

An Introduction to the Seven Sacred Mysteries of Orthodoxy

Note from Berean Beacon: This article is adapted from the book: Eastern Orthodoxy Illuminated by the Scriptures (Current: Belgrade, 2009), written by Serbian author, Ivica Stamenkovic. His research is based upon Holy Scripture, as well as primary Orthodox sources. Future articles will examine in detail specific Eastern Orthodox teachings on salvation that oppose Holy Scripture.

As we saw in an earlier article,¹ God's Word teaches that the only way a sinful person can receive salvation from God (i.e., forgiveness and eternal life) is by God's gracious gift of His Son Jesus Christ through man's response of faith in Him. It is God's grace, revealed in saving faith in Christ, which fully justifies a guilty sinner to possess Christ's perfect righteousness.

*"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."*²

In contrast, Eastern Orthodoxy denies the clear teaching of God's Word on salvation. Orthodoxy denies that God's gracious gift of faith in Christ's righteousness, as a substitute for man's complete sinfulness, is enough for salvation.

Furthermore, Orthodoxy confuses the order of faith and good works. God's Word teaches that once a person is already saved by His grace through faith in Christ, good works will then follow out of that person who becomes a new work through Christ. Eastern Orthodoxy teaches the opposite order. Orthodoxy teaches that a person must first do good works in order to receive a mere possibility that God might save him. The seven "Sacred Mysteries," or sacraments, are one primary component of "good works" in Eastern Orthodoxy.

Eastern Orthodoxy teaches that man can attain salvation only through partaking in specific practices called the Sacred Mysteries.³ Orthodoxy commands people to submit themselves to these Mysteries that are performed on their behalf by the Church. Indeed, Eastern Orthodoxy teaches that the only way to salvation and eternal life is through the Mysteries:

"The whole world lieth in wickedness," writes John, the Apostle loved by Christ.⁴ In this world dominated by evil, man is found at the bottom of a well crying out for salvation. He himself is unable by his own strength to save himself, but someone at the top of the well can throw him a rope, **a lifeline**, which he will eagerly catch. The mysteries of the [Eastern Orthodox] Church of Christ form a 'rope' that the Lord Jesus Christ gives from His heavenly heights out of clean and infinite love for man down into our valley of tears

¹ See the article "Eastern Orthodoxy Denies the Certainty of Biblical Salvation in Christ" on http://www.bereanbeacon.org/eastern_orthodoxy/Orthodoxy_No_Assurance_of_Salvation.pdf

² Ephesians 2:8-10

³ They also are known as "Sacred Sacraments." Both words will be used interchangeably in this article.

⁴ 1 John 5:19

so that we, sinful men, might grab them and partake of their powers, by the grace of God, and acquire the Light of God that is without darkness.”⁵

The main mysteries, or sacraments, in Orthodoxy consist of seven “mysteries,”⁶ which include: Baptism, Chrismation, Holy Communion (i.e., the Eucharist), Repentance (i.e., Confession), Holy Orders (i.e., Clergy), Marriage, and Anointing of the Sick. A Serbian Orthodox writer, Lazar Milin, describes the sacraments:

“Roman Catholics have also listed all the seven Holy Mysteries, or Sacraments. The Reformers, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, reduced the number of sacraments from seven to two, limiting them to Baptism and Communion.⁷ Protestant sectarians, primarily the Anabaptists, and soon others, deleted even these two sacraments by proclaiming them to be merely sacred rites.”⁸

So, according to Orthodoxy, both the Orthodox and Roman Catholics have the “fullness of God’s grace” because they adhere to seven Mysteries. They allege that mainline Protestants adhere to only two, while the “sectarian” Protestants (those whom Milin calls Biblical Christians who live in Serbia and other parts of the world) deny the existence of sacramental acts as mentioned above.

Before elaborating on how the Holy Scriptures describe that which the Orthodox call “Sacred Mysteries,” it is clear that the Orthodox doctrine of Sacred Mysteries is not based on the Bible. Rather, Orthodoxy bases its beliefs in the Mysteries from Sacred Tradition; e.g., the interpretation of the Gospel and speculation by the Church Fathers over many later centuries.

The Origin of Teaching on the Seven Mysteries in the Eastern Orthodox Church

As anyone who studies the doctrines of the Eastern Orthodox Churches knows, different teachers believed other sacraments existed in addition to the seven that are now officially recognized. Such is the example of monastic tonsures (cutting the hair of monastic initiates into life in the monasteries).⁹ However, under the influence of Roman Catholic theology, the Orthodox Church officially recognized seven to be the number of Sacred Mysteries. Ernst Benz says this:

“Orthodoxy characteristically does not strictly adhere solely to seven as the number of the Mysteries in the Church. **However, the theology of the Orthodox Church later came**

⁵ *Religion in the Home*, 4th Edition, (Religious Charity Foundation: Belgrade, 1991), 25. Author’s emphasis.

