

RUSSIAN ORTHODOXY: AN EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVE

[Author's note: This article was drafted at the very end of the 1990s; its writer finished working in Russia in 2001 and (sadly) has not been able to spend too much time in this great country since. Consequently, comments which the article contains about aspects of the contemporary situation may no longer be accurate or appropriate.]

One of the major world challenges facing evangelicals in the coming years is to understand Orthodox Christianity. How are we to regard it? What questions should be on the agenda as we attempt to decide?

Certain things are obvious from the beginning.

First, that the correct approach is one of respect. At the very least, Russian Orthodoxy can claim to represent a community that has (sometimes at great cost) confessed Christ's name for a millennium; a community compared to which most Western denominational traditions look rather youthful.

Secondly, that in our response to Orthodoxy we should be cautious of assuming the indispensable nature of Western thought-forms. (One of the question marks over westerners' habit of encouraging Russian believers to leave their country for theological training abroad concerns the extent to which this will train them in an agenda shaped by the concerns of a dying liberal protestantism.) Meaningful discipling in the CIS today must speak to the patterns of indigenous thinking; whereas it is all too common for western materials and training to be shaped totally by Anglo-Saxon patterns.

The real difficulties arise, however, for those engaged in church-planting or parachurch groups who desire to become genuinely Russian and truly indigenous. What are we aiming to build? Obviously we cannot simply equate 'indigenous rather than western' with 'Orthodox rather than Protestant' (though people sometimes do). But what precisely are the problem areas to which we must be sensitive in establishing foundations for ministries that will remain totally biblical while becoming genuinely indigenous? And what are the issues as we seek to foster the future leaders who will one day inherit what we're building?

THE PRESENCE OF LIFE

As Russia opened to wider western contact around 1990, many evangelicals found themselves sensing a more frequent affinity with Orthodox than they were accustomed to with, for example, mainstream Roman Catholics.

And, for many foreign evangelicals, Orthodoxy contains very much that is attractive. Sometimes there are cultural factors underlying this. One senses a number of American ex-evangelicals (particularly from Jesus Movement or Campus Crusade backgrounds) turning to the seriousness and apparent age-long unity of Orthodoxy, in reaction against US evangelicalism's occasional tendency to hyperactive shallowness and divisiveness¹; yearning also (in a very American way?) for some depth of tradition. (Britishers are used to a similar fascination with Anglicanism in their American friends; particularly if it has anything to do with Oxford!) There were major missiological factors too, of course, in terms of the need to be sensitive to the forms Christian belief has taken in Russia in past centuries.

More generally, though, many evangelicals relate very positively to Orthodoxy's deep sense of awe and astonishment at the majesty of God.² It is an awareness that is profoundly right in itself, but that

¹ See, for example, Peter Gillquist, author of *Becoming Orthodox* (Brentwood, 1989), a former leader in Campus Crusade (cited appreciatively by Hal Lindsey in his preface to *The Liberation of Planet Earth*). Franky Schaeffer V (son of the better-known Francis Schaeffer), who had previously proclaimed forcefully his dislike of the 'mediocrity' of American evangelicalism, is another example.

² One senses the real strength of this side of the Russian tradition in some of the writing about the Trinity in Vladimir Lossky's stimulating *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (1957). Cf also the marvellous

also we must take very seriously when ministering in Russia. ('I want to feel like a grain of sand on the seashore', one woman said to a friend of mine in defining what, though evangelical, she felt was lacking there compared to Orthodoxy.) Further, mainstream evangelical writers such as John White clearly value books on prayer by Orthodox writers like Anthony Bloom. Encountering Orthodoxy's profoundly Trinitarian way of thinking (for example in Solovyev) has been educational for many of us.³ And we admire the unswerving Orthodox commitment to the creeds; what has surfaced in some ecumenical discussions (eg the World Council of Churches event at Canberra) is that Orthodox and evangelicals are at least united (as against liberal Protestants) in fighting for the beliefs embodied in the Nicene Creed, and in a theological attitude that takes very seriously the concepts of truth and error.⁴

Evangelicals who come from liturgically-minded mainline denominations and feel attracted by aspects of contemplative Catholic spirituality, yet are repelled by so much that goes with it that is unreformed, may sense something equally congenial in Orthodoxy⁵, yet (it may seem) without the apparent obstacle of papal authoritarianism. These have been chronicled elsewhere. But there are aspects of Orthodoxy that may appeal equally to the opposite or 'radical' end of the evangelical spectrum. This writer, coming originally from a 'Brethren' background, would report three areas as particularly 'convergent'.

First, there is the insistence on the priority of worship, and that all theology must be integral to and inseparable from worship of God, rather than becoming an arid intellectual game. 'Instead of assimilating the mystery to our mode of understanding', says Lossky, 'we should... look for profound change, an inner transformation of spirit, enabling us to experience it mystically. Far from being mutually opposed, theology and mysticism support and complete each other. One is impossible without the other... There is no theology without mysticism... Christian theology is always in the last resort a means: a unity of knowledge subserving an end which transcends all knowledge. This ultimate end is union with God.'⁶ (The content of that mysticism may be more problematic, as we shall see below.) Many 'radical evangelicals' - charismatics, pentecostals, 'Brethren', Baptists - would share the Orthodox discomfort at the sterile way in which much Western theology (both Catholic and Protestant) has developed; while warming towards Stamoolis' comment about 'the centrality of worship to the Orthodox experience of Christian truth. For the Orthodox, all theology is worship; all worship is theology.'⁷ (Indeed, there is something about this theme in Orthodoxy (for example in Meyendorff's definition of truth being above all not 'a concept which can be expressed adequately in

prayer from Simeon the New Theologian with which Florensky closes his essay on the Holy Spirit (accessible in English in Ultimate Questions, ed. Alexander Schmemmann (1977), pp.170-72); or Timothy Kallistos Ware, The Orthodox Way (1979), a great deal of which is likely to meet with a positive response in an evangelical reader. It should be borne in mind that Ware writes as an apologist to westerners, and perhaps minimizes features that westerners might find problematic; but he often has a comparable feel to C.S.Lewis in this volume. In contrast, his more well-known book The Orthodox Church (1964) feels more like a mainstream, non-evangelical Anglicanism, to this reader at least.

