

IS WISDOM SILENT?

APOPHATIC GLOSSOLALIA

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Abstract

Drawing on both similarities and disagreements between the apophatic theology of Dionysius and Gregory of Nazianzus, I will demonstrate how glossolalia can be better understood through the lens of apophatic theology. Gregory and Dionysius both recognize the failure of human language, but each follows that concept to a different conclusion. Dionysius switches from categories of knowledge to categories of experience and focuses the mystical life on ascetic practices in the hopes that they promote an experience of God's presence. Pentecostals, with our emphasis on experience, often find a kinship with thinkers like Dionysius. In contrast, Gregory of Nazianzus switches from the quest for our own knowledge to a reliance on revealed knowledge. Thus, while Dionysius relies on our ability to experience God, Gregory relies on God's ability to make Godself known. We are unable to know God, except that God made Godself known. The Father condescends to provide the Law, a framework through which we understand Christ. The Son condescends to show us the Father. Likewise, the baptism of the Holy Spirit provides for us the only method by which we can speak mysteries to God. This method is a private prayer language, which is often called glossolalia.

Introduction

“The Wise Man never opines, never regrets, never is mistaken, never changes his mind.”¹ This Stoic opinion of Cicero presents humility in its

reticence to opine but also stubbornness in its reluctance to change. We can see a similar humility in Dionysius the Areopagite.² He says, “[w]e offer worship to that which lies hidden beyond thought and beyond being. With a wise silence we do honor to the inexpressible.”³ The stubbornness is unfortunately often present among theologians today, even if only unconsciously. Cicero was right to caution towards humility. But the resistance to change is, in fact, unwise. Such hubris requires a corrective. One such option is found in the apophatic⁴ strand of theology practiced by people like Dionysius. What follows here is a comparison of the approaches to apophatic theology taken by Dionysius and Gregory of Nazianzus. Drawing on both similarities and disagreements between the two, I will demonstrate that glossolalia can be better understood through the lens of apophatic theology. Humility need not lead to silence, as Dionysius suggests. Wisdom is not silent, as Cicero believes. Through the power of the Spirit, the wise may opine without regret, and change their mind when they are mistaken.

The apophatic call to silence often results from the realization that our language falls short. Gregory and Dionysius both recognize this failure, but each follows that concept to a different conclusion.⁵ Dionysius switches from categories of knowledge to categories of experience and focuses the mystical life on ascetic practices in the hope that they promote an experience of God’s presence. Pentecostals,⁶ with our emphasis on experience, often find a kinship with thinkers like Dionysius. However, this is not always worthwhile. Experience, while important, can be unreliable. Peter Neumann suggests that “[e]xperience should be thought of not so much as a source, but as a means by which the ‘Source’ (God) becomes known.”⁷ Neumann’s excellent study on Pentecostal experience has shown that Pentecostals should be more careful “in their popular, and sometimes naïve, appeals to experience of the Spirit as justification for belief and practice. The history of Pentecostalism is tainted with charges (and evidence) of triumphalism, elitism, and schism (often within its own ranks).”⁸ Dionysius’s approach to apophaticism struggles in these areas as well.

In contrast, Gregory of Nazianzus switches from the quest for our own knowledge to a reliance on revealed knowledge. Thus, while Dionysius ultimately relies on our ability to experience God, Gregory relies on God’s ability to make Godself known. Gregory’s approach to apophatic theology then provides a much-needed corrective to Ciceronian stubbornness while simultaneously avoiding the iterative skepticism often produced by Dionysius’s humility. So, while we should

agree with Dionysius (and Gregory) that God is beyond us, from that point on we should follow Gregory.

We are unable to know God, except that God made Godself known. We are unable to become acceptable to God, except that God made us acceptable. As Mark McIntosh puts it, “theological ascent is dependent upon the prior ‘descent’ of God’s self-disclosure as the cause of all things.”⁹ We are likewise unable to adequately pray to God, except that God made available to us a method of prayer that is efficacious even as our “mind is unfruitful” (1 Cor 14:14).¹⁰ At every point our knowledge of and relationship to God is contingent upon God condescending to us. The Father condescends to provide the Law, a framework through which we understand Christ (cf. Gal 3:24). The Son condescends to show us the Father (cf. John 14:9). Likewise, the baptism of the Holy Spirit provides for us the only method by which we can speak mysteries to God (1 Cor 14:2). This method is a private prayer language, which is often called glossolalia.¹¹ This concept is unfortunately lacking in theological development.¹² Apophatic theology provides us with a helpful lens through which to understand this Pentecostal phenomenon. It is to this topic that we now turn our attention.

