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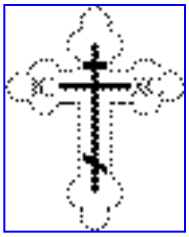
Witnessing to People of Eastern Orthodox Background:



Turning Barriers of Belief into Bridges to Personal Faith

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PREFACE

Rarely in the history of missions has such a large area opened to the gospel as did Eastern Europe following the fall of Communism in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Although clearly God was at work behind the "wall" prior to the fall, once the wall fell, there was an unparalleled openness and freedom for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Thousands came from the West to participate in evangelizing people who for so many years had been told by Communist governments that there was no God. Many who came were surprised to find that despite the years of Communism, many people in Eastern Europe claim to have a Christian heritage via the Eastern Orthodox Church. What are the beliefs of the Orthodox Church and how should these beliefs affect our attempts to witness? The manual I have written is an attempt to address this question.

The manual may be used by individuals or groups. The manual material may be divided into four sessions, each followed by questions for review. I have included footnotes and bibliography for those who would like to do further research.

Special thanks to Daniel Sanchez and Gerald Cornelius, who served as faculty and field supervisors, respectively, for the D.Min. project that has resulted in this manual. I am also grateful to those who helped evaluate the material as I presented it in seminar format at Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth: Rick Yount, Dmitri Kostyunin, Keith Sullivan, Reny Madjarsky, Leeanne Williams, Lana Bagdasarian, Lisa Duncan, and LuSinda Spann. Thanks as well to those who participated in Dallas at the seminar hosted by East-West Ministries and Global Missions Fellowship. Your feedback was very helpful.

Such a manual would have been much less relevant without the help of those who served alongside me during the years I served in Moscow as a church planter missionary with the International Mission Board (1994-1998) until my first wife Carol's death. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Brad Horne, Mel Skinner, Ed Tarleton, Randy Covington, Connie Robbins, Tim Springer, Charles and Phyllis Hardie, Angela Hunter, and Brad Pollard for reviewing and/or field testing the manual. Special thanks are also in order for the Russian brothers who gave input into the manual and shared their experiences in witnessing to Orthodox people: Ruslan Nadyuk and Nikolai Kornilov.

Finally, I want to thank my wife LuSinda and children Paul, Karrington, and Lydia for their patience and understanding as I have worked on this project. You are such precious gifts to me! God has been good and faithful to us, and we can continue to trust Him fully in all circumstances. I dedicate this manual to Him, to be used for His glory in seeing more and more people from Orthodox background come to experience the joy that comes from personal faith in Jesus.

Matt Spann, September 2001

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION TO THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH 1

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH 5
Classical Orthodoxy: to 787 5
Middle Orthodoxy: to 1453 8
Modern Orthodoxy: after 1453 11

TURNING BARRIERS OF BELIEF INTO BRIDGES TO PERSONAL FAITH 15

Belief: Authority and Tradition 16

Belief: Doctrine of God 21

Belief: Fall of Man and Nature of Sin 27

Belief: Understanding of Grace 31

Belief: Concept of Salvation 33

Belief: Prayers to the Saints 39

Belief: Use of Icons and Relics 41

Belief: Religious Nationalism 45

CONCLUSION 51

Appendix A: GLOSSARY 53

Appendix B: SUMMARY CHART – BELIEFS, BARRIERS, BRIDGES 56

Appendix C: THE ORTHODOX CALENDAR 57

Appendix D: ORTHODOX CLERGY 59

Appendix E: STAGES IN THE PROCESS OF AN
ORTHODOX PERSON COMING TO CHRIST 60

Appendix F: RABBIT'S FOOT RELIGION 62

BIBLIOGRAPHY 68

INTRODUCTION TO THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH

A Case Study

Susan never imagined she would find so many cathedrals in Moscow. She thought the Communists had destroyed them all. One of the cathedrals on the south side of downtown caught her eye because it looked like a "ginger bread" house to her with its white, green, and reddish-orange walls and columns, capped by gold-colored onion domes. She left her guide outside and walked in alone. Inside she heard an older lady's voice chiding her and pointing to her head. She remembered the scarf in her purse and put it on. Inside the cathedral it was dark, but once her eyes adjusted, she saw colorful paintings in almost every direction. People were lighting candles in front of what looked like wood paintings of saints. In the front there was a huge wall with 30-40 paintings on it. As she looked, a door in the wall opened and out walked the priest, clothed in a black robe. As the service proceeded, she was enthralled with the sights, smells, and sounds of Orthodox worship. It was like nothing she had ever experienced…

"The only thing I can compare it to is a Catholic mass I once attended with a friend. But there was something different about what went on in this cathedral. It's as though there was some sort of secret mystery there that was to stay hidden."

"We Orthodox like mystery. It's our way of describing God."

"How do you know about God? I thought the Communists made sure nobody believed in God anymore."

"They tried, but we all knew he still is there. Russia has been a Christian nation for over a thousand years. It would take more than 70 years of Communism to change who we are."
"Wow, a thousand years—that's over four times older than America. I had no idea!"

Mystery to Westerners

The Eastern Orthodox Church is a mystery to many in the West. Often it is associated in the minds of Protestants from the West with the Roman Catholic Church because of perceived similarities in ideas and customs. However, in reality the Orthodox Church is vastly different from the Catholic Church. Indeed, from the Orthodox perspective, Protestantism and Catholicism are simply opposite sides of the same coin, and much more similar to each other than either is to Orthodoxy.[1] For those from the West exploring Orthodoxy, Khomiakov advises that they will find "a new and unknown world," where not only the answers but even the questions are very different.[2]

Orthodox Peoples

There are some 214 million people in the world who claim to be Eastern Orthodox.[3] The five largest Orthodox bodies in the world are: Russian (70 to 100 million), Romanian (15 million), Greek (13 million), Serbian (8 million), and Bulgarian (7 million). Adherents of these churches live predominantly in Central and Eastern European countries, although many have immigrated to western countries. There are approximately 5.6 million Orthodox people in the United States.[4]

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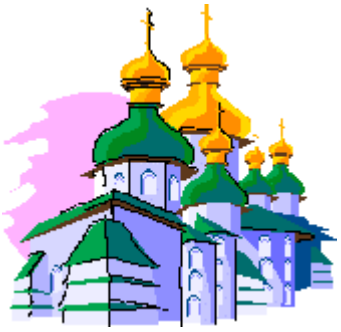
[1]Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 15.

[2]from a letter printed in W.J. Birkbeck, ed., *Russia and the English Church* (London: Rivington, Percival & Co., 1895), p. 67.

[3]"Religious Population of the World, 1998," [world wide web page online]; available from http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0001484.html; accessed 13 October 2000; Internet.

[4]Daniel B. Clendenin, "Little-known or fascinating facts about Eastern Orthodoxy," *Christian History* magazine 54:3, No. 2, 2 [magazine online]; available from http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/54h/54h002.html; accessed 13 October 2000; Internet.

Spiritual Condition of Orthodox People



Studies indicate that the spiritual condition of peoples in so-called Orthodox countries is in actuality quite poor.[5] A large percentage of the population in these countries still claims to be atheist, a continuing negative effect of the years of Communism. Others claim to be Muslim, Buddhist, even Hindu. Moreover, though the Orthodox Church claims millions of members in some of these countries (the Russian Orthodox Church claims some 70-100 million members), the percentage of practicing members is very small.[6] Even among practicing members, it is not always clear if one is dealing with persons who have genuinely placed their faith in Jesus as personal Lord and Savior. In this manual, we will address the Eastern Orthodox concept of salvation as well as what Eastern Orthodox people commonly believe about salvation (these two understandings may differ). It is likely that the number of lost people among practicing and nominal Orthodox people is very high.

Regardless of whether or not they regularly attend an Orthodox church, people in or from Orthodox countries have been dramatically influenced by Orthodoxy. For centuries, the culture and thought patterns of these people have been shaped by Eastern Christianity. At times the Orthodox Church has been so closely intertwined with the state that there was in effect no "secular" society in these countries.[7]

Meaning of "Orthodox"

The term "Orthodox" derives from two Greek words *Orthos* (right) and *Doxa* (opinion or glory). The meaning of this combination is "right belief and worship," as

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[5]Anatoly Rudenko, interviewed 6 June 1997 and quoted in Mark Elliott, "What Percentage of Russians Are Practicing Christians?", *East-West Church & Ministry Report*, 5 (Summer 1997), 5-6, maintains the number of practicing Christians of all confessions in Russia to be no more than 1-2% of the population. Statistics from other Orthodox countries are similarly low.

[6]Vyacheslav Polosin in "Russian Religion by the Numbers," *East-West Church & Ministry Report*, 7 (Winter 1999), 4-6, claims the percentage of people involved in active church life in Russia is 2.5-3.0% at the most and church attenders (who go once a month) is a mere 7%. Similarly, Mark Elliott in "What Percentage of Russians are Practicing Christians?," *East-West Church & Ministry Report*, 5 (Summer 1997), 5-6, cites a Russian study indicating that only 7% of the population attends church regularly (once a month) and even fewer pray regularly (4%).

[7]Take, for example, the case of Russia under the rule of Ivan the Terrible as described in James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Random House, 1966), 69.

opposed to heresy or heterodoxy.[8] In this manual, the terms "Eastern Orthodox Church," "Eastern Christianity," and "Orthodoxy" are used interchangeably.

The Eastern Orthodox Church considers itself to be the authentic Christian church, connected through "unbroken apostolic succession"[9] to the early first century church and effectively preserving the tradition of the early church as commanded in 2 Timothy 1:14, "Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you."[10] This feeling of preserving the tradition of the past is so strong in Orthodox life that indeed "the greatest insult one could pay to any [Orthodox] theologian…would be to call him a 'creative mind.'[11]

[8]*The Thailand Report: Report of the Consultation on World Evangelization Mini-Consultation on Reaching Nominal Christians Among Orthodox* (Wheaton, Illinois: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1980), 5.

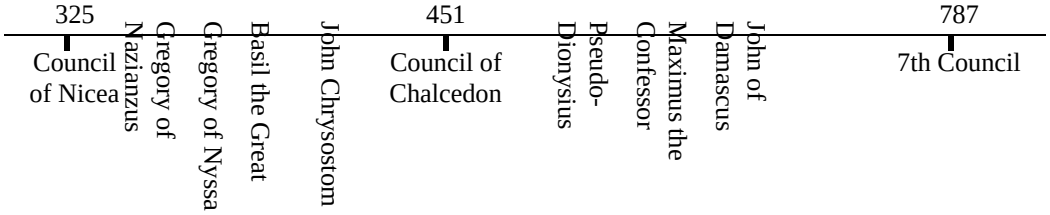
[9]Homer Goumenis, "Eastern Orthodox," in *Beliefs of Other Kinds* (Atlanta: Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention), 41.

[10]All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

[11]Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), vii.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF
THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Classical Orthodoxy[12]: to 787



Church of the Seven Councils

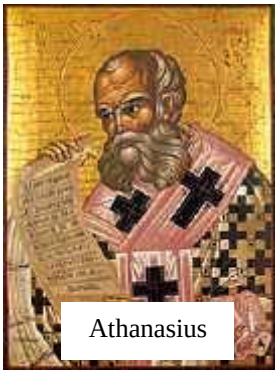
Council of Nicea

In its first few centuries, the Christian community faced serious threats on a number of fronts. One of these threats was the horrible persecution until the Edict of Toleration (311). Another of these threats was a series of intellectual and heretical challenges that came from within and without the church. The church sought to address these challenges through gatherings of bishops known as "Councils." The Orthodox Church identifies itself as the "Church of the Seven Councils," fully affirming the doctrines delineated through the first seven ecumenical councils.

Generally, Protestants subscribe to the decisions of at least the first six of these councils. In fact, the councils have played a major role in forging the basic doctrines of the Trinity held by Christians today. The first and fourth councils are especially significant in this regard. The seventh council, which deals with icons, is by and large not accepted by Protestants.

[12]The designations "Classical," "Middle," and "Modern" for the sections on Orthodox History are adapted from Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 33-44.

Council of Nicea (325)



The first council came in response to the "Arian" controversy. Around 321, Arius, an influential priest from Alexandria, began to teach that Jesus Christ was not fully God himself, but was a created being. The local bishop, Alexander, refuted Arius' claim regarding Christ, insisting that the Son is uncreated and coeternal with the Father. At Emperor Constantine's request, some three hundred bishops, mostly from the Greek-speaking East, gathered in 325 in Nicea in council to resolve the issue. Led by a young deacon named Athanasius, the Council decided in favor of Alexander's view, affirming that Jesus was "true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance (*homoousios)* with the Father," as stated in the Nicene Creed.

Council of Chalcedon (451)

The fourth ecumenical council came about in response to two rapidly spreading heresies. The Eutychian heresy fused the two natures of Christ into one nature. The Nestorian heresy divided the nature of Christ between two persons. The definition which came from the fourth council, the Council of Chalcedon (451), affirms that Christ is one person, that he has two natures (divine and human), that each nature is complete and maintains its integrity, and that the two natures are united in such a way that a third nature is not formed.[13]

In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, almost all of the Orthodox groups except the Armenian Apostolic Church affirm the Chalcedonian definition. Even though the decision of the council was the most unanimous of any of the seven, it led to a bitter split that has continued to this day. Among the major groups to leave the main body of Christendom following Chalcedon were the Oriental Orthodox churches, today found in Armenia, the Middle East and North Africa. These churches insisted that in Christ the human and divine were fused into one nature. The scope of this manual does not include the non-Chalcedonian Orthodox churches outside of Eastern Europe.

Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicea II, 787)

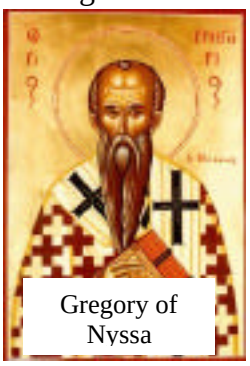
The seventh ecumenical council, held in 787, is significant for a study of Orthodoxy because of its unique focus on icons, which are perhaps the most obvious symbols of the difference between the East and the West. An icon is a two-dimensional artistic rendering of a saint or of Jesus as they appear in heaven. According to the decision of this council, icons are of equal benefit and mutually revelatory with the written gospel. This decision represented a major victory for the

[13]Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, 36.

use of icons, and is celebrated as "The Triumph of Orthodoxy" each spring on the first Sunday of Lent by a special service that includes the carrying of icons in procession.[14] The use of icons will be discussed in depth in a later section of the manual.

Theologians

Several figures from the fourth through eighth centuries loom large in the development of Orthodox theology. Whereas Protestants often quote theologians from the Reformation period and forward, contemporary Orthodox theologians spend more time interacting with the teachings of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers. Basil the Great (329-79), Gregory of Nyssa (330-95), and Gregory of Nazianzus (329-89) spoke and wrote heavily in defense of the trinitarian orthodoxy that was enunciated at Nicea. John Chrysostom (345-407), literally John "the golden-mouthed," was known as an eloquent biblical expositor and as a popular defender of the faith. The church liturgy he wrote is the most commonly-used pattern in Orthodox worship services worldwide, even today.


Gregory of Nyssa

John Chrysostom

Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 500), anonymous author of *Mystical Theology,* is generally credited for giving the most comprehensive expression to Orthodox negative theology, the idea that all we really know of God is who or what he is not. Of course, western theology also acknowledges that sometimes the only way you can describe God is by telling what he is not (i.e., in-finite, im-mortal, etc.). Maximus the Confessor (580-662) dominates the seventh century and is considered by many the real father of Byzantine (Orthodox) theology.[15] John of Damascus (675-754), the major figure in eighth century theology, gave to Orthodoxy its most comprehensive, and in some opinions, *only* systematic theology (*The Orthodox Faith*).

