

SYMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN  
A SAINT OF AND FOR HIS TIMES

By

Stephen D. Barkley

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St. Symeon the New Theologian lives in exclusive company. Only two other saints in the Eastern Orthodox tradition have received the title, “Theologian”: St. John the Evangelist and St. Gregory of Nazianzus.<sup>1</sup> Today *theology* is often misunderstood to be the domain of experts who work with philosophical abstractions. For Symeon, nothing could be further from the truth. His theology was worked out alongside the rhythms of monastic life, and rooted in his intensely personal experience of God.

If the title “theologian” was an honour, the prefix “new” was certainly not. “Newness or innovation in Byzantine theology was an attribute normally associated with heretics, and it therefore seems likely that this sobriquet was originally given Symeon by his enemies . . . .”<sup>2</sup> Symeon was a controversial character. In a world where scripture and tradition were the two sources of theology, Symeon claimed to be enlightened directly by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit “shall enlighten your mind, / and open the pupils of your heart, / . . . / But through Him you shall be taught everything, / even if you are an uneducated peasant.”<sup>3</sup> This paper will explore how Symeon was a new theologian who shaped by and in turn challenged tenth and eleventh century Byzantine culture. I will show how he contextualized his theology by taking a firm position on the two interrelated dichotomies of his day. Finally, I will suggest how Symeon’s contextual theology can inspire the North American church, specifically the Pentecostal tradition.

## THE LIFE OF SYMEON

### Sources

Only two eleventh century sources about the life of Symeon exist: Nicetas’ *Vita* and Symeon’s own autobiographical reflections. Each source has significant biases to account for. Nicetas Stethatos was a disciple of Symeon who became the influential abbot of the Studite monastery

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<sup>1</sup> Golitzin, *Mystical Life*, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Golitzin, *Mystical Life*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Symeon, *Divine Eros*, 146–7.

where Symeon began his monastic life.<sup>4</sup> Nicetas not only edited and published Symeon's writings, he wrote a hagiography of Symeon. Hagiographies share similar features to account for such as exaggeration of the saint's sinfulness before conversion and sanctity after conversion.

Symeon's own writings contain much autobiographical material. In his *Discourses*, he told the monks of St. Mamas about his former life, sometimes using the pseudonym George.<sup>5</sup> His fifty-eight *Hymns* also include many vivid first-hand experiences. If Nicetas' *Vita* exaggerates Symeon's saintliness, Symeon's own works exaggerate his unworthiness. The saints are known for by their humility and Symeon is no exception.

### Life

The precise dates of Symeon's life are unclear. Scholars place his birthdate at 949 (Hausherr), 956 (Christou), or 963–69 (Holl).<sup>6</sup> We will follow Hunt in using Hausherr's generally accepted chronology.

Table 1. Timeline of Symeon the New Theologian<sup>7</sup>

Date	Age	Event
949	0	born in Paphlagonia
960	11	sent to the court under the protection of his uncle
963	14	uncle was murdered
977	28	entered the Studite monastery
980	31	moved to the smaller St. Mamas monastery
980	31	elected abbot
986	37	spiritual Father, Eulabes <sup>8</sup> , died
996–998	47–49	thirty St. Mamas monks rebelled
1003	54	encountered Stephen of Alexina in the imperial palace
1005	56	ecclesiastical trial and dismissal
1009	60	sent into exile to St. Marina monastery
22 March, 1022	73	died of dysentery

<sup>4</sup> Golitzin, *Mystical Life*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Hunt, *Guide to St. Symeon*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Alfeyev, *Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Hunt, *Guide to St. Symeon*, 2–14. Age numbers have been calculated based on Symeon's birth year. Since his exact date of birth is unknown, they may be  $\pm 1$  year.

<sup>8</sup> Symeon's spiritual Father is St. Symeon Eulabes or Symeon the Studite. I will follow Hanna Hunt's practice in this paper and refer to him as Eulabes to prevent confusion.

