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An Examination of the Salvation Teachings of Eastern Orthodoxy and Southern Baptist Protestantism

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An Examination of the Salvation Teachings of Eastern Orthodoxy and Southern Baptist Protestantism

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An Examination of the Salvation Teachings
of Eastern Orthodoxy and Southern
Baptist Protestantism

Pamela Blackmon
15 April 1996

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
What are Southern Baptist Salvation Teachings?.....	3
What are Eastern Orthodox Salvation Teachings?.....	10
A Look at Similarities and Differences.....	15
Conclusion.....	20
Bibliography.....	23

Introduction

A green dot on a watch face; a bracelet with plastic beads in red, yellow, green, white, and black; the dozens of Christian T-shirts ranging from humorous to gory: these are the images which come to mind when I think about salvation at Ouachita Baptist University, Arkadelphia, Arkansas. The green dot several students wore to lure others into asking, "Why do you have a green dot on your watch?" The reply was, "I am wearing it to remind me to tell others about what Jesus has done for them. Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior?" Ah! The foot was in the door! The bearer of the green dot had an opportunity to witness. The beaded bracelet is worn for a similar reason. Each color represents a step in the salvation process. The trinket can be used to explain salvation to unbelievers in an organized way, taking the person through the explanations of sin, savior and heaven with color symbolism. The T-shirts are definitely the most marvellous Ouachita-salvation phenomena. One can read a good chunk of the gospels and Paul's epistles on the T-shirts of Ouachita students if one sits in the cafeteria long enough. I am exaggerating. There are more T-shirts bearing Christian messages (especially lessons or verses pertaining to salvation) than I have ever seen in any other place at one time. Their popularity is undeniable.

All these outward symbols and slogans signify a concern among Ouachita students with salvation. Salvation is a public preoccupation which revolves around the longed-for conversion of the lost to the saved. The preoccupation is manifested in publicity which over and over again announces the salvation story and always ends with the poignant question: *Are you saved?*

Ouachita students are not alone in their preoccupation. Southern Baptists are a people preoccupied with the saving of souls. Southern Baptist church services frequently close with an altar call, an invitation to the lost to come forward and experience salvation.

After spending a summer with Russian Orthodox friends, I began to wonder if the Eastern Orthodox Christians shared the same beliefs about salvation as Southern Baptist Christians do. Does the Eastern Orthodox Church (officially called the Orthodox Catholic Church) with all its incense and iconography, its use of both the empty cross and the crucifix, its kissing of the priest's hand and its Lord-have-mercy chanting work against the salvation story depicted with green dots, colorful beads, and cotton T-shirts? Do Southern Baptist Christians and Eastern Orthodox Christians work to proclaim the same salvation or do they hold different beliefs, proclaim different messages?

Despite the vast differences in the outward appearance of a Southern Baptist church service and an Eastern Orthodox one and the differences in the way Southern Baptists and Eastern Orthodox Christians witness, ultimately, I found the two denominations to hold many of the same beliefs concerning salvation. However, the specific points in which Eastern Orthodox salvation teachings and Southern Baptist teachings differ are significant ones.

What are Southern Baptist Salvation Teachings?

After spending months immersed in Eastern Orthodox literature, I found myself experiencing a bizarre shock upon returning to books about Southern Baptist beliefs. The disparity between Orthodox scholars' perception of Protestant beliefs and Southern Baptist scholars' description of Southern Baptist beliefs shocked me. It can understandably appear to some that Southern Baptists preach a salvation which is nothing more than a ticket to heaven purchased with intellectual assent at one moment in time of a person's life. While this myth is understandable, it is just that -- a myth.

Southern Baptist teaching about salvation begins with a question of identity, first of the Creator and then of the creature. God as creator is identified as being both holy and loving. God's first act of love towards man was in creating man, fashioning man in his own image, giving man free will. God loved man so much that he desired fellowship with him. God's holy identity is recognized in the way God gave man standards of conduct, declaring some actions to be good and others bad / wrong / sin. God's holiness can not abide with sin. His holiness declares that there is a penalty for sin: spiritual and physical death. These two identifying characteristics of God -- holiness and love -- do not make up an exhaustive list of God's attributes. They are simply the chief characteristics used in explaining God's actions in the salvation of man.

