

Differences Between Orthodox Teaching on Salvation and That of Protestants

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Protestants and particularly evangelicals take a "minimalist" approach to salvation. They focus on salvation as justification, "I can go to heaven rather than hell." Plenty of people recognize that being a Christian is more than just a matter of "fire insurance," but it is easy to be fooled by one's own sales pitch--Just accept Jesus as your savior. Plenty of people think that is all there is to it.

Furthermore, the "saved by faith" emphasis is a strong filter on one's Bible reading. In Romans 10, St. Paul writes: *if you will confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved* (v 9). My evangelical training led me automatically to think in terms of a "punctilious" confession. It is not good to argue whether this particular passage refers to a one-time action or a recurring one.

But in his sermon the Orthodox priest in Orthodox fashion, of "confessing with our mouth" each time we receive Holy Communion. The Orthodox approach to salvation is "maximalist": "How can I be **most** saved?" . One gets a sense of this teaching from St. John Chrysostom's "Baptismal Instructions," Talking to the newly baptized, he says (3d Instruction):

Let us say again: Blessed be God, who alone does wonderful things, who does all things and transforms them. Before yesterday you were captives, but now you are free and citizens of the Church; lately you lived in the shame of your sins, but now you live in freedom and justice. You are not only free, but also holy; not only holy, but also just; not only just, but also sons; not only sons, but also heirs; not only heirs, but also brothers of Christ; not only brothers of Christ, but also joint heirs; not only joint heirs, but also members; not only members, but also the temple; not only the temple, but also instruments of the Spirit.

Blessed be God, who alone does wonderful things!. You have seen how numerous are the gifts of baptism. Although many men think that the only gift it confers is the remission of sins, we have counted its honors to the number of ten. It is on this account that we baptize even infants, although they are sinless, that they may be given the further gifts of sanctification, justice, filial adoption, and inheritance, that they may be brothers and members of Christ, and become dwelling places for the Spirit." [Ancient Christian Writers, p. 57]

St. John uses other descriptions of baptism: marriage, enrollment in the army, putting [on] a white robe (which they literally did). He goes on to urge his listeners to keep their robes spotless:

Knowing, therefore, that after the grace of God everything depends on us and on our zeal, let us be grateful gifts which have already been given, so that we may make ourselves worthy of still greater gifts. [24]

Therefore, I exhort you who have just deserved the divine gift to keep careful watch and to guard the spiritual garment bestowed on you, keeping it clean and spotless. Let those of us who received this gift in the past show a far-reaching change in our lives. It is possible, if we are willing, it is possible for us to return and go back to our former beauty and luster, if only we will do our fair share The soul which was once sullied and became disfigured and disgraced by the multitude of its sins can quickly return to its former beauty, if we give evidence of ample and exact repentance." (circa ad 390) [pp. 90-91]

I think one can construct from the Church Fathers a "normal" Christian life: instruction, baptism, on-going participation in the life of the Church: repentance, confession, receiving the Eucharist. But it is rare that you will find them attempting to answer the question "What can I get by with and still be saved?" or "How far can one be from this 'norm' and still be saved?"

They did have to deal with the question of "how necessary is baptism?" during the persecutions.

What of the catechumens who were martyred before baptism? It was in this context that the belief in 'martyrs being baptized with their own blood' arose.

At the other end of the Christian life, many saints (as recognized later by the Church) died with a profound sense of their own sinfulness and unworthiness before a Holy God. I have found the Orthodox approach to Scriptures, especially on matters of salvation, to be very "integrative." Christ's incarnation, ministry, death, descent into hades, resurrection, ascension; our sinfulness, repentance, baptism, carrying our cross, 'doing to the least of these', running the race, confidence in God's love and mercy, fear of falling away, putting on the new nature, There is no tendency to pick one aspect of salvation "to reinterpret everything else to fit." The parable of the goats and the sheep is taken as seriously as Ephesians 2:8-9.

Orthodoxy often insists that the whole truth lies in holding on to two (or more) apparently contradictory concepts: God is both One God, and Three Persons; Christ is one person, two natures. The same applies to our salvation. On many points where a Protestant wants an *either/or* answer, an Orthodox will insist on *both/and*.

My most merciful and all-merciful God, O Lord Jesus Christ! In Thy great love, Thou didst come down and become flesh in order to save all. Again, I pray Thee, save me by Grace! If Thou shouldst save me because of my deeds, it would not be a gift, but merely a duty. Truly, Thou aboundest in graciousness and art inexpressibly merciful! Thou hast said, O my Christ: "He who believes in me shall live and never see death". If faith in Thee saves the desperate, behold: I believe! Save me, for Thou art my God and my Maker. May my faith replace my deeds, O my God, for Thou wilt find no deeds to justify me. May my faith be sufficient for all. May it answer for me; may it justify me; may it make me a partaker of Thine eternal glory; and may Satan not seize me, O Word, and boast that He has torn me from Thy hand and fold. O Christ my Savior: save me whether I want it or not! Come quickly, hurry, for I perish! Thou art my God from my mother's womb. Grant, O Lord, that I may now love Thee as once I loved sin, and that I may labor for Thee without laziness as once I labored for Satan the deceiver. Even more, I will labor for Thee, my Lord and God Jesus Christ, all the days of my life, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Source: <http://www.stjohndc.org/Russian/english.htm>