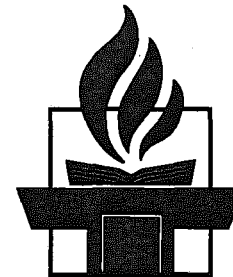


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Frank Schaeffer's Protest Against Protestantism: A Protestant Response

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Upon hearing that Frank Schaeffer, the son of the late prominent evangelical spokesman Francis Schaeffer (and activist in his own right), was coming to my rather small town, I immediately made plans to attend his meetings. I'd heard he'd recently converted to Eastern Orthodoxy because of his frustrations with the divided world of Protestantism. Though I certainly didn't expect to "be converted," I assumed I would share much of his critique of American Christianity and wished to learn from it.

I certainly didn't expect to be writing a critique of the ideas presented during the meetings and in his paper *The Christian Activist*. However, upon reflecting on his presentation and some of the ideas presented in the *Activist*, I cannot let these concepts go unexamined. I feel I owe fellow Protestants who have heard Frank Schaeffer speak and read of his conversion this article to help us evaluate together our beliefs biblically.

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Frank Schaeffer's Evaluation of Protestantism

Going there with high hopes, I was startled to begin the evening feeling so uncomfortable. Should I have expected the worst when Schaeffer began the lecture by asking how many people in the audience were "Orthodox"?

Naturally I considered myself to be "orthodox"—not perfect or sinless, but *orthodox*. Quite honestly I bristled at the term "orthodox" used in a way to *exclude* sincere, doctrinally sound believers in Jesus Christ! After all, my wife and I, not to mention other members from my congregation who were there, not only embrace the authority of Scripture and seek to practice it, but also embrace the ancient creeds of the church as well as the more recent evangelical and Reformed confessions of faith!

However in the spirit of adventure and a desire to learn, I did want to hear about Frank Schaeffer's pilgrimage to the

Orthodox Church and see what he'd come to believe, so I persevered. This article will attempt to outline Frank Schaeffer's "protests" against Protestantism (he does not choose to differentiate between evangelicals and even the most radical liberal Protestants—he considers us all one "failed experiment"). It will also attempt a critique of what Schaeffer considers "solutions." I will attempt to confine my critique to the material presented in the issue of *The Christian Activist* given attendees and some indisputable observations from my visit to St. George's Orthodox parish in Huntington, West Virginia.

Schaeffer's spiritual journey to Orthodoxy began when he started asking some hard questions about the corporate faith of Protestantism as well as his own faith.

Specifically, he noted his own lack of spiritual growth despite constant activism. Looking at the cultural skirmishes he'd been involved in for years, he noted that he seemed to arrive on the scene while the problem was a small fire, pour his energies into dealing with the problem, only to see the problem eventually become a consuming bonfire, far worse than when he had arrived. It was as if the firemen were pouring gasoline on the flames instead of working to extinguish them!

Looking back on the heyday of evangelicalism in America he sees his personal struggles multiplied a thousand fold. The "I Found It" era included vast undertakings to "convert" America to faith, and seemingly convinced many otherwise pagan people that they were "born again" or that somehow they believed in "God" (the divine identity is unspecified). These massive efforts, however, have showed no lasting signs of revival in the way of a transformed culture. Instead, culture simply became more secularized.

The bottom line: He saw Protestantism yielding minimal practical effects in his own life as far as continuing growth and yielding even less impact in any measurable way to the

culture surrounding it.

On top of that, Protestantism as he sees it is characterized as much by an American individualism that teaches us it's OK to "do our own thing" as by anything truly Christian. This "let's-make-the-rules-as-we-go-along" mentality is founded upon typical American self confidence which, he suggests, is often absolutely groundless. This American elitism has left Protestantism feeling vastly superior to any prior generation of Christians. However when crises occur—such as the abortion issue since 1973—this lack of historical moorings left the Protestant church unprepared to do battle. Protestants were constantly having to "re-learn" and "re-study" issues which were settled in whole or in part centuries ago, had they only been aware of the fact.