⁶ “Neither the liturgical book called Euchologion (prayer book), which contains the texts of the sacraments, nor the patristic tradition, however, formally limits the number of mysteries; they do not distinguish clearly between the “mysteries” and such acts as the blessing of water on Epiphany day or the burial service or the service for the tonsuring of a monk that in the West are called sacramentalia. In fact, no council recognized by the Orthodox Church ever defined the number of sacraments; it is only through the “Orthodox confessions” of the 17th century directed against the Reformation that the number seven has been generally accepted.” <http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/general/doctrine3.aspx> (Translator’s note: the webmaster indicates that Serbian Orthodox monks at the Decani Monastery in Kosovo compiled this information.)

⁷ The Communion is also called The Lord’s Supper, The Lord’s Table, or the Eucharist.

⁸ Lazar Milin, *The Church and Sects*, 299.

⁹ More about tonsure will be discussed in a future article on Orthodox Monasticism.

under the influence of the Roman Catholic Church and adopted the definition of Seven Sacraments identical to those of Rome. However, Orthodoxy does not recognize the principle of a strict distinction between the Sacraments and sacramentals, in other words, devotional acts of the church that are not sacraments in the truest sense.”¹⁰

This author also confirms the fact represented by Bible-believing Christians (the so-called “Protestant sectarians”) that the doctrine of the Sacraments developed gradually over many centuries. Various church authorities have different numbers of sacraments. The dogma of the “Sacraments” found in Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism appeared only 1200 years after Christ's ascension into heaven.

“In a certain way, the Church in its entire sphere of 'mysteries' brought out of its charismatic fullness could always devise a new mystery. While the old church resolved its acceptance of the books of the New Testament canon in the Fourth Century, its establishment of church dogmas in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries, and the simplification of the church liturgy in the Seventh Century, the number of Sacraments had not yet been defined until the end of the first millennium. This always signified its creative liveliness in this sphere.

One of the renowned teachers of the Orthodox Church, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (6th Century) listed six sacraments in his work *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*: baptism, Eucharist, confirmation, priesthood, the consecration of monks, and rites for the dead. Another teacher revered by Orthodoxy, John of Damascus, two centuries later mentions only two sacraments: Baptism together with the corresponding chrismation and the Eucharist (Communion). Only during the Council of Lyons in 1274 did Greek theologians, who discussed the possibility of uniting with Rome, accepted the number of Sacraments to be seven, which is slightly before the West accepted scholastic theology: Baptism, Confirmation (Confirmation), Eucharist, Penance, Priesthood, Marriage, and Anointing of the Sick. Even today there are many Orthodox theologians who do not hold strictly to the scheme of the seven ‘Mysteries’ established by the Roman Catholic Church. This discord indicates a much more comprehensive range of Orthodox mystery.”¹¹

St. John of Damascus was one of the most respected theologians in Orthodox history, particularly for his views on icon veneration. Yet, it is remarkable that even his view of the “mysteries” bears strong parallels to that of the Protestants. Like the Protestants, St. John only recognized two sacraments: baptism and the Eucharist. Yet, two centuries earlier, the list by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite contains six sacraments. Orthodoxy recognizes some of them and rejects others. These facts cited in the above quote are sufficient to demonstrate that the number of “Holy Sacraments” do not originate from the teachings of Christ and His apostles. Rather, the seven Sacraments are based on the opinions of Church Fathers and the decisions of later ecumenical councils. Indeed, the Orthodox churches settled on “Seven Sacraments” based

¹⁰ Ernst Benz, *The Spirit and Life of the Eastern Churches*, 32. Author’s emphasis.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 33. Author’s emphasis.

on the influence of the anathematized “brethren” of the Western Roman Catholic Church! As the Roman Catholic Church settled on the number “seven,” so the Orthodox churches also followed Rome!

Because of the weight of these historical arguments, we ought to be careful with passively accepting the accuracy of Orthodox teachings on sacraments. Earlier, we read an Orthodox text that alleges that Christ established the seven sacraments as a “lifeline” from heaven. However, we just saw that the Church Fathers wove this “lifeline” throughout the centuries. Yet, one faction stayed in the West while the other faction switched to the East. Scripture never mentions any word about “Holy Sacraments,” neither those found in the Roman Catholicism of the West nor in the Orthodoxy of the East. Although the Scriptures never use the term “Holy Sacraments”¹² or “Holy Mysteries,” the Scriptures do make references to “mysteries.”

