

Not just 'how' but also 'who': What evangelicals can learn from the Orthodox

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If you ask a typical evangelical which aspect of Christian theology is the most important, he or she will very probably answer, 'The question of how a person is saved.' Indeed, the insistence that a person becomes acceptable in God's sight only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ is the hallmark of what it means to be an evangelical. Most of us believe that where we hear the doctrine of justification by faith proclaimed, there theology is decidedly Christian and biblical. Conversely, if we do not hear this doctrine clearly, we become suspicious that the person, group, or church in question has departed from the truth of Scripture.

However, as crucial as the means of salvation is, one could argue that justification by faith is not *the* ultimate foundation on which Christian doctrine rests. Instead, one could legitimately claim that there are three fundamental questions related to salvation: 'Who?' 'What?' and 'How?' First, who is the God who saves us? Second, what is salvation? What does it mean to be saved? Third, how is a person saved?

Of these three questions, the one on which Eastern Orthodox theology concentrates is the first: 'Who?' Who is the triune God who saves us? Who is the Christ who entered the world for our redemption? Of course, Western evangelicals believe the doctrines of the Trinity and of Christ's full deity and humanity just as fervently as the Orthodox do, but few of us have probed these doctrines with anything approaching the depth of attention which Eastern Christendom has given to them. We accept the formulae — 'one essence in three persons' and 'one person in two natures' — which the early church established during the great controversies over the Trinity and christology in the fourth and fifth centuries. But rarely do we think deeply about what these formulae mean, what they tell us specifically about God's character and his action on our behalf.

In this article I would like to suggest that there are some significant problems with the way western evangelicals normally express our faith about the Trinity and the person of Christ. In fact, I will argue that some of

what the Orthodox say about God and Christ corresponds more closely to what we evangelicals actually believe than what we say ourselves! By paying attention to the Orthodox on these two issues, we can learn to express more accurately what we believe. We can also gain a greater appreciation for the 'who' of salvation, to go along with our own emphasis on the 'how'.

A personal way of understanding the Trinity

People who have some familiarity with church history will know that one of the major controversies leading to the separation between the Eastern and Western Churches in the Middle Ages was the issue of the *filioque*, the question of whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone or from the Father and the Son. (*Filioque* is Latin for 'and from the Son'). This question is not actually the basis for differences between the ways Orthodoxy and Western Christianity understand the Trinity, but rather it is symptomatic of those differences. The real heart of the differences lies in the question of whether one begins with the oneness of God or with his threeness.

Western Trinitarian theology grows out of the battle against pagan polytheism in the Western Roman Empire during the early centuries of Christianity, and this battle has led us to place most of our emphasis on the unity and uniqueness of God. In order to safeguard God's uniqueness, we carefully define the attributes — love, justice, holiness, omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, etc. — which comprise his nature, and we ask how many beings there are who possess these attributes. The answer, of course, is that there is only one: the living God of the Bible. When it comes to the threeness of God, we generally say that there are three persons — Father, Son, and Spirit — who share all of these attributes, and since they share all characteristics in common, they are the same being, the same God.

This way of looking at the Trinity explains the unity of God very well, but is less successful at explaining the differences between the persons. If the Father, Son, and Spirit all have the same attributes, what prevents them from being the same person as well as the same God?

It is precisely this question which forms the starting point for the Orthodox approach to the Trinity. The early Eastern Church was concerned primarily with combating modalism, the belief that there is in God only a single person who reveals himself in different ways (or modes) at different times — as a Father to Israel in the Old Testament, as a Son during the life of Christ, and as a Spirit during the church age. In order to avoid this error, Eastern Christendom began with the threeness of God and focused on the differences between the persons. The Father is not *exactly* the same as the Son, because if he were, there would be two Brothers, not a Father and a Son. The Father is the head and the source of the Godhead, and the Son is God because he exists eternally in a filial relationship to the Father. Similarly, the Spirit is God because he eternally proceeds from the Father, the source. In this understanding, the insistence that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone helps to safeguard the differences between the persons of the Trinity, and thus it is very important to Eastern theology.

This terminology probably sounds strange, perhaps even suspicious, and my purpose here is not to defend all aspects of the Eastern understanding of the Trinity or to discuss the question of whether the Holy Spirit actually proceeds only from the Father. Rather, my aim is to point out that the Eastern way of looking at the Trinity is very personal and lends itself easily to a stress on the relationship, the fellowship, which God has within himself. In the West, we place most of our emphasis on the nature or essence of God, and we define this nature in terms of attributes or characteristics. Many of these attributes, such as omniscience and omnipresence, can very easily turn into mere philosophical ideas, and we lose our stress on the personal nature of God by talking about him in this way. Moreover, one of our common ways of dealing with the Trinity is to use physical analogies (such as the presence of water in solid, liquid, and gaseous phases), analogies which further depersonalize our portrayal of God. The result is that our depiction of God sometimes sounds like a philosophical idea of a perfect yet distant supreme being, rather than the God of the Bible, the God who personally weeps and mourns over his people, who is filled with joy or sadness, who suffers with and for us. What we say theologically *about* God does not correspond as well as it might to the personal God whom we actually know and in whom we believe.

