. Imagine the pain of being separated from it, the infinity of love, the greatness of my passion, the sublimity of this greatest of blessings!<sup>138</sup>

According to Symeon, whatever he experienced was otherworldly and wonderful. The Orthodox believe that this divine light was the same divine light with which Jesus was transfigured on Mount Tabor (Mount of Transfiguration).

Gregory of Palamas also contributed to this idea that meditation is a way of participating in the divine light. Russell quotes Gregory who wrote: “Theosis is experienced as participation in God as light, which is attainable even in this life by monks practicing the hesychast method of prayer.”<sup>139</sup> Hesychasm is a meditative type of prayer developed by Eastern Orthodox monks which is known for its stillness, a specific praying posture, self-reflection, and repetition of the Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me”).<sup>140</sup> This is the type of prayer

---

137. Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*, 201.

138. Symeon the New Theologian, *The Discourses*, 201.

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

140. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*, 67.

that one should use if he wants to experience the divine light. Gregory of Palamas believed that this light is actually inside of all of us. He writes:

For on the day of Transfiguration, that Body (Christ's 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.<sup>141</sup>

Through hesychastic mediation, Gregory believed that a person could participate in this divine light that is already in them.

This idea of experiencing God through hesychastic mediation wasn't uncontested in Eastern Christianity, however. There was a controversy between a scholar named Barlaam the Calabrian and Gregory of Palamas in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>142</sup> In this controversy, Barlaam argued that the natural human mind could not reach divine truth on its own. It could only draw conclusions about God over what has been revealed.<sup>143</sup> The hesychasts were claiming to encounter God through contemplation of the divine light, but Barlaam didn't think that was possible. He accused the Hesychasts of violating the apophatic principle (describing God in the negative) because they were encountering the incomprehensible being through meditation.<sup>144</sup> Gregory of Palamas responded by saying that man could directly experience God through the divine light because he is in communion with God. This communion with God allows man to transcend himself and reach the divine through meditation.<sup>145</sup>

---

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

142. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*, 68.

143. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 139–140.

144. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*, 68.

145. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 140.

### **Summary**

According to the Orthodox, Theosis is the process by which Christians are made to be like God. They are not transformed into “God” or “gods” in essence, but rather are made into God’s likeness through participation with God’s energies. This is possible because all human beings possess the gift of God’s image even in our pre-Fall state. Achieving theosis is the ultimate purpose for mankind, and according to some Orthodox theologians, the ultimate purpose for the whole of creation. Theosis is synergistic in that man and God are working together to achieve man’s deification. One way that man can participate in the divine is via the hesychastic method of meditation in which a person participates with the divine light of Tabor. This is the same divine light which illuminated from Christ when he was transfigured on Mt. Tabor.

## OTHER SCRIPTURE REFERENCES TO THE MYSTICAL UNION AND THEOSIS

**Scriptural References**

In this portion of the thesis, I will show other prominent scriptural references which theologians use when speaking of the mystical union and/or theosis. Most of these passages were not referenced earlier in this paper. I will leave out the Transfiguration account since I already covered it thoroughly in the previous section. I will also leave out Gal 2:20 and Eph 5:32 which were covered already. I will provide a one-to-two paragraph summary after each scriptural reference to explain why they are useful for understanding the mystical union and/or theosis.

## Psalm 82:6 and John 10:34–36

*Psalm 82:6: I said, “You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you.*

*John 10:34–36: Jesus answered them: “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods?’ If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken—do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God?’”*

Russell notes that these two scriptural references serve as key foundations of the Orthodox understanding of theosis.<sup>146</sup> Jordan Cooper comments on the significance of Jesus’ usage of Ps 82 to the Eastern Orthodox. He describes how they view Jesus’ quote: “Jesus makes the point that divine titles are applied to humans in the Old Testament. If it was not sinful for Old Testament saints to be described as divine, surely it is not blasphemy to declare divinity.”<sup>147</sup> Jesus is refuting

---

146. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 57.

