

EVANGELICAL AND ORTHODOX

Understanding, Redeeming, and Manifesting the Meaning of Our Name

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INTRODUCTION

When I am asked what church I pastor, I often get this reaction to our name: "Evangelical Orthodox? How does that work?!" There are certain assumptions and misunderstandings that come with each of those words that cause people to conclude that the two terms are virtually incompatible. So what does it really mean to be "evangelical" and "orthodox"? Those two words are packed with meaning, but every church name comes with some baggage – at least to someone – since every name has been borne imperfectly by sinful people who bear it. Consequently, words like "evangelical" and "orthodox" need to be redeemed and elevated back to their classical definitions and delivered from some of the negative connotations and confusion that has surrounded them in contemporary usage. That will be the purpose of this paper, especially as those words relate to the heart of our calling and vision to be Evangelical Orthodox Christians. But before we begin, let me make a couple of disclaimers.

- This paper was not written as a definitive scholarly statement of expertise on the Evangelical or Eastern Orthodox ecclesiastical bodies. There are others much more qualified than I to speak to those issues. When I wrote the paper, I did so primarily as a therapeutic exercise to sort out my own thoughts regarding the calling and purpose of the EOC. Although its final draft took the form of a personal apologetic for being "evangelical" and "orthodox," it was not intended as an official EOC position paper. I am honored and humbled that God seems to be using it in that way.
- Also, the paper is not an attempt to replace the triumphalism of other traditions with an EOC triumphalism. Only God is worthy of our worship and adoration. We must be careful of our attitude. We must be careful how we stand lest we fall. We can, however, be genuinely grateful for the work God has done and is doing among us, for we are only who we are by His calling and design.

Therefore, as we consider what it means to be evangelical and orthodox, let us do so with a commitment to balance. Church history is fraught with reactionism. It has been said, whenever there is a major reactionary event in Church history, even though something is gained, something is also lost. May God grant us the grace to sort through the rubble of things that have been lost, abused, and misused that we might hold on to those things that are treasures of the Kingdom of God.

EVANGELICAL: Believing, embracing, and manifesting the Good News.

“Evangelical” is derived from the Greek word *evangelion* meaning “gospel” or “good news,”¹ biblically referring to the good news of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom. By connotation it has also come to be identified with a certain tradition within Christianity. Apparently, it was determined from the beginning of our communion that our evangelical heritage included things so necessary and important to hang on to that the word should be part of our name.

In some ways, adding this descriptive qualifier to “orthodoxy” was redundant. Truly orthodox Christianity has always been centered in the good news of the gospel, i.e. it is “evangelical” in its very essence. Even so, the founding fathers of the EOC must have felt there was something critically important about calling attention to that word. But how was it understood? Even more critical, how are we to understand it now? What do we mean when we say we are evangelical?

1. We are Committed to Believing and Proclaiming that the Gospel is Truly Good News, Rooted in Christ’s Actions Rather Than Our Own.

One of the dangers for anyone who ventures deep into a heavy liturgical and ascetical discipline is the tendency to slowly drift into a somber, sin-focused, works-oriented mentality. The exhortation of scripture to live soberly means to be focused and awake, but not joyless. Certainly we need to take the battle we are in seriously, but not as those who have no hope, for Christ has won the victory! Many of us have experienced the practices and worship of highly liturgical churches where the people look like they have never heard any good news. Their lives are so preoccupied with ritualistically trying to pacify God or earn His favor that they have completely lost sight of His grace. As a result, there is seldom any real sense of joy. Or, if they are joyful, it is often about things other than the gospel, such as a love for antiquated or artsy practices, etc. They turn repentance into a destructive cycle of payment for sin, or achievement and reward, rather than the joyful privilege of conversion by which we are restored to wholeness as men and women created in the image of God.

Brennan Manning, in his book *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, captures this dynamic well when he says:

“The disciple living by grace rather than law has undergone a decisive conversion - a turning from mistrust to trust. The foremost characteristic of living by grace is trust in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. ...The tendency in legalistic religion is to mistrust God.