In contrast, the Eastern emphasis on the threeness of God places Orthodoxy in a better position to talk about the fellowship which is at the heart of our faith. God

does not just desire a relationship with us; he himself is a relationship. To be God is not just to have certain attributes; it is to be three persons who are eternally in perfect fellowship with each other. The first person of the Trinity is not one member of an undifferentiated triad; he is a Father to his beloved Son, in whom he delights, whom he has loved for all eternity (See Mt.3:17; Jn. 15:9; 17:21–24). In fact, this love between the Father and the Son is the basis of God's love for us — for his creating us initially, and especially for his redeeming us through the person and work of Christ.

Of course, emphasizing the threeness of God creates problems as well, and the greatest is the issue of how three separate persons can be the same God. Here we need to fall back on to the Western idea that Father, Son, and Spirit are the same Being because they share identical attributes; they have a single nature. But even as we do this, our focus should lie not on the abstract idea of God's nature itself, but on the fact that the one God consists of three persons who alike possess that nature and who share perfect fellowship with each other. By taking a cue from the East and concentrating more on this triune fellowship, we evangelicals will be better able to explain the basis for our own emphasis on the fellowship we have with God. God gives us fellowship with himself on the basis of the fellowship he has within himself. If we devote more attention to this aspect of who God is, our Trinitarian theology will match up more completely with the substance of our faith.

A focus on the eternal person of christ

Of course, all Western evangelicals accept the truth that Christ is one person in two natures, the formula which the church proclaimed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. When we are asked to explain this formula more explicitly, we generally say that at the incarnation, divine and human natures were combined in an inexpressible union into a single person. However, as Eastern Orthodox theologians will be quick to point out, this explanation is problematic, and one could argue that it is not what we actually believe about Christ.

To say that the two natures were combined *into* a single person seems to imply that what was united to human nature was the divine nature in the abstract. But the divine nature does not exist in the abstract, and it therefore could not have been united to human nature in Mary's womb. The divine nature exists *only* in the three persons of the Trinity — the Father, Son, and Spirit. It was not the divine *nature* which became a man; it was the *person* of the Word, the Son, who became a man. If we say that the nature of God was united to humanity, we are saying at once too much and too little: too much, because this could imply that the whole Trinity became incarnate, since the Father and Spirit

also possess the divine nature. Too little, because such a statement could imply that the Son before the incarnation and Christ after the incarnation are not the same person; Christ the person was created through the union in Mary's womb.

This problem with the way we typically explain the person of Christ is very probably connected to the problem with our expression of the Trinity. We place so much emphasis on the essence or nature of God that we tend to conceive of that nature as an entity in itself and to forget that it exists only in the three divine persons. Since we think of God's nature as an abstract entity, we tend to explain the incarnation in terms of that entity. But if we push this thought to its logical conclusion, it implies that in Christ we have the embodiment of the abstract idea of deity in a concrete man, Jesus. This might be what some Protestant liberals, or even some pantheistic or New Age thinkers, mean by the incarnation, but it is certainly *not* what we evangelicals mean! What we mean is that one of the persons of the Trinity, the Son, became a man.

I believe that we can learn a much clearer and more accurate way to express our faith in the incarnation by attending to the way Eastern Christianity explains the person of Christ. Orthodoxy asserts that since the Son was already a single person before the incarnation, and since he remained a single person after the incarnation, then both before and after the incarnation he must be *the same* person. That is to say, the one person of Christ is not a product of the incarnation; his single person is the eternal person of God the Son. The incarnation was not a process of *making* a person out of two impersonal natures; it was an act by which God the Son *added* humanity to who he already was. He added human attributes and human experience to what he already possessed as God. He took a full human nature into his divine person, without thereby ceasing to be God or changing from who he already was. He did this in order to give himself, God, to us, to give us anew the very fellowship he has eternally with the Father.

Although this language may sound very strange to us, careful consideration should reveal that this is actually what we believe about Christ. We insist that the man who taught in Jerusalem was the same one who existed before Abraham (as Jesus says of himself in Jn. 8:58). We believe that the Word who was with the Father in the beginning dwelt among us in human flesh (as John says in 1:14). We believe that the one who was from Jewish lineage in human terms is also 'God blessed forever' (as Paul declares in Rom. 9:5). None of these bold truths would be possible if the person of Christ came into existence by the combining of two natures into a person. What we generally say in the West is not quite what we actually *believe* about the person of Christ.