³ For an excellent example, see Ware's chapter in Reclaiming the Great Tradition, ed. James S Cutsinger (1997).

⁴ Cf James Stamoolis, Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today (1986), p.5, citing Alexander Schmemmann.

⁵ See, for example, Joyce Huggett, Listening to God (1986).

⁶ Lossky, pp.8-9.

⁷ Stamoolis, p.10. Ironically, it is precisely when the Orthodox apologist Khomiakov is attempting to assert the difference between Orthodox and Protestant - Protestant theology is, he says, based on rationalising processes, whereas Orthodoxy recognizes that 'only he who bears within himself the living Christ can approach His throne without being annihilated by the glory' and can have 'the right and power to contemplate the grandeur of heaven' (in Schmemmann, pp.51-53)) - that he may well sound highly congenial to Protestant evangelicals! Equally ironically, Lossky's account (op.cit.) of the series of deductions by which the finer points of Orthodox trinitarian theology were constructed feels perilously close (to this reader at any rate) to precisely that sense of rationalistic theological process that Khomiakov condemns.

words or developed rationally, but as God Himself - personally present and met in the Church⁸) that illuminates the academicism and spiritual lifelessness which all too often mars evangelical theological education.)

Secondly, we may find the central theme of Orthodox spirituality, of 'theosis' or 'deification', very meaningful. Here the goal and focus of salvation is becoming 'partakers of the divine nature' (Ware⁹ citing 2 Peter 1:4) and 'conformable to Christ' (Lossky¹⁰), in mystical union with the Trinity. (Ware carefully, and rightly, draws a sharp distinction between this and pantheism.) There is a great deal in common between this and the theology of being 'in Christ' or 'conformed to Christ' that marks much of the Keswick tradition. Particularly, one senses strong parallels with Watchman Nee¹¹ (whose writings, I have noticed, are indeed popular among some of the followers of Alexander Men). Many evangelicals might agree with Lossky's criticism that in some parts of the western tradition the joy of this union with Christ has been lost in a spirituality that is aware of redemption from guilt but stays preoccupied with 'our own present wretchedness', not building towards the experienced union with God that is the goal of redemption.¹² And we would share the profound vision that inspires, say, Solovyev, drawing on Romans 8, that neither personal salvation alone, nor social amelioration, is the full meaning of salvation, but nothing short of the transfiguration of the entire cosmos by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Logically, the same wing of Protestantism may find parallels in the Orthodox theology of the Church. Unlike Catholicism, Orthodoxy strongly emphasises the Church not primarily as human organization but as the mystical Body of Christ, partly on earth, partly in heaven, with no visible head. ('Christ is her head and she knows no other', Khomiakov tells his Catholic opponent.¹³) 'The Church is the centre of the universe, the sphere in which its destinies are determined... The history of the world is a history of the Church which is the mystical foundation of the world', says Lossky; and since Pentecost 'the created and contingent universe has borne within itself a new body, possessing an uncreated and limitless plenitude that the world cannot contain. This new body is the Church.'¹⁴ Ware's emphasis that the church is 'taken up into heavenly places' as it worships¹⁵ will resonate with many charismatics or 'Brethren', as will Florovsky's insistence that 'The Church is first of all a worshipping community. Worship comes first, doctrine and discipline second'.¹⁶ And all of this is of particular significance at a time when there seems a hunger among many evangelicals for a rediscovery of a biblical mysticism, as reflected in the concerns of writers like Richard Foster and James Houston.

⁸ John Meyendorff, Byzantine Theology (1974), p.11.

⁹ Ware, Orthodox Church, p.236.

¹⁰ Lossky, p.243.

¹¹ Another evangelical parallel would be Paul Bilheimer's Destined for the Throne (1975). Ware's emphasis on our responsibility to 'become what we are' (Orthodox Church, p.248), and Solovyev's understanding of faith as affirming and living by a unity or perfection that 'actually is already for God, ie, in truth', though 'unrealized as yet in the sphere of outward existence'(in Schmemmann, pp.126-27), are also reminiscent of Nee in The Normal Christian Life. (Ranald Macaulay and Jerram Barrs make a linkage between Lossky and Nee in Christianity with a Human Face, ch.2, and are perhaps a little hard on both.) It is very strange to read Daniel B Clendenin's complaint (Eastern Orthodox Christianity (1994),pp.121,157), of Protestants' lack of interest in these doctrines of mystical union with Christ; this reflects his focus on ecumenical mainstream Protestantism rather than radical evangelicalism (either in its pentecostal/charismatic or Keswick forms).

¹² Quoted in Stamoolis, p.9. Lossky's criticism of the 'external' tradition of Thomas a Kempis - 'The spirituality of the imitation of Christ which is sometimes found in the West is foreign to Eastern spirituality, which may rather be defined as a life in Christ' - could have been penned by many an evangelical.

¹³ In Schmemmann, p.33; cf Lossky p.15.

¹⁴ Lossky,pp.178,111,113. Lossky has a fine chapter (ch.9) on the Church, focusing on Ephesians, much of which is again very reminiscent of Nee's What Shall This Man Do? - until he suddenly turns to Mary as the 'crown' of the church at the chapter's end.