147. Cooper, *Christification*, 71.

the Pharisees who are accusing him of blasphemy. Russell explains: “Jesus does more than simply refute his accusers. Certainly, they are wrong in accusing him of blasphemy, but worse than that, by rejecting the Word sent by the Father they are rejecting the opportunity to become ‘gods’—to attain eternal life.”<sup>148</sup>

Schmeling notes that many Lutheran scholars believe the term “gods” is referring to civil or ecclesiastical magistrates. However, he argues that one could properly understand these verses to be referring to the mystical union.<sup>149</sup> Schmeling writes: “According to this view Christ is saying if you are gods by participation in the divine nature then why am I blaspheming when I say that I am the Son of God in the fullest sense, the Only-Begotten from all eternity.”<sup>150</sup> If one does take “gods” to refer to the mystical union, there is still a difference between that interpretation and the Orthodox interpretation. The Orthodox interpretation emphasizes Jesus’ reference to men as “gods” while the Lutheran interpretation emphasizes Jesus’ divinity.

#### John 17:20–23

John 17:20–23: “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may also be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”

One can see several words or phrases which can be used to defend theosis or the mystical union. Jesus talks about believers being “one” with him and his Father. He asks God the Father to give

---

148. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 58.

149. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 69–70.

150. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 70.

believers the “glory” that he has given him. He also wants the Father and himself to “be in” believers and vice versa. Ryan Ferries comments on John 17 as it relates to the Orthodox teaching of theosis. He focuses on the word “glory” (δόξα). He writes: “In John 17, glory is a divine prerogative that believers can expect to participate in, eschatologically speaking. Nevertheless, this future promise is something that believers have now because of what Christ has given to them and by the Spirit’s active presence in their lives.”<sup>151</sup>

Schmeling describes this verse as a *homologoumena* passage for the mystical union.<sup>152</sup> This verse is clearly talking about a union between Christ and the believer. Not only that, but it is also referring to a union between the believer and the whole of the Trinity as well. Christ specifically mentions the union with him and the Father, but one can implicitly understand that the Holy Spirit is also included in this union too. There are passages which refer to our union with the Holy Spirit as well such as Rom 8:9 and Heb 6:4.<sup>153</sup> Schmeling uses John 17 to defend the truth that the mystical union is a union of substances rather than the formation of a brand-new union transformation into something else. He writes: “In this union the substance of God and the substance of man interpenetrate but never become one substance or a new substance.”<sup>154</sup>

#### 2 Peter 1:3–4

2 Peter 1:3–4: 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,

---

151. Ryan A.R. Ferries, “Pauline and Johannine Theosis,” *HTS Theological Studies* 78, no. 4, (Jan 2022): 1–5, 4.

152. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 15.

153. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 40.

154. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 71.

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.

In 2 Pet 1:4, Peter plainly says that we are “partakers of the divine nature” (θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως). Cooper notes that 2 Pet 1:4 is probably the most common text used to defend the concept of deification. However, he notes that a lot of church fathers don’t use it because 2 Peter’s canonicity was contested.<sup>155</sup> Russell also mentions that the early fathers were “wary of this text” over doubts of genuine Petrine authorship.<sup>156</sup> 2 Peter 1:5–7 lists several qualities which the believer ought to supplement his faith with: Virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love. Russell comments as to how these virtuous qualities deal with theosis:

But this is not affected automatically. We have to respond to the divine initiative with faith, goodness, understanding, self-control, patience, true devotion, kindness to our fellow human beings, and love. 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.<sup>157</sup>

Russell’s quote shows how the Orthodox view theosis as a synergistic cooperation with God.

Union with God is dependent on the Christian’s life of sanctification.

Schmeling doesn’t identify 2 Pet 1:4 as a *sedes* passage for the mystical union, but rather as an *antilegomena* passage which speaks of the mystical union.<sup>158</sup> He identifies Johann Gerhard and Abraham Calov as Lutheran theologians who taught the mystical union according to this

---

155. Cooper, *Christification*, 49.

156. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 66.

157. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 65–66.

158. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 26.

verse.<sup>159</sup> Luther speaks about this verse pertaining to the mystical union as well. Luther writes that the Christian who partakes in the divine nature receives everything that pertains to the divine nature such as eternal truth, righteousness, wisdom, everlasting life, peace, joy, and happiness.<sup>160</sup> Luther goes so far as to say that anything done to a believer is really done to God. He writes: “Just as God cannot be deprived of being eternal life and eternal truth, so you cannot be deprived of this. If anything is done to you, it must be done to God; for he who wants to oppress a Christian must oppress God.”<sup>161</sup>

---

159. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 71.