By listening to Orthodox theologians, we can learn to say what both we and they believe. The Word became

flesh. The eternal Son of God added a real, complete human nature to his own person while remaining who he always was. Christ's humanity came into existence and was added to his eternal divine person in Mary's womb, but his person is and has always been the second person of the Trinity. This is what we mean when we say that Christ is God and man, and this is in fact what the Orthodox say.

God, mystery, and salvation

At this point, some of my readers may be thinking that what the Orthodox say about the Trinity and Christ's person is more specific than is necessary, and probably even more specific than is permissible. How can speculation about these unsearchable mysteries actually be as important in Christian doctrine as the issue of how a person is saved?

I think one can respond to this objection in two ways, which I will discuss in this section and the following one. First, we should recognize that Christianity is at heart a faith in *someone*, in Christ. Therefore, the more precisely we can understand who Christ is, the more fully we can appreciate and know the one in whom we believe. Because of this, anything which helps us to understand Christ more fully is important, even though we recognize that we cannot completely fathom the mystery of his person.

In fact, the more completely we seek to probe the depths of God's character, the more we recognize how far beyond our comprehension he is. This is one of the reasons for the emphasis on mystery in Orthodox thought and worship. (It is certainly not the only reason or even the primary one, but discussing the full basis for Orthodox mysticism would require an article in itself.) The stress which the Orthodox place on the mysteriousness of God does not necessarily mean that they see him as distant from us. Rather, at its best, such mysticism reflects a deep effort to know God, which leads people to marvel at how far beyond our grasp is the God who has saved us and which drives us to stand in awe at his greatness. While we evangelicals will certainly not agree with all aspects of the Orthodox emphasis on mystery, we should applaud and seek to emulate the desire to know God deeply which lies behind much of it. We will not have truly sought to know God profoundly until we have been pushed to the limits of our understanding and have been driven to marvel at how short of God's full character our minds fall.

The 'who' and the 'how' of salvation

A second way in which one can respond to the objection above is by recognizing that what we say about the 'who' of salvation has a dramatic influence on our

understanding of the 'what' and the 'how' of salvation. If we neglect the personal fellowship which lies at the heart of the Trinity, if we do not seek to probe the mystery of Christ's person, then it is very easy for us to dissociate salvation from the doctrines of the Trinity and of Christ. In a worst-case scenario, salvation can become merely a set of goods (heaven, living forever, being sinless, etc.) which have no connection to Christ himself except that he procures these goods for us. The means of salvation can be reduced from a vibrant faith in Christ himself to a mere belief that he has done something to obtain salvation for us.

If one understands the 'what' and the 'how' of salvation in this reduced way, then clearly one is far from the picture which Jesus gives us when he says, 'Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent' (Jn. 17:3). Eternal life is to know God, to know Christ. Salvation does not merely come to us *through* Christ; salvation is Christ. What is heaven? It is many things, but primarily, it is to see Christ face to face and to know him even as he knows us (1 Cor. 13:12). What is forgiveness of sins? It is to be united to the one who took our sins upon himself in order to remove our guilt. Salvation is to have eternal fellowship with the Trinity, just as he has eternal fellowship within himself.

Of course, it is true that Western evangelical theology

at its best is far from the reduced statements of the nature and means of salvation which I have mentioned above, but it is also true that some popular evangelical thought succumbs to these pitfalls. A greater attention to the 'who' of salvation, to the personal relationship within the triune God and to the eternal person of Christ, could help ensure that we never fall into such traps. Such attention could also help us to see more clearly the magnitude of salvation: not just *what* God has done for us through Christ, but *whom* God has given us in Christ.

Orthodoxy is at its most biblical and most profound when explaining the Trinity and the person of Christ. By attending to the East on these issues, we can gain a much greater understanding of our own faith, and a much greater appreciation for the God whom we worship, than we might otherwise have had.

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Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism in dialogue¹

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Introduction

A re-evaluation of the role of communism in Eastern Europe has once more placed the Eastern Orthodox Church at the forefront of contemporary Christian thought. Missionaries from the West are meeting the Orthodox Church for the first time and often find themselves bewildered by its identity. Who are Orthodox Christians? What do they believe? Are they to be considered the friend or enemy of evangelical believers? These questions are not limited to western missionaries. Even well-established Protestant churches in traditional Orthodox Countries have struggled to obtain reliable answers on what the Orthodox Church believes and

how to best relate to it. Quite often, authentic Christian dialogue has been hindered by fear and ignorance on both sides. On the one hand, theologically unsophisticated Orthodox fear that all evangelicals belong to one great heretical sea of undifferentiated darkness; on the other hand, misinformed evangelicals sometimes fear that the Orthodox Church is nothing more than a cult. As these encounters between the two traditions unfold, one can see that a painful legacy of mutual ignorance exists. Can anything be done to fulfil Jesus' prayer that all his followers 'may be one, even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us' (Jn. 17:21)?

The purpose of this article is to build bridges between