

What Do Protestant Missionary Activities Have to Do with Theosis?

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Introduction

There is a tendency among Protestant Christians to reject earthly elements that have been tainted by creation's fallen nature in an effort to preserve the purity of their faith. If a style of music is paired with unfortunate lyrics, then it follows that all pieces of music in that style are not acceptable. If a piece of art is provocative, then all art is immoral. If an icon becomes the subject of idolatry among a small group of people, then all icons are bad. The Protestant experience tells Christians to cut off anything that looks, smells, sounds, or tastes perverted as a result of the fall.

This is not Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy teaches the fall of Adam and Eve, and it teaches that all creation has suffered as a result of the fall, but it also teaches that Christ came to redeem *all* of creation – not humans alone. As a result, the Church incorporates various earthly elements into its worship. As inanimate objects are incorporated into the liturgical life of the Church, they are blessed and redeemed, and thereby exorcised of all Satanic influence. Christ does not reject us

because of the fall, but rather embraces us and redeems us; likewise, we are called to embrace His creation and redeem it.

It is, therefore, troubling when Orthodox believers paradoxically reject a so-called Protestant church practice – such as missions and Bible translation – on the basis that this practice is Protestant, and therefore, not Orthodox. If we are willing to recognize, embrace, and redeem what is good in both inanimate objects and in other world religions, why do we refuse to redeem what is good in other Christian churches?

Mission Is Orthodox

In fact, the practices mentioned above were originally Orthodox endeavours. This is not a case of incorporating a new element into our faith, but rather reclaiming what is rightfully part of our own tradition.

Bible translation and missions were both part of the early church experience. They fulfill the Old Testament prophecies that the Messiah was to suffer, and that "...repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name *to all nations* [emphasis added] beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47 NRSV).¹ They fulfill the mandate given to us from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to go and be His "...witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And they seek to fulfill the prophecy in Revelation that there will be a great multitude of believers from every nation, tribe, people, and language worshipping Christ (Revelation 6:9). The apostles carried out the mandate to preach Christ to both the Jews and the Gentiles, and then passed the torch to us through apostolic succession. They did their part; now it is our turn.

¹ All scripture quotations have been cited from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Preaching Christ is not an option. Fr Martin Ritsi (director of the Orthodox Christian Mission Center [OCMC]) challenges Orthodox Christians by saying, “[m]issions is not a fad, an addendum, or an elective. Mission is central to the Gospel and it is the cutting edge of our Faith. When it is the focus of our Christian walk and the outreach of our church, it is an indicator of a healthy living Church.”² Archbishop Anastasios of Albania agrees with Fr Martin Ritsi: “How is it possible to celebrate Easter and Pentecost without accepting the consequences of these feasts? Look at their theological perspective. These feasts proclaim that we must go!”³

The icon for the feast of Pentecost teaches us that we must go. In the icon, we see the twelve apostles⁴ seated in a semi-circle. Each of them holds either a scroll or a book representing the glad tidings of joy which must be shared. On their heads, we see the flames of fire in the shape of tongues. This represents what the scriptures proclaim: “divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2: 3-4).

The visual depiction of these tongues of fire represents not only the physical manifestation of these flames, but also the symbolic reminder that the apostles spoke in tongues at this occasion. This miracle had a practical purpose and is explained in the verses that follow. There were people from many different language groups

² Fr Martin Ritsi, in *Short Term Missions Prayer and Study Guide*, St Augustine, FL: OCMC. P1. Unpublished.

³ Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, in *Short Term Missions Prayer and Study Guide*, St Augustine, FL: OCMC. P13. Unpublished.

⁴ There were twelve apostles once again since Matthias had now joined their number after Judas fled.

present in Jerusalem at that time. The miracle, which reverses the effects of the Tower of Babel when the nations were divided into language groups, unites all who hear the apostles preaching because they could all understand the good news of Jesus Christ in their own language. Even before sending the apostles to the Gentiles, Christ is clear that the message of salvation is intended for all people.

There is another aspect of this icon which clearly commands us to go. At the top of the icon, we see the light of God streaming down to the world, enlightening the apostles. At the bottom of the icon, and also at the center of the apostles' semi-circle, is an old man named *Kosmos*. He represents the world, as his name implies,⁵ and he is completely surrounded by darkness. Christ has given the apostles the task of taking God's light to the world. Through apostolic succession that task becomes ours as well.