160. *LW* 30, 155.

161. *LW* 30, 155.

## KEY SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE MYSTICAL UNION AND THEOSIS

### Union with God

Both the mystical union and Eastern Orthodox theosis involve union with the Triune God. The methods of this union differ; however, the nature of this union is similar. In the mystical union, a believer still remains human, and God still remains God. Hoenecke writes: “The essence of the mystical union is that God according to his substance in a miraculous way is close to the substance of believers and permeates their substance with his essence.”<sup>162</sup> It is a true Trinitarian reality in which the persons of the Trinity truly dwell within the believer.<sup>163</sup> The Orthodox understand the union with God in theosis in the same way. A believer remains human, and God remains God. Yet there is this extremely intimate union of substances between God and the believer. This isn’t a fusion<sup>164</sup> of the substance of God and the substance of man, but rather a true union of both substance in which they remain completely whole and distinct.

Another important similarity is that this union is initiated by God. Lutherans teach that the mystical union is something that God makes a reality. “The mystical union occurs through the means of grace and not apart from them.”<sup>165</sup> The mystical union cannot be separated from saving faith which is something God creates in believers through the means of grace. God creates the faith which also receives the mystical union. The Orthodox teach that the ability to achieve

---

162. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 386.

163. Cooper, *Christification*, 34.

164. Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 23.

165. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 43.

union with God through theosis is something that first must be initiated by God. Bartos writes: “The process of theosis is adoptive, not natural, because it depends on God’s creative and sustaining initiative.”<sup>166</sup> God starts the process. God gives human beings the ability to be deified. Stavropoulos explains how the Holy Spirit’s work of bringing someone to faith is necessary to start the process of theosis:

Our union with God, the theosis which is objectively offered to us by the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, and ascended God, can be realized only in the Holy Spirit. Only with the Holy Spirit will we be able to receive and taste redemption and theosis. Only in the Holy Spirit will we be able to reach the point of becoming gods, the likenesses of God. Only the Holy Spirit will transmit to us that which the Son and Word of God has offered to us.<sup>167</sup>

Both traditions, Lutheranism and Eastern Orthodoxy, teach that union with God is impossible without God bringing someone to faith first.

### **Incarnation**

According to both Lutherans and the Orthodox, the incarnation is necessary for union with God to occur. Schmeling writes:

Christ’s humanity allows mankind to have union with his divinity and the entire Trinity through the person of Christ. Mankind cannot approach God in his divinity. This cannot be stressed enough, for if Christ’s body is absent in the mystical union, man cannot have access to the divinity, destroying the mystical union. For this reason, it must be maintained that the incarnation is the basis of the mystical union or that the mystical union is predicated from the incarnation.<sup>168</sup>

---

166. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 145.

167. Stavropoulos, “Partakers of Divine Nature,” 188.

168. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 38.

In the incarnation, Jesus is true God and true man. God descended to us and took on our flesh. Through his saving work, Christ made possible the mystical union between man and God. In the mystical union, believers are united with the whole Christ (both the human and the divine) because the two natures are inseparable.<sup>169</sup> Just as faith looks to the person of Christ (both human and divine), so the mystical union is a union with the person of Christ (both human and divine).

Similarly, the Orthodox also emphasize the incarnation as key to their teaching of theosis. Bartos writes: “By his incarnation in man, Christ created the opportunity for us to have communion with God in its consummate form.”<sup>170</sup> In the incarnation, Christ was both truly human and truly divine. Since this is true, so a believer can also be united with God through theosis in a way in which the believer remains truly human and God’s substance remains truly divine. This believer is participating in Christ’s body since it cannot be separated from the person of Christ. By participating in Christ’s body, man also participates in Christ’s incorruption, immortality, the resurrected life, and eschatological fulfillment in heaven.<sup>171</sup>

This is all because of God’s descent to us. Timothy Ware writes: “The incarnation equally is a doctrine of sharing or participation. Christ shares to the full in what we are, and so he makes it possible for us to share in what he is, in his divine life and glory. He became what we are to make us what he is.”<sup>172</sup> Through the incarnation, God made himself both known and accessible to us.<sup>173</sup> In the incarnate Christ, mankind has access to the divinity. Mankind is able to

---

169. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 35.

