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Theosis- Evangelicalism and Orthodoxy in Dialogue

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Abstract

The doctrine of *theosis*, or deification, is a foundational to Eastern Orthodox soteriology and has emerged as a central topic in contemporary ecumenical discourse. This article synthesises principal objections to *theosis* from a mainstream evangelical perspective and provides a scholarly rebuttal grounded in patristic evidence. The evangelical critique is systematically outlined, focuses on four primary areas of perceived incompatibility: soteriological paradigms (forensic justification versus ontological transformation), anthropological presuppositions (monergism versus synergy), the nature of grace (unmerited favour versus uncreated energies), and Christological models. To consider these critiques, the article drawing principally on Norman Russell's *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition,* as the methodological primary source for understanding the historical and theological development of theosis, supplemented by selected engagement with recent ecumenical scholarship. Russell's research challenges claims that the doctrine is an unbiblical, Hellenistic innovation by demonstrating its deep roots in scriptural exegesis and Jewish tradition, as well as its essential role in patristic Christology. The article concludes that, although Russell's findings address many historical objections, the core disagreement persists due to fundamental, systematic differences between the legal-forensic framework of Reformational Evangelical theology and the therapeutic-ontological framework of the Eastern tradition. Consequently, the dialogue shifts from accusations of historical deviation to substantive engagement with two distinct, internally coherent models of Christian salvation.

Keywords: theosis; soteriology; forensic justification; therapeutic-ontological; Eastern Orthodoxy; essence-energies distinction.

Introduction

The doctrine of theosis (θέωσις), also referred to as "deification," "divinisation," or "ingodding" (a literal rendering of theosis), is described as the "central theme, chief aim, basic purpose, or primary religious ideal of Orthodoxy" (Clendenin, 1994:120). It conceptualises salvation as a transformative process in which the human person, through cooperation with divine grace, becomes by grace what God is by nature. This concept is succinctly articulated in the patristic axiom attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria, that the Son of God became human so that humans might become divine, which has served as a foundational principle of Eastern Christian soteriology since the patristic era (Rakestraw, 1997:257). In recent decades, there has been a notable resurgence of interest in theosis within Western theological scholarship, with representatives from Lutheran, Wesleyan, and Reformed Evangelical traditions examining its relevance for contemporary theology and ecumenical dialogue (Gavrilyuk, 2009).

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Despite increasing interest and recognition of conceptual parallels with Western doctrines such as sanctification and union with Christ, mainstream evangelical theology has traditionally maintained significant scepticism, often resulting in outright refutation. This critical stance extends beyond terminological differences; surveys of theological motifs reveal fundamentally different conceptual frameworks. Orthodox works prioritise terms such as "deification" and "energies of God," whereas evangelical literature emphasises "justification," "substitutionary atonement," and "imputation" (Horton, 2007). The evangelical objection is not directed at the concept of union with God itself, a notion well developed within evangelical traditions (Billings, 2011, McCormack, 2010), but rather at the specific formulation of theosis in Eastern Orthodoxy, which is perceived as grounded in a fundamentally different and incompatible theological foundation.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the theological impasse between evangelical and Orthodox perspectives. It first presents a systematic account of the evangelical critique, outlining the deep-rooted, methodical differences that underlie it. The analysis addresses four primary theological loci: the nature of salvation (soteriology), the condition of humanity (anthropology), the definition of grace, and the application of Christ's work (Christology and ecclesiology). These deviations, it is argued, create a theological gap that cannot be bridged by superficial linguistic similarities. The article then critically evaluates these objections by drawing principally on Norman Russell's (2004) comprehensive study, The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition, as the primary source of patristic evidence. The article proceeds through a literature review, a statement of methodology, the presentation of the evangelical critique, the patristic re-evaluation, and a comparative synthesis, before concluding with a constructive proposal for advancing the dialogue.

Methodology

This article employs a systematic-theological and comparative methodology. The approach is analytical rather than empirical: it proceeds by close reading, conceptual mapping, and critical comparison of doctrinal positions. The evangelical critique is constructed by synthesising representative voices from the Reformed tradition, primarily Horton (2007) and White (2001) for the forensic framework, and Meyendorff (1979) and Yannaras (1991) as primary Orthodox interlocutors, while the Orthodox rebuttal is drawn principally from Russell (2004).