¹⁵ Ware, Orthodox Church, p.270.

¹⁶ Quoted ibid, p.271.

These subjective reflections are offered to demonstrate that evangelicals of numerous varieties may find much that is attractive in Orthodox thinking and literature. In practical ministry, however, a vital question appears: to what degree do we share the same understanding of the gospel and its goal, new birth? And as we think of the Great Commission to 'make disciples', to what degree do we have the same understanding of discipleship? We are not attempting here to define who is a true child of God, who should be admitted to communion, etc.; but rather to consider how we begin to answer the pragmatic questions that arise in day-to-day ministry.

It is not easy to approach these issues, because it is not easy to define what precisely Orthodoxy is (any more than to define what today Protestantism is). This is partly because there is no central authority to define authentic Orthodox doctrine comparable to the papacy in traditional Catholicism. But it is also because, in Orthodoxy, verbal, systematic formulations tend simply to be less significant than the shared liturgical experience (the Russian word for Orthodoxy, pravoslavie, means 'right worship' rather than 'right doctrine'). Indeed, in the 'apophatic' theological tradition that dominates Orthodoxy, with its deep concern to safeguard the impenetrable mystery of God, we may say that what can be said about God is less significant than what cannot be verbalized. Thus Orthodoxy is almost as hugely diverse as Protestantism: what may be taught by a philosophical adherent of Berdyaev may be very different from the concerns of an official in the patriarchal hierarchy or, again, a countryside priest. It is the liturgy and the sacraments that keep them unified. And seventy years of communism, with its severe restrictions on theological education and literature, left a situation where at the grassroots many found it hard to verbalize what exactly they believed.

Further, the situation is in flux. Will the next few years see a building upon the intellectual foundations laid by Solovyev and his followers at the beginning of this century? Or, might the spread of evangelical input lead to an increasingly biblically-centred development of doctrine (which we should surely pray for as we pray for it within our own denominations)? Or, more probably, will ecumenical and academic contacts lead to a steady infection by western liberal theology (hints of which are apparent even in Bulgakov)?¹⁷ Or, again, will entrenched nationalism continue to enforce a harsh rejection of everything that can be perceived as western influence? We can only guess.

Space forbids examination of all the relevant issues. But four seem to stand out as especially important. What is our authority for recognizing true doctrine and life? What is the gospel that saves? What is the place of the cross? And as we seek to 'make disciples', what exactly is discipleship?

FOUNDATIONS FOR LIFE AND DOCTRINE

We must face this issue first, since the question of the authentic gospel can only be settled if we can agree on how it is to be recognised.

For evangelicals, our authority is the Bible alone, sola scriptura . This does not mean we deny having any tradition in our churches; nor do we deny that that tradition has some kind of authority. (Watch a strong Welsh Calvinist's commitment to his Banner of Truth Puritans, or a Dutch Calvinist to the Three Formulas of Unity.) What it means is that, always, we recognise our church tradition is a fallible mixture of truth and error; always it must be checked against the infallible authority of Scripture; it is semper reformanda, forever in need of correction by a deeper understanding of the perfect revelation of Scripture.

¹⁷ A deep respect for what is perceived as being of a 'high intellectual level' is such a mark of Russian culture that one fears this is all too probable. It is striking that even Alexander Men writes surprisingly positively of the arch-liberal Bultmann (see Christianity for the Twenty-First Century, ed. Elizabeth Roberts and Ann Shukman (1996), p.200). And in his otherwise superb life of Christ, Syn Chelovecheskii (1968), he accepts unquestioningly the standard liberal Protestant views of the authorship and dating of the Pentateuch, Isaiah, and Daniel (Son of Man, tr. Samuel Brown (1998), p.223).

The Orthodox position tends to be different. Perhaps it is fairest to summarize it as the authority of tradition. This, however, is usually not a 'two-sources' approach such as might have been found in traditional Catholicism, where church tradition is viewed as a body of revelation alongside, and illuminating, Scripture. Rather, to Orthodoxy, tradition is the developing unfolding of revelation by the life of the Spirit in the Church. It is an organic, unified whole; Scripture forms a crucial part - but so do the Creeds, the decisions of the seven Ecumenical Councils ('Anyone who does not accept this minimum of Church tradition by that fact separates himself from the society of the Church', says Bulgakov significantly¹⁸), and other things besides. (Bulgakov notes especially 'the order of the services and the sacraments... By means of the services certain dogmas of Christian doctrine which have not been declared by the definitions of the ecumenical councils acquire the force of law. For example: reverence of the Mother of God in Orthodoxy... the cult of holy images and relics...')

The renowned John Meyendorff draws a clear distinction between this and the evangelical position. For Orthodox, he says, 'the Christian faith and experience can in no way be compatible with the notion of *Scriptura sola*... Tradition becomes the initial and fundamental source of Christian theology - not in competition with Scripture, but as Scripture's spiritual context.'¹⁹ Thus what is authentic belief cannot be decided on the basis of Scripture alone, but rather is to be received within the context and perspective of the Church, that is, on the basis of the totality of tradition. Or, alternatively, Scripture may indeed be given a primacy over the other forms of tradition²⁰; but then the problem recurs in another form, because its authentic interpretation must still be that revealed in the historic interpretation of the church.

