

Eastern Orthodoxy Denies the Certainty of Biblical Salvation in Christ

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

Can a person have any certainty in knowing if God truly can forgive him solely by faith in Christ's merits? Or, does God leave a person to strive by his own efforts and doubts for the duration of this earthly life, not knowing until death whether that person will receive eternal life or eternal punishment from the All-Holy God? What does God teach in His Word? Does Eastern Orthodoxy adhere to the teachings of Jesus Christ as revealed from His firsthand teaching and testimony?

The Orthodox Church teaches a system of salvation radically different from what God's Word teaches. One area where Eastern Orthodoxy differs radically from the plain teaching of Holy Scripture is justification. Does God simply accept faith in Christ as the basis for giving a sinful person new eternal life in Him? Here are two examples of Orthodox teaching on the subject:

“Justification is not given once and for all, nor is it a guarantee of eternal salvation, but it depends on how much a man will live righteously or sinfully in the future. There exists no such thing judicially that instantly converts a sinful person into a righteous one.”¹

“Therefore, it is no wonder that the Orthodox doctrine of justification plays such a minor role. The most common presentation of the Orthodox teaching on religion by John of Damascus² does not mention the concept of justification at all.”³

In contrast, numerous passages in Holy Scripture demonstrate that true Christians believe in justification and thus can be assured of their eternal salvation with God now. A couple of examples include:

*“Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that heareth my word, and believeth on Him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.”*⁴

*“And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.”*⁵

¹ *What Do Orthodox Christians Believe?* (Lamp Publishing of the Little Orthodoxy Library: 1996) p. 9

² St. John of Damascus (c.a. 700-750 AD).

³ Ernst Benz, *The Spirit and Life of the Eastern Church*, (Svetlost Press: Sarajevo, Bosnia, 1991) p. 48

⁴ John 5:24

⁵ John 10:28

“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.”⁶

“These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.”⁷

In complete opposition to Scripture, **many Orthodox believers live in constant fear and insecurity.** Of course, this stems from their belief that salvation is based on works of human merit, and thus they need to earn God’s favor in order to receive eternal life. Some of the works that Orthodoxy cites in order for human beings to attain the kingdom of heaven include: baptism, communion, fasts, confession to the priests, prayers to dead saints and angels of God, prayer on behalf of the souls of dead people, and many other works.

Future articles will examine specific teachings of Eastern Orthodoxy on salvation. This article will address two areas:

- (1) Is the Orthodox criticism of salvation by “faith in Christ alone” a valid one?
- (2) Does the Orthodox teaching on salvation give its believers a firm foundation for peace with God?

The answer to both questions is “No.” The only way to salvation is found in Christ’s direct teachings as recorded in the Scriptures. Christ Himself teaches that He is the only Way to reconciling the sinful human soul with the All-Holy Father:

“Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”⁸

Does the Bible Teach that Faith Alone in Christ Alone is Enough for Peace with Him?

Eastern Orthodox theologians accuse biblical Christians of promoting false teachings that are contrary to the Bible. Such criticisms are, of course, the result of unfounded and erroneous understanding of the texts of Scripture on the part of Orthodoxy, as will be proven.

Both the Old and New Testaments teach that salvation comes only by the grace of God, and reconciliation with God ultimately and exclusively comes through faith in Christ the Savior who

⁶ Ephesians 2:8-9 Please note the order that God inspires Paul to explain salvation: (1) grace (from God), (2) faith (manifested in a believer who admits God’s sovereignty, man’s sinfulness, and desperate need for Christ’s redemption and lordship in his life, and (3) man can take NO credit for any of this. Only in verse 10 do we see as a result a fruit of salvation, NOT a precondition—does a believer, after being saved by God’s grace through faith in Christ, fulfill his purpose to God’s glory of walking “in Christ unto good works.” Good works do not save; rather works are a logical, reasonable response to God’s mercy. Romans 12:1 says, “*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.*”

⁷ 1 John 5:13

⁸ John 14:6

fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. Despite such clear teaching in the Bible, the Orthodox theologian, Lazar Milin, states the following complaint in his book. He uses a very narrow argument to persuade “true believers” that Bible-believing Christians base their doctrine of salvation on an incorrect translation of the Epistle to the Romans by Martin Luther. Here is what Mr. Milin writes:

“As a matter of fact, Luther argued, and other Protestants also affirmed, that a man is justified before God only through faith in Christ and the redemption that Christ brought to suffering humanity. This is called a material principle of the Reformation. Good works are not necessary for salvation... It is interesting to study the process how Luther translated the Holy Scriptures into the German language. In Romans 3:28, the verse reads: *‘We believe, namely, that a man is justified by faith independent of the works of the Law.’* Luther added to the translation an extra word: ‘alone.’ That word corrupted the Holy Scriptures to say what Luther declared as a material principle of the Reformation: ‘Man is saved by faith alone.’ **Regardless of the fact that such teaching is illogical and contrary to the Bible, it has infiltrated the entirety of Protestantism in all its forms.**”⁹

It is obvious that Milin and other Orthodox theologians, as well as ordinary Orthodox believers, believe that Protestants are wrong. They believe that Protestants are misled by Luther’s translation of the Holy Scriptures.

Is it truly possible to believe this accusation after reading the previous chapter? Previous chapters have shown scores of biblical texts that show God’s way of salvation that apply to anyone who repents and believes. Is there anywhere else in the Bible that states that a man can only be saved (or justified) by God through “*faith alone*”?

Regarding this issue, we can give a very clear answer. Even if such wording existed nowhere else in Scripture, that is, the system of salvation by faith alone, the Bible implicitly demonstrates that salvation comes solely from God’s justifying the believer through faith alone.

However, the Lord through the Apostle Paul ensured that once and for all that the biblical text would indeed uphold the doctrine of salvation through faith alone for those who wish to accept Him and obey His Word. The apostle Paul wrote Galatians, an epistle in which he fought strongly for the purity of faith and the correct understanding of God’s gift of salvation, among other things. In describing his earlier interaction with the Apostle Peter, Paul said the following:

*“But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?.. Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even **we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law:** for by*

⁹ Lazar Milin, *A Systematic Apologetic of Religions, Cults, and Sects*, 52.

the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid.”¹⁰

Scholars from various backgrounds, including Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, acknowledge this indeed is what the Bible teaches.¹¹

However, even with this evidence for the biblical teaching on salvation, Orthodox believers remain entrenched in their belief that salvation demands various pious works, even if the Bible emphasizes the contrary. Future study of the beliefs of Eastern Orthodox churches will show their opposition to the truth of the gospel of salvation as presented in God’s Word.

Eastern Orthodoxy Offers No Assurance of a Right Standing with God

The previous section demonstrates the contradictions of Orthodox doctrine versus God’s Word in the areas of salvation and justification of the believer by faith in Christ. The majority of the church in Serbia, unfortunately, does not have the truth on this issue. It is no wonder that adherents (including bishops) of Orthodoxy do not know in the end whether they are saved or not. Let us read some direct quotations from Serbian Orthodox bishops, including the Serbian Patriarch himself. These quotes clearly demonstrate the fact that those in the “Only Saving Church,” even the Orthodox theologians, have no any assurance that they will be saved. They assert that it is very possible, in spite of all one’s efforts and striving toward salvation, a person could still end up in the lake of fire!¹²

The first statement comes from the Diocesan Bishop, Dr. Porphyry Peric, from an interview published in the magazine, *MTS CLUB – The Mobile Telephony User Club of Serbia*. The title of the article is “Porphyry, Our Representative Before God.” Amongst other things, here is the Bishop’s answer to some journalists’ questions about the security of salvation in the framework of the Ecumenical Orthodox Church:

“Bishop Porphyry is known for his many professional articles in which he stands for the purity of the Orthodox faith and also very harshly criticizes the cults. I wonder if Orthodox believers themselves will be saved. He responded, ‘**Even just belonging to the Orthodox Church does not guarantee salvation. No one, not even a Patriarch or a Bishop, can find any certain sign that they are saved themselves.** Who knows how much closer a so-called ‘sinner’, so far as he can understand, is to God compared to some ‘righteous person’?’¹³

¹⁰ Galatians 2:14, 16-7.