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

171. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 188.

172. Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 74.

173. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 119.

achieve theosis because the incarnate Christ dwells inside of him. Meyendorff writes: “Through Christ alone united in his hypostasis divinity and humanity, he communicates to all Christians the divine energy – in other words, sanctifying grace – of which he is the source.”<sup>174</sup>

### **Baptism and the Lord’s Supper**

Both traditions see baptism and the Lord’s Supper as a key part of a believer’s union with God. Cooper writes: “This union (mystical union) is begun in the sacrament of baptism and strengthened by the Eucharist.”<sup>175</sup> Schmeling also describes the means of grace (Word of God, baptism, Lord’s Supper) as the instrumental cause of the mystical union.<sup>176</sup> There are several passages in Scripture which describe how close Christ is to us in baptism. One of them is Gal 3:27 which says: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Luther comments on this verse, saying: “Paul teaches that baptism is not a sign but the garment of Christ, in fact, that Christ himself is our garment. Hence, baptism is a very powerful and effective thing. For when we have put on Christ, the garment of our righteousness and salvation, then we also put on Christ, the garment of imitation.”<sup>177</sup>

In Rom 6:3–4, Paul explains even more benefits of baptism. He says: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the

---

174. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 183.

175. Cooper, *Christification*, 48.

176. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 41–42.

177. *LW* 26, 353.

dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Through baptism, the believer is clothed with Christ, buried with Christ, and raised to life in Christ. Baptism intimately connects us to our Lord. Likewise, the mystical union is also an intimate thing that is initiated with baptism. Christ dwells in us because of baptism. The Christian is able to live a new, sanctified life because he has been baptized. Christ, who dwells in us via the mystical union, plays a role in that. Cooper writes: “It is baptism that grants the power of Christification, wherein the Christian is continually brought to conform to the image of the indwelling Savior through participation in him through faith.”<sup>178</sup>

As was explained earlier in this thesis, the communion of the physical and supernatural elements in Lord’s Supper provides a picture of the communion that takes place in the mystical union. In the Supper, the body and blood of Christ are not mixed with the bread and wine nor does the bread and wine transform into the body and blood of Christ. Both the body and blood of Christ and the bread and wine are all present in the Supper. This union of substances helps us understand the union of substances that exists in the mystical union. However, the Eucharist also strengthens the mystical union as well. 1 Corinthians 10:16 says: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” In the Lord’s Supper we participate in the body and blood of the Lord. Cooper explains: “Holy Communion, in Paul’s thought, is not a purely symbolic or memorial meal, but an event wherein Christians are mystically united with one another and their Lord through the presence in the Eucharistic elements.”<sup>179</sup>

---

178. Cooper, *Christification*, 26.

179. Cooper, *Christification*, 68.

Similarly, the Orthodox see a strong connection between theosis and the sacraments. Meyendorff writes: “Redeeming, sanctifying and deifying grace is bound up with baptism and the Eucharist.”<sup>180</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius referred to baptism as a “divine birth” through which the believer is raised to a “divine level of existence.”<sup>181</sup> Baptism is what initiates the process of theosis in a new believer. Baptism also connects the believer to the Church as well. This process of theosis can only be done in the confines of the Church.<sup>182</sup> Meyendorff expands on this: “This divine mystery into which God allows us to penetrate, this union which he makes accessible to us, is the Mystery of the Church, the Body of Christ. There is no other way of ‘knowing God in God’ but to be grafted by the new birth of baptism on to the Body of the Incarnate Word.”<sup>183</sup>

Through baptism and the Lord’s Supper, a believer is participating in the liturgical life of the body of Christ, the Church. Russell notes: “We thus transcend our fallen humanity by becoming the body of Christ. It is through participating in Christ intellectually, ascetically, and liturgically, in mind and body, that we receive the gift of theosis. For we do not possess the potentiality for it by nature.”<sup>184</sup> Baptism initiates this process of theosis in the Church. The Lord’s Supper is one of many ways the believer continues to progress in theosis within the confines of the Church.

