**What is “the Gospel” in Eastern Orthodox Perspective?**

 by Bradley Nassif

  **Precis**

The gospel is the work of the Holy Trinity to restore humans to union with God, and communion with others, for the good of the world and the glory of God. The gospel is a many-sided mystery that can be described, but not defined. It is discerned by discovering its content, gifts and demands as expressed in Scripture and confessed by the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.” This essay, therefore, places primary emphasis on the Orthodox Church’s understanding of the “content” of the gospel through the Scriptures and the dogmas of the Ecumenical Councils paying special attention to the Nicene Creed and Chalcedonian Definition. Due to limitations of space, it places secondary emphasis on the “gifts” of the gospel while leaving to other Orthodox contributors the task of explaining its “demands” for social relevance and discipleship.

 The gospel begins within the Being of God himself. At the center of creation is a God who exists in an eternal communion of Trinitarian love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is out of God’s Trinitarian relationships, and for participation in those relationships, that we humans were created and redeemed. Humanities’ original vocation in creation was to grow eternally in “the image of God” (*theosis*, divinization), and to rule over creation. However, the original union which God created between himself and Adam and Eve (and with each other) was broken through sin resulting in physical and spiritual death, the domination of sin and the Satanic powers of darkness, and the material decay of the cosmos. Humans and creation now stand in need of healing and renewal.

To that end, the question Jesus posed to his disciples is the most important for determining the content of the gospel: “Who do people say that I am?” (Mt. 16.15). The Gospel of John answers: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God…And the Word became flesh” (Jn. 1.1,14). Therefore, following the Holy Fathers of the ancient and undivided Church, Orthodoxy sees the Incarnation as the supreme mystery that lies at the center of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ is confessed as fully human and fully divine – two natures united in one Person “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.” (Chalcedon). In the incarnate Person of Jesus Christ -- in his Trinitarian relations -- is found the mystery of salvation. Because the saving gospel is embodied in the very Person of Jesus Christ, he is depicted and venerated through icons, which are the “visual gospel” of the Church. The Incarnation explains why humans, as well as the whole of creation, need salvation and why salvation can only be appropriated through union with the risen Lord.

Union with the Incarnate Son, and his communion with the Father through the power and presence of the Spirit, constitutes the heart of the gospel. Incarnation is not just a necessary pre-requisite to the cross. Rather, it is itself salvific and atoning; it is what makes the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ efficacious (Nicene Creed). As “the only mediator between God and humans” (2 Timothy 5.2), the Son of the Father took our full humanity into the very life of God, destroying the separation between God and humanity within his own Being. The Incarnation recreated and reoriented our fallen humanity (*theosis*), and the entire cosmos, back into the proper relation to God which Adam and Eve had lost in the Garden of Eden.

Because of the ontology of the Incarnation, the death and resurrection of Christ constitute the climactic work of salvation through which death and the cosmic defeat of evil are accomplished (Rom. 1.1-4; 8.31-34; 1 Cor. 15.1-4; Jn. 12.31). Christ’s death on the cross on our behalf was an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. Christ did for us what we could never do for ourselves. The gifts or benefits of his cross and resurrection are rich and varied. The cross and resurrection also demand radical discipleship make possible the believer’s deification (Rom. 8.29; 2 Cor. 3.18).

 The proclamation of the gospel includes the Church because it is appropriated through it and leads to participation in it as “the body of Christ.” The Church proclaims the gospel of the Kingdom of God by calling all people to repentance, faith and baptism (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom. 6:1-12). Baptism is the occasion at which time Christ, the Living Gospel, is appropriated by faith through the work of the Spirit. Discipleship follows baptism and becomes a daily “death and resurrection” with Christ. At the center of this worshipping community lies the “bread and wine” of the new covenant (Mt. 26:26; 1 Cor. 11:24). The Eucharist is key to the ongoing appropriation and proclamation of the gospel. Formal membership in the Church and participation in the Eucharist, however, do not guarantee salvation. Saints Symeon the New Theologian, Makarios of Egypt and other mystical writers remind us that it is possible to be religious, but lost. Whether lifelong or through an instantaneous experience, an authentic form of Christian existence is one which appropriates the gospel through the experience of a personal Pentecost that is rooted in the sacramental life of the Church.