Apophasis

Speaking of apophaticism within Orthodoxy,¹³ patristic scholar Donald Fairbairn says, “Instead of listing and explaining the attributes of God (as Western theologians would probably do), Eastern theologians are more likely to consider aspects of our world that show imperfection or incompleteness and to declare that God does not have these qualities. God is *not* limited; he is *not* temporal; he is *not* sinful, and so on.”¹⁴ Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky put it this way, “All knowledge has as its object that which *is*. Now God is beyond all that exists. In order to approach Him it is necessary to deny all that is inferior to Him, that is to say, all that which *is*.”¹⁵ This theology by negation ought to warn against an overly positive view of our ability to understand God. As Jaroslav Pelikan has said, “[t]hroughout the history of patristic theology, Eastern but also Western, this accent on the apophatic had functioned as a check, and one that was often necessary, on the pretensions of theologians.”¹⁶ Thus apophaticism at its best provides a framework through which we honor our own limitations while also honoring divine self-disclosure.

From the Orthodox perspective,¹⁷ God is unknowable in *ousia* (God’s essence or being), but knowable in *energia* (God’s actions).¹⁸ Specifically,

energia here refers to God's self-disclosure.¹⁹ Therefore God is knowable insofar as God has made that possible. Dionysius puts it this way: "For, if we may trust the superlative wisdom and truth of Scripture, the things of God are revealed to each mind in proportion to its capacities; and the divine goodness . . . alone could give an authoritative account of what it really is."²⁰ In other words, human knowledge of the divine is a result of grace manifested in divine self-disclosure because only God can give an accurate account of who God is.²¹

Placing the emphasis on humanity's inability will hopefully prevent the apophatic theologian from falling into the Platonic error of viewing salvation as our unaided ascent to God, an error Dionysius arguably did not avoid.²² Humanity could not reach God on its own. In the same way, humanity is incapable of understanding God on its own. Put simply, this epistemic humility results from the realization that our knowledge of God is a function of his grace rather than one of our ability operating on its own. This is precisely where Dionysius fails.

Dionysius²³

It should be said at the outset that understanding Dionysius the Areopagite is not an easy task. Noted Dionysian scholar Paul Rorem affirms that "a perplexed reader is in good company, for the history of Christian doctrine and spirituality teems with commentators and general readers who have found the Areopagite's meaning obscure."²⁴ In spite of the difficulty, he was a favorite of such important theologians as Gregory the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventure.²⁵ In fact, "[e]xcept for the Bible and perhaps the works of Boethius, no writing of the early Christian era received similar attention in terms of translations, excerpts, commentaries, and even cumulative corpora that combined these elements into veritable encyclopedias of Dionysian scholarship."²⁶ Given such difficulty, it is not surprising that many interpreters are conflicted about what the Areopagite meant.²⁷ For just one example, Jaroslav Pelikan indicates that one of the chief roles of Maximus the Confessor was to reform Dionysius from "speculative nihilism" to "a concentration on the person of Jesus Christ."²⁸

Read in isolation, it seems quite clear that Dionysius sees himself as a bridge between Greek wisdom and the Christian gospel.²⁹ As a result, his idea of salvation is far more Platonic than Gregory's. For Dionysius, salvation is an "upward ascent of progressive unknowing, rather than a divine rescue."³⁰ All humanity needs to do is try harder. Cataphatic

theology seems to be no more than a useful fiction that is eventually shed in favor of true theology, which must be apophatic.³¹

What has actually to be said about the Cause of everything is this. Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being. Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the Cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.³²

So, while Dionysius affirms that some statements are legitimately true, the point of the Christian life is still an upward ascent towards union with God.³³ Even the things that are legitimately true are ultimately transcended.³⁴ John Anthony McGuckin, influenced by Dionysius, says, “The ascent of the mind through affirmative declarative statements about God (cataphatic theology) leads on the percipient theologian to realize that ultimately the God who is above all essence . . . is far above ‘all names that can be named.’”³⁵ For the Orthodox, this results in the apophatic theologian being “rendered speechless in an ‘ignorance’ that is far higher than the ‘wordiness’ of those who think they have fully comprehended God.”³⁶ This is Dionysius’s *wise silence*.