---

180. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 161.

181. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*. 253.

182. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 161.

183. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 165.

184. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 120.

## KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE MYSTICAL UNION AND THEOSIS

### **Union with God: Objective Reality or Dynamic Process?**

While union with God is a key factor in both the mystical union and theosis, there is a difference in how that union is achieved. Lutherans teach that the mystical union is an objective reality for all believers in faith. It is something that occurs instantaneously when a believer is brought to faith. Although instantaneous, it is critical to understand that the mystical union is a result of our justification and not the cause of justification.<sup>185</sup> Otherwise the assurance of one's salvation will be in jeopardy. The Triune God is the sole source of this union. Man plays no role whatsoever in attaining the mystical union. It is a gift of God. Grobien writes:

This union is not something to be attained through mystical ascent but is the gracious fellowship of God with believers that God initiates and establishes through Baptism, faith, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Not only are some qualities communicated from God to the Christian, but God himself dwells in the believer.<sup>186</sup>

God initiates this in a believer when a believer is brought to faith. Whether through Baptism or the Word, God dwells in the new believer. Whether baptized baby or adult convert, the Holy Spirit has made that individual his dwelling place.

To the Orthodox, union with God is something that man needs to achieve via theosis. God is the initiator; however, man needs to finish the job. Throughout this paper, the Eastern Orthodox teaching of theosis has been referred to as a "process." Union with God isn't just given to human beings, they must achieve that union through their life of sanctification. Stavropoulos writes: "It is absolutely necessary that people receive divine grace willingly and without

---

185. Schmeling, "Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis," 49.

186. Grobien, "Mystical Union as Unifying Biblical Theme," 59.

coercion. It is absolutely necessary for individuals to freely cooperate with divine grace in order to be able to travel the blessed road of union with God.”<sup>187</sup> God starts the believer on the road to theosis with divine grace, then the believer must cooperate with that divine grace to climb up the ladder to union with God. This difference also highlights an important difference between Lutherans and the Orthodox on baptism. To the Orthodox, baptism is a way in which God begins the process. Meyendorff writes: “At baptism we receive a disposition to do good and we conclude a pact with God, but it depends on us to give real value to this grace.”<sup>188</sup>

Since theosis is something that man is to achieve in his sanctified life here on earth, there are different methods in achieving this theosis. Most of these methods can be summarized as a mixture of both action and contemplation. Russell notes: “Union with God is the final state of theosis, an ascent by action (the overcoming of the passions) and contemplation (the grasping of the spiritual realities). It is the product of turning to God in repentance and prayer, of cooperating with him by a synergistic harmony of wills, of dwelling in ecstasy in the divine glory.”<sup>189</sup> Niketas Stethatos, a disciple of Symeon the New Theologian, even came up with stages of deification.<sup>190</sup> Throughout these stages, a man practices various virtues and contemplates on the divine in order to eventually reach union with God. For the Orthodox, this union with God is the ultimate goal of theosis. It can only be achieved through the synergistic cooperation between God and man.

---

187. Stavropoulos, “Partakers of Divine Nature,” 189.

188. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, 160.

189. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 153.

190. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 146–147.

### Salvation through Theosis

Christopher Veniamin introduced his book with a personal story. When he was teenager, he heard a priest say to him: “In this world, there is nothing more difficult than to be saved.”<sup>191</sup> This priest was referring to theosis which is the process by which someone is saved. This is the biggest difference between the mystical union and theosis. Lutherans do not believe the mystical union is the reason that a believer is saved. The Orthodox, however, do believe that the process of theosis is the means by which a believer is saved. Cooper writes: “While the Lutheran tradition has placed soteriology primarily in the realm of event rather than process, the Eastern tradition proclaims deification, its central soteriological category, as a process.”<sup>192</sup> Salvation is a synergistic process for the Orthodox. One of the primary concerns for Lutherans is one’s assurance of salvation. To Lutherans, union with God via the indwelling Christ cannot become something that we base our salvation on.