In fact, noted Protestant theologians in the 1970s from Dallas Theological Seminary (I use this example only because DTS in many circles is considered the epitome of evangelical orthodoxy) openly debated whether abortion was even a sin or whether the "fetus" was even a person. And to this date, many Protestant denominations have not done so much as take an official stand against abortion on demand as a plague on our country. (Please note: I do not believe this opinion has been held for years at DTS, and the professor who made these statements has long ago recanted them. This is merely evidence of the historical "rootlessness" in evangelicalism the abortion crisis uncovered, and it is my example, not Schaeffer's.) Schaeffer notes that had we been more attuned to the church of the past, we would have immediately had the resources to attend to the issue and would have realized why the church has always condemned abortion.

Schaeffer fondly noted as well that the same cultural "hatchery" that spawned various new denominations also spawned cultural pluralism and, eventually, the "separation of nature and grace" which today is seen in secularism's

constant cry for "separation of church and state." The problem with pluralism is twofold: It has divided the church from itself and also opened the door for unchristian thought to have room in the marketplace of ideas, further weakening the church. Because American Protestantism is so "democratically minded" we are slow to purge the church of heretical theologians because they have supposed "rights" to live off the church's bounty while undermining it at the same time.

Schaeffer concluded that Protestants don't study church history for the same reason German school students didn't study the Holocaust (this is his example, not my own). It's too painful to see what we stand for historically contradicted. Noting that the canon of Scripture was not "finalized" until the church had existed longer than the United States has existed today, he said that it was technically impossible to define one's orientation as a "biblical Christian" since the Bible's contents hadn't been put into its present form. The defining trait of the church then, was not the Bible, but the "apostolic tradition." This paves the way for Schaeffer to acknowledge the authority of Scripture and early church tradition in defining true orthodoxy since the early church was closer to the historical events of the gospel age than we are. Schaeffer's arguments are similar to Robert Webber's in this regard: To understand the Bible, we should interpret it through the eyes of those who were culturally and historically nearest its source, i.e., the church fathers.

The three "essentials" of a valid church for Schaeffer are apostolic doctrine, morality, and worship. While he acknowledges, I believe, that the Protestant church (or at least the evangelical wing) has at least a minimum of doctrinal purity, he feels that in Protestantism, a common moral viewpoint and common worship are not present, invalidating the "Protestant experiment." Though I am not sure how much weight

Schaeffer personally gives the element of "apostolic succession" to judging the validity of a church, he did mention several times how Orthodox priests are supposedly able to trace the lineage of their ordination to the apostles. He noted that Calvin attempted to trace the same thing to validate his message and lamented that, basically, within a generation Protestants stopped caring about the subject at all.

On the topic of morality, he points out that through the vehicle of confession and barring from the communion those who are not resolving sinful problems, the Orthodox church has maintained a basic moral consensus within its ranks. On the other hand, Protestantism often lacks basic morality because its members have been trained to assume one can "believe" intellectually without radically conforming one's behavior. Therefore the Protestant church is riddled with those who claim to "believe" but who send their children to public schools to be trained by pagans, who pursue the "American Dream" as opposed to "seeking first the kingdom," and who tolerate growing liberalism in their denominations.

On the subject of worship, he finds it a distressing thought that a Christian could be transported from Constantinople in A. D. 400 to Western Protestant churches today and not be able to recognize when or if "worship" were going on. Why? Because of America's "entertainment approach to worship," the lack of liturgy and ritual, and the almost certain lack of weekly communion that characterize what goes on weekly in our church buildings.

(Author's note: We even have a megachurch that teaches other "minichurches" how to use the traditional Sunday worship time as a "service for unbelievers" while supposedly having worship times for believers at other times during the week! Is this not an admission of defeat when we must transform the gathering of God's elect, His royal priesthood,

into something so watered down that pagan crowds are not offended?)