Man's identity as creature is that of a free being. He has been given the choice of doing what is right or doing what is wrong. Before the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were sinless. Therefore, they were able to have fellowship with their holy and loving creator. This communion with God was destroyed when Adam and Eve became contaminated by sin. Their loving creator still desired communion with them, but his holy nature could neither come into contact with their sin nor leave their sin unpunished.

Man today inherits a fallen nature, the sin nature. He can not attain sinless perfection. He will *freely* and *inevitably* choose to sin. He is responsible for his sin. God both desires sinlessness from man and knows that it is impossible for man to be anything but sinful. Modern man, like Adam and Eve, is barred from true fellowship with God because man's sin prevents it.

On the one hand God is like a parent who must discipline a naughty child or else the child will never understand that his actions were wrong. On the other hand, God and sin are like electrical forces of the same charge which, by their very nature, can not come into contact with each other. The two forces are intrinsically unable to meet: by nature, they repulse each other. These two illustrations are only half of the Southern Baptist salvation story. God's nature is also pure love. His desire from the beginning to have fellowship with man continues uninterrupted. God's love is like the beam from a light house -- its radiance is most splendid and best appreciated on the darkest night by the most desperate and needy seafarer.

God sent his son, Jesus Christ, into the world. Jesus was absolutely and perfectly sinless. Jesus allowed himself to be crucified for the sins of all mankind. He took men's sins upon himself and received the penalty of sin in man's place. In this act, both the holiness and the love of God was satisfied. The holiness was satisfied in that God's righteousness required that the penalty be paid. His love was satisfied in that the sin barrier between man and God was removed; fellowship between man and God was made possible again.

Today, all men stand in need of salvation. Their sin separates them from God, making fellowship with God impossible without the appropriation of God's saving work. God's desire is that he have fellowship with every single person. He desires that not a single person should perish in his sins. God's offer can be compared to a bank advertising savings accounts with high-interest rates. Every person may be offered the opportunity, but only the individual who enters the bank and takes advantage of the offer by investing

cash will actually receive the interest income. Similarly, though the offer is made to all men, only the ones who accept the offer will receive salvation.

According to Southern Baptist writer Herschel Hobbs, salvation is an instantaneous occurrence caused by God's offer and actions and man's response as well as an ongoing occurrence completed only after death. When man becomes convicted of his sins, he recognizes that he has committed sins and is unable to achieve perfection. Man repents by turning away from sin and turning in faith towards God. God responds to man's faith and repentance through regeneration. "Regeneration, or new birth, is a work of God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus" (Hobbs 55). At this moment, man ceases to be unjustified -- living with enmity between God and him -- and becomes justified. Justification is a legal "not guilty" ruling. Justification is also much more: ". . . the mere pardon of God does not restore to man all that he has lost through sin. In the decree of justification, God . . . declares that he is restored to divine favor. He is to be treated henceforth as a man who had never sinned" (Turner 72). Justification is also the adoption of the man by God made possible by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

This regeneration -- conversion, repentance, faith, justification -- is just the first step in salvation. It is the permanent and instantaneous salvation of the soul, but it is not the complete process. After a person's initial saving experience, his lifetime is spent in sanctification. Sanctification "means the state of being set apart or dedicated to the services of God" (Hobbs 61). The person who was reborn a child of God now grows to maturity spiritually by the work of the Holy Spirit. The believer continues to be convicted of sin and to repent of sin, but these experiences are not the same as the initial conversion experience. The degree to which the believer repents of his sins, obeys the prompting of the Holy Spirit, performs acts of Christian charity and service, reads and studies the Bible, and prays will determine the believer's ability to grow more spiritually mature or his inability to move beyond spiritual infancy.

Southern Baptists emphatically teach that good works do not gain a person entrance into the kingdom of God. Rather, only when a man recognizes the failure of his good works to ever enable him to merit heaven, can he recognize the necessity of and experience Christ's saving work. Good works are still considered a key ingredient in salvation in that a true conversion experience will always be evidenced in good works. A true believer will always seek to do the work of Christian love. In emphasizing faith, Southern Baptists do not teach that good works are unnecessary or optional. Instead, they believe "the person who professes to have had a saving experience with Christ and continues to live as he has always lived, is either self-deceived, or he is trying to deceive somebody else" (Turner19).