#### Osiandrianism: The Danger of Over-emphasizing the Mystical Union

In the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, there was a controversy among the Lutherans. A man named Andreas Osiander argued that a man was justified not because of God’s righteous verdict, but because of the righteousness of the indwelling Christ who dwells inside every believer by faith.<sup>193</sup> Brug explains some of the problems with Osiander’s teaching:

For Osiander justification is not an imputation of a righteousness existing outside of man, but an actual infusion of a righteousness dwelling in man. It is not a mere acquittal from sin and guilt, but includes regeneration, renewal, sanctification, and internal cleansing

---

191. Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, 13.

192. Cooper, *Christification*, 1.

193. Brug, “Osiandrianism—Then and Now,” 1.

from sin. Justification is not a forensic or judicial act outside of man or a declaration concerning man's legal standing before God, but a story of medicinal process within a person.... Therefore, for Osiander justification is never instantaneous and complete, but gradual and progressive.<sup>194</sup>

Osiander's teaching undermined forensic justification and ultimately the assurance of one's salvation.

This prompted the writing of Article III of the Formula of Concord. In Article III, the Formulators clarify that the indwelling of Christ, although a reality for every believer, is the result of our justification through faith alone rather than the cause of justification.<sup>195</sup> Osiander was specifically over-emphasizing the indwelling of Christ, however, one can see how over-emphasizing the mystical union can also lead to the same problems. The mystical union is not the same thing as justification. Schmeling points out: "If the comfort of the mystical union is confused with the objective comfort of the cross, a confusion of justification and sanctification will result."<sup>196</sup> Osiander's false teaching would have resulted in that confusion. Likewise, an over-emphasis on the mystical union would do the same.

### Theosis: The Process of Salvation

Concerning theosis as a process, Russell writes: "We have to respond to the divine initiative with faith, goodness, understanding, self-control, patience, true devotion, kindness to our fellow human beings, and love. Our admission to the eternal kingdom depends on the moral effort we

---

194. Brug, "Osiandrianism—Then and Now," 5.

195. FC SD III 54.

196. Schmeling, "Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis," 64.

make.”<sup>197</sup> For the Orthodox, salvation is synergistic. Meyendorff uses that exact work to describe how Gregory Palamas viewed salvation: “This synergy of grace and human effort is for Palamas an obvious axiom.”<sup>198</sup> The Orthodox would not say that a person is saved by works apart from God’s grace, however, good works are necessary for someone to cooperate in the process of theosis. Tibbs writes: “The Orthodox are in complete agreement with Luther in his insistence that no human can ever do enough to be saved by works alone. Yet Orthodoxy also teaches that God sees one’s efforts motivated by faith and blesses those efforts with his grace. In this way salvation is a cooperative effort between the human person and God.”<sup>199</sup>

Since salvation can only be achieved via theosis which is a process, objective or forensic justification is undermined. Schmeling compares the two different understandings of salvation by saying: “The only conclusion that can be made from these paradigms is that man is either only a saint or in the process of being saved. In other words, man achieves perfection already in this life or God is not just, since an incomplete satisfaction for sin is permitted.”<sup>200</sup> Bartos notes that the Orthodox have problems with the “Protestant” belief in objective justification. He writes that this emphasis on objective justification weakens man’s relation with Christ with whom man cooperates to achieve theosis.<sup>201</sup> He also argues that the doctrine of justification “gives the impression that nothing essential or personal could happen inside the believer.”<sup>202</sup>

---

197. Russell, *Fellow Workers with God*, 66.

198. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas* 165.

199. Tibbs, *A Basic Guide to Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 110.

200. Schmeling, “Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis,” 55.

201. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 291.

202. Bartos, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 293.

This shows a major difference between Lutherans and the Orthodox. As has been stated before, man still has the image of God even after the Fall according to the Orthodox. The Orthodox do believe in original sin, but they don't believe in total depravity. Ware writes that the Orthodox cannot agree with the Augustinian view of original sin in which mankind has been completely ruined by the fall.<sup>203</sup> Total depravity would mean that there is nothing good inside men, hence no image of God. This would also mean that salvation must be completely from the outside without any human cooperation whatsoever. Hence, theosis as the process of salvation would be incompatible with the Augustinian view of original sin.