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***“In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God…And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1. 1,14).***

In these few lines, the apostle John summarizes the central theme that permeates the whole of Eastern Orthodox life and thought: *In the incarnate Person of Jesus Christ, and his Trinitarian relations, is found the mystery of salvation*. Every other Christian doctrine either prepares for, reveals or grows out of this reality. Hence all Christian conversation about the meaning of the gospel must begin with a shared understanding of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ in his Trinitarian relations and what that means for the message that Christians preach and the life that we live within the various cultures of the world.

In accordance with the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas of Nicea and Chalcedon, I will attempt to make clear in this essay the Orthodox Church’s understanding of the gospel as it relates to the Incarnation as the supreme mystery that lies at the center of the Christian faith. Because the saving gospel is embodied in the very Person of Jesus Christ, the Incarnation explains why humans, as well as the whole of creation, need salvation and why salvation can only be appropriated through union with the risen Lord. As we will see, the gospel is discerned by discovering its content, gifts and demands. I will focus in this paper mainly on the content of the gospel and secondarily on its gifts. Regrettably, I will not have space to explore the demands of the gospel for discipleship and its social relevance. I will rely on my Orthodox colleagues who will speak after me for developing those subjects.

***The Gospel and Salvation History***

Before articulating the content of the gospel, a few words are in order to place the gospel in its biblical, historical and liturgical context. The term most often employed by the Church Fathers to describe the history of salvation is the Greek word *oikonomia.* In its classical context the term refers to the management of a household. According to Father John Meyendorff, “Among the Greek Fathers *oikonomia* has the standard meaning of ‘incarnation history.’”[[1]](#footnote-1) So in patristic usage, *oikonomia* describes the providence of God which governs the course of human history toward the Incarnation of the Word who will save fallen humanity and renew the entire physical cosmos.

Incarnation history is grounded in the Old and New covenants. The Old covenant is the one God made with Israel. But as John Goldingay explains (and which accords with the Church’s perspective), in Old Testament history that covenant was not meant for Israel alone. Rather, the covenant was meant to be a bridge to the rest of the world: “God’s choice of [Israel] is subordinate to a commitment to humankind as a whole….Creation looks forward to the covenant, but the covenant serves the creation.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Thus Israel was chosen to be the channel of revelation through which YHWH would reach all the other nations of the world (Gen.12.3; Gal. 3.28). The creation of the heavens and the earth in Genesis 1-2 eventually reaches an eschatological climax in a divine promise of renewal when God said, “I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth” (Is. 65.17 and 66.2). The New Testament reaffirms the continuing validity of the Old Testament’s hope of a renewed creation (2 Pet. 3.13 and Rev. 21.1, Rom 8.19-22). That new creation belongs to the eschatological Kingdom of God which was fulfilled in the earthly ministry of Jesus, and will one day be consummated in the age to come. Jesus is the one through whom God has formed a new covenant people through his life, death, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Spirit at Pentecost.

In the present age, that new covenant is established in the Eucharist in which Jesus took bread and wine and declared them to be “the new covenant” in his blood (Mt. 26.26 and par.). The Eucharistic meal is celebrated every Sunday in the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church. It is there that the Kingdom of God becomes the North Star that guides the eschatological proclamation of the Scriptures and the partaking of communion. The first words of the opening petition of the liturgy are: “Blessed is the kingdom of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Here the Church’s liturgical theology is revealed as kingdom theology; and kingdom theology is gospel theology. The gospel lies at the very center of the Orthodox liturgy and permeates its entire structure and content.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The four Gospels unanimously bear witness to the coming of the Kingdom of God and the new creation through the Person of Jesus of Nazareth. In and through Jesus, the living God has opened the door of this new creation he has been preparing, and has invited all to enter. In the synoptic gospels, the name given to life in this new creation is the “Kingdom of God,” while the gospel of John describes it as “eternal life.” Yet the collective witness of all four Gospels is that God is rescuing the whole creation, and individuals within it, through the eschatological coming of the King of the Kingdom. Through the birth, life and, climactically through the cross, Jesus is bringing the kingdom to its climax by defeating sin, death and the devil. Through his resurrection, his death has saving meaning. Through his ascension into heaven, Jesus completes the process and now sits in glory interceding with the Father on our behalf in anticipation of the Second Coming. The story of salvation history is what constitutes the gospel for St. Paul as well as the rest of the New Testament writings:“But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law.” (Gal. 4.4;1 Cor. 15.1-8 *et al.*).