This is somewhat problematic for evangelicals in principle. First, to us the decisions even of the seven ecumenical councils - for example those of the seventh regarding icons - are not authoritative *in themselves*, but stand in need of confirmation or reformation by the test of Scripture. Recent church history and mission experience make us acutely aware of the problems of second- and third-generation spiritual movements, and so we are not surprised that as early as the second century some significant deviations had appeared in the Church's life and doctrine. We note, too, without surprise, the ugly politicking and power struggles that went on around the Councils²¹, which as Florovsky says developed in 'that peculiar structure which was the new Christian commonwealth' after Constantine's adoption of the Christian faith, 'in which the church was strangely wedded with the empire.'²² As early as the Council of Chalcedon in 451 Pope Leo the Great was pushing for a unique 'fullness of power' whereby, as he wrote five years earlier, 'the care of the universal Church should converge towards Peter's one chair, and nothing anywhere should be separate from its head'. Many things at the Councils had already moved a long way from the new testament.

We recognise that, through all this, the Spirit worked to give His people outstanding definitions of many of the fundamentals of Christian faith. (But by no means perfect ones, as time and the errors of mediaeval Catholicism would tragically demonstrate.) But we find ourselves far more sceptical about

¹⁸ Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church (Pravoslavie)*; tr. Lydia Kesich (1988), p.27.

¹⁹ John Meyendorff, 'Doing Theology in an Eastern Orthodox Perspective', in *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, ed. Daniel B. Clendenin (1995), pp.82-83.

²⁰ So Bulgakov, p.18.

²¹ This is important, in view of the liberal argument that Nicaea and Chalcedon only decided what they did because of manipulation by the political authorities. That is irrelevant for us, since whether a creed accurately summarizes Scripture or not can be decided by turning to Scripture, and this is unaffected by the circumstances of the creed's origin. As it is, what emerges even from the Orthodox Metropolitan Ware's account (*Orthodox Church* pp.30-31) is the power politics and jockeying for pre-eminence of the different bishops - even as early as the very first Councils, Nicaea and Constantinople, whose Canons setting out a 'pecking order' which, as Ware admits, merely fed new resentments; and the dubious methods of Saint Cyril of Alexandria, who in his struggle against the Nestorians (culminating in his victory at the third Ecumenical Council (431)) 'bribed the Court heavily and terrorised the city of Ephesus with a private army of monks'(p.44).

²² George Florovsky, 'The Authority of the Ancient Councils and the Tradition of the Fathers', in Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, p.117.

other things that the Councils decided: for example, the definition of Mary as 'Ever-Virgin' by the fifth Ecumenical Council in 553, with its disastrously negative implications for the entire Christian attitude to sexuality - to say nothing of such unwritten liturgical traditions as praying towards the east, threefold baptismal immersion, or standing for Sunday worship, that mattered so much to Basil the Great.²³

Is tradition enough to make such matters authoritative for us? Surely we would want to look to Scripture to decide them; for in so doing, we believe we are following the warnings of Christ, Paul and Peter (look at Mark 7:8, Colossians 2:8, Galatians 2:6, or 1 Peter 1:18) concerning the fallibility of human religious tradition ('old wineskins'). And we note that, according to Jesus, religious 'tradition' was highly unreliable even among God's chosen Jewish people who, alone in all the world, were guardians of His revelation.

In practical terms, this raises two issues. One, what is our main source for teaching and discipleship? It has been interesting to watch the difficulties encountered by western missionaries in Russia concerned to set out the teaching of Scripture and facing difficulties with Orthodox co-workers anxious to balance out what has been said by copious quotation from the Fathers. In shared ministry, there has to be a shared understanding of what is the final authority. More crucial is the issue of how we teach young believers to set about understanding the Bible.²⁴ For the Orthodox, the true understanding is that established by church tradition. 'The Church then', says Bulgakov, 'applies to the interpretation of Scripture this self-evident general principle: the understanding of Holy Scripture must be based on tradition... one must necessarily be in accord with the interpretation of the Church handed down by the divinely-inspired Fathers and teachers of the Church.'²⁵ This writer was disappointed to find, even among some 'renewal' Orthodox of the stream of Alexander Men, a discomfort with evangelical group Bible study outlines (designed to assist readers to draw out the meaning of Scripture) on the grounds that 'the important things between the words can be lost', that is, the expression of church tradition.²⁶ 'Penetrating the meaning of Scripture outside the' (liturgical) 'service', says Bulgakov, '... needs specially to be guided by Church tradition.'²⁷

Another Orthodox way of speaking to the authority issue is to speak of the infallibility of the Church: it is impossible for the Church to err.²⁸ It is important to understand, however, that when Orthodox theologians speak of the authority and infallibility of the Church (and its Tradition), they tend not to

²³ It may be true that Orthodoxy can make a claim to continuity with the dominant theology of the fourth century. What is unclear is how far the fourth century already represents some significant shifts from new testament belief. We would not today claim an automatic ability to faithful interpretation of Puritan thought just because the gap separating us was a mere three hundred years. Even one generation can involve subtle, but far-reaching, changes of emphasis - and arguably that happened as early as the second century. Certainly several new testament books hint at it commencing and make the necessary restatements of authentic faith; fourth-century belief needs to be compared with the new testament in the same way.

²⁴ There may be other issues here too. In some cases, we may find ourselves at odds with some of our Orthodox friends regarding the authority of the apocrypha. The issue may also arise as to whether the authoritative Old Testament is the Hebrew text that is as close as we can get to what was 'originally given', or the Greek-language Septuagint - which represents to many Orthodox the ongoing revelatory activity of the Spirit among His people (Ware, Orthodox Church, p.208).

²⁵ Bulgakov, p.23; cf Ware Orthodox Way p.148.

²⁶ A comparable sentiment from Coptic Orthodoxy is found in a document reprinted in Turning Over a New Leaf: Protestant Missions and the Churches of the Middle East (InterServe/Middle East Media, 1992 - a report unusually committed to going the second (and possibly third) mile towards Coptic Orthodoxy), which strongly criticises 'attachment to the letter - in particular by the "literal" reading of the Holy Scripture separated from the Spirit of the Church'(p.101).