After pondering these points for several years, Schaeffer decided he had three options: (a) None of it matters—I'll keep doing the same old thing. (b) The historic church (Orthodoxy) is wrong; I'll invent something new (which created the current problems in the first place). (c) The historic church is right, I'll join it.

Obviously, he chose number three as the most consistent option.

Certainly most thoughtful Christians agree that there are serious problems in the body of Christ, not least of which is the way it sends "mixed messages" to those outside regarding the truth God has revealed to us on every subject the gospel addresses. For me the question remains, however: Are Schaeffer's options the only ones? Do Schaeffer's options as he presents them do justice to the real issues at stake? Should every Protestant become Orthodox now?

Should Every Protestant Become Orthodox Now?

One person highlighted in *The Christian Activist* is a Harvard professor of religion, Kimberley Patton. Her background as a child was Unitarianism and atheism. By her own testimony, her heart and mind had been poisoned against religion, and certainly against Protestantism from an early age. Instrumental in her conversion were two evangelical Anglicans. Her husband reportedly is a Southern Baptist (he did not convert), and her colleagues are liberal Protestants of every stripe, all of whom seem to be running from their religious roots.

From this background where Protestantism is so warped that it does not even retain a testimony to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I cannot blame her for joining the Orthodox Church. At least the liturgy retains constant reference to Christ and the Gospel. I respect her faithfulness to the

Gospel and Scripture because these seem to have motivated her move to the Eastern Church instead of setting for churches that in her view seemed hopelessly adrift theologically.

(I have to wonder if there is really no other option besides apostate Protestantism and Orthodoxy in her neighborhood? Or, perhaps unintentionally, has she written off certain churches right away without an examination?)

Naturally any Protestant in her situation or a similar one must take steps to associate with *Christian* groups. And perhaps this was her only option. May God bless her desire to be obedient.

What about those of us who have options?

Do Schaeffer's Questions Do Justice to the Real Issues at Stake?

Those who don't care about truth will continue as they have before, or make changes only for pragmatic reasons.

For Schaeffer, those who don't join Orthodoxy right away are, according to his judgment, following the path of American "do-your-own-thing-ism." Is this a fair evaluation? If we start a church "from scratch," is that, as Schaeffer says, "invention"? Or is it obedience? Is it always wrong?

Obviously some *have* started churches out of self-will or from other evil motivations. But is it essentially and therefore always wrong to depart from a group claiming to be the organized expression of the truth to "begin again"?

Some biblical illustrations that come to mind were happenings in David's life and in Jesus' day.

During Saul's reign, David encamped in Ziklag (1 Sam. 27) to escape Saul's persecution. He did not seek to overthrow Saul or otherwise rebel; he sought only freedom from persecution and to proceed with God's plans for him as he was able. In essence David was carrying on the Holy War that was his destiny while Saul's establishment wrestled

against God's condemnation. Indeed, by sparing Saul's life in the cave, David showed it was not his task to eliminate the once glorious and faithful regimen with one stroke, but to rescue Israel with the means at his disposal—a separate encampment on the Holy War.

On the other hand, faithfulness to God's larger purposes for David did not include observing organizational niceties such as making false peace with Saul. At the very least, he departed from the "organized" nation of Israel to pursue God's will rather than submit to an apostasy that would claim his life. David would rather lay down his life in Holy War than in mindless submission to Saul's claims to his "rights." Though Saul perhaps saw this as "self-will" and "invention," Scripture does not condemn David but Saul.

Based on David's example, it does not seem like an ungodly "invention" to depart from evil and under the guidance of God's Word create an alternate establishment to do God's will.

During Jesus' time, the Pharisees claimed an authority and an orthodoxy stemming from a succession of rabbis and oral tradition. Jesus had a legitimate succession through his bloodline to David the King, but it was not recognized by the Pharisees (Jesus was called illegitimate). Jesus did not even take the step that Calvin did and aim to connect with part of the oral tradition, "upstream" from the Pharisees, that He could agree with and fight from that position. Instead, Jesus based His claims on the message of Scripture itself.

