

# EASTERN ORTHODOXY

(This is one of a series of three resources related to reaching students from Eastern Europe. The other two are: Roman Catholicism; Ministering to students from Eastern Europe)

## 1. BACKGROUND.

Orthodox Christianity is a family of self-governing churches which are united by a common faith expressed especially in the Nicene Creed of AD 325 (see appendix) and the seven Ecumenical Councils of the Early Church. There is equality among the leaders of the different national churches, although the Ecumenical Patriarch based in Istanbul is given special honour because of its importance in early Christian history.

It is estimated that there are over 300,000,000 Orthodox believers, with between one third and half of these being in Russia. Countries today with significant Orthodox communities include Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Greece, Romania, Armenia and to a lesser extent Turkey, Syria, Cyprus, Poland, Albania, Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The story of Orthodoxy begins in Byzantium, located in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire at the site of modern day Istanbul. Constantine the Great, the Roman Emperor, relocated his capital there in AD 325 and renamed it Constantinople five years later. It became the wealthiest of all cities in the early Christian world. Approximately ninety years after the founding of Constantinople, Rome fell in AD 410. Constantinople now became the new Rome (centre of political dominance), the new Jerusalem (centre of religious dominance), and the new Athens (centre of educational dominance).

The Eastern Church has experienced several significant divisions. The first two took place in AD 431 involving the Church of the East (modern day Iraq and Iran); the second took place in AD 451 involving Syrians, Copts, Armenians and Ethiopians. Both of these disputes were Christological in nature, taking different views on how Christ's divinity and humanity were combined in his one person.

By far and away the biggest division occurred in 1054, when the church of the East (Orthodox) separated from the church of the West (Roman Catholic Church) in what is known as the Great Schism. Reasons for this included different histories of the Eastern and Western churches, since the move of the capital of Rome from Italy to Constantinople (Istanbul) in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Mingled with this were increasing differences of theology, language and culture over the centuries.

The Orthodox Church believes that it is the church which has preserved theological and historical continuity from the apostolic period until now. According to Irenaeus of Lyons AD 130-200 this continuity consists of three elements:

- Tradition of revelation handed down in the Scriptures
- Tradition of doctrine derived from the apostles and contained in the Rule of Faith
- Tradition of ecclesiastical structure starting with those whom the apostles appointed as bishops in the churches...and the succession until current times.

It is not surprising therefore, that the Orthodox Church understands itself to be the true church of Jesus Christ on earth.

## 2 Beliefs

### 2.1 What do Evangelical Christians believe?

## Important Scriptures

- One God - Isaiah 43:10, Isaiah 44:6, Isaiah 44:24, Isaiah 45:22
- Father is God - Galatians 1:3, 1 Peter 1:3, Jude 1
- Jesus Christ is God - Isaiah 9:6, John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:15-17, Hebrews 1:1-12
- Holy Spirit is God - Job 33:4, Psalms 104:30, John 16:7-15, Hebrews 9:14, Hebrews 10:15-18
- Sin is falling short of the glory of God - Romans 3:23
- Wages of 'sin' is death - Romans 6:23
- Sin is not doing what you know is right - James 4:17
- What ever is not of faith is sin - Romans 14:23
- The Law shows we are sinners - Romans 3:19-23
- All people sin - Ecclesiastes 7:20
- Sin separated us from God [Old Covenant] - Isaiah 59:2
- Jesus sacrifice reconciled us to God [New Covenant] - Colossians 1:19-22
- If we say we have not sinned we say God is a liar - 1 John 1:10
- Sin is lawlessness - 1 John 3:4
- Jesus came to save sinners - 1 Timothy 1:15
- Jesus died for sinners - Romans 5:8
- Paul said he was a sinner - 1 Timothy 1:15
- Devil is a real being - Matthew 4:1-11
- Devil fell from heaven - Luke 10:18
- Devil deceives people - John 8:44 & 2 Corinthians 11:3, 13-15
- Devil seeks to destroy people - 1 Peter 5:8-9
- Devil will be thrown into the lake of fire - Revelation 20:10
- Heaven is a real place - Revelation 4 & 19:1-6
- The Father is in heaven - Matthew 6:9
- Jesus and the Father are in heaven - Revelation 5:1-14
- Those who are born again will go to heaven - 1 Peter 1:3-5
- A new heaven and new earth one day - Revelation 21-22
- Hell is a literal place - Luke 16:19-31
- Those whose names are not written in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire - Revelation 20:11-15
- Jesus warned of a literal hell and place of torment - Matthew 10:28

## 2.2 Common ground between Evangelicals and the Orthodox Church

This common ground is largely hidden from sight and can only be seen when we are prepared to look beneath the surface. This hiddenness exists partly because neither Orthodoxy nor Evangelicalism has had first hand experience of each other throughout history. At the level of external appearances Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism seem poles apart, since Orthodoxy uses a long elaborate liturgy with formalised ceremonial and colourful vestments, and sometimes in an ancient language. The mystical ethos of Orthodox spirituality coupled with the contemplative and passive flavour of their discipleship contrast markedly with Evangelical spirituality. So where then is the common ground?

**Doctrinal conservatism.** Both Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism are conservative in holding to the apostolic presentation of Jesus Christ, the giving of the Spirit and the birth of the church in the New testament. Both adhere to the truths expressed by the creedal declarations of the Early Church, especially as expressed in the Nicene Creed. See appendix.

**Scripture.** Undergirding these shared creedal convictions is an equally shared high view of Scripture as inspired by God as expressed in 2 Tim 3.16. Different ways in worship and personal devotion give expression to the holiness of Scripture.

**God.** Both traditions understand God to be the creator and sustainer of the world which depends on God for its existence and is not self contained or self explanatory.

**Eschatology** (or what happens at the end of time!). Like Evangelicals Orthodox believe in the visible and public return of Christ as Lord and King, the bodily resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. This is not merely glory for the individual, but the consummation of all things in Christ. Orthodoxy has a well developed sense of cosmic redemption in which the whole created order is restored to perfection.

**Church and its mission.** Orthodoxy has a strong focus on the church, while Evangelicalism is more a movement or constituency which exists between different churches. However, Evangelicalism and Orthodoxy share the same conviction that salvation is received in human experience and is inseparable from incorporation into the Christian community. If the Great Commission in Matt 28 leads to activism for Evangelicals, for Orthodox it leads more to a "Come and see"...approach.

**Christian experience.** Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism also share common ground in the Christian experience of the Holy Spirit. While Orthodoxy may envisage this more in sacramental and ecclesial terms, both agree that men and women are called to experience regeneration and rebirth into the life of God himself through the Holy Spirit, who gives us access into the transcendent realm of experience of Almighty God.

**Ethics.** Orthodox and Evangelicals share considerable common ground on contemporary ethical issues, especially ecology and sexual ethics. Both share a belief in the divine ordering of marriage, the family and refuse to recognise homosexual practice as acceptable in the sight of God.

## 2.3 Differences between Evangelicalism and Orthodoxy.

**Church and movement.** If Evangelicalism is a constituency or movement across various churches, Orthodoxy understands itself to be the church. Communication and relationships can therefore be difficult, because the Orthodox are more used to relating to institutions, i.e. a united and visible church tradition. Thus Orthodoxy has a deep reverence for the church and a natural reluctance to criticise it, since it is not just a collection of believers or forgiven sinners, but the holy body of Christ embracing a presence both on earth and in heaven.

**Scripture and Tradition.** If Evangelicals want individuals to engage directly with the text of Scripture, the Orthodox desire to read the text within the context of Tradition and together with all the faithful. While Evangelicals speak of the Bible as having final authority, Orthodoxy speaks of the Tradition of the church of

which Scripture is a part and without which Scripture cannot be properly understood. "Orthodoxy sets the apostolic witness within the framework of an unbroken stream of divine life flowing from God through Christ in the Spirit to the apostles and through the early Fathers into the Church's life throughout the centuries." (see resource *Evangelicalism and the Orthodox Church*, p 39).

The importance of Tradition for the Orthodox shows up in very practical ways: an evangelical missionary talks about how he brought the gospel to Armenia; Baptists plant churches in Eastern Europe. Evangelicals sometimes appear to be dismissive of almost 2000 years of Christian witness and tradition, i.e. Orthodoxy.

**Worship and spirituality.** There are some very strong contrasts between Orthodox and Evangelical worship: Evangelicals use the common language of the people...Orthodox often an ancient ecclesiastical language; Evangelicals use flexible orders of service...Orthodox set forms; Evangelical pattern of worship is very word centred...Orthodox focuses on symbol and action while using biblical language; Evangelical worship often climaxes in a sermon...Orthodox leads into an experience of mystery, heightened by colour, chanting and incense sometimes enhanced by evocative church architecture.

**Baptism (Chrismation).** When an Orthodox priest declares a newly baptised baby to be a Christian, he is saying that the child has begun to become a Christian. This process begins at baptism and is continued through faith, repentance and all the disciplines of the Christian life. So baptism for the Orthodox is the sacrament of initiation into the kingdom of God and the life of the Church. While Evangelicals can hold wide views on baptism (child baptism to believers' baptism), more emphasis is placed on the conscious response of an individual to God at whatever stage of life (s)he may be.