Symeon was born in Galati, Paphlagonia in 949 to parents Basil and Theophana, members of the provincial nobility.<sup>9</sup> At age eleven, his uncle recognized potential in young Symeon and presented him to the court at Constantinople where he finished his secondary education.<sup>10</sup>

When Symeon was fourteen his uncle died and he felt alone in the world. He recalled this time in Hymn 20:

Parents did not turn to me with natural love,  
 my brothers and friends were all mocking me,  
 for when they said that they love me they only lied.  
 My relatives, strangers, the princes of the world  
 did not so much as turn to me and bear to see me,  
 except to destroy me by their ungodliness.<sup>11</sup>

These lines demonstrate both his separation from his family as well as his desire for godliness. He turned to spiritual help from Eulabes of the Studite monastery.<sup>12</sup> That Symeon in his secular days sought out Eulabes of the Studion as a spiritual adviser testifies to his status and ambition. Symeon desired to enter the monastic life at fourteen but Eulabes had him wait until he was twenty-seven.<sup>13</sup>

Symeon had the first of many visions around twenty years of age. While praying the Jesus prayer, he experienced the light of God:

[S]uddenly a flood of divine radiance appeared from above and filled all the room. As this happened the young man lost all awareness [of his surroundings] and forgot that he was in a house or that he was under a roof. He saw nothing but light all around him and did not know if he was standing on the ground. . . . [H]e was wholly in the presence of immaterial light and seemed to himself to have turned into light.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Maloney S.J., "Introduction," 5–6.

<sup>10</sup> Maloney S. J., "Introduction," 6.

<sup>11</sup> Symeon, *Divine Eros*, 136.

<sup>12</sup> Alfeyev, *Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 30–31.

<sup>13</sup> Maloney S. J., "Introduction," 6.

<sup>14</sup> Symeon, *Discourses*, 245–246.

This event would shape of his entire theology since he became convinced that he could experience God just as Stephen the Martyr and St. Paul did.<sup>15</sup> Despite the enduring strength of this vision, he lapsed in his faith and continued in his life of sin for many years.<sup>16</sup>

At twenty-seven, Symeon entered the Studite monastery. Ever since Abbot Theodore's role in the iconoclast struggle of the ninth century, the Studion's authority was "extraordinarily high."<sup>17</sup> New arrivals to the monastery received two fathers when they entered: the Abbot of the entire monastery and a personal spiritual director.<sup>18</sup> Symeon's devotion and servitude to his spiritual director Eulabes created tension in the Studion. The "close relationship between the elder and his disciple seems to have troubled the other monks and the abbot himself, probably because they felt that the special relationship controverted the monastery's chain of command."<sup>19</sup> Within a few short years he was transferred to the neighbouring St. Mamas,<sup>20</sup> a monastery "of the same tradition and type"<sup>21</sup> as the Studion.

St. Mamas was in physical and spiritual disrepair.<sup>22</sup> Symeon successfully rebuilt the building, likely leveraging his former aristocratic connections.<sup>23</sup> The spiritual repair was more difficult.

Symeon's wisdom was quickly recognized and after only two years in St. Mamas, Symeon began teaching the monks. A year after this the Abbot died and Symeon was elected to fill his role.<sup>24</sup> The Abbot had a multifaceted and demanding job. Not unlike modern pastors, the Abbot was a generalist, capable of functioning in many contexts. An Abbot "must be at one and

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<sup>15</sup> Symeon, *Divine Eros*, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Symeon, *Divine Eros*, 184–5.

<sup>17</sup> Alfeyev, *Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Hunt, *A Guide to St. Symeon*, 40, 46–7.

<sup>19</sup> Golitzin, *Mystical Life*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Maloney S. J., "Introduction," 9.

<sup>21</sup> Alfeyev, *Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Maloney S. J., "Introduction," 8.

<sup>23</sup> Alfeyev, *Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 36.