Monasticism

The late fourth through the end of the eighth century marked a time when Eastern monasticism flourished. Many of the Church Fathers came from monasteries, where they had lived secluded lives dedicated to perpetual prayer and the quest for holiness. Most Orthodox people are familiar with the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me"), a prayer recited repeatedly by Orthodox monks. Monasteries also became places of pilgrimage where other Christians would go to be spiritually refreshed. The

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[14]*The History of the Orthodox Church*, VHS videocassette (GOTELECOM, Greek Orthodox Telecommunications).

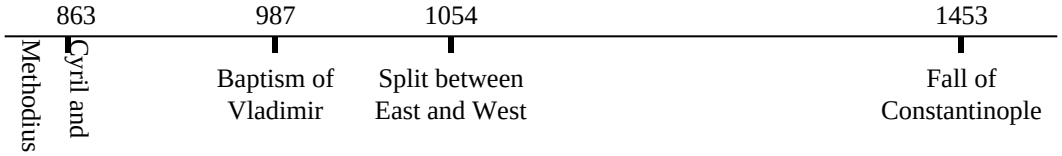
[15]John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), 37.

monastery at Sergei Posad is a well-known example of such a location in Russia. The most famous monastic settlement is North Athos, Greece, which since the tenth century has set the standard for monastic life in Orthodoxy.

Sergei Posad

In contrast to Roman Catholicism, the Orthodox Church ordains married men to the priesthood, and most of its local pastors are husbands and fathers. However, it is traditionally only the unmarried clergy, usually monks, who are allowed to become missionaries and bishops in the Orthodox Church.

Middle Orthodoxy: to 1453

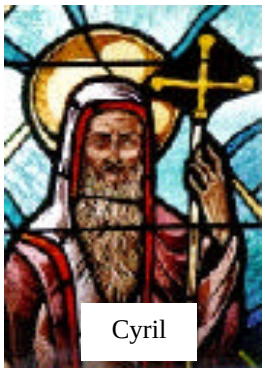


Several events mark the history of Orthodoxy's "middle" years. First is the conversion of the Slavic people to Orthodoxy Christianity (863-988). Next is the final break with Rome and Western Christianity (1054). Finally there is the fall of Constantinople (1453) and subsequent subjugation of much of the Orthodox world under Islam.

Conversion of the Slavs

Cyril and Methodius

In 863, at the cathedral of St. Demetrios in Thessaloniki (Greece), a congregation allegedly founded by the Apostle Paul and his companions more than 800 years earlier, Cyril and Methodius were commissioned to take the Gospel to the Slavs. Their work resulted in the spread of Christianity among the Slavs throughout modern-day Bulgaria, Albania, Serbia, and


Cyril

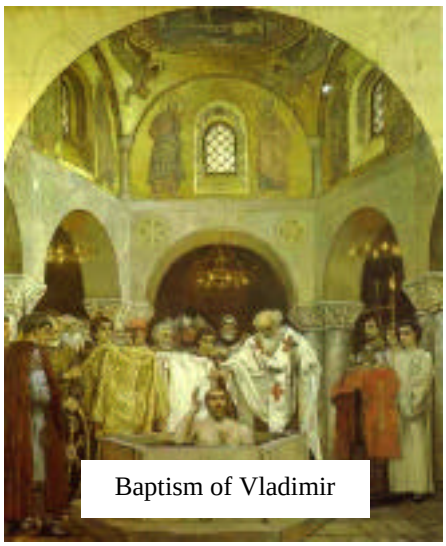
Methodius

Romania. These two missionaries used their linguistic skills to set the Slavonic language to writing by developing the Cyrillic alphabet. They also wrote and performed Orthodox liturgy in the vernacular Slavonic tongue rather than Greek. Their use of the vernacular was quite effective in reaching the Slavic people at the end of the first millenium. Unfortunately, however, some Orthodox priests in Eastern Europe still use Church Slavonic in their services, a tongue little known or understood by modern-day Slavs.

Beginnings of Christianity in Russia

Prior to the coming of Christianity, the Russian people practiced a pagan form of animism, worshiping various nature spirits. The beginnings of Christianity among the Russian people are recorded in the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, an extensive historical document written in the late twelfth century. In an attempt to locate the one true religion, Prince Vladimir of Kiev sent out a delegation. The group first met the Muslims along the Volga River, but found them uncouth and depressing. Next the group examined the Catholics in both Germany and Rome. Apparently, among them they also found nothing that attracted them. However, when they visited the Orthodox Cathedral of St. Sophia in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), they were spellbound by the beauty of the service, and said they did not know whether they were in heaven or on earth.[16]

In 988 Prince Vladimir was baptized and declared Eastern Orthodoxy the official religion of Kievan Russia (today Ukraine). Mass baptisms took place, cathedrals were built, and priests were imported from Constantinople, all under the auspices and support of the government. Eastern Christianity flourished in Russia, so that by the late sixteenth century, Orthodox religious life so pervaded society that secular culture was virtually eliminated.[17] However, it is important to note that some of the pagan superstitions of pre-Christian Russia were incorporated into Orthodox life. Many of these superstitious beliefs are still held by many Russian people and are combined ("syncretized") with what they understand of traditional Christianity.[18] Nevertheless, after the fall in 1453 of Constantinople, the center of Eastern Orthodoxy, Moscow began to consider itself the "Third Rome" of Christianity. In 1988 Russia celebrated a millenium of Orthodox Christian heritage.


Baptism of Vladimir

[16]Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, 6-7.

[17]Ibid., 69.

[18]Dale Ledbetter, "Rabbit's Foot Religion: Worldview and Evangelistic Issues Concerning Peoples Influenced by Russian Orthodoxy" (unpub. paper, January 2000), 3.

The Split between East and West

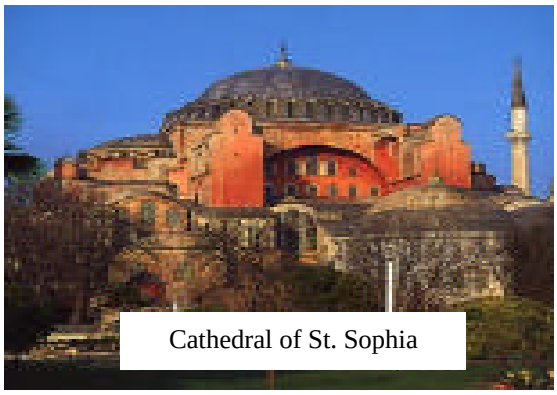
Despite a number of efforts by both sides to protect the unity of the church, by the eleventh century it was almost inevitable that a split would separate Greek and Latin Christians. Historians debate the significance of the various factors contributing to the split, but most agree that there were two primary causes.

One cause for the split was the rise of the Roman Papacy to fill the power vacuum created by the political disintegration of the Roman Empire. Accompanying this rise was an attempt to extend the papacy's power over the rest of the Christian world. The Eastern Christians saw Rome as an honored one of five original church patriarchates, "first among equals." However, they saw no need for Rome's bishop (the Pope) to have supremacy in governing the other bishops and the rest of the church. They were more inclined to appeal to ecumenical councils to settle doctrinal debates rather than to trust a single bishop with such authority. Eastern resentment toward the Pope's attempts to expand his authority were coming to a head in the ninth century.

The Vatican, Rome

The second cause was the western addition of the *filioque* clause to the Nicene Creed. The original Nicene Creed stated that the Holy Spirit proceeded "from the Father." In 6th century Spain, the custom arose of inserting into the Nicene Creed the phrase "and the Son" to indicate that the Spirit proceeded from both Father and Son. Within a few years, the use of this additional clause was widespread through the west and was codified as official Roman doctrine in 936. The use of this clause was considered heretical in the East because it contradicted explicit instructions by the ecumenical councils not to alter the creeds and because it seemed to diminish the Holy Spirit's status as a person of the Trinity.

The definitive break between East and West came in 1054 when Cardinal Humbert, an emissary of Pope Leo IX, placed an edict of excommunication on the altar in Constantinople while Patriarch Cerularius was celebrating the divine liturgy. Further exacerbating the split was the storming of Constantinople and desecration of the Cathedral of St. Sophia by western forces during the 4th Crusade (1204).


Cathedral of St. Sophia

Subjugation under Islam

Islam spread with lightning speed following the death of Mohammed (632), so that by 700 most of the Eastern Christian world was threatened. Eventually the Orthodox lands around the Mediterranean all fell to the Muslims, culminating with the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Timothy Ware describes what this subjugation was like for Orthodox Christians: "Christianity under Islam was a second-class religion, and its adherents second-class citizens. They paid heavy taxes, wore a distinctive dress, were not allowed to serve in the army, and were forbidden to marry Moslem women. The Church was not allowed to undertake missionary work, and it was a crime to convert a Moslem to the Christian faith. From the material point of view there was every inducement for a Christian to apostatize to Islam."[19]

Modern Orthodoxy: after 1453

Church-State Relationships

While the Orthodox church of the Mediterranean was falling under the control of Islam, Orthodoxy in Russia and Eastern Europe was growing steadily in power and influence. Orthodoxy in most parts of Eastern Europe was from the beginning closely aligned with and almost equal in power to the state up until the Communist Revolution of 1917. In Russia, however, under Peter the Great (1689-1725) the Russian Orthodox patriarchate was dissolved and replaced with the Holy Synod. This Synod, in fact, became an arm of the state for controlling the church. In 1917, the Russian Orthodox bishops finally rid themselves of the synodal form of government and restored the Patriarchate. Ironically, just two weeks before the new patriarch (Nikon) was elected, the Communist Revolution began.

Communism

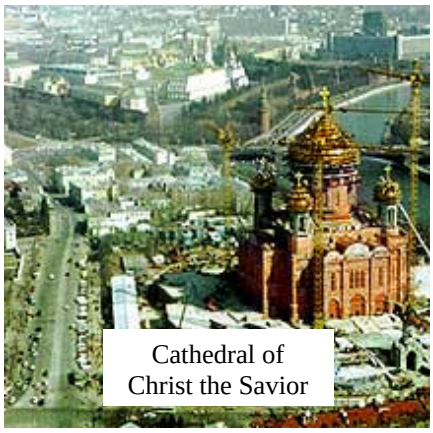
Under Communism, the Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe suffered terribly. In Russia alone, nearly 50,000 priests vanished between the 1917 Revolution and the outbreak of World War II. Sixty

[19]Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 97.

Orthodox seminaries and a thousand monasteries were closed.[20] 98 percent of all Orthodox churches in Russia were closed by 1941.[21] The Orthodox churches that were allowed to remain open were tightly controlled and infiltrated by the Communist government.

After the Fall of Communism

With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the fall of Communism as a viable ideology, the Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe has experienced a revival of sorts. In 1992, Easter bells in the Moscow Kremlin chimed for the first time since the 1917 Revolution. The government began the process of returning hundreds of church buildings to the Orthodox Church. A huge cathedral in Moscow, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, had been completely destroyed under Stalin in a foiled attempt to build the world's largest skyscraper. The cathedral was rebuilt in 1996-1999 as a national symbol of the revival of Orthodoxy in Russia.


Cathedral of Christ the Savior

Contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy in Eastern Europe faces the future with mixed feelings. On the one hand, there is rejoicing at the newfound freedom and position of influence *glasnost* has brought. A few priests within the Orthodox Church are open to working together with outsiders. On the other hand, for many there is suspicion and jealousy toward foreign missionaries. Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad expresses the sentiment: "In most cases the intention [of missionaries from abroad] was not to preach Christ and the Gospel, but to tear our faithful away from their traditional churches and recruit them into their own communities. Perhaps these missionaries sincerely believed that they were dealing with non-Christian or atheistic communist people, not suspecting that our culture was formed by Christianity and that our Christianity survived through the blood of martyrs and confessors, through the courage of bishops, theologians, and lay people asserting their faith."[22]

Metropolitan Kirill

[20]Mikhail Heller and Aleksandr Nekrich, *Utopia in Power* (New York: Summit Books, 1986), 407.

[21]Kent R. Hill, *The Soviet Union on the Brink: An Inside Look at Christianity and Glasnost* (Portland: Multnomah, 1991), 84.

[22]Metropolitan Kirill, "Gospel and Culture," in *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia*, eds. John Witte, Jr. and Michael Bordeaux (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 73.

In response to Orthodox complaints about Protestant proselytizing, it should be pointed out that the majority of peoples in so-called "Orthodox countries" are non-Christian and unevangelized, even in countries where the figures given for church membership are relatively high.[23] Surely, there is enough evangelistic work for everyone. Also, despite whatever shortcomings there are in the work of Western missionaries, many East Europeans are responding very positively to clear, contemporary presentation of the gospel by Protestant missionaries.[24]

[23]In Russia, for example, even if there are 70 million Orthodox (as some would suggest), there are still 75 to 80 million people unaffiliated with Orthodoxy.

[24]Daniel B. Clendenin, "Why I'm Not Orthodox," *Christianity Today*, January 6, 1997, 10.

Questions for Review

1. What is the meaning of the term “Orthodox?”

2. What was the issue that led to the Council of Nicea (325) and how was it resolved?

3. Where are the Oriental Orthodox Churches primarily located?

4. What was the significance of the seventh ecumenical council (787)?

5. Theologians from what time period are quoted most often in contemporary Eastern Orthodox theology?

6. Who were the two missionaries sent to the Slavs from Greece in 863?

7. Name two major causes for the split between Eastern and Western Christianity in 1054.

8. How did Russia become a “Christian” nation in 988?

9. What happened to the Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe under Communism?

10. How would you describe the general attitude of the Eastern Orthodox Church toward foreign missionaries?

TURNING BARRIERS OF BELIEF INTO BRIDGES TO PERSONAL FAITH

A Case Study

Ivan was frustrated. The more he tried to know God, the farther away God seemed. He wanted to read and learn more about him, but where should he turn? Should he look in his daily prayer book, talk to his priest, buy a Bible and read it? Which one would be the best source for showing him the way? He decided the best option would be to talk to the priest, Father Dmitri. At least you could trust the Church. It had been in his country for over a thousand years. The priest frustrated him even more. Dmitri told him not to worry about knowing God—he was a mystery and could not be known. But the missionaries who led a Bible Study where Ivan went to college seemed to personally know him. They *think* they do, Dmitri said, but what they really know is merely a system they have created to explain him who is without explanation.

Introduction

Rather than present a comprehensive overview of Orthodox beliefs, this work concentrates on those Orthodox beliefs that differ significantly from evangelical beliefs. There is a focus on beliefs which relate to the understanding of salvation and a personal relationship with God, since a grasp of these beliefs can enhance the evangelical witness to Orthodox people.

Eight areas of belief are discussed: authority and tradition, the doctrine of God, the fall of man and nature of sin, the understanding of grace, the concept of salvation, prayers to the saints, the use of icons and relics, and religious nationalism. Each section is introduced by quotes from Orthodox theologians and from Scripture passages often used to bolster the Orthodox position.

A section entitled “Why is This Belief a Barrier to Personal Faith?” follows the discussion of each area of belief. Many Orthodox people are prevented from

apprehending personal faith in Jesus Christ[25] by the beliefs discussed. All too often, rather than facilitating personal faith, these beliefs pose barriers to the true knowledge of God.

A practical section entitled "Turning Barriers into Bridges" concludes the discussion of each area of belief. In these sections, specific guidelines are suggested for turning beliefs that pose barriers into bridges to personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Despite the emphasis on practical methods for overcoming the barriers and turning them into bridges to personal faith, it must be kept in mind that only with God's mighty weapons—prayer, faith, hope, love, God's Word, the Holy Spirit—can we truly see these barriers broken down. As Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God."

Belief: Authority and Tradition

"So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings [tradition] we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter." (2 Thess. 2:15)

"We do not change the everlasting boundaries which our fathers have set, but we keep the Tradition, just as we received it." (John of Damascus)

"Hence it is manifest that they did not deliver all things by epistle, but many things also unwritten, and in like manner both the one and the other worthy of credit. Therefore let us think the Tradition of the Church also worthy of credit." (John Chrysostom)

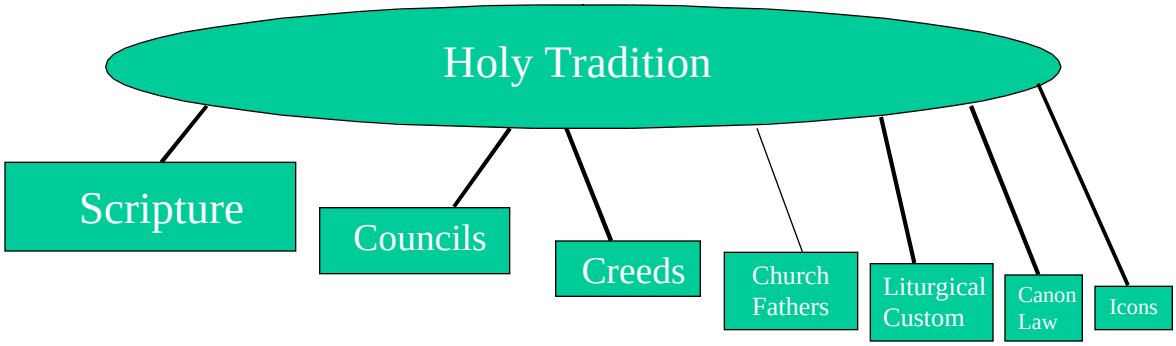
"Tradition is the witness of the Spirit." (George Florovsky)

Holy Tradition: the source for authority

A critical issue in formulating beliefs about God is the source of authority for those beliefs. Evangelicals generally look to the Bible as the sole authority for their beliefs. Orthodox also appeal to the Bible for beliefs, but do not see Scripture alone as authoritative. The Holy Scripture is only a part of what is referred to as Holy Tradition of

[25]The expression "personal faith in Jesus Christ" describes a relationship with God that comes when an individual trusts Jesus Christ alone for salvation, putting him at the center of his or her life, seeking to follow and obey him.

the Church. Orthodox theologians have varying explanations for what comprises Holy Tradition, but Ware gives a comprehensive list that includes elements common to most definitions: (1) the Bible, (2) the Seven Ecumenical Councils and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, (3) local councils, (4) the Fathers, (5) the liturgy, (6) canon law (officially established church rules governing faith and practice), and (7) icons.[26]



Authority lies with *Holy* Tradition, not just any tradition. Orthodox would acknowledge that some forms of tradition do not fit in the category of "holy" and are merely customs or habits. It is critical, however, to understand that the Church's Holy Tradition is the source for Orthodox belief and practice.[27] Thus, authority lies with the Church and its Tradition as a whole rather than simply with the writings of Scripture.

Scriptures: a part of tradition

One Orthodox explanation for understanding the Tradition of the Church rather than the Bible to be the true source of authority is that there really is no distinction between the Bible (at least the New Testament) and Tradition. The Church with its Tradition existed three hundred years prior to the actual canonization of Scripture and the pronouncements of the seven ecumenical councils. Therefore, the Church's Tradition has primacy. In fact, the Tradition of the Church would be valid and true, according to Orthodoxy, regardless of whether or not there was the written word of the Bible. The Scriptures are simply a part of the Church's Tradition, although according to most Orthodox theologians, it has a higher priority than other parts of Tradition.

The Church: the life and activity of the Spirit in the world

Related to the issue of authority is the Orthodox view of the Church. Orthodox theologians perceive the Church as the life and activity of the Holy Spirit in the world rather than as the body or fellowship of believers or the building where they meet. The Tradition of the Church, then, is the life of the Spirit in the church, who alone is the

[26]Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 9-16.

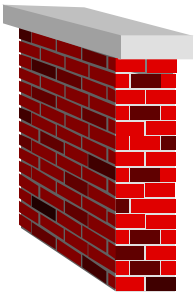
[27]Paul Negrut, "Searching for the True Apostolic Church: What Evangelicals Should Know about Eastern Orthodoxy," *Christian Research Journal* (1998 January-March): 30-31.

ultimate criterion of truth and source of authority.[28] Irenaeus' position on the role of the Spirit is often quoted in defense of this concept: "Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and every kind of grace; but the Spirit is Truth."[29]

Interpretation of Scripture:
must line up with Church Tradition

For Orthodox who see the Church as the activity of the Holy Spirit, it is natural that the Church as a whole would hold the authority to determine truth and that individuals seeking to interpret Scripture must do so in line with the Holy Tradition of the Church. Converts to Orthodoxy vow to "accept and understand Holy Scripture in accordance with the interpretation which was and is held by the Holy Orthodox Catholic Church of the East, our Mother." From the Orthodox point of view, the subjugation of individual interpretation to Tradition protects the Church from heresy. It also prevents one bishop or patriarch, such as the Roman Pope, from becoming the criterion of truth.

Why is this Belief a Barrier to Personal Faith?



• Leads people to assume the Church's responsibility (not theirs) to seek the truth

One way this belief poses a barrier to personal faith in Christ is that it so elevates the Church's Tradition and its interpretation of Scripture that many Orthodox people assume it is only the Church's responsibility (through its representative, the local priest or bishop) to interpret and disseminate spiritual truth. Orthodox lay people usually do not feel a responsibility or right to seek the truth on their own or do personal Bible study, since it is already contained in the Tradition of the Church. The Bible is not viewed as the primary source for dogma—Tradition is. Yet if Orthodox people were to study the Bible for themselves, many would discover personal faith in Christ as God speaks to them through His word.

• Leaves no room for questioning the Orthodox Church

Another way this belief creates a barrier is that it leaves no room for questioning the Tradition of the Orthodox Church, especially if Tradition is viewed as the life of the Holy Spirit working in the Church. There is even less room for questioning when Orthodox doctrine clearly teaches that the Orthodox Church is the one true Church, that

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[28]Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 152, 159-60.

[29]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.24.

all other churches and their teachings are deviations from the real Church. Such preconceptions sometimes keep Orthodox people from being willing to listen once they discover the person sharing the gospel with them is not from the Orthodox Church.

• Overemphasizes the corporate aspect of faith (to the exclusion of the personal aspect)

There is the potential barrier posed by the Orthodox concept of the Holy Spirit, which taken to an extreme seems to limit the Spirit to working only in the corporate context of the church. The idea of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of the individuals who comprise the church, a concept so important among evangelicals, is foreign to the Orthodox mind.

• Causes people to think the church building is the only place God's Spirit works

Orthodox lay people see the church and often specifically the church building itself as the place where God's Spirit can work. They speak of feeling the presence of God in the worship there. It is difficult for them to conceive of meeting God in a building that is not a church building (such as a rented theater, school, cultural hall, or house).

Turning Barriers into Bridges

The Orthodox understanding of authority and tradition may pose a barrier for evangelicals seeking to share the gospel with people of Orthodox background. However, with an understanding of the Orthodox viewpoint, it is possible to turn this "barrier" into a "bridge" to personal faith in Jesus.

· **Demonstrate conviction that Bible is authoritative**

You will accomplish little by criticizing the Orthodox adherence to Tradition, but you can demonstrate your own conviction that the Bible is authoritative in itself. During conversations with Orthodox people, turn repeatedly to the Bible in discussing spiritual matters (Acts 17:11).

• Encourage Orthodox people to read the Bible themselves

In time, such an approach can lead Orthodox to the conviction that Scripture is the supreme authority with respect to spiritual truth. God speaks through the words of Isaiah 55:10-11 to demonstrate the effectiveness of his word: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word

that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish the purpose for which I sent it."

• Use a Bible approved for usage by the Orthodox Church

The versions approved may tend to be older translations, but this is often what many Orthodox people prefer. They are sometimes suspicious of Scriptures in language more comprehensible to modern people. Obviously, nonetheless, if there are no objections, it is preferable to use newer translations so that the meaning of the text is clearer. Note that the canon of the Orthodox Bible differs from the Protestant in its inclusion of the Deuterocanonical books found in the Septuagint, sometimes called the "Apocrypha."

• Compare other sources of tradition with the Bible

Demonstrate a willingness to look with Orthodox people at the extra-biblical sources of their tradition. In Orthodoxy, a specific form of tradition is considered reliable and true if it is accepted by the Church as being consistent with other "witnesses" to the Church's life. The evangelical can join with the Orthodox in comparing other sources of tradition with the witness of Scriptures, which most Orthodox would acknowledge as one of the main (if not *the* main) source. The Orthodox theologian Hopko even goes so far as to assert that Tradition can never contradict Scripture, and in this sense Scripture is the "main written authority" by which "everything in the church is judged."[30] Such an approach shows respect for the ideas of Orthodoxy, rather than dismissing them summarily because they may be extra-biblical and non-authoritative from an evangelical perspective. The biblical guideline from I Peter 3:15 is applicable in conversations with Orthodox people, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with *gentleness* and *respect*." (italics mine)

• Show that God's Spirit is not confined to Orthodox Church buildings

Show that though there is a corporate aspect to the Holy Spirit's work, he is not confined to working only through the Orthodox Church and in church buildings. The Spirit can encounter us wherever we are (1 Kings 8:27) even if we are outside of a church building, and he can relate to each of us personally as well as corporately.

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[30]Thomas Hopko, "The Bible in the Orthodox Church," in *All the Fulness of God: Essays on Orthodoxy, Ecumenism and Modern Society* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 49-50.

Belief: Doctrine of God

"No one has ever seen God." (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12)

"The true knowledge and vision of God consist in this—in seeing that He is invisible, because what we seek lies behind all knowledge, being wholly separated by the darkness of incomprehensibility." (Gregory of Nyssa)

"God…who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see." (1 Tim. 6:15-16)

"God then is infinite and incomprehensible; and all that is comprehensible about Him is His incomprehensibility." (John of Damascus)

God beyond human comprehension or logic

The beginning point for understanding the Orthodox view of God is that he is mystery, unexplainable and unknowable. In the words of Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399), "God cannot be grasped by the mind. If he could be grasped, he would not be God."[31] Whereas Western Christianity tends to systematize and rationalize who God is, Eastern Christianity is content to merely say that he is beyond human comprehension or logic, that the best man can do is to explain who and what he is not. This negative approach to a doctrine of God is termed "apophaticism" (derivative from *apophasis*, denial). Orthodox theologians see in the rationalistic approach of evangelicals "both the arrogance and the tragedy of modern rationalism."[32] In apophaticism, on the other hand, they see a respect for the mystery of God and an awareness of the limitations of the human mind. For Orthodox, the great mysteries of the faith, especially the doctrine of God, are matters for adoration, not analysis. In all fairness, however, it should again be pointed out that western theologians sometimes also describe God in apophatic terms such as "in-finite," "im-mortal," and "im-mutable" (unchanging), but it is not the major focus. The difference between eastern and western doctrines of God seems to be more one of emphasis.

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[31]Quoted in "An Exercise in Wonder: Orthodox writers on the deep mysteries of the Christian faith," in *Christian History* magazine, Spring 1997.

[32]Anthony Ugolnik, *The Illuminating Icon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 144.

The apophatic way

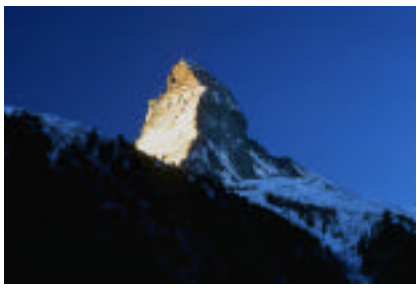
Rather than list and explain the attributes of God (as Western theologians often do), an Eastern theologian looks for aspects of the world which show imperfection or incompleteness. Then he points out that God does not have these qualities. For example,

God is not sinful, he is not finite, he is not evil, etc. By continuing to focus on those things which are not true of God, eventually a person reaches the point when he or she cannot make any more negations. Then, in the face of the mystery of God, it is impossible to say whether some quality is true of him or not. From the Orthodox perspective, this process does not lead to knowledge of God, but to union with him.[33]

Images of the transcendent

Eastern theologians often appeal to pictures, images, and metaphors in an attempt to illustrate the human encounter with him who defies every human description. Gregory of Nyssa used the picture of a hiker poised atop a dangerous precipice:

> Imagine a sheer, steep crag with a projecting edge at the top. Now imagine what a person would probably feel if he puts his foot on the edge of this precipice and, looking down into the chasm below, saw no solid footing nor anything to hold on to. This is what I think the soul experiences when it goes beyond its footing in material things, in its quest for that which has not dimension and which exists from all eternity. …content now to know merely this about the Transcendent, that it is completely different from the nature of the things that the soul knows.[34]



[33]Don Fairbairn, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: An Introduction to Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Privately printed, August 1996), 38.

[34]Quoted in Kallistos (Timothy) Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Press, 1980), 29-30.

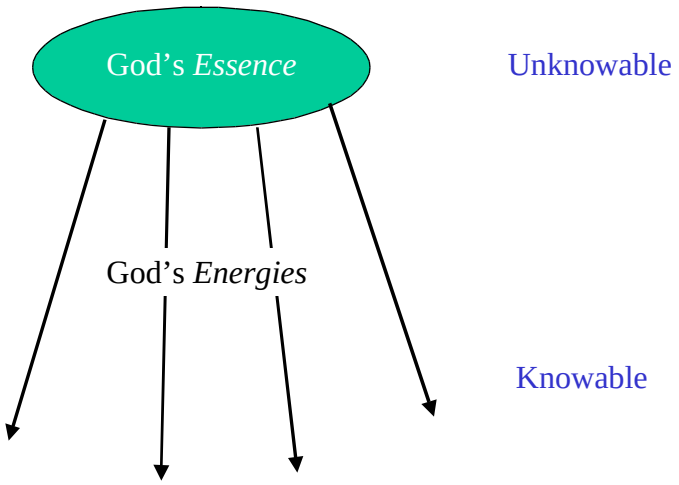
Moses experiences God in the Sinai darkness

One of the favorite biblical paradigms for Orthodox theologians in describing man's posture before the incomprehensible God is Moses. Moses encountered God in the burning bush (Exod. 3:2), in the pillar of cloud and fire, and in the thick darkness of Sinai. Reflecting on Moses' experience in Sinai darkness on the mountain, Pseudo-Dionysius writes:

> And then Moses abandons those who see and what is seen and enters into the really mystical darkness of unknowing; in this he shuts out every knowing apprehension and comes to be in the wholly imperceptible and invisible being entirely of that beyond all—of nothing, neither himself nor another, united most excellently by the completely unknowing inactivity of every knowledge, and knowing beyond intellect by knowing nothing.[35]

Essence and energies

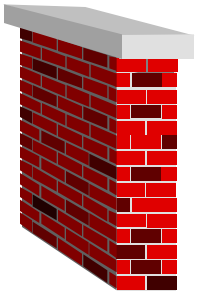
In order to maintain that God is rationally unknowable yet can be personally known, the Orthodox distinguish between the essence and energies of God. Basil the Great (329-79) explains: "It is by His energies that we can say we know our God; we do not assert that we can come near to the essence itself, for His energies descend to us, but His essence remains unapproachable."[36] Thus, from the Orthodox perspective, one cannot know anything about God as he is in himself (his essence), but we can know his energies or actions. In a latter section, it will be shown that these energies are what the Orthodox believe allows them to be united with God.



[35]Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology* 1.3, trans. John D. Jones (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1980), 214.

[36]Quoted in Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 72.

Why is this Belief a Barrier to Personal Faith?



- **Overemphasizes mystery and transcendence of God**
- **Gives people sense that God cannot be personally experienced**
- **People are reluctant to seek to understand God**

The emphasis on God's transcendence is not in itself negative. There is adequate biblical precedent for God's unknowability. No one has seen or can see God (John 1:18). He lives in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16). His ways are unsearchable and unfathomable (Job 11:7-8; Rom. 11:33-36). However, taking this aspect of God's character to an extreme builds a barrier in the minds of Orthodox people. With a view of God as so transcendent and mysterious, there is a sense that he cannot be personally experienced.

Turning Barriers to Bridges

• **Draw attention to Scriptures which make it clear that a personal faith[37] with God is possible**

John 15:5 describes this intimate relationship as a branch (the believer) being connected with the vine (Jesus). Galatians 2:20 speaks of Christ living through the believer. Colossians 1:27 describes the presence of Christ in a believer's life as the "hope of glory."

• **Share a testimony** of how you have come to know Christ in a personal way.

•**Teach patiently and thoroughly what is known of the character of God in Scripture**

Show that we can know not simply what God has done (his energies as they have come down to us), but also his very nature. We know from Scripture, for example, that God is kind, loving, merciful, and gracious. Yet we also know that he is holy, righteous, and just (Ps. 99:9; Ps. 116:5; Lam. 3:23; Rom. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9; 1 John 4:8). This understanding of God's nature is foundational to our personal knowledge of him and our fellowship with him.

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[37]The term "personal faith" is used rather than "personal relationship" because it has less potential for negative connotations. Some Orthodox people see the expression "personal relationship" with God as sacrilegious, implying sexual relations or a relationship that is too intimate for a person to be able to have with a holy God. In fact, "relationship" is one of the words considered difficult or impossible to render in Russian by the *English-Russian Dictionary for a Christian Translator: Preliminary Edition*, Mark Makarov, ed. (Moscow, Russia: Triad Publishing Company, 1994), 3, 135.

• **Avoid suggesting final, certain answers to all questions**

Especially avoid trying to give final answers to Orthodox questions pertaining to the mystery of God. Admitting "I don't know" may actually enhance your witness and build a bridge to relationship. Also, be careful not to reduce God and the way of salvation to a collection of spiritual formulas to be mastered. Even though such an approach may appeal to some of the more westward-oriented intellectuals, such an approach is theologically alien to the Orthodox mindset and culturally foreign to the Slavic way of thinking. By reducing great truths to simplistic formulas, there is a danger you will be seen as not appreciating the great mysteries and deep truths of the gospel.[38]

[38]For an excellent study of the way Western evangelistic methods are perceived by Eastern Europeans, see Mark Harris, "Russian youth talk about evangelism," in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (April 2001), 204-209 and in greater depth in the paper "Evaluations of Western Evangelistic Methods by Young Russian Evangelicals" [electronic document online]; available from http://www.westernseminary.edu/mrg/dmiss/harris/; accessed 3 September 2001; Internet.

Questions for Review

1. What are some of the components of Orthodox Tradition?

2. How does Orthodoxy define the Church?

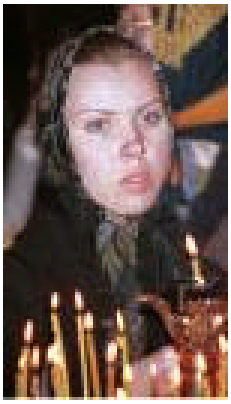
3. In witnessing to Orthodox people, what are some ways to overcome the barrier that Tradition may pose?

4. What is “apophaticism?”

5. What is the difference between the “essence” and “energies” of God?

6. In witnessing to Orthodox people, what are some ways to overcome the barrier caused by an overemphasis on God as transcendent?

A Case Study



Katya rarely went to the cathedral where she had been baptized as a baby anymore. She used to go almost every week. Then it happened—she had a child out of wedlock. At first she was ashamed and feared what would happen to her if she walked through the door into the cathedral again. But she wanted to be forgiven. She wanted to feel that God would still somehow accept her. Somehow she thought if she could just participate in the Eucharist (communion) again, she would feel better. Finally she went and took the bread and wine—she felt a little better at first, but then the gnawing guilt came back again. The next time she went, she lit a candle in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary, hoping to feel better again. This time nothing happened.

Later she talked with Lucia, a lady who lived in her apartment building and seemed to know a lot about religion. "You have to spend a lot of time meditating on God. You have to become more and more like him—then he will accept you and you will know it." Katya didn't doubt Lucia's word, but she did wonder if anybody had ever really done this and knew they were accepted by God. "Yes, some people have made it, but they didn't know till they died and were in heaven. Others didn't make it in this life, but were accepted by God at some point after they died." Katya lost hope—if only a few could make it, she felt it was hopeless for her to try. Would she ever feel forgiven?

Belief: Fall of Man and Nature of Sin

"Perfection was not offered to him [Adam] from the beginning which, in fact, would constitute coercion. But, rather, perfection was set before him as an objective to be attained." (Panagiotes Chrestou)

"For Orthodoxy, man's fall, the lapsus, was like a wayfarer departing from the path, indeed the only path, that led to his rightful home. The fall was not a departure from an originally static and perfect nature; it was the interruption—the cessation of a priceless process." (Auxentios)

"The image was given to us in our nature, and it is unchangeable; from the beginning until the end it remains. The likeness, on the other hand, we gain and achieve through our cooperation and volition; [it] exists potentially in us, and is energized through the good life and excellent behavior." (Basil)

Adam and Eve: put on the *pathway* to fellowship with God

Evangelical theology clearly teaches that Adam and Eve enjoyed full communion with God before the fall. Eastern Orthodoxy theology, on the other hand, suggests that Adam and Eve "were not put in a condition of fellowship with God, but were placed on a pathway to fellowship with God. They were not created perfect. They were created with the opportunity to gain the fellowship with God which was set before them as the goal of their lives."[39]

What was the original condition of Adam and Eve?

Evangelical View	Orthodox View
• perfect	• imperfect
• full communion with God	• not in communion with God, but assigned the task of achieving it

Image and likeness of God

The basis for this concept is a perceived distinction made by Orthodox theologians between the words "image" and "likeness" in Genesis 1. The image of God is those *unique attributes* which God gave people at creation. The likeness of God, on the other hand, is *becoming* as much *like God* as possible. Growing in the likeness of God is maximizing all that comes with being in the image of God to become more and more like God. It is something which humanity had(s) to acquire after creation.

Sin requires a *"course correction"*

Understood thus, the Orthodox perspective does not perceive the fall of humanity as a severe departure from an originally perfect state but rather as a turning aside from the pathway to achieving fellowship with God and the likeness of God. The Orthodox remedy for sin is not as dramatic as that of the evangelical—man needs only a "course correction" to be put back on the road to

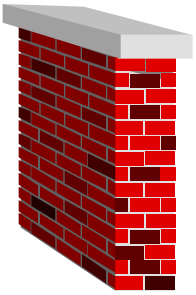
What happened when Adam sinned?

Evangelical View	Orthodox View
He lost the precious possession of his communion with God	He got off the path toward union with God
God Man	
atonement needed	*"course correction"* needed

[39]Don Fairbairn, "Eastern Orthodoxy: Five Protestant Perspectives," *East-West Church & Ministry Report* (Spring 1995), 3.

fellowship with God.[40] What evangelicals see as the loss of a precious possession comes across in Orthodox theology as simply having made a wrong turn or series of turns. In Eastern thought, sin has less to do with disobedience and consequent guilt than it does with the failure to pursue the task (stay on the path) which God has set before them.

Why is this Belief a Barrier to Personal Faith?

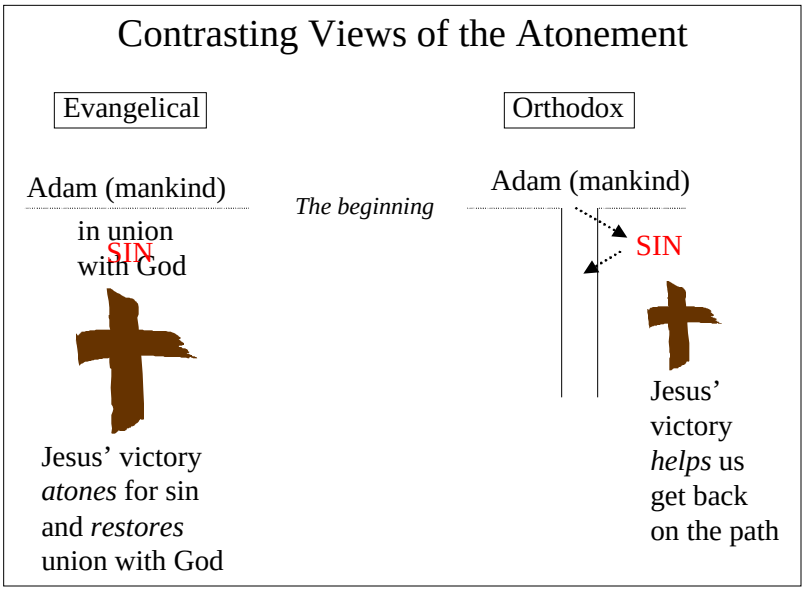


· **Minimizes sin**

Orthodox theology teaches that man was not created in perfect fellowship with God. He was instead given the goal or task of attaining this fellowship through *theosis*. When he fails by sinning, he does not fall into grave sin. He simply is taking a wrong turn that forfeits his ability to reach the goal and allows Satan to have victory. Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection was a victory over the powers of Satan. Jesus' victory thus helps man to get back on the right path.

· **Minimizes the atonement**

The Orthodox view minimizes the severity of sin and creates a barrier to a proper understanding of sin's impact on the life of an individual. People of Orthodox background must see sin as not merely a wrong turn, but as a dramatic and severe separation from God. The only sufficient remedy for sin is the substitutionary atonement of Christ through his death on the cross, a concept difficult to grasp when sin is perceived as merely getting off the path.



[40]Ibid.

Turning Barriers into Bridges

· **Many Orthodox people are already aware of their sin**

It is not necessary to convince most people of Orthodox background of their sinfulness. Many live with a sense of shame as a core issue, a deeply felt reality of their soul.[41]

• **Address the severe consequences of sin in the life of an individual**

It is clear from Scripture that sin separates us from God: "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isa. 59:2).

• **Emphasize the necessity of God's punishing sin**

Explain that Christ has taken that punishment on himself. Orthodox people sometimes reject this understanding because it seems to depict God as a God of wrath rather than love. Show that the necessity for punishing sin comes not because God is a God of hate instead of love, but because of his perfect holiness (which must punish sin) (Isa. 53:4-6; 1 John 4:10). God's holiness may be compared to fire. When a person is in a right relationship to fire, it brings warmth. However, when a person is not in right relationship to fire, he or she is burned.[42]

· **Show the finality and sufficiency of Jesus' death and resurrection**

There is much in Orthodox liturgy connected with the sacraments which could be taken to imply that Christ's atoning death on the cross was not sufficient and final. For example, in connection with the wine at Eucharist is the expression from the Divine Liturgy, ""this has touched my lips and will remove my transgression and wash away my sin." Stress with Orthodox people that Jesus' once-for-all death on the cross was final and sufficient atonement for sin (1 John 2:2). I Peter 3:18 reads, "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God."

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[41]Ralph Ennis, *Understanding the Russian Soul* (Raleigh, N.C.: CoMission Training and Materials, 1995), 12.

[42]William Hendricks, class notes from "Theology of Paul and John," 1974.

Belief: Understanding of Grace

"Grace is uncreated and by its nature divine. It is the energy or procession of the one nature: the divinity in so far as it is ineffably distinct from the essence and communicates itself to created beings, deifying them." (Lossky)

"The sacraments, when they are worthily received, become instruments, means of transmission, of divine grace." (John Karmiris)

"A sacrament is a symbolic ceremony through which divine grace is transmitted." (Eastern Orthodox Catechism, Noli)

Grace: divine energy to walk the path

Contrasting Views of Grace

Evangelical View	Orthodox View
• divine attitude toward man	• divine energies
• gift that is unmerited and free	• received through sacraments, icons, good deeds, etc.

Evangelicals generally understand grace to be an attitude of God toward man. Despite what the repentant sinner deserves for his sin, God graciously makes him or her one of his children. Being saved by grace (Eph. 2:8) is a gift that is unmerited and free. Eastern Orthodoxy, on the other hand, interprets grace as divine energy or power that is transmitted to believers, allowing them to return to the way of fellowship and acceptance by God.[43] Seen in such a light, grace is almost like a power, made available through icons or sacraments. Orthodox theologians would vehemently deny grace is merited (as it appears to be in the Roman Catholic understanding) and assert that grace comes only from God.[44] However the Orthodox "person on the street" often comprehends (and Orthodox catechisms recurrently imply) that grace is something earned by following practices and observing rites the church requires (i.e., sacraments, icon veneration, good deeds).[45]

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[43]Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 162.

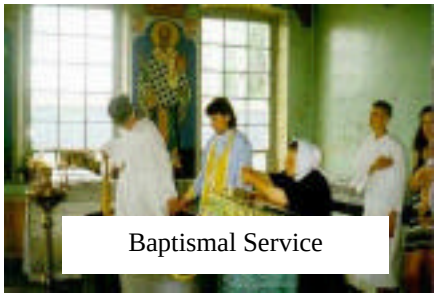
[44]Fr. John Maxwell, "An Orthodox Response to Don Fairbairn, 'Eastern Orthodoxy: Five Protestant Perspectives'," *East-West Church & Ministry Report* (Fall 1995), 9-10.

[45]See, for example, Valerian D. Trifa, *Religious Information for Eastern Orthodox Christians*, trans. Fr. Vasile Hategan (Jackson, Michigan: The Romanian Orthodox Episcopate of America, 1963), 31-32, 62-71.

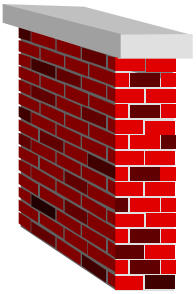
[45]Stanley S. Harakas, "Eastern Orthodoxy: An Introduction for Southern Baptists," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 22 (Winter 1977), 387.

Sacraments: conduits of grace

Orthodoxy accepts seven sacraments. Karmaris writes of how the sacraments, in particular, convey grace: "Baptism and chrismation[46] transmit justifying and regenerating grace; repentance and unction (prayer and annointing for the sick) transmit grace which is for the healing of soul and body; ordination and marriage enable us to perform certain specific functions; and the Holy Eucharist feeds and satisfies us spiritually."[47] The question of which sacraments are essential for salvation is answered in different ways by Orthodox theologians. Whereas Karmiris seems to imply that baptism and chrismation (annointing with spices to "receive" the Holy Spirit) are necessary for salvation, Demetry lists four essential sacraments: "for the individual Christian, Baptism, Chrism [Chrismation], Penance, and the Holy Eucharist are necessary [for salvation]."[48]


Baptismal Service

Why is this Belief a Barrier to Personal Faith?



· **Diminishes sense of need for personal relationship with God**

The Orthodox idea of grace is very different from the evangelical view. Rather than comprehending grace as the "unmerited favor of God," Orthodox understand grace as the energies of God transmitted through simple partaking of the sacraments (voluntarily *or* involuntarily), venerating icons, and by human effort.[49] This extreme emphasis on receiving grace through religious actions presents a formidable barrier to personal faith, almost making the need for a personal relationship with Christ seem unnecessary.

· **Distorts biblical concept of grace as unmerited and free**

Another way this view of grace presents a barrier is that it includes human effort as a way of receiving grace. The biblical perspective on grace, on the other hand, clearly excludes human effort as a means for obtaining grace. Grace, by its very nature, is a gift that cannot be earned.

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[46]See Glossary in Appendix A for definition of terms often unfamiliar to evangelicals.

[47]John Karmiris, *A Synopsis of the Dogmatic Theology of the Orthodox Catholic Church*, trans. George Dimopoulos (Scranton, Pa.: Christian Orthodox Edition, 1973), 100-112.

[48]Constas H. Demetry, *Catechism of the Eastern Orthodox Church* [condensed book on-line] (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: The Saint Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church); available from http://www.christusrex.org/www1/CDHN/catechis.html, p. 44; accessed 2 August 2001; Internet.

[49]Ledbetter, 7.

Turning Barriers into Bridges

· **Emphasize grace as a gift from God**

Partaking of the sacraments and venerating icons are integral aspects of Orthodox religious ritual. Rather than discrediting such practices as ways for receiving grace, emphasize that grace is a gift from God (Rom. 9:16; Eph. 2:8-9).

• **Stress the immediacy of grace through faith**

Explain how grace is immediately received through faith and not by works. Titus 3:5 reads, "he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."

Belief: Concept of Salvation

"Man has been ordered to become God." (Gregory of Nazianzus)

"God became man so that men might become gods." (Athanasius)

"[God] has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature." (2 Pet. 1:4)

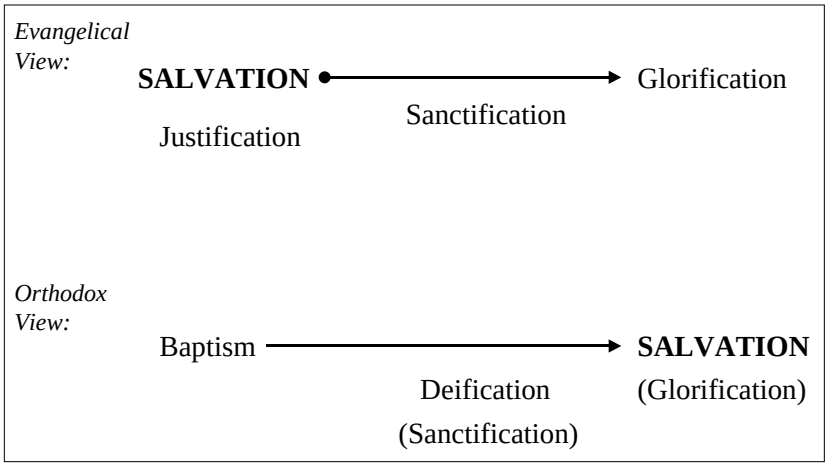
In theosis God "makes man god to the same degree as God Himself became man" except that God "will divinize human nature without changing it into the divine nature." (Maximus the Confessor)

One-time event or process?

Evangelical scholars tend to explain salvation as justification, the initial act by which God declares a sinner to be righteous. Upon justification, the sinner becomes acceptable in the eyes of God and begins a personal relationship with him. Eastern Orthodox theologians, on the other hand, rarely speak of justification as the beginning of the Christian life. In the Orthodox mindset, salvation is understood more as the process of becoming acceptable to God. In this manner of understanding salvation, as a person practices love, mercy, and justice, he or she becomes more and more like God, acceptable to God, and in fellowship with him.[50]

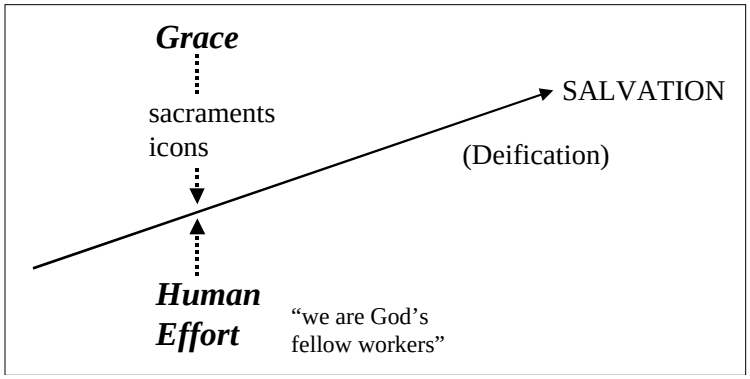
[50]Fairbairn, "Eastern Orthodoxy: Five Protestant Perspectives," 3.

When is a person acceptable before God?



Orthodox scholars explain the contrasting perspectives as the difference between seeing salvation in legal terms and seeing salvation in relationship terms.[51] Westerners tend to look at the event of justification whereby they were declared not guilty, whereas Eastern Orthodox focus more on the relationship that ensues. Though the difference in perspective may seem innocuous at first glance, it becomes critical when it comes to determining the point at which a person becomes acceptable before God. For evangelicals, this point is clearly connected to the moment when genuine faith begins, the point of justification. For Orthodox believers, the point is much more vague, but is located sometime at the end of *theosis* (deification), the process of becoming like God and attaining union with him. The end of *theosis* may not even occur until sometime in the afterlife, according to Orthodox teaching. This seems to account for the Orthodox practice of praying for the dead, in hopes that souls not yet deified in the afterlife will continue to progress into the likeness of God.[52]

Theosis: man's work + God's grace



From the Orthodox perspective, *theosis* is the result of both the Holy Spirit's action, performed by means of the Church's sacraments, and of human striving to acquire virtue. A passage often cited in support of this viewpoint is

[51]James J. Stamoolis, *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1986), 7; Ernst Benz, *The Eastern Orthodox Church: Its Thought and Life*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1963), 43-53.

[52]Fritz Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 2001), 58.

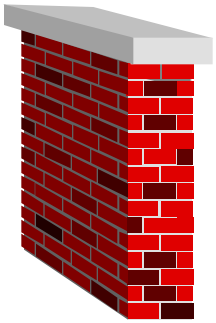
1 Corinthians 3:9, "For we are God's fellow workers." Holland summarizes this partnership in the Orthodox concept of salvation:

> "In Orthodoxy, a man is not 'saved' in an event. He is transformed, and is like a sapling that grows towards the light, and he loves God more and more, because "He first loved us."…God helps to change him, and his will slowly, imperceptibly conforms to the perfect will of God. He becomes like God; he shares in the energy of God. We call this process "theosis," and this is salvation. It is not just intellectual assent, and it is not just ascetical endeavor, which some call "works." It is a synergy of the two,. The first follows the other, and the other empowers a man to do the first."[53]

Differing Views on Salvation

Evangelical View	Orthodox View
• emphasis on justification (legal standing before God)	• emphasis on relationship
• salvation precedes sanctification	• salvation as end of *theosis*
• assurance of salvation	• no assurance of salvation
• salvation by faith alone	• salvation includes human effort

Why is this Belief a Barrier to Personal Faith?



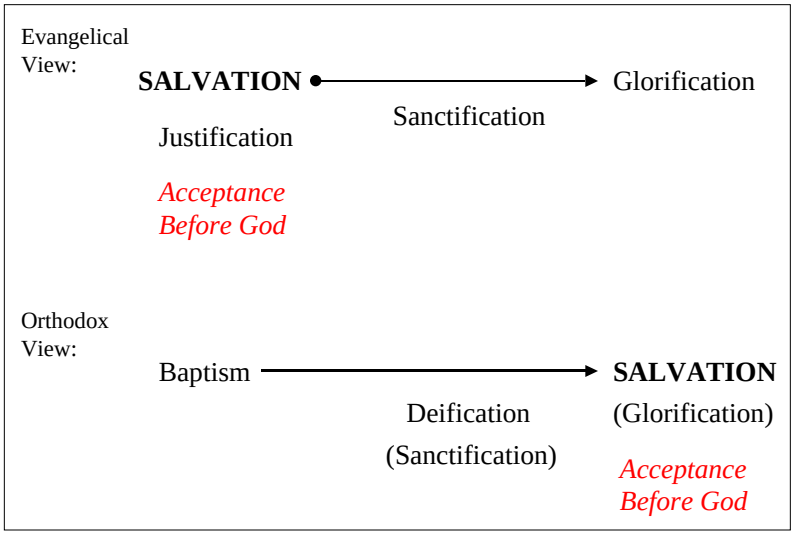
· **Deludes people into believing that baptism and chrismation are sufficient for salvation (seems to make personal faith unnecessary)**

The Orthodox concept of salvation is perhaps the most formidable barrier to personal faith for people of Orthodox background. Many Orthodox see the sacraments of baptism and chrismation as all that is required for salvation. Orthodox catechisms and liturgy clearly convey this idea. The *Eastern Orthodox Catechism* (Noli) states: "Holy Baptism is a Sacrament which cleanses us from original sin, gives us a new life of grace, makes us Christians." This perception creates a barrier to personal faith because it seems to make a personal relationship with Christ unnecessary for salvation.

[53]Seraphim Holland, "Personal Testimony of Fr. Seraphim Holland" [world wide web page on-line]; available from http://www.orthodox.net/conversions/priestseraphim.html; accessed 20 March 2001; Internet.

· **Makes people think there is no way to be sure of one's salvation (acceptance before God)**

Another way the Orthodox concept of salvation creates a barrier is by making it unclear at what point a person becomes acceptable to God. The many Scriptures that support the idea of salvation as immediate acceptance (justification) before God are largely ignored in Orthodoxy. Instead, the emphasis is on the process of becoming like God. Supposedly a person becomes acceptable to God at the end of this process, but no one can say for sure when he has completed the process. The idea of never knowing for certain whether one is acceptable or will ever be acceptable to God is disconcerting for sincere Orthodox who are striving to perfect themselves enough to gain union and fellowship with God. Other Orthodox people simply give up hope of salvation, overwhelmed by the barrier of their inability to perfect themselves.



Turning Barriers into Bridges

• **Show that baptism is insufficient for salvation**

Salvation comes as a person places his or her faith in Jesus Christ alone. Baptism is a meaningless ritual unless it pictures what has already occurred in the heart of the one being baptized. Many Orthodox people have been baptized as a baby. Rather than criticize what has happened to them, emphasize the true meaning and intent of baptism. Focus on the fact that biblical baptism occurs *after* a person understands the message and believes. There is no place in the New Testament where it says specifically that a baby or child was baptized. Pertinent passages to share regarding baptism include: Acts 8:34-39, 2:41, 18:8, 19:4-5, Matthew 28:19-20, and Luke 23:39-43 (thief on the cross was saved without being baptized).

· **Emphasize that acceptance before God is both free and immediate for those who trust in Christ**

Romans 5:9-11 explains the status of those with personal faith in Christ: "Since we have *now* been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have *now* received reconciliation" [italics mine].

• **Show that God justifies sinners even though they are not perfect**

Point out that one does not need to go through a life-long process of *theosis* in order to gain fellowship with God. God justifies sinners who trust in Christ and accepts them into fellowship with himself, even though they are not perfect (Rom. 5:8). This fellowship, which begins at the inception of faith, is the basis for pursuing a life of Christ-likeness, not the result of completing the process of becoming like Christ. This is great news for those filled with guilt and frustration over their inability to be completely deified and experience union with God.

• **Highlight the necessity of personal faith in Jesus**

Sacraments such as baptism and chrismation are meaningless rituals without genuine conversion. (Rom. 14:12; 1 Pet. 4:5)

• **Point out that salvation is a life-changing event**

Sometimes Orthodox believers are willing to pray the "sinner's prayer," but merely perceive such a prayer as another ritual which will grant them favor with God. Help them to understand the decision of salvation is a life-changing event, not simply a ritual or sacrament. (Isa. 29:13; 2 Cor. 5:17)

• **Emphasize that the believer can have assurance of salvation now**

John 3:18 addresses assurance of salvation in the present. I John 5:13 also speaks of this assurance: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life."

Questions for Review

1. What is the difference between the evangelical and Orthodox view regarding the fall of man?

2. In witnessing to Orthodox people, what are some ways to overcome the barrier that the Orthodox perspective on sin may pose?

3. What is the difference between the evangelical and Orthodox view of grace?

4. In witnessing to Orthodox people, what are some ways to overcome the barrier that the Orthodox understanding of grace may pose?

5. What is the Orthodox concept of salvation?

6. In witnessing to Orthodox people, what are some ways to overcome the barrier caused by the Orthodox perspective on salvation?

A Case Study

"Oh, Virgin Mary, Mother of God, please keep us safe as we travel to our dacha. Also, please make Ivan well soon." Valentina prayed standing before the icon and the candle she had lit, then hurried to go out of the cathedral. On the way, however, she saw the icon of Saint Nicholas and decided to pray once more. This time she simply bowed and asked the saint to give her family safe travel. She lingered a little in front of the icon, as though she expected the image to respond. She wondered, did these rituals really make any difference? Did Mary and Saint Nicholas even know she was there? She didn't know. But she did know if something bad were to happen on the trip or if Ivan never got well, she could never forgive herself for not praying. Ira, one of her friends who had recently become a Baptist, had told her she could pray directly to Jesus--praying to the saints wasn't necessary. Valentina wasn't sure who was right, but the Orthodox way just seemed easier to her. Besides, how could one be a Russian and believe like the Baptists do?

Belief: Prayers to the Saints

"The saints are our intercessors and our protectors in the heavens and, in consequence, living and active members of the church militant." (Sergius Bulgakov)

"Even after their deaths these saints perform works of love as intercessors and helpers and smooth their fellowmen's path to salvation." (Ernest Benz)

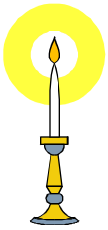
"All mankind is involved in the process of deification and the saints are those who, having advanced nearer to the ultimate goal, can uplift the rest." (Nicolas Zernov)

"Mary, becoming the Mother of God, receives the 'glory which belongs to God' and is the first among human beings to participate in the final deification of the creature." (Vladimir Lossky)

Probably no area of Orthodox religious life is more disconcerting to evangelicals than prayers to the saints and the use of icons. The primary criticism leveled against these elements of Orthodoxy is that they seem to set up another mediator between man and God (besides Jesus) and that they diminish the unique role of Christ.

Orthodox rationale for praying to the saints

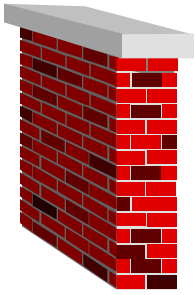
Orthodox theologians seem to be aware of concerns related to prayers to the saints and generally respond with two rationales. First, the saints are intercessors just like



anybody on earth you ask to pray for you. The difference is that they are in heaven (but still alive spiritually) and they are people whose prayers carry heavier "weight" than the average person. As James 5:16 says, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." Second, praying to the saints does not lessen the uniqueness of Christ, but actually enhances it since the only reason the saints are so honored is because of their relationship to Christ. It is believed that when a person prays to a saint, the saint somehow helps him or her by example and prayer to receive more grace and to progress in *theosis.*[54]

Mary: the "Mother of God"

Among the saints, Mary the mother of Jesus is accorded the highest honor. She figures prominently in both the liturgy and in the liturgical calendar. In the liturgy, Mary is remembered as "our all-holy, spotless, most highly blessed and glorious Lady the Mother of God and ever-virgin Mary."[55] Five of the twelve major Orthodox feasts in the liturgical calendar are dedicated to Mary. She is considered the greatest of the saints, "the first among human beings to participate in the final deification of the creature."[56] Thus, she is seen as the primary intercessor for the whole world, and is frequently invoked in prayer by almost every Orthodox believer.



Why is this Belief a Barrier to Personal Faith?

- **Deflects to saints worship and prayer that should go to God himself**
- **Saints viewed as mediators between people and God**
- **Prayer and devotion to the saints replaces direct prayer to God**

The Orthodox devotion and prayer to the saints creates a barrier to personal faith in Jesus by deflecting to the saints worship and prayer that should go to God himself. Despite what Orthodox theologians may teach regarding the saints as intercessors, Orthodox lay people all too often view the saints as mediators between people and God. The saints are understood as objects of worship who are much more accessible than God

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[54]Fairbairn, *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 67-68.

[55]Joseph Raya and Jose de Vinck, eds. *The Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (Allendale, N.J.: Alleluia Press, 1970), 30.

[56]Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 208.

is, rather than simply as guides to help them along the path of union with God. Prayer and devotion to the saints replaces direct prayer to God.

Turning Barriers into Bridges

• Don't directly attack the practice of praying to the saints

Though we may regard the devotion to saints as blasphemy, do not directly attack the practice of praying to saints. Instead, show that acceptance before God (and acceptance of our prayers) does not depend on our becoming like God.

• Show that God accepts the believer and his or her prayers

Point out that our acceptance before God and his attention to our prayers comes from the fact that he has already become like us, as Hebrews 4:14-16 makes clear:

> "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

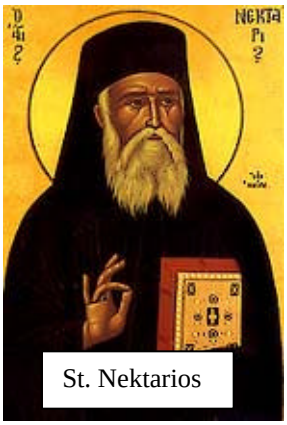
Belief: Use of Icons and Relics

"The honor given to the image passes over to the prototype." (Basil)

"The veneration of relics (as well as that of the icons of the saints) is founded on faith in a special connection between the spirit of the saint and his human remains, a connection which death does not destroy." (Sergius Bulgakov)

"Since the grace attained by the saints during their lives continues to dwell in their images [icons], these images are placed everywhere for the sanctification of the world by the grace which belongs to them." (John of Damascus; Leonid Ouspensky)

Icon painting: a sacred craft



Icons are two-dimensional (flat) paintings of Jesus, events in his life, the virgin Mary, the Trinity, saints, and angels. Icon painting is considered a sacred Orthodox craft, where every detail is fixed by tradition and every color has symbolic significance. The paintings have a unique symmetry to depict people who are supposedly already deified and in heaven. The forehead of the person depicted is often disproportionately large to indicate the illumination of the mind that is given to the faithful.[57]

Icons integral to Orthodox religious life

The use of icons is essential to entire religious psychology of Eastern Christianity, and marks nearly every important milestone of an Orthodox person's life. When an Orthodox believer is baptized, he or she often receives an icon of the saint whose name he or she takes. At marriage, the father of the couple usually blesses them with icons. When an Orthodox Christian dies, icons are frequently carried at the front of the funeral procession.

When an Orthodox person lights a candle, kisses, or says a prayer in front of an icon, he or she is invoking the help of the saint depicted, asking for help in solving personal problems and in achieving deification. The use of icons is integral in Orthodox worship, as Benz explains:

> "The Orthodox believer who enters his church to attend services first goes up to the iconostasis, the wall of paintings which separates the sanctuary from the nave. There he kisses the icons in a definite order: first the Christ icons, then the Mary icons, then the icons of the angels and the saints. After this he goes up to a lectern placed in front of the iconostasis. On this lectern the icon of the saint for the particular day or the particular church feast is displayed. Here, too, he pays his respects by a kiss, bow and crossing himself. Then having expressed his veneration for the icons, he steps back and rejoins the congregation."[58]

Rationale for use of icons

Orthodox believe that the first icons of the virgin Mary and baby Jesus were actually painted by Luke and may have even accompanied the original Gospel of Luke as delivered to Theophilus (Luke 1:1). Other icons are believed to have appeared in

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[57]Jay C. Rochelle, "Majesty, Mystery, and Mercy: An Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 26 (Je 1999): 179.

[58]Ernest Benz, *The Eastern Orthodox Church: Its Thought and Life*, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1963), 2.

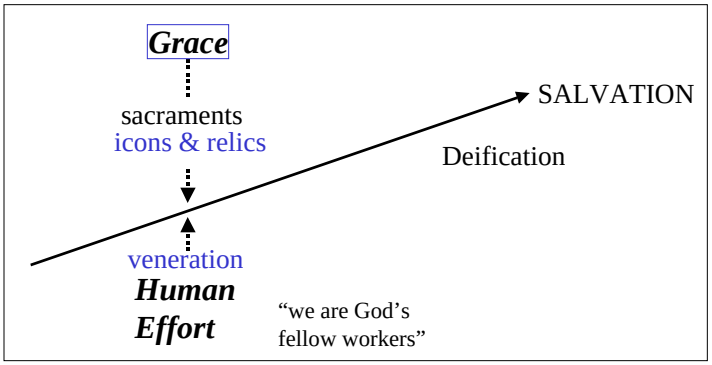
miraculous fashion, as in the case of the icon left behind on a church wall after the virgin Mary supposedly appeared there (Virgin of Kazan).[59]

Orthodox theologians justify the use of icons by pointing to the fact that God made the first icon when he shaped an image of himself in Jesus Christ, the perfect icon.[60] They discount charges of idolatry by explaining that in the veneration of icons, the honor is given not to the icon itself, but to its "prototype," the person or persons represented in them.[61] Worship, however, is reserved for God alone. Icons are considered more than pictures—they are an important part of the Church's teaching of the faith. Those who are uneducated or who lack the time to study can enter an Orthodox Church and see on its walls all they need to know to understand their faith.[62]

It is believed that icons also hold a mystical value for those who venerate them. They are like a window into heaven, a view of perfection and peace that is otherworldly. As an Orthodox believer pauses in front of an icon to pray or light a candle, he or she has a sense of seeing another dimension. The person represented by the icon is supposedly already in heaven and is participating in the divine nature. Somehow there is a mystical sense in which the icon illustrates the process of deification and that future state of the world when the entire world will be transfigured and united with God.[63]

Icons and relics: channels of grace

The effect of icon veneration, according to Orthodox teaching, is similar to that of praying to the saints. The grace which the saints attained (understood as energy or power from above) is present in the icon. The same teaching applies to holy relics of the saints, such as their bones or articles that



[59]Rochelle, 178.

[60]John Moldovan, "The Theological Approach of Orthodoxy in Contrast to Roman Catholic and Protestant Theology," unpub. paper, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1 March 1989, 23.

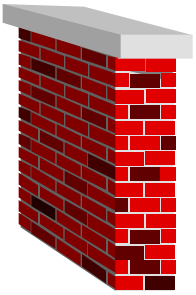
[61]Michael Azkoul, "What are the Differences between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism?"[world wide web page online]; available from http://www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/reading/ortho_cath.html, accessed 6 April 2001; Internet.

[62]Ridenour, 59.

[63]Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), 219.

were special to them. The grace residing in the icon or relic can be obtained by the worshipper as he offers veneration. This grace, in turn, can help him or her to progress along the path of deification.[64]

Why is this Belief a Barrier to Personal Faith?



· **Gives impression icon or relic has spiritual power in and of itself**

The concept that the grace a saint acquired resides in an icon or relic gives the impression that the icon or relic has spiritual power in and of itself. According to Orthodox tradition, some of the most famous icons were the powerful "good luck charms" that enabled battles to be won and cities to be protected.[65]

· **Distorts concept of grace**

Grace as the source of "good luck" and protection is a gross distortion that creates a barrier to personal faith in Jesus' saving grace. The idea of grace as an energy that can be received from the icon or relic is also a misconception of grace. Orthodox people who perceive grace as a power or energy to acquire may be hindered from understanding the true nature of salvation.

· **Tends to replace Jesus as the mediator**

Another obvious barrier to personal faith from the use of icons is that icons and the saints they represent tend to replace Jesus as the mediator between man and God in the minds of the people. Since the saints seem more accessible and more "human," some Orthodox people pray to the saints more than to Jesus.

Turning Barriers into Bridges

• Acknowledge the difference between idolatry and icon veneration

Recognize that Eastern theology does differentiate between idolatry and the veneration of icons. All too often, westerners attack the use of icons based on the perception that icons are idols.

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[64]Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: American Review of Orthodoxy, 1935), 163.

[65]The Virgin of the Don icon allegedly brought the Russians victory over the Tatar-Mongols at the River Don in 1380 and later at Kazan, under Ivan the Terrible (A. Kostova, *The Subjects of Early Russian Icons* (St. Petersburg, Russia: *Isskustvo* Publishers, 1991), 196).

• Affirm the value of learning from the examples of the saints depicted in the icons

· Stress the full sense of the word "grace"

Rather than rejecting icons outright, emphasize the full sense of the word "grace" in the New Testament and the nature of salvation as a free gift (Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8). Once an Orthodox person realizes that grace is God's favor toward those who do not deserve it, it is easier for that person to see that icons are not a necessary or effective means for obtaining grace.

• Show that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man

1 Timothy 2:4-5 makes this clear: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time."

• Explain that God desires the believer's devotion

Exodus 20:3-5 and 34:14 are pertinent passages to share. A helpful analogy is as follows: "Suppose your child comes home from school each day, and rather than going to you, goes and talks exclusively to the icons in your home. Wouldn't you prefer your child's attention be shown to you? It is the same with God."[66]

Belief: Religious Nationalism

"Throughout Russian history, there was always a 'close connection between the Russian people, the narod, the nation, on the one hand, and Russian Orthodox Christianity, on the other." (John Witte Jr.)

"Hear me, pious Tsar [Basil III], all Christian kingdoms have converged in thine alone. Two Romes have fallen, a third [Moscow] stands, a fourth there shall not be." (Philotheus)

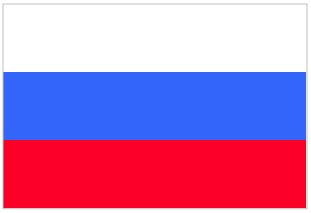
"To be Russian is to be Orthodox." (Russian saying)

[66]Analogy from Priscilla Nicoara, Romanian believer on staff with Global Missions Fellowship, Dallas, Texas, 15 May 2001.

Definition

Religious nationalism is the belief that people within a certain ethnic and religious group stand in a special relationship with God that is superior to that of other peoples.[67] Though religious nationalism is not a part of official Orthodox theology, it is definitely a part of popular thought among Orthodox groups in the former Soviet Union. People consider themselves already Christians because they live among "Christian" peoples in a "Christian" nation. Often religious nationalism is fostered by numerous legends which exaggerate the importance of a nation or region. It is helpful for the Christian worker to be aware of the religious nationalism and accompanying legends prevalent in some of the Eastern Orthodox lands.

Russia



Religious nationalism is a significant aspect of popular thought in Russia. Orthodoxy has been closely intertwined with Russian culture for over a thousand years. It is commonly said that "to be Russian is to be Orthodox." The Russian Orthodox Church is the largest of the Orthodox bodies and has in a sense been the center of Eastern Christianity since the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Some Russian Orthodox people even consider Russia to be the permanent hub of all Christendom, despite having been under seventy years of atheistic Communism. For such people, the struggle between the Church and the Communist government represented the climactic battle between evil and good, showing the Russian Church's special position before God.[68]

Ukraine

Ukrainian Orthodoxy traces its beginnings to the conversion of Vladimir in 988, just as the Russian Orthodox do. However, in popular legends, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church sees its origins even earlier. One legend claims the Apostle Andrew traveled as far as Kiev and predicted a great city would be built there. Another legend holds that delegates from the Council of Nicea (325) proclaimed Christianity in southern Ukraine. Throughout its history, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church has struggled to maintain its

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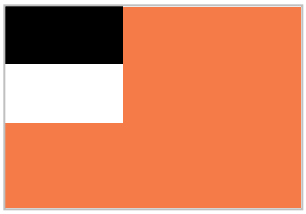
[67]Fairbairn, *Partakers*, 91.

[68]The material in the sections on Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia is adapted from Don Fairbairn, "A Summary of Eastern Orthodox Thought" (unpub. paper, March 1993), 15-17.

identity against attempts to absorb it by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Polish Roman Catholic Church.

Georgia

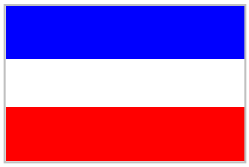
The Georgian Orthodox Church has historically verifiable roots dating to the beginning of the fourth century, when a slave girl from Turkey brought Christianity to the region. Around 330, Christianity became the official religion of Georgia. Legends date the beginnings of Christianity in Georgia even earlier. According to one legend, some Georgian Jews who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion purchased his garment from the Roman soldier who had won it, and brought it, along with Christianity, back to Georgia in the first century. Another legend purports that the virgin Mary wanted to come to Georgia to preach the gospel there, but died before she could. Nevertheless, after her assumption, she granted the country and its people special standing before God and became its spiritual protector.

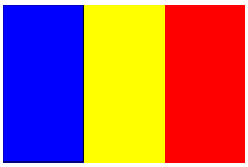


Armenia

Armenian Orthodox trace their historical roots to Gregory the Illuminator, who lived at the beginning of the fourth century and led the country to adopt Christianity as its official state religion in 301. The isolation of the Armenian Church, resulting from Persian rule and doctrinal differences with the rest of the Orthodox world (over the nature of Christ), has helped to foster feelings of religious nationalism. Among the legends circulated about Christian beginnings in Armenia is that Christ himself appeared to Gregory the Illuminator and showed him where to build the first church in the country. Other legends claim that the apostles Thomas and Bartholomew brought Christianity to Armenia between 35 and 60.

Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania

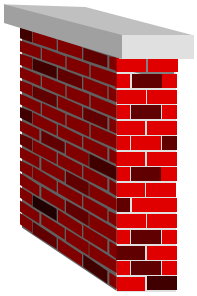




The Bulgarian, Serbian and Romanian Orthodox Churches were significantly influenced by the early missionary work of the Greek missionaries Cyril and Methodius. in the ninth century, but have legends suggesting a much earlier Christian history. The Khan (Tsar) of Bulgaria, Boris I, though initially wavering between Rome and Constantinople, eventually chose Eastern Christianity and gave free reign to the disciples

of Cyril and Methodius to establish a national church. The Bulgarian Church grew rapidly and was recognized as an independent Orthodox church body by Constantinople in 945. The Serbian people became Orthodox in the years following the baptism of Prince Mutimur at the end of the ninth century by followers of Cyril and Methodius. In Romania, Christianity had existed prior to the ninth century, but was influenced by the Slavonic Churches which grew up in surrounding countries as a result of the work of Cyril and Methodius and their followers.[69]

Why is this Belief a Barrier to Personal Faith?



· **Causes people to believe they stand in a special relationship to God simply because of their nationality**

· **Hampers Orthodox people from considering Christian witness that is not Orthodox because it is regarded as foreign**

· **Hinders Orthodox people from the realization that each individual is personally responsible before God**

Beliefs regarding the legends of Christian origins in Eastern European countries often emerge in conversations on spiritual matters. These legends create a barrier to the degree that they foster religious nationalism and cause people to believe that they stand in a special relationship to God simply because they live in the country which is uniquely the object of divine favor. They are often skeptical of any Christian witness that is not "Orthodox" because anything non-Orthodox is regarded as foreign. Many are baptized into the Orthodox Church while still a baby and grow up with the perception they have been Christian believers from birth. Such a belief hinders Eastern Orthodox people from the realization that each individual is personally responsible before God.

Turning Barriers into Bridges

• **Show the universality of God's care**

Emphasize that while a given nation's hopes are significant to God, he does not limit his care to any single nation. There is no country which is so favored that all its people are automatically acceptable to him, simply because of their nationality.

[69]Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 84-85.

- **Stress that God loves people of all nations**

Romans 10:13 indicates that all can be saved: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

- **Emphasize personal accountability before God**

Point out that every individual, regardless of nationality, is personally accountable for his or her response to Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 4:5; Rom. 9:6-8). Romans 14:12 says, “each of us will give an account of himself to God.”

Questions for Review

1. What is one rationale Orthodox give for praying to the saints?

2. What is one passage of Scripture that indicates it is not necessary to pray to the saints?

3. What does an icon depict?

4. How do Orthodox people use icons in their worship?

5. How does the idea that grace resides in an icon or relic distort the biblical concept of grace?

6. What is religious nationalism?

7. What is one way to turn the barrier of religious nationalism into a bridge to personal faith?

CONCLUSION

The foundational theological premise underlying this manual is that a person can be of Eastern Orthodox background and yet not have a personal faith in Jesus Christ. It is even possible for a person to faithfully attend an Eastern Orthodox Church, listening to the liturgy and teachings, and still never experience personal faith in Christ. Of course, this can also happen in an evangelical setting where people attend without ever really becoming a true believer. Jesus refers to this kind of person in the parable of the sower as the seed sown in a place where for one reason or another it does not produce a crop (Matt.13:3-23). He also compared this kind of person to a weed that grows up among wheat (Matt. 13:24-30).

However, in an Orthodox setting, the seed which is sown (the Orthodox belief system) may in itself create a barrier to personal faith in Christ. A critical theological theme of this project is that some of the key Orthodox beliefs pertaining to salvation actually pose barriers to the true knowledge of God. In fact, these barriers are akin to the "strongholds" addressed by Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:5. Therefore, the evangelical witness to people of Orthodox background, like Paul, is in many cases "engaged in confuting arguments and pulling down every barrier raised up against the knowledge of God."[70] The effective witness must move beyond the barriers, however, building bridges to personal faith in Jesus Christ. The approach of this manual is to use the barriers as common ground for spiritual discussion, turning them into bridges to personal faith in Christ.

Some might raise questions regarding the need for studying Orthodoxy in order to reach Orthodox people, wondering whether it would be just as effective to merely present the simple truths of the gospel and let the Holy Spirit do the work of conviction. While it is true that God's Spirit can speak through the unprepared person, the injunction of 1 Peter 3:15 remains the same, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." There is a sense in which a person cannot build a bridge until he or she knows where the river is.[71] Being prepared for witness to Orthodox people means knowing the differences between evangelical and Orthodox theology as it pertains to salvation. Knowing the differences, the witness is better equipped to build bridges.

Let me encourage you to put into practice what you have learned to reach people of Orthodox background for Christ. There is a summary chart that appears in Appendix B

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[70]This translation of 2 Cor. 10:5 is from the *Twentieth Century New Testament*, published by Moody Bible Institute.

[71]Analogy credit to Gerald Cornelius, field supervisor for the D. Min. project which led to the manual.

to help you remember the beliefs, barriers, and bridges discussed in the manual. The emphasis of this manual has been on barriers that keep people from a *personal faith in Jesus Christ* and on bridges to help them come into that relationship. Keep your conversations Christ-centered. In the end, with those to whom you bear witness, it is this relationship with Christ that will matter for eternity.

Appendix A

GLOSSARY

Apocrypha – books (such as 1 and 2 Esdras, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, etc.) considered part of the Bible by Catholics and Orthodox, but not by Protestants; sometimes referred to as the "Deuterocanonical books"

apostolic succession – idea that the leadership of the church has been passed down from the apostle Peter and other early apostles to the present

apophaticism - concept that God is best explained by what he is not, rather than what or who he is

atonement – sacrificial death to pay for sins; results in sins being forgiven

canon (of Scripture) – the writings that are considered inspired by God and part of his holy word the Bible

catechism – method of conveying doctrine to new Christians; often written in question and answer format

chrismation – in Orthodox understanding, the sacrament whereby a person receives the Holy Spirit; accompanied by annointing with oil immediately following baptism

deification – Orthodox term for the process of becoming more like God; involves the sharing of God's energies

ecumenical – involving several different denominations or faiths

essence of God – who God is, in terms of his character and being

energies of God - the actions of God

eucharist – the Lord's Supper, or communion

glasnost – "openness;" used in the Gorbachev-era and following to describe the freedoms in the former Soviet Union following the fall of Communism

glorification - the state whereby a Christian is transformed into the image of Christ

heychast – the practice of repetitive meditation with the goal of unifying heart and mind

in order to see the vision of the Divine Light

Holy Synod – political entity designed to control the Orthodox Church; originally established by the Russian tsar Peter the Great in the early 1700's

Holy Tradition – tradition of the church that is considered to be authoritative and inspired of God

icon – two-dimensional painting of a saint or biblical scene designed for spiritual meditation

iconoclast – opponent of icons

image of God – those unique attributes that God gave people at creation

justification – point at which a person is considered not guilty before God and is saved from his or her sin

likeness of God – the goal of the process of becoming more and more like God

liturgical calendar – schedule of church holidays, feasts, events, and ceremonies throughout the year

liturgy – the script for a service of worship

metropolitan - bishop of a chief city, a metropolis

patriarch - bishop of the most important city and diocese in a local church and normally the leading bishop of a country (*patria* means country)

proselytize – to seek to convert a person from one faith to another

prototype – the original person or idea that a symbol represents

relic – the remains of a saint (usually bones) or some article that was special to him or her (often piece of clothing)

religious nationalism - belief that people within a certain ethnic and religious group stand in a special relationship with God that is superior to that of other peoples

Russian Primary Chronicle – one of the earliest historical records of the Russian people; compiled in the period from approximately 1040-1118 A.D.

sacrament – in the Orthodox understanding, a ritual that conveys grace from God

sanctification – process of becoming more Christlike after one has already experienced justification (term more commonly used by Protestants than Orthodox)

Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was made by Jewish scholars during the two centuries prior to the time of Christ

theosis – Greek word for deification, becoming more like God

transcendence of God – God's separateness from and superiority to man

unction – annointing with oil for healing

veneration – in the Orthodox understanding, showing honor and respect to an icon or relic

Appendix B: SUMMARY CHART – BELIEFS, BARRIERS, BRIDGES

BELIEF	BARRIERS	BRIDGES
AUTHORITY AND TRADITION (p. 16) -the Orthodox Church's Holy Tradition is the source for belief and practice	· Leads people to assume it is the Church's responsibility (not theirs) to seek the truth · Leaves no room for questioning the Orthodox Church · Overemphasizes the corporate aspect of faith (to the exclusion of the personal aspect) · Causes people to think the church building is the only place God's Spirit works	· Refer to Scriptures in conversation re: spiritual matters (Acts 17:11) · Encourage Orthodox people to read the Bible themselves (Isa. 55:10-11) · Use an Orthodox version of the Bible when possible · Be willing to look at extra-biblical sources (1 Pet. 3:15) · Show that the Holy Spirit can work in their lives as individuals even when not in a church building (1 Kings 8:27)
DOCTRINE OF GOD (p. 21) -God is a mystery, unexplainable, and unknowable	· Overemphasizes mystery and transcendence of God · Gives people the sense that God cannot be personally experienced · Causes Orthodox to be reluctant to seek to understand God	· Share a testimony of the personal relationship you have with God (John 15:5; Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27) · Share Scriptures which help us understand God's character—there are some things about who He is that can be known (Ps. 99:9; Ps. 116:5; Lam. 3:23; Rom. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9; 1 John 4:8) · Admit "I don't know" when appropriate · Avoid spiritual formulas
FALL OF MAN AND NATURE OF SIN (p. 27) -sin is merely a wrong turn, not a separation from God	· Minimizes sin · Minimizes the atonement	· It is not necessary to convince most people of Orthodox background of their sinfulness · Address the severe consequences of sin in the life of an individual (Isa. 59:2) · Emphasize the necessity of God's punishing sin and the way Christ has taken that punishment on himself (Isa. 53:4-6; 1 John 4:10) · Stress with Orthodox people that Jesus' once-for-all death on the cross was final and sufficient atonement for sin (1 Pet. 3:18; 1 John 2:2)
VIEW OF GRACE (p. 31) -Grace is divine energy available through the sacraments	· Diminishes need for personal relationship with God · Distorts biblical concept of grace as unmerited and free	· Rather than discrediting sacraments and icons as ways for receiving grace, emphasize that grace is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 9:16) · Explain how grace is immediately received through faith and not by works (Titus 3:5)
CONCEPT OF SALVATION (p. 33) -salvation is a process of becoming acceptable to God	· Deludes one into believing that baptism and chrismation are sufficient for salvation (seems to make personal faith unnecessary) · Makes people think there is no way to be sure of one's salvation	· Show that baptism as is insufficient for salvation (Acts 8:34-39, 2:41, 18:8, 19:4-5; Matt. 28:19-20; Luke 23:39-43) · Emphasize that acceptance before God is both free and immediate for those who trust in Christ (Rom. 5:9-11) · Point out that one does not need to go through a life-long process of theosis in order to gain fellowship with God (Rom. 5:8) · Show the necessity of personal faith in Jesus (Rom. 14:12; 1 Peter 4:5) · Help them understand that salvation is a life-changing event, not a ritual (Isa. 29:13; 2 Cor. 5:17) · Emphasize that the believer can have assurance of salvation now (John 3:18; 1 John 5:13)
PRAYERS TO SAINTS (39) -saints are viewed as intercessors and as ones who help you become more like Christ	· Deflects to the saints worship and prayer that should go to God himself · Views saints as mediators between people and God · Replaces direct prayer to God	· Don't directly attack the practice of praying to saints—instead show that acceptance before God (and acceptance of our prayers) does not depend on our becoming like God (Rom. 5:8) · Point out that our acceptance before God and his attention to our prayers comes from the fact that He has already become like us (Heb. 4:14-16)
USE OF ICONS AND RELICS (p. 41) -icon veneration provides access to divine energy and power from above	· Gives the impression that icons and relics have spiritual power in and of themselves · Distorts the concept of grace—sees it as a power that can be acquired through an icon or relic rather than as saving grace from God · Tends to replace Jesus as the mediator between man and God in the minds of the people	· Acknowledge that Eastern theology does differentiate between idolatry and the veneration of icons · Affirm the value of learning from the examples of the saints depicted in the icons · Rather than rejecting icons outright, emphasize the full sense of the word "grace" in the New Testament and the nature of salvation as a free gift (Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8) · Show that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:4-5) · Explain that God desires a believer's devotion (Exod. 20:3-5; Exod. 34:14)
RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM (p. 45) -i.e., "to be Russian is to be Orthodox"	· Causes people to believe that they stand in a special relationship to God because of their country · Hampers people from considering non-Orthodox witness · Hinders Eastern Orthodox people from the realization that each individual is personally responsible before God	· Emphasize that no country is so favored that all its people are automatically acceptable to Him simply because of their nationality · Stress that God loves people of all nations (Rom. 10:13) · Point out that every individual, regardless of nationality, is personally accountable for his or her response to Jesus Christ (Rom. 9:6-8; Rom. 14:12, 1 Pet. 4:5)

Appendix C

THE ORTHODOX CALENDAR*

Feasts

The "great feasts" of Orthodoxy, as they occur in chronological order after September 1, are listed below. The first date represents the date these holidays are celebrated according to the Gregorian calendar, the second date is the date (according to the Gregorian calendar) on which the feast is held in regions such as Russia, Serbia, and Jerusalem which use the Julian calendar.

1. The Nativity of the Virgin Mary (Sep. 8/21) – begins the Christian year by celebrating birth of the one who bore Jesus
2. The Elevation of the Life-giving Cross (Sep. 14/27) – celebrates important events related to the cross
3. The Presentation of the Virgin Mary in the Temple (Nov. 21/Dec. 4) – celebrates Mary's complete devotion to God and her readiness for her vocation
4. Christmas (Dec. 25/Jan. 7) – celebrates the incarnation
5. Epiphany (Jan. 6/19) – celebrates the baptism of Christ
6. The Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Feb. 2/15) – celebrates Mary and Joseph's presentation of Jesus
7. The Annunciation (Mar. 25/Apr. 7)) – celebrates Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she would bear the Messiah
8. Palm Sunday (the Sunday before Easter) – celebrates the public presentation of Christ as King of the Jews
9. The Ascension (40 days after Easter) – celebrates the completion of Christ's work as he returns to the Father and the Spirit
10. Pentecost (50 days after Easter) – celebrates the birth of the Church through the gift of the Holy Spirit
11. The Transfiguration (Aug. 6/19) – celebrates the revelation of Christ's divine glory to the apostles
12. The Repose of the Virgin Mary (Aug. 15/28) – celebrates Mary's death and her "resurrection" three days later

Note: Easter, which celebrates the resurrection of Christ, is observed between Palm Sunday and The Ascension, but it is not considered one of the 12 feasts; instead, it is the great and central "Feast of Feasts."

Fasts

Four main fast periods are included in the ecclesiastical year. They are:

1. The Great Fast (Lent)--beginning on a Monday 7 weeks before Easter.
2. Fast of the Apostles--varying in length from 1 to 6 weeks; it begins on a Monday, 8 days after Pentecost, and ends on June 28--the eve of the feast of Saints Peter and Paul.
3. Fast of the Repose of the Virgin Mary--August 1 to 14.
4. Christmas Fast--lasting 40 days, from November 15 to December 24.

Individual fast days include the feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross (September 14), the Beheading of St. John the Baptist (August 29), and the eve of Epiphany (January 5), as well as all Wednesdays and Fridays. There is no fasting, however, between Christmas and Epiphany, during the tenth week before Easter, the week after Easter and the week after Pentecost.

Although the term denotes total abstinence from food or drink, fasting as practiced in the Orthodox Church means abstinence from meat, fish, dairy products, olive oil, and wine. Total abstinence is reserved for the fast of several hours duration preceding holy communion.

*****material adapted from "Companion to Orthodox Calendar" [world wide web page online]; available from http://www.goarch.org/access/Companion_to_Orthodox_Church/calendar.html; accessed 29 April 2001; Internet.