For the Orthodox, one's salvation isn't guaranteed. Tibbs points out that the Orthodox wouldn't state that they are saved for a couple of reasons.<sup>204</sup> First the Orthodox believe only God can declare someone saved or not. Second, since salvation is a process, one cannot objectively say that he is certainly saved. She mentions that theosis doesn't ever end for a Christian even in eternity. She compares it to a journey up a never-ending mountain.<sup>205</sup> A Christian is constantly on the journey. There is no particular moment where one can definitively say that he is saved. As with all synergistic views of salvation, there is no assurance of salvation with Eastern Orthodox theosis.

---

203. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 217.

204. Tibbs, *A Basic Guide to Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 112.

205. Tibbs, *A Basic Guide to Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 112.

## CONCLUSION

Although there is similar terminology between the mystical union and Eastern Orthodox theosis, they are not the same thing. The mystical union is an objective reality in which the Triune God dwells in a believer. Through this union, God moves the believer to live a sanctified life. The Christian participates with God who dwells in him and leads him to progress in his life of holiness. However, this is not to be mixed with our justification. God declared us “not guilty” through the innocent suffering and death of Christ. This blessed status of “not guilty” belongs to the Christian through faith which is the means by which this status is appropriated. Salvation is purely an act of God without any work of man whatsoever.

Eastern Orthodox theosis is a process. It is the synergistic process in which God begins man’s deification. It is up to man to respond to this initial divine grace through good works, contemplation, and whatever other means man can climb the ladder up to God. Salvation to the Orthodox is dependent on man’s cooperation and not just God’s declaration. Union with God is something to be attained through theosis rather than an objective reality for all believers through faith.

The mystical union is not a Lutheran understanding of Eastern Orthodox theosis. Objective justification is the doctrine on which the Church stands or falls. Eastern Orthodox theosis cannot be separated from synergism and the works of man. Any synergistic path to salvation is incompatible with objective justification. Although it might be tempting to overemphasize similarities for the sake of ecumenicalism, we cannot jeopardize people’s assurance of their salvation. As Paul states in Eph 2, it is by grace that we are saved through faith apart from works. The mystical union is not “Lutheran theosis.” We are either saved solely by God’s grace or we are not saved at all.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bartos, Emil. *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*. Paternoster Theological Monographs. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999.
- Brenner, John. "Eastern Orthodoxy." Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 2015.
- Brug, John F. "Osiandrianism—Then and Now: Justification through Christ Dwelling in Us." Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 2015.
- Clendenin, Daniel B. *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*. Second Edition. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003.
- Cooper, Jordan. *Christification*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014.
- Ferries, Ryan A.R. "Pauline and Johannine Theosis." *HTS Theological Studies* 78, no. 4 (January 1, 2022).
- Glazov, Gregory, "Theosis, Judaism, and Old Testament Anthropology." Pages 16–31 in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*. Edited by Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006.
- Grobien, Gifford A. "Mystical Union as Unifying Biblical Theme." *CTQ* 87, no. 1 (January 2023): 57–73.
- Kolb, Robert, and Timothy Wengert. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000.
- Louth, Andrew. *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013.
- Marquardt, Kurt. "Luther and Theosis." *CTQ* 64, no. 3 (July 2000): 182–205.
- Meyendorff, John. *Byzantine Theology*. New York, NY: Fordham University, 1974.
- Schmeling, Timothy. "Life in Christ: The Unio Mystica and Its Relation to Theosis." Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 2016.
- Stavropolous, Christoforos, "Partakers of Divine Nature." Pages 183–192 in *Eastern Orthodox Theology*. Edited by Daniel B. Clendenin. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003.
- Tibbs, Eve. *A Basic Guide to Eastern Orthodox Theology: Introducing Beliefs and Practices*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021.
- Veniamin, Christopher. *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation: Theosis in Scripture and Tradition*. First edition. Dalton, PA: Mount Tabor, 2013.

Ware, Timothy. *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity*. 3rd ed. UK: Penguin Random House UK, 2015.

Ware, Timothy. *The Orthodox Way*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1979.