<sup>24</sup> Alfeyev, *Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 35–6.

the same time an example of humility, contemplation, and piety and capable of holding his own with court officials, representatives of the emperor, and even trading partners.”<sup>25</sup> To make matters more complicated, the Abbot could not assume that his monks were there for spiritual reasons. Tax evasion, military exemption, or even a disinclination for family life and childrearing were reasons why some citizens entered the monastery.<sup>26</sup>

Symeon did his best to reform “what Nicetas describes as a refuge of worldly monks, a cemetery for a great number of dead,”<sup>27</sup> employing fiery rhetoric. “We complain, contradict, curse, and are lazy,” Symeon told his monks, “we do all the things God hates, and which led our souls to the destruction in the fire of hell.”<sup>28</sup>

Not everyone enjoyed being reformed. After about fifteen years of his leadership, thirty of his monks rebelled. “[W]hen he was preaching during matins, they attacked him, shouting loudly, and wanted to drive him out of the monastery, by Symeon, as [Nicetas] claims, stood his ground with his hands lowered and looking at those who hated him with a smile and ‘bright countenance’.”<sup>29</sup> The rebels ran to the Patriarch who questioned Symeon and declared the rebellious monks at fault. The Patriarch wanted to expel the monks, but Symeon interceded so that they could return to the monastery.<sup>30</sup> Symeon remained Abbot for a few more years until he turned over the role to his disciples Arsenios.<sup>31</sup>

The life of peace and contemplation Symeon expected failed to materialize. Stephen, former metropolitan of Nicomedia and now chancellor to the Patriarch, challenged Symeon on his theology of the Trinity. Symeon replied with the correct answer and added a personal

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<sup>25</sup> Hunt, *Guide to St. Symeon*, 46.

<sup>26</sup> Hunt, *Guide to St. Symeon*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Maloney S. J., “Introduction,” 8.

<sup>28</sup> Symeon, *Discourses*, 64.

<sup>29</sup> Alfeyev, *Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Alfeyev, *Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 38.

<sup>31</sup> Alfeyev, *Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 38.

counter-attack. Stephen followed by challenging Symeon's devotion to his spiritual father, Eulabes, whom Symeon treated as a Saint without hierarchical blessing.<sup>32</sup> When Symeon disobeyed the Patriarch's order to stop venerating Eulabes, he was exiled from Constantinople.<sup>33</sup>

Although the Patriarch lifted the exile and even offered Symeon the archbishopric to reconcile, Symeon refused. He lived out the remainder of his days rebuilding another monastery, St. Marina, in a small town called Paloukiton.<sup>34</sup> Symeon died on March 12, 1022. Thirty years later his relics were returned to Constantinople.<sup>35</sup>

### **Theology**

Symeon's theology is "thoroughly traditional,"<sup>36</sup> reflecting the full gamut of Eastern Orthodoxy. He pursued his theology as an ascetic mystic, in the tradition of Gregory of Nazianzus<sup>37</sup> and John Climacus<sup>38</sup> who came before him.

What made Symeon unique was not so much the content of his theology, but his epistemology. It was not enough for him to study scripture and the writings of the church fathers. He understood that theology must come from an experience with the living Spirit of God. Symeon wrote because God compelled him to write. Nicetas, said it well: "The Spirit that was stirring and leaping within him was not allowing him any repose until he had put into writing His words and interior operations."<sup>39</sup>

## SYMEON'S CONTEXT

### **Constantinople and Basil II**

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<sup>32</sup> Alfeyev, *Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 35–6.

<sup>33</sup> Alfeyev, *Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 36–7.

<sup>34</sup> Maloney S. J., "Introduction," 13.

<sup>35</sup> Hunt, *Guide to St. Symeon*, 14.

<sup>36</sup> Golitzin, *Mystical Life*, 55.

<sup>37</sup> Golitzin, *Mystical Life*, 127.

<sup>38</sup> Golitzin, *Mystical Life*, 59.

<sup>39</sup> Maloney S. J., "Introduction," 14.