¹¹ Various commentators include Serbian Orthodox (Dr. Emilian Carnica, Dimitrije Stefanovic, Vuk Karadzic), Croatian Catholics (Dr. Ivan Saric, Archbishop of Vrhbosna, Ludevit Rupsic), and Protestants (Dr. Louis Bakotic, Branko Dakovic).

¹² Revelation 20:15

¹³ *MTS Club – Customer Club of Mobile Telephony of Serbia 064*, May 2005, 21. (Author’s emphasis)

Another example comes from Bishop Justin Stefanovic of the Diocese of Timočki who gave a lecture in 1995 or 1996.¹⁴ The Bishop said he was unsure whether he was saved or not. He explained his current involvement in “political activity.” The mid 1990’s were a time of much political activity in terms of major opposition rallies and demonstrations in Serbia. Frequently, clergy led such demonstrations. The Bishop expressed his hope that one day, before the end of his life, he would return to the monastery and thus receive credit for his salvation.

Still another case comes from Pavle, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church.¹⁵ In one of his letters, he responds to the criticism by Bishop Artemije of Raska Prizren. The Bishop criticized the Patriarch’s declaration that Muslims and Christians in Bosnia are all God’s children, i.e., “Brothers in God.” Patriarch Pavle expressed uncertainty about his own salvation when he cited verses from Matthew 10:22 and 25:41:

“To address our people as brothers in God is always meant in the potential sense, in other words, the potential for it exists. But will this potential be realized? And as for Christians, whether they are truly honest sons and daughters of God, will they hold on until death? **For only they who endure to the end will be saved.**”¹⁶

Further on, Patriarch Pavle adds:

“I only know that our Lord, in His Day of Judgment, will judge us according to how we commiserated and behaved before His ‘little brothers,’ and did works, but if I failed to love, even though my duty was to do so, **may I not be found on the side of those to whom the Righteous Judge will say: ‘Get away from me, you evildoers!’**”¹⁷

These quotations clearly recognize the fact that even the highest dignitaries of the Orthodox churches do not have assurance as to whether or not God would accept them. All this stems from the unbiblical theology of the Orthodox Church.

Christ exhorts His disciples in Matthew 10:22 to persevere in ministry in face of great suffering and opposition. When read in context with Jesus’ other teachings, we realize that perseverance is a consequence of God’s salvation of the believer. The disciples will endure trial because God has already justified and saved them. Thus, faith in Christ, and new birth given by God, results in eternal life, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Future articles will examine what duties “ordinary” believers, who live in a sinful world, are expected to perform in the Orthodox Church. These are people who reverence the leaders in the church with titles such as “Your High Grace” and “Your Holiness.” Yet, those very leaders are not sure whether or not they will end up in hell!

¹⁴ The author personally attended this lecture.

¹⁵ Patriarch Pavle died in 2010. (Translator’s note)

¹⁶ *Holy Prince Lazar*, Vol.1 (5), 1994, 108. (Author’s emphasis)

¹⁷ *Ibid.* (Author’s emphasis)

The Eternal and Certain Promise of Eternal Life in Christ Jesus

In contrast to the doubt and instability of the invented teachings of men in Eastern Orthodoxy, Jesus Christ has provided everything necessary to put away the sins of His people. He has provided a certain and knowable way for them both to be forgiven their sins and granted a right standing before God. *“It is finished,”* He declared. Paid in full was the price of the believer’s redemption! Fulfilled perfectly were all the requirements of God’s law! In a word, complete satisfaction had been made to God for the believer, solely by Christ’s works.

Holy God is merciful to every person who calls upon Him in truth. God’s eternal and unfailing command for a person to receive eternal life is to repent and believe on the eternal, Lord Jesus Christ.

“...if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”¹⁸

Delusionary religious systems and philosophies apart from God leave a person in doubt and instability. A person trapped in such a system cannot find peace or assurance with God. Manmade traditions or religions, including Eastern Orthodoxy, can never overcome the power of God that grants His people an unbreakable bond and confidence in His love—made through Jesus Christ:

“My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my hand.”¹⁹

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¹⁸ Romans 10:9-10

¹⁹ John 10:29