The Orthodox claim that we should interpret Scripture based on what those closest to its origin had to say about it would seemingly undercut Jesus' approach to establishing His own authority, citing Scripture directly. After all, Jesus was not closer to the events of Scripture than many of the rabbis He contradicted. Should His interpretation be invalid as a result? Should we assume His deity allows Him to

choose this course but that we should not attempt to follow His example in this regard? If we shouldn't follow His example, why did Jesus rebuke people when they didn't understand the Scriptures (John 5:39)?

(Someone's close proximity to a historical event does not guarantee his correct interpretation of it. Often the people closest to Jesus' words and deeds were the disciples who were so hard-hearted that they could not perceive the significance of them. Certainly Apollos in Acts 18 was a powerful preacher even with a limited knowledge. His proximity did not guarantee he fully understood the gospel until meeting Priscilla and Aquilla and being taught.)

Based on Jesus' example, it seems it is our duty to discern whether the teachings we are to live by are indeed biblical and the commands of God, or are simply part of some group's "oral tradition" which may actually serve to discourage true obedience (Mark 7:6-13; Acts 17:11). Paul the apostle did not advise the churches to accept any teaching simply because it claimed "apostolic" origins—or even directly divine ones. He says to evaluate all prophecies (even from people closest in historical and cultural proximity to the acts of God!) and to test them, clinging only to what is good (1 Thess. 5:20-21).

Though the Orthodox church uses the fact that the sixty-six books of the Bible were not collected in their present arrangement until nearly A. D. 300 as an argument for their understanding of apostolic tradition having authority alongside Scripture (Schaeffer, I believe, called "sola scriptura" a "slogan," as if it were fairly meaningless), I feel this understanding ignores important facts and simply, in effect, undermines the true authority of the Bible.

For one reason, the "apostolic tradition" was certainly not "fixed," as Orthodoxy implies. If it had been, Paul would not have required the churches to "test all things." Furthermore, even during the lives of the apostles, error was

creeping into the "apostolic tradition" in the Pauline churches of Asia Minor, and the letters of Paul and the letters to the churches in Revelation occur precisely to "codify" the apostolic testimony. Paul in Galatians 1 and elsewhere assumes that any version of the oral apostolic tradition will agree with his written words. If they do not, that tradition is to be rejected, and under certain circumstances the bearer of that false oral tradition is to be condemned. The assertion that because the *final collection* of biblical books was not *recognized universally* until A. D. 300 is used by the Orthodox to virtually imply that prior to that time, these books or parts of books were not in circulation and therefore had no authority. This is absurd.

The experience in the *apostolically founded congregations* also shows the danger of relying on the tradition in such a way as to put it on par with Scripture. In Galatia, we see Judaizers who though close to the Christ event culturally and historically (Orthodoxy's two criteria for why we are supposedly so dependent on tradition), had a *Pharisaical bias* which led their teaching to be condemned in the strongest terms by Paul. The believers John addressed in his first letter seemed to have had a bias toward the heresy that says Christ did not actually suffer in the flesh. Other indications suggest that in this letter John was fighting an early form of Gnosticism as Paul did in his letter to the Colossians. In Corinth, the believers there had a nasty habit of combining their Christian liberty with pagan license and confusing Paul's apostolic tradition (which I'll gladly follow any day!) with the "authority" claimed by almost any wandering philosopher who could attract their attention. Noting this sick pluralism and lack of consensus on doctrine, morality, and worship (the Corinthians were, after all, not as liturgical as everyone else), would we—had we been there—have been justified in concluding that the "Christian experiment is over"? Would we have been justified in revert-

ing to tried and true Judaism which, after the purgings of their idolatry in the last exile, had been relatively "pure" for five hundred years and had an even longer history before that?