¹ On-line *Greek-English Lexicon*, www.kypros.org/cgi-bin/lexicon/

...We need a new kind of relationship with the Father that drives out fear and mistrust and anxiety and guilt, that permits us to be hopeful and joyous, trusting and compassionate. We have to be converted from the bad news to the good news...²

If ritualistic efforts to appease God are the essence of our hope, how is that "good" news, and why did Christ need to come? But the good news of the gospel is that what we were powerless to do for ourselves Christ came and accomplished for us, and what He accomplished was so perfect there is nothing we could ever do to improve on it. He who knew no sin became one of us and took our sins upon Himself, removing them as a barrier and restoring us to communion with God, a union we enter into by faith through baptism and by which we are made acceptable to God. Through that union we partake of the grace of the divine nature and are made whole and normal human beings again. That's marvelous news!

Yes, we do participate in our own transformation through discipleship, seeking to appropriate that which is ours in Christ, to lay hold of that for which Christ laid hold of us. But this is a work of joy because of what is already ours in Him, not a means of wrenching it away from Him! It is His good pleasure to give us the kingdom; we don't have to wrestle it out of His hands by our good works. What kind of father would require that of his child? We struggle to make our hearts fit vessels, we fight to guard the treasure, we work to cooperate with His grace, but the grace itself remains a free gift that He joyfully gives to all who call on Him in sincerity. His grace is not magic, but it is a free gift. The word evangelical continually reminds us of this good news and challenges us to reflect it in all we say and do.

2. "Evangelical" Keeps us Mindful of A Particular Cultural Reality.

The other use of the word, "evangelical," as mentioned earlier, is associated with the particular tradition or body of teaching within Christianity that emphasizes the proclamation of the Gospel, a zealous and personal relationship with God in Christ, and the authority and importance of the Scriptures.

For some, just the mention of those things conjures up warm memories, but for others the memories are not so good. This is where we really need to work at that balance I spoke of earlier and not throw the baby out with the bath water. The three evangelical values mentioned above have certainly been abused and misused by many in evangelical circles, but they have also been abused and misused in other ways in highly liturgical traditions.

² Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Books, 1990) pp. 74-75

For instance, in the one case, evangelism and the proclamation of the Gospel has become the central and dominating focus of many evangelical churches and has often been reduced to spiritual head hunting and a contest to see who can boast the most souls saved. On the other hand many highly liturgical churches have either lost any sense of compassion for the lost or smothered the gospel with a multitude of man-made, cultural traditions and requirements of false piety for those who respond to it.

Again, on the one hand, a zealous and personal relationship with God in Christ in many evangelical churches has come to mean an individual and private relationship that mocks accountability and disregards the visible Church as the only tangible and possible context of that relationship. On the other hand, in many high liturgical churches the importance of a personal relationship with God has been replaced by a false sense of security in simply being associated with the Christian community, and zeal for God has been liturgically lulled to sleep and has given way to nominalism.

Finally, on the one hand, the authority and importance of the Scriptures, because of the privatization of faith, has turned many evangelicals into their own pope, each touting his own interpretation of scripture as the infallible truth without even the slightest consideration to how the Church through the ages has interpreted it. This has often resulted in a biased interpretation of the Scriptures that is based on reaction to abuses in other traditions or on a desire to cater to the sins of the culture rather than embrace a classical hermeneutic. On the other hand, many in high liturgical traditions who rightly see the Bible as the Church's book carry that conviction so far that they tame the Bible and make it their pet, rendering it virtually powerless to be a two-edged sword of the Holy Spirit to penetrate the depths of the human heart.

These things are not trivial matters. They embody aspects of the Faith the Reformers sought to recover. That many Protestant churches have isolated these tenets from their proper context and denominated around them is unfortunate, but that doesn't discount their essential value. Our desire from the beginning of the EOC has been to continue to embrace evangelical values, but to do so within the fullness of Apostolic Faith rather than a context of "protest," letting those values *both* shape *and* be shaped by sacramental/liturgical theology and life.

