

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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WHAT IS EASTERN ORTHODOXY? (PART II)

You belly up to the bar and ask the bartender, “What’s on tap?” He replies, “We got grace, salvific grace on tap.” You tell him “That sounds great! That’s what I’ll have!” This illustration of the sacerdotal system, though rather crude, nonetheless captures the nature of the sacerdotalism that is the defining feature of both Eastern Orthodoxy (EO) and Roman Catholicism (RC). This is how Warfield described it:

“The typical form of sacerdotalism is supplied by the teaching of the Church of Rome. In that teaching the church is held to be the institution of salvation, through which alone is salvation conveyed to men. Outside the church and its ordinances salvation is not supposed to be found; grace is communicated by and through the ministrations of the church, otherwise not. The two maxims are therefore in force: Where the church is, there is the Spirit; outside the church there is no salvation. The sacerdotal principle is present, however, wherever instrumentalities through which saving grace is brought to the soul are made indispensable to salvation; and it is dominant wherever this indispensability is made absolute. Thus what are called the Means of Grace are given the ‘necessity of means,’ and are made in the strict sense not merely the *sine quibus non*, but the actual *quibus* of salvation. Over against this whole view evangelicalism, seeking to conserve what it conceives to be only consistent supernaturalism, sweeps away every intermediary between the soul and its God, and leaves the soul dependent for its salvation on God alone, operating upon it by his immediate grace. It is directly upon God and not the means of grace that the evangelical feels dependent for salvation; it is directly to God rather than to the means of grace that he looks for grace; and he proclaims the Holy Spirit therefore not only able to act but actually operative where and when and how he will. The Church and its ordinances he conceives rather as instruments which the Spirit uses than as agents which employ the Holy Spirit in working salvation. In direct opposition to the maxims of consistent sacerdotalism, he takes therefore as his mottoes: Where the Spirit is there is the church; outside the body of the saints there is no salvation.”¹

In addition to sacerdotalism, EO, even more so than RC, is stridently by anti-Reformational² on the following points.

I SIN AND FREE WILL

RC gave birth to the Protestant Reformation because within RC there is a very strong Augustinian tradition that heavily influenced all of the Reformers. There is no *Augustinian* tradition in EO. As one writer from that perspective recently noted that in EO the “ability to believe is not based on Augustinian anthropology, which renders human beings incapable of making a positive spiritual response to God’s call, but rather on the conviction that humans possess a capacity for freedom of choice even after the fall.”³

As a result EO finds itself advocating an overt form of semi-pelagianism as seen in this statement from one of the early EO theologians of the 4th century, Macarius the Egyptian.

“Divine grace arranged things in such a way that everyone participates in spiritual growth as he chooses, according to his own will, his own labor, and his own effort, in proportion to his faith and zeal. The more one loves, the more one gives oneself to the fight, in one’s body and in one’s soul, in order to accomplish the commandments, the greater the communion one achieves with the Spirit into the spiritual growth of the renewing of the mind; acquiring salvation by grace and divine gift, but receiving by faith, by love, and by the effort of free choice, progress and increase in the measure

of the spiritual age. Thus eternal life will be inherited by grace [note: in the East, grace is defined as “communion or participation in/with divine life” not a created gift as in Western Catholicism], but also in all righteousness, since it is not only through the divine grace and power without human collaboration (*sunergia*) and effort that progress is made; nor is it only by one’s power, one’s own effort and one’s own strength, without the collaboration and help of the Holy Spirit, that the perfect accomplishment of the divine will and the full measure of all freedom and purity shall be reached.”⁴ It is statements like this (and there are many others) that made Mike Horton write that EO “possesses an inadequate view of sin. This becomes apparent in its treatment of original sin, excluding inherited guilt from the picture and embracing a synergistic view of regeneration as well as a medicinal view of justifying grace. To do justice to the Orthodox view, we must again recall that the reigning paradigm is relational and transformative. Humanity is on a pilgrimage—from innocence to mortality to immortality. It is a movement from image to likeness, from natural goodness to moral goodness. Father Palachovsky explains: ‘We have been made in His image through Creation, but we must become like Him by ourselves, through our own free will. To be the image of God belongs to us by our primordial destination, but to become like God depends upon our will... Human nature has not remained intact, as some theologians teach, but has become corrupt. Nevertheless, this corruption does not go so far as the Protestant theologians teach.’”⁵

