

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH: Eastern Christianity

I. Introduction

- A. There are 215 million people in the world who align themselves with one of the branches of Orthodox Christianity sometimes known as The Eastern Church. Beyond some stereotypes, Westerners (Protestants) know very little about the distinctive beliefs of this large branch of Christianity. There are an estimated 5.6 million Orthodox Christians in the U.S.
- B. Over the last decade or two the Orthodox Church has experienced a revival world-wide. This has been due to a number of factors: The fall of communism in Eastern Europe and Russia is certainly one of the most obvious. In the United States, the OC has been attracting disenchanted Protestants who are discouraged by postmodern influence in the church, lack of unity among denominations, and a rekindled desire to be connected to the past. In 1987, some former Campus Crusade leaders led several congregations (about 2000 people) into Orthodoxy (See: *Westerners on the Eastern Orthodox Trail*, ***Christian Research Journal***, Summer, 1995). St. Vladimir Seminary Press reports that three-fourths of its publications are sold to non-Orthodox readers! The most recent issue of the ***Encyclopedia Britannica Yearbook*** lists the OC as among the fastest growing in the U.S (hence the reason for this briefing).

II. A Brief Overview of the Orthodox Church

- A. There are currently 13 branches of the OC which are in substantial agreement with regard to sacraments, liturgy, doctrine, and church government. Each branch is directed by a Patriarch,” with the Patriarch of Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey) granted special honor as the first among equals. Its 13 branches in order of size are: Russia, Romania, Greek, Serbia, Bulgaria, Constantinople, Georgia, Poland, Antioch, Cyprus, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Albania. OC members in the U.S. usually come under the jurisdiction of Antiochian, Greek, or Russian. There is also an independent Orthodox Church in America, but it is currently not recognized by any of the 13 patriarchates.
- B. The OC claims to be the one true Church of Jesus Christ founded by the Apostles. It split from the Roman, or Western Church in 1054. Factors

behind the split were theological, geopolitical, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic. Seeds for the split were planted hundreds of years earlier when Emperor Constantine moved the seat of the church from Rome to Constantinople in 311. As the language barrier grew and the conquests of Islam ensued in the 7th Century, Eastern Christians were further isolated from those in Rome.

Two theological controversies finally drove an irrevocable wedge between the Eastern and Western Church. The first was over papal supremacy. While the East had respect for the Pope as the bishop of Rome he was seen as an equal to other prelates. The Roman church, however, insisted on supremacy. The other dispute was known as the *filioque* controversy. Somehow, no one quite knows how, the Roman Church added the phrase *and the son*, to the statement in the Nicene Creed about the procession of the Spirit. Originally the creed read that the *Spirit proceeded from the Father*. The Eastern Church was adamant about changing one word of the ancient church councils. They believed this was a threat to the authority of tradition, was not true theologically, and was a threat to the doctrine of the Trinity. In 1054, Pope Nicholas, to assert his authority, excommunicated the patriarch of Constantinople. To make matters worse, the Crusaders in 1204, ransacked the Church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople. Any hope of reconciliation died with this act of desecration.

III. General Distinctives of the Orthodox Church

When one thinks of the OC several things immediately come to mind:

A. Its Connectedness to an Ethnic Group

The branches of the OC are usually defined by their ethnic group, e.g. *Russian, Greek*, etc. In most cases, the key to understanding the culture of these groups lies in understanding the OC. In some countries, where the OC is dominant, it also constitutes a monopoly or state religion. In the U.S., this ethnicity has hampered its growth among the general citizenry. Congregations are generally made up of immigrants and children of immigrants. Liturgies are in languages other than English. This ethnicity has also made the OC culturally invisible in the sense that it has had very little impact on the culture as a whole. Instead, the church is like an island where a particular culture and language are featured and sustained.

B. Its Icons

Icons are indelibly tied to the OC. Their use in worship was established by the 8th Century, though not before much blood was shed over the matter. Those who argued against icons (iconoclasts) believed it was idolatry to make images of Christ. Gradually the argument developed that since the incarnation (when Christ became visible) it was permissible for Christ to be represented by images.

When one enters an Orthodox sanctuary one is overwhelmed by the icons and frescoes on every square inch of the walls. They are for the OC a form of theological expression much as commentaries are for the Western Church. Contrary to the stereotype, they are not worshiped, but they are venerated and considered holy, much as the Bible is not a profane book, but rather *the Holy Bible*.