What we often forget is that this evangelical tradition is woven into the very fabric and history of the societies where our churches exist. The particular characteristics of evangelical worship and hymnody are indigenous to our respective cultures. There is still something that reaches deep into the hearts of many of us when we hear a hymn like "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" by Martin Luther, or "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" by Charles Wesley, or a good Celtic Christian hymn like "Be Thou My Vision," or a good Baptist hymn like "I love to

tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory, to tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love," or traditional choruses like "Bless the Lord, O My Soul," or even some of the more contemporary choruses that proclaim apostolic Faith. (Even the old hymns were once contemporary! Contemporary can be good if it returns us to apostolic, biblical Faith rather than just entertains us.)

In the countries where our churches are planted, the Faith has been attached to these hymns in a way that is permanent, every bit as much as the Greeks or Russians experience the Faith in ways that are intertwined with their own culture and history. While it is possible for a group to betray their own culture and adopt the hymnody and piety of another culture, what fruit does that eventually bear in their own country? Whether or not our experience of the Evangelical tradition has been good or bad or indifferent, that tradition embodies values we can't afford to forget. Also, it is a heritage that is deeply rooted in the societies to which our churches belong. We would do well not to ignore that reality.

One of the reasons we have difficulty embracing our own culture is that we have been fed and digested too much anti-western propaganda. Whatever its weaknesses and flaws may be, the West is our home. Somewhere along the way the "western captivity" language that has flooded the writings of many recent eastern theologians, and which sometimes seeks to blame the West for everything that is wrong with the contemporary Eastern Orthodox Church, has entered into our own mindset and made us suspicious of anything "western."³ This has often resulted in a lopsided and pastorally insensitive eastern focus and a liturgical life that is too awkward, complex, and foreign for a non-monastic parish.

Not only is this "western suspicion" grossly exaggerated, misdirected, and inappropriate, it borders on blasphemy against the Holy Spirit who has faithfully worked within the West just as He has in the East. Liturgy in the West has developed in response to events of history just as it has in the East – for good and for bad. Those who would say that the development in the East has been more "pure" than in the west are often either simply enthralled by the mysticism of eastern culture, have a hidden agenda that has nothing to do with life in the Kingdom of God, or have had a negative experience in a western Church. As we consider the contemporary practices of the mainline historic churches, we must be careful not to mistake local, cultural, temporal traditions for the essential dogmas of the Faith, or unfairly consider the East to the exclusion of the West.

Having stated that, however, it could well be that studying eastern patristic tradition is more advantageous for Protestant Christians seeking to better

³ See Georges Florovsky, *The Ways of Russian Theology* (In Russian), Paris, 1937. English translation, Belmont, Mass., 1979. Christos Yannaras, *Theology in Present-Day Greece*,: *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 1972, pp. 195-214. Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, Crestwood, 1988.

understand the ancient Faith, but not because eastern tradition is more pure. It simply may have a greater ability to speak into our western deficiencies in a way that helps us discern apostolic truth and practice. The West desperately needs to hear the perspective of the East. But the opposite is also true - the East needs to learn from the West. There is no shining victor or superior here. Both have neglected the other to their own peril. Triumphalism and patriotism about things that have been given priority over the Kingdom of God are always destructive.

In summary, it is critical that the Faith be contextualized, i.e. be reflective of and connected to the culture and context within which it is being embraced. (Of course that doesn't mean controlled and manipulated by the culture.) For us that culture is predominantly the western world, which has been largely shaped by the Evangelical tradition. Evangelical is not synonymous with Protestant, though it has sometimes been understood that way. It is simply an emphasis on certain aspects of apostolic Faith which have too often been neglected in those churches that claim ownership of that Faith. With that understanding, may God give us grace to always be evangelical.

ORTHODOX – Comparative rightness or apostolic authenticity?