We do not need to focus exclusively on Easter and Pentecost to sense the missionary heart of God throughout the ages. God's desire to draw all nations to Himself is evident from Genesis through the prophets, proclaimed in Christ, continued through the early church, and depicted in Revelation. Christ's commands were not new commands; in fact, He assumed the apostles would fulfill the Old Testaments commands to go. This is why He instructed them that, *while going*, they should baptize those who believe. This same missionary mandate has been passed on to us. What are we doing with it?

⁵ *Kosmos* (Greek: world, universe, creation).

Theosis – Missions and Our Salvation

There is a famous quote attributed to St Francis of Assisi that says: "Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words." This statement summarizes the Christian life.

We are not all called to be St Paul, evangelising in the market and acropolis. We are not all called to be St Xenia of St Petersburg, living in a cemetery and transporting stones up a hill at night so the builders could work on the church building during the day. We are not all called to be St Nicholas of Japan, who laboured for eight years before seeing one Japanese man come to Christ. We are not all called to be St Perpetua, who chose to deny her family so as not to deny Christ, and who suffered martyrdom because she insisted that she was a Christian.

Instead, we *are* all called to be faithful to whatever journey God has for us. Part of that faithfulness includes using the talents that God has given to us. Another part of that faithfulness is responding to His voice even when we do not feel talented in a certain area, thereby allowing Him to demonstrate that He is our strength in our weakness.

As a result, our faithfulness results in different journeys. Some people are clergy, while others are laity. Some people are teachers, prophets, healers, leaders, caregivers, administrators, treasurers, cooks, or cleaners... Some have more money to give, while others have more time to give. How we give, or what we give, is not really important; what is important is that we *are* giving, and that we *are* being faithful to God in our daily lives.

How can we preach the gospel at all times? By the things we do (or do not do), by the things we say (or do not say), by our priorities,

by the ways we spend our time, by forgiving one another, by our attitudes... the list could go on. Most importantly, we preach at all times by simply existing.

On our journey of salvation, we are called to become partakers of the divine nature. That is to say, we are called to become what God intended us to become at the dawn of creation. Christ's sacrifice for us in His incarnation, death, and rising, allows us to go back to the garden of Eden and start anew. Our relationship with Him allows us to struggle and work out our salvation each day as we allow ourselves to be transformed by God into His likeness. With Christ living in us, we become a living icon and a revelation to others around us. As we live our faith day by day, and allow ourselves to be transformed, we naturally witness to others. This is not an option. It is a natural extension of our Christian life.

There is a movement in modern evangelical Protestant circles called the Red Letter Revolution based on the book by the same name by Colin McCartney.⁶ The premise of the book and the revolution is that Christians get consumed with unimportant matters and neglect to live their faith. McCartney challenges readers to imagine what the world would look like if Christians actually lived the red letters of the Gospels – that is to say, the words of Christ as recorded in the Gospels. What would happen to our communities if we really believed the words of Christ and put them into action? What would happen to our churches and our families?

⁶ Colin McCartney, *Red Letter Revolution*, (Pickering, ON: Castle Quay, 2009). Colin is the founder of Urban Promise, Toronto, a Christian organization designed to address the needs of inner-city children and young adults.

We are created for community and unity with all of creation. We are saved together. Our salvation is not about us as individuals alone. As we become like God, his desires and longings should flow through us. Our faith should flow through us and affect the world around us. Echoing St Francis of Assisi, St Seraphim of Sarov tells us to “acquire inner peace and thousands around [us] will find their salvation.”

These challenges to preach the gospel at all times, to live the red letters of the gospels, and to acquire inner peace are relevant to all Christians. We need to be reminded that our faith is meant to be lived. Our faith is not about intellectual discussions, but rather a day-by-day relationship with Christ and His Church.

Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and All the Ends of the Earth

As we live out our faith, and the desires of God flow through our veins, we develop concern for our fellow brothers and sisters in this world, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, Christian and non-Christian. Like the apostles, we are called to go to Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and to all the ends of the earth. The apostles were not always prepared to progress to the next step. St Peter himself struggled with the idea of preaching Christ to the Gentiles, but the book of Acts records that God sent a vision to transform Peter's heart so that he could see that God indeed wanted him to go and share the gospel with the Gentiles beginning with a single household (of Cornelius), and eventually stretching out to entire communities (Acts 10). Like the apostles, we too are called to embark on a spiritual journey and allow God to prepare us for these figurative places.

