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## Mystical Union as Unifying Biblical Theme

Gifford A. Grobien

At the beginning of his first epistle, St. John declares the purpose of his writing, and the result that will come from hearing his epistle for those who heed and believe his message (1 John 1:1–10). He announces all that he has perceived and experienced, by which he has *κοινωνία*<sup>1</sup> with the Father and the Son, so that his recipients also have *κοινωνία* with him, and with the Father and the Son (1 John 1:3). Those who hear and believe the testimony of Jesus also walk in the light, confess their sins, are cleansed of their sins by Jesus' blood, and have fellowship with God and with other Christians (1 John 1:5–10).

*κοινωνία*, as many have noted, is not the same as the English “fellowship,” if by fellowship is meant simply a social relationship between two or more people. Rather *κοινωνία* is a mutual sharing that two or more people have in a particular good, essence, or experience.<sup>2</sup> What is this mutual sharing, this *κοινωνία*, that St. John purposes for the Father, the Son, his recipients, and himself? This *κοινωνία* is of the divine life itself, a *κοινωνία* which evangelical dogmatists have traditionally labeled *unio mystica* or “mystical union.”

If this mystical union, this sharing in the divine life, is a purpose of the proclamation of the gospel as St. John declares, then the mystical union is indeed a unifying biblical theme. Does, however, the mystical union receive the attention—whether in the ministry, teaching, or study of our churches—that one might reasonably expect of such a unifying theme? If not, perhaps there is concern that attention to the mystical union will distract from the “central article” of justification. Not only is justification the central article, but justification is forensic—which, to many, may mean “not related to union.” Related to this is the connection of mystical union to good works. If the mystical union is primarily concerned with sanctification, then it is concerned with good works, and we do not want discussions over good works confusing justification. Too much attention on the mystical union

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<sup>1</sup> *koinōnia*, “communion, fellowship.”

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. N. E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 1–5.

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could distract, confuse, or lead astray unwary or less capable Christians from the forensic, non-participatory nature of justification.<sup>3</sup>

However, this approach to good works is not only misguided, but contrary to the scriptural witness regarding good works. The scriptural teaching of good works is not just that Christians do good works, but that works should be taught, and they should be urged upon Christians. Furthermore, how good works are taught bears directly on justification. The mystical union as a unifying and comprehensive theme teaches the manner by which to understand good works rightly. Finally, the mystical union sets forth more than just a doctrine of good works, but underlies the holiness, splendor, and perfection of salvation in Christ. The mystical union is not limited to an instrumental knowledge about good works, but illuminates and characterizes the eternal glory of salvation. To set forth the scope of this glory, our Lord interweaves the mystical union throughout the Scriptures.

### Clarifying the Dogmatic Concept “Mystical Union”

Our dogmaticians clarified the biblical teaching of mystical union, which had been blurred in the history of Christianity. Mystical union was for much of Christian history associated with mystical ascent, which was depicted in three stages: purification, illumination, and union with God. Gregory of Nyssa offers an early example of this thinking in his homilies on the Song of Songs. He challenges the immature Christian to purge himself of temptation and sin through impassibility, and in this purity to enter into a heavenly understanding of God, and by this understanding to be united to the ineffable divine nature.<sup>4</sup> These three stages of purification, illumination, and mystical union are also famously iterated by Pseudo-Dionysius around the turn of the sixth century.<sup>5</sup> While there were many variations on the theme, this process of purification, illumination, and union with the divine, in an ineffable yet intimate manner that surpasses perception and understanding, became standard for mystical theology in the medieval period.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> An early evangelical confusion of the relation of union to justification is found in Osiandrianism, which argues that a Christian’s righteousness before God depends on his nature being changed due to its union with Christ’s divine nature. The Formula of Concord rejects this error while distinguishing the true teaching of mystical union from it (FC SD III 54–58).

<sup>4</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs* 1.25, trans. Richard A. Norris, Jr. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology* I, in C. E. Rolt, trans., *Dionysius the Areopagite on the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1951), 191–94.

<sup>6</sup> Felix Vernet, *Mediaeval Spirituality*, trans. The Benedictines of Talacre, Catholic Library of Religious Knowledge, XIII (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1930), 86.

Luther studied mystical theology and had a certain appreciation for some German mystics' understandings of purification (also referred to as purgation). However, he clarified that purification came not through a meditative effort to become more virtuous, but by being conformed to the suffering of Christ.<sup>7</sup> For the mystics, the beginning of such conformity comes in human preliminary efforts and initiative, but finds its fulfillment with Christ taking form in the Christian according to Christ's grace and initiative.<sup>8</sup> Luther countered that nothing was accomplished by human initiative, but everything depended on the gift of Christ, that is, Christ taking up residence in a Christian through faith, and in this faith being formed by Christ, especially through suffering.<sup>9</sup>

Evangelical dogmaticians, expanding biblically on Luther's train of thought, explain the mystical union as the gracious union of the believer or believers with God, given by faith and without efforts on the part of the believer. The mystical union is distinguished from God's general union with all things, from the Son's personal union with the human nature, and from the sacramental union of the body and blood of Christ with the bread and wine. 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>10</sup>

Accordingly, what is the biblical testimony regarding the mystical union, regarding *κοινωνία* with God, as one of the results and blessings of salvation, and how central or unifying is this testimony?

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<sup>7</sup> Dietmar Lage, *Martin Luther's Christology and Ethics*, Texts and Studies in Religion 45 (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 49–55. See Luther's thoughts on Romans 8:29, on being conformed, passively. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans* (1515–1516), in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), 25:365–370, hereafter AE.

<sup>8</sup> Lage, *Martin Luther's Christology and Ethics*, 79.

<sup>9</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1531), AE 26:167–168, comments on Galatians 2:20.

<sup>10</sup> FC SD III 54, 65; Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 2:86. Johann Quenstedt treats the topic comprehensively in “De Unione Fidelium Mystica cum Deo,” part III, chapter X in *Theologia Didactico-Polemica Sive Systema Theologicum* (1685). Salient points from Quenstedt, as well as Hollaz and Calov, are excerpted in English in Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3rd ed., trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1899, 1961), 481–486.

### Mystical Union according to the New Testament

*κοινωνία* most simply has to do with the sharing of something with one another (Heb 13:16). The writer to the Hebrews asserts that the Son of God shares in the same human nature as men (Heb 2:14); Paul calls for the sharing of a gift of money with those in need (2 Cor 8:4; 9:13); catechumens are to share goods with their teachers (Gal 6:6). Communion may be not just of a thing, but also of an activity. Both may participate in the same activity, in which case such fellowship is called a partnership. Peter and Andrew are partners with the sons of Zebedee in their fishing enterprise (Luke 5:10); by sending gifts to Paul, the Philippians not only made Paul a partaker of their material goods, but they also became partakers of Paul's evangelistic work (Phil 1:5; 4:15). Those who show hospitality to heretics commune with them in their evil deeds (2 John 10–11). Paul warns Timothy not to commune with others in their sins (1 Tim 5:22). Paul emphasizes the significance of shared activity in 1 Corinthians 10:18–21, when he highlights that *food* sacrificed to idols *per se* is not anything. It is rather the act of offering to demons which one must avoid. One cannot with integrity commune at both the demonic altar and the divine altar. *κοινωνία* expresses a tangible partnership by which communicants share in a mutual thing, activity, or benefit.

Some of the most significant language in Scripture on *κοινωνία* Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:16: τὸ ποτήριον τῆς εὐλογίας ὃ εὐλογοῦμεν, οὐχὶ κοινωνία ἐστὶν τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ; τὸν ἄρτον ὃν κλάμεν, οὐχὶ κοινωνία τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐστὶν; (“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion of the body of Christ?”).<sup>11</sup> The genitive case indicates the object or experience which is shared: in this case, the blood of Christ and the body of Christ. Drinking of the eucharistic cup is a common partaking—a communion—of the blood of Christ; eating the bread of the Lord's Supper is a common partaking—a communion—of the body of Christ. The church gathered together for the Lord's Supper partakes commonly of Jesus' body and blood. It is of the body and the blood which the church has common partaking. In this communion, they also commune with one another and are made one: “because there is one bread, we many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17). Such a communion is not just an association of believers in association with Jesus and with God, but the common essence of communion is the body and blood of Christ himself. It is the mutual partaking of the body and blood of Christ which makes Christians into a communion.