The methodological decision to rely primarily on Russell (2004) for patristic evidence is deliberate and justified. Russell's work is the most comprehensive and academically authoritative lexical and historical survey of the doctrine available, spanning from pre-Christian antecedents to late Byzantine expression. Using it as the primary patristic source ensures methodological consistency: all historical claims about the Church Fathers' understanding of deification are evaluated against the same scholarly standard, rather than assembled eclectically from diverse secondary sources. This approach also reflects the article's specific focus: it is not a comprehensive survey of *theosis* scholarship, but an evaluation of the most common evangelical historical objections considering the best available patristic evidence.

The scope is deliberately bounded: the article focuses on the interaction between the mainstream Evangelical tradition and the Greek patristic tradition. Western medieval developments, Byzantine hesychasm beyond the Palamite essence-energies distinction, and the Lutheran debate initiated by the Finnish school are noted in the literature review but are not the primary focus of the comparative analysis. The article proceeds from critique to rebuttal to synthesis, treating the theological debate as an encounter between two internally coherent paradigms rather than as a dispute between orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

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Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with theosis within the ecumenical arena has grown substantially since the late twentieth century. Gavrilyuk (2009) traces the trajectory from an era in which the doctrine was routinely dismissed as a Hellenistic corruption to its contemporary status as an ecumenical desideratum. Within Lutheranism, the Finnish school represented by Mannermaa (2005) has argued that Luther's own theology of justification, centred on the real presence of Christ in the believer which contains a participatory dimension structurally like Orthodox deification. This interpretation has generated significant debate and opened new lines of Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue.

Evangelical and Reformed responses have been more cautious. Horton (2007) represents a rigorous defence of the Reformation's forensic framework, arguing that the covenant-historical structure of Scripture resists reduction to an ontological-participatory model. Billings (2011) occupies a mediating position, demonstrating that Calvin's own theology of union with Christ is richer and more participatory than often acknowledged, without surrendering the forensic priority of justification. Rakestraw (1997) represents an earlier evangelical attempt to retrieve theosis as a legitimate doctrinal category within Protestant soteriology. McClymond (2012) examines Jonathan Edwards's use of deification language and its implications for evangelical retrieval of the concept. Fairbairn (2007) critiques the traditional two-part division in early church theology. He proposes that soteriology consists of a Western juridical approach, an Eastern mystical approach, and a personal, relational Eastern approach.

On the Orthodox side, Russell (2004) provides the most comprehensive lexical and historical analysis of the doctrine from its antecedents to its Byzantine expression. This work has become the standard academic reference for historical claims about theosis. Finlan and Kharlamov (2006) and the volume edited by Christensen and Wittung (2008) gather essays examining deification across multiple traditions, including patristic, medieval, and Protestant contexts. Kärkkäinen (2002) specifically addresses the ecumenical potential of theosis from a comparative perspective, identifying convergences among Orthodox, Protestant, and Pentecostal soteriologies. Gorman (2005) argues that Pauline soteriology itself contains a theotic dimension, framing justification as a participatory, transformative reality rather than a purely forensic declaration.
What the existing literature has not provided in a single, tightly focused study is a systematic juxtaposition of the four principal evangelical objections to theosis against the patristic evidence marshalled by Russell (2004), followed by a synthetic diagnosis of which objections are historically untenable, and which point to genuine, irresolvable paradigmatic differences. This article addresses that gap.

The Evangelical Critique of Theosis

The evangelical refutation of theosis is neither monolithic nor simplistic in its rejection of an "Eastern" idea. It is a theological stance rooted in convictions established in the Protestant Reformation and has since defined evangelical identity. The critique is systematic, asserting that the Orthodox doctrine of theosis, when closely examined, rests on presuppositions at odds with the evangelical understanding of the gospel at its most basic levels[1].

[1] In "Patristic Soteriology: Three Trajectories," Donald Fairbairn challenges the idea of a simple two-part division in early church theology. Instead, he suggests that soteriology includes a Western juridical path, an Eastern mystical path, and a personal or relational Eastern path. Fairbairn argues that the relational model, favoured by figures like Athanasius, provides a more effective, non-legal understanding of salvation as adoption into divine love, setting it

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Different Soteriological Paradigms: The Primacy of Forensic Justification

The most important point of departure lies in the basic model of salvation. Western theology, especially in its Reformed expression, is dominated by a juridical or forensic paradigm. The primary problem of humanity is legal: as sinners, all people stand guilty and condemned before the righteous judgement of a holy God (cf. Romans 5:16, 18). The narrative of salvation is therefore a forensic drama. Redemption is accomplished through Christ's substitutionary atonement, wherein He satisfies the demands of divine justice by bearing the penalty for sin on behalf of His people. The central, decisive benefit received by the believer through faith alone (*sola fide*) is justification, a legal declaration by God that the sinner is now righteous. This righteousness is not inherent but is the imputed righteousness of Christ, credited to the believer's account (Schreiner, 2011:19–20). For evangelicalism, this forensic declaration is the heart of the gospel, securing the believer's standing with God once and for all (Horton, 2007:145–160).

In sharp contrast, Eastern Orthodoxy frames salvation primarily as a therapeutic and ontological process. The fundamental human problem is not guilt, but mortality, corruption, and alienation from God, the source of all life (Meyendorff, 1979:143–146). As Orthodox theologian states, the work of Christ was not to "propitiate his Father, but he cured the ailing nature of man" (Yannaras, 1991:111). Salvation is therefore the healing and restoration of human nature, a progressive journey of becoming united with God and partaking of His divine life. In this model, theosis is not merely one aspect of salvation; it is the process of salvation itself (Kärkkäinen, 2002:46).

From an evangelical perspective, this therapeutic model, however valuable its awareness of spiritual transformation, dangerously displaces the forensic core of the gospel. The critique is that the Orthodox doctrine of theosis overemphasises ontological transformation while distorting the prioritisation of justification as the regulative soteriological factor (Bardis, 2016). By prioritising ontological transformation over legal declaration, theosis is seen to conflate or subordinate justification to sanctification. The biblical language of guilt, punishment, and imputation, which evangelicals view as central to the Pauline exposition of the gospel in texts like Romans 3–5, is either relegated to a secondary status or reinterpreted in non-legal terms. This leads to the charge that the Orthodox model fails to do full justice to the scriptural portrayal of God as both "just and the one who justifies" (Romans 3:26).

Anthropological Foundations: Original Guilt and Monergistic Grace

Flowing directly from this soteriological divide are considerable differences in anthropology. The Reformed tradition, following Augustine, affirms the doctrine of original sin, which entails both inherited corruption and, crucially, inherited guilt (*reatus*). In Adam, the federal head of humanity, all have sinned; therefore, all are born under condemnation and are spiritually dead, possessing a will that is in bondage to sin and unable to initiate or contribute to salvation (total depravity). This state of spiritual inability requires a monergistic work of regeneration: God alone must act to give new life, create faith, and bring the sinner to salvation (Horton, 2007:35–60).

The Eastern Orthodox tradition approaches the Fall from a different angle. The consensus in Greek patristic and Byzantine traditions identifies the inheritance of the Fall as "an inheritance

apart from Western legalism and Platonic-influenced mysticism. See Fairbairn's Patristic Soteriology: Three Trajectories in JETS 50(2).

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essentially of mortality rather than of sinfulness, sinfulness being merely the consequence of mortality" (Meyendorff, 1979:145). Humanity inherits the consequences of Adam's sin, corruption, disease, and death, but not his personal guilt. While human nature is wounded and the will is weakened, it has not lost the innate capacity to respond to and cooperate with God's grace. This leads to the doctrine of synergy (συνέργεια), the belief that salvation is achieved through the cooperation of divine grace and human free will. As Vladimir Lossky states with characteristic force, "God becomes powerless before human freedom; he cannot violate it... man was created by the will of God alone, but he cannot be deified by it alone" (as cited in Russell, 2004:1).

Evangelical critics consistently identify this synergistic framework as a form of semi-Pelagianism (Horton, 2007:60–80). By denying inherited guilt and affirming a retained capacity of the will to cooperate in salvation, Orthodoxy is seen to possess an inadequate view of sin (Bardis, 2016). The Orthodox emphasis on human effort, ascetic practices, and holy works as necessary means for the achievement of deification raises sharp concerns about the compromise of *sola gratia* (by grace alone). At the same time, Orthodox theologians insist that such efforts do not merit deification in a legal sense; their role as a necessary personal participation is viewed by evangelicals as challenging the sovereign, unmerited, and wholly gratuitous nature of God's saving action (Russell, 2004:1–15).

The Nature of Grace and Union: Unmerited Favour versus Uncreated Energies

A third major area of contention involves the very definition of grace and the nature of the believer's union with God. Central to later Orthodox theology, particularly as systematised by St Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century, is the distinction between God's unknowable essence (οὐσία) and his knowable, uncreated energies (ἐνέργεια) (Russell, 2004:300–315). Within this framework, grace is not simply a divine attitude or a created gift; it is identified with these uncreated divine energies themselves. As Lossky explains, grace is uncreated and by its nature divine, the energy or procession of the one nature that communicates itself to created beings, deifying them (as cited in Russell, 2004:1). To "participate in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) is thus understood as a real, ontological participation in these divine energies, through which the believer is transformed and deified without ever becoming part of the divine essence.

This conception of grace is largely foreign to the Protestant tradition. For evangelicals, grace is primarily understood as God's unmerited favour and benevolent disposition toward undeserving sinners (Schreiner, 2011:20). While this grace has powerful effects, it is not a quasi-divine substance or energy that is communicated or infused. Consequently, the evangelical doctrine of "union with Christ" is understood differently. Billings (2011:15–40) demonstrates that Calvin carefully maintained an ontological distinction between Christ and the believer even within their intimate union, rejecting any "ontological co-mingling" (Billings, 2011: 28–32) and insisting that the union is spiritual and dynamic, not one that deifies human nature by permeating it with divine properties. The evangelical concern is that the essence-energies distinction ultimately erects a metaphysical system not explicitly found in Scripture and that it risks blurring the non-negotiable Creator-creature distinction. This fear is sometimes expressed as an anxiety about "excessive theological apophaticism" that can lead to a view of salvation detached from the concrete, historical work of Christ's atonement (Horton, 2007:175).

Christological and Ecclesiological Implications

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Finally, the evangelical critique focuses on what is perceived as a dangerous extrapolation of the Chalcedonian definition. Orthodox theology holds that, in the Incarnation, Christ's human nature was deified through its hypostatic union with the divine nature of the Logos. This deified humanity becomes the source and channel through which deifying grace flows to believers (Russell, 2004:10–14). The salvation of the individual is thus modelled directly on the union of the two natures in the one person of Christ. Reformation theology strongly resists this move, regarding it as a category error. It maintains a sharp distinction between the unique, unrepeatable hypostatic union within the person of Christ and the believer's union with Christ. The classic Reformed doctrine of the *extra Calvinisticum*, for instance, asserts that the divine Logos was not fully contained within the human nature even in the Incarnation, thus stressing the integrity and distinction of the two natures (Billings, 2011:50–75). To model the believer's salvation directly on the hypostatic union is seen as diminishing both the uniqueness of Christ and the createdness of the believer (Horton, 2007:190–210).

This Christological concern extends to ecclesiology and the sacraments. In Orthodoxy, the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, are understood as the supreme means of theosis, through which believers physically and spiritually partake of Christ's deified body and blood and are progressively incorporated into His life (Russell, 2004:10–14). While evangelicals hold diverse views on the sacraments, they are generally not seen as channels of an ontological, deifying grace. For evangelicals, the Orthodox emphasis on sacramentalism, combined with asceticism and mysticism, creates a system in which salvation becomes dependent on a synergistic process mediated by the institutional church rather than on a direct gift received by faith alone (*sola fide*) (White, 2001:200–225).

An Orthodox Re-evaluation: The Evidence from Norman Russell's Survey

The evangelical critique, as outlined above, is systematic and firmly grounded in Reformation principles. However, several of its key objections are historical in nature, charging that theosis is a "Hellenistic" corruption, an "unbiblical" intrusion, and a distortion of the gospel of atonement. To assess these claims, this article relies principally on Russell's (2004) comprehensive survey of the doctrine, from its antecedents to its later Byzantine expression, as a robust scholarly framework for re-evaluating the foundations of theosis.

Deconstructing the Charge of Pagan Hellenisation

The most persistent and damaging charge against deification is that it represents the "Hellenisation" of Christianity. Influential critics like Adolf von Harnack asserted that the doctrine, particularly its "exchange formula," was fundamentally derived from the mystery cults and served to obscure the simple content of the gospel (as cited in Russell, 2004:3). This perspective views theosis as a foreign body imported from the pagan religious and philosophical milieu of the Roman Empire. Russell's (2004) detailed analysis of the Graeco-Roman world, including the ruler-cult, mystery religions, and Platonist philosophy, presents a far more refined picture. While the language of apotheosis was indeed part of the cultural air, Russell demonstrates that the Church Fathers' engagement with it was critical and transformative, not one of simple adoption. Christian intellectuals like Clement of Alexandria adopted a Euhemeristic interpretation of pagan gods, allowing Christians to appropriate the language of deification without taking over the content of pagan religion (Russell, 2004:34).

Most decisively, Russell's (2004:37) lexical analysis directly subverts the borrowing thesis. He demonstrates that "the Christian usage of deification terms expressing the soul's ascent to God precedes the pagan usage rather than the other way round, as is often assumed." The technical

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language of deification appears in Christian writings more than a century before it is found in a Platonist philosopher like Porphyry. This chronological evidence strongly indicates that the Christian doctrine was not a derivative of pagan philosophy but an independent, and indeed pioneering, theological development. The Hellenistic world provided a conceptual vocabulary, but the content, trajectory, and theological grounding of Christian deification originated elsewhere (Russell, 2004:1–40).

Uncovering the Biblical and Jewish Foundations

The second major historical critique is that the doctrine is "unbiblical" (as cited in Russell, 2004: 6). Russell's (2004:6) study mounts a substantial counterargument, positing as a central thesis that "the deification metaphor has biblical roots and that during the second and third centuries it came to be expressed in the language of Hellenism". The development of the doctrine was not an alien imposition onto Scripture but an organic explication of scriptural themes of participation, divine sonship, and transformation.

The basis of this biblical foundation is the patristic exegesis of Psalm 82:6: "I said, 'You are gods, and all of you are sons of the Most High.'" Russell (2004: 60, 76) traces the Christian use of this verse back to Justin Martyr in the mid-second century, and notes that Irenaeus of Lyons subsequently developed this theme, explicitly identifying the "gods" with the baptised who have "received the grace of adoption." This was not a Christian invention but an engagement with a living Jewish interpretive tradition (Russell, 2004:60–64). Beyond this key verse, Russell (2004, pp. 55–64) demonstrates that various streams of Second Temple Judaism — including Hellenistic Judaism in the Book of Wisdom and the works of Philo of Alexandria, and apocalyptic traditions in Enochic Judaism, profoundly shaped the conceptual world that gave rise to theosis.

Finally, the New Testament itself provides the rich participatory language that the Fathers would later systematise. Russell (2004: 11) notes that while the Apostle Paul does not use the technical term "deification," his dense metaphorical language of participatory union forms the very bedrock of the later doctrine: Deification as a theological term only emerged later when Paul's metaphorical images were re-expressed in conceptual language. The Johannine themes of believers being children of God (1 John 3: 1-2) and the explicit statement in 2 Peter 1:4 that believers become "partakers of the divine nature" became central for later Fathers like Cyril of Alexandria (Russell, 2004:13). This evidence portrays deification not as an unbiblical aberration, but as the conceptual fruit of a long developmental trajectory rooted firmly in Scripture and its Jewish interpretive context. This reading is corroborated by Gorman's (2005:181-200) argument that Pauline soteriology itself carries a genuinely theotic dimension.

The Soteriological and Christological Necessity of Deification

The third critique is that deification presents a flawed soteriology, substituting a "miraculous transformation of our nature" for the gospel of atonement and demanding a Christology at odds with the Gospels (as cited in Russell, 2004:3). Russell's (2004) study shows, on the contrary, that for the Fathers, the doctrine of deification was inseparable from their understanding of salvation and the person of Christ. Far from being an alternative to a biblical soteriology, it was its ultimate expression and logical conclusion. Russell (2004:12) repeatedly emphasises the unbreakable correlation between Christology and deification: "The opponents of Arianism could therefore use the doctrine of deification as an argument for the fully divine nature of Christ: human beings could be deified only if Christ was indeed God." The logic was inescapable, salvation, understood as deification, required a Saviour who was fully divine to bridge the ontological gap between Creator and creature.

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Russell (2004:14–15) recognises two distinct but convergent strands in the patristic tradition. The "realistic" approach, characteristic of the Alexandrian school, stresses the ontological transformation of human nature accomplished "in principle" by the Incarnation. The "ethical" approach, more typical of the Cappadocian Fathers, stresses the ascent of the soul through the practice of virtue and the imitation of Christ. These are not mutually exclusive paradigms but represent different emphases on a single, unified path to salvation. Crucially, Russell's (2004:1) work shows that the Fathers were acutely aware of the need to preserve the Creator-creature distinction. Deification was consistently understood as participation by grace, not an attainment of the divine essence by nature. The "gods" of the Fathers are sons "by adoption," who participate in divine attributes such as incorruptibility, immortality, and glory, but always remain creatures utterly dependent on the uncreated God.

A Comparative Synthesis: Paradigmatic Tensions and Points of Union

The juxtaposition of the evangelical critique with the patristic evidence offered by Russell (2004) permits a more precise diagnosis of the theological conflict. It shows that while some objections are based on historical misunderstandings, others point to genuine, foundational differences in theological architecture. The debate over theosis is ultimately about the fundamental shape of the Christian gospel.

Reassessing the Historical Objections

The first clear conclusion from this analysis is that Russell's (2004) findings considerably weaken the historical objections central to the traditional evangelical critique. The charge that theosis is a foreign element imported from pagan Hellenism appears historically untenable. Russell (2004:1–40) provides evidence for the priority of Christian usage of deification language, and his analysis of the Fathers' polemical engagement with pagan culture suggests an internal, organic development rather than external borrowing. Similarly, the claim that the doctrine is "unbiblical" is challenged by Russell's (2004:6–15) tracing of its exegetical roots to Psalm 82:6, its conceptual antecedents in Second Temple Judaism, and its continuity with the participatory language of the New Testament, a conclusion reinforced by Gorman's (2005) Pauline analysis and Finlan and Kharlamov's (2006) broader ecumenical survey.

The Continuing Divide: Forensic versus Ontological Frameworks

However, dismantling historical objections is not the same as resolving the theological conflict. The core of the evangelical critique, as articulated in the first section, consists of its systematic, not historical, commitments. Even if theosis is recognised as an authentic Christian doctrine, it still operates within a soteriological framework fundamentally different from the forensic model of the Reformation. The evangelical starting point is the problem of legal guilt before a holy God; the solution is justification by faith, understood as a declarative legal act based on Christ's imputed righteousness (Schreiner, 2011; Horton, 2007). The Orthodox starting point is the problem of mortality and corruption; the solution is deification, understood as a transformative ontological process of participation in the divine life (Meyendorff, 1979; Russell, 2004).

These are not merely different emphases; they are different theological arrangements that configure all other doctrines around them. Russell's (2004) clarification of the patristic position illuminates the coherence and integrity of the ontological-therapeutic model. Still, it does not, and cannot, bridge the gap with a system for which the forensic declaration of justification is the article by which the church stands or falls.

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The evangelical concern remains that in the Orthodox model, the believer's legal standing before God, which is seen as the immediate and primary benefit of faith, becomes obscured or subsumed within a lifelong process of transformation (Horton, 2007:175–200).

Grace, Synergy, and the Human Condition

This paradigmatic clash is nowhere more evident than in the doctrines of grace and anthropology. The evangelical critique of Orthodox synergy as "semi-Pelagian" comes directly from the Reformed doctrine of total depravity and the corresponding necessity of monergistic grace. If the human will be spiritually dead and in bondage to sin, then it cannot cooperate in its own regeneration. Salvation must be a sovereign act of God from start to finish (Horton, 2007:35–70). The Orthodox view, rooted in a different understanding of the Fall, inheriting mortality rather than personal guilt (Meyendorff, 1979:145), sees the human will as wounded, but not destroyed, capable of responding to and cooperating with divine grace.

Russell's (2004) work clarifies that for the Fathers, deification is entirely a gift of grace. However, the evangelical objection is more precise: it concerns not only the source of salvation (grace) but also its mode of application. The Reformed understanding of *sola gratia* excludes any contribution from the human will in the initiation of salvation. The Orthodox concept of synergy, by definition, includes it. Therefore, even when theosis is properly understood as participation "by grace," it still entails a model of divine-human cooperation that is structurally incompatible with the monergistic framework of Reformed soteriology. The disagreement is not over whether salvation is gracious, but over what "grace alone" entails for human agency (Horton, 2007:60–90; White, 2001:150–180).