The third step in the salvation process according to Southern Baptist belief is glorification. Here again, works play a key role. "Glorification is the culmination of salvation and is the final blessed and abiding state of the redeemed. It is the ultimate and complete salvation which shall be realized in heaven" (Hobbs 62). Christians are assured of God's promise to save them from the penalty of their sins by the atoning sacrifice of Christ and of God's assurance to carry them to heaven upon their death. The degree to which a person receives blessings and rewards in heaven is determined by his works on Earth. God will reward each believer in proportion to his opportunity and fidelity on Earth (Turner 128, 129).

The entire picture of salvation, then, includes an instantaneous experience, a progressive experience, and an ultimate experience. Below is a chart I have drawn to display key points in Hobbs' explanation of salvation.

<p>Instantaneous</p>	<p>Progressive</p>	<p>Ultimate</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redemption from sin • By grace through faith apart from works • New birth as a child of God. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedication to God's service by the Holy Spirit wherein, through good works, the believer grows into the likeness of Christ. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culmination of the redemptive process. • Total benefits and blessings in heaven • All Christians will be saved, but the glory received shall be in proportion to one's faithfulness in Christian service.
<p>Regeneration</p>	<p>Sanctification</p>	<p>Glorification</p>

While it is more common to hear a Southern Baptist person say, "I am saved," than to hear one say, "I am saved; I am being saved; I will be saved," the latter is more appropriate to the entire salvation process (Hobbs 63) taught by Southern Baptists.

No discussion of Southern Baptist salvation teachings would be complete without mention of assurance. Southern Baptists emphasize assurance of salvation, first because it is considered a scriptural promise of God and, second, for practical reasons. To doubt one's assurance is to question God's ability to fulfill his promise. It suggests that the Christian may have believed his salvation was based on his own goodness rather than God's grace. "Once saved, always saved" is a familiar phrase. A person may "backslide"-- enter a spiritual slump, a period when he returns to an old sinful lifestyle-- but this is considered a temporary condition which does not negate or reverse the person's earlier regeneration experience. Assurance of salvation is never considered a free ticket to sin because a true believer is inclined towards God and goodness, not sin; a believer may be disciplined in this lifetime because of his sinfulness; a believer's glorification experience is affected by his actions on Earth. To Southern Baptists, assurance implies freedom to do good, not freedom to sin. Freedom comes from the psychological and spiritual peace of knowing that one's eternal fate is irreversibly decided. Joy and gratitude at this knowledge motivate good works.

While it is common for many Southern Baptists to know the exact date of their regeneration, to pinpoint the day is not necessary. Southern Baptist writer Clyde J. Turner in his Soul-Winning Doctrines compares this situation to the driver who did not see the border sign which read, "Welcome to Virginia," but who, nonetheless, eventually knew beyond a doubt that she had left North Carolina and arrived in Virginia (Turner 65). The Christian whose faith is genuine need not fear missing the border sign.

According to Southern Baptists, the reality that some people appear to have genuine conversion experiences and then lead wicked lives illustrates that their experiences

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According to Southern Baptists, the reality that some people appear to have genuine conversion experiences and then lead wicked lives illustrates that their experiences

were false or that they are back-slidden. In any case, it is important to note that assurance works as motivator for good and not as an excuse for evil.

... through all time. In ... God created ... This position is ... For the life of the ... of God's ... the whole world was ... the ... of ... Every action was in ... all the ... from the ... God the ... as a ... in the ... the ... in the image of God. According to ... writer ... this has several implications. ... from other ... He was given a spirit. Second, ... towards ... him to seek ... of God to the ... of God is an ... some of God's ... to the ... to God's wisdom and ... on man as character ... to progress ...

The fourth ... of God's ... in the ... of ...

What Are Eastern Orthodox Salvation Teachings?

Salvation in Orthodoxy is God's work on the man's behalf throughout all time. It began with God's creation of man or perhaps with God's idea to create man. God created Adam and Eve and put them in a unique position in the garden of Eden. This position is described by Eastern Orthodox writer Alexander Schmemmann in his For the Life of the World. Man was distinct from all other creatures because he was the priest of God's creation (Schmemmann 15). The whole world was blessed by God for man's use except the forbidden fruit. Everything which man did, every single action, was an act of communion with God (Schmemmann 17). Every action was in union with God's will. Man, unlike all the other creatures, could not only take from the universe, but could also bless God for his goodness. Man functioned as a priest in this ability to give God thanksgiving.

