

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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WHAT IS EASTERN ORTHODOXY? (PART I)

The stunning revelation that one of our Redeemer families recently converted to Eastern Orthodoxy continues to reverberate through our Church.¹ Questions abound. Why wouldn't they meet with the Elders before leaving? Why would they do this? Do they fully understand what they are doing? What is Eastern Orthodoxy? Eastern Orthodoxy has become increasingly popular in America over the past few years. There are a number of reasons for this. For example, people often say that it conveys a greater sense of the mysterious and the transcendent than one normally encounters in your typical Evangelical church. It also accents a strong continuity with the past, and perhaps even more than that, people find that it offers a very dignified worship especially when compared with the clap-happy atmosphere that characterizes much that passes for Evangelicalism today (especially in the so-called 'seeker' churches where entertainment reigns supreme). However, despite this appeal, the theological distinctives of Eastern Orthodoxy are what should concern us. Is it Biblical? How does it compare with the Reformed Faith? The Eastern Orthodox Church (hereafter EOC) is often used interchangeably with that of Greek Orthodox or Russian Orthodox or Antiochian Orthodox – all of which designate what is commonly known as Eastern (as opposed to Western or Latin) Christianity, and is historically linked with the Byzantine Empire (395-1453 A.D.) and its capital city, Constantinople.² In answering the question "Who are the Orthodox?", James Stamoolis, who made the journey *from* Eastern Orthodoxy *to* Evangelicalism, wrote: "The Eastern Orthodox Church is best described as the communion of churches recognizing the patriarch of Constantinople and in turn recognized by the patriarch as belonging to the 'family' of Eastern Orthodox churches. This mutual recognition is based on adherence to Orthodox faith and practice. While the highest-ranking prelate in the Orthodox Church is the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, he does not have the same authority that the pope (or patriarch) of Rome exerts. The patriarch of Constantinople is the 'First among Equals' of the ancient patriarchates: Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, and Constantinople. All but Rome still regard Constantinople as having a primacy among equals."³ Rick Wade of Probe ministries tellingly observed, "for many if not most of us, Eastern Orthodoxy is a real mystery. Images of bearded priests and candles, and the sounds of chanting come to mind. They are so far removed from us, it seems. Are we really part of the same church? Such a question would be absolutely preposterous to them, of course, for Orthodox are fond of pointing out that they stand closer to the ancient church than do Catholics or Protestants."⁴ The EOC claims to be the only church that stands in unbroken continuation with the Apostolic Church of the first century. Both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism are viewed as having deviated from the great tradition handed down by the Apostles. That said, it should be pointed out that the major theological features of the EOC are substantially the same as the Roman Catholic Church (hereafter RCC), especially in regards to the roles of the sacraments.

I SACERDOTALISM⁵

The EOC, like the RCC, is centered around sacerdotalism, i.e., the church is characterized by belief in the divine authority of the priesthood. The Latin word *sacerdotium* refers to a priestly work or office. The Reformers restricted the use of the term to the Work of Christ.⁶ The EOC, like the RCC, however both have as one of the seven sacraments "Holy Orders." Contrary to the dogmatic claims of the EOC and the RCC, this "tradition" does NOT go back to the Apostolic Church. "In the New Testament the two major human offices which are mentioned for the ongoing oversight of the Church are distinctly different from the priesthood which had gone before. These offices are those of 'elder' and 'deacon.' The 'elder' or 'overseer' is designated as the one who is called by God

