

# **Koinonic Evangelism: The Community as the Evangelist**

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*At the end of the 20th century, the evangelistic task is still regarded by many as a kind of sermon addressed to the world. However, evangelism is better understood and served not by placing the Gospel over against the world, but by seeking ways of relating the Gospel to the existential needs of the world. In Orthodox liturgical practice, in which the Eucharist is central, the world is brought to the Church in the forms of the natural elements, the cultural riches of the local community, or the everyday preoccupations of the faithful. Our liturgical and sacramental tradition clearly indicates that the Church's mission is not literally throwing the Gospel into the face of the world, but rather seeking first to understand what every human being longs for, and then seeing how, through the Word and the Sacrament, the Church can respond to those needs or heal any infirmities.*

Georges Lemopoulos in "Come, Our Light, and Illumine our Darkness: Reflections of Evangelism from an Orthodox Perspective"<sup>1</sup>

I will begin this paper with a short personal story on how I became interested in the subject of evangelism. I was completing my third and final year of Seminary and patiently awaiting an assignment. As is sadly typical, the last few months of Seminary were filled with uncertainty. Where would I be assigned? Would it be the correct match? Was I capable of leading a parish? All of these weighed heavily on my family. Each potential assignment that was offered somehow fell through: the priest decided not to move, the parish decided it wanted a more experienced priest, or the salary package was simply unlivable.

Then I received a phone call from the chancellor of the Diocese of the West who inquired whether I would be interested in a mission parish in Billings, Montana. A new national program was giving 3-year grants to selected missions and this particular mission was entering into the second year. For personal reasons, the current priest and his family decided to move back to their hometown, thus leaving the mission in jeopardy of losing

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<sup>1</sup>Georges Lemopoulos, "Come, Our Light, and Illumine Our Darkness!: Reflections on Evangelism from an Orthodox Perspective," *International Review of Mission* 87, no. 346 (July 1998), 324.

the grant. He asked my wife and me to visit the mission, without any obligation, before making my decision. One week later we were on our way to meet with the mission.

The mission was small, consisting of twenty-five families, and struggling, renting space at a local Roman Catholic Church. We spent the weekend, teaching and preaching and learning about their history. While there had been an Orthodox church in Billings on and off for twenty-five years, it was never quite able to become established. The mission was multiethnic and mostly filled with young married couples with children. They were hungry for the Faith and dedicated to making the mission succeed. During our flight back home, my wife and I decided to take the assignment. It was a risk, but one that had a profound effect on my life from that point forward.

I was given a seemingly simple charge: make the mission work. We had two years left on the grant, but there was no guarantee of income after that. It was a matter of grow or die which is not exactly the best evangelistic strategy. I needed a crash course on evangelism only to discover that one did not really exist in the Orthodox Church. There were some passages from the Church Fathers and some scattered writings by theologians but nothing that explained the mechanics or even the definition for that matter. The best advice came from experienced clergy who had similar experience establishing a parish but it was mostly "learn by doing". There began my journey to discover the Orthodox theology of evangelism--not from a burning desire for knowledge, but rather a matter of survival.

Father Alexander Schmemmann, a prominent 20<sup>th</sup> Century Orthodox theologian, posed the question which I needed to answer, "Can a Church whose life is centered almost exclusively on the liturgy and the sacraments, whose spirituality is primarily mystical and ascetical, be truly missionary?"<sup>2</sup> Would the Orthodox Church be viable in rugged, individualistic Montana, or for that matter anywhere in the United States, or we were just too different. Would we remain a small, exclusive, exotic (if not downright bizarre)

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *Church, World, Mission* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 210.

expression of Christianity? Or were we to be the expression of Church that can really and truly connect with this world and provide for the needs of the community?

As I examined the question, I kept coming back to some basic Orthodox theological principles which were ingrained into me throughout my life and particularly at Seminary. St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary is world-renown for being the leader in the liturgical revival movement in the Orthodox Church. It is the home to some of the most influential modern theologians in the Orthodox Church: Fr. Georges Florvosky, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, Fr. John Meyendorff, and Fr. Thomas Hopko. Their basic theological principles focused on the Liturgy, the Church and the particular Orthodox ethos that formed the foundation. They taught that the Liturgy was the central focal point in which Orthodox Christians live out their Faith in a community but that also that the Liturgy was the truly transforming and missionary event in parish life. It was not just a matter of what the Church taught but how a community lived its sacramental life that was truly missionary. Fr. Schmemmann reflected,

Nothing reveals better the relation between the Church as fullness and the Church as mission than the Eucharist, the central act of the Church's *leitourgia*, the sacrament of the Church itself. There are two complimentary movements in the Eucharistic rite: *the movement of ascension* and *the movement of return*. The Eucharist begins as an ascension toward the throne of God, toward the Kingdom. 'Let us now lay aside all earthly cares,' says the offertory hymn, and we prepare ourselves to ascend into heaven with Christ and in Christ, and offer in Him – His Eucharist. This first movement, which finds its fulfillment in the consecration of the elements, the sign of acceptance by God of our Eucharist, is to be sure, already an act of mission....And then precisely at the moment when this state of fullness has been reached and consummated at the table of the Lord in His Kingdom, when 'we have seen the true light and partaken of the heavenly Spirit.' The second movement begins – that of *return into the world*. 'Let us depart in peace,' says the celebrant as he leaves the altar and leads the congregation outside the temple – and this is the last, the ultimate commandment. The Eucharist is always the End, the sacrament of the *parousia*, and yet it is always the *beginning*, the *starting point*: now mission begins.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Schmemmann, *Church*, 215.