Apparently the apostolic tradition could not even be received in the time of the apostles without being embraced along with other philosophical biases, making us all the more dependent on the word of the Scripture itself. The resiliency and intrinsic authority of the Bible is testified to by the fact that it was received despite the fact that at times it embarrassingly contradicts what the Orthodox call the "apostolic tradition." One simple example should suffice.

Orthodoxy encourages the veneration of the saints and, in fact, the Patriarch Jeremias writes to Lutherans in the 1500s that "it is a sign of humility that we sinners should be shy of making a direct approach to God and should seek the intercession of mortal men and women who have earned salvation" (*The Christian Activist* 3:36). The Epistle to the Hebrews—certainly a book never accused of promoting a lack of reverent worship if one has read the "warning passages"—tells us that the work of the mediator Jesus Christ gives us *boldness* to enter the Holy presence of God based on His intercessions!

The Patriarch clothes his acceptance of rival mediators in the language of worship: "humility." Unfortunately, God is not especially impressed with worship that He has not commanded. When the two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, "offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them ... (the) fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord" (Lev.10:1-2) So, regardless whether Nadab and Abihu in fact were pursuing this course of action out of "humility," the terrible results were the same. It appears that modern Americans are not the only ones to absolve virtually any sin with the justification "but he's *sincere*."

In answer to the question, "Is even a casual distance from the 'apostolic band' a sin?" Shaeffer suggests we read Mark 9:39. There, the apostles ask Jesus if they should forbid the ministry of someone casting out demons in Jesus' own name, but who did not accompany the apostolic band directly. Amazingly, Jesus did not deny the power and effectiveness of their ministry or tell them to "join up." His statement was, "Do not forbid them." If, as the Orthodox say, "Grace is where you find it" (allowing for the salvation of those technically outside their church who follow Christ), perhaps here Jesus is saying that, in fact, the fullness of the kingdom is found wherever men act "in Jesus' name," not simply where—by accident of geography or history—they are planted next to the apostles.

But here is the real question: Is Protestantism as a whole wrong for its continued refusal to join with Orthodoxy? So far the answer is "no," based on the biblical materials. It is not essentially wrong to be separate if there is evidence of Christ's working where we are and it is not *necessary* to join Orthodoxy. Now we must ask if joining Orthodoxy would be *forbidden* by the same biblical standards, at least as an evangelical understands them.

Evangelical and Orthodox

Let me use articles from *The Christian Activist* and some illustrations from St. George parish to explain why I feel rejoining Orthodoxy is not the option many evangelicals can choose with a clear conscience.

My first comments will be based on the article "Luther Had His Chance," by Stephen Runciman, which was alluded to above. It describes the dialogue between the Lutherans and an Orthodox spokesman in the 1500s. Runciman does not imply that Orthodoxy has changed its opinions, and *The Christian Activist* runs the article without comment. Accordingly I consider this a fairly reliable guide to how basic

evangelical doctrines are received today. Other comments will be based on the icons and veneration of man-made symbols as witnessed at St. George parish.

I believe it's safe to say most evangelicals believe in the priority of Scripture when formulating their beliefs. Admittedly, my statement is not as strong as I believe the Bible mandates, but it generally suffices for what evangelicals as a whole believe. The relative merits of the Bible vs. tradition in the debate have been discussed already. So has the issue of rival mediators in Orthodoxy. Now I must turn to other issues.

I believe that it is also safe to say that evangelicals for the most part espouse the doctrine of "justification by faith alone." Patriarch Jeremias' statement that those who have "earned their salvation" are fit mediators for us may immediately tell us that the Orthodox do not believe in salvation by grace in the same way we do. But Peter Gillquist's comments in *The Christian Activist*, in another article on page 53 of the same volume, is a blatant denial of the truth. Alluding to Acts 10 and Cornelius' conversion he says:

By the way, if you ever need a verse to refute the relatively modern theory of justification by faith alone, here is one of many! (Fearing God and doing righteous deeds) by themselves do not save us, of course. But they bring us to Christ and His kingdom. Thus Cornelius, a good and righteous man, was given the Gospel and the gift of salvation.