to teach and rule, and the ‘deacon’ is called to minister in a practical serving capacity. There are two terms used for ‘overseer’ in the New Testament—*presbuteros* and *episkopos*: although these are translated ‘elder’ and ‘bishop’ respectively, they are used interchangeably in the New Testament. Paul and Peter, for example, both use the terms elder and bishop to describe the same office. The word *presbuteros* or ‘elder’ describes the position, while *episkopos* describes the function of the elder as one who rules or oversees. And the New Testament exhorts believers to be submissive and obedient to the elders God has placed in authority over them (cf. *I Pet. 5:5; Heb. 13:17*). The New Testament does not use the term priest—*hierus*—to refer to a separate office of Christian ministry. Similarly, in the early writings of the Church no mention is made of priests in Christian ministry. There is a parallel sometimes drawn between the offices of the New Testament and the ministerial functions of the priesthood in the old dispensation—as found in the writings of Clement and Ignatius, for example—but they do not teach that New Testament ministry and ministers are the same as in the Old Testament. Clement in 1 Clement 40-41 uses the Old Testament priesthood as an illustration of a principle of divine calling and orderliness. At that time, God specifically called and appointed certain men to perform a specified ministry which was to be done in a particular way. He then applies that principle to his readers under the New Testament dispensation, to warn them that God still calls and appoints men to fulfill the role of pastor, elder and deacon, and that believers must be careful to submit to the authorities that God has established in the Church. Clement never uses the term ‘priest’ to describe a Christian minister. This is true of all the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. Polycarp, Ignatius, Clement and *The Didache* all use the terms ‘bishop’ or ‘presbyter’ and ‘deacon’ when referring to those responsible for Christian ministry. These are the terms employed by the New Testament itself. When these and other writers do use the Greek term for ‘priest’ (*hierus*), it is always in reference to the Old Testament or to the person of Christ. The first use of the word to refer to Christian ministers is from the writings of Origen the third century Greek Father. Clement of Alexandria, writing in the latter part of the second century, uses the word to describe all Christians in general. It is with the fourth century Greek Fathers that we find the word *hierus* universally applied to describe a Christian minister. And it is with Tertullian in the West that the beginnings of a sacerdotal function in the Christian ministry began to become evident, for he uses the Latin term *sacerdotium* (priesthood) to describe a Christian minister. It is clear that by the beginning of the third century Christian ministers were beginning to be viewed as priests similar to those of the Old Testament.”⁷

CONCLUSION: John Muether, one of my professors at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia (he now teaches at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, FL.) correctly observed, “As the doctrine of the church developed in medieval Catholicism, salvation took on a sacerdotal character. Viewed as the perennial incarnation of Christ, the church was the automatic dispenser of the gift of salvation through its sacraments. By themselves, the sacraments granted salvation to the partaker *ex opera operato*. The Reformers were quick to reject sacerdotalism. God alone is the actor in our salvation. He works salvation in his elect, through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, the one mediator between God and man, and the efficacious power of the Spirit working directly upon human souls. Contrary to medieval Catholic dogma, there was nothing mechanical or magical about the instrumentality of the church. In short, the sacerdotal confusion of the mediation of Christ with the mediation of the church was a denial of *solus Christus*.”⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ There have been over the last decade or so, a number of high-profile conversions to both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy from within the ranks of Evangelicalism. Many of these conversions are documented in various books. See, for example, Peter E. Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith* (Conciliar Press, 1990), which describes the pilgrimage of a group of Campus Crusade for Christ staff to the Orthodox Church. See also Franklin Billerbeck, ed., *Anglican-Orthodox Pilgrimage* (Conciliar Press, 1993); Peter E. Gillquist, ed., *Coming Home: Why Protestant Clergy Are Becoming Orthodox* (Conciliar Press, 1995). One of the most vocal converts to the Orthodox Church is Frank Schaeffer, the son of the well-known evangelical apologist Francis Schaeffer. See Frank Schaeffer, *Dancing Alone: The Quest for Orthodox Faith in the Age of False Religion* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1994), who finds Protestantism responsible for secular Western society and defends his conversion to the Orthodox Church. Cf. *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*, ed. J. Stamoilis (Zondervan, 2004) p. 13.

² As for terminology, Anastasios Kallis points out that *Orthodox Church* is the most common term in use today; *Orthodox Catholic Church* expresses the ecclesiastical reality in Orthodox eyes; the phrase *Eastern Orthodox Church* underlines the cultural and geographical aspects, since the bulk of Orthodoxy is located to the east of the Latin Church; the term *Eastern Church* goes back to the division of the Roman Empire in AD 395, and so has long historical use, but is rather outdated, since neither the Eastern nor the Western Church is an ecclesial unity; *Greek Orthodox Church* stresses the common bond of all Orthodox churches, since the Greek cultural tradition influenced the development of the theological structure and spirituality of Orthodoxy more than any other; while the phrase *Catholic Church* which was preferred by the older Councils and the Church Fathers stresses its historical continuity, and is now paired with *Orthodox* to denote its division from Rome. In turn, we may add that *Oriental Orthodox Churches* refers to those churches that were unable to accept the Definition of Chalcedon and so were separated from the *Eastern Orthodox Church* – among these were the Nestorians and the Coptic Church. Robert Letham, Through Western Eyes: Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective (Mentor, 2007) p. 13.

³ Ibid.

⁴ R. Wade, *Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy* <http://www.probe.org/content/view/619/77/>

⁵ B. B. Warfield in his masterful book The Plan of Salvation (rpt. Simpson Publishing Co., 1989) describes sacerdotalism this way. “The question which is raised in sacerdotalism, in a word, is just whether it is God the Lord who saves us, or it is men, acting in the name and clothed with the powers of God, to whom we are to look for salvation. This is the issue which divides sacerdotalism and evangelical religion. The essence of the sacerdotal scheme as it regards the actual salvation of individual men, may perhaps be fairly expressed by saying that, according to it, God truly desires (or, as the cant phrase puts it, wills by an antecedent conditional will) the salvation of all men, and has made adequate provision for their salvation in the Church with its sacramental system: but he commits the actual work of the Church and its sacramental system to the operation of the second causes through which the application of grace through the Church and its sacramental system is effected. As this system of second causes has not been instituted with a view to the conveying of the sacraments to particular men or to the withholding of them from particular men, but belongs to his general provision for the government of the world, the actual distribution of the grace of God through the Church and the sacraments lies outside the government of his gracious will. Those who are saved by obtaining the sacraments, and those who are lost by missing the sacraments, are saved or are lost therefore, not by the divine appointment, but by the natural working of second causes. God’s antecedent conditional will that all should be saved, that is, on the condition of their receiving grace through the sacraments distributed under the government of second causes, is supplanted by a consequent absolute will of salvation, therefore, only in the case of those who, he foresees, will under the government of second causes, actually receive the sacraments and the grace which is conveyed by them. Thus, it is supposed, God is relieved from all responsibility with regard to the inequality of the distribution of saving grace. By his antecedent conditional will he wills the salvation of all. That all are not saved is due to the failure of some to receive the requisite grace through the sacraments. And their failure to receive the sacraments and the grace conveyed in them is due solely to the action of the second causes to which the distribution of the sacraments has been committed, that is, to the working of a general cause, quite independent of God’s antecedent will of salvation. This seems to satisfy the minds of the sacerdotal reasoners. To the outsider it seems to mean only that god, having made certain general provisions for salvation, commits the salvation of men to the working of the general system of second causes; that is to say, he declines to be concerned personally about the salvation of men and leaves men to ‘nature’ for the chances of their salvation.” (p. 53)

⁶ When applied to Christ, the *sacerdotium* or *munus sacerdotale* is one aspect of the threefold office (*munus triplex*). The Protestant scholastics divide the *sacerdotium* into two functions, the *satisfaction Christi*, or *satisfaction vicaria*, and the *intercession*. The former term refers to the character of Christ’s death as a propitiatory and expiatory work, performed for the sake of appeasing the anger of God against sin and bearing the divine wrath in the place and on behalf of believers. The latter term refers to Christ’s prayers on behalf of believers—prayers both on earth (John 17) and now in heaven at the right hand of God the Father. R. A. Muller, Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms (Baker, 1983) p. 267.

⁷ William Webster, The Church of Rome at The Bar of History (Banner of Truth, 1995) p. 93.

⁸ J. R. Muether, Reformation Societies International: A Sixth Sola? <http://www.covenant.net/articles/sixthsola.htm>. The noted Scottish Theologian Thomas F. Torrance made a similar observation over 50 years ago. “Nowhere does Justification by Christ alone have more radical consequences than in regard to the pastoral ministry. Justification by Christ is grounded upon His mighty Act in which He took our place, substituting Himself for us under the divine judgment, and substituting Himself for us in the obedient response He rendered to God in worship and thanksgiving and praise. In Himself He has opened up a way to the Father, so that we may approach God solely through Him and on the ground of what He has done and is – therefore we pray in His Name, and whatever we do, we do in His Name before God. Thus the whole of our worship and ministry reposes upon the substitutionary work of Christ. Now the radical nature of this is apparent from the fact that through substituting Himself in our place there takes place a displacement of our humanity by the humanity of Christ – that is why Jesus insists that we can only follow Him by denying ourselves, by letting Him displace us from a place of centrality, and by letting Him take our place.” Christianity Divided, eds. Daniel J. Callahan, Heiko A. Oberman, Daniel J. O’Hanlon (Sheed & Ward, 1961) p. 300.