

**Report on Faith and Works:
Eastern Orthodoxy's Confusion of Law and Gospel**

It can be said that there are only two religions in the world: the religion of the Gospel and the religion of the Law. It is the heathen which adhere throughout their manifold manifestations to the religion of the Law. "Since the heathen know nothing of the Gospel of Christ, but have some knowledge of the Law, their entire religious thinking moves in the sphere of the Law. Religion to the heathen means man's endeavor to placate the deity through his own efforts and works, through worship, sacrifices, moral exercises, ascetic discipline and the like" (Pieper, vol 1, pg. 8).

It is the religion of the Gospel which accepts by faith alone the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ for all sins and God's declaration of the sinner as being righteous on account of His sacrifice. This religion is properly called Christianity for its foundation is the Apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus Himself the chief cornerstone! Christ is all and in all. By faith alone in Christ's holy incarnation, baptism, sinless life, suffering, death, resurrection, descent into hell and ascension to the Father's right hand, poor sinners are cleansed from their sin, rescued from death, and set free from the powers of the Devil. Therefore the religion of the gospel is one of faith passively receiving from Christ the forgiveness of sins for justification and it is one of works (for Lutherans do not deny the necessity of works, only the necessity of works for salvation. AC VI) only in the sense of doing good towards one's neighbor.

It is when Faith and Works, Law and Gospel, are combined, co-mingled, or confused within "external Christendom" that the religion of the Gospel succumbs to the religion of the Law. The enlightened return to heathenism. The dog returns to his vomit (2 Peter 2:22). Christ becomes a new law-giver, one in succession of Moses and the sinner is burdened with more works to trouble his soul than his own conscience required before his conversion. As we will see below, like her Roman sister, Constantinople and the Eastern Orthodox fall prey to such confusion and become a religion of the Law.

The Confusion begins: Original Sin and Man's Fall from Grace

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Though others will provide a more in-depth study of the Orthodox doctrine of Original sin, a brief summation is important for this study as one's view of humanity following the fall into sin will surely impact the doctrine of justification and the role of good works in the life of the Christian.

As Lutherans we believe that "since the fall of Adam all men who are born according to the course of nature are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mother's wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit" (AC II, Tappert). Therefore humanity is totally depraved and unable to move towards God, either in repentance, love, devotion, or any kind of good work. For man before rebirth is "dead in his sins and trespasses" (Ephesians 2:1b.)

The Orthodox, however, do not view man's fall quite as terminally as we Lutherans. The Eastern Orthodox Catechism plainly states that humanity suffered 5 things when Adam fell. 1.) Their minds became darkened and they lost God. 2.) Their hearts became perverted and they began to love evil more than good. 3.) They fell into sickness and various other evils. 4.) Their bodies became mortal. 5.) Their souls were condemned to *moral* death, which is separation from God, i.e. eternal misfortune." (emphasis added)

It is the fifth which impacts our study regarding faith and works. According to the Orthodox, humanity suffered moral death and therefore all the various evils that come with sin in life; "sweats in labor, afflictions, bodily sicknesses, pains in child-bearing, to live a laborious life, and lastly bodily death" (Dositheus' Confession Decree VI). Humanity did not suffer spiritual death. Point being, according to them, man's nature is still capable of doing some good towards God. Decree XIV of Dositheus' Confession¹ states that man has free will "so as to be by nature able to choose and do what is good and to avoid and hate what is evil."

¹ The authority of the 17th century "Confession of Dositheus" is disputed by some within the Eastern Orthodox churches, but more generally it is seen as a correct statement of Eastern Orthodox faith. For a full text, see <http://catholicity.elcore.net/ConfessionOfDositheus.html> .

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The Eastern Orthodox therefore believe that human nature continues to be good and is able to do good. "For it is absurd to say that the nature which was created good by Him who is supremely good lacketh the power of doing good. For this would be to make that nature evil" (Dositheus, Decree XIV).

The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, one of the Lutheran confessions, clearly refutes this argument and rejects all who permit human nature to retain any power or ability to do anything good towards God (FC SD I pr. 23). Lutherans confess on the basis of Scripture that human nature was created good, as was all creation, yet its spiritual goodness died when Adam sinned so that "we are by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). This has been handed down to us from our first father, Adam, and is present within all who are conceived and born in the natural course of things, i.e. not conceived by the Holy Spirit & born of the blessed virgin.

Faith Alone: Orthodox Christianity or Lutheran Heresy?

From our Lutheran standpoint regarding the doctrine of original sin it is plain to all that our works cannot have any place within the court of the King regarding salvation. We have no standing before God in and of ourselves. Humanity is dead and must therefore be revived, resurrected, unto newness of life. Such revival occurs when the sinner by the power of the Holy Ghost believes Christ to have lived a perfect life in his stead, to have died on his behalf as a propitiation for his sins, and to have been raised from the dead for all eternity. Such a faith (faith alone without the deeds of the Law) is reckoned to the sinner as righteousness even as Abraham was accounted righteous before God upon believing (Romans 4 ff.).

Logically, in accordance with their doctrine of original sin, the Eastern Orthodox cannot confess justification by faith alone but must include works. Dositheus states with utter clarity, "We believe a man to be not simply justified through faith alone, but through faith

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which worketh through love, that is to say, through faith and works” (Decree XIII). Also, Jeremiah II in his reply to the Lutheran theologians of Tübingen, Germany (late 16th century) says, “One should not boast about works, but to do and fulfill them is necessary. For without divine works it is impossible to be saved.” And again he says, “It is necessary to join our good works together with the mercy from above. If we excuse ourselves because of our weakness or the goodness of God and do not add something of our own, there will be no benefit to us. How can we invoke mercy for the cure of our iniquities if in no way have we done anything to appease the Divine one?”

Such theology begs two questions, “What good works are necessary? And how many?” It is here that the Eastern Orthodox, bound by the tradition of the Church and not the scriptures alone, add to an already burdened conscience. For if our sins were not enough to plague us and cause us despair, now, as in Rome, Constantinople lays a heavier yoke upon the saints. Works must be added to faith in order to establish and preserve faith. “After baptism it is without fail necessary to keep God’s commandments, by which the grace given at baptism is preserved and, to the measure of one’s proficiency in the commandments is increased. Having transgressed the commandments, by repentance one again acquires grace. All this acts through faith, but without faith one could not perform deeds of repentance” (St. Macarius of Optina). Thus the Eastern Orthodox confuse the Gospel with the Law by requiring works for salvation.

Participation in and reception of the seven sacraments as well as other means of grace called “Means of Sanctification” are provide to add grace (understood as spiritual power) to the believer that he may do good works. What are these “Means of Sanctification” you ask? They are simply things “established by the Church to develop good thoughts and character in Christians and help them in their physical and spiritual life” (Orthodox catechism). These include: “The sign of the cross when we pray, the lesser and the Great Holy Water; the Flowers of the Cross and of the Veneration of the Cross, and the Flowers of the Holy

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Sepulchre, the Palms, the Prayers to the Holy Virgin and saints, the Prayers of birth and of the forty days; the Prayers of Exorcism against the evil eye and for various needs which arise during the life of man; finally the constant use of the Holy Scriptures . . .” (Orthodox Catechism). While some of such “means of sanctification” may indeed spur faith on towards an ever more fervent adoration of our Lord, we have no promise that grace is delivered let alone received by faith through these means. For these means are neither biblical nor are they proclamations of the Gospel. But instead they are outward actions, and in some cases they are idolatrous actions. For they are actions directed to things and persons other than the person of Jesus Christ! Again the Gospel is confused with the Law.

Though the Eastern Orthodox condemn us Lutherans as heretics, we must clearly and unabashedly confess that justification by faith alone is orthodox Christianity, even if it's not Eastern Orthodox. For no other doctrine brings comfort to terrorized hearts nor glorifies Christ our Lord more than the promise of the forgiveness of sins on account of Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection received by faith alone!

A Comfort Lost. A Hope Deprived!

Such a confusion of Law and Gospel results in faulty doctrine and despairing, hopeless hearts. Even with all of the works listed above actively being done in the life of the believer it is possible that an insufficient number of good deeds have been done and therefore upon death such a person would not obtain heaven, but rather punishment. According to the Eastern Orthodox catechism there are three possible stages for the believer after death:

1) If he has believed in Jesus Christ, kept his faith incorrupt, repented his sins before his death, *and done good deed* (emphasis added), he is led where God assigns him and lives in happiness until the Second coming of Christ.

2) But if he has been an unbeliever, or *believed in Christ* (emphasis added), but corrupted his faith, or sinned after Baptism and did not repent before he died, and *did not do*

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good deeds (emphasis added), he is taken where God assigns him and lives unhappy until the Second Coming of Christ.

3) But if he was a believer, and did not corrupt the faith, and having sinned, did indeed repent, but ***did not reach the performance of good deeds to prove his repentance by actions*** (emphasis added), then he is led where God assigns him, that he may be punished temporarily, as long as Divine Righteousness considers proper.

Again we see that certainty of salvation eludes the adherents of Eastern Orthodoxy. There is no comfort for a despairing soul! Not a single soul may know beyond a doubt that he is in “group one” and will be received into heaven upon his death. The promise of forgiveness is not to be taken seriously! The life, death, and resurrection of Christ is not enough. No! Works done by the sinner must be sufficiently added! To make matters worse for an already troubled conscience, neither the Scriptures nor the church can tell us how many works are needed. Well, that’s not exactly true, the Scriptures do tell us that the whole life of the man is to be perfect, “Be ye holy as I the Lord am holy!” but that is not good news either. Rather such news condemns all to at the very minimum “temporary unhappiness.” For who among us can discern his ways and perfectly repent of them?

A reasonable person would logically conclude that if humanity is good by nature and by nature does good then there would be no need for grace, forgiveness, nor “temporary unhappiness.” Man would simply do what he is commanded. Sadly, this is not the case as reason and experience, not to mention Holy Writ, plainly reveal. Man is dead spiritually in sin and trespasses. Death is not necessarily the primary problem, but is rather the end result of sin. “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). What humanity needs is the sure and certain comfort of the Gospel, a comfort that comes only through Word and Sacrament, only through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ for the sins of the world. It is a comfort that is to be received by faith alone and in no way confused, co-mingled, or conjoined with the deeds of the Law!

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Conclusion:

As we have very briefly heard, the Eastern Orthodox, like their Roman counterpart, continue to confuse the Gospel with the Law, requiring good works in addition to faith for justification. Such faulty theology places these brethren under the religion of the Law, steals away all comfort, hope, and security as well as delivering a yoke heavier than that which the Gentiles bear. All who consistently believe their doctrine of Faith and Works are lost, since their trust ultimately will drift away from Christ alone, towards the number of works required of them to enter the kingdom of heaven. Those contemplating the Eastern Church as a resting place from the trials and tribulations that are promised to all who bear the Name of Christ will fall by the wayside searching for something that does not, in fact cannot, exist in the midst of such theological parameters. The burden of Works is one which we cannot bear for our salvation. Rather we must constantly fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set Him before endured the cross, scorning its shame, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He is our comfort, security, hope, our very life! To God alone be all glory power and dominion forever and ever! AMEN!

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Abbreviations: AC – Augsburg Confession; FC – Formula of Concord; SD – Solid Declaration; Pieper – *Christian Dogmatics* by Francis Pieper.

The Book of Concord is available on-line at <http://www.bookofconcord.org/> .

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