II. ATONEMENT AND JUSTIFICATION

EO has a very strong and robust doctrinal understanding of the Trinity and the incarnation and rightly so, but due in large part to the widespread semi-pelagianism, the doctrine of the Atonement in EO is truncated and hostile to the notion of penal substitution. Salvation is seen primarily through the incarnation which brings about the deification and resurrection of the individual believer.⁶ An even greater concern is that the EO understanding of justification is decidedly anti-Reformational, and this creates no small amount of concern. Once again Mike Horton: “Daniel Clendenin, who describes himself as an evangelical student of Eastern Orthodoxy, offers a sympathetic reading of this position:

Orthodox theologians contend that in the West the doctrines of sin and salvation have been unduly dominated by legal, juridical, and forensic categories. These categories, they insist, are not only overly negative and alien to the spirit of Eastern Christianity, but, when allowed to dominate, are actual distortions of the biblical message. Ernst Benz suggests that this legal framework predominates in Western thinking (both Catholic and Protestant). He notes how the apostle Paul [that great Western thinker!] frames his Epistle to the Romans in terms of divine law and justice, categories that are perhaps taken from Roman civil law, and that his idea of justification by faith answers the question of how guilty people can stand before a just God. Benz suggests that the Catholic church especially, with its doctrines of penance and indulgences, its concepts of the church, the role of the priest, and canon law, developed in this [Paul’s?] legalistic direction. This accent on legal concepts, in contrast to the idea of mystical union perpetuated in the East, is seen by Orthodoxy as the ‘real issue that unites the West theologically and divides it from the East.’”

Clendenin correctly notes that this is irreconcilable with the position of the Reformers:

In his *Institutes* Calvin described justification by faith as the “hinge on which all true religion turns,” and in his precise definition of the doctrine he compares it to an acquittal in the courts of divine justice: “just as a man, deemed innocent by an impartial judge, is said to be justified, so a sinner is said to be justified by God when he asserts his righteousness.” In the history of Orthodox theology, on the other hand, it is startling to observe the near total absence of any mention of the idea of justification by faith.

As a result, Horton rightly concludes:

“Eastern Orthodoxy has many healthy emphases, but its denial of the full seriousness of sin and its consequently high appreciation for the possibilities of free will keep it from recognizing the heart of the gospel.”⁷

CONCLUSION: There are other issues in EO that should concern us as Reformed Christians (the role of the Virgin Mary, the veneration of icons,⁸ etc.) But I have highlighted the most important. Robert Letham, who is very much impressed with a number of doctrinal contributions the EO have made concerning the Trinity and the

deity of Christ, nonetheless writes, “Dating back to the early church, at least to Chrysostom, the East has had a vigorous doctrine of free will. This puts Orthodoxy further away from the Reformed than is Rome. This is in many ways the most serious division of all. The Eastern view of salvation as deification, with the defeat of death central, contrasts to the more legal and forensic approach of the Western church, with its stress on law and grace, atonement for sin, and justification. However, these particular factors are all aspects of salvation. The question here is the balance between them. However, the issue of the weighting between grace and the human will is far reaching. It entails differing understandings of the extent of human sin, and thus the magnitude of the work of salvation Christ has brought about. The question, ‘What is the gospel?’ is an absolutely crucial one. How the Reformed, Rome, and Orthodoxy answer it differs in key respects. Orthodoxy is very similar on soteriology to Arminianism. Having said that, the Reformed recognize that Arminians are Christian, although with a seriously defective theology. So too this does not negate the Christianity of the Orthodox but bespeaks, from the Reformed perspective, a less than thorough working out of the entailments of sin and the sovereign purposes of God.”⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ B. B. Warfield, The Plan of Salvation (rpt. Simpson Publishing Co. 1989) p. 11.

² This has not always been the case, in fact the EO once had as its head a Calvinist! “Cyril Lucar (1572-1638). Patriarch of Constantinople and theologian. He knew much of Western ways, for he studied in Venice and Padua, could read and write Italian with ease, and served the Orthodox Church in Poland as rector of the Vilna Academy. This service in Poland transformed his outlook, for in controversies with the Roman Catholics he found allies in the Protestants. Appointed patriarch of Alexandria in 1602, he became patriarch of Constantinople in 1612. Although deposed several times by the Muslims, he continued as patriarch until his murder at the hands of the troops of Sultan Murad. Lucar tried to bring the Orthodox Church closer to a Calvinist theological position. He entered into cordial relations with the archbishop of Canterbury and other important Protestant leaders. As a sign of this friendship he gave the Codex Alexandrinus to Thomas Roe, the English ambassador to Constantinople, who presented it to Charles I (it is now in the British Museum). He sent some of his ablest young priests to study at Oxford, Helmstedt, and Geneva. He also allowed his *Confession of Faith* to be printed in Geneva. This thoroughly Calvinist document taught that the church was subject to Scripture and could err; predestination to eternal life irrespective of good works; justification by faith; two sacraments; and a Reformed doctrine of the Eucharist. This statement caused a reaction in Europe. The confession’s effect upon the Orthodox Church was limited, however, since it was repudiated shortly after Cyril’s death. Finally, in 1672 the great Orthodox Synod of Jerusalem formally condemned the ‘error’ of Protestantism.” Robert Clouse, Dictionary of the Christian Church, ed. J. D. Douglas (Zondervan, 1974) p. 607.

