

# Baptists Target the Orthodox



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In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen!

I am holding in my hand a doctoral project that was approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. It is titled "Witnessing to People of Eastern Orthodox Background: Turning Barriers of Belief into Bridges to Personal Faith." It is 75 pages long and the first 14 pages are an introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy. The next 36 pages are a detailed examination of the so-called "barriers" and strategies for helping an Orthodox Christian come to a "personal" faith in Jesus Christ.

Why am sharing this with you? Because it shows that some people are willing to learn our Orthodox Teachings, perhaps better than we know it ourselves, in order to advance their own agenda, in this case to "evangelize" us, the Orthodox. More importantly, for our purposes today, it demonstrates how some people see Orthodox Christians from the outside and how we are presenting our Faith to the world around us.

The author, Matt Spann, identifies eight different Orthodox beliefs that he interprets as barriers to personal faith in Christ. Obviously, he is looking through the distorted lens of Protestant Evangelical Baptist Christianity that places primacy on personal faith over the more communal consensus of faith. What he labels as barriers, need not be when viewed from the official teachings of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Nevertheless, his thesis is based on case studies of actual Orthodox people who we may resemble to some degree. We do not have time for a detailed review of the thesis. However, I would like to share its main points in a way that will cause us to examine our own faith relationship with Christ in the life of the Orthodox Church. I do so from the perspective that Orthodoxy does encourage and teach the importance of a personal relationship with Christ. As I present each point, we will see the two extremes that distort the true Faith, the Protestant Evangelical perspective on one hand and the Orthodox Christian on the other hand and how we may have fallen into either extreme. Hopefully, at the end, we will have gained *theoria* and *praxis*, an understanding of the Faith in Christ and how to live it each day. The first belief is Authority and Tradition. In Orthodoxy Holy Tradition has several components including Scripture, Councils, Creeds, Fathers, Liturgics, Canon Law and Iconography. The Protestant teaching is *Sola Scriptura*, that only the Scripture is authoritative for teaching. The author correctly observes that some Orthodox, believing the Church has the Truth and, since they are members of the Church, they do not need to seek or learn the Truth. Therefore, daily reading of Scripture and the Fathers or attending Bible Study is not really necessary or important.

Second, the Orthodox believe that God is transcendent, mysterious, unexplainable and unknowable. The author says that this belief causes people to see God as someone far

away and impersonal. No doubt, the mystical character of our worship emphasizes the mystery of God and worshipping in a language that no one understands nor speaks, certainly contributes to this problem. However, this is only half the story. Our God, while being wholly other in His essence, has come to live among us and in us through His energies. We can know Him personally in His Son Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit because He has revealed Himself to us.

Third, regarding Grace and Salvation, we teach that the Sacraments of our Church are the visible means by which the invisible grace of God comes to us. The author rightly observes that many Orthodox approach the sacraments as a direct tap to God's grace that automatically or magically saves us. Is that so surprising when we still have people who disappear from the life of the Church after their marriage or baptism or their baby's baptism? The truth is that God's grace cannot penetrate an unrepentant heart that is darkened by sin. Holy Communion cannot save us, especially if we have not confessed our sins in the Sacrament of Penance. I would include icons in the sacramental life of the Church. Similarly, if we bow before and kiss the icons thinking that these gestures erase or balance out sin in our life, then, we are sadly mistaken.

Fourth, we pray to the Virgin Mary and the Saints and ask them to pray to God to help us in our struggles. We know this is helpful because the faith of the Saints is great and powerful. Many of us have experienced God's grace through the miraculous intercession of Saints, sometimes after coming in contact with their relics. However, as the author notices, if we only pray to the Saints without directing our own prayers to Christ our Lord, then we have made idols of Mary and St. George and others saints. The fifth point is what the author calls 'Religious Nationalism'. This attitude says, "To be Russian is to be Orthodox" or "To be Greek is to be Orthodox." In other words, "I am of Greek descent; I am automatically an Orthodox Christian and perhaps a better Christian than those who are not Greek or not Orthodox." Thankfully, this attitude is on a fast decline in our churches. Orthodoxy has officially condemned 'philetism' as heresy and we must be careful not to treat those of different backgrounds with prejudice or contempt. St. Paul said, "There is neither Greek nor Jew, there is neither male nor female, but we are all one in Christ."

In today's Gospel reading, the 8th Sunday of Luke 10:25-37, Jesus affirms the lawyers statement of how to inherit eternal life. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (v.27). This implies a deep, personal, affection relationship with God. However, if we are only love God with part of ourselves, less than 100 percent, then, distortion and perversion will creep in to our life. We will easily begin making idols out of the very gifts and tools the Church offers to us to build our relationship with Christ and others. The Holy Tradition, the Sacraments, the Saints, the Icons and our culture will become our gods instead of the One, True God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We hear repeatedly during the worship services, "Remembering our most-Holy Lady Theotokos and ever-Virgin Mary, and all the Saints: let us commit ourselves and our whole life and one another to Christ our God." Our life in the Body of the Christ, the

Church is an excellent barometer, of how well we are remembering our saintly examples and imitating them. Can we say we've committed our whole life to Christ if we rarely attend worship services, or come late, if we do not help the ministries regularly with our time and talents, if we do not give generously and sacrificially with our stewardship offering of our monetary treasures? Can we say we've committed others to Christ when we don't invite them, including non-Orthodox to worship with us, or worse, when we gossip about and slander those who are in the church? Have we contacted and encouraged those who have drifted away from the Church?

The lawyer also questioned Jesus saying, "Who is my neighbor" (v.29). Jesus goes on to tell the Parable of the Good Samaritan and then asks the lawyer who the neighbor was. The lawyer answered, "He who showed mercy on him" and Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise" (v.37). If we want to be a good neighbor, we must look for an notice those who are hurting and suffering, we must inconvenience ourselves, go out of our way, give our money and help them. As we all know, recent deaths in our community have brought hurt and suffering to many families. The reality is that everyone is hurting and suffering in some form or another. If we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, then we must love our neighbor to the same degree. We must help each other commit ourselves and our whole life to Christ our God.

Southern Baptist document: <[http://www.namb.net/atf/cf/%7BCDA250E8-8866-4236-9A0C-C646DE153446%7D/BB\\_E\\_Orthodox\\_Manual.pdf](http://www.namb.net/atf/cf/%7BCDA250E8-8866-4236-9A0C-C646DE153446%7D/BB_E_Orthodox_Manual.pdf)> Witnessing to People of Eastern Orthodox Background: Turning Barriers of Belief into Bridges to Personal Faith <<http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles7/>>

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