In *The Divine Names*, Dionysius states that the only language that we should use in theological discussion is language that exists in Scripture. He appeals to 1 Corinthians 2:4 for this, because the power granted by the Spirit to the authors of Scripture allows us to “reach a union superior to anything available to us by way of our own abilities or activities. . . . This is why we must not dare to resort to words or conceptions concerning that hidden divinity which transcends being, apart from what the sacred scriptures have divinely revealed.”³⁷ However, notice that for Dionysius the words of Scripture are used as tools by humanity in their ascent to God. We reach the union by employing the words of Scripture. “[T]he further revelation passes into the cosmos, the more it will be clothed in words, interpretations and theories.”³⁸ There is a place for cataphatic theology on the lower levels of reality, further from the divine light and source of all things.³⁹

Dionysius says, “[t]his is the kind of divine enlightenment into which we have been initiated by the *hidden tradition* of our inspired teachers, a tradition at one with scripture.”⁴⁰ Not only is this hidden tradition viable, but so is natural theology.⁴¹ Dionysius begins with Scripture, but only as a tool of ascent to God. Tradition and natural

theology are rungs on that very same ladder. Indeed, the ladder itself could only be called experience, as that seems to be the only common denominator. For example, it is not Scripture, nor tradition, nor natural theology that is the ultimate source of the names of God.⁴² The fundamental source is experience of the divine.

Eventually, even negations cease, as propositional content is no longer useful or helpful, whether it is positive or negative.⁴³ Ultimately, for Dionysius, the “task of theology . . . is to pass by way of these signs into the depth of the Mystery who speaks them.”⁴⁴ It is “to leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge.”⁴⁵ Notice the focus is on personal effort, both in discarding all knowledge and in ascending to the divine. This is how he uses the model of Moses in *Mystical Theology*.⁴⁶ He is the pattern of our ascent. He “moves beyond the trumpet sounds and the many lights . . . to transcend the bare sounds of the scriptures and the material lights of worship.”⁴⁷ Again we see emphasis on the ability to transcend, rather than a reliance on the transformative power of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸ Gregory’s response to this approach to God would likely be:

A person who tells you what God is not but fails to tell you what he is, is rather like someone who, asked what [two times five is], answers “not two, not three, not four, not five, not twenty, not thirty, no number, in short, under ten or over ten.” He does not deny it is ten, but he is also not settling the questioner’s mind with a firm answer. It is much simpler, much briefer, to indicate all that something is not by indicating what it is, than to reveal what it is by denying what it is not.⁴⁹

It may be hard to imagine that this author is in any way apophatic. Let us now turn our attention to him, perhaps one of the sharpest minds ever to expound the gospel.⁵⁰

Gregory of Nazianzus⁵¹

He was a key player at the Council of Constantinople, where he earned the title *the Theologian*.⁵² Gregory, along with the other two Cappadocians,⁵³ appreciated an apophatic approach to theology. But, as Jaroslav Pelikan points out,

they did not do so . . . in order to induce a kind of “sanctified skepticism” that would leave the believer unsure of anything. On the contrary, the purpose of the [apophaticism] in Cappadocian spirituality was to affirm the oneness of God with the Logos, through whose Incarnation “that which is completely inexpressible and incomprehensible to all created intellects” became that which “can to a certain extent be grasped by human understanding.”⁵⁴

This is not congruent with Dionysius’s theology. Gregory balances our inability with God’s self-disclosure. We can only know God insofar as God has made it possible for us. So, Gregory makes very apophatic statements like this: “To know God is hard, to describe him impossible. . . . No—to tell of God is not possible . . . but to know him is even less possible.”⁵⁵ But the same Gregory also “set out a complete apologia of how he saw Nicene systematic theology to be defensible” in Orations 27–31 of the *Five Theological Orations*.⁵⁶ Gregory forged this balance in response to his opponents who, not completely unlike Cicero, were radically certain. They saw theology as a pastime for clever men who wanted to solve difficult puzzles.⁵⁷ These men, Eunomius and his followers, thought that “because God is fundamentally simple, he can be easily understood.”⁵⁸

Gregory, along with the other Cappadocian Fathers, responded strongly to this, emphatically indicating that not only was God not *easily* understood, God was beyond understanding at all. Their motivation was pastoral. Gregory sees theology as central to the life of the church. As a result, those who are not holy are even less capable of understanding God. This should dissuade the puzzle solvers, because their lack of character inhibits their ability to solve any theological puzzle. Gregory, as always, puts it beautifully: “I only wish they would display comparable energy in their actions: then they might be something more than mere verbal tricksters, grotesque and preposterous word-gamesters—their derisory antics invite derisive description.”⁵⁹

Gregory also speaks of ascent, but not in a Platonic sense.⁶⁰ Like Dionysius, he references Moses’ ascent of Mt. Sinai.⁶¹ But far from a Platonic charge for humanity to climb the mountain and see God, Gregory pastorally warns of the danger of the ascent for those who are not prepared. “He too shall ascend, but stand further off, *his place matching his purity*. Is any of the crowd, unfit, as they are, for so sublime contemplation? Utterly unhallowed? — *let him not come near, it is dangerous*.”⁶²

Gregory also speaks quite strongly about our lack of knowledge of the divine. But when he does so, it is not driven by Platonic philosophy, but rather reverence for God and humble recognition of his own limitations. The two keep each other in check. Cataphatic theology encourages us because we can understand God. Apophatic theology warns us that we cannot comprehend him.⁶³ When we recognize our place in the world with respect to God, we recognize that we fundamentally lack the ability to describe God. But God has provided the description. God has descended to us. The unknowable has become known as a function of divine grace. Thus, to leave God completely shrouded in mystery is to disrespect God's own work of self-revelation.