Jerusalem represented many things to the apostles. It was the capital city. It represented power and central authority for Judaism. This is where the Temple was located along with the priests, Pharisees,

and teachers of the law. It also represented home. For many of the apostles, home was in a rural community, not actually in Jerusalem itself. However, compared to Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the world, Jerusalem symbolized everything with which they were familiar. Christ told them to start here, right where they were, before going anywhere else.

Then, after the ascension, they were to go to Judea: to their countrymen who were like them, who spoke their language, who believed the teachings of Judaism, and who shared the same culture. The first step had been to stay and preach right where they were: in Jerusalem. This second step required them to travel physically, but it did not challenge them spiritually or mentally because they were still among their own people.

After this, they were called to travel within their own borders, but this time to people who were outsiders: the Samaritans. The Jews and Samaritans celebrated centuries of a shared ethnic racism for each other. After preaching in Jerusalem, and then physically travelling to preach to their own people, they were now being called to travel in their hearts and preach to those whom they despised.

Having preached to both Jews and Samaritans in their homeland, the apostles were now called to travel great distances both physically and mentally by preaching Christ to the Gentiles in all the ends of the earth. In this directive, Christ demonstrates His compassion by recognizing that humans need time to grow in love for one another so that we can indeed share Christ's love with people who live, behave, and believe differently. This journey of the heart is one that Christ calls us to as well. The command to preach in Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, then everywhere else allows us grow in

Christ, and to embrace and reflect His love for all of creation one step at a time.

The Universality of the Church, and Our Role

One argument against overseas missions is that there is a lot of work to be done here in North America. This is a valid argument. Christ did not send His apostles to the ends of the earth alone; He sent them to Jerusalem, to Judea, and to Samaria first; only after this were they to go to the ends of the earth. There is always work to be done in each of these geographic areas of the world and of the heart. In North America, we have great ethnic and religious diversity. As a result, we can preach Christ within all four of these areas without ever going overseas. There is much to be done, and much love to share.

We are not all called to pack up and go to a new culture. However, if we are resistant to the idea that God may be calling us to do this, we must examine our hearts and ask: "Why am I resisting the idea of something that is so clearly laid out in scripture and church history?" This examination of conscience may be quite revealing if you allow yourself to answer honestly. We are all called to be icons of Christ, and to influence the world around us. Christ tells us that we are salt, we are light, we are cities on hills, and we are neighbours. We should be equally ready to serve our brothers and sisters at home and overseas.

As the Body of Christ, we not only influence the world around us, but we also influence one another. We are all connected and have a responsibility to be aware of the global nature of Orthodoxy, to pray for the entire church, and to support our brothers and sisters in whatever ways we can. We can go spend time with them through short-term trips. We can help them to build churches, clinics, schools,

orphanages, and homes. We can send supplies such as non-perishable foods, school supplies, and supplies for Sunday Schools (especially in the major language of the country). We can encourage them and help run camps, seminars, and other teaching events for Orthodox of all ages. We can send financial aid to assist in the on-going work of the churches and to support priests. Through long-term trips, we can give them on-going support, catechism, and translations of the Bible (as well as Church services) into local languages. When clergy members devote themselves through a long-term trip they are also providing the gift of on-going sacraments and liturgy. Regardless of what we are able to offer, we can educate ourselves and others about the global nature of Orthodoxy, and we can pray for God to have mercy on His global Church.

Conclusion

Mission is an essential expression of Orthodox self-conscience, a cry in action for the fulfillment of God's will 'on earth as it is in heaven.' ... Indifference to mission is a denial of Orthodoxy.⁷

God is faithful and will provide the resources, the people, the strength, and wisdom in order to accomplish His purposes. Our job is to be available and ready to be faithful. As we are faithful with what He has given us, we allow ourselves to be transformed into His likeness and we are open to His direction which says, "This is the way you should go. Walk in it."

⁷ Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, in *Short Term Missions Prayer and Study Guide*, St Augustine, FL: OCMC. Unpublished.

What does missions have to do with our salvation? Everything. If we are not willing to preach Christ, we are indicating that we do not truly believe.

References

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