Symeon lived his life in and around Constantinople. Dedicated by Constantine in 324 and destroyed by the Ottoman Turks in 1453, the city was “for a millennium the richest metropolis in Europe and the most populous city west of . . . Xian [in China].”<sup>40</sup> It was an urban centre where cultures met and mixed. Constantinople was also a rich context for monasticism. Unlike Western monastic communities which were centred around a common rule, Constantinople had hundreds of monasteries,<sup>41</sup> each with its own *typikon* or rule book.<sup>42</sup> In this way, diversity was reflected in monastic community. Eastern monasteries were not Essene-like otherworldly communities, but places where “monks had to carry out the spiritual direction of seculars, have intensive and constant contact with the life of the city, visit people and receive visitors.”<sup>43</sup> Constantinople’s “spiritual elements [cannot] be entirely separated from the worldly.”<sup>44</sup>

Symon’s life corresponds roughly with Emperor Basil II who reigned from 976–1025.<sup>45</sup> Basil’s leadership “marked the high-water point in the medieval history of Byzantium.”<sup>46</sup> During his reign, Byzantium “virtually doubled in size compared to the end of the eighth century.”<sup>47</sup> Most importantly, Vladimir the prince of Kiev converted to Orthodox Christianity.<sup>48</sup> “Vladimir’s acceptance of Christianity had the very practical impact of strengthening and extending long-standing strategic, religious, and commercial ties between the Byzantine and Rus.”<sup>49</sup> As we examine the relationship between spiritual and worldly elements, it is worth noting that

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<sup>40</sup> Hunt, “Byzantine Christianity,” 74.

<sup>41</sup> Hunt, “Byzantine Christianity,” 74.

<sup>42</sup> Hunt, *Guide to St. Symeon*, 122.

<sup>43</sup> Alfeyev, *Symeon the New Theologian and Orthodox Tradition*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Hunt, “Byzantine Christianity,” 75.

<sup>45</sup> Golitzin, *Mystical Life*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Holmes, *Basil II*, 510.

<sup>47</sup> Hunt, *Guide to St. Symeon*, 21.

<sup>48</sup> Holmes, *Basil II*, 514.

<sup>49</sup> Holmes, *Basil II*, 513.

Byzantine historians “registered little interest in the acceptance of Christianity among the Rus.”<sup>50</sup> Evidently political gain outweighed religious concerns.

In addition to his shrewd statesmanship, the Byzantine emperor was also “viewed as a semi-divine personage, God’s regent or representative on earth, who ruled his empire in imitation of the heavenly kingdom.”<sup>51</sup> Although Symeon disapproved of the opulence of court life, there is no indication that he questioned “the rightness of the empire itself.”<sup>52</sup> The spiritual danger of politico-religious triumphalism is more easily discerned in hindsight.

### **Two Dichotomies**

Symeon lived in the midst of two interrelated dichotomies: the political/religious and the corporate/individual. We can see how these dichotomies exist in the relationships between the court, the church, and the monasteries. The court was both a political and religious organization where the emperor was viewed as “God’s viceroy on earth and answerable to Him alone.”<sup>53</sup> As we have seen with Basil II, the emphasis falls firmly on the political side of the balance. The emperor was responsible for appointing priests and bishops to run the church where lay people would regularly worship. Although churches are more associated with religion than politics, there was “a degree of co-dependency between the court and the church.”<sup>54</sup> Due to its close relationship with the state, the church also prized corporate policy over individual inspiration. In the state churches, a “Byzantine scholasticism was taking over and theology was being divorced from authentic religious experience or mysticism.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Holmes, *Basil II*, 511.

<sup>51</sup> Hunt, *Guide to St. Symeon*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> Golitzin, *Mystical Life*, 14.

<sup>53</sup> Shepard, “Byzantine Commonwealth,” 5.

<sup>54</sup> Hunt, *Guide to St. Symeon*, location 111.

<sup>55</sup> Maloney S. J., “Introduction,” 1.

The monasteries had traditionally skewed toward the religious side of the dichotomy. They acted “as a powerhouse of spiritual endeavor and prayer for the community”<sup>56</sup> where saints were birthed. However, by Symeon’s time, even the monastic life “had become ossified, not only in its extrinsic and impersonalized formalism, but also in its worldly sycophancy toward the emperor.”<sup>57</sup> The monastery began to follow the state church, favouring corporate expression rooted in the will of the political leaning hierarchy over individual inspiration. Individualism is inherently unmanageable. We will see how Symeon challenged the political and corporate context of his day by retreating from political life to offer an unapologetic holiness rooted in his own personal mysticism.

## HOW SYMEON SHAPED HIS CONEXT

### **Contextual Theology**

Symeon was no missionary to a foreign culture, but his mystical epistemology made him an outlier within his own culture which he in turn challenged. Symeon was a clear example of Bevans’ transcendental model of contextual theology:

The transcendental model proposes that the task of constructing a contextualized theology is not about producing a particular body of any kind of texts; it is about attending to the affective and cognitive operations in the self-transcending subject. What is important is not so much that a particular theology is produced but that the theologian who is producing it operates as an authentic, converted subject.<sup>58</sup>

Nigerian scholar Olagunju, in his evaluation of Bevans’ models, notes that this model “resembles an Eastern approach to theology, which sees the true theologian not as one . . . who has cultivated a relationship with the Holy Spirit through long years of discipline and prayer.”<sup>59</sup> The theology that Symeon produced is not novel, despite his title. It was Symeon himself, as one who

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<sup>56</sup> Hunt, *Guide to St. Symeon*, location 111.

<sup>57</sup> Maloney S. J., “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>58</sup> Bevans, *Contextual Theology*, 97.

<sup>59</sup> Olagunju, “Evaluation of Bevans,” 48–9.

experienced the Spirit of God, who was unique. Revelation for Symeon was not mere content, but something experiential that happens “when a person opens himself or herself to reality . . . [when] person who in full openness has allowed God to touch and transform his or her life.”<sup>60</sup>

### **Symeon v. Stephen**

Symeon’s religious-individualist position becomes clear in the war he fought with Stephen, exemplar of the political-corporate context of the day. In his role as chancellor to the Patriarch (one of the highest ranking bishops)<sup>61</sup> and former Metropolitan (bishop of a major city),<sup>62</sup> Stephen was firmly entrenched in the political establishment. The war between the two can be broken down into two battles, each illustrating one of the two dichotomies.

#### On the Trinity: Individualism Over Corporate Expression

Motivated by jealousy and with full knowledge of Symeon’s lack of higher education, Stephen tried to trick Symeon into speaking heretically about the Trinity.<sup>63</sup> Symeon, with a reputation for wisdom, disarmed the trap and responded with a vicious counter-attack. His attack was not theological, but epistemological: how dare a philosophical theologian like Stephen claim to speak about God?

[T]ell me, how do you not tremble to speak about God?  
 How dare you, you who are yourself all flesh,  
 And have not yet become spirit like Paul, (Rom 8)  
 To speak or to philosophize about the Spirit?  
 . . .  
 Tremble, O human being, at least know thyself.  
 . . .  
 Yes, leave behind your meddling,  
 and put away the blasphemy of your sayings!  
 . . .  
 . . . now leave God alone<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Bevens, *Contextual Theology*, 99.

<sup>61</sup> Hunt, *Guide to St. Symeon*, 121.

<sup>62</sup> Hunt, *Guide to St. Symeon*, 120.

<sup>63</sup> Turner, *Spiritual Fatherhood*, 33.

<sup>64</sup> Symeon, *Divine Eros*, 147, 151–2, 156.

This was not mere braggadocio; Symeon was appalled that someone who had not experienced the Spirit of God dared to theologize about God.

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul coined the term, *theodidact*: “. . . you yourselves have been *taught by God* to love one another.”<sup>65</sup> Symeon understood himself as a *theodidact*. Rather than relying on reason and tradition, Symeon encouraged theologians to “beg to receive fire, / that teaches and shows all these / mysteries manifestly to those who / possess it . . .”<sup>66</sup> It was this individual experience of God that gave authority to a theologian’s voice, not the corporate philosophical theological enterprise. Without “the wisdom of the Divine Spirit, the philosophical theologian can only engage in a foolish human attempt to speak of God.”<sup>67</sup>

Stephen was a clear example of the tenth century’s “growing renaissance of rational philosophical theology, . . . [and] antimystical sentiment.”<sup>68</sup> His theology is rooted in a corporate expression of human logic and reason. He spoke about God based on the collective wisdom of a many people who exegeted the same scripture and church tradition. The experience of the Spirit is personal and does not lend itself to corporate analysis.

It is important to note that Symeon’s emphasis on the personal inspiration of the Spirit was not without safeguards. He was aware that such individualism could lead to heresy. “Sacred tradition, Scripture, and holy living are the criteria he offers to safeguard against self-authentication, error, and hypocrisy.”<sup>69</sup> It is telling that Symeon did not view the authorization of the emperor as one of the safeguards. This leads us to the second battle.

#### On Eulabes: Religion Over Politics

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<sup>65</sup> 1 Thess 4:9 ESV, emphasis mine.

<sup>66</sup> Symeon, *Divine Eros*, 234.

<sup>67</sup> McInnes, “Byzantine Theodidact,” 196.

<sup>68</sup> McInnes, “Byzantine Theodidact,” 195.

<sup>69</sup> McInnes, “Byzantine Theodidact,” 200.

One of the ways the emperor kept the religious establishment under political authority was by the publication of a *menologion*, a calendar of the officially recognized saints. “The function of such a text was more than just a record of pious observation; by listing those deemed worthy of sainthood it showed Basil’s control of people’s perceptions of who bore spiritual power in his empire.”<sup>70</sup> Symeon blatantly ignored the official *menologion* in his veneration of his spiritual Father, Eulabes.

In Symeon’s first vision of light, he saw a distinction within the light. “His mind ascended to heaven and beheld yet another light, which was clearer than that which was close at hand. In a wonderful manner there appeared to him, standing close to that light, the saint of whom we have spoken, [Eulabes].”<sup>71</sup> Symeon understood from this vision and his ongoing relationship that Eulabes was a saint. When Eulabes died, Symeon “initiated a cult of his dead father as a saint, composing hymns, getting an icon painted, and celebrating an annual festival in his honour.”<sup>72</sup> Stephen couldn’t fool Symeon theologically, so he attacked his veneration of Eulabes as defiance of the political establishment. “Stephen feared that Symeon was denying the authority and jurisdiction of the official hierarchy.”<sup>73</sup> In the end, this led to Symeon’s exile.

There were other events in Symeon’s life where he emphasized the religious over the political. Indeed, Symeon’s “whole life was one continuous conflict with the (ecclesiastical) ‘establishment.’”<sup>74</sup> In his rebuilding of the monastery of St. Mamas, for example, he removed the corpses of Emperor Maurice (who ruled from 582–623) and his family and retiled the floor in order to “[wipe] out signs of the original imperial patronage.”<sup>75</sup> Another key moment of conflict

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<sup>70</sup> Hunt, *Guide to St. Symeon*, 19.

<sup>71</sup> Symeon, *Discourses*, 246.

<sup>72</sup> Turner, *Spiritual Fatherhood*, 33.

<sup>73</sup> Maloney, S. J., “Introduction,” 10.

<sup>74</sup> van Rossum, “Priesthood and Confession,” 220.