The Biblical Concept of “Mysteries”

The Bible elevates the word “mystery” to the highest place.¹³ The fulfillment and the contexts in which they refer to “mystery” vary. There are human and divine mysteries. For example, passages in the Old Testament such as Judges 3:19 and Proverbs 25:9 use the word “mystery” only in the context of ordinary human secrets, i.e., confidential information that one would not want to disclose to many other people. However, other verses use the word “mystery” to refer to certain facts or events that had been kept secret from a specific people group or generation. There are also God's mysteries which people have never understood fully, such as the mystery of God and the miracle of His eternal existence, His unlimited power, and many other magnificent properties:

“Art thou the first man that was born? or wast thou made before the hills? Hast thou heard the secret [mystery] of God? and dost thou restrain wisdom to thyself?”¹⁴

*“And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable. And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to **know the mystery of the kingdom of God**: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables... .”¹⁵*

*“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of **this mystery**, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the*

¹² Serbian Orthodox historian Eusebius Popovic believed the idea that “mysteries” were defined as activities carried out by Christians in the first centuries after Christ’s ascension during great persecution and were called “secrets” because they did not want to disclose them publicly before Gentiles. The Gentiles would wrongly interpret their meaning. Because the Christian baptism, taking the Lord's Supper, and other activities held in secret Christian meetings (forests, caves, catacombs and similar places), from their fear of persecution, it is possible that they called these activities “mysteries.” See: Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 437.

¹³ However, we shall see that the Bible defines “mystery” quite differently than Eastern Orthodoxy.

¹⁴ Job 15:7-8 Author’s emphasis.

¹⁵ Mark 4:10-11 Author’s emphasis.

*Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob....*¹⁶

*“Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to **the revelation of the mystery**, which was kept secret since the world began, But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith....*”¹⁷

*“That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of **the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ**; In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”*¹⁸

*“Behold, I shew you **a mystery**; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed*”¹⁹

*“Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in **the mystery of Christ** Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit....”*²⁰

*“For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is **a great mystery**: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.”*²¹

*“And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: And upon her forehead was a name written, **MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH**. And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration.”*²²

As the above verses demonstrate, the biblical writers use the word “mystery” in reference to the teachings about the Kingdom of Heaven, the Church of Christ (i.e., true Christians), and the resurrection of the dead. “Mystery” also alludes to the future salvation of Israel.

“Mystery” also depicts the rise of Babylon, which according to many evangelical interpreters is materially rich, yet spiritually bankrupt. Babylon symbolizes religion that is far from God with rules derived from tradition based not on the Bible but rather dictated by men. Through the

¹⁶ Romans 11:25-6 Author’s emphasis.

¹⁷ Romans 16:25-6 Author’s emphasis.

¹⁸ Colossians 2:2-3 Author’s emphasis.

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:51 Author’s emphasis.

²⁰ Ephesians 3:4-5 Author’s emphasis.

²¹ Ephesians 5:31-2 Author’s emphasis.

²² Revelation 17:4-6 Author’s emphasis.

centuries, Babylon in the name of protecting “orthodoxy” has persecuted the true followers of Jesus and brutally murdered them.²³

These verses show that the apostles emphasized that mysteries had been secret or hidden to people in the past. However, they also reveal that such mysteries were revealed once the Gospel of Christ was written down and, thus, no longer remain secret.

To repeat once again, the New Testament does not use the term “mystery” for such things as baptism, communion, marriage, and other “spiritual institutions” that Eastern Orthodoxy calls “Sacraments” or “Mysteries.” Neither do the Scriptures mandate that a believer in Christ must partake in them to earn salvation from Him.

However, we do realize that such ordinances truly remain a “mystery” to those who do not trust the clear teaching of the Holy Scriptures. Such “mysteries” remain hidden to some for the simple reason of their own misunderstanding and spiritual apostasy.

The Biblical Mystery of Salvation Revealed

God says nothing about the constant participation in man-made “mysteries” to earn favor from Him. In fact, He says the opposite about man’s works! *“But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our **righteousnesses are as filthy rags....**”*²⁴ Indeed, it is presumptuous to boast that man deserves anything good from God in light of man’s corruption before the All-Holy God.

*“As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.”*²⁵

But God reveals the one and greatest mystery about His character and plan of salvation:

*“And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.”*²⁶

We will see more about this manifested gospel of grace as we proceed with other articles on the seven sacred mysteries of orthodoxy.

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²³ This theme will be covered in a future article.

²⁴ Isaiah 64:6

²⁵ Romans 3:10-12

²⁶ 1 Timothy 3:16