Though branches of evangelicalism have espoused an "easy believism," to my knowledge no evangelical theologian has ever claimed that the Four Spiritual Laws (from Gillquist's background) was designed to express in a comprehensive fashion our understanding of grace and works in the Christian life. And if easy believism characterized Gillquist's early Campus Crusade ministry, it is not then fair to assume he understood the doctrine of justification by

faith as it was originally formulated by Luther and Calvin. Also, it seems doubtful if he has understood it as espoused by the heirs of the Reformers, such as Spurgeon, Whitefield, Edwards, and even Francis Schaeffer himself, who, to our knowledge never recanted the *Westminster Confession* and who, to my knowledge, felt his ministry was to explain the Christianity found in them to the modern world.

But this intolerance with justification by faith seems to have a long history, for even the Patriarch Jeremias shares the same bias. While admitting that good works alone will not bring salvation, he states that the "Sermon on the Mount lists virtues that will bring salvation without any reference to faith" (p. 34), and states that "grace will not be given to those who do not live virtuous lives."

Evangelicals have problems with this statement because they believe in the sinfulness of man that requires the intervention of grace to bring salvation.

Jesus said men can confess who He is only through revelation from God (Matt. 11:25; 16:17), not through being disposed to believe through good works, as Gillquist and Jeremias declare. Even Cornelius, a God-fearing Jew, i.e., a convert to Judaism from paganism, is not some morally "neutral" good man wandering the face of the earth earning God's attention, as Gillquist describes. He is a convert to Jehovah as Ruth was. And now that Christ has come, God fully reveals His identity, not merely as Jehovah of the old covenant, but as Jesus of the new covenant. Cornelius was already leading a virtuous life based on God's gracious revelation. Indeed, God's grace was the foundation for God's reward, even here, just as it is throughout Scripture.

What Orthodoxy actually hates (as all we sinners do) is "anything that might suggest predestined election" (pp. 34-35), and therefore Jeremias hates Luther's emphasis on man's bondage to sin. Luther teaches that a man may do whatever he wishes ("free will") but without God's interven-

tion, man's "will" inevitably leads to death. For Luther, a man may do "good things," but without grace he is still lost. "This is too close to the doctrine of complete predestination for the Patriarch!" Here the Patriarch seems to commit the error of Paul's antagonists in Romans 9 who simply cannot tolerate the notion that there is nothing "lovable" in them that will force God's saving attentions to come to them and that *salvation is a free gift God could have chosen to withhold*.

From the evangelical's point of view, Orthodoxy suffers a misunderstanding of justification by faith because of a misunderstanding of the depth of man's sins. Orthodoxy misunderstands man's sin problem because it brings up the horrifying thought that for salvation we *are absolutely dependent upon God to save us even though there's nothing about us that logically should move a holy God to do anything but damn us*. This "predestination theology" of Luther (and Paul!) is frightening because it declares that we have no hold upon God, no bargaining chip, no way to manipulate God. That's scary! It's much easier (though damaging and potentially damning) to avoid these thoughts by minimizing our need for God and implying we have something to offer Him in the first place—our good works. Unfortunately, these are issues evangelicals, especially Reformed evangelicals, cannot compromise on because it threatens the Gospel of Christ itself.

I must add that Paul, certainly no antinomian, teaches us a principle in Galatians. He teaches us that, as important as good works are, being the very goal of our eternal destiny (Eph. 2:10), they may never be enjoined on the believer in such a way that the recognition of Christ as full and final Savior through faith in Him is violated. Any teaching deviating from this rule is pronounced "anathema" by Paul (Gal. 1:9).

Francis Schaeffer used to say in a world dominated by existentialist despair that the biblical message we must

preach is that man has worth as God's creature. This is certainly true. In the light of Orthodoxy's teaching which is bursting with optimism about man's goodness, Francis Schaeffer (I have no doubt) would declare that the biblical truth needing proclamation was that "man is a worm." By the way, who says only Americans are to be noted for their "groundless self esteem"? I fear that is what the *Activist* promotes on one level by denying justification by faith and total depravity.

