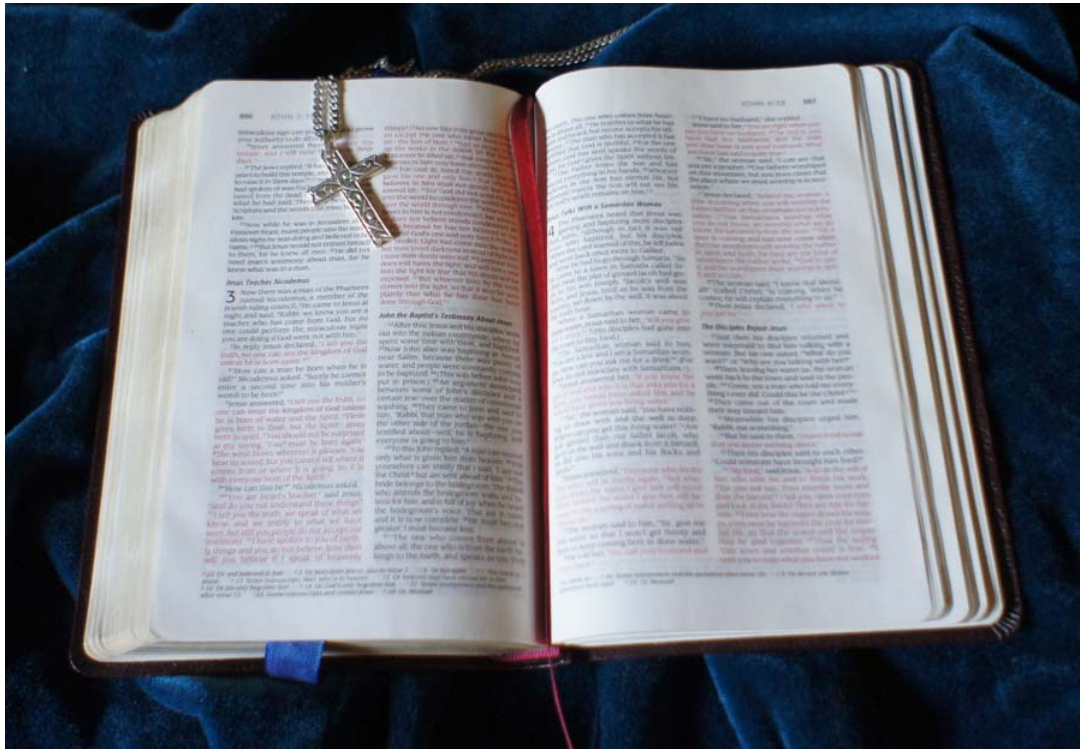


The Orthodox Christian Opportunity (Bradley Nassif, Ph.D.)

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Last December, *Christianity Today* magazine graciously provided a forum for me to answer a question I posed in the title of my article: “Will the twenty-first be the Orthodox century?” I answered, “Yes. The twenty-first will likely be a century that witnesses a theological rebirth of the Orthodox vision within Protestantism, regardless of whether or not the Orthodox Church itself grows numerically.” I explained the ways in which mainline and evangelical Christians are retrieving the Great Tradition of our Church as a resource for reconstruction and renewal. I documented evidence for the rise of a new kind of ecumenism that is basing itself on a revival of the ancient approach to worship and theological decision-making.

However, there was one very important question to which I could only allude in that article: “Will the twenty-first be the Orthodox century *for the Orthodox?*” Here is my answer to this question: *The extent to which the Orthodox Church can acquire and keep its converts will depend in large measure on how clear and how central we make the Gospel to those who are our own.*

In this article I'd like to address some of what I think the Orthodox message to evangelicals should be, and what Orthodoxy's mission to its own members requires.

The Church in America has an unprecedented opportunity to speak meaningfully to the evangelical community today. Non-Orthodox theologians and lay people alike are discovering the continuing relevance of the early church fathers, mothers, ascetics, councils, creeds, art, music, worship, and spirituality. Many are rediscovering the creative relevance of the Christian East and packaging it for their people far more attractively than we have been doing for ourselves. In one way or another, nearly all evangelicals who value classical faith borrow a flame from the fires of the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

But most of these people see the Great Tradition of our Church as if it were a library—a place you go to pick out the books you find most helpful while discarding the ones that no longer seem relevant. Thus, there are gaps and inconsistencies in their retrieval efforts. They are not making the connections between the Great Tradition and the Great Church (the Orthodox Church) to which that tradition belongs. They don't recognize the vital relationship between the major movements and themes of Christian antiquity and the organic life of the Orthodox Church from which many of those themes came.

So what's our message to evangelicals? Two key themes of our message should be *tradition* and *transformation*. We need to instruct evangelicals in matters of history, while also inspiring them towards spiritual transformation.

Regarding tradition, we certainly need to know the Bible when talking to evangelicals, but we also need to know the facts and mysteries of Christian history. I say "mysteries" of history because the providential mysteries of history emphasize the ongoing life of the Holy Spirit in the Church, and evangelicals certainly know about that—especially charismatic ones!