C. Its Liturgy and Worship

The OC worship service centers around the Eucharist and a liturgy which is about 80-90% Scripture. According to OC scholars, it is virtually unchanged since the 7th Century. The main goal of Orthodox worship is a mystical union whereby Jesus Christ, The Head of the Church, is united with His Body, i.e., all believers, past and present. The worship service is generally more than 2 hours in length with worshipers either standing, kneeling, or lying prostrate (no pews!). All the senses are to be engaged in worship and involves art (icons), architecture, crosses, music, stained glass, gilded religious objects, vestments, candles and incense. The purpose for the decoration and layout of the Orthodox sanctuary is to convey to the worshiper that they are standing in the presence of the Living God and the saints of all ages. The service is meant to be foretaste of Heaven with its emphasis on the beauty, mystery and majesty of God.

D. Its Monasticism

Historically monasticism was a very important part of the OC. It began in Egypt in the 3rd Century. There are three main types: (1) The austere version which involves isolation and a life devoted to prayer, (2) the communal form where monks work and pray together, and (3) the third is known as the Middle Way; it is a small group of monks who live together

under a leader in a small settlement. Most monasteries were located in very remote regions, e.g., St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai desert.

In the Eastern Church, monasteries were places of prayer and spirituality, however, in the Western church monasteries were for the most part centers of scholarship where manuscripts were copied and books written.

E. Its Persecution

The OC has undergone brutal and lasting persecution, perhaps more than any other Christian body. In recent times, under the Soviet regime, 98 percent of its churches were closed as well as hundreds of monasteries and seminaries. After the revolution in 1917, 50,000 Orthodox priests were martyred. Earlier, the Eastern Church suffered untold persecution under the religion of Islam.

IV. Specific Theological Teachings

A. The Godhead

The OC considers the doctrine of the Triune God the foundation of its theology. It is believed that if one deviates even in the most insignificant detail it will affect the outcome of all other doctrines. This Triune God is utterly transcendent and unknowable by mere finite beings. They teach that God can only be described in a negative manner, i.e., what He is not. *God cannot be grasped by the mind. If he could be grasped, he would not be God.* (Evegrius of Pontus 4th Century). This form of theological reasoning is known as apophatism, e.g., God is not finite; He is not limited. Hence in the OC there is resistance to the use of logic and reasoning to explain God. They believe that the human response to the incomprehensibility of God is worship and praise. How does this God work in the world if He is totally transcendent? It is believed that we can experience His *energies* but not His *essence*. It is as we experience the heat from the fire but not the fire. *Comment:* The OC is certainly to be commended on maintaining its witness concerning the Trinity, but goes to the extreme on God's knowability. If Westerners rely too much on logic as they would charge, then the East goes too far in the other direction. While we cannot know exhaustively, we can know what He has revealed about Himself in His Word, and above all in His Son.

B. The Source of Authority

The OC believes the great sin of the Reformation was *sola scriptura*.

They charge that Protestants neglect tradition. They teach that the church is the guardian of Apostolic tradition, and that the Scriptures are only a part of that tradition. There is also the 7 early church councils, the Church fathers, the liturgy, canon law, and icons. OC theologians differ as to how they explain final authority but most mention some or all of the above. *Comment:* When one has more than one source as final authority there is bound to be conflicts, e.g., Scripture as opposed to tradition. Ultimately what happens in the OC, is similar to what happens in the Roman Catholic Church: the Church itself becomes the official interpreter of tradition (in which they include Scripture). They are to be commended for their high view of the inspiration of Scripture and their commitment to the early creeds of Christendom. Their interest in the early church fathers is likewise commendable. May a revival of interest in these giants of the faith come, but hopefully, their works will be evaluated in the light of Scripture. They are right to be interested in tradition, but it too, must be tested against Scripture. Nobody should ignore what God the Holy Spirit has taught the Church over two millennia, but false traditions can arise in any church. The OC belief in the final authority of the Church as the infallible interpreter of Scripture is tied to their belief in Apostolic succession, i.e., the authority of the leaders (patriarchs) is passed down from the Apostles. Once this is understood, one can understand how the Creeds from official councils have the authority they do.