***Why Does Anyone Need the Gospel?***

At the center of creation is a Trinitarian God. It is out of God’s Trinitarian relationships, and for communion with those Trinitarian relationships, that we humans were created and redeemed. God exists in an eternal communion of Trinitarian love between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our original vocation in creation was to become like God: “Then God said, ‘Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us” (Gen. 1:26). Adam and Eve were called to grow eternally in the “likeness of God.” In Orthodox vocabulary, this is known as “glorification,” “deification” or *theosis*.

Adam and Eve were also tasked with overseeing the earth and the created order as the realm of the Kingdom of God. This is the “royal priesthood” of our divine calling as children of God. Sin, however, brought both physical and spiritual death to the human race (Genesis 3; Rom. 5:12) as well as dominion by the flesh and the demonic powers of darkness. The union which God created between himself and Adam and Eve (and with each other) was broken through sin. Humanity and creation now stands in need of healing and renewal.

***The Mystery of the Gospel***

In Orthodoxy, as in the New Testament, the gospel is a many-sided mystery. Its “description” -- impossible to narrowly “define” -- is simultaneously simple, comprehensive and complex. The gospel constitutes the very essence of the Christian message. It includes a vast embrace of the story of creation, humanity made in “the image of God,” the Fall into sin, Israel as the nation through whom God’s Messiah would come, the climax of the Incarnation, eschatology, the Kingdom of God, the cross, resurrection, ascension, the Church as the new Messianic community, the sacraments, spiritual life, social engagement and missions. All of this originates from the very center of the Church’s life which is the Lord himself who has incarnated the good news of the Kingdom of God.

So our union with Christ is a profound mystery of the gospel. To be united to Christ means that we are joined to the incarnate Person of Christ himself, and by this union we participate in the very life and love of the Trinity. Paul identifies this mystery as “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1.27). The mystery of Christ’s union with his Church lies at the core of the good news that Paul preached and was willing to suffer and die for: “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim *the mystery of Christ,* for which I am in chains.” (Col. 4.3). “Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known *the* *mystery of the gospel*, for which I am an ambassador in chains.” (Eph. 6.19-20).

The supreme mystery of the gospel is the Incarnation of the Word (Jn. 1.14). God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, takes upon himself our humanity in order to save us in the humanity he assumed. C.S. Lewis repeats the central conviction of patristic Orthodoxy when he observes that the Incarnation lies at the center of the Christian gospel: “The Central Miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation….Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Important as the mysteries of the death and resurrection of Christ are, without the supreme mystery of the Incarnation, the crucifixion and resurrection would not have their saving power. The Incarnation is much more than simply a necessary pre-requisite to the work of Christ. The very Person of Christ *is* the gospel.

***“Who do people say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15)***

“In the mind of Eastern Christians,” said Father John Meyendorff, “the entire context of the Christian faith depends upon the way in which the question ‘Who is Jesus Christ?’ is answered.”[[5]](#footnote-5) That answer is given in the saving dogmas of the Ecumenical Councils (325-787 AD). Those dogmas bear witness to the meaning of the gospel. The identity of Jesus Christ, and his Trinitarian relations, constituted the heart of the Church’s Christological, Trinitarian and Iconoclastic controversies in the age of the Ecumenical Councils. It is important to know that the Councils were not abstract philosophical speculations over correct formulas of Christological chemistry. On the contrary, the Ecumenical Councils were the byproduct of the practical concerns of Church life and worship. The Councils produced pastoral statements by bishops about the meaning and content of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The dogmatic decrees and ecclesiastical canons which resulted from several centuries of protracted theological debates centered on the meaning of the salvation that was achieved through the Person of the incarnate Lord in his Trinitarian relations. In other words, the dogmatic conclusions of the Ecumenical Councils were all about the saving realities of the gospel as embodied in the Incarnation, and the Son’s eternal relations with the Father and the Spirit.

