

Evangelicalism and Orthodoxy

By the Very Revd Michael Harper

Evangelicals claim their ancestry from the Apostles and the Early Church, although “early” is usually defined narrowly as the Church of the 1st century. In reality Evangelicalism stems largely from the Protestant Reformation. It is a river with many tributaries, including Lutheranism, Calvinism, Presbyterianism, the Baptists, Methodism, the Moravians, the Holiness Movement, Plymouth Brethren, Pentecostalism and the Independents, including the modern House Church Movement, to name some of the more prominent. In addition most of the post-Reformation Churches have developed Evangelical parties within them, alongside liberals and, in the case of Anglicans, alongside Anglo-Catholics.

What do all these Evangelicals have in common? Most of them believe:

- 1 Salvation or Justification by faith alone, not by works.
- 2 That sound teaching is based on the Bible, Old and New Testament, some would say “sola Scriptura” – Scripture only.
- 3 That to be saved one needs a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This is often described as being “born again.”
- 4 That the Church means any gathering of Christians – and there is no such thing as the “true” or the “perfect Church”. It is often said – “if there is a perfect Church, don’t join it, you will spoil it.” Any gathering of two or more believing Christians is a Church.

Let us look at these from an Orthodox perspective:

- 1 St Paul never wrote that Justification is by faith *alone*. The Orthodox certainly believe in Justification by Faith, but also in works as the fruit and evidence of that Justification. The Orthodox see Salvation as a much broader concept; it includes what the Orthodox call “Theosis”, which is the working out of holiness in the life of the believer. Yes, the believer is saved; but also “being saved”.
- 2 The Bible never tells us that it is the basis of the truth. In fact St Paul tells us that it is “the church of the living God”

which is the “bulwark of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:18). Scripture does not interpret itself; it needs to be interpreted. If one only looks at the thousands of different interpretations Evangelicals have made – leading to hundreds of different denominations. The Orthodox believe that the Church not the individual interprets the Scriptures in which the message of salvation is enshrined, for each person.

- 3 The Orthodox agree with the latter, in part, but don't leave it there. The Orthodox Church believes there is a corporate dimension to salvation. Salvation is in the Church, as Noah's was in the ark.
- 4 Perhaps the greatest weakness in Evangelicalism is its doctrine of the Church. It is interesting that the Orthodox teaching on this was never a source of dispute until the Reformation. There was disagreement on the issue of the nature of Christ and the Trinity; but in the early centuries the Church stood united in its clear understanding of itself.

Recent comings together

Until recently there has been very little contact between Evangelicals and Orthodox, but it is much more common today. One important overlap is with Methodism, and there is a Methodist/Orthodox Society in the United States, and a number of books have been written about this link.

John Wesley's time at Oxford in the 18th Century coincided with a revival of the study of the Church Fathers. When this happens there is nearly always a re-discovery of Orthodoxy. There are some who have concluded that Wesley based his distinctive teaching, which was called “Entire Sanctification”, on the Greek Fathers. In the Orthodox Church this is called “Theosis” and is at the heart of its tradition. Others have challenged these conclusions. Certainly Wesley's ministry was condemned by some of his contemporary Evangelicals, and a man called Walker banned him from preaching in Truro in Cornwall.

What has been lacking in the distant past, has been more than made up for in recent times.

In 1995 the World Council of Churches organised an Orthodox-Evangelical Consultation in Alexandria, Egypt. The published report was entitled *Proclaiming Christ Today*. A little earlier Evangelicals and

Orthodox shared together in Cyprus. Their Report published in 1992 was called *Turning Over a New Leaf: Protestant Missions and the Orthodox Churches of the Middle East*.

The most dramatic example of this new coming together was the conversion of two thousand Evangelicals from the American Bible belt to the Antiochian Orthodox Church in the 80s. Some of their stories have been published in a book called *Coming Home*, edited by their leader, once a leader in the Campus Crusade for Christ movement, now a Priest in the Orthodox Church – Father Peter Gillquist.

Reading

Turning over a New Leaf; Protestant Missions and the Orthodox Churches of the Middle East (Interserve and Middle East Media – 1992)

John Wesley and Christian Antiquity Ted A Campbell (Kingswood Books 1991)

Coming Home: Why Protestant Clergy are becoming Orthodox Edited by Peter Gillquist (Conciliar Press, 1992)

Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality edited by S T Kimbrough (St Vladimir Press, 2002)

Three Views of Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism (Zondervan, 2004)

Evangelicalism and the Orthodox Church Acute 2001

Proclaiming Christ Today: Orthodox Evangelical Consultation 1995 (WCC and Syndesmos 1996)

Beyond Salvation: Eastern Orthodoxy and classical Pentecostalism on becoming like Christ Ed Rybarczyk (Paternoster Press 2005)