²⁷ Bulgakov, p.22.

²⁸ 'Infallibility resides solely in the ecumenicity of the Church... entrusted to the care not of one hierarchy but of all the people of the Church, who are the body of Christ', wrote the Eastern patriarchs in their 1848 encyclical. Cf. Bulgakov, p.59; Ware, Orthodox Church, pp.252, 257-58.

mean the utterances of its human head (as Catholicism does), but rather the faith of the whole Body, 'the Church in her living wholeness' (so Khomiakov²⁹). Thus phrased we might well agree with the principle - that the true Body of Christ will indeed not ultimately be led astray doctrinally.

But then comes the key question: where has the voice of the Body been infallibly heard?

This, say the Orthodox, is the significance of the seven early Ecumenical Councils, that in them the whole Body spoke as one.³⁰ But, as a matter of historical fact, this was not the case at all. As Ware admits, this completely ignores the opposition to the Council decrees of the Monophysite churches of Syria, Armenia and Egypt, such as the Coptic Orthodox Church - to say nothing of the more 'evangelical' groups (eg Donatists) that the Catholic Church was already fiercely persecuting during these centuries. The sceptic might say that this Orthodox position comes down to the infallibility of the majority; at best it seems somewhat circular reasoning - the true, orthodox church is defined as such by its acceptance of orthodox dogma, but true, orthodox dogma is recognised by its acceptance in the orthodox church. However, this faith in the Councils as the voice of the Church is fundamental to the whole Orthodox position: and indeed today no distinction is allowed between the visible and invisible church.³¹ Rather the Orthodox Church is, and its hierarchy represents, the mystical Body of Christ³²; as such the 'Orthodox Church is aware that she is the true Church, possessing the plenitude and purity of truth in the Holy Spirit', says Bulgakov.³³

²⁹ In Schmemmann pp.55-56,60,62; compare Ware *Orthodox Church* pp.255-57.

³⁰ Ware admits that Orthodoxy has failed to explain how one recognises which councils qualify as ecumenical and therefore authoritative; but he suggests that, though some would look to the decisions of the bishops at this point, the 'present trend of Orthodox thought' follows Khomiakov in defining ecumenical councils as those whose decrees were (supposedly) accepted by the whole Church (p.256). However, with the element of paradox which one encounters often in Orthodoxy, he quotes Meyendorff to the effect that 'it is not the ecumenicity but the truth of the councils which make their decisions obligatory for us'; which might imply a higher criterion of truth before which the councils must be vindicated. But he also cites Lossky: 'Truth can have no external criterion, for it is manifest of itself and made inwardly plain.' (pp.257-58) Obviously for Lossky the 'truth' of all seven councils is now understood to have been permanently recognised as 'manifest'; but evangelicals will not feel so sure about this...

³¹ Lossky, p.186.

³² The drastic implications for non-Orthodox congregations emerge in Solovyev when he seeks to set out what is central to the Church: 'The hierarchical succession, which has its startingpoint in Christ, is the way whereby the grace of God spreads through His whole body, that is, through all the Church; belief in the dogma of His Incarnation, through which we confess that Christ is perfect man, is the witness to the truth of Christ; the holy sacraments are the source of the life of Christ in us. In the hierarchy, Christ Himself is present as the way; in the confession of faith, as truth; in the sacraments, as life... The human fellowship that possesses a true hierarchical succession coming from Christ, and confesses the true faith and has the true sacraments, has immediately everything necessary to constitute the Church; on the other hand, a fellowship that lacks one of these elements cannot be the Church.' Thus if one of the three is missing, he continues, the others are affected too: a fellowship marked by the 'absence of the hierarchical succession from Christ' will 'necessarily lack also the divine grace of the sacraments which should be ministered by the priesthood; and as a result of this absence of the life of grace, lacking a real communion with God, even the confession of faith becomes an abstract and lifeless formula.' In other words, most evangelical churches are not churches at all. The issue here is of a concept of unity based on a visible hierarchy, rather than the invisible unity of shared faith and life in the Spirit that evangelicals would confess. But what makes it really problematic is that these beliefs - which force someone holding Solovyev's position to refuse to recognise evangelical communities as genuine churches - are in fact central to the entire picture of the Church as Solovyev presents it.

³³ Bulgakov, p.187; cf p.1. It should be said that Bulgakov's treatment runs into severe difficulties elsewhere as to whether decisions of the visible Church hierarchy of bishops can be assumed to be final (pp.76-80). On the one hand 'the episcopal order possesses the authority to safeguard the purity of doctrine in the Church, and, in the case of profound differences in the heart of the Church, can render a decision having the force of laws. Such a decision should put an end to dissensions. Those who do not submit are automatically cut off from the Church by anathema.' And yet church history demonstrates that that is not the whole story: 'The dogmatic definition of a council... certainly has a supreme authority for believers, and should be obeyed, even in doubtful or obscure

If it were not for this refusal to distinguish between the infallible Body of Christ in its invisible wholeness and the fallibility of its visible expressions, this 'whole body' understanding of the infallibility of the Church might (for evangelicals) be much preferable in principle to one that locates infallibility in the Papacy. But it is not so; and there is a practical problem for us, because an Orthodox convert must promise to interpret Scripture under the controlling authority of the Church, meaning Orthodoxy as it now exists. When received into the Orthodox Church, says Ware, a convert promises: 'I will accept and understand Holy Scripture in accordance with the interpretation which was and is held by the Holy Orthodox Catholic Church of the East, our Mother'.³⁴ Obviously, we have to assess how comfortable we feel about co-workers making this solemn and weighty public promise regarding their future approach to Bible study and to doctrinal and practical issues; indeed, how far we feel comfortable about committing converts to longterm involvement in churches where they will be fostered on this basis of the priority of the Orthodox Church's interpretation; or, how far these churches will be places where they - and their disciples in turn - will be likely to grow in a faith and life that is truly shaped, and corrected, by the Bible's input.