*The Gospel’s Link with the Ecclesiology of the Ecumenical Councils*

Without going into great detail on this subject, there are at least two points to made concerning the ecclesiology of the Ecumenical Councils which most evangelicals seemed to have overlooked when claiming allegiance to the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. The first is that the Churches which gathered at the Ecumenical Councils were already in Eucharistic communion with each other. The ecclesiological principles of Ignatius of Antioch and Irenaeus in the second century continued to shape the life of the communities who gathered at the Ecumenical Councils. The bishops present came from local communities of believers who were in communion with their local bishops gathered together around the celebration of the Eucharist. These bishops, in turn, were in communion with one another. This “Eucharistic Ecclesiology,” as it is called, pre-existed before the Councils gathered and continued to exist during and after the Councils proceedings (except of course in the case of those bishops recognized as heretical).

Second, Irenaeus emphasized the doctrine of “apostolic succession” against the Gnostics. The Church’s true bishops were (and are) those whose ordination stood in historical apostolic succession with the original Twelve and the authority of Jesus. Historic succession, however, is no guarantee of truth. So there exists not only a historical succession, but the succession of apostolic truth in each local community headed by its local bishop. Both successions (historical and theological) were necessary pre-conditions for each bishop’s participation in the Ecumenical Councils (even if the truth question was still to be discussed during the proceedings of the Councils).

These ecclesiological realities cannot be marginalized for the Orthodox today when describing what the gospel is. Christian truth is a communal, not individual matter. Scripture, Tradition, authority and the “mind of the Church” work together symbiotically in the Ecumenical Councils.[[6]](#footnote-6) The conclusions that were reached by the Fathers of the Ecumenical Councils are the faith of “the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” of the Nicene Creed.

*The Saving Ontologies of the* Homoousion *and the Hypostatic Union*

The Nicene Creed (325/381) and the Chalcedonian Definition (451) constitute the foundation of Orthodox soteriology and thus the very content of the gospel. The incarnate Son of the Father, in his Trinitarian relations, lies at the heart of these two conciliar statements (in tandem, of course, with the other five Ecumenical Councils which surrounded them). For example, the Nicene Creed declares the saving significance of the Incarnation:

“Jesus Christ…of one essence (*homoousion*) with the Father….Who for us humans and for our salvation, came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became human.”

In the fifth-century, the crucial negative adverbs of the famous Chalcedonian Definition built the boundaries around the mystery of the union of the two natures of Christ with the aid of apophatic language[[7]](#footnote-7) (“without confusion, without change,” etc.). Here we have the Church’s formally declared inability to exhaust the meaning of the mystery of salvation:

 “… one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten,

to be acknowledged in two natures,

without confusion, without change,

without division, without separation”

 Chalcedon, however, was not the final word on the Christological debates in the Christian East. Against the heresy of monothelitism (the belief that Christ had only one divine-human will), the Sixth Ecumenical Council (680/1) formally attested to the complete integrity of, and cooperation between, the human and divine wills of Christ:

“We also proclaim two natural willings or wills in him and two natural operations [modes of action], without separation, without change, without partition, without confusion, according to the teaching of the holy Fathers – and two natural wills not contrary [to each other], God forbid, as the impious heretics have said [they would be], but his human will follows, and does not resist or opposes, but rather is subject to his divine and all-powerful will.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Christology of St. Maximos the Confessor lies behind this conciliar statement. Maximos advanced the work of Chalcedon by distinguishing between the “natural” and “gnomic” (deliberative) wills. He maintained that Christ has a natural will that followed its created instincts toward union with God, but he did not have a gnomic will which is characterized by hesitation and deliberation between two or more options. Christ never deliberated between doing the will of the Father or not. He sinlessly followed the natural will of his fallen, but healed, humanity. In his Incarnate life, Christ did for us what we could never do for ourselves. His obedience to the Father through the natural operations of his human will, in synergy with the divine will, makes it possible for us to obey God when we become united with his redeemed humanity.

 Once again, the soteriological significance of these saving truths are *affirmations about the good news of the gospel*. In becoming human, the Son of God assumed a human body, a human soul, a human mind and a human will. In taking up our full humanity, the hypostatic (personal) union of the divine and human natures in Christ brought about a reconciling, atoning union in the Being of the Savior. As “the only mediator between God and humans” (2 Timothy 5.2), the Son of the Father took our full humanity into the very life of God, destroying the separation between God and humanity within his very Being. The Incarnation recreated and reoriented our fallen humanity back into a proper relation to God which Adam and Eve had lost in the Garden of Eden.