<sup>75</sup> Griggs, “Introduction,” 13.

between his religious vision and the political establishment is seen in his “Letter on Confession.” He was asked the question, “Is it really permissible to confess one’s sins to monks who are not priests?”<sup>76</sup> Symeon showed how this authority to bind and loose had shifted from the Apostles, to Bishops, to Priests, and finally “it was transferred, as we said above, to God’s elect people, I mean to the monks. It was not that it had been taken away from the priests and bishops but rather that they had made themselves strangers to it.”<sup>77</sup>

Here we can see Symeon’s stance on both dichotomies. He privileged the individual over the corporate in his assertion that intercessors need to first have the spiritual authority that comes when “you have yourself been filled with the Holy Spirit”<sup>78</sup> before forgiving sins. He privileged the religious over the political when he declared some of the politically established priests unable to receive confession legitimately.

#### SYMEON’S VOICE AND THE PENTECOSTAL TRADITION

Symeon’s trademark emphasis on the experience of the Spirit has made him an important figure in the Pentecostal tradition. Not only does *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* contain an entry on Symeon,<sup>79</sup> he is featured on the cover. McGuckin, writing on Symeon’s personal and experiential Hymns, notes how Symeon’s work “brings to the fore the pressing need for the Christian Church to theologize primarily from its living experience of God: the need for each believer to accept the highest vocation as . . . prophet of the presence of God.”<sup>80</sup> This evaluation of Symeon’s work resonates strongly with the Pentecostal tradition’s emphasis on the experiential Baptism in the Holy Spirit where “believers yield control of

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<sup>76</sup> Symeon, “Letter on Confession,” 186.

<sup>77</sup> Symeon, “Letter on Confession,” 196.

<sup>78</sup> Symeon, “Letter on Confession,” 195.

<sup>79</sup> Burgess and van der Maas, *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, 1112.

<sup>80</sup> McGuckin, “Symeon the New Theologian’s Hymns,” 182.

themselves to the Holy Spirit . . . [and come] to know Christ in a more intimate way . . . .”<sup>81</sup>

Symeon goes so far as to refer to his experience of the Spirit as a “second Baptism” or a “second purification.”<sup>82</sup> In Symeon’s work as in the Pentecostal tradition, the Holy Spirit is understood to make himself experientially available to those who seek him.

Olga Zaprometova offered a Pentecostal reading of Symeon in the *Journal of the European Theological Association*. For her, Symeon’s experience began when Eulabes encouraged Symeon to “pursue God’s commandments for the sake of earning the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>83</sup> Symeon’s perception of divine light accompanied by tears along with his experiences of ecstasy that punctuated his life also anticipate key Pentecostal themes. Zaprometova presented the testimony of a nineteen-year-old boy during the Welch revival of 1904: “I fell on my knees . . . , my face was bathed in perspiration, and the tears flowed in streams.”<sup>84</sup> This could have been written by Symeon himself.

Burgess and Zaprometova have recognized obvious parallels between Symeon and Pentecostalism. I would go further to suggest that Symeon’s epistemology should inspire the Pentecostal and Charismatic tradition today. Not unlike Symeon’s time, the Evangelical church in North America has formed suspect alliances with political power. Consider how leaders such as James Dobson, Pat Robertson, and Jerry Fallwell Jr. encourage the Christians that follow them to vote for Donald Trump.<sup>85</sup> Rather than blindly follow the leader by endorsing one politician over another, Symeon’s contextual theology is a call for Christians to become *theodidacts* and to hear how the Spirit might challenge the corporate-political religion of our day.

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<sup>81</sup> PAOC, “Fundamental and Essential Truths,” 5.6.3

<sup>82</sup> van Rossum, “Priesthood and Confession,” 222.

<sup>83</sup> Zaprometova, “Experiencing the Holy Spirit,” 8.

<sup>84</sup> Zaprometova, “Experiencing the Holy Spirit,” 10.

<sup>85</sup> Volf, Miroslav and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, “We Can Forgive Donald Trump,” para. 2.

Symeon was a child of his times. He was raised in both the political life of Constantinople and the religious life of the monastic tradition. He understood the value of community as demonstrated by his long-time role as Abbot but at the same time emphasized the need for monks to experience the Holy Spirit before attempting to theologize. His culture first shaped him before he in turn prophetically challenged his culture.

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