Linked with these issues is a criticism sometimes made of evangelicals, that truth to the Orthodox is something to be attained communally, whereas in Protestantism it is perceived by the lone individual. But in fact this distinction dissolves when we look at it closely. We all - Protestants and Orthodox - agree that truth is best sought together (it is 'with all saints', as Paul says (Eph 3:18), that we grasp the full truth of God), rather than by the individual with his many prejudices and limitations (albeit under the grace and guidance of God). The problem is that we (Orthodox as much as Protestants) do not actually have that choice - at least once we have looked outside the borders of Russia. For even when we accept that truth is to be attained collectively, the problem is where the voice of that divinely-ordained community is to be recognised; if Scripture can only be understood aright within the Church, then which Church? And then it is the individual who must decide whether that 'living Truth' is to be recognised in, say, the teachings of the bishops in fellowship with the Moscow Patriarchate, the Pope in the Vatican, the Orthodox Synod in Exile, or the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch (who being Monophysite would not recognise all seven Councils). Even within Russian Orthodoxy, it is still the individual who must ultimately decide whether to put her trust in the views of, say, Alexander Men, Seraphim Rose, or Sergius Bulgakov.

It should also be said that there is in Orthodoxy (as in Protestantism) often a difference between strict theology and actual practice. Thus in Solovyev's God, Man and the Church, though he attacks anyone relying 'on his individual interpretation of the holy scriptures', and emphasises that 'we recognise in the tradition... the work of the divine Spirit... we recognise the truth, which was expressed earlier but always remains the same, by the powerful grace of the same Spirit', nonetheless as he develops his own argument he works mostly from Scripture, with scarcely any references to the Fathers. (So, more obviously, does Alexander Borisov'.) There is no problem here with models for growing believers. But still we have a problem when we want to know what is the fundamental truth of the gospel: can we decide this by looking simply to Scripture, or must we always bow to that interpretation of Scripture which is held and permitted by the Orthodox (or some other) church tradition?

SALVATION (1): NEW BIRTH - BY BAPTISM OR BY FAITH?

There are a number of issues here. The crucial problem for evangelicals is not the question of salvation by faith and works, as it might be with some versions of traditional Catholicism. On that topic the Orthodox position is not far from evangelicalism, though it tends to rephrase the question.

cases. But there may be instances where, precisely, disobedience to ecclesiastical power or to a council, which had become heretical, is glorified by the Church. This happened, for example, in the times of the Arian, Nestorian or Iconoclastic discords.¹ The severe strain this Protestant-sounding admission implies for Bulgakov's position emerges as he adds, 'Disobedience to ecclesiastical power is in itself a grave fault, a heavy burden on the conscience, even though it is sometimes inevitable.'

³⁴ Ware, Orthodox Church, p.208.

Khomiakov simply refuses to acknowledge the existence of a difficulty: the Orthodox Church, he says, 'cannot even understand the question whether salvation lies in faith alone or in faith and works together. In her eyes life and truth are one, and works are nothing but the manifestation of a faith which, without this manifestation, would not be faith but logical knowledge.'³⁵ 'It must not be imagined that because a man accepts and guards God's grace, he thereby earns "merit"', says Ware, distinguishing the Orthodox view from some at least of Catholicism. 'God's gifts are always free gifts, and man can never have any claims upon his Maker. But man, while he cannot "merit" salvation, must certainly work for it, since "faith without works is dead"'.³⁶ This is close to our understanding, though 'must work for it' is a stronger phrasing than we might feel comfortable with (though cf Philippians 2:12).³⁷

So that is not the question. The key issue is how we 'accept' the grace of God - that is, the basic message of how you become a Christian. What lies at the heart of the gospel message? Is the focus of what we want to preach a process of our 'acquiring grace' sacramentally during a long 'ascent' to a transfiguring union with Christ? Or is it the overwhelmingly important moment where we confront the cross in repentant faith and becoming assured that we are forgiven, once and for all?

Here we encounter the paradoxical character of Orthodoxy. Often, Orthodoxy sees salvation entirely in terms of our receiving divine grace by means of the Church's sacraments. Baptism, says Bulgakov very clearly, 'is a spiritual birth. In putting on Christ the natural man dies, together with the original sin innate in him. A new person is engendered. It is the appropriation of the saving power of the redemptive work of Christ.'³⁸ Ware concurs: 'Through Baptism we receive a full forgiveness of all sin... we "put on Christ", becoming members of His Body the Church'; then at Chrismation (anointing with ointment), immediately after Baptism, the child 'who has been incorporated into Christ at Baptism, now receives at Chrismation the gift of the Spirit, thereby becoming... a full member of the people of God... The chrism... must first have been blessed by a bishop.'³⁹ 'Through this sacrament, the Christian has access to the life of grace in the Church by means of participation in all the other sacraments', says Bulgakov.⁴⁰ Thereafter the Eucharist plays a central role as we continually acquire the transfiguring grace needed to share in the life of Christ.⁴¹

Such an understanding of forgiveness and new birth will seem a long way from the Bible's, when we think of the overwhelming number of times that the new testament identifies faith as the heart of the gospel.⁴² Biblically, we are saved, born again, 'by grace through faith' (Eph 2:8), not by grace through baptism. If one of our converts goes for Orthodox baptism there is liable to be a significant difference

³⁵ In Schmemmann, pp.54-55; he has some good remarks too on the place of works in James 2 as 'faith's distinctive marks' (p.52). Bulgakov (p.107) clearly misunderstands the evangelical position.