The word "orthodox" comes from 2 Greek words, *orthos*, and *doxa*. The definition of *orthos* has undergone somewhat of an evolution from ancient Greek to Modern Greek. Classically it was used as an adverb that meant "rightly, really, truly, uprightly, or authentically" but in modern Greek it is used more as an adjective meaning "correct" or "historically true." *Doxa* is generally translated as "glory, opinion, or reputation."⁴ The word "orthodox" then would mean a combination of those two words, something like "to uprightly or authentically give glory" or to have a "correct or historically true opinion." It is important to understand that this word did not even show up in patristic writings until about the 4th century and was then only used to distinguish the Faith of the apostolic Church from "heterodoxy" or heresy. There is no indication of it being used by one Christian to boast of a greater degree of "rightness" than another Christian. It was seen more as a sign of apostolic authenticity, i.e. agreement with the faith and practice of the apostles, rather than as a triumphalistically comparative "we're right and you're wrong" between Christians. Unfortunately the word eventually degenerated to the later emphasis.

By connotation "orthodox" has also come to be associated with the Eastern Orthodox Church. It is important to realize, however, that this is only an association of convenience, not of synonymy. The Orthodox Church is not automatically the sole owner or possessor of orthodoxy simply because it uses the word in its name any more than the Roman Catholic Church has exclusive claims to being the "catholic" Church because it uses that word in its name.

⁴ On-line *Greek-English Lexicon*, www.kypros.org/cgi-bin/lexicon/

Ultimately, neither orthodoxy nor catholicity can be judged in a moment but only over the course of years and centuries. For instance, there were church councils that initially judged themselves ecumenical (representative of the whole church) but were later rejected as such by the greater church body. In many ways it is presumptuous for us or any church to even use the word "orthodox" in its name rather than let history and God be the judge of such a claim. However, at this juncture of history, any name is problematic because of associations with abuses and misrepresentations by others. Therefore, we must strive to redeem the word "orthodox" as a symbol of apostolically centered faith rather than as a sword of division, at least in the spirit of how it is used.

The best way to understand "orthodox" may be to consider it in terms of "uprightness" and "authenticity." If something is upright, it is balanced – not leaning to the right or to the left, but centered. As such, it simply means we are striving to be balanced Christians, authentically centered in Christ as He has been and continues to be revealed through the apostolic Faith and Tradition "once for all delivered to the saints."⁵ Furthermore, this balance is only discerned and achieved by listening to the Holy Spirit in every way He speaks to us, especially through the witness of sincere Christians everywhere throughout all the ages, not just to one Christian tradition. Even though for the sake of identity and order we may pattern ourselves more after one particular tradition, we must only do so with humility toward other Christian traditions, seeking by our balanced attitude to encourage restoration of a unified Christian witness and the fullness of the Faith in every place.

We must reject the notion that orthodoxy and the "canonical" Eastern Orthodox Church are automatically synonymous. Even if that tradition has maintained an ancient form of the apostolic Faith better than other traditions, that does not make it the sole proprietor of the Faith. To borrow and slightly alter a saying of the Forerunner and Baptizer John: "God is able from these stones to raise up children to *the apostles*."⁶ Neither the eastern church's use of the name "Orthodox" nor their historical antiquity is a guarantee of anything. Their tradition certainly has its own internal integrity, rooted in and shaped by cultural and historical events. But their mother cultures are not our culture and their national histories are not our history, except any aspects of their histories that all Christians share. We have our own unique history, short though it is. By His own grace and sovereign will, God called the EOC into being for His own purposes, poured out His Spirit upon us and shaped us – not eradicating our Evangelical heritage and western culture, but baptizing it and bringing it into the fullness of Faith, into "orthodoxy." To deny that history would be to blaspheme the Spirit of God who has fashioned us, not because of our own works or worthiness but because of His great mercy.