For example, the history of the formation of the Bible is one of the greatest testimonies to the faithfulness of Christ to His Church. One of the greatest miracles of history is that the entire Christian Church agreed on the same Bible. The Old Testament was inherited from Israel, and the 27 books of the New Testament were soon agreed upon universally and spontaneously in the first few centuries—even though the Church was scattered in different geographical locations and spoke different languages. I also think of how the doctrines of the ecumenical councils (AD 325–787) were received among the faithful, not in any legal way but in a truly charismatic way, through an undomesticated procedure that can only be attributed to the life of the Spirit in the Church.

These realities can be shared by anyone who knows the facts, but knowing the facts is our challenge. We need to work hard at learning the past so we can relate it to the present. The article I wrote for *Christianity Today* may illustrate the point. For 30 years I served as an Orthodox consultant for the magazine. I put in my time and energy freely. I became a trusted consultant. As evangelicals began to catch up with history in the past few years, I felt it was time to seize the moment with confidence and to argue that the Orthodox perspective is one that needs to be heard. The magazine concurred, and the article was published.

So my advice to readers of *AGAIN* is, “Be courageous!” Don’t think that just because you’re not a scholar you have nothing to say. True, you need to know what you’re talking about, but don’t fall into the trap of thinking, “Oh, I’m just an ordinary Christian. Who would want to listen to me?” Share what you know, and trust God for the results.

That leads me to a second theme evangelicals may welcome: our message about the transforming power of Jesus Christ. Evangelicals are people who love God and desire a close relationship with Him. I can think of no better way to help them fulfill that desire than to introduce them to the lives of the leaders of our Church. The holy lives of great men and women of the Faith can serve as a powerful way to inspire others to a deeper walk with God. They are living testimonies to what God can do in a life that is fully obedient to Him.

This can be done through a weekend outreach by your priest or a lay person in your own church who knows the stories of the great Fathers and Mothers. For example, I’ve offered a weekend seminar to our churches entitled “Desert Spirituality for City Folk.” It’s a great opportunity to talk to Orthodox and non-Orthodox people about the rise of the monastic movement, the lure of the desert, and biographical sketches of great ascetics like St. Anthony of Egypt; and to

elaborate themes of the Christian life such as humility, prayer, fasting, Scripture, and the quest for holiness. I connect the “then” of the past to the “now” of the present in such areas as “spirituality at home and in the workplace.” Do something like that, and then invite the audience to church. The liturgical witness to the transforming power of Christ may draw them even further toward the Church.

Or will it? Here’s where I need a family talk to my Orthodox readers.

The current fascination with the Great Tradition may signal deep changes for evangelicals, but it should also prompt the Orthodox to spiritual renewal. The Great Tradition cuts both ways—we ourselves are judged by it! To be sure, the spiritual lives of many people are flourishing in vibrant Orthodox communities, and that fact should never be minimized.

Still, an untold number of converts are coming through the Church like a revolving door: They enter with zeal, but quietly leave depressed and disappointed. Few take notice, and even fewer seek to retrieve them. In some cases, the converts are even blamed by Orthodox for not *really* knowing the Church or its ways. Good and godly Anglicans, evangelicals, charismatics, and mainline Protestants who could strengthen the Church end up being shunned by Orthodox fundamentalists within it. Legalism replaces love; mere church attendance gets counted as godliness; some priests control their parishioners through fear instead of leading them with a gentle spirit; and the pulpit disagrees with the altar by focusing on moral reform rather than spiritual healing. Now this is not true of all Orthodox parishes, to be sure. But it is true of too many of them not to say something about it.

Converts are leaving our Church in increasing numbers. Not because of a disagreement with Orthodox doctrine, but because of the distortions of Orthodox practice. They or their families are simply not being fed the Gospel, despite all the liturgical celebrations that go on. They are finding our Church to be more about Orthodoxy as a religion than about the life-changing power of Jesus Christ risen from the dead.

This past year I have received more letters acknowledging this problem than at any other time in my life—and I’ve been preaching about it for the past 35 years. Orthodox people throughout North America and abroad are asking me how they can help change the Church for the better. They ask, “What can we do to regain the central message of the Gospel in our churches? What needs to be done to make the faith relevant to our everyday lives?”

I don’t have easy answers, but I do know where the answers lie. The Scriptures give

us the cure, and their message is not complicated. So I say this every chance I get:

The most urgent need in world Orthodoxy at this time is the need to engage in an aggressive internal mission of spiritual renewal or outright conversion of our clergy and people to Jesus Christ. All of us—bishops, priests, and people—need to make the Gospel crystal clear and absolutely central in our lives and in our parishes. We must constantly recover the personal and relational aspects of God in every life-giving action of the Church.

If that happens, watch out! It will lead to a revival within Orthodoxy itself, and the Church will grow in unprecedented ways. We will figure out how to evangelize the unchurched people of North America, and not just disillusioned Christians of other denominations. We will all recognize that true Orthodoxy is indeed about the Church, but at the center of it all is a life-giving relationship with Christ, who is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:17).

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