**Liturgy.** Celebration of Holy Communion, Lord's Supper, Eucharist or whatever name we choose for it, is largely an act of remembering for an Evangelical. In contrast Orthodoxy believes the actual body and blood of Christ to be present in the consecrated bread and wine without any attempt to define how it happens. The act of Eucharist while not repeating Christ's unique sacrifice, brings together and unites the faithful of every age in communion with the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit.

While the sermon may be the high point of a worship service for an Evangelical, for the Orthodox the Eucharist is the climax of the liturgy.

### 3. Evangelical witness and the Orthodox (adapted from Lausanne paper. See resources)

3.1 Generally there are several stages that the Orthodox mind goes through in the process of responding to evangelical witness.

- **Ignorance.** The Orthodox mind has not been preconditioned to understand the concept of salvation by faith. Either (s)he does not know how to be saved, or (s)he believes that they will be saved by works and by participating in the sacraments.
- **Confusion.** The average Orthodox confuses salvation by faith with salvation by works.
- **Clarification.** A gradual understanding that salvation is by faith.
- **Trusting Christ.** This stage usually comes very soon in time after the third stage, or else it may never come at all.
- **Crisis of identity.** For a time there may be a devout loyalty to Orthodoxy, followed by a frustration that (s)he is not being fed spiritually through the church.
- **Estrangement from Orthodoxy.** Disillusionment with the Church and resentment of the institution. Converts may become hostile towards the church. This makes it hard for them to relate to the priests and properly appreciate the tradition of the Church. Often at this stage ties are cut with nominal Orthodox acquaintances, limiting the future possibility of offering Evangelical witness.

### 3.2 Overcoming the hindrances

- **Love.** Show love and respect to overcome pride, ignorance, prejudice and fanaticism
- **Respect.** Show respect to the Orthodox tradition.
- **Approaches.** Use teachings common to both faiths, an Orthodox edition of the Bible and refer to the writings of the Church Fathers (may need to do some homework here!), the Apostles' Creed and biblical Christ centred hymns. Take advantage of religious celebrations, holy days and festivals

to visit Orthodox, sharing spiritually with them. We should use Orthodox religious terminology rather than Evangelical jargon, where this will not lead to misunderstandings of the concepts involved.

- **Show cultural appreciation.** In many countries from the beginning of missionary work, both missionaries and national evangelicals in general had the tendency to separate themselves from the culture of the people. The churches which were established were western churches with western singing and decoration, western literature and mentality, western ways and means of spreading the gospel.
- **Christ.** Emphasise the exclusiveness of Christ's person and the finality and substitutionary aspects of his unique work...that repentance and faith bring salvation.

### 3.3 Speaking to the nominal or cultural Orthodox.

- **Be positive** about your own experience of faith in Christ.
- **Stress the confidence** you have in your salvation, but in the context of expressing humility. Stress the need for repentance and Lordship in your life as well as theirs.
- **Be honest** about any shortcomings in the Evangelical community.
- **Avoid giving the impression** that evangelicalism is equivalent to spiritual anarchy...avoid undue criticisms of church leaders...yours and theirs!
- **Try to offer a critique** mostly in response to questions and enquiry. The culturally Orthodox are usually unreserved about "God-talk".
- **Becoming a student** of Russian/Greek/Romanian culture is a good way to befriend nominally Orthodox.
- **Teaching EFL** is another good strategy to build relationships with a smaller number of nominally Orthodox.

### 3.4 Other dos and don'ts

- Don't try to jump in and tell them what they believe. Ask them.
- Don't present an anti-Orthodox attitude
- Do pray
- Be aware that some cultural Orthodox may be fearful that Evangelicals are a cult, and that it may take longer for them to trust us in what we say about Christianity.
- Persuade them of the authority of the Scriptures and encourage them to investigate the Scriptures themselves
- Stress the importance of individual (non-church) decisions
- Emphasise personal prayer and praise

### 3.5 Useful phrases for constructive dialogue which may avoid unnecessary hostility

- Our evangelical tradition emphasises that....
- We confess/believe that...
- I can see how that is important (to you)...
- How would you explain the meaning of (bible passage)?
- How do you account for the difference between Orthodox theology you have been describing and the Orthodox practice which can readily be seen in....?
- What do you consider to be the main inadequacies within Evangelical/Protestant theology and practice?
- What do you think we evangelicals should not be prepared to give up?

### 4.Resources:

*Christian Witness to Nominal Christians among the Orthodox.* Lausanne Occasional Papers, Pattaya, Thailand, June 1980

*The Orthodox Church,* Timothy (Kallistos) Ware. Penguin

*Evangelicalism and the Orthodox Church,* Evangelical Alliance/Paternoster

## 5. Appendix

### *The Nicene Creed*

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

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