Man was created in the image of God. According to Eastern Orthodox writer Panagiotes Chrestou, this has several implications. First, man was distinct from other created beings. He was given a spirit. Second, man was born with an impetus towards God. He had a natural inclination towards his creator. Third, this motivated him to seek perfection or the gradual transformation of his nature from the image of God to the likeness of God. The image of God is an incomplete condition imparting some of God's characteristics to man, who receives them passively as intrinsic properties. "In the likeness of God" refers to God's wisdom and goodness which are imparted on man as character qualities if man is willing to progress spiritually, actively and increasingly becoming more Godlike.

The fourth implication of man's creation in the image of God is man's destiny. God created man in His image because He had a unique purpose for man. God desired that man would know him, love him, worship him, and partake of his divinity. The first three purposes of God for man might be described sufficiently with one familiar word: fellowship, if it weren't for this fourth purpose. God sought a relationship with man which

is so personal that it goes beyond the definition of fellowship. God wanted to share his very nature with man. This was what he destined man to receive from the very beginning.

Because Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, they were not in a spiritually static state in the garden. They were progressing spiritually in the endless journey towards perfection, the journey from the image of God to the likeness of God. They were increasingly assuming the characteristics of God-- not his omnipotence, but his goodness and love. If they had remained in the garden without ever having sinned (by eating the forbidden fruit), they could not have fulfilled their destiny without the Incarnation, because before the sin barrier, there existed a barrier between the nature of God and the nature of man. God was the creator and man the creature. They were not of the same substance. God is timeless and uncreated. It was impossible for man to partake of God's glory, God's nature, His divinity.

It is not Orthodox doctrine, but rather, Orthodox speculation that the Incarnation would have occurred whether or not Adam and Eve ever sinned. Their creation in the image of God was so that some day they could receive the Godman. At the risk of sounding silly: God could never have come as dog because the canine species was not made to receive Christ. Human beings, on the other hand, were created to receive Jesus. I do not mean receive Jesus "in one's heart" in the Southern Baptist sense; I mean receive Jesus as a human being. It is speculation that the Incarnation was inevitable because it is the necessary act of God for the fulfillment of his plan. This will be described in more detail in the next discussion of similarities and differences between the denominations.

When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they sinned. They performed the one act which was opposed to God's will. They ate the one fruit for which they could not thank God. This was the first "secular" act in the history of the world and therein lay the sin. Every act, whether mundane or significant, up until that point was sanctified. In sinning man split his actions into two categories -- secular and spiritual -- for the very first

time. This goes against the plan of God. God meant every act to be spiritual, blessed, an act of communion with him. Now man had acted apart from God.

Man before the Fall was not a neutral being with free will. His God-given destiny was also his definition. Man's function defined him. Free will, then, was not the choice to take one direction or the other, it was a choice between existence or death. I best understand this Orthodox idea when I think of it in terms of a cup. A pottery dish may be called a cup because it is constructed with properties that allow it to hold water. If the cup were animate and could replace its pottery composition with paper towel, it would cease to be a cup. It doesn't matter if the paper towel figure looks like the original cup, it can not be a cup unless it fulfills the function of a cup. In the same way, man was created to be in communion with God. To break out of this communion is to reject man's nature, his defining function. Man, therefore, can choose to obey God or to cease to be man.

The world was contaminated by Adam and Eve's sin. Order and harmony was shattered. The universe was polluted by man's sin and no longer functioned as it had before the fall. Man's nature also reflected the fall. His personality was split. His intellect and will were divided between desires of the flesh and desires of the spirit. Before the Fall, man's intellect and body worked in harmony in pursuit of godliness. After the Fall, man's body led his intellect away from God while his intellect struggled to return to his pursuit of God.

God's plan remained the same after the Fall. God still sought communion with man, still longed to share even his divinity with him. God allowed man to suffer the consequence of his sin. He also transformed the curse of death into a blessing. He used physical death to put an end to man's polluted, sin-stained nature. It became the means through which man would come to shed his sin-contaminated body and inherit an incorrupt spiritual body.

God sent his son Jesus to mankind. In Orthodoxy this is not viewed as God's rescue plan for man, but it is seen as the fulfillment of God's original purpose for man.

Jesus was the new Adam who destroyed the barrier between the natures of God and man. He was God and man; in him the ideal union of God and man was found. All those who are grafted into the new root are able to receive the Holy Spirit and enter into union with the creator. This transforming relationship is called *theosis*.

God is uncreated. Man does not receive this from God in theosis. The energies of God are what man receives in theosis. God's characteristics, his nature, "rubs-off" on man in this special relationship. It is not only man on the road towards God, seeking godliness, but also God in man, pulling him towards Himself, filling man with Himself. This is the fulfillment of God's purpose for man. This is man's destiny, this is man's salvation.

Jesus' life and death were for man. His life taught man how to live. It also sanctified life. Every action from birth to death was once again blessed by God. For his children, there is a return to the meaning of life found in the pre-fallen days: there is no division between secular and spiritual. Every action is blessed communion with God for which man can thank God.

Jesus' death was both sacrificial and victorious. It was a victory in that, by nature of Jesus' immortality, he was resurrected and destroyed death's curse. Death no longer means the end, but the means to shed the imperfect body and inherit the imperishable, spiritual body.

Jesus' death was sacrificial in its atoning purpose. Orthodoxy recognizes that Jesus' death paid the ransom for man's sins, but does not try to define the nature of the payment. To whom the sacrifice was made is left unanswered, but for whom Jesus suffered is clear. In other words, we know he suffered out of love for mankind, but we know not to whom the payment was made. Forgiveness is inextricably tied to the cross, and it is understood that God has said that there is no remission for sins without the shedding of blood. However, in Orthodoxy, to go beyond this explanation would be to make presumptions.

The cross is the pinnacle of the Incarnation. It allowed for the forgiveness of men's sins and displayed the supreme love of God who willingly suffered on man's behalf. Sins are also affected by theosis. As man receives God and is increasingly progressing towards him, it becomes impossible for him to remain in his sins. His character is being transformed by God's.

A Look at Similarities and Differences

Eastern Orthodoxy agrees with Southern Baptist Christianity in that it also recognizes the holiness and love of God. For example, in the liturgy of the Sunday Orthodox service God is called "the God who lovest mankind" and over and over again the whole congregation prays, "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal." Upon these two attributes of God, Eastern Orthodoxy and Southern Baptist Protestantism agree, however, the understanding of God's holy and loving nature impact upon the two denominations' salvation teachings differently. This will be explained in more detail later, in the discussion of the cross' implications.

To a Southern Baptist, "man's nature is autonomous" (Mc Henry 848). Both denominations recognize that God does not coerce mankind or program men like robots, but there is a difference in how man's free will is described. Southern Baptists see man's choice as one of obedience and disobedience whereas Eastern Orthodox Christians see man's choice as one of existence or death. This goes back to the difference in views on the purpose of God for man.

Southern Baptists see *fellowship* as the chief desire of God^d for his relationship with man. Eastern Orthodox Christians see *theosis* as God's purpose for man. Theosis is more than a relationship. It is a transformation of man's substance. Eastern Orthodox Christians don't deny that God seeks fellowship with man, but they do believe he seeks fellowship and more: theosis. Jordan Bajis, in her book Common Ground: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity for the American Christian, depicts theosis using the image of a sword in fire (Bajis 242). Man is seen to be like that sword and God like the fire. The sword will never become fire, but it will assume the properties of the fire.

Theosis influences Orthodox teaching about sin. Pantagiotes Nellis, in his book Partakers of God, describes the way theosis and forgiveness work:

"Influenced as we are by the legal understanding of salvation, we regard forgiveness simply as the remission of sins, whereas in reality it is something much broader. Even the remission of sins is brought about because when we 'co-habit' with God, the ocean of divine goodness annihilates human sins. In its full reality forgiveness is 'communion with Christ' and 'communion with the Kingdom of Christ.'" (Nellas, 193)

How different this understanding of forgiveness is from the Southern Baptist understanding of justification which is a more legal term. Both acknowledge that it is one's relationship with Jesus which saves one, but the Southern Baptist teaching is that of receiving the sacrifice which paid for one's sins while the Orthodox teach that forgiveness is almost a side effect of the relationship with Christ. Southern Baptists do teach that believers truly receive the Holy Spirit and that sanctification and good works pour out of the Holy Spirit's work in the believer's heart, but they do not teach theosis.

Both Eastern Orthodox Christians and Southern Baptist Christians teach that God calls every person to salvation but that only those persons who respond to God's call will receive salvation. Neither denomination teaches a universal salvation. The final destination of those who are not saved is also a point of agreement between the two. The following quote from Barbara Pappas' Are You Saved? An Orthodox Christian Perspective could easily have been written by a Southern Baptist believer: "Those whose lives do not show belief in Jesus (. . . considering opportunity), will be sent to eternal punishment in a place prepared for Satan and his demons" (Pappas 38).

Both Eastern Orthodox Christians and Southern Baptist Christians agree that Jesus' death on the cross made atonement for man's sins. There is a very significant difference between the degree to which each denomination will define the nature of this atonement. Southern Baptists will delineate the nature of the sacrifice. Herschel Hobbs writes that God paid the ransom to himself to satisfy the demands of his holy nature and his moral law. God's holiness prompted the need for the sacrifice in the first place

according to Southern Baptist belief. Eastern Orthodox Christians will not go beyond acknowledging that Christ's death was a sacrifice of love which atoned for man's sins. They will not answer the question, "to whom was the sacrifice made?"

There are at least two reasons for Eastern Orthodoxy's reluctance to answer this question. First, to the Eastern Orthodox Christian, there is no sufficient answer. To say that the Son of God died to pay ransom to the Devil is ludicrous to the Orthodox. To say that the Son of God died because God the Father *desired* a blood sacrifice in order to forgive man is unthinkable to the Orthodox. The same God who prevented Abraham from slaying his son Isaac could not also desire the blood of Jesus. The same God who abhors suffering could not desire it. And yet, Orthodox do believe the Bible's teaching that without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness of sin. Therefore, the atoning work of Christ is considered a mystery which cannot be understood or defined correctly by man.

Second, to say that God *required* a blood sacrifice in order to forgive man is also unthinkable to the Orthodox. It suggests that some higher necessity dictated God's actions. In his article, "The River of Fire," Dr. Alexandre Kalomiros describes what he attributes to western Christianity's teachings about salvation as follows:

"It was necessary for God to punish man's disobedience. It was impossible for Him to pardon; a superior Necessity demanded vengeance. Even if God was in reality good and loving, He was not able to act lovingly. He was obliged to act contrary to His love; the only thing He could do, in order to save humanity, was to punish His Son in the place of men, and by this means was Necessity satisfied." (Kalomiros 113)

This view of the Cross expressed by Dr. Kalomiros is completely different from Southern Baptist teaching. There is no contradiction for Southern Baptists between the idea of God's holiness necessitating Jesus' sacrifice and the idea that God is omnipotent. There is

no contradiction for Southern Baptists between the idea that God is loving and the idea that God sent his son to suffer and die for mankind. Finally, there is no contradiction for Southern Baptists between the idea that God is loving and the idea that God required a blood sacrifice for men's sins.

For Southern Baptists, assurance of salvation is a key belief. It is the devil who desires to cast doubt in a believer's mind concerning the security of his salvation and God who desires to give man peace concerning his eternal destination. Southern Baptists believe that "so long as God is, so long is that soul safe which has leaned on Jesus for repose" (Hobbs 70). The reason for this assurance is that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is "God's . . . guarantee that he will keep that soul and life looking toward the full redemption or glorification . . . So God has put up his very being as his guarantee to keep saved and to glorify the soul which believes in Jesus" (Hobbs 70). Despite theosis' emphasis on the bond between man and God in which man is transformed by God's presence in him, there is not this assurance of salvation for Eastern Orthodox Christian.

Although Eastern Orthodoxy and Southern Baptist Protestantism disagree on the question of assurance of salvation, they both agree that no man can earn his way to heaven through good works. Southern Baptists and Eastern Orthodox Christians teach that works are proof of one's faith in God.

A major difference in salvation teachings between the two denominations is the additional barrier which Eastern Orthodox Christians believe Jesus overcame through the Incarnation. This barrier was the barrier between God's uncreated, unapproachable nature and man's nature as the created being. The barrier prevented theosis. Because the Eastern Orthodox believe that theosis was man's ultimate destiny before the creation of the world, they speculate that Jesus would have become incarnate whether or not man ever sinned. Man could become more godly before the Incarnation, but only through the God-man could man partake of God's nature. Man can never become God (partake of "the essence of God"), but through Jesus he can partake of "the energies of God" (Chrestou, 62).

Southern Baptists do believe that Jesus was both God and man, but they do not have a parallel teaching relating the Incarnation to salvation in this way, nor do they relate salvation to the destruction of the barrier between the natures of God and man.

Finally, there is a difference between where Southern Baptist Christians and Eastern Orthodox Christians begin the story of salvation. For Southern Baptists, salvation is God's repair plan. His movement towards man is to bridge the gap which man created with his sin. Eastern Orthodoxy sees salvation as theosis which was not in response to man's sin at all. Professor Panagiotes K. Chrestou in his book Partakers of God describes the Eastern Orthodox perspective of salvation,

"the Incarnation of the Divine Word granted theosis to mankind. Thus, the Incarnation is something broader than the process of the redemption of the human race; for theosis is that which is higher and more precious than the redemption of fallen man." (Chrestou 45)

Southern Baptists and Eastern Orthodox Christians would agree that "salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ" (Hobbs 58). Exactly what this "salvation" means for each denomination would differ. Ultimately, both seek to bring man to a deeper relationship with God. Both seek to bring man to repentance. Both seek to bring man to a sanctification process in which man becomes more godly. Both teach that Jesus is the only way to salvation. But the green dots on students' watches and the colorful beads and the Christian T-shirts do not depict theosis nor does the Eastern Orthodox Church teach the specific nature of Christ's atoning sacrifice or the assurance of the saved soul.

Conclusion

Besides the satisfaction of personal curiosity, there are three important reasons to examine similarities and differences between the Southern Baptist and Eastern Orthodox denominations. First, both are related to each other in their historical straddling of Catholicism. Eastern Orthodoxy predated Catholicism. Christianity was unified until the split between the two in 1054AD. The Protestant Reformation postdated Catholicism. It was in 1517 that Martin Luther introduced his ninety-five theses. Thus, there is a relationship between Orthodoxy and Protestantism in that neither one believes what the Roman Catholics believe. In rejecting aspects of Catholicism, do Southern Baptists return to beliefs held by the Eastern Orthodox Christians?

Second, is the Eastern Orthodox Church by virtue of its adherence to tradition and its resistance to modern influences a cure for the kind of modernity prevalent in evangelical churches today? David Wells is a contemporary protestant scholar and author who has noted that today

"Truth is displaced by experience, reason by intuition, the universal by the private, the external by the internal -- and the result is a way of looking at life that entails substantial modifications of God himself to these modern habits in order to sustain the relevance of the Church." (Wells 298)

In his book God in the Wasteland, Wells describes what is needed to combat the influence of modernism on the Church:

"[The reality and character of God] enables Christian believers to stand outside their culture cognitively, morally, and spiritually. More than that, . . . to stand against worldly culture. And it is just this kind of distance -- this kind of opposition to modernity as an essentially ungodly worldview that is indispensable to the preservation of Christian identity." (Wells 119)

While Orthodoxy does seem to answer the call for a Church separated from and opposed to the modern world, Southern Baptists could never lay core beliefs aside in the hope of adopting this separation and opposition. According to Southern Baptist writer Herschel Hobbs some of these core beliefs include the "soul competency" of every believer, the possession of a "living faith" as opposed to a "credal faith," and the absence of such "human interference in religion" as episcopacy, infant baptism, religious proxy, and governmental authority in religion. Eastern Orthodoxy possesses almost all of these "human interferences" and uses creeds.

Third, the study is an important one because denominationalism is a significant issue in Christianity today. In a panel discussion about the "issues and challenges facing the church as it enters a new century" Robert Wuthnow notes that "Christians are going to be living within a multi-religious context right here in our own society." He also asks the question,

"Can we be a particularistic tradition that says that Christianity is the only way or are people going to be increasingly relativistic in their orientations and say, 'Well, I happen to be a Christian and that is just the way I was raised. You are something else and that is fine, too.' We certainly see a lot of that relativism, and I think it remains to be seen how well the Christian community can address that challenge."

How the Christian community responds to pluralism among religious groups within the United States, it seems to me, must be linked to how the Christian community responds to pluralism among Christian denominations within the United States.

To some people the idea of one Christian church united is antithetical to the Bible's teachings. I have met people who view the different denominations as different ways to worship the same God. The need for different ways to worship is based on the great variety of personalities and tastes among Christians and is met within the ability to choose a denomination which most meets one's preferred worship style. I have also met people

who are not Christians who find the inability of the Christian community to agree on core beliefs to be a stumbling block for their faith. Whether or not it is true, there is a prevalent perception of the Islamic faith as being more unified than the Christian faith. As Islam increasingly comes to America, the way one Christian denomination relates to another will become increasingly significant to a population with more choices than ever before.

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By Mark A. Noll, Ph.D., and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., Ph.D.

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