So as such evangelism (mission) begins with the central element in the Orthodox Church, the Liturgy, and by extension then to the Eucharistic community. It is through that Eucharistic community that individuals are brought into the fullness of the Faith as the Body of Christ. The common understanding of evangelism as working with individuals to lead them into the Faith and presenting the teachings of the Faith in a systematic and coherent manner is the common paradigm (the commonly used phrase "teaching and preaching" is brought to mind), is only part of the equation. It is not enough to merely lead an individual into an understanding of God, Faith and the Church without integrating that person into the Eucharistic (worshipping) community. In biblical and patristic parlance this understanding of the Eucharistic community is revealed as *koinonia*. The Liturgy and the community intersects precisely at that point (communion and community), *koinonia*, but *koinonia* as properly understood not in weakly translated connotation of fellowship but rather strongly connected with Eucharistic community.

Acts 2:42-47 illustrates *koinonia* in its fullness and in its relation to building a community, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the communion (*koinonia*), to the breaking of bread and to prayer...All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need...They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people." Without this *koinonia*, a community is just a group of individuals with the same beliefs, perhaps no different than a local club. However, when in a Eucharistic fellowship this gathering of individuals becomes the Body of Christ. Even into the modern times, the understanding of the centrality of the worshipping community as *koinonia* remains foundational. "Our personal Christian experience", writes Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos) one the greatest modern Orthodox missionaries, "is made steadfast and strengthened through our *incorporation in the mystical Body of Christ* [emphasis added]."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Mission in Christ's Way: An Orthodox Understanding of Mission* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Press, 2010), 113.

It is also sadly typical that this understanding of the centrality of *koinonia* is often lacking in many Orthodox parishes. By viewing themselves as a collection of individuals of the same Faith and not as members of the Body of Christ, each with their own purpose and function actuated and actualized in the Eucharist, these parishes lack the foundation upon which to build. Evangelism in the parish needs to focus on incorporating the person into the local community which is the Body of Christ, which is centralized around the corporate and liturgical life of the community. As Fr. Ion Bria, wrote, “Prayer, worship and communion have always formed the context for the witness of faith, including evangelism, mission and church life. The missionary structures were built on the liturgy of the word and the sacraments; and since the beginning the great variety of liturgies and rites, creeds and confessions has been due to the diversity of missionary contexts.”<sup>5</sup>

Archbishop Anastasios expounded on this same theme,

Orthodox mission – internal or external – is by nature ‘ecclesiastical.’ It cannot be understood as an individual or a group activity, disconnected from the Body of Christ. For those who work for it; it is the Church that they serve, the Church that they represent; it is the life of the Church that they transplant. No one is saved alone; no one offers Christ’s salvation alone. One is saved within the Church, one acts within the Church, and what one lives and offers to others is done in the name of the Church...mission is the extension of the of the love of the Trinitarian God, for the transformation in love of the whole world.<sup>6</sup>

### **Some Issues in Exploring this Topic**

My early experience of unearthing and exploring evangelism exposed some of the major issues in understanding it from an Orthodox perspective particularly when trying to apply such theology in a parish context. Certainly the Orthodox Church is replete with deep and unchanging theology. In fact, the depth and breadth of the theology can be so overwhelming that it makes approaches to such practical questions difficult. How many times would one approach a very specific question and be confronted with an array of material from the Gospels to the Church Fathers to the Holy Tradition of the Orthodox

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<sup>5</sup> Ion Bria, *The Liturgy After the Liturgy: Mission and Witness from an Orthodox Perspective* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Anastasios, *Mission*, 220-221.

Church. Lost among all the incredible material, fascinating and enlightening as they are, was the practical answer to that question of evangelism.

In conjunction with the search for the practical is an agreement on the specific definition of such critical terms as evangelism, evangelization, mission, proselytism and the Church. There are many views as to what it is, often derived from non-Orthodox sources and applied in a well-meaning if overly general way. This may serve for a common factor in discussions with the non-Orthodox but misses the mark among the Orthodox because there are few direct sources that define it outright. . As the author David Bosch reflects, "It remains difficult, however, to determine precisely what authors mean by evangelism or evangelization. Barrett (1987:42-45) list seventy-nine definitions, to which many more could be added."<sup>7</sup> There is also not an uncommon phenomenon in Orthodoxy's recent reencounter with the Christian West, where definitions of various theological nomenclature are agreed upon simply to ensure a common terminology, only to discover that the words might be similar but have vastly different meanings in the Orthodox tradition.<sup>8</sup>

This is also not an uncommon phenomenon in Orthodoxy's recent reencounter with the Christian West, where definitions of various theological nomenclature are agreed upon simply to ensure a common terminology only to discover that the words might be similar but have vastly different meanings in the Orthodox tradition. How the Orthodox may define "Church" for example, may be vastly different than how a non-Orthodox may define it. And this eventually leads to an impasse as discussions proceed.

The next challenge builds upon a lack of an agreed and defined understanding of the term "evangelism." And if the Orthodox cannot agree on the term than how can they agree on the theology? Since so little was explicitly written on that subject from an Orthodox perspective and thus ignored, at times, by current discussions on evangelism. The great

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<sup>7</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 409.