³⁶ Ware, Orthodox Church, p.227.

³⁷ Cf Harold O J Brown's comment that the 'typically Russian stand concerning the relationship between faith and good works' is 'a strong theoretical emphasis on the sufficiency of faith coupled with a very practical insistence on good works' (IVP New Dictionary of Theology, p.600).

³⁸ Bulgakov, p.112.

³⁹ Ware, Orthodox Church, pp.284-85.

⁴⁰ Bulgakov, p.113.

⁴¹ There is a paradox here, however, since many who consider themselves Orthodox in fact only take the Eucharist a few times each year.

⁴² See the centrality of 'believing' and 'faith' to the gospel in: Acts 13:38-39, 15:7-9, 16:31, 20:21; John 1:12, 3:14-18,36, 5:24, 6:28-29,35,40,47, 7:39, 20:31; Romans 1:16-17, 3:22,25-31, 4:5,9-16,24-5:2, 10:8-11, 13-14; 1 Corinthians 1:21; Galatians 2:16, 3:2,5-9,22-24; Ephesians 1:13, 2:8; 1 John 5:1. In many of these the term 'baptism' could easily have been used instead of 'believing' or 'faith', if baptism were indeed the means of new birth. These are well worth looking up, and many more could be cited, eg: Mark 1:14-15; Luke 8:11-12; John 9:35-38; Acts 10:43,26:18; Rom 9:30,32, 10:4; Phil 3:9; 1 Tim 1:16, 4:9-10; Heb 4:2-3, 11:7; 1 John 3:23, 5:13 (where it is noteworthy that assurance of salvation is *not* located in the attractively tangible act of baptism).

between what they have read in their Bible about their standing before God, having trusted Christ, and what the priest may tell them they must believe about their position before and after baptism.

And this may be doubly the case as we move from the level of the theologians to that of rural folk-religion. Argyris Petrou, writing from the Greek situation, observes that 'People really believe that the lighting of candles at the church empowers their prayers for the forgiveness of sins... In some cases the specific forms of the folk religion themselves are seen as leading to salvation... For most Orthodox people, whom we call nominal, the only way of salvation they know of is to have faith in the creed, try to do good, confess their sins to the priest, fast and take communion, go to church to light a candle, kiss the icons..... hoping that your merits will outweigh your sins on the day of judgment.'

Yet the diversity of Orthodoxy can also be good news at this point. For sometimes Orthodox writers display an understanding of 'conversion' that is more biblical. Lossky, for example, says quite clearly that 'The beginning of the spiritual life is conversion, an attitude of will turning towards God and renouncing the world.' He adds that repentance, 'literally "change of mind" or "transformation of spirit"', is the 'gateway of grace', though he switches between using the term as 'gateway' and as hallmark of the process beyond. He is not far removed from evangelical Lutheranism in what follows: 'Repentance, according to St John Climacus, is a renewal of baptism, "the fount of tears after baptism has become greater than baptism, though this be a bold saying". This judgment may appear paradoxical or even scandalous, if it be forgotten that repentance is the fruit of baptismal grace... Repentance is not merely our effort, our anguish, but is also the resplendent gift of the Holy Spirit.'⁴³

Arseniev's Russian Piety, also apparently mainstream, sounds even more evangelical on this topic - ironically, because elsewhere he speaks at length of the 'real presence' of God in the Eucharist, Mary, and the monastic life in ways that do not sound biblical at all. Arseniev describes repentance ('conversion... this healing spiritual upheaval') as 'the response we give to the action of grace upon our hearts, diseased and crying out to be healed. Yes, it is precisely a response, for in the eyes of the religious conscience grace takes the initiative, it is grace that makes the first move, not us... The undeserved bounty of forgiveness which comes to us from on high, and the feeling of repentance, together form one of the main themes of the Christian life in general, a theme manifested with particular force among the Russian people. This people has often felt its sinfulness, and whenever it has been truly religious it has felt with a deep and humble understanding the overwhelming greatness of that grace which brings pardon and renewal... The decisive moment in the religious outlook of this people... is the sinner's encounter with the God of mercy and consolation, it is the refuge he finds with God, and the sinner's response to the invitation of grace... This overflowing tenderness that takes hold of the soul of the repentant sinner, the deep emotion of prayer, the tears of contrition and joy at the feet of the merciful Lord - this is what has given strength to the soul of the Russian people.'⁴⁴ Ware likewise writes, 'Repentance marks the starting-point of our journey... It means, not self-pity or remorse, but conversion, the re-centering of our whole life upon the Trinity', and later describes faith as a 'personal relationship... "I believe in you" means: I turn to you, I rely upon you, I put my full trust in you and I hope in you... It is to know God not as a theory or an abstract principle, but as a person'. Though British, Ware is proof that such an understanding is possible within mainstream Orthodoxy

⁴³ Lossky, pp.199,205.

⁴⁴ Nicolas Arseniev, Russian Piety, tr. Asheleigh Moorhouse (1964), pp.76,78,81. One problem here, however, may be that in the biblical gospel repentance and faith belong together (see, eg, Acts 20:21), whereas, as we shall see, in Orthodoxy faith in the cross as payment for sin is sometimes lacking. And a repentance that is not accompanied by without faith in once-for-all forgiveness and new birth through the cross is in grave danger of leading only to an increased determination for self-purification. That, however, would be salvation by our own efforts again. This does sometimes seem to be an issue in the Orthodox approach to repentance.