So, apophatic theology need not be a murky skeptical pit from which we are incapable of escape. It need only be a salve to our overly inflated view of our intellectual abilities. If it is practically focused and grounded in the incarnation, apophatic theology lies at the bedrock of all theology for it begins with the heart of the gospel. We cannot reach God, but nevertheless God has reached us. Our theological reflection needs to keep this in mind. We may have great confidence of what we believe, but that confidence must be tempered by a careful recognition that we are not the arbiter of truth in the universe. "Our preaching is not vain, our faith empty; it is not that doctrine we are propounding. Do not take our frankness as ground for atheistic caviling and exalt yourselves over against us for acknowledging our ignorance. Conviction, you see, of a thing's existence is quite different from knowledge of what it is."⁶⁴ Cicero was wrong. Wisdom opens itself to change.

Glossolalia

What does all of this have to do with tongues? First, we must define what we mean by tongues. "Pentecostals themselves have most often defended tongues as evidence of Spirit baptism and have placed little emphasis on reflecting on what the continued practice of glossolalic prayer represents theologically."⁶⁵ As Macchia has pointed out, "[w]hat glossolalia means in the context of the rich theological presuppositions surrounding the experience in Scripture has been neglected."⁶⁶ Put simply, glossolalia is often emphasized but seldom explained.⁶⁷ In light of apophaticism, we ought to understand glossolalia as an apophatic declaration that is empowered by the Spirit. So, how can glossolalia be an apophatic declaration?

Non-Pentecostal apophatic theologians prefer silence because God transcends all language, all propositional content. While that is true, that

is focusing on our language directed at God, not a partnership between God and humanity wherein God provides words for us. These words transcend language and propositional content. This is why Paul says that tongues must be interpreted if uttered in a corporate setting. Without an interpretation, the hearers are not edified. Instead, only the speaker is edified (1 Cor 14:4). But the speaker's mind is unfruitful (1 Cor 14:14). If the speaker's mind is unfruitful, then this edification does not consist of propositional content. It cannot. If it were propositional content, then the speaker could simply explain it in a known language without relying on an interpreter.

Put simply, Paul is telling us that those who pray in tongues are edified, but not in a way that they can explain. If the edification consisted of rational thought, then speakers could explain themselves. Note that Paul says precisely the opposite. "Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret" (1 Cor 14:13). Thus, glossolalia is the means by which one participates in trans-rational communication with God, communication that conveys mysteries to God (1 Cor 14:2) while simultaneously building up the speaker. Since this communication lacks propositional content, it is apophatic by nature. It transcends both affirmations and negations.⁶⁸

As we have seen, the typical perspective from both ancient and modern authors is that the height of apophaticism is silence.⁶⁹ There are often experiences where we cannot know what to pray. As Abraham Heschel has said, "in no other act does humanity experience so often the disparity between the desire for expression and the means of expression."⁷⁰ It is hard indeed to describe some experiences, especially those found in Pentecostal churches. There are often times where an experience with God is strong, but inexplicable. There are often experiences where we cannot know what to pray. But as a praying people, Pentecostals often find that silence difficult. As Stephen Land has said, "Prayer is the primary theological activity of Pentecostals. All worthwhile knowledge must be gained and retained prayerfully because only the Spirit can lead into all truth. . . . All prayer is in the Spirit, and all who truly pray continually open themselves to and receive what the Spirit is saying and doing in and among them. To receive and to be indwelt by the Spirit of Christ is to be a Christian."⁷¹ Gregory says much the same thing.

[I]t is the Spirit in whom we worship and through whom we pray. "God," it says, "is Spirit, and they who worship him must worship him in Spirit and in Truth." And again: "We do not

know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” And again: “I will pray with the Spirit but I will pray with the mind also”—meaning, in mind and spirit. Worshipping, then, and praying in the Spirit seem to me to be simply the Spirit presenting prayer and worship to himself.⁷²

Perhaps silence is more appropriate than speaking our own words, but certainly words given by God are better than either.