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 1:9, the call of the faithful God is for communion of his Son, Jesus: “God is faithful, through whom you have been called into the

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<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise marked, Scripture quotations are the author's translation.

communion of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” Again, “of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” is genitive, indicating that in which Christians commune, and that which makes Christians a communion with one another. Jesus himself is the one of whom and in whom we have communion. Further, this communion comes about as the purpose and result of God’s calling.

This communion includes also the Holy Spirit, as Paul blesses the Corinthians at the conclusion of his second epistle to them: ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἡ κοινωνία τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος μετὰ πάντων ὑμῶν (“The grace of the Lord, Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit is with you all”) (2 Cor 13:14). Here communion is of the Holy Spirit; the Spirit is the one of whom the Corinthians partake.

Peter’s encouragement to the hearers of his second epistle, that through the glory and virtue of Christ they become *θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως* (“sharers of the divine nature”) (2 Pet 1:4), expounds on the significance of having fellowship with our Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Peter’s recipients have received faith in the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet 1:1). Christ calls with his glory and virtue (cf. 1 Pet 2:9, where the connection between virtue and calling is also made in that the recipients are to proclaim the *virtues* of the one who *called* them), by which we receive precious and great promises, that is, we become sharers in the divine nature and escape the corruption of the world. *κοινωνία* with God is a gift received through faith. This divine power, in turn, grants us all things pertaining to life and godliness, whereby we are exhorted to add to faith virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, love, and charity.

The *κοινωνία* of a Christian with God is expressed by the dogmatic term *unio mystica*. *κοινωνία* also helps to define what is meant by union. *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. It is not a dissolving of a human being into the divine nature such that the human nature or person is lost. Nor is it a blending of the human being with the divine nature resulting in a third substance, such as a demigod. Rather, believers share in the divine nature perichoretically, each nature interpenetrating the other, without either substance losing its substantial identity. The benefit of this union is the gracious communication of divine power needed for life and godliness, beginning with righteousness and incorruption, but also including other virtues such as those listed by Peter.

At the same time, the mystical union is not a personal union. In the mystical union, the divine nature does not become subject to believers such that it is possessed by their persons. Christ’s personal union is the union of the human and

divine natures under the one person of the Son, with the result that the Son's human nature is truly the Son's and can no longer be removed. The mystical union of the believer with the divine is not one in which the divine nature belongs to the person of the believer, but, rather, is graciously, substantially communicated with the believer. Through unbelief, this union could be lost.

Furthermore, there is no loss of personhood in Christian union with God. Rather, the unity is a communication of the divine nature to each Christian, to the church, which occurs precisely through the unique person of Christ, for the benefit of other human persons, believers in Christ. Such a communication is an intimate, interpenetrating sharing of the divine nature between persons. Jesus' remarks in his high priestly prayer in John 17:20–23 explain this:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all 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. (ESV)<sup>12</sup>

According to Jesus' prayer, Christians are to be one, *καθώς*, "just as," the Father and Son are one. This "just as" cannot refer to a substantial sharing of natural divinity from eternity, as it does for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, because human beings are created and do not exist with the divine nature from eternity. This "just as" does not refer to a natural divine unity, but to a unity into which believers are graciously brought through faith so that they now share in a union with God which they once did not possess. He says, "The glory that you have given me I also have given to them, so that they be one just as we are one" (John 17:22).

Both John and Peter state that unity with God comes by the gift of Christ's glory to believers: Jesus has "called us by his glory and virtue, through which precious and great promises are given to us, that through these you become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:3–4). The glory of Christ restores the very image of God unto us, the image lost in the fall and which belongs properly to Jesus, but which he shares with us. Paul explains, "When one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, contemplating as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into this image from glory to glory, accordingly from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:16–18). The glory of the Lord is unveiled to us by the Holy Spirit,

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<sup>12</sup> Scripture quotations marked ESV are from the ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

received through faith, who transforms us into this image of God in Christ. Likewise, Paul says, “You have stripped off the old man with his deeds, and have clothed yourselves with the new, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of the one who created him” (Col 3:9–10). The new man is being renewed in the image of Christ, so that even though our life is hidden with Christ in God, we shall appear in glory with him when he appears (Col 3:3–4).

Because we partake of the divine through our fellowship with Christ and his Spirit, we depend on the Son first becoming a man, first partaking of the human nature (Heb 2:14). Hebrews 2:9–11 proclaims:

And we behold the one who briefly was made lower than angels, Jesus, who because of the suffering of death has been crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God he might taste death on behalf of everyone. For it was fitting for him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, to make the author of their salvation, in leading many sons into glory, complete through suffering. For both the sanctifier and those being sanctified all are of one, for which reason he is not ashamed to call them brothers.

That Jesus suffers death on behalf of everyone is due to him being “of one” with all those whom he is sanctifying, that is, one in the human nature. This unity in humanity means all who are being sanctified are his brothers and are to be led into glory. In this case, this unity is due to his taking on the human nature. As Jesus is crowned in glory, so he also leads his church into glory.

The writer to the Hebrews continues: “Therefore because the children have communed of blood and flesh, he also likewise shares in these things, that through death he might overthrow the one having the power of death, that is, the devil, and release them who by fear of death through all their lives were subject to slavery” (Heb 2:14–15). By partaking of the human nature of flesh and blood, Jesus is able to suffer death, by which he redeems men from sin, death, and the devil, and further leads them into the glory in which he is crowned, having been made complete through this suffering. The Son takes on a share in the human nature, and brings his brothers into the share of the divine nature. See this theme similarly in Romans 8:3–4: “God, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and concerning sin, condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit”; likewise in Galatians 4:4–6: “But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption. And because you are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts.” This is to say that the great exchange depends on the great *κοινωνία* of God



in human nature, in which he shares the glory, immortality, and other virtues of his divine nature.

### **Mystical Union in the Old Testament**

We have observed some of the New Testament witness to the mystical union as a significant theme of salvation in Christ. But what of the Old Testament? Is the mystery of the mystical union borne witness to prior to the New Testament, and, if not, can we consider it a unifying or significant theme of Scripture?

First, the doctrine of mystical union is set forth from the beginning in the institution of marriage. “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Gen 2:24). Paul explains that this saying, and therewith marriage itself, “is a great mystery, and I am speaking with respect to Christ and to his church” (Eph 5:32). Paul here further speaks of Christ’s relation to his church as one flesh, for we Christians are members of his body (vv. 30–31). Christ further loves the church as his own body, just as husbands are called to love their wives (vv. 28–29), and his loving union accomplishes his work of sanctifying, purifying, and glorifying the church, so that she is holy and without blemish.

In order to extol this sanctifying union, even centuries before Christ’s incarnation, the Holy Spirit gave us a rhapsody of the unifying love of the Son for his people in the Song of Songs. From the first verses, this theme is clear (1:2–4):

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.  
Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee. Draw me, we will run after thee: the king hath brought me into his chambers: we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine: the upright love thee. (AV)<sup>13</sup>

The kiss itself is already an act of love expressing tender unity, demonstrating one’s mutual association with another. Even kisses by friends or family express the affection appropriate to the type of kiss. For Christ and the church, the acts expressed are those of marital love, for marital intimacy specially typifies the intimacy of Christ’s love for his people.

Christ’s love is better than wine, for it does not make the church drunk with passion, but cleanses soberly with the purification of blood. The name of Christ is poured forth upon us in the anointing of Baptism, a spiritual fragrance far more wonderful than earthly perfumes. The fidelity of this holy union is for the church,

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<sup>13</sup> Quotations marked AV are from the King James or Authorized Version of the Bible.

so the many virgins—those who are purified through faith and sanctified by Christ—love him. Thus it is for all the people of God as his church, his body, to be drawn into his bridal chamber, to be purified and sanctified forever. These who are made upright are the beloved of God.

Rich descriptions of the beauty of the love of the Lover and the Beloved follow as the Song progresses, depicting in figures—even the figures of natural, marital love—Christ’s loving union with his church. The Song culminates in 8:6–7:

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised. (ESV)

The bridegroom, the Lord himself, is the seal upon the heart, a seal which not only protects his beloved from the strongest attack, but which engraves into the heart, and characterizes the beloved as holy and pure. The love and zeal of the Lord is stronger than death and the grave; indeed, this passage iterates the victory over death accomplished by our bridegroom who takes on our human nature in order to suffer death, thereby destroying sin in the flesh and defeating death, and to lead us into glory and holiness.

Furthermore, our bridegroom does not try to buy or sell love, but gladly sets aside the wealth of his house. He does not consider his divinity something to be clung to or grasped in protection (Phil 2:6), but he happily sets it aside in order to redeem, rescue, enliven, and purify his bride. His bride, then, is one whom he does not simply have pity on, but one with whom he desires to be united in love, figured beautifully as marital love in Song of Songs 7:5–12:

Your head crowns you like Carmel, and your flowing locks are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses. How beautiful and pleasant you are, O loved one, with all your delights! Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit. Oh may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine. It goes down smoothly for my beloved, gliding over lips and teeth. I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me. Come, my beloved, let us go out into the fields and lodge in the villages; let us go out early to the vineyards and see whether the vines have budded, whether the grape blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love. (ESV)

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.

Second, a clear expression of mystical union can be found in Leviticus 26:11–12, where the Lord says: “And I will place my tabernacle in your midst, and my soul will not despise you. And I will walk about among you, and I shall be your God, and you shall be my people.” Paul explains this (in 2 Cor 6:16) not simply as God placing his tabernacle among his people, but as the church herself being the temple of God. God's dwelling place is not a tent or building, but the souls of the church. Those among whom the Lord dwells are his temple. Even if Leviticus 26 refers only to the future indwelling of God in the New Testament, it indicates that the theme of mystical union is in God's mind much earlier. It also indicates, at the very least, that just as the tabernacle is a figure of Christ's body, so also its presence among the Israelites is a figure of the mystical union, of the divine presence made accessible in *κοινωνία* with his people.

Indeed, we see this particular language of God dwelling in the midst of his people to be their God, and for them to be his people, taking on a programmatic character in the Bible (Exod 6:7; 29:45; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; Ezek 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:27). Even if one were to say that fellowship in the divine nature is only anticipated but not experienced in these instances, these indicate the intent and hope of God, and his eschatological view, as is clear from Haggai 2:5, 9: “My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. . . . The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts” (ESV). The glory of the Lord is shared with his people by the presence of his Spirit, and this latter glory of the Spirit's dwelling, that is, in the temple of Jesus' body—and therefore also the church—is the place of peace and salvation.

This promise of the indwelling Spirit is well-known in Ezekiel 37:14 (in the valley of dry bones): “I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live” (ESV), as well as in 36:24–28:

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and

be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (ESV)

There is, furthermore, the expectation of this *κοινωνία* with God in some psalms, such as Psalm 42, expressing the hope for the beatific vision: “My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God? . . . Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God” (vv. 2, 11, AV). How is this longing satisfied? How is this hope fulfilled? By the Divine Service, where the Lord has given himself among us: “These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise” (v. 4, ESV). Where the Lord dwells among his people, there also one pours out his soul and is consoled by his gracious presence, the salvation of his countenance. The tabernacle, the dwelling place of God among his people, is the location of *κοινωνία* with God.

The centrality and continuity of this theme of God dwelling within his people and being their God, and they his people, culminates in the Book of Revelation:

I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.’ . . .

And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife. And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. . . .

And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. . . .

The throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in [the city]; and his servants shall serve him: and they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever. (Rev 21:2–3, 9–11, 22–23; 22:3–5, AV)

At the consummation of the kingdom of the resurrection, the dwelling of God with man is perfected. The people of God are his bride, having been purified and sanctified. The glory of the Lord permeates this city, so much so that no other light or beauty is needed. The Lord himself simply is his own dwelling place—there is no temple—yet his glory illuminates all things. In particular, his people see the face of his glory, and he is the salvation of their countenance, as Psalm 42 anticipated. The glory of the Lord is the light and beauty of the city, penetrating and characterizing all people and things. The people of God are perfected as those among whom the Lord dwells in beatific union.

### **The Blessings of the Mystical Union**

If the mystical union is an underlying biblical theme, what is the purpose of this theme? What is being communicated or witnessed to? Generally, we can understand that communion with another person inclines the two to become like each other. Communion is a convivial life, in which they share gifts, assets, honor, strengths, weaknesses, and limitations. We have already begun to see that communion with Jesus means that he shares his life and gifts with us, and purges us from our weaknesses and sins. He sanctifies us, and in the resurrection, grants us immortality and glory.<sup>14</sup>

Consider, further, for example, Romans 6:5–8: “For if we have been grafted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection. Knowing this, that our old man has been crucified with him, that the body of sin might be abolished, that we should no longer serve sin. For the one who has died has been justified from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him.” In being grafted into Christ in Baptism, we share in Christ’s death, such that our sin is already put to death, and we will also share in the resurrection of the body. Furthermore, because the body of sin is put to death, we are no longer enslaved to sin, but begin to be purged of sin and to do good works. In our union with Christ, the old is put to death, and the new is raised up with Christ.

Paul exhorts the Corinthians, on the basis of God’s promise that he dwells within them as a tabernacle, that they purify themselves from all defilements and bring holiness to perfection (2 Cor 6:18–7:1). In Philippians 3:9–10, he explains that he is found in Christ, having the righteousness of faith, in order to know Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the *κοινωνίαν* of his sufferings, in which he is conformed to Christ’s death, in order to attain to the resurrection. He is found in Christ through faith, by which he has fellowship with Christ’s suffering, death, and

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<sup>14</sup> John W. Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made: A Protestant Theology of the Body* (Bellingham, Wash.: Lexham Press, 2021), 120–121.

resurrection, that he also be conformed to these things. Participation of a person means to become like him and to be brought into a share of his activity.

Similarly, Colossians 3 states that our life is hidden with Christ. When Christ appears, we also will appear in glory. In the meantime, we put to death all vices, putting off the old man, and putting on the new man and all virtue, being renewed in knowledge after the image of Christ (v. 10). Having life in Christ means we share in and are renewed in his image, and are strengthened to purge the old man and his vices.

Similar statements can be found in Galatians 5:25: "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (AV); 1 Peter 4:13: "Even as you partake of the sufferings of Christ, rejoice, for in the appearance of his glory, exulting you will also rejoice"; Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; no longer do I live, but Christ lives in me. Yet the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God"; Ephesians 2:5–6: "God made us alive together in Christ, and raised us together and sat us together in the heavenly places in Christ"; and 2 Timothy 2:11–13: "If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; . . . if we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself." This last phrase reminds us of the bond of marriage, as St. Paul says, "No man ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it, as the Lord does the church" (Eph 5:29).

In summary, 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 blessings are assured because of our union with him. Furthermore, because Christians are united to him, he empowers them with his holiness and spiritual gifts so that they put off the old man and his vices, and begin to put on the virtues of the new man and bear the fruits of the Spirit. This transformation from glory to glory will be completed in perfect glorification in the eternal kingdom.

Finally, John 17:21–23 offers further nuance to the sanctifying effect of the mystical union. Jesus prays "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" (ESV). The fruit of sanctification is, in this case, evidence of the redeeming and glorifying work of Christ. The love of God for his people is manifest in his union with them, in his sharing of glory with them, and in their love for one another. By living in this union, experiencing the love of God, and loving one another, Christians bear witness to God's love and his saving work.

### Mystical Union and Justification

Because the mystical union is a central and unifying theme in Scripture, what are the implications of this teaching for theology and ministry? On the one hand, one might respond, quoting the introduction to Luther's *Psalm 51* (1532): "The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of man the sinner. Whatever is asked or discussed in theology outside this subject, is error and poison."<sup>15</sup> A strict interpretation of this claim might suggest that only sin and justification should be treated in theology, perhaps including some Christology for good measure. Mystical union, and whatever its fruits, would be outside the circle of theology and only treated in other disciplines.

But such a strict interpretation of Luther's comment, of course, does not correspond to the evangelical tradition. Theologians from Melancthon and Chemnitz to Gerhard, Quenstedt, and Pieper treat numerous topics other than sin, justification, and Christology in works titled, variously, *Loci communes rerum theologiarum* (*Commonplaces on the Facts of Theology*); *Loci Theologici* (*Theological Topics*); and *Christian Dogmatics*, which is another way of saying "true Christian teaching." Such other theological topics include the doctrines of God's persons, nature, and attributes; of creation; of angels; of good works; of the mystical union; of the church, ministry, and sacraments; and of the last things. Luther himself treated topics in theology other than sin, Christology, and justification; to our point, he treats the fruit of the mystical union—sanctification—in his 1539 treatise *On the Councils and the Church*:

Christian holiness, or the holiness common to Christendom, is found where the Holy Spirit gives people faith in Christ and thus sanctifies them, Acts 15 [:9], that is, he renews heart, soul, body, work, and conduct, inscribing the commandments of God not on tables of stone, but in hearts of flesh, 2 Corinthians 3[:3]. . . . That is called new holy life in the soul, in accordance with the first table of Moses. It is also called *tres virtutes theologicas*, "the three principal virtues of Christians," namely, faith, hope, and love; and the Holy Spirit, who imparts, does, and effects this (gained for us by Christ) is therefore called "sanctifier" or "life-giver." For the old Adam is dead and cannot do it, and in addition has to learn from the law that he is unable to do it and that he is dead; he would not know this of himself.

In accordance with the second table, He also sanctifies the Christians in the body . . . . That is the work of the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies and also awakens

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<sup>15</sup> Luther, *Psalm 51* (1532), AE 12:311.

the body to such a new life until it is perfected in the life beyond. That is what is called “Christian holiness.”<sup>16</sup>

The discerning learner from Luther here will recognize that sin, Christology, and justification, in a narrow sense, are not the only topics of theology, but rather that theology includes those topics which have significant bearing upon sin, Christology, and justification, and vice versa. It is in this way, as exemplified by Luther, that we should understand his own comments on Psalm 51. In this case, we recognize that true holiness is not reduced merely to good works or to obedience to the law. It is perhaps this distinction that we can see in Luther himself: to confuse theology with mere natural ethics was not only misguided, but a wicked error and breach of the theological office. Correlatively, teaching that in some way suggested, asserted, argued, or tempted people to believe that works contributed in some way to justification was above all to be rejected. Yet, from his comment, Luther clearly views true Christian holiness differently from following moral principles. Christian holiness is not merely about behavior, but about regeneration, new life, purification, and perfection worked by the Holy Spirit, received through faith, and part of the comprehensive understanding of salvation. As the basis for sanctification, the mystical union has more to do with this comprehensive account of holiness and salvation than a simplistic, isolated view of good works.

In fact, 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.