To the Third and Fourth Generations

My concerns in this matter are not based solely on printed material. I am concerned about icons in Orthodox churches that depict heavenly realities and, most of all, the veneration of these man-made objects.

The second of the ten commandments forbids bowing to any man-made image and giving it worship. We cannot understand this verse in a way so limited that the Israelites would be forbidden to build the ornate tabernacle or fashion their God-ordained vestments! But we must be careful not to transform even useful symbols into objects of veneration and worship.

God hates idolatry so much because it takes His divine essence and minimizes it and conforms it to man's image. God says that people who do this *hate* Him because they are not satisfied with the self-revelation God has already given, but wish to secure even more, possibly for the purpose of manipulating or "simplifying" God and His demands. He promises that His jealousy for His own integrity will cause Him to "visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me" (Ex. 20:5).

Perhaps there is something subtle I've missed here. But to me, kissing the cross—even though it supposedly symbolizes our love for Jesus—falls under this warning of idolatry.

Likewise, I love art, but I fear that the icons, as people are taught to venerate them, and feel "watched by the icons," reduce a great deal of Orthodox piety to superstitious idolatry. Schaeffer himself expressed that he was being "watched" and "zapped by lightning" by the icons when he erred and said he "hated" something. Presbyterian theologian James Jordan equates this function of the icons in Orthodoxy to the function of the "totem pole" as the "guardian of tradition" in tribalistic cultures.

Based on my understanding of Scripture, I do not feel it is *necessary* for the evangelical to convert to Orthodoxy for fear that he is somehow not in Christ's "mainstream." Why? Because the "mainstream" is any setting where Christ demonstrates His transforming power and truth.

Based on the Orthodox opinion of the cardinal doctrine of justification by faith (and the doctrine of total depravity), I feel that an evangelical would be *forbidden* by his understanding of God's Word from converting to Orthodoxy. Why? How can someone who has acknowledged the true depth of his sin and true sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice see Christ's work trivialized?

A missionary to the Middle East in the late 1700s was told by a Muslim that a brief cessation of persecution has occurred because Christ has implored Mohammed to have mercy on the church. The Muslim was shocked when the missionary started weeping uncontrollably. Why such tears? asked the Muslim. "Because I cannot bear the thought of my glorious Lord being disgraced so that He would have to ask anything of a mere man!" By converting, I would have to give up my view of an exalted Christ in favor of a view of exalted sinners who can earn His favor and attention, and that thought is too much for me to bear.

I will grant that perhaps my views seem too harsh. Is Orthodoxy this bad? Admittedly, I have limited my sources for critiquing the Orthodox view. However, I have chosen

modern, straightforward sources dealing with the subjects at hand. These were the materials presented as expressing the "Orthodox view" and what I witnessed in an Orthodox parish. I have not written off their church based on transgressions of long ago that are no longer present. Based on my findings so far, the Orthodox church would have to disavow the views of Patriarch Jeremias and Peter Gillquist before I as an evangelical could comfortably accept their view of salvation and justification.

Though I have promised to restrict my comments to materials presented by Schaeffer, I cannot help but mention a reference in DeMar and Leithart's *Reduction of Christianity* (pp. 308-309) to Russian Orthodoxy's capitulation to communism. Schaeffer accuses Protestants of cultural ineffectiveness despite good intentions. The report quoted accuses Orthodoxy of actually desiring the cultural irrelevancy and intensely privatized focus foisted upon it by the pagan regime. I bring this up as relevant because Schaeffer's criticism of Protestantism was its *cultural irrelevancy*.

This seems to be a trend in Orthodox theology towards cultural retreat, a willingness to give over the church's jurisdiction in all but the Mass to civil rulers, good or evil. If this is the doctrine of the *church*, and that doctrine is fixed, is Schaeffer fighting against the church by calling his paper *The Christian Activist*?