<sup>8</sup> See Schmemmann, *Church*, 201 for a commentary on such an issue.

theological discussions on mission and evangelism that has occurred over the past century by the West had bypassed the Orthodox Church due to this separation. Thus, it was no surprise that the West overlooked the Orthodox in these discussions because it had little engagement with the Orthodox missions and theology except in a combative mode. “Until quite recently the Eastern Orthodox Church was regarded in the West as a *non missionary* church. It was an opinion commonly held that the great missionary movement which marked so deeply the Christian West during the last centuries somehow by-passed the ‘static’ Christianity of the East. In fact, the Orthodox Church was *hyper missionary*.”<sup>9</sup> The Orthodox Church was “hyper missionary” albeit in a very different mode, method, circumstances and regions. But most significantly the Orthodox mission theology, despite whatever theological developments or historical or cultural circumstances “is thoroughly *church-centered*.”<sup>10</sup>

Fr. Thomas Hopko reflected on this very issue "The Church is not simply an institution though it has institutional elements. It is not simply a vague invisible community but rather a real and distinct community where the gospels and sacraments are rightly practiced (hence the term “Orthodox” or right praise or belief). The church is real and present." Fr Hopko continues,

The Church, as Fr. Alexander Schmemmann has said, is not an organization with a gospel; it is a gospel with organizations; it is not an institution with mysteries; it is mystery with institutions..It is about what the churches of Christ, Christ’s one holy Church, believe, teach, pray and do. <sup>11</sup>

### **Some Assumptions**

There is a personal assumption that the Orthodox Church has a history of evangelism and mission. It is a long history which begins at Pentecost and comes in an unbroken line until today. As such there must be internal developments of mission and evangelism

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<sup>9</sup> Schmemmann, *Church*, 209.

<sup>10</sup> Yannoulatos, *Mission*, 81.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hopko, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Education, Mission and Witness in Contemporary Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 2004), 139.

awaiting discovery and application to contemporary times and circumstances. Even discussions of evangelism in the 9th Century with Ss. Cyril and Methodius had established certain paradigms, namely the use of local language, local leaders and establishing a local church. In North America in particular, there is a history of Orthodox evangelization ever since St. Herman and the other missionaries arrived in Alaska in 1794 resulting in the conversion of many of the native population. Fr. Michael Oleksa observed,

Historically mission, has, by definition, meant preaching the Gospel message, baptizing those who convert and request baptism, and receiving them into the communion (the sacramental and liturgical fellowship) of the church through holy Chrismation and the Eucharist. This has been the paradigm followed since apostolic times. Historically, mission has meant the extension and expansion of the church as a visible, Eucharistic society into a geographic region and among a theretofore unbaptized people, the construction of church buildings, and education and ordination of local clergy, and the church increasingly becoming the social, moral, spiritual, and artistic centre of national life.<sup>12</sup>

It was recognized that even at the earliest times in the history of Orthodoxy in North America, the missionaries and Church fathers were drawing upon something both ancient and tested based around the concept of *koinonia*.

Reading through the history of the Church and examining the 2,000 year history of her expansion from the Middle East, into the Balkans and Eastern Europe, and into North America, it was clearly demonstrated that the Church was active, missionary and had a methodology and a theology. Likewise, in reading the lives of the great missionary saints of the Church also proved that there was a missionary impetus. But it was also clear that their methods and goals were quite different than other Western missionary experiences, often dramatically different. David Bosch, a 20th Century Western mission theologian wrote on Orthodox mission, “In the Orthodox perspective mission is thus centripetal rather than centrifugal, organic rather than organized. It ‘proclaims’ the Gospel through

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Oleksa, “The Orthodox Church and Orthodox Christian Mission from an Alaskan perspective” *International Review of Mission* 90, no. 358 (January 2001), 281.



doxology and liturgy. The witnessing community is the community in worship; in fact, the worshipping community is in and of itself and act of witness.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Presented Thesis**

While evangelism in the parish can be affected by a host of external factors such as the demographics, location and economics of a particular region, there are some universal principles which can be uncovered. As Fr. Schmemmann wrote, "The Church thus is not a 'self-centered' community but precisely a missionary community, whose purpose is salvation not from, but of, the world. In the Orthodox experience and faith it is the Church-sacrament that makes possible the Church-mission."<sup>14</sup>

After a thorough examination of a variety of material and sources, a reflection on the history and theology of the Orthodox Church, specifically in the context of the North America, and the study of a variety of non-Orthodox sources, I have developed a clear definition and understanding of the practice of Orthodox evangelism. It is the thesis of this paper that evangelism may involve individual actions, but it is a communal (*koinonic*) activity. Evangelism must integrate the liturgical with the practical and can only be successful if the Church is at the center of parish life and Only a properly functioning and worshipping liturgical community – the *koinonia*—can actuate the many dimensions and ministries of evangelism. Healthy, local, worshipping parishes live evangelism because it is simply what they do as a Christian community. In turn, people are attracted to that local parish experience precisely because it is the place that they discover and worship Christ, while the parishioners must be open to receive and integrate them into the Body of Christ.

The most basic of terms for this paper is perhaps the most complicated. . Bosch wrote, "evangelism cannot be defined in terms of its results or effectiveness, as though evangelism has only occurred where there are 'converts'. Rather, evangelism should be

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<sup>13</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 207-208.

<sup>14</sup> Schmemmann, *Church*, 213-215.

perceived in terms of its nature, as mediating the good news of God's love in Christ which transforms life, proclaiming, by word and action, that Christ has set us free."<sup>15</sup> So while it may be difficult to define effectiveness of evangelism in a qualitative terms (parish growth, number of baptisms, number of 'converts', etc.), it is understood much more clearly as how a community witnesses to its life in Christ.

The root term is used sparingly in the Bible (some 55 times and found mostly in Acts) and almost not at all in the patristic sources. While the Bible refers to the *euaggelion* or "Good News" as the message of Jesus Christ, the verbal form *euaggelizesthai* is rarely used and usually only in terms of the bringing of the Gospel message, although even that usage is open to debate. Other connotative terms are used in the New Testament such as *martyria* meaning "witness" and *kerruso* meaning "to proclaim or herald". These terms are also not used often but do assist in understanding the concept of evangelism as an active proclamation. The term *martyria* has an important Orthodox connotation relating to a category of saints. However, by most definitions, evangelism is the "proclaiming the good news" and this act of proclaiming is at the heart of any understanding of evangelism.<sup>16</sup> This definition is shared by some Western theologians, "At the center of the act of evangelism is the message announced a verbal, out-loud assertion of something decisive not known until the moment of utterance."<sup>17</sup> In the Christian context, this has come to mean the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Risen Lord, a view which is shared by some Orthodox theologians, "This good news is that God has spoken and acted fully, finally, and definitively in His Son Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Word. The blessed message is that by his crucifixion, resurrection, and glorification Jesus the Messiah has brought God's kingdom to the world."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bosch, *Transforming*, 412-413.

<sup>16</sup> The Greek word [εὐαγγέλιον](#) is translated as εὖ which means "good" and ἀγγέλλω which means to announce so the full definition is one who announce something good.

<sup>17</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspective on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storyed Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 14.

<sup>18</sup> Hopko, *Speaking*, 80.

However, despite this common foundational definition, its application becomes more polemical. In practice, evangelism is interpreted according to the particular theologies that underpin the various denominations. Even a cursory reading of anthologies such as *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church* highlights the massive number of publications on evangelism from non-Orthodox sources, each filled with its own nuanced definitions and applications across a wide spectrum of theologies.<sup>19</sup> Such a diversity of opinion runs the gamut from traditional Protestant missional practices through hermeneutics through emerging issues of postmodernism, liberation theology and feminism. Such a diversity of opinions implies that there is not a unified theology in the entire field of evangelism. Given its long history of isolation and separation from Western theology, it is easy for Orthodox Christians to become quickly overwhelmed and wonder if it is even possible to apply any of these theologies.

David Bosch tackled the problem of multiple definitions and connotations of evangelism by outlining a series of eighteen parameters of understanding.<sup>20</sup> While these points cover

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<sup>19</sup> Paul W. Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner, *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Bosch, *Transforming*, 411-420. The eighteen principles are as follows:

1. Mission is wider than evangelism.
2. Evangelism should therefore not be equated with mission.
3. Evangelism may be viewed as an essential dimension of the total activity of the church.
4. Evangelism involves witnessing to what God has done, is doing and will do.
5. Evangelism aims at a response.
6. Evangelism is always an invitation.
7. The one who evangelizes does not judge.
8. Though modest about the character and effectiveness of witness, evangelism remains an indispensable ministry.
9. Evangelism is only possible when the community that evangelizes is a radiant manifestation of the Christian faith and exhibits an attractive lifestyle.
10. Evangelism offers people salvation.
11. Evangelism is not proselytism.
12. Evangelism is not the same as church extension.
13. To distinguish between evangelism and membership recruitment is not to suggest they are disconnected.
14. Only people can be addressed and only people can respond.
15. Authentic evangelism is always contextual.
16. Evangelism cannot be divorced from the preaching and practicing of justice.
17. Evangelism is not a mechanism to hasten the return of Christ.
18. evangelism is not only a verbal proclamation.

These eighteen points will be used throughout the dissertation in evaluating and analyzing the *koinonic* evangelism in the three parishes.

a wide spectrum and are certainly reflective of his particular analysis, they are quite applicable to the question of defining *koinonic* evangelism. For example, in point nine Bosch explicitly states, "Evangelism is only possible when the community that evangelizes - the church - is a radiant manifestation of the Christian faith and exhibits an attractive lifestyle."<sup>21</sup> In other words, the communal aspect of evangelism is a critical factor in drawing people into a relationship with Christ. This relationship also presupposes a growing relationship in a witnessing and worshipping community.

However, as Bosch quickly points out in point twelve, "Evangelism is not the same as church extension."<sup>22</sup> He refers to a number of historical examples in which evangelism was equated precisely with winning people over to a particular church or denomination. It was about gaining members and growing churches. However, he correctly ascertains that this is false evangelism "since reasons why people joining the church may vary greatly and may often have little to do with a commitment to what a church is supposed to stand for."<sup>23</sup> He reflects that this a common mistake when churches are experiencing declining membership and resigns itself to such a definition. However, in point thirteen he does state that growing parishes and membership is an organic byproduct of when a church is true to its calling.<sup>24</sup>

According to Bosch, the authentic evangelism, if not a true definition, relies heavily on a witness, a response, a reorientation, an embracement of Christ as Savior and Lord, and ultimately becoming a "living member of his community, the church" and then living such a life that looks for peace, reconciliation and justice.<sup>25</sup> As Bosch narrowly defines evangelism as (a) activities involved in spreading the Gospel, or (b) theological reflection on these activities. Evangelization is narrowly defined as (a) the process of spreading the

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<sup>21</sup> Bosch, *Transforming*, 414.

<sup>22</sup> Bosch, *Transforming*, 415.

<sup>23</sup> Bosch, *Transforming*, 415.

<sup>24</sup> Bosch, *Transforming*, 416.

<sup>25</sup> Bosch, *Transforming*, 420.

Gospel, or (b) the extent to which it has been spread.<sup>26</sup> If these elements are considered foundational in establishing a working definition, then it allows for a much more focused approach to the research and the analysis.

This explanation rather elegantly falls in line with modern Orthodox explanations on evangelism. Fr. Bria perceptively wrote, "The Orthodox understanding of the ecclesial character of evangelism means that the Church is the aim, the fulfillment of the Gospel, rather than an instrument or means of mission. Of course, a church without evangelism and without mission is one that has abandoned its fundamental calling to be the original and authentic witness of Pentecost. The Christian community is the community of the Gospel, the sacramental synaxis where Christ mediates the communion of man with God through the Holy Spirit."<sup>27</sup> This focuses evangelism with a goal of both a calling to and an integration into the Church, the Body of Christ, which is manifested concretely and tangibly by a witness and response, an entrance into and a participation in the sacramental life of the Church.

I propose a working definition of evangelism for the purpose of this dissertation is *the witness in living out of the proclamation of the Good News of the Risen Christ with an invitation to become a part of the local Orthodox Body of Christ through participation in the Sacramental and Liturgical life*. This definition fits with evangelistically effective Orthodox congregations, but is also applicable to churches of other traditions which demonstrate similar strengths. This definition integrates a number of key points that Bosch uses in his parameters in defining evangelism such as the centrality of witness, the need for a proclamation of the Good News, the focus on the Risen Christ, an invitation, a response and involving a local community. Specifically in referencing the contextual nature of evangelism (point fifteen), the definition does reference the Orthodox focus as it is the prevailing worldview for those within the church. Finally, it integrates Bosch's eighteenth point which relates that evangelism is more than just a verbal proclamation; it involves activities and actions. As Bosch relates, "The deed without words is dumb; the

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<sup>26</sup> Bosch, *Transforming*, 409.

<sup>27</sup> Ion Bria, "The Church's Role in Evangelism: Icon or Platform?," *International Review of Mission* 64, no. 255 (July 1975): 245.

word with deed is empty."<sup>28</sup> This is realized partially through the sacramental and liturgical life within the Church but also in the activities that is promulgated in the local surrounding community . Evangelism reaches in and out of the *koinonia*

If evangelism is an invitation to become a believer, then the invitation must extend to become members of a community. Membership in that community begins with baptism (a response to that invitation) and is fulfilled in being in sacramental communion with the Church. In the Orthodox Church this would be manifested locally in the Orthodox parish. This is the place where believers encounter Christ in His fullness while they gather as the sacramental Body of Christ and are nourished with His Body and Blood. For an Orthodox Christian, this enculturation into the Body of Christ is to be received as a full participant into a local Eucharistic community which in turn puts them in communion with the Orthodox Church. As such the communal liturgical experience becomes the center of one's life as Orthodoxy believes that "worship is the center of the life of the Church, but it should also determine the whole life of every Christian."<sup>29</sup> By focusing their spiritual life through the participation in a cycle of services, an Orthodox Christian becomes part of that Body of Christ. It goes beyond a simple gathering of people as a community, but rather it is through the active involvement in that life as a parish that differentiates a simple community of people from the Body of Christ. Plainly stated, the context of evangelism in the Orthodox Church is to integrate a person into the Body of Christ through the diverse ways that parish manifests itself. As has been pointed out, "Prayer, worship and communion have always formed the context for the witness of faith, including evangelism, mission and church life."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the goal of evangelism is not personal conversion to an individual and privatized faith but rather to be a member of a worshipping community.

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<sup>28</sup> Bosch, *Transforming*, 420.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Fueter, "Confessing Christ Through Liturgy" *International Review of Mission* 65, no. 257 (1976): 125.

<sup>30</sup> Bria, *Liturgy*, 9.

Orthodox theologians stress that the communal, worshipping experience The working definition fits with evangelistically effective Orthodox congregations, but is also applicable to churches of other traditions which demonstrate similar strengths.

The Eucharistic community where the love of Christ prevails...has been a central way by which Orthodox missionaries have taught the gospel to the nations. From the moment our Lord established the Holy Eucharist in the upper room, promising eternal life to those who would commune his body and blood. Christians have celebrated this divine service in their gatherings. Thus Christian life has been a process of living in love...under God the Father, with Christ's teachings, and by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>31</sup>

This illuminates the concept that the goal of evangelism is to lead people into a sacramental relationship with God in the local liturgical community. It is not meant to simply preach the "Good News", critical as that is, nor is it meant simply to serve others, again critical as that is in the Christian life. It is meant to bring people into a *koinonia* with each other through the sacramental *koinonia* of the Eucharist. This, in turn, leads to the ultimate *koinonia*, a communion with God. This is both highly personal and yet very corporate. It means being a part of a Church in a local parish, living the life of Christian growth and love. It means being part of the Body of Christ, the *koinonia* of the Church. Again as Archbishop Anastasios relates, "Our personal Christian experience is made steadfast and strengthened through our *incorporation in the mystical Body of Christ*."<sup>32</sup> Evangelism is that map for incorporating people, in fact all creation, into the mystical Body of Christ.

For an Orthodox Christian, this enculturation into the Body of Christ is to be received as a full participant into a local Eucharistic community. By being a full participant in a local Eucharistic community means to be in communion with the Orthodox Church. As such the communal liturgical experience becomes the center of one's life. "Worship is the center of the life of the Church, but it should also determine the whole life of every

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<sup>31</sup> Alexander Veronis, "The Task of the Church to Evangelize the World," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 42 no. 3-4 (1997): 441.

<sup>32</sup> Yannoulatos, *Mission*, 113.

Christian.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the goal is not necessarily an individual act of conversion but rather conversion with integration into a worshipping community.

What I found in investigating the evangelical life of parishes is that evangelism is not necessarily a formal program nor is it something that can be fully planned. Instead, it is how the parish lives and what it does which forms the heart of evangelism. It is the totality of the life of a Christian in the Body of Christ. As one Orthodox theologian proclaimed,

Evangelism in action involves a number of activities. It sows the seeds of faith by proclaiming the good news of salvation and it invites the world to conversion by engaging people with the truths and values of the Gospel. In addition, it seeks to build-up daily the faith community by nourishing the faith of Christians, explaining to them - and celebrating - the dogmatic statements, the moral principles, the liturgical ethos, and the canonical tradition of the Church. Moreover, evangelism in action relates human life and activities to the mystery of Christ and his Church, elucidating for the faithful and for the world how the Church lives her life of faith by fostering a ministry of generous service to the world.<sup>34</sup>

John Bowen, an Anglican writer on evangelism correctly ascertained this matter, "No crusades. Not a lot of preaching. No door-to-door visitation. Certainly no aggressive confrontations. Just convinced people doing their thing. Personal stories of the non-preachy variety. People who integrated their faith and their work, people who practiced what they believed."<sup>35</sup>

It is for this reason that the title of this paper refers to the term "*koinonic*" because it is that communal experience which is the goal in evangelism. Fellowship, particularly as *koinonia* as properly understood, is essential.<sup>36</sup> The goal of evangelism in the Orthodox

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Fueter, "Confessing Christ Through Liturgy" *International Review of Mission* 65, no. 257 (1976): 125.

<sup>34</sup> Alkiviadis Calivas, "Approaching the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Challenges and Opportunities for Evangelism" *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 42, no. 3-4 (Fall 1997), 446.

<sup>35</sup> John Bowen, *Evangelism for "Normal" People* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 22.

<sup>36</sup> *Koinonia* comes from the Greek word *koine* which means "common" which implies a common vision and activity. However, in the Orthodox Church it has a deeper meaning in that it implies a relationship that develops from the act of being together; a communion of believers. It is used to denote the Eucharistic act



perspective is to lead people into a sacramental relationship with God in local liturgical community. The concept of *koinonia* is critical in the reality of daily Church life, not just on the central and national level, but rather diocesan and parish level. This is the *anknupfungspunkt* or “connecting point” between God’s work and the people seeking to be a member of the Body of Christ.<sup>37</sup> The parish as a *koinonic* experience was the entry point to Christ and His Church. It is also clear that sometimes adherence to the ritual, the language, and customs or financial concerns have caused the parish to lose the emphasis on the *koinonic*. When this happens, parish life suffers and the community breaks down. In order to regain what was lost, the focus must return to the basic component of *koinonic* evangelism, the parish.

As stated above, most parish leaders misunderstand the main *anknupfungspunkt*, which causes parishioners to drift from the Church to seek a different communal relationship in this post-modern society. The Roman Catholic missionary Fr. Vincent J. Donovan wrote in his landmark book *Christianity Rediscovered*, “We used to translate the word *koinonia* in this phrase as communion. Hence, our expression ‘holy communion’, and our lack of wonder at any deep mystery in the phrase or thought. But the word, *koinonia*, is the same word used in the Acts of the Apostles to describe the initial response to the good news, to describe the church community itself. ‘And the churches grew in numbers daily. And they continued in the teaching of the apostles, in the life of the *koinonia*, in the breaking of the bread, in the following of the Way.’”<sup>38</sup> Thus, being a Christian literally involved communing together with fellow believers with the Body and Blood of Christ. The Body of Christ as the Church receives the Body of Christ as the Eucharist. Likewise the Body of Christ as the Eucharist forms the Body of Christ as the Church. “Therefore, the Orthodox Church’s sense of mission is that it is not aimed only at the transmission of

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of communion by a body of believers which is the central activity of the Orthodox Church. The term “koinonic” is generally not used but here it defined as the active gathering of Orthodox Christians in Eucharistic fellowship. Sergius Bulgakov in his book *The Bride of Lamb* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002) uses the term” koinonic” (pp 285-287) and is one of the few references that can be found in Orthodox theology.

<sup>37</sup> For more on this concept of *anknupfungspunkt* and evangelism, see Bowan, *Evangelism*, Chapter 8.

<sup>38</sup> Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 93.

intellectual convictions or moral values, but also at the transmission of the experience of life in communion, the communion which exists in God.”<sup>39</sup> This is realized through the very central act of the Orthodox Church, communing together around the Eucharistic table. This is *koinonic* evangelism.

This connection becomes more understandable in light of the Orthodox approach to communal life centered on the most basic ecclesial unit, the parish. While the situation in North America may be unique in the greater Orthodox world, the foundational concept of the parish itself is ubiquitous as the focal point of all local activity of Orthodox Christians. This is more than just a place for worship, it is the place where parishioners build a community. As Fr. Hopko wrote, “An Orthodox parish, that is, a local community of Orthodox Christians with one or more priests, has only one God-given reason for being. It exists to be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of Christ. Whatever the original reasons and conditions for its founding, whatever other services and activities it may provide, whatever other desires and needs it may fulfill for its members, the parish must be Christ’s one holy Church. If it is not, then it is neither Christian nor Orthodox whatever else it may be or do.”<sup>40</sup> So despite age and distance, a truly living Orthodox parish converges around the same basic principles. These same principles also lay at the heart of *koinonic* evangelism: to be a part of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. As Fr. John Meyendorff wrote, “Whenever our parishes - these cells of the Church - really shine with the virtues, the dynamism, the faith of true Christianity, they also perform the mission. This mission - because it is the mission of the Church, and not of an individual, or of a human agency - can take many forms and be performed by a variety of ministries, all equally legitimate.”<sup>41</sup>

This concept is especially critical in light of both the fractured history of the Orthodox Church in America. The true focus of evangelism is not solely between individuals, but

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<sup>39</sup> Ioann, Abp of Belgorod and Stariy Oskol; Vorobyeva, Olga (Translator), “Ecclesiological and Canonical Foundations of Orthodox Mission” *International Review of Mission* 90, no. 358 (2001), 271.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Hopko, “The Orthodox Parish in North America” from *Speaking the Truth in Love* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2004), 86.

<sup>41</sup> John Meyendorff, “Many Ministries, One Mission” from *Witness to the World* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1987), 180.

rather is on the community activity that draws those individuals into communion. Therefore community activity in the Orthodox Church cannot ever be separated from the local worshiping, liturgical, sacramental church. As Fr Hopko details, “A parish must be *the* Church of Christ and not simply *a* church, because, according to the Orthodox faith, every local community actually is the one Church of Christ.”<sup>42</sup> And it is into this Body of Christ is what the goal of evangelism is to be; integrating people into and becoming the Body of Christ. “Thus every local Christian community, every ‘parish,’ theologically, mystically, and sacramentally, is to be ‘Christ’s Body, the fullness of him who fills all in all’ [Eph 1:23]. It is to be ‘the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth’ [1 Tim 3:15]. Everything in the parish is to participate in God’s fullness and wholeness. Everything is to express it. Everything is to testify to it.”<sup>43</sup>

In examining parishes, it is evident that this embrace of community is precisely why some are effective as parishes and why they are effective in evangelism. They are an expression of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. They define and center their existence and activity on being the local manifestation of Orthodoxy, which is reflected in how they treat one other and interact with the wider community. By focusing their attentions on even the smallest details, these parishes strive to be the Body of Christ. In the end, this is the common denominator among all. As Fr Hopko further elaborated, “Obviously a parish will be particular and limited in empirical, cultural, and sociological forms; it has to be, since it is made up of human beings. But all of a parish’s particular aspects, with all of its teachings, services, and activities, if they are Orthodox and Christian, will be open to the boundless fullness of God and will thereby be inclusive of everyone and everything that is good and holy and true, to the measure that this is possible given the actual people who comprise the community.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Hopko, *Truth*, 86.

<sup>43</sup> Hopko, *Truth*, 87.

<sup>44</sup> Hopko, *Truth*, 87.

## Some Common Koinonic Elements

*I ask for assistance and cooperation not only from the pastors, but also from my entire beloved flock. The Church of Christ is likened by the Holy Apostle Paul to a body, while a body has not one member, but many (1 Cor 12:14). These have not one and the same function (Rom 12:4), but each its own: the eye its own, and the arm its own. Each member is necessary and cannot be without the other, they all have concerns for each other, and there is no division in the body (1 Cor 12:25-26). So you also, my brethren, are the body of Christ, and members in particular (v. 27). And unto every one of you is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ (Eph 4:7), unto the perfecting of the saints, for a work of ministration, for the building up of the body of Christ (v. 12). And for this purpose continue with true love to grow into Him Whom belongs the whole body, which is built up of and joined through the supply of every joint, according to the working in the measure of each single part, receiving increase for the building up of itself in love (v. 15-16).*

Saint Tikhon of Moscow's First Sermon to his North American Flock  
Given in San Francisco on December 23, 1898.<sup>45</sup>

I began this paper with a story about my first parish and how that experience ignited my study of evangelism. It was a transformative event in my ministry. A number of years later I had a providential encounter in another parish. The parish was playing a softball game against another church, a sort of ecumenically friendly game. By chance, one of the other players got hit by a ball and my wife, being a nurse, ran onto the field to assist her. She was taken to the hospital where our parish sent her flowers. She and her husband asked to meet me and we had a wonderful talk. It seems that they were not happy with their current church and were much taken by our kindness. Our meeting became a weekly event and we began discussing many aspects of the Christian Faith. Soon thereafter, she had a difficult pregnancy which confined her to bedrest for the last trimester. During that time, I catechized her and her husband. A year after that initial meeting, she and her family were received into the Orthodox Church. I asked her what had prompted their journey to the Orthodox Church and she stated, "It was the Christian love that was shown us, the joy of being a part of loving community and the desire to be sacramental part of the Church."

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<sup>45</sup> Tikhon Bellavin, "My People and My Beloved" as translated in *Alive in Christ*, Vol. XIII, No. 3 (Winter 1997): 36-37 and first published in Russian in *The American Orthodox Herald*, No. 2 (1899), 50-51.

It is precisely that witness that is so critical in evangelism. It is not a strategy or a methodology *per se* but rather the activity of Christian witness which demonstrates both the truth and the power of Christianity. In *koinonic* evangelism, that witness of Christ is powerfully demonstrated, and, more importantly, lived out. Fr. Bria writes, "The Orthodox realize that the transmission of the faith cannot be taken for granted as an automatic consequence of an uninterrupted historical apostolic succession. Both militant atheism and secularism have pointed to the breaking of the tradition. They also understand that without a personal confession of faith there is no living church. Faith is always personal and relational. There is no baptism, no liturgy no evangelism, no Eucharistic communion unless the faithful personally repeat the baptismal confession of faith: 'I believe.'"<sup>46</sup> Therefore, with this "Holy" witness must also be personal belief, since one cannot truly live a Christian life unless one truly believes in Christ. That belief comes through and that witness will inspire others to come to Christ. This is the personal facet of evangelism.

However, as the initial thesis postulated, evangelism may involve personal actions, but it is a communal activity. This activity takes on many forms, but is most powerfully realized in the worshipping parish community. Without this community, the context of evangelism which draws people to worship is lost. Likewise without this community, the goal of evangelism, which is the integration into the Body of Christ, is also lost. Fr. John Reeves, a long time leader in evangelism in the Orthodox Church in America, observes, "Thus the life of one truly evangelized is life lived in communion with God, walking in obedience in his commandments all the days of one's life. For the Orthodox Christian, evangelism is one by nature not of quick and easy decisions, devoid of moral change, nor one which allows avoidance of life in the Christian community or obedience to spiritual authority. In very fact, the life in Christ which is the goal of evangelism can only be lived out in the Church, Christ's own body."<sup>47</sup> *Koinonic* parishes demonstrate this very fact time and again. They do not live out their Christian faith in a void, as "Neither do men light a lamp, and put it under a bushel, but on a lamp stand; and it gives light unto all that

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<sup>46</sup> Bria, *Liturgy*, 48.

<sup>47</sup> John Reeves, "The Nature of Evangelism" *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 42, no. 3-4 (1997), 472.

are in the house" (Matt 5:15). Instead they live "to bear witness to the truth." (John 18:37). Fr. Bria is absolutely correct when he writes, "As a place of gathering for praying and sharing the body and blood of Christ, every local parish is also a point of departure into the world to share the joy of resurrection. The worshipping community is prepared and sent as an evangelizing community."<sup>48</sup>

This approach requires a paradigm shift in evangelism among parishes in the Orthodox Church. Although, as translated and applied, the Great Commission (Matthew 28) exhorts follower to preach the Gospel to all the end of the earth, perhaps the more powerful application is to be witness to the world "and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." (Acts 1:8). Archbishop Anastasios writes, "It is definitive that during the first centuries the Christians spoke about 'witness' (martyria) and 'martyrdom' (martyrion), which meant the testimony of an eye- and ear- witness, which was often made at the cost of life itself, with martyrdom. The most profound spiritual stirrings that kindle within the human being cannot be ignored."<sup>49</sup> Therefore, by necessity, the act of evangelism involves far more facets and communal action than has been previously taught and practiced. It requires nothing less than a whole communal activity facing a world of disbelief and disconnection. Fr. Calivas reflects

Evangelism in action involves a number of activities. It sows the seeds of faith by proclaiming the good news of salvation and it invites the world to conversion by engaging people with the truths and values of the Gospel. In addition, it seeks to build-up daily the faith community by nourishing the faith of Christians, explaining to them - and celebrating - the dogmatic statements, the moral principles, the liturgical ethos, and the canonical tradition of the Church. Moreover, evangelism in action relates human life and activities to the mystery of Christ and his Church, elucidating for the faithful and for the world how the Church lives her life of faith by fostering a ministry of generous service to the world.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Bria, *Liturgy*, 31.

<sup>49</sup> Yannaoultas, *Misson*, 230-231.

<sup>50</sup> Alkiviadis Calivas, "Approaching the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities for Evangelism", *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 42, no. 3-4 (1997), 446.

The guiding hypothesis of this paper is that evangelism may involve individual actions, but it is a communal (*koinonic*) activity. That is that evangelism can only be successful in a parish if the community is involved and it is centered on a life in the Church. Effective evangelism in the Orthodox Church is through a parish that is involved in the community and that it is centered on a life in the Church. It integrates the liturgical with the practical and involves many dimensions and ministries which can only be actuated through a properly functioning and worshipping liturgical community - the local parish. Healthy, local, worshipping parishes live out evangelism because it is simply what they do as a Christian community. This, in turn, attracts people to that local parish experience as the place to discover and worship Christ, while the parish is open to receive them into their midst and integrate them into the Body of Christ.

In conclusion, evangelism is about groups of people dedicated to the Orthodox Church, consciously choosing to be a part of the Church and living out a life in the Church. That is Christianity as meant to be, a life dedicated to a life in Christ; a communion of people seeking their salvation within a worshipping, liturgical community. It is through this *koinonia* that they discover Christ in such a powerful way that they simply desire to witness that to the world and to share that joy. This witness transforms them from a community to a church, from a parish to the Body of Christ. Fr. Schmemmann also wrote about *leitourgia* (liturgy or action) as "an action by which a group of people become something corporately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals - a whole greater than the sum of its parts."<sup>51</sup> In effect *koinonic* evangelism is just that, a whole becoming greater than the sum of its parts.

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<sup>51</sup> Schmemmann, *Life*, 25.