⁵ Jude 3

⁶ Lk. 3:8b

On numerous occasions we have had leaders from various jurisdictions of the Eastern Orthodox Church confess and affirm our “orthodoxy.” In spite of that, the greater Eastern body has been unwilling or unable to extend to us, or to anyone else for that matter, the “right hand of fellowship” without requiring assimilation into their historical and cultural piety. It is no more appropriate for us to seek to conform to another’s history and culture than it is to expect them to conform to ours – both scenarios lack integrity. It is simply each tradition’s responsibility to recognize and affirm one another’s “authenticity” of Faith. Although that affirmation and witness provide the physical and incarnational aspect of apostolic succession, succession itself is primarily the work of the Spirit, coming to us from the eternal Kingdom and charismatically “connecting” us to the train of apostolic Tradition.⁷

We should earnestly seek the affirmation and witness of others, but not at the sacrifice or denial of the internal integrity in which the Holy Spirit has fashioned us. To hold this integrity in humility is itself authentically orthodox because what the Spirit has birthed in us is the Apostolic Faith. Of course, that does not mean we shouldn’t be ready to lay down our lives in areas of non-essentials, if doing so furthers the work of God without denying the work He has already done, and if doing so does not require us to unnecessarily betray the culture we live in.

CONCLUSION

We are evangelical and orthodox - in the classical sense of both words. We are not on a journey, except in the same sense that all Christians are on a journey – to continually be restored and transformed to the image and likeness of Christ. Constantly being compared to another’s history and tradition only breeds discontentment. The apostle Paul and his Gentile churches suffered often under a similar pressure. They were continually being badgered to contrast themselves with the Jewish Christians and the Jerusalem church, and they were made to feel like sub-par believers because their system of faith was simpler and did not look as official or impressive as that to which they were being compared. Furthermore, Paul was frequently cast as inferior to the other apostles.⁸ He didn’t appear to have the same pedigree or the same eloquence of speech. In his response to these things, he stood upon the foolishness of the cross, the grace of God, and the witness of the Spirit, and he refused to boast in the flesh.⁹ Are we willing to do the same?

Clearly, the EOC is a small communion that appears insignificant in the vast expanse of Christendom. It was paralyzed for a number of years by constant

⁷ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, Ch. 5, Crestwood, 1985

⁸ Paul N. Tarazi, *The New Testament Introduction*, Chs. 4 and 6, Crestwood, 1999. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, Chs. 12 and 13, Minneapolis, 1999.

⁹ 2 Corinthians Chs. 10-13 and the entire book of Galatians are filled with such responses.

comparison to the "official" Orthodox Church. Consequently, in many ways it grew weak and stagnant as a communion. But God is not held in bondage by such things. The result of the past struggles is a communion that is stripped of ostentation and prestige but committed to being authentic and without guile. Such a communion of churches God can use for His purposes. The movement of the Holy Spirit among us in the past decade to renew calling and vision is witness to a resurrection that has taken place.

The story is told of a young woman who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had been given three months to live. So as she was getting her things "in order," she contacted her pastor and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes. She told him which songs she wanted sung at the service, what scriptures she would like read, and what outfit she wanted to be buried in. Everything was in order and the pastor was preparing to leave when the young woman suddenly remembered something very important to her.

"There's one more thing," she said excitedly. "What's that?" came the pastor's reply. "This is very important," the young woman continued. "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand." The pastor stood looking at the young woman, not knowing quite what to say. "That surprises you, doesn't it?" the young woman asked. "Well, to be honest, I am puzzled by the request," said the pastor.

The young woman explained. "My grandmother once told me this story, and from there on out I have also always tried to pass along its message to those I love and those who are in need of encouragement. In all my years of attending church socials and potluck dinners, I always remember that when the dishes of the main course were being cleared, someone would inevitably lean over and say, 'Keep your fork.' It was my favorite part because I knew that something better was coming...like velvety chocolate cake or deep-dish apple pie. Something wonderful, and with substance! So, I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand and I want them to wonder 'What's with the fork?' Then I want you to tell them: 'She was keeping her fork because she knew the best was yet to come.'"

Even though many great things have happened and been accomplished in our communion over the years and in the greater Body of Christ, my prayer for the coming days is that we will hear God saying the best is yet to come. If we will seek Him with our whole hearts, He will faithfully lead us and bless us according to His good pleasure. Therefore, let us have hope. Let us put our hand to the plow, and be about the work He has given us to do: living and manifesting the good news of the King and His Kingdom, the gospel of love, peace, grace, and great joy in the Holy Spirit. To our God be all glory, honor, and power, to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; Now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen!