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# ORTHODOX EVANGELIST

“Do the work of an evangelist” - 2 Tim 4:5



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## Repentance: The Key to Orthodox Renewal

By Archimandrite Fr. Eusebius Stephanou Th.D

**“The Orthodox Church is the true Church but not the perfect Church.” I did not understand in my earlier years what Father George Florovsky (a world renown theologian)**

meant by that statement. My inner security was rooted more in the institutional church than in a personal relationship with Christ.

Like many others, I used to varnish over the failures and defeats of the Orthodox Church lest it appear that she is less than the true Church. In a report by the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America in 1972 another of our famed theologians, the late Father Alexander Schmemmann, stated the following: “Only a spiritually blind and insensitive man would deny that in spite of all her relative success, external and material, our Church is threatened with a danger from within: the danger of secularization, of a deep spiritual decay have appeared long ago...”

“All this reveals such a deep secularization of the mind and consciousness that one truly becomes apprehensive about the future of our Church, which does not seem to realize the true scope and depth of this crisis.” It gives us more hope of the future of our Church when we see that even our scholars in theology are beginning to admit that Orthodoxy is in a deep crisis and that the Church is failing to recognize it.

### Calling it by its Real Name

It is time to be realistic and honest when we assess the quality of the real Church that is sitting in the pews. The Church is not some Platonic idea that exists in the world of perfect, universal ideas. We need to view it as it is in real flesh and



blood. Our ecclesiology needs to be brought in line with the actual Church with all her failures and shortcomings. We have idealized and romanticized about the Church long enough.

Anyone can understand and even accept the existence of secularism and liberalism and even infidelity to Christ outside the Church. However, what is unbelievable has occurred. Such evils have found their way into the life of Church and indeed have

found acceptance there. This is not easy to live with. It's like a bad dream. It can't be true. But we wake up only to discover that it is factual. It is like a contradiction in terms. We confess solemnly that the Church is “holy.” But how can a holy Church be afflicted on such a grand scale by what is unholy and what is abomination in the eyes of God?

Let's call a spade a spade. It's no use glossing over it. The signs of the times demonstrate that we are living in the closing days of the Christian Dispensation. St. Paul called it *apostasia* or falling away from the faith. We can do no less than call it by its real name. To do so is not apocalyptic sensationalism nor fanaticism. It is simply a matter of recognizing a divinely revealed truth in Scripture and a fact of church life.

### The New Device of Satan

The first formidable enemy of the Church in her early history was external: paganism which imperiled the physical lives of the Christians. Later the threat to the Church emerged from within: Heresy which aimed at distorting and thus obliterating the redeeming Gospel. In these last days, however, Satan has contrived a new device to sap the Church of her redeeming power and to deprive her of her impact on the unregenerate world. He probably reasons:

“Let them have their unity and their orthodoxy of dogma. I will make it barren, lifeless and impotent – a dead letter to murder souls. What once secured their salvation will now secure their perdition (The letter kills”). St. Paul foretold for the sake of our welfare that in the last days, when perilous times arise, men will

“hold to the form of religion, denying the power thereof” (2 Tim. 3:5). The peril that threatens the Church is “dead formalism” and a “deep spiritual decay,” just to quote again the words of Father Alexander Schmemmann. It is denying the power of orthodoxy.

The only regret is that this distinguished theologian fails to recognize the apocalyptic implications of this crisis within the Church. He falls short of viewing the situation in the Church within an eschatological setting. Our theologians seem to leave apocalyptic matters to the monks and the prophets. They seem to find it difficult to acknowledge that it is part of “mystery of iniquity” which St. Paul warns will take place just prior to the advent of the Antichrist. As a matter of fact, he states that the “mystery of iniquity doth already work.” In other words, it is already beginning to stir in the Church.

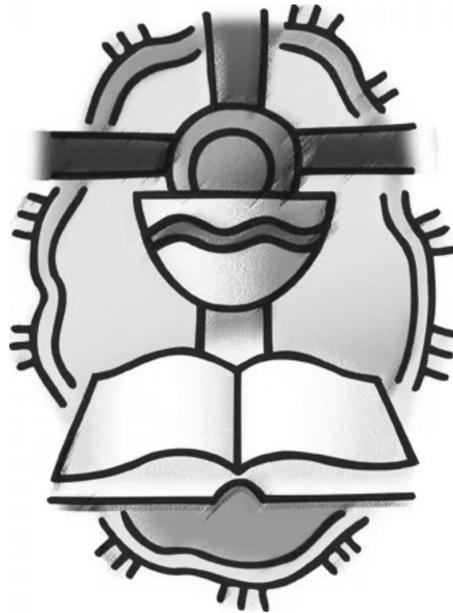
If Satan's end-time master plan for the takeover of the Church, as well as of the world, began to unfold from St. Paul's day, it requires little imagination to conceive of its spread after two thousand years. We are now probably at the peak of the “mystery of iniquity,” when one considers how much Satan has already flooded the world by multiplying iniquity of every description.

We cannot even take the first step in approaching effectively the question of the spiritual crisis inside the Church, unless we have the honesty and the courage to recognize that it is an apocalyptic phenomenon. Isn't it strange that the Church Fathers, who lived in an age when gun powder was totally unthinkable, wrote extensively on apocalyptic matters? Whereas the theologians of our Church who live

in a computer and nuclear age ignore these matters by associating them simply with the Fundamentalists and Pentecostals! The nuclear scientists, military leaders and government leaders have become more prophetic in this regard than our theologians and Church leaders. Isn't it ironic! Isn't it sad?

### An Oversimplification

No sooner was I reassured by Schmemmann's honest and candid recognition of “dead formalism” and “spiritual decay” in the Church, when I became disappointed with the solution he offered to what he specifies as “opposition” and “rebellion” in connection with the



rights of parish property. His reference was to the tensions between the authority of the hierarchy and the “parish rights on the local level.”

I consider the author's solution to an oversimplification: he points to the sacraments as the key to solving the crisis in the Church and begins to expound on the sacraments of the Eucharist and

Confession and their relationship in the life of the Orthodox believer. I have said it before, and I say it again. **The sacraments, as holy, sacred and divine, as they are, do not work like magic.** They are not a magical solution to the spiritual ills in the Church. The misapplication and abuse of the two sacraments to which our theologian alludes are but the symptoms –not the causes – of the spiritual malaise in the Church.

The sacraments of the Church are a two-edged sword. They can bless and sanctify you, if you are in a right relationship with God. However, they can be received to your judgement and condemnation if you are in an unrepentant state of sin (1 Cor. 11:27). Because they are valid regardless of your inner disposition, they can cause eternal harm to you if you are not a “saint.” Remember what the Priest intones at the Divine Liturgy just prior to the Communion: “Let us be attentive! The Holy Things for the saints (agiois)!” Why don't more Priests protect their people and caution them by preaching to them this truth?

How can we have a Eucharistic renewal of the sacrament of Penance without a personal renewal of the Orthodox believer himself? Schmemmann grieves over the divisiveness in the parishes and rightly so. But is not simply focusing on the Eucharist that will automatically heal the breaches in the body of believers and the broken relationship between hierarchy and parish.

St. Paul provides us with the correct understanding of the divisiveness on which Schmemmann focuses. Human nature has not changed since the time of the early Corinthian Christians. He states:

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“For ye are yet carnal, for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?” (1 Cor. 3:3).

Three times in that chapter he calls the Corinthians “carnal” because of their factionalism. They were baptized and Holy Spirit-sealed believers and communicants of the Eucharist, but they behaved as if the Holy Spirit was not in control of their lives. The Spirit always glorifies and lifts up Jesus. The Corinthians did not act as if Jesus Christ was the lord of their lives, enjoying pre-eminence above all men as the true Head of the body, the Church.

### Valid for Every Generation

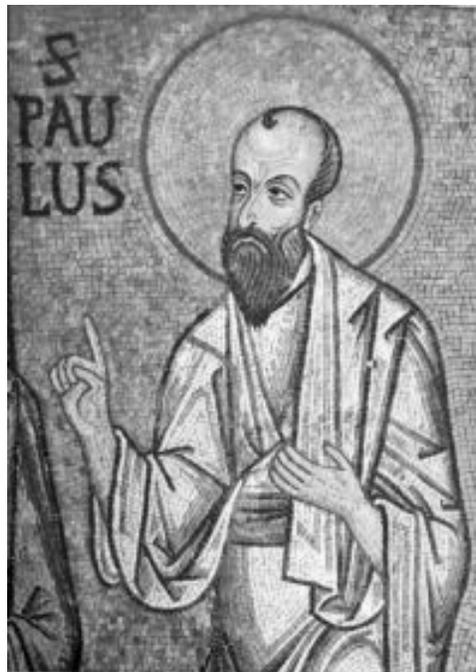
St. Paul's solution to the situation in Corinth is valid and useful for every generation of Orthodox Christians: to be cautious against placing our focus on man in the Church instead of Christ. “Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” He asked the divided Corinthians. It was another way of saying what John the Baptist said: “He must increase; I must decrease.”

St. Paul did not refer to a sacramental renewal as a solution to the spiritual problem that afflicted the Corinthian Church. Even the abuses at the Communion were symptoms and not causes of the situation. As a matter of fact, the apostle boasted of not baptizing many, “for Christ sent me not to baptize,” he explained, “but to preach the Gospel (*evangelizesthai*)” (1:17). The Greek term literally means “to evangelize.” Giving Christ the preeminence in the Church was of primary importance for St. Paul. He was sensitive to this and by giving evangelism priority in the ministry he secured the lordship of Jesus Christ.

**Preaching the *evangelion* constantly secures the centrality of**

**Christ because of the focus on His atoning death and resurrection and imminent return.** The corrective to carnality and *apostasia* in the Church is renewed enthusiasm for the ministry of the word and for re-evangelizing the members of the Church. It is not more teaching on the sacraments that will meet the need. The sacraments are always valid but not always efficacious to the recipient, unless he is “born of God” in actual experience, as well as sacramentally.

But even God's word does not work like magic. It is not any



preaching of the word that will necessarily produce a renewal in the Church. The Protestant Reformation, for example, restored the ministry of the word which helped to lead many souls to a redeeming relationship with Christ. However, with the passing of the centuries it lost the Holy Spirit anointing and consequently it ceased to be effective as a regenerative power. We can see the results now in the dead Lutheran Churches in Germany and in the Scandinavian countries.

### The Key to Effective Preaching

St. Paul gives us the explanation why. He said that he was preaching the Gospel “not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in the demonstration of the Spirit and power” (2:4). Paul's preaching produced results because it was carried out in the dynamic of God's Spirit. It was supernaturally charged with spiritual power.

That's why Paul's words became the “sword of the Spirit” for every Christian generation. **It is the Holy Spirit unction that makes the difference.** So it is not simply increasing the sermons more frequent preaching that answers the need. It is not the messages of more theologically qualified theologians that have to be heard. More eloquent speakers who are gifted in the natural but not the solution. Usually they touch the mind but not the heart.

I am referring to the power of the Holy Spirit in preaching about which we don't hear very much in the Orthodox Church. It is a dimension of preaching that warrants more of our careful attention and serious consideration if we are to make preaching more than part of the Church ritual. Carnal Christians in our Churches cannot be changed by means of the techniques of intellectual persuasion and exhortation, least of all by legislating moral and spiritual principles and behavior. That would be equal to “emptying the Cross of its power” against which St. Paul cautions.

**There is power which is inherent in the message of the Cross.** We don't have to add it to our own human wisdom and skill. All we need to do is to act on our faith that indeed there is supernatural power hidden in the word of God simply because it is revealed to us in Holy Scripture. “The Gospel is the power of God into salvation unto them that

believe.”

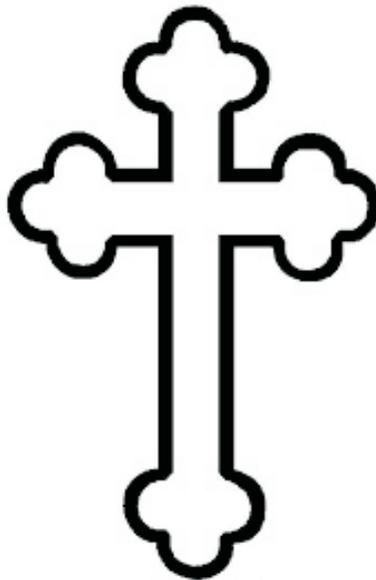
**The word of God does not need our help.** It has within itself the power to do its work of salvation, healing and deliverance. Those preachers who believe this fundamental truth, though they might be uneducated and appear foolish to the world, “confound the wise.” Though they may appear weak to the world and unqualified, “confound the things which are mighty.” Though they might seem despised and unimpressive in the flesh and a non-entity, they “bring to nought things that are” (1 Cor. 1:27f).

### Re-evangelizing Our People

The only reliable basis for authentic and lasting renewal is the re-evangelizing of our people. It is time to free ourselves from the illusion that the man in the pew is a converted Christian and that all he needs is a little moral exhortation when he attends the Liturgy on

Sunday morning.

We need also to divest ourselves of the notion that all we need is the right decisions and enactments of our bishops and archbishops. In the words of Alexander Schmemmann “to think that this process of the Church's secularization can be stopped by decrees and administrative instruction is nearsighted and



dangerous.”

It is not restoring frequent Communion nor revising the practice of sacramental Confession that we should start with in dealing with the spiritual decay in the Church. That would be putting the cart before the horse. No sacrament of the Church can administer the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit unless the recipient has had the threshold experience of the Holy Spirit baptism about which St. Symeon the New Theologian speaks repeatedly.

Listen to the voice of St. Symeon: “He that lacks awareness of his baptism and was baptized in infancy, accepting it only by faith and having effaced it by sins, but refuses the second one – I mean the baptism of the Holy Spirit, given by God in His love to those who seek it in repentance – how can he ever be saved? Not in the least!” (*Catecheses* 32:66).

## The latest update from the Ministry

by Joseph Abbate / President

We wish to thank all of you for your prayers during this difficult time with Hurricane Irma. It is truly tragic to witness the destruction upon people's homes and lives during such an event. Besides some light rain and wind, this area of Florida was unaffected by the storm.

At the same time that Hurricane Irma came crashing through Florida, we had witnessed the recent flooding of Houston and surrounding parts of the city in Texas. Mexico got hit by an 8.1 magnitude earthquake, then immediately followed with a category one Hurricane. A crazy dictator in North Korea had tested a destructive hydrogen bomb. Europe is effected with terrorist attacks and flooded with immigrants from the war-torn Middle-East. A mile-stone debt of over twenty trillion dollars has been reached by America, and forest

fires are burning down thousands of acres in the western states of our nation.

**The earth is truly experiencing the “birth-pains” (Matt. 24:8), which were prophesized in the Holy Scriptures. Yet, Jesus said: “when you see these things, lift up your heads, for your redemption is drawing near.”** In other words, Jesus is returning soon, but Satan knows that his time is short, so he is stirring up as much as he can do.

I also wanted to share with you the struggles that we here in the Ministry have been going through. First of all, we are happy to announce our new website. Since it had been compromised months ago, it seems as if it is a battle to do the easiest of projects. Switching our telephone service and cable service took almost a month and a half.

Since we have had our email, website address and telephone number on our publications for almost 25 years, it was of utmost importance to retain this information if anyone would wish to contact after picking up an older Ministry publication. We are not ignorant of the enemy's devices. **It is a spiritual battle.** As St. Paul said: “*We do not fight against flesh and blood.*” At least its good to know that this Ministry, even how small it appears, is still a threat to Satan's kingdom. It remains the only Ministry of it's kind to reach out and evangelize the Orthodox people. We will be adding more video messages onto the internet and continue to do the work which the Lord called us to do. We continue to ask for your prayers. God bless you!