Such a concern is at the heart of the argument of Article IV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. Here we rightly recognize that the heart of the dispute with the opponents is not *if* works relate to faith and justification, but *how* works relate to justification. In other words, the question is not if good works are a theological topic, but how they are a theological topic. As we confess throughout the second part of Apology IV, true, assenting, and trusting faith receives the Holy Spirit, who regenerates. Of natural necessity, this regeneration produces good works (e.g., Ap IV 124–126). Furthermore, the Scriptures often speak of love, works, and the promises of God together in the same passage. The theologian cannot ignore love and works, taught by Scripture, but rather rightly discerns that true love and

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<sup>16</sup> Luther, *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), AE 41:145–147.



works are the result and fruit of faith (Ap IV 154–155, 184, 188, 219, 248–253). When the proper relationship between faith and works is not continually taught and retained, one may fall into the error of depending on works for salvation, or having confidence in a dead faith, which is no faith at all.

For good works are to be done on account of God's command, likewise for the exercise of faith, and on account of confession and giving of thanks. . . . We therefore praise and require good works, and show many reasons why they ought to be done. . . . Although in this way good works ought to follow faith, men who cannot believe and be sure that for Christ's sake they are freely forgiven, and that freely for Christ's sake they have a reconciled God, employ works far otherwise. When they see the works of saints, they judge in a human manner that saints have merited the remission of sins and grace through these works. Accordingly, they imitate them, and think that through similar works they merit the remission of sins and grace. (Ap IV 189, 201, 203 [III 68, 80, 82])<sup>17</sup>

According to the Apology, good works must be taught, in accordance with the Scriptures, for the sake of God's command, to exercise faith, and to confess Christ's name and work before the world and praise him for these. Good works must be taught. But because unbelievers and hypocrites think that by these works they will be justified, works must be taught in their proper relation to faith, that is, as fruits of the Holy Spirit who indwells a believer. On the other hand:

Renewal and the inchoate fulfilling of the Law must exist in us . . . . If any one should cast away love, even though he have great faith, yet he does not retain it, for he does not retain the Holy Ghost . . . . [Paul] writes to those who, after they had been justified, should be urged to bring forth good fruits lest they might lose the Holy Ghost. (Ap IV 219–221 [III 98–100])<sup>18</sup>

Here we confess that if good works are not encouraged and exhorted, some run the real risk of losing their faith with hearts grown cold. It is not a question of teaching good works, but of the true, holy, and good manner of teaching good works, over against legalism or listlessness.

The mystical union is fundamental to the true, holy, and good teaching on good works. Rather than fear the mystical union as a threat to justification or peripheral to the theological task, we confess, as the Scriptures do, the mutually supportive and complementary character of justification and mystical union. Union with Christ, biblically understood, does not interfere with or contradict the doctrine of

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<sup>17</sup> W. H. T. Dau and F. Bente, eds., *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), 175, 177.

<sup>18</sup> *Triglot Concordia*, 181.

justification. Union with Christ, participation in the divine nature through the indwelling of God, is a gracious gift of God through faith. Justification occurs logically prior to indwelling, although they both occur through faith (Gal 3:2; Eph 1:13). “Faith brings with itself the Holy Ghost and produces in hearts a new life. . . . there is now within through the Spirit of Christ a new heart, mind, and spirit within” (Ap IV 125 [III 4]).<sup>19</sup> The mystical union, while it makes possible and communicates gifts of God for efforts in the new obedience and holiness, does not depend on these efforts and strivings. Indeed, in his lively spiritual work, Christ protects us from legalism, lethargy, and hypocrisy.

Furthermore, the significance of the mystical union goes beyond the concern over good works, but is central to conversion, sanctification, and glorification. Such comprehensive, Christian holiness includes the putting off of vices of the old and putting on the gifts, fruits, and virtues of the new life in the Spirit. Yet such activity comes from holiness enlivened and illumined in the Son, an ongoing transformation by the renewing of the mind, the conformity to the image of Christ, and the transformation from glory to glory. 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. It breaks the power of death, and does not just impose outward behavior, but transforms our bodies from death to glory. While dim and hidden in this life, it is not only an eschatological hope. Through faith, by the indwelling of God, by the activity of the Spirit, this glorious purpose has begun and remains sure in Christ.

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<sup>19</sup> *Triglot Concordia*, 157.