C. Doctrines of Sin and Salvation

The OC doctrine of the atonement stands in stark contrast to the theology of the Reformation. Salvation is described as a process called *theosis* which is the means whereby man becomes united with God's divine energies. Human beings participate in these divine energies through the sacraments and human effort. Since the sacraments can only be administered by the church, salvation can come only through the church (You can't be saved at home on your knees). Since this process of *theosis* is grounded in Christ's incarnation, His work on the cross is largely ignored. There is almost no mention of Justification in the OC theology, and there is little or no discussion of substitutionary atonement or the propitiation of sins. Here's how one Orthodox theologian summarizes the process of *theosis*: deification, i.e. salvation:

“If God has given us in the Church all the objective conditions, all the means that we need for the attainment of this end [deification], we, on our side, must produce the necessary subjective conditions; for it is this synergy, in this co-operation of man with God that the

union is fulfilled.” (Vladimir Lossky, in *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 196.)

Comment: More than one critic has noted the similarities between the OC doctrine of God and salvation with the 3rd Century Greek philosophy of neo-platonism. Even the noted Orthodox theologian, John Meyendorff, admits as much: *Byzantine theology never escaped from the great problem of the relationship between Greek philosophy and Christian revelation. (Christ in Eastern Christian Thought, p. 91.)* In our opinion the OC has serious deficiencies in an area of theology that the reformers believed the whole system of Christianity would rise or fall. The Orthodox theology of salvation is not based on the clear teaching of the Apostles of the First Century. One critic rightfully notes *that the problem with the OC (which prides itself in being old) is that it is not old enough* (Doug Wilson). Its teaching of a salvation by works is foreign to Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, indeed at this point the OC is heterodox!

D. Praying to Mary and the Saints

The OC does not view Mary as a Mediator and Co-redemptrix as does the Roman Catholic church, but it does view Mary as the perpetual virgin and as an intercessor to be prayed to. Orthodox theologians are quick to deny that Mary is to be worshiped, but do agree that she is to be venerated as the Mother of God. *Comment:* The clear teaching of Scripture is that Mary had a normal marital relationship with Joseph after the birth of Jesus and had other children (see Matt. 1:25; Mk. 3:21,32-35). Nowhere in Scripture are we instructed to pray to Mary or any departed saints. In fact the Bible forbids that believers pray to the dead (Dt. 18:11). Logic would dictate that for Mary to hear the world-wide prayers of the saints she would have to have aspects of deity! Believers are instructed in Scripture to pray to the Father in Christ’s name.

V. Summary

As evangelicals we should be excited about the revived interest in the liturgy, worship, and writings of the early Church Fathers fostered by recent growth and interest in the OC. We believe these matters can only result in a renewal of the church at a time when one is so desperately needed. We also believe we should pray that the OC would experience a renewal similar to the one it experienced in the 16th Century under the leadership of Patriarch Cyril Lucaris of Constantinople, who tried to lead the OC away from the pagan Greek philosophy back to the Apostolic faith.

For Further Study:

For Orthodox links on the web, see the following URLs:

<http://www.voithia.org/orthlink.htm/>

<http://www.oca.org/links-and-miscellaneous/>

<http://www.goarch.org/access/gotel/other.htm/>

Bell, Charles. *Rediscovering the Rich Heritage of Orthodoxy*.

Brown, Harold O.J. *Heresies: The Images of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present*. *Christian History*. Issue 54, Volume 3. Number 2. See entire issue.

Clendenin, Daniel B. *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective*.

Clendenin, Daniel B. *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*.

Coniaris, Anthony M. *Introducing the Orthodox Church*.

Credenda Agenda. Volume 6, Number 5. See entire issue.

Cutsinger, James S. *Reclaiming the Great Tradition*.

Davis, Nathaniel. *A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy*.

Dmitri, Bishop. *Orthodox Christian Teaching: An Introduction To The Orthodox Faith*.

Gillquist, Peter. *Becoming Orthodox*.

Lossky, Vladimir. *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*.

Meyendorff, John. *The Orthodox Church*.

Negrut, Paul. *What Evangelicals Should know About Eastern Orthodoxy*. *Christian Research Journal*. January-March, 1998.

Ware, Timothy. *Introducing the Orthodox Church*.