(though we should add that he sounds far more sacramentalist and far less biblical elsewhere in his writings.⁴⁵)

Still more interesting is Alexander Men, whom indeed many Russian evangelicals counted as one of their own number. Men's Easter sermons, published in English as Awake to Life!, express repeatedly an evangelical gospel. 'What kind of will-power, what exertions can free us from sin? You and I are no longer children and we understand very well that such efforts are largely useless... We have no help or salvation other than the Lord Jesus Christ and His love... Whoever believes in Christ is saved... Whoever calls on the name of Jesus and follows the Lord is saved. But to be saved, you must begin to follow Him. And in order to follow Him, we have to see that we are unworthy, that we cannot save ourselves and that first we must repent... Today, in the Gospel reading, the Church bids us, "Arise, like the tax collector, without thinking about your merits, your power or your good works. Just get up and repeat, as he did, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner."' ⁴⁶ Men's successor Alexander Borisov is equally definite: 'The turn to God by man starts with repentance; without it a person cannot take part in the life of the Church. Repentance comes before the sacrament of baptism.' Indeed, Borisov goes so far as to argue that the early Christians did not baptise children, and that current Orthodox practice leads people to see baptism as something magic, whereas biblically only those who believe and are baptised will be saved (he also warns against the replacement of genuine faith by religion, which he describes as 'something made by man, the response man gives to the revelation of God').⁴⁷

⁴⁵ The quotation is from Ware, Orthodox Way, p.152, 18-20. But Ware's summary of his message in his more widely-known book The Orthodox Church is much less evangelical (which may possibly reflect an intended Catholic/liberal protestant readership), and clearly views salvation as a sacramentally-based process, not a moment of repentance and faith: 'If a man asks "How can I become god?"' (Ware is quoting 'become god' from Athanasius), 'the answer is very simple: go to church, receive the sacraments regularly, pray to God "in spirit and in truth", read the Gospels' (why only the gospels?), 'follow the commandments.'(p.241) Elsewhere he emphasises the sacrament of 'confession' to a priest, saying that 'Through this sacrament sins committed after Baptism are forgiven' (though paradoxically it is not necessary to go to confession every time one goes to communion (pp.295-97)); and here he (apparently unlike Lossky) uses the term 'repentance' as a synonym for such confession. This is an important shift to notice because it not only changes the meaning of repentance but also has major implications for personal spiritual life. Bulgakov does the same: 'To free himself from sins committed after baptism, man confesses his faults to an authorized minister, bishop or priest; the latter gives absolution which confers grace, wipes out the sins and reconciles man to God'(p.113). Even Men uses the term 'repentance' in the sense of confession to a priest in one of his earlier and perhaps untypical books, Orthodox Worship: sacrament, word, and image (Pravoslavnoe bogosluzhenie: tainstvo, slovo i obraz (1969), tr. Colin Masica, 1999), pp.109-10, though elsewhere he would seem to be using it in the same sense as evangelicals.

⁴⁶ Alexander Men, Awake to Life! (Propovedi protoiereia Aleksandra Menia: paskhalnyi tsikl, tr. Marite Sapiets (1991)), pp.4-5. But Men's position too is complex, and possibly evolves between his books; a fuller picture may be gained by setting this passage against the section of his early Orthodox Worship where he writes, 'Baptism is the sign of entry of a person into the Church and of his mystical joining to the unity of the believers in Christ... It is accomplished through the faith of the one being baptized (in the case of an adult) or through the faith of its parents (in the case of an infant)... The lifegiving Spirit... comes to everyone that receives Baptism and enters the family of the children of God' (pp.108, 99). But then, 'Each one of us has besmirched the clean baptismal garment... On what, then, can we put our hope? Only on the fact that the grace of the Lord Jesus revives us in the Mystery of Repentance, and accepts us in the House of the Father, like prodigal children' (p.102).

⁴⁷ Alexandr Borisov, Pobelevshie Nivy; Razmyshlenia o Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Cerkvi (1994), pp.157,101. It is interesting to see how Men handles this issue: 'In the first centuries mainly adults were baptized. But later the custom of baptizing infants appeared, a custom that has become firmly rooted in our Church... From the moment of Baptism the seed of grace is sown in the soul of the child. Even if its awareness is still asleep, the Spirit sanctifies all of its being.' (Many evangelicals will of course find this idea highly problematic and lacking in biblical basis.) 'But what happens then? What has been sown must be nurtured... It happens that we see people bringing children for Baptism, who themselves don't even know how to make the sign of the cross... In spite of this, we never refuse Baptism, because children need the grace, and because even a single desire to introduce a child to the church, however vague and unconsidered, is imputed by the Lord to people as faith. We can only pray regarding these children, that God Himself will enlighten them in the future. Even as

So here we face the paradox: for Orthodoxy, is new birth to be seen primarily in baptism or in conversion? The difficulty of obtaining an unambiguous answer to this crucial question is clearly seen in the writings of Solovyev. The excellent first section of his God, Man and the Church sets out the 'spiritual foundations of life', and does it well.⁴⁸ Salvation is clearly by grace: 'Divine grace turns us to God, and in such a conversion we do no more than to consent by our wills. That is the essence of prayer... This new and good life... will not be created by ourselves; it will be given to us, it is a free gift... The life does not come forth from us, it comes from the Father.' 'The principle of a new, better life, man cannot create for himself; it must exist outside our own will; we must receive the new life.' Belief itself 'is at the same time a gift from God and our own free action.' The 'way in' to grace is through repentance: 'But, in order to come truly into the order of grace... it is necessary to wrestle within oneself to ascend through an inner motion of the will; a person must "fight" inwardly in order to receive the grace or divine power within him. The movement on the human side, this spiritual struggle, includes three steps: first, a man must feel that evil is an abomination, he must sense and recognise evil as sin; then he must strive inwardly to expel the evil and to set himself free from it; thirdly, convinced of the inadequacy of his own strength to set him free from evil, he must turn