We have also seen that the gospel is at every point dependent on divine condescension. As Ephrem the Syrian says, “Heat loosens the onerous, cold Bridle—the silence of frost upon the lips . . . like the tongues of the Spirit, which rested upon the disciples, with its heat, with tongues, the Holy Spirit drove silence from the disciples. . . . Silence fled [their] tongues by means of tongues.”⁷³ Just as every other element of redemption is contingent upon divine condescension, in Spirit baptism the Holy Spirit provides the only method by which we can faithfully speak mysteries to God (1 Cor 14:2). Thus, the supposed “‘ignorance’ that is far higher than the ‘wordiness’ of those who think they have fully comprehended God”⁷⁴ misses a vital experience of the third person of the Trinity.

Glossolalia “found prayer to be a ‘two-way relationship,’ not just talking at God, but God (the Holy Spirit) already cooperating in their prayer, energizing it from within, and no less also responding in it, alluring them again, inviting them into a continuing adventure.”⁷⁵ Indeed, “Romans 8 for Coakley represents a kind of ‘deep prayer in the Spirit’ that was espoused in early patristic tradition; it is a passage that relates an ‘incorporative’ account of trinitarianism in which the Spirit draws one into the triune life of God and by that drawing and activation the Spirit is in some sense apprehended to be personal.”⁷⁶ Chris Green, likewise responding to Sarah Coakley, says, “prayer is God’s first, and then—and only so—ours. We cannot pray to God except as God prays with and for us. Without the Spirit’s ‘sighs too deep for words’, our words can never deliver the prayer our hearts by grace desire to bring forth.”⁷⁷ In Coakley’s own words, “It is not I who autonomously prays, but God (the Holy Spirit) who prays in me, and so answers the eternal call of the ‘Father’, drawing me by various painful degrees into the newly expanded life of ‘Sonship’.”⁷⁸ This does not entail possession, but partnership. The Spirit provides for us the means by which we can communicate to the Father. Our spirit joins with the Holy Spirit in the groanings that are beyond words (Rom 8:26).

This is a practical application of Gregory’s apophaticism.⁷⁹ As we have seen, Gregory rejects that we can know God on our own effort. As a result, he throws himself on God’s self-disclosure. Glossolalia is the divine-human partnership exhibited in prayer. This is not to say that glossolalia is the highest possible experience of God. That is precisely the error that Paul is correcting in 1 Corinthians 12–14. As Macchia rightly points out, “[t]his does not mean that rational and literate theology and worship is thereby made insignificant. If this were so, a *theology* of glossolalia would be a contradiction in terms!”⁸⁰ Rather, glossolalia is a demonstration of apophatic theology.

In spite of this, it would seem that in practice glossolalia often has more in common with Dionysius’s apophaticism. But this is likely because of a lack of a clear theology of glossolalia. Bereft of that, Pentecostals default to an approach that is experientially focused and lacks careful thought and explication. This is not to say that experience is irrelevant or unimportant. “[T]he height of theology is not tomes written but God experienced.”⁸¹ However, that experience is not simply a mystically inexplicable encounter. It is that, but it is more. It is an experience that provides relief when we do not know how to pray. It is an experience that allows us to declare mysteries to God (1 Cor 14:2) that transcend language. Finally, it is an experience that allows us at any time to partner with the third person of the Trinity in prayer that edifies us in ways that we cannot describe.

Apophatic theology is the heart of the gospel. We have no ability to understand God, no ability to reach God by our own effort. We are utterly hopeless. That is, except for God’s grace. God has chosen to reach out to us and redeem us. It is for this reason that our very knowledge of God cannot properly be the cause for boasting. All that can properly result from our understanding of God is humble adoration. Any knowledge that does not lead us to this conclusion is ultimately ashes. The truly wise man hesitates to opine because he knows the gravity of the topic. This humility is needed. But wisdom is not silent. Thanks be to God that through the Spirit, we do not have to be either.



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Notes:

¹ Cicero, from *Greek and Roman Philosophy After Aristotle*, Readings in the History of Philosophy (New York: Free Press, 1994, 1966), 61.

² There is some conflict regarding this author's name. This article will follow the lead of Andrew Louth, who views the prefix *pseudo* as pejorative and distracting from the content present in the writings of Dionysius. Andrew Louth, "Byzantine Theology Part 2 by Andrew Louth," May 7, 2015, YouTube video, 19:14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8OyR__AA88. See also, Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

³ Divine Names 1 589B, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, eds. Paul Rorem and Rene Roques, trans. Luibhéid Colm (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 50. Hereafter abbreviated DN.

⁴ Also called negative theology or the way of remission, usually by the Western church. This is in contrast to cataphatic theology, also called positive theology or the way of eminence. Since the ancient authors in question in the article hail from the East, this article will exclusively use apophatic/cataphatic. It is worth noting that the terminology of apophatic/cataphatic in theology may find its origin in Dionysius. Richard J. Foster and Gayle D. Beebe, *Longing for God: Seven Paths of Christian Devotion* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 239. Daniel Castello has said that apophaticism "needs further demarcation if it is to be put to use for a specific end." Daniel Castello, *Pentecostalism as a Christian Mystical Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 129. For the purposes of this article, Gregory and Dionysius serve as my governing boundaries.

⁵ Many thanks to Dr. Donald Fairbairn for pointing this out in private conversation.

⁶ This is used broadly in this article to refer to any believer or group of believers who affirm the broad tenets of renewal theology evident in Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, among others.

⁷ Peter D. Neumann, *Pentecostal Experience: An Ecumenical Encounter* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 6; emphasis added.

⁸ Neumann, *Pentecostal Experience*, 15.

⁹ Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), 54.

¹⁰ This is not to say it is the only kind of prayer that is fruitful, but instead that Paul makes it clear that it is particularly fruitful (cf. 1 Cor 14:5).

¹¹ For the purposes of this article, tongues, glossolalia, etc., will refer to a private prayer language that is untranslated. This is not to exclude other potential definitions, but a full treatment of such is beyond the scope of this article. For a scholarly and balanced view of various other definitions, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit: In Biblical Teaching, through the Centuries, and Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2013), 51–69, and particularly 490–92; and also, Anthony C. Thiselton, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 282–83. Some see it as either interchangeable with or an umbrella covering for xenolalia, the ability to speak other known languages that have not been learned by the speaker (also,

sometimes called xenoglossia. Cf. Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit*, 54). Glossolalia could also refer to the ecclesial gift that requires interpretation. Finally, glossolalia could refer to a private prayer language that is exclusively between the one praying and the one to whom prayer is directed, namely God.

¹² For more on this, see Watson Mills, ed., *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research on Glossolalia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986). While there has been notable progress in the decades since this was published, it remains a remarkably helpful resource and his point stands. For a notable and helpful exception to this, which is relevant to our current pursuit, see Castello, *Pentecostalism as a Christian Mystical Tradition*, 127–39. For an excellent interdisciplinary treatment with an expansive bibliography, see Mark J. Cartledge, *Charismatic Glossolalia: An Empirical-Theological Study* (Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2002).

¹³ For the purposes of this article, terms like *Orthodox* and *Orthodoxy* refer broadly to Eastern Orthodox churches. An exploration of the diversity of that group is well outside the bounds of this article. Apophatic theology is a significant commonality among all of Orthodox Christianity. For a good summary, see Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, Penguin Religion and Mythology (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 62–70 (historical), 208–9 (theological). For an informed Protestant perspective, see Donald Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 51–64.

¹⁴ Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes*, 52; emphasis added.

¹⁵ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1957), 25; emphasis added. Similarly, David Wilhite suggests that the ecumenical councils ought to be understood apophatically. They often tell us what *not* to say about God, or Christ, etc. David E. Wilhite, *The Gospel According to Heretics: Discovering Orthodoxy through Early Christological Conflicts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 189.

¹⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology: A Philosophical Dictionary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 7. Also Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 209.

¹⁷ This is not to say that Orthodoxy is monolithic. However, this distinction between *ousia* and *energia* is generally accurate for most of Orthodoxy. For one example in the writings of an Orthodox theologian, see Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 28.

¹⁸ Fairbairn deftly explains the distinction in Orthodoxy between God's *ousia* and *energia* in *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes*, 55.

¹⁹ This distinction is eventually made quite clear by Gregory Palamas, but it is definitely present in Dionysius. Andrew Louth, "Byzantine Theology Part 2." See also Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes*, 54; and James R. Payton, *Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 78–82.

²⁰ DN 1588B, 49–50. It will become clear that Dionysius does not consistently maintain this perspective.

²¹ This does present a problem, which is unfortunately beyond the scope of the article. What if God's energies do not reflect God's essence? Ultimately, if God has chosen to self-reveal and we wish to understand anything of God, we must trust that

God's inner mystery is meaningfully aligned with God's outer energies. For more on this, see Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes*, 115.

²² There is some debate here. See Vladimir Lossky, "Apophysis and Trinitarian Theology," in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Daniel B. Clendenin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 152; Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 29–33; contra Glen G. Scorgie, ed., *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 677, 697–99; Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit*, 225; Jaroslav Pelikan, "Introduction," in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 6–8; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 344–49; Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springsted, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 62–63. It is worth noting at this point that monks from the Middle Ages welcomed the Neoplatonic framework found in Augustine, but they found Dionysius "insufficiently biblical." Jean Leclercq, "Introduction (II)," in *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 31.

²³ Kin-Yip Louie has written a helpful, but brief, summary of Dionysius's life and work in, *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 697–99.

²⁴ Paul Rorem, "Foreword," in *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 3. For perhaps the most easily understood summation of Dionysius, see McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 44–56. Due to their pseudonymity, it is hard to posit a historical situation for the writings of Dionysius, which makes interpreting him that much harder.

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas is said to have quoted Dionysius 1,760 times. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 63. Lossky records a fascinating development of Dionysian thought in Aquinas's writings. See Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 26.

²⁶ Karlfried Froehlich, "Introduction (III)," in *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 33. For an exploration of the identity, reception, and importance of Dionysius, see 11–46.

²⁷ Lossky, for instance, sees Maximus as the defender of the correct interpretation of Dionysius. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 23–24; contra Tony Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 68–69, 71–72; and Jaroslav Pelikan, "Introduction (I)," in *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 16–24; idem., *Maximus Confessor*, 6–7. Pelikan notes this both in his introduction to Dionysius and his introduction to a collection of works by Maximus the Confessor, who is perhaps the most influential interpreter of Dionysius in history. Jaroslav Pelikan, "Introduction (I)," in *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 13–24. See also Jean Leclercq, "Introduction (II)," in *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 27–32. Pelikan, "Introduction," in *Maximus Confessor*, 7. It is very likely, in fact, that Maximus has misread Dionysius. The fact remains, however, that whether Maximus is right or not, his interpretation tips the scales for us in the direction of Gregory's perspective.

²⁸ Pelikan, "Introduction," in *Maximus Confessor*, 9. It should be said that Pelikan is not a scholar of Maximus, so his interpretation here is only offered as a sample of the history of interpretation of Dionysius. One such interpretation comes in a discussion on the unknowability of God in *The Four Hundred Chapters on Love*, 1:100. Maximus supports his statement by a quotation that he states is from both Gregory and Dionysius. But the quotation is only found in Gregory. Thus, to Maximus's mind Gregory and Dionysius are in agreement (Maximus the Confessor, *Maximus*

Confessor: Selected Writings, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. George C. Berthold [New York: Paulist Press, 1985], 46). It is beyond the scope of this presentation to explicate every instance of a reference to the Nazianzen or to Dionysius in the writings of Maximus. This allusion is enough to illustrate that Maximus at least occasionally reads the two in agreement with one another.

²⁹ Louth, “Byzantine Theology Part 2.”

³⁰ Allen and Springsted, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 62–63.

³¹ “Does not Dionysius say time and time again that apophatic theology surpasses cataphatic?” Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 26.

³² Mystical Theology 1 1000B, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. Paul Rorem and Rene Roques, trans. Luibhéid Colm (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 136. Hereafter abbreviated MT.

³³ Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology*, 6.

³⁴ Lossky, *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 152.

³⁵ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, The Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 23.

³⁶ McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, 23.

³⁷ DN 1 585B–588A, 49.

³⁸ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 51–52.

³⁹ Dionysius is perfectly comfortable with stating that God is Trinity, and even explicitly states that the authors of Scripture say as much (DN 1 592A, 51). But according to Pelikan, “to call God one was not strictly proper unless it was made clear that unity did not mean here what it meant anywhere else.” Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 347. Cf. DN 13 980C–981B, 129–130. Ultimately, God is “above not only incarnation and Trinity, but godhead itself.” Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 348. Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, Letter Two 1068A–1069A, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. Paul Rorem and Rene Roques, trans. Luibhéid Colm (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 263.

⁴⁰ DN 1 593B, 52; emphasis added.

⁴¹ “[T]o praise this divinely beneficent Providence you must turn to all of creation.” DN 1 593D, 54.

⁴² “These are not the only names for God favored by the scripture writers. . . . Some too have their origin in spiritual visions which enlightened initiates or prophets in the holy places or elsewhere.” DN 1 597A, 56.

⁴³ MT 2 1033C, 139.

⁴⁴ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 53.

⁴⁵ MT 1 997B, 135.

⁴⁶ This follows a broad tradition of grounding apophaticism in Moses’ experience. For more on this, see Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes*, 52–55.

⁴⁷ Paul Rorem, *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols Within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis (Studies and Texts)* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 141.

48 Indeed, Pelikan points out that Dionysius “mentions the name of Jesus Christ and professes his belief in the incarnation, but the structure of his system is perfectly independent of his profession of faith.” Pelikan, “Introduction,” in *Maximus Confessor*, 7. Elsewhere, Pelikan states that the regulating principle for Dionysius was a perspective on God that threatened to swallow up the incarnation into the One. Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 347.

49 Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), Kindle Electronic Edition: Location 661–67. “twice five are” has been replaced with “two times five is” for rhetorical purposes.