 The last of the Ecumenical Councils (787 AD) visualized the gospel through icongraphic depictions of Christ made possible by the Word made flesh. Icons, in other words, are the Church’s “visual gospel.” The ultimate theological justification for the use of images in liturgy and devotion is the Incarnation. Icons bear witness to the saving realities of the God who became human. To reject the icons is to implicitly deny salvation itself. St. John of Damascus sums up the Orthodox position with brilliant Christological insight:

“In former times God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honoring the matter which wrought my salvation! I honor it, but not as God*.*”[[9]](#footnote-9)

*Jesus Christ as the Defining Center of the Gospel*

What the Orthodox want to say through the Ecumenical Councils is that Christ, in his Trinitarian relations, is the defining center of the gospel, and of all Christian belief. Everything in the Christian faith depends on knowing who Christ is and becoming united with him. Christ reveals the nature of sin, salvation, the Church, reconciliation of the cosmos, missions and every other dimension of reality. Father John McGuckin elaborates on the expansive embrace of the Incarnation in Orthodox soteriology:

“In Orthodox understanding, incarnation does not simply refer to the act itself…it stands more generically for the whole nexus of events of the life, teachings, sufferings, and glorification of the Lord…As such, the theological concept of incarnation is a profoundly soteriological term: it always has reference to the dynamic effects of God’s involvement in the cosmos. It is also an obviously Christocentric way of approaching the concept of salvation....[W]hen one approaches a theology of salvation through the medium of the incarnation of the Logos, one soon finds the argument turns into the profoundly related areas of Trinitarian doctrine of God and transfigured anthropology.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Two Church Fathers sum up all that we have said thus far. Saint Gregory

Nazianzius (4th c.) succinctly states the saving work of the full humanity the Son of God assumed: “Whatsoever has not been assumed has not been healed.” (*Letter to Cledonius*, No. 101). Saint Athanasius (4th c.) expresses the wondrous soteriological exchange between God and humans as a consequence of the mediatorial work of the God-man: “God became human so that humans might become God.” Or more literally: “God became humanized so that humans might become divinized.” (*On the Incarnation of the Word*, par. 54).

Through the Ecumenical Councils the Church Fathers proclaimed and protected the Church’s understanding of the Person of Christ. The Incarnation shows us in the clearest way possible that God, the Holy Trinity, wants to join humanity to himself through uniting us with Jesus Christ. Such is the “good news” of the gospel.

***Union with the Incarnate Son is the Heart of the Gospel***

The content of the good news of the gospel cannot be limited to any

single soteriological doctrine whether it be the Protestant emphasis on “justification by grace through faith” or the Orthodox emphasis on “deification” (*theosis*, divinization). The work of Christ is much more comprehensive than either of these. Father Theodore Stylianopoulos underscores how holistic the doctrine of salvation is in the New Testament:

“The New Testament features an array of participatory, forensic, expiatory, ethical, sanctifying, and transformational concepts pertaining to the understanding of salvation. The richness of salvific language contravenes exclusive concentration on any single concept or principle. For example, Paul’s teaching of justification (*dikaiosis*) cannot be isolated from other concepts such as redemption (*apolytrosis*), reconciliation (*katallage*), sanctification (*hagiasmos*), transformation (*metamorphousthai and kaine ktisis*), glorification, and union with Christ (*en Christo*).”[[11]](#footnote-11)

What is the connection between deification[[12]](#footnote-12) and the Incarnation? By uniting our humanity with the God-who-became-human, there is a transformative healing of our fallen humanity (1 Pet. 2.24) that makes it possible for us to regain what was lost in the Fall, and to begin living here and now in the eschatological blessings of the Age to Come (Rev. 21.1-4; 22.1-5). Saint Paul teaches that all the saving benefits of the gospel have taken place “in Christ.” Redemption and forgiveness are “in him” (Eph. 1.7); believers are made alive “in Christ” (1 Cor. 15.22); they are justified “in Christ” (Gal. 2.17); they are relieved from condemnation because they are “in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8.1); they are sanctified “in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 1.2); and “in Christ Jesus” humans become the adopted children of God through faith (Gal. 3.26). In other words, salvation is accomplished not only *by* Jesus Christ, it is also accomplished *in* Jesus Christ. Salvation is found in our union with the divinized, new humanity that Christ has assumed and restored to communion with the Father.