Isn't it more truthful to say that both Orthodoxy and Protestantism have failed in various times and places to transform culture and have succeeded in others? I don't believe it's fair to say all Protestantism is a complete cultural failure, any more than it's fair to say that "because the Russian Orthodox church could first be called the pawn of the Czars and then a pawn of the communists, that therefore all the Orthodox are alike culturally irrelevant in all times and all places."

How Shall We Then Live?

Peter Gillquist in his article asks, "Honestly, for people who fear God and want to be righteous, is not Orthodox Christianity the one choice left?"

No, I must say that for the evangelical who is based on biblical conviction, it is no option at all. In fact, converting and being forced to deny these biblical truths destroys piety by stripping Christ of His glory.

I do not lightly accuse Orthodoxy of stripping Christ of His glory. Perhaps I should put my statement in deeper context. It's already apparent that I find intercessions and liturgies directed to the saints and Mary as rival mediators a matter of concern. Let me state my case in another way.

Though Orthodoxy believes in progressive sanctification on an individual basis, it assumes the church's understanding has always been fixed and is not subject to any growth or progress (at least beyond the church fathers).

The evangelical affirms, however, that as history unfolds Christ's church better understands God's *unchanging deposit of truth in Scripture*. The style of growth referred to often parallels our personal struggles with sin: three steps forward, two steps back. This was certainly the case with Israel under the old covenant: corporately they did not comprehensively reject idolatry until after the Babylonian exile, though the prohibition against idolatry was essential to the old covenant revelation.

That "two steps back" occurred at least in some circles is obvious since the church began to encounter *heresy*, necessitating the formulation of the early creeds during a time when the apostolic tradition was, as Schaeffer claims, "clear" and "fixed." I would also include the veneration of saints and images, forgetting Israel's lessons against graven images as one problem which slipped through the confessional net until the Reformation.

Though under the new covenant we ultimately accept

better things, faster progress, greater faithfulness. Because we have the risen Lord guiding us, does not mean that a pattern of decline, revival and growth does not take place. The history of revivals through the centuries is in accord with this statement.

As part of this corporate growth, Protestants affirm that in the Reformation the church in the West came to a corporate consensus on salvation by grace greater than had been previously held in the church. If that means by implication that Protestants affirm that a latent semi-Pelagianism seems to course through the veins of Orthodoxy (as attested by the words of the Orthodox speakers quoted herein) so be it. Like Luther we cannot recant.

Acknowledging that corporate doctrinal growth occurs, though the deposit of truth remains unchanged, is not a license for pride. It should humble us Protestants because that reality implies our own churches continue to experience a pattern of decline, revival and growth as each generation comes to grips with the Word of God, embracing the past in part and rejecting the past in part—always hoping to corporately be transformed into a likeness more becoming to Christ's bride.

With Schaeffer I share the hope for continued transformation in the areas he mentioned—worship, doctrine, and morality—throughout evangelicalism. I simply see that transformation occurring due to continued progress, not in going back to Orthodoxy. I see Orthodoxy as successful in maintaining a status quo. Unfortunately its isolation has kept it immune from the refining fires of history that have providentially led the church into a deeper appreciation for the sufficiency of Christ's holy work on the cross.

The best alternative for the evangelical is to focus on building up the local church he/she already attends, deliberately attempting to submit to the Bible in every area of life. I believe the worship of the church will become more

liturgical to the degree the Bible supports it. I believe that the sacraments of the church will become more important in the right way, and that worship will not be "entertainment" any more but rather a true "renewing of the covenant." I also believe this path will mean that Christians will see Christ bless their church and family and that as we are transformed ethically and spiritually, our land will be changed too.

These are the things I trust Schaeffer truly seeks. I seek them too. I believe the path to them is for us to emphasize justification by faith more, not less. I believe the path is to seek to be more biblical, not simply more traditional. May God help us seek His blessing through His Word.

Author

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