Appendix D

ORTHODOX CLERGY*

Titles

In Orthodoxy, the **bishop** is the leading church officer, and all bishops have exactly the same sacramental position in guiding the people of God. A bishop of a large and important area of leadership (usually called a diocese) may be called **archbishop** or **metropolitan**, the latter meaning simply the bishop of a chief city, a metropolis.

The **patriarch** is the bishop of the most important city and diocese in a local church and is normally the leading bishop of a country (*patria* means country). This is especially the case when within the self-governing church of which the Patriarch is primate there are other bishops with metropolitan sees. For example, in Russia the bishop of Moscow is the patriarch; the bishops of Kiev and Leningrad are metropolitans; and there are other archbishops and bishops within the local church.

All bishops, regardless of their title or the size and importance of their diocese, are identically equal with regard to their sacramental position. None is higher or greater than the other; none rules over another.

Offices

The Orthodox Church has the three classical Christian offices: bishop, priest (or presbyter) and deacon.

The **bishop** is the highest office since the bishop is the one responsible to guide the life of the church, to guard the faith and to preserve the unity of the churchly body in truth and love. Bishops are traditionally taken from the monks, and by a regulation dating from the 6th century, must be unmarried. A widowed priest or any unmarried man can be elected to the office of bishop.

The **priests** (or presbyters) carry on the normal pastoral functions in the Church and lead the local parish communities. They are usually married men. They must be married prior to their ordination and are not allowed to marry once after becoming a priest. Single priests or widowers may marry but in this case, they are no longer allowed to function in the ministry.

At the present time, the **diaconate** in the Church is usually a step to the priesthood, or else it exists solely as a liturgical ministry. The deacon may also be a married man, with the same conditions as those for the married priesthood.

*****adapted from Thomas Hopko, “Meeting the Orthodox” [world wide web page online]; available from http://www.oca.org/pages/orth_chri/Q-and-A_OLD/Meeting-the-Orthodox.html; accessed 29 April 2001; Internet.

Appendix E

STAGES IN THE PROCESS OF AN ORTHODOX PERSON COMING TO CHRIST

An Orthodox person usually goes through several stages in the process of coming to personal faith in Christ. An understanding of these stages gives the evangelical witness a better grasp of the theology surrounding the salvation experience and enables him or her to be more effective in reaching Orthodox people. The stages are:*****

(1) ***The stage of ignorance****:* An Orthodox person usually has not been taught the concept of salvation by faith. Either he is unaware of how to be saved, or he thinks he will be saved by works and by participating in the sacraments. Even if he reads the Scriptures, he feels unable to have certainty of salvation.

(2) ***The stage of confusion:*** At this stage, the Orthodox person is hearing preaching and reading of the Word of God, but still confuses salvation by works with salvation by faith. He seems to be thinking: "Certainly salvation is by faith! But we must do good works in order to go to Paradise."

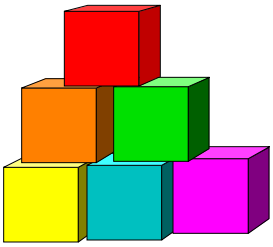
(3) ***The stage of clarification:*** After much exposure to the teaching of the Word of God, the Orthodox person eventually comes to the understanding that salvation is indeed by faith.

(4) ***The stage of trusting Christ:*** Usually this stage comes close on the heels of stage 3, or it may never come at all. Generally, much time is needed to make the gospel clear to an Orthodox person.

(5) ***The crisis of identity:*** Many times people of Eastern Orthodox background come to Christ through the witness of a non-Orthodox, or through Bible Study or evangelistic preaching. For a time, the new believer struggles with being loyal to Orthodoxy, while at the same time being frustrated at not being fed spiritually through his church.

(6) ***Estrangement from Orthodoxy:*** As the person matures in his faith, there is often a disillusionment with the Orthodox Church and resentment of the

institution which for so many years claimed to be the only source of spiritual truth yet failed to make the truth clear to him. A new believer who becomes hostile to the Orthodox Church has a difficult time relating to the priests and appreciating the tradition of the Church, which now seems meaningless to him. It is often during this stage that ties are cut with many Orthodox friends and acquaintances, thus limiting the future possibility of evangelizing them.



*****Adapted from *The Thailand Report: Reaching Nominal Orthodox*, 30. The Orthodox person in each stage is referred to simply as “he” or “him” for clarity’s sake (rather than “he or she” and “him or her”), but apply equally to an Orthodox female.

Appendix F

RABBIT'S FOOT RELIGION

by Dale Ledbetter (former IMB missionary to Ukraine)
January 2000 (reprinted with author's permission)

WORLDVIEW AND EVANGELISTIC ISSUES CONCERNING PEOPLES INFLUENCED BY RUSSIAN ORTHODOXY

INTRODUCTION

God has opened a wonderful window of opportunity to reap the harvest in the former Soviet Union. Over the past few years, thousands of short-term volunteers have been willing to take part in this great movement of God. The reported results have been outstanding. In fact, if one were to add up all of those who, according to their statistics, made a commitment to Christ then it would total over half the population. Unfortunately, on any given Sunday, less than one percent of the population can be found in any church of any kind. With such conflicting information, the natural tendency is to ask why. Certainly, better methods of follow-up at the local level need to be instituted. On the other hand, we need to realize that although the people of the former Soviet Union are similar to us in many respects, their decision making process concerning spiritual issues is very different from our western culture.

With this in mind, the following has been prepared, not as an authoritative guide by an expert in this field, but as a help to those who would like to participate in evangelism efforts of those people who live under the influence of Russian Orthodoxy.

It should be noted that official Orthodox theologians might disagree with many of the statements made in this article. Although their writings are often complicated, confusing, and ambiguous, there are some similarities with Protestant beliefs. However, this article is not only intended to summarize official Orthodox theology, but popular Orthodox beliefs as well. The issue of concern is not what the official doctrines of Orthodox Church are but what does the average person under its influence believe when confronted with spiritual matters. This is the target group of our evangelism efforts, and we should endeavor to learn all we can.

With this in mind, the purpose of this article is to summarize the basic popular theological beliefs and spiritual worldview of the people living under the scope and influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is hoped that this will serve as a helping guide to those of the Evangelical Protestant faith in reaching these people for Christ.

GENERAL BACKGROUND

For westerners, it is difficult to comprehend a religious heritage that is over 1000 years old. Prince Vladimer embraced Orthodox Christianity in 988 and since then, very little has changed. Even more difficult to understand is the fact that this part of the world never experienced the Renaissance or the Reformation. In many ways, it is like stepping back in time.

Russian Orthodoxy can by summarized by three "M"s. It is ***mysterious***, ***mystical,*** and ***magical***. The sacraments are referred to as mysteries and much of the popular understanding of a person's relationship to God through rituals is akin to mysticism and magic. Just as a child might believe his rabbit's foot brings good luck, so is the popular understanding of faith in Orthodoxy.

SOURCE OF AUTHORITY

It is incomprehensible to the Orthodox believer the idea that there is only one source of authority, the Bible.
With a heritage in some parts of the former Soviet Union dating back to the 4th century (Georgia, Armenia),
tradition is seen as the one and only true source of authority. The Bible is held in high regard but only as a product or result of tradition. The Bible is often treated like an icon by the general populace. The Orthodox Church's ability to proclaim truth is not limited to the Bible. In fact, it believes even if there were no Bible, the Church's traditions would still be true. A corporate understanding that encompasses the Scriptures, the writings of the Church Fathers, and many other sources are all considered equally valid because they all originate out of the Church's traditions.

THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

Below is a summary of the major beliefs found in Russian Orthodox thinking that differ from traditional Protestant beliefs.

<u>Fall of Man</u> – Adam and Eve were not created perfect. They were given the opportunity to gain fellowship with God which was set before them as the goal in their lives. They did not fall into grave sin. They simply took a wrong turn which forfeited their ability to reach this goal. This gave victory to Satan.

<u>Salvation</u> – In the Protestant Evangelical faith, salvation is seen as a process of *Justification* (being saved), *Sanctification* (daily being made godly), and *Glorification* (ultimately being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ). In Orthodoxy, there is very little emphasis on the issue of justification. Salvation is thought of in terms of *theosis*

(deification or becoming god). The broken relationship that man has with God is not considered important. The goal is to reclaim the path of *theosis (deification)* forfeited at the fall. Participation in the sacraments of the Church, prayer, fasting, and other works are necessary means for achievement of this purpose.

Note: In official doctrines, *theosis* (*deification*) is found to be similar to the Protestant belief of being conformed to God's likeness in the sanctification process. However, the mysterious, mystical, and magical extremes are widely circulated in popular belief.

Atonement – Christ's sacrifice was a victory over the powers of Satan. This breaks man free allowing him to continue on the path of *theosis* (*deification*). The necessity of Christ's sacrifice as payment for man's sin is considered a minor issue.

Grace – "Unmerited favor" is not found in the Orthodox concept of grace. Grace is not something good that God gives to man which he does not deserve. Grace is the energies (activities and operations) of God, through the Orthodox Church, which lead to deification of believers. A person receives it by partaking of the sacraments and by human effort. The process begins at one's baptism, is maintained with penance, and achieved temporarily through participation in the Eucharist (Lord's Supper) when the participant literally becomes one with Christ. Interestingly, personal faith is not necessary. Simple participation (voluntarily or involuntarily) in the sacraments gives grace to the individual.

Church - The Church is not simply a body of called out believers. It is not simply a building. The Church is literally God Incarnate through the person of the Holy Spirit. It is heaven on earth. Salvation can not take place outside of the Orthodox Church.

SAINTS, ICONS, AND RELICS

In official doctrines, saints are only seen as intercessors. However, in popular belief, these saints are thought of as mediators and protectors. They are believed to pray for the Orthodox believer just like Protestant believers pray for each other today. Mary is revered above all others because she, as the Mother of God, is the only one who most completely achieved the goal of *theosis* (*deification*).

These saints are accessed through their icons and relics. All Orthodox churches have icons. Many also have relics of a departed saint. Orthodoxy is a very ritualistic religion filled with sights, smells, and sounds. Icons play a major role in these rituals and are thought of as not only representing the person of their image, but actually being the essence of that person. In other words, when a person lights a candle, kisses, or says a prayer in front of an icon, they are invoking the help of that person. They are asking for their help in solving personal problems and in achieving *theosis* (*deification*). Although the person represented by the icon has passed on to the next world, the grace obtained by

that saint continues to dwell in their icons and relics and can be accessed by the participant through any number of rituals.

PRACTICAL ISSUES

Certainly, this only scratches the surface of this most important subject. The main issue that can be gleaned from this brief summary, however, is that the people of the former Soviet Union who are under the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church think differently about spiritual issues when compared to western thought. Religion and spiritual issues are thought of as rituals that must be accomplished in order to mystically and magically receive mysterious grace from God.

With this in mind, standard western methods of witnessing such as EE, CWT, The Four Spiritual Laws, The Roman Road, etc. all fall short of communicating the true meaning of the gospel. The people hear the message but interpret it through their cultural and religious experiences. They perceive the idea of praying a sinner's prayer as nothing more than a Protestant ritual that might help them. In fact, they will often readily and willingly pray a sinner's prayer even without hearing the gospel message. Certainly, some understand and genuine salvation does take place. In most cases, however, their lives do not change and they do not embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In other words, the only thing that they perceive they are doing is to add what they believe to be a Protestant ritual to their Orthodox ones.

SUMMARY

It is very tempting to compare Russian Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism but in reality, there are more differences between them than exist between Protestantism and Catholicism. Many of its rituals are classic examples of syncretism. Praying to icons, for example, to invoke the help of departed saints, is not too far removed from ancestor worship in pagan, animistic cultures. Grace is received through a variety of magical, ritualistic methods. The Church's concept of God is extremely mystical and mysterious.

It should be noted again, however, that many of the Church's official doctrines are similar to that of the Protestant faith. Some of these could be disputed but that is beyond the scope of this article. Three major differences surface, however, that must be addressed.

1. Man's sinful condition - Orthodoxy believes he only took a wrong turn off the path of deification.
2. Grace – Orthodoxy believes grace is simply God's activities and work through the Church's rituals.
3. Salvation – Orthodoxy believes it to be the goal of obtaining deification without

concern for justification.

STRATEGY AND RESPONSE

The people who live under the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church do not have to be convinced of the basics tenants of Christianity. Even the average person on the street knows something about the fact that God created the world, man is sinful, Jesus was born of a virgin and lived a perfect life, died on a cross, and rose again. Unlike most people from the west, he does not have to be convinced he is a sinner and headed to hell.

If traditional western methods falls short, how can we communicate the true gospel to them? What is a proper strategy and method of spreading the message of salvation among these people? With this in mind, the following steps are highly recommended

1. Visitors to this part of the world must come with a servant's attitude. Self-serving agendas and quick fixes are not the answer. You must spend time with the people. They are very inquisitive by nature and would like to speak with you at length. Mass evangelistic methods should only be used as a tool to gather interested people into more intimate follow-up discussions. Successes should be measured not only by the number of people who indicate decisions for Christ but by the quality of the seed planted as well.

2. Realize that most of the people you will witness to do not attend any church. They will not be rooted in their faith. With this in mind, the subject of Orthodox beliefs will probably not even surface. Should the subject come up, it is best never to argue. There are only two possible results to arguing. First, you could lose the argument and lose all credibility. Second, even if you win the argument, you destroy their self esteem. Simply emphasize the positive aspects of the gospel message.

3. Please realize that none of us are experts on the complicated subject of Russian Orthodoxy. This summary is only the tip of the iceberg. The purpose of sharing this is to acquaint you with the mind-set and worldview of your target audience. It is not meant as ammunition for a frontal attack on Orthodoxy.

4. The western method of presenting the gospel must be modified. Spend less time telling the basic tenants of the faith and spend more time encouraging them to have a personal relationship with the Lord. Most western methods emphasize the free gift of salvation and saying a sinner's prayer. Certainly, these issues are genuine, but much more emphasis must be placed on repentance and Lordship. Some suggested passages are: Ezekiel 14:6; 18:30b; Mt. 3:2, 4:17; Mark 1:15, 6:12; Luke 13:3,5; Acts 2:38, 3:19, 8:22, 17:30, 26:20, Rev. 3:3 and 3:19. Emphasize the fact that God forgives us completely and places us in a position of acceptance immediately upon our repentance.

Emphasize that grace is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8,9) that can not be earned or deserved. Explain how Christ's sacrifice restores us into an immediate fellowship with God. Explain how grace is immediately received through faith and not by works. Make them understand the decision of salvation is a life changing one; not simply a ritual.

5. In a positive way, emphasize that we can know God personally. We have access to Him through the work that Jesus did on the cross and the Holy Spirit's work today. If the issue arises, do not negate their belief in prayers to icons, etc. Simply teach them there is a better way. Explain that we have God's Spirit interceding for us (Romans 8:26). Stress that since we have direct access to God through Christ's work, there is no need for to have an earthly intercessor to do the same.

6. Please make contact with a local Baptist (Protestant) church in the area in advance and make specific plans to invite interested individuals to this church. It would be a good idea to have the address and contact information of the church readily available.

7. Depend on the Holy Spirit for wisdom in each situation.

I trust this article has helped you understand the mind-set and worldview of the people influenced by the Russian Orthodox Church. We are all privileged to be a part of what God is doing. May God richly bless your endeavors for His kingdom.

Sources of information available upon request.

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