***“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” 1 Corinthians 1.18***

Because of the ontology of the Incarnation, the death and resurrection of Christ constitute the climactic work of salvation through which physical death and the cosmic defeat of evil are accomplished (Rom. 1.1-4; 8.31-34; 1 Cor. 15.1-4; Jn. 12.31). Christ’s death on the cross on our behalf was an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world.[[13]](#footnote-13) Christ did for us what we could never do for ourselves. The gifts or benefits of his cross and resurrection are rich and varied: union with God, justification, redemption, reconciliation, adoption, sanctification, a new humanity, the fruit of the Spirit, a new creation and more. The cross also demands radical discipleship, most notably recorded in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7). The Christian life is a life of daily death to sin and increasing in newness of life (Rom. 6.1-11; 12.12). The resurrection of Christ is the ultimate “good news” of the gospel. “Christ is Risen!” is the victorious source and goal of all the Church’s liturgical, spiritual and social life. It is the basis of the believer’s ever-growing deification into the image of Christ (Rom. 8.29; 2 Cor. 3.18).

Notice also in Paul’s writings how the death and resurrection of Christ belong together: “He was handed over to die because of our sins, and he was raised from the dead to make us right with God.” (Rom. 4:25 NLT). The gospel includes both. At the cross, Jesus won the victory over the powers of darkness, and granted forgiveness of sins (Col. 2:11-15). Moreover, the cross needs the resurrection for the forgiveness of sins (1 Cor. 15:17). Without the resurrection, there is no gospel (1 Cor. 15:1-3). The biblical texts are more numerous on these points than we can do justice to here. Space also prevents me from developing the role of the Spirit in the impartation of the saving work of Christ and empowerment for service (Acts 2).

***The Gospel is the Church’s Story***

In the Fathers’ exposition of the gospel, the Incarnation takes place within what we would call a story*[[14]](#footnote-14)* that has many parts, and if any are left out, or if one part is given undue emphasis, the story will not come out as its author intended. How the story is told makes all the difference to how the gospel is known. The story of the gospel cannot be reduced to emphasizing a few propositions about the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross, justification by faith and the need to repent and believe -- crucial as those things are. Rather, the gospel involves the whole plan of salvation history. It is starts with God himself and then moves on through creation, the fall of the human race, the establishment of the covenant with the nation of Israel through whom the Messiah would come, the climactic fulfillment of salvation in the Incarnation of the Son through whom God’s kingdom is given and the Church of God is formed, followed by the proclamation of the gospel through the Church and ending with the eschatological consummation of the entire cosmos. Once again, the gospel is the work of the Triune, interpersonal God to restore us to union with himself and communion with others for the good of the world. This God does by forming a community through which the “image of God” is restored through the cross, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost.

The gospel is appropriated through the Church. The Church proclaims the gospel of the Kingdom of God by calling all people to repentance, faith and baptism into the body of Christ (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom. 6:1-12). Baptism is the occasion at which time Christ, the Living Gospel, is appropriated by faith through the work of the Spirit. Discipleship follows baptism and becomes a daily “death and resurrection” with Christ. At the center of this worshipping community lies the “bread and wine” of the new covenant (Mt. 26:26; 1 Cor. 11:24). The Eucharist is key to the ongoing appropriation and proclamation of the gospel. Just as the Exodus and Passover meal became the central communal act of commemorating the deliverance of the children of Israel from bondage, so also in a much greater way does the celebration of the Eucharist proclaim the salvation wrought by the death, resurrection and Second Coming of Jesus Christ: “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.” (1 Cor. 11.26; 10.16). The Christian Church, therefore, is the locus of God’s work in the world today. It is a Eucharistic community that becomes most fully itself when it is gathered around the Lord’s Table, presided over by a bishop in apostolic succession who calls on the Holy Spirit to bring to reality what it celebrates in word and sign. The primary language of the gospel, therefore, is the language of Scripture expressed through the Church’s worship.

***The Gospel and Nominal Christianity***

Finally, no presentation of the gospel in Orthodox perspective is complete without addressing the gospel to the internal life of the Church. The Church itself tells us that no formal membership in the community can ever guarantee salvation. Saints Symeon the New Theologian, Makarios of Egypt and other mystical writers remind us that it is possible to be religious, but lost. Whether through lifelong commitment or through an instantaneous experience, an authentic form of Christian existence is one which appropriates the gospel by experiencing a personal Pentecost that is rooted in the sacramental life of the Church.[[15]](#footnote-15) The gospel not only leads to the Church; the Church leads us to the demands of the gospel: “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.” (Mark 9.23-24).

1. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology* Vol. 1:101 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the centrality of the gospel in the Church’s liturgy, see my essays “Orthodox Spirituality: The Quest for a Transfigured Life” in *Christian Spirituality: Four Views*, ed. Bruce Demarest (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012); and “Divinization in the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom” in *Religious Affections in the Christian Tradition* (provisional title), eds. Dale Coulter and Amos Yong (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame press, forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (NY, NY: Touchstone, 1996 reprint of 1947), 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bradley Nassif, “Tradition, ‘Catholicity,’ and the Mind of the Church” in *The Mission of God*, eds. Mark Oxbrow and Tim Grass (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Church’s use of apophatic (negation) and cataphatic (affirmation) language as paths to the knowledge of God are explained by Andrew Louth, “Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology” in *Cambridge Companion to Mystical Theology*, ed. Amy Hollywood et al. (2012), pp.137 ff. The Definition condemned Apollinarianism, Nestorianism and Eutychianism which, in various ways, undermined the full humanity of Christ or the unity of humanity with divinity. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Deno John Genakoplos, *Byzantium: Church, Society, and Civilization Seen Through Contemporary Eyes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 152. The heresy of “aphthartodocetism” (the belief that Christ’s body was incapable of death and corruption) explained such passages as Lk. 2.52 (“Jesus grew in wisdom and stature” etc.) as divine pedagogy and not real growth from ignorance to knowledge. The Church’s opposition to aphthartodocetism indicates a biblical and Chalcedonian perception (“the preservation of the properties of each nature”) that Christ’s humanity was identical to ours in every way except sin. See John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (NY, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1975), 86-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Saint John of Damascus,* *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, tr. Andrew Louth (NY, NY: St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Seminary Press, 2003), par. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John McGuckin, “Incarnation” in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), ed. John McGuckin, Vol.1, 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Theodore Stylianopoulos, *The Making of the New Testament*, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Misconceptions about the Orthodox doctrine of deification may need to be dispelled lest we be misunderstood. Unlike Neoplatonism, Mormonism or Hinduism, deification does not involve the loss of our individual identity by reabsorption into a divine Being. On the contrary, those who are divinized remain in an “I-Thou” relationship with God. We do not lose our creaturely status. The distinction between the Creator and the creature eternally remains. In addition, the doctrine is not just a patristic teaching. It is a Scriptural one: John 10.34-36; 1 John 3.2-3;2 Pet. 1.3-4; 2 Cor. 3.18; Rom. 8.29; Mt. 17.1-8 and parallelsFor an exegesis of these texts see Payton, *Light from the Christian East*, 137-142. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For a fuller account of the work of Christ on the cross in Orthodoxy and its relation to evangelical theology, see my essay on “The Evangelical Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church” in *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*, ed. James Stamoolis (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 37-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. N.T. Wright and others have used the story-model to explain the overarching narrative of Scripture. We find this to be a helpful model to use because it comports well with the way the Church Fathers “did” theology. Even though the Fathers did not have all the storylines organized in the neat and orderly way it is often done today, their reading of the biblical text was coherently theological as they followed the overall Christological purpose (*skopos*) of the Scriptural narrative. Examples include the exegetical commentaries of St. John Chrysostom and Athanasius’s treatise *On the Incarnation of the Word*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kallistos Ware, “Personal Experience of the Holy Spirit According to the Greek Fathers” a paper presented at the European Pentecostal/Charismatic Research Conference held in Prague on September 10-14, 1997 and available online. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)