Christology and Participation

Finally, the Christological concerns highlight the different ways the two traditions relate the person of Christ to the life of the believer. The evangelical critique, particularly from a, erects a boundary around the hypostatic union to protect its uniqueness. The believer's "union with Christ" is spiritual, federal, and relational, but it is not modelled on the union of God and man in the person of the incarnate Logos (Billings, 2011:50–90). The fear is that doing so, as the Orthodox model appears to, risks either inappropriately divinising humanity or compromising the uniqueness of Christ (Horton, 2007:190–210).

Russell's (2004:10–15) analysis shows that for the Fathers, this connection was not a category error but the very heart of the gospel. The Incarnation was salvific precisely because the Logos assumed human nature, deified it in His own person, and thereby created the possibility for all humanity to participate in that deified life. Here again, Russell's work clarifies the internal logic of the patristic view but does not resolve the evangelical reservation. The two traditions operate with different safeguards: the Orthodox tradition preserves the Creator-creature distinction via the essence-energies (οὐσία-ἐνέργεια) distinction, while the Evangelical tradition maintains it by upholding a sharper differentiation between the hypostatic union in Christ and the believer's spiritual union with Christ (Billings, 2011).

Conclusion

The dialogue between evangelicalism and Eastern Orthodoxy regarding the doctrine of theosis represents a significant encounter between two firmly established theological traditions. The evangelical critique, rooted in the Reformation's emphasis on forensic justification, *sola gratia*, and

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the legal gravity of sin, accurately identifies a series of fundamental and systematic differences that distinguish it from the Orthodox vision of salvation (Schreiner, 2011; Horton, 2007; White, 2001).

Engagement with Russell's (2004) scholarly work of the patristic doctrine provides a vital corrective. It demonstrates that common historical objections, namely, that theosis is an unbiblical intrusion of pagan Hellenism, are largely based on a misreading of the early church's historical and theological development. Russell's work establishes theosis as a doctrine with deep roots in the biblical text, its Jewish interpretive context, and the Christological logic of the Incarnation. Rather than a "corruption" of the gospel, theosis emerges as a coherent articulation of the gospel's goal within its patristic framework, a conclusion supported by the broader ecumenical scholarship of Gorman (2005), Finlan and Kharlamov (2006), and Kärkkäinen (2002).

By dispelling historical caricatures, this analysis reveals the true nature of the divide. The conflict is not between a "biblical" faith and a "Hellenised" one, but between two comprehensive and internally consistent soteriological paradigms. The evangelical forensic model, emphasising legal status, imputation, and monergistic grace, stands in direct tension with the Orthodox therapeutic model, which centres on ontological transformation, participation, and synergistic cooperation. Core disagreements regarding the nature of the human problem (guilt versus mortality), the function of grace (declarative versus transformative), and the relationship between Christology and salvation remain the primary subjects for continued ecumenical dialogue.

The value of this theological encounter lies not only in clarifying these foundational differences, but also in suggesting a constructive path forward. Rather than seeking a premature synthesis that dissolves the genuine distinctives of each tradition, ecumenical dialogue would be better served by what might be termed a "paradigm acknowledgement". Thus, a mutual recognition that both the forensic and the therapeutic-ontological frameworks represent internally coherent articulations of the biblical material, each with its own strengths and vulnerabilities. The Finnish Luther School's recovery of participatory themes in Luther (Mannermaa, 2005), and the evangelical retrieval of union-with-Christ language (Billings, 2011), suggest that the chasm between the traditions, while real, is not absolute. The most productive direction for future dialogue is not the abandonment of either paradigm, but a more honest and rigorous engagement with the foundational commitments that give each tradition its distinctive shape.

The study mainly focused on the Reformed/ Evangelical tradition and emphasised dogmatic statements over the lived liturgical and experiential aspects of Orthodoxy. Its polemical goal of justifying a theological rebuttal limits exploration of ecumenical synergies or engagement with modern Orthodox responses. Future research might explore the historical Western Patristic views on deification and consider whether the Palamite distinction between essence and energies can be integrated with Western metaphysical frameworks.

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