50 Dr. Lionel Wickham’s introduction to Gregory’s *Five Theological Orations* glows with admiration of Gregory’s intellect and writing ability. Lionel Wickham, “Introduction,” in *On God and Christ*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Location 44–303.

51 Kelby Cotton has written a helpful, but brief, summary of Gregory’s life and work in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 485–86. For more detail, see Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Lion Books, 2003), 214–17. However, nothing matches the depth and riches in John Anthony McGuckin, *St Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001).

52 McGuckin, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus*, 393; also, Brian E. Daley, ed., *Gregory of Nazianzus, The Early Church Fathers* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1–2, 41. It is possible that he earns this title elsewhere. Cf. Hill, *The History of Christian Thought*, 72.

53 This refers to Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus.

54 Jaroslav Pelikan, “Introduction,” in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 8. The term *apophaticism* has been inserted here in place of *via negativa* in the interest of consistency. According to Pelikan, the source for this quotation is Gregory of Nyssa, *Homiliae in Cantica Canticatorum XII* (PG 44:1045D). However, 1045D is in homily 13, not 12. Both discuss apophaticism, but neither seem to have a quotation that accords well with what Pelikan has here. See Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, vol. 2, trans. Richard McCambly (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987), which can be accessed at <http://www.lectio-divina.org/images/nyssa/Commentary%20on%20the%20Song%20of%20Songs%202.pdf>.

55 Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Location 591–93.

56 McGuckin, *St Gregory of Nazianzus*, 58.

57 Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Location 591–93.

58 Andrew Louth, “Byzantine Theology Part 2.” It is interesting that Dionysius also believed strongly in divine simplicity but did not take it to the same conclusion. See DN 1 592B–592C.

59 Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Location 316–18.

⁶⁰ It is worth noting that Diogenes Allen mentions Gregory along with his contemporary Gregory of Nyssa as notable exceptions to the pattern of Christian Platonists. Allen and Springsted, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 61. This is not to say that they were not Platonic at all, rather that they did not take Platonism as far as others.

⁶¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 28.2, in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel R. Wickham, Popular Patristics Series 23 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 30.

⁶² Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Location 553–56; emphasis added.

⁶³ Vladimir Lossky has a similar quotation, “If in seeing God one can know what one sees, then one has not seen God in Himself but something intelligible, something which is inferior to Him.” Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 25.

⁶⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Location 607–10.

⁶⁵ Heidi G. Baker, “Pentecostal Experience: Towards a Reconstructive Theology of Glossolalia,” (Ph.D. diss., Kings College London, University of London, 1996), 7; see also 197. It is worth noting here that this work is in many ways indebted to Heidi Baker’s doctoral dissertation while hopefully expanding on it in several ways.

⁶⁶ Frank Macchia, “Sighs Too Deep for Words: Toward a Theology of Glossolalia,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1:1 (1992), 49.

⁶⁷ “Most Pentecostal material says little or nothing about the value or relevance of glossolalia for Christian life and spirituality. Often Pentecostals have created the impression that the experience itself is being sought.” See also W. E. Mifis, “A Theological Interpretation of Tongues in Acts and 1 Corinthians,” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Seminary, 1968), 224–25.

⁶⁸ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 55.

⁶⁹ “Theology does its job, in Dionysius’s view, by leading the community beyond where human words can go. But the crucial point is that the final stage of this journey is not the silence which is utterly null and void of meaning but the silence of embrace, unity with God who unspeakably comes forth from divine life in order to draw what is not divine into divinity.” McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 55.

⁷⁰ Abraham Heschel, *Quest for God* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 3–4, quoted in Frank Macchia, “Sighs Too Deep for Words,” 63.

⁷¹ Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 21.

⁷² Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, Kindle Electronic Edition: Location 2701–6. This comes from his fifth theological oration, which has been called by many the “greatest of all sermons on the doctrine of the Spirit.” Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit*, 217–18.

⁷³ Ephrem the Syrian, *The Hymns on Faith*, Fathers of the Church Patristic Series (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 74:18–20, 24b; 354.

⁷⁴ McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, 23.

⁷⁵ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 169.

⁷⁶ Daniel Castello, “Charisma and Apophasis: A Dialogue with Sarah Coakley’s *God, Sexuality, and the Self*,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 26 (2017), 13.

⁷⁷ Chris Green, “Prayer as Trinitarian and Transformative Event in Sarah Coakley’s *God, Sexuality, and the Self*,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 26 (2017), 21.

⁷⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 55–56.

⁷⁹ This is not to say that Gregory would agree. Rather, this is to say that glossolalia is consistent with Gregory’s approach to apophaticism.

⁸⁰ Frank Macchia, “Sighs Too Deep for Words,” 62; emphasis his.

⁸¹ Eric Lopez, email message to author (January 11, 2019).