

CRISIS OF SOTERIOLOGY:  
DANGER AND OPPORTUNITY  
FOR WESTERN EVANGELICAL EVANGELISM  
IN EASTERN ORTHODOX RUSSIA

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## INTRODUCTION

American Evangelicals have invaded Russia with the good news of the Gospel for almost all of the 1990's. Often lost among the reports of successes are the growing crises in communication between Evangelicals and the Russian Orthodox Church – a church which has been in existence for over a thousand years. One central crisis is that the two confessions understand soteriology in very different ways. Although only a small fraction of Russians are active in Orthodox churches, the identity and tenets of Orthodoxy have had at least some influence on almost all Russians. And, in spite of the fact that many Russians have been reached for Christ by Evangelicals with no regard for Russian Orthodoxy, deep and lasting change to Russian religious thought is not likely to take place unless Evangelicals understand Russian Orthodoxy and communicate through word and deed in a way that will not be rejected outright by the Russian culture.

The purpose of this short paper is to briefly introduce the central aspects of this crisis, and then offer a few perspectives on how the dangers can lead to opportunities for fruitful evangelistic work in Russia. I will first contrast Orthodox and Evangelical soteriology, then list what I perceive as the major dangers and opportunities that arise out of the battle between the contrasting confessions.

## RUSSIAN ORTHODOX SOTERIOLOGY

### 1. Orthodoxy as the True Church

**a. History** – Any interaction with Eastern Orthodoxy must begin with an understanding of the self-image of the Orthodox churches. The Orthodox Church believes that its forms, sacraments and traditions have continued uninterruptedly from the apostles themselves.<sup>1</sup> When Constantinople and Rome split apart in 1054, the Eastern branch of Christendom considered that the West had deviated from the truth, leaving the East to preserve the initial teachings of the undivided church.<sup>2</sup> Orthodoxy then continued in the tradition which had been formerly accepted by all Christians as the common and universal teaching of the church.<sup>3</sup> “The doctrinal continuity of the Orthodox Church from the earliest time is a cardinal tenet of the Orthodox Church.”<sup>4</sup>

**b. Tradition** – Although the Orthodox Church considers the Scriptures to be the “supreme expression of God’s revelation,”<sup>5</sup> it is not considered the only authoritative source for doctrine and practice. “While the apostolic deposit finds unique articulation in the written tradition of canonical Scripture, it is not confined or limited to the biblical text, but finds fuller expression in extracanonical tradition.”<sup>6</sup> Thus the doctrinal continuity mentioned above must be seen as contained within the Orthodox traditions, and not just in their interpretation of biblical texts.

**c. Authority** – Given the Orthodox view of church history and the nature of tradition, it is no surprise that Orthodoxy considers that authoritative truth is not to be found outside of the Orthodox church.<sup>7</sup> The church itself is considered to be infallible, and the result is that the ecumenical councils and other traditions have

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<sup>1</sup> John Karmaris, *Concerning the Sacraments* in Daniel B. Clendenin, ed., *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995, p.30.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Moment of Truth for Orthodoxy* in *Ibid*, p. 206

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> James Stamooolis, *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994, p. 109.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 110.

<sup>7</sup> George Florovsky, *The Function of Tradition in the Ancient Church*, in Daniel B. Clendenin, ed., *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995, p. 112.

authority equal to that of the Bible.<sup>8</sup> The Church has no external or dogmatic authority, but is itself the authority, a fact guaranteed by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church. "...the only ultimate theological criterion to which Orthodoxy appeals is the living presence of God himself, who safeguards the church and promises through his Spirit to lead us and guide us into all truth."<sup>9</sup>

**2. Orthodox Forms as Normative for the World** – Not only is the Orthodox Church the true church of God on earth, her forms are the true forms to which all Christians everywhere must submit.

**a. Liturgy** – The word "Orthodoxy" signifies both right belief and right worship to the Orthodox Church. It is just as important to worship correctly as it is to believe the right truths. In fact, Orthodoxy understands doctrine mainly in the context of divine worship.<sup>10</sup> "Into the holy liturgy which expresses their faith, the Orthodox peoples have poured their whole religious experience."<sup>11</sup> The liturgy is so central to Orthodox faith that it is seen as both the method and the aim of Orthodox missions. The extension of the Orthodox to all the nations is inseparable from carrying the liturgy intact.

**b. Sacraments** – For the Orthodox Church, baptism, communion, and other church activities are far more than symbolic acts. They are sacraments in the fullest sense. They are seen to transmit grace to the believer, resulting in true communion with Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup> "Through the actions of the sacraments, the salvific power of God completes in us the process of sanctification." "It is for this reason that the sacraments occupy such a prominent place in the Orthodox conscience."<sup>13</sup> It would not be enough for non-Orthodox Christians to try to copy these sacraments. The Orthodox Church believes that divine grace is not dispensed outside of the true church, and does not recognize as valid that which is performed outside of its own walls.<sup>14</sup>

**3. Salvation as an Orthodox Process** – Since Orthodoxy claims to be the one true Church, and since its sacraments are essential to salvation, it is clear that, according to their confession, salvation does not take place outside of the Orthodox Church. In addition, the very notion of salvation in Orthodoxy differs greatly from that of evangelical Christians. The elements of salvation in Orthodox soteriology are as follows:

**a. Baptism** – Water baptism is the means by which believers enter into salvation according to Orthodox teaching. Much more than a symbolic act, baptism is considered to transmit justifying and regenerating grace.<sup>15</sup> Every statement made about water baptism in Orthodox teaching is made about the combination of justification and regeneration in evangelical teaching. By it a person is said to be made a member of the mystical body of Christ and a partaker of the divine nature.<sup>16</sup> "Indeed, through this sacrament those who believe are cleansed of original sin and all actual sins (if they be adults). All of these sins are totally uprooted and obliterated,

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<sup>8</sup> George Florovsky, *The Authority of the Ancient Councils and the Tradition of the Fathers*, in Clendenin, ed. *Ibid*, p. 124.

<sup>9</sup> Clendenin, p. 107.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Ware, *The Earthly Heaven*, in Clendenin, ed. *Ibid*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Karmaris, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 24.

together with their guilt and their due punishment...<sup>17</sup> Consistent with the insistence on proper liturgy and form in Orthodoxy, even the form of baptism is prescribed: “In order for the sacrament of baptism to be considered valid, it is necessary that the person being baptized be immersed and raised up three times in water which has been sanctified.”<sup>18</sup>

**b. Chrismation** – This is a sacrament unknown to Evangelicals, which is normally performed at baptism. The newly baptized person is anointed by the priest with a mixture of sweet-smelling spices, in the form of a cross, on various parts of the body. Through this sacrament it is believed that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are received, together with a power that enables them to develop their new spiritual state.<sup>19</sup> Like baptism, it is a one-time act.

**c. Theosis** – This is a term that denotes the central meaning of salvation in Orthodoxy, which is that a believer partakes in a union with God. Although the believer remains human by nature, he begins to “participate in God by means of the divine energies or grace.”<sup>20</sup> This is a commonly misunderstood teaching, partly because it is often termed “deification.”<sup>21</sup> It is this process that is the central aspect of salvation according to Orthodox teaching, in contrast to the focus on legal justification in Western teaching. “Orthodox theologians contend that in the West the doctrines of sin and salvation have been unduly dominated by legal, juridical, and forensic categories.”<sup>22</sup> The restoring of a mystical union with God, a process not completed in this life, is the focus of Orthodox soteriology, and one does not hear of God declaring sinners righteous on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ. “In the history of Orthodox theology...it is startling to observe the near total absence of any mention of the idea of justification by faith.”<sup>23</sup> Unlike evangelical soteriology, in Orthodox teaching there is no clear distinction between justification and sanctification.

**d. The Eucharist** – The Holy Eucharist is the all-embracing sacrament of the Orthodox Church.<sup>24</sup> “In the Holy Eucharist the faithful truly participate in the real body and blood of Christ. They are mystically united with and incorporated into him...”<sup>25</sup> The Orthodox Church thus accepts that the elements of bread and wine are changed into Christ’s very body and blood. Partaking of the Eucharist is so critical as to be placed on a level of importance with baptism in the process of salvation.<sup>26</sup> As with other sacraments, there is no true Eucharist outside of the Orthodox Church, a fact which excludes all non-Orthodox people from the saving life of Jesus Christ.

**e. Repentance** – A separate sacrament of repentance, or penance, is practiced in the Orthodox Church. This sacrament is critical to an ongoing standing with God. “Through our repentance God forgives the sins we have committed after baptism, provided we have frankly repented of them, and have confessed them before

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>20</sup> Clendenin, p. 130.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 121.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 122.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 123.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Missionary Imperative in the Orthodox Tradition*, in Clendenin, ed. *Ibid*, p. 198.

<sup>25</sup> Karmaris, p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

the bishop or priest. Thus penance, the sacrament of repentance, is characterized as a second baptism.”<sup>27</sup>

**4. The Insecurity of the Believer** – It should be clear from the above that an Orthodox believer has no assurance of salvation in this life. He can never consider that his position before God is secure; he is always in process.

## EVANGELICAL ATTITUDES AND APPROACHES IN RUSSIA

**1. Ignorance of Orthodoxy** – Eastern Orthodoxy has played a very small part in the religious life of America. “Thus most Christians in the West encounter Orthodoxy from the perspective of near total ignorance or mystification bordering on suspicion.”<sup>28</sup> Many from the West think that “Orthodox” is the name of a denomination, often labeling it a Protestant one at that. Evangelicals who are working in Russia may not be aware of the claim of Orthodoxy to be the true Church, and that their evangelical doctrines and practices are considered heretical. Without the foundation of this understanding, any communication between Evangelicals and Orthodox Christians will be greatly hindered.

**2. Doctrinal Approach** – Evangelicals begin their understanding of truth from the principle that the Scriptures can stand alone. They may be assuming that Orthodoxy will not oppose this principle. However, “it is precisely this view of the self-sufficiency of Scripture, elevated above the church, that Orthodoxy considers... ‘the sin of the Reformation,’ the consequences of which are arbitrary, subjective, and individualistic interpretations of the gospel.” Evangelicals want to debate doctrine and examine church teaching and practice by interpreting the Bible, but this is an approach that will not work in discussions with Orthodox believers. In their view “Scripture does not stand over the church but within the church, and in that sense its authority is derivative rather than independent and direct. By itself and without the church the Bible would not be understood, or would be liable to great misunderstanding...”<sup>29</sup> Evangelicals, being outside of the true church, will not be allowed to enter into a discussion of what is true.

**3. Legal Orientation** – As mentioned above, Evangelicals are considered by Orthodox theologians to be distorting the message of the Bible by their focus on the legal aspects of justification. Yet Evangelicals consider this the very key point that they want to get across in explaining the finished work of Christ and eternal life. They are thus unwittingly confirming the suspicions of the Orthodox leaders and serving as an easy target for attack.

**4. Disdain for Liturgy** – American evangelicals commonly reject a liturgical approach to worship due to its association with spiritual deadness in their own context. A belief that the use of liturgy is not a proper means to worship will greatly hinder any communication with Russian Orthodox people. In addition, some Evangelicals may be tempted to expect that they could offer an evangelical form of liturgy that would become acceptable in the Orthodox context. Yet, as noted above, changes in liturgy are extremely serious (even very minor ones). Orthodox worship is a “package deal” that cannot be taken apart or reconsidered. The liturgy is considered to be beautiful and moving because it is timeless, and modern changes are not tolerated.

**5. Simplistic Message** – Evangelicals who do not respect the richness of Orthodox history, worship and teaching tend to offer messages that are frightfully

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29.

<sup>28</sup> Clendenin, p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> Clendenin, p. 105-6.

simplistic in contrast. Some of this is due to ignorance, as mentioned above. But some is also due to a spiritual and intellectual laziness that is not truly prepared to deal with the challenge of communicating in an Orthodox context.

**6. Individualism** – Often the motivations utilized in Western presentations of the Gospel do not appeal to people trained in the Orthodox way. In contrast to the common evangelical approach, “the Orthodox idea of evangelism is free from individualistic and spiritualistic connotations. The church, the sacrament of Christ, is not a religious society of converts, an organization to satisfy the religious needs of man.”<sup>30</sup>

## **CURRENT DANGERS FOR EVANGELICAL MISSIONS IN RUSSIA**

Many dangers for Evangelicals could be listed in response to the contrast between the Russian Orthodox soteriology and the American Evangelical approaches named above. The main danger is outright rejection of Evangelicals before they can have a fair chance to fully communicate their message. Some of the more common bases of rejection would be the following:

**1. Rejection as Ignorant People** – Russians commonly view Americans as people who are spiritually shallow, overwhelmed by the pettiness of their “pop” culture. Too often Evangelicals witnessing in Russia support this contention by their ignorance of Russian culture, history, and religion (all of which is Orthodox to the core). A common response to Americans coming to Russia is: “What can they possibly have to tell us about spiritual matters?” If continued, this lack of proper preparation for communicating in the Russian context will continue to mark Evangelicals as unworthy of a serious hearing.

**2. Rejection as Vulgar Worshipers** – Orthodox worship is majestic, solemn and beautiful to the Russian ear. An expectation of such an atmosphere of worship is the attitude many Russians who have exposure to Orthodoxy either first hand or through the media. Many have a resulting distaste for the casual and plain approach to worship preferred by Evangelicals from the West. To them it feels too common, even vulgar, and is not considered a serious approach to our holy and mysterious God.

**3. Rejection as Rationalists** – The spiritual emphases between East and West are like two sides of the brain. The West tends to look at the East as being too mystical and too ready to abandon attempts to systematize doctrine in favor of considering the truths to be beyond the reach of mortal man. The East sees the West as being too logical and too ready to place faith in its ability to understand God. There is a tendency among Evangelicals to argue with reason as opposed to letting their lives speak for the reality of Jesus Christ in them. This approach will not have the respect among the Orthodox, who value experience over doctrine.

**4. Rejection as Worldly** – The Orthodox look at their approach to life and worship as a way to bring heaven down to earth. This otherworldly perspective causes them to look with disfavor on the attempts of Evangelicals to behave and communicate in a way that makes sense to the man of the world. Attempts to contextualize the gospel will thus often be interpreted as worldliness, and Evangelicals will not be respected.

**5. Rejection as Heretics** – This is the most serious basis of rejection, since it will undermine the very heart of the message that Evangelicals bring – that the average person can receive the Word of God and become a true believer in Jesus Christ apart from the Orthodox Church (or any other religious institution). The claim

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<sup>30</sup> Schmemmann, *Missionary Imperative*, p. 200.

of Orthodoxy to be the preserver of the pure truth of God for men closes the door to outsiders who claim to bring Christianity to Russians. To accept Orthodoxy is to receive the complete package of the faith, including all the forms of expression that are considered to be authoritative traditions. The work of Evangelicals in Russia is thus considered a cancerous infiltration into the territory of the true Church. Evangelicals are not and will not be considered partners with the Orthodox Church in the work of the evangelization of Russia. The products of their evangelical work will still be heretics, detached from their Mother.

## **CURRENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR EVANGELICALS IN RUSSIA**

In spite of the dangers listed above for Evangelicals in Russia, there are some opportunities presented for them in the midst of the theological crisis. The following are four of the key current opportunities of which Americans should be aware:

**1. Lack of Identity among Russia Youth** – A main premise of this paper is that Russians are influenced by Orthodoxy at varying levels. Most of the dangers and problems discussed in this paper relate to (a) Working alongside Orthodox leaders in the task of Russian evangelism and (b) Reaching Russians who are heavily influenced by Orthodox teaching and practice. The reality is that a great many of the Russian youth do not look to the Orthodox Church to define for them what should be Russian religion or culture. Seventy years of communism effectively removed Orthodoxy from its place of power in defining Russian reality. Modern Russian youth are looking as much to the West for answers as they are to Russian history, and there is much cultural confusion as a result. The key opportunity is to show them how Jesus Christ answers their deepest needs within their own context. Many of them feel that Orthodoxy is out of date, or else pay it respect only from a distance. Evangelicals must fill in this gap of truth and life for a new generation of Russian Christians.

**2. Weakness of Spiritual Life among Orthodox** – Even at the peak of the power of Orthodoxy in Russia, it was often said that “the Russian masses were only superficially Christian...”<sup>31</sup> This situation continues today. “The lack of real piety and Christian theological understanding among the Orthodox constituency has not gone unnoticed by Orthodox clergy and theologians.”<sup>32</sup> For Evangelicals, this weakness among the Orthodox only becomes an opportunity if they can effectively model spiritual maturity as they labor in Russia. The evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of a witness is every bit as critical as his proper explanation of the gospel message. Russians who are trusting in sacraments and rituals, but lack true spiritual life, need to see that the lives of Evangelicals offer something that they don’t have. If they don’t, then there is no reason to take the frightening step out of Orthodoxy.

**3. Variation among Orthodox Leadership** – The official pronouncements of the Russian Orthodox Church reflect the principles discussed in this paper, especially as they relate to relationships with Protestants. However, “...an individual Orthodox theologian might take a more latitudinarian stance.”<sup>33</sup> One is able to discover varying degrees of theological leeway in today’s Russian Orthodox setting,<sup>34</sup> and this presents an opportunity for perceptive Evangelicals. Recent movements in Russia have shown that “...a number of individual Orthodox priests exhibit in their own life and thinking a large measure of ecumenicity and empathy toward Protestants, along with strong

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<sup>31</sup> Stamooolis, p. 129.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Clendenin, p. 143.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*



evangelical inclinations.”<sup>35</sup> Evangelicals are finding bridges of communication with such leaders, but must still be very wise and discerning, not assuming that more is held in common than is really the case. In addition, priests who exhibit such tolerance and acceptance may often be excluded from official Orthodoxy, in which case Evangelicals will have made no headway in gaining a hearing among committed Orthodox believers.

**4. Compatibility in Theology** – There is no need for Evangelicals to seek to expose and maximize the differences in theology that they find as they examine Russian Orthodoxy. Many doctrines that appear to be strange and unbiblical, such as the doctrine of theosis, appear much more acceptable once studied carefully. Many misunderstandings can be cleared up with open-minded research and contemplation. The emphases of Orthodox Christianity can often be embraced by Evangelicals, who must be able to show that they also promote the same values. Recognizing and building on compatible teaching may present one of the best opportunities for Evangelicals to make headway in Orthodox Russia.

## CONCLUSION

Evangelicals in Russia will need to pay attention to Russian Orthodoxy in order to be most effective in their task of communication. They will need to recognize the differences in communicating to Russians all along the Orthodox spectrum. The deeply committed are different from the marginal Orthodox, and both are different from the indifferent outsider. The message must be contextualized in different ways for different groups, but the flavor of Orthodoxy must always be appreciated if one is to reach deeply into the Russian heart.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 142.