³ Bradley Nassif, in Three Views On Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism, ed. J. Stamoolis (Zondervan, 2004) p. 73. He adds in a footnote, “Augustine’s doctrine of inherited guilt was disharmonious with the wider ‘catholic’ tradition of Greek and Latin Patristic theology before and during his time. See Bradley Nassif, ‘Towards a “Catholic” Understanding of St. Augustine’s View of Original Sin,’ *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 39, no. 4 (19984): 287-300; David Weaver, ‘From Paul to Augustine: Romans 5:12 in Early Christian Exegesis,’ *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 27 (1983): 187-206; idem, parts 2-3, ‘The Exegesis of Romans 5:12 Among the Greek Fathers and Its Implications for the Doctrine of Original Sin: The 5th-12th Centuries,’ *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 29 (1985): 133-59, 231-57.”

⁴ As cited by the EO theologian, John Meyendorff, Christ In Eastern Christian Thought (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1975) p. 124.

⁵ M. Horton, in Three Views On Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism, p. 129.

⁶ In EO, the ultimate goal of salvation is deification. This is brought about through the Holy Spirit in sanctification. EO contends that this does not blur the Creator/creature distinction, but rather highlights the nature of the union and communion that salvation entails. Appeal is made to II Peter 1:4, cf. the extended discussion by Robert Letham, Through Western Eyes: Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective (Mentor, 2007) pp. 253-263.

⁷ Horton, op. cit. p. 139.

⁸ The question is often asked, do those in EO worship Icons? Here is their response, “Orthodox Christians do not worship Icons in the sense that the word ‘worship’ is commonly used in modern English. In older translations (and in some more recent translations in which the translators insist on using this word in its original sense), one finds the word ‘worship’ used to translate the Greek word *proskyneo* (literally, “to bow”). Nevertheless, one must understand that the older use of ‘worship’ in English was much broader than it is generally used today, and was often used to refer simply to the act of honoring, venerating, or reverencing. For example, in the old book of common prayer, one of the wedding vows was ‘with my body I thee worship,’ but this was never intended to imply that the bride would worship her husband in the sense in which ‘worship’ is commonly used now.” Taken from the website Orthodox Christian Information Center, www.orthodoxinfo.com/general/icon_faq.aspx. Calvin saw through this kind of smoke-screen in the Roman Catholic Church. “In what respect, pray, do we impair the honour of the saints, unless it be in forbidding idols to be made of them? Is it honour to the saints to rob God of his honour and transfer it to them, that they may be worshipped promiscuously with God? They will deny that they do so, by bringing in their distinction of *dulia* and *latria*. An excellent method, forsooth, of avoiding idolatry when they distinguish between kinds of worship altogether similar by employing two vocables, just as horses in a stall are kept separate by their tethers. Meanwhile, they allow the saints to be worshipped indifferently with God. What is it that the prophets everywhere condemn in the people of Israel, but just that they give incense to their idols, provide sacred feasts, pay gifts, dedicate altars, and prostrate themselves before them? In all these things the Papists go beyond the Israelites. For they kindle lamps and tapers at the dead images of the dead, sprinkle incense, celebrate their memory in solemn feasts, place them on altars, make oblations to them, carry them about on their shoulders in procession, undertake long pilgrimages to visit them, bow down before them and pray to them. Nay, illiterate females and almost all the peasantry, in praying to Hugo and Lubin, use the very form of prayer which was given us by the Son of God. Thus a block of wood will be our Father in heaven. So far is any one from opposing this horrid sacrilege, that priests and monks sing out, Well done! Well done! And it is made a serious charge against us that we have studied to purify the holy worship of God from all these profanations.” Calvin Selected Works III (Trans. And ed. Henry Beveridge rpt. Baker, 1983) p. 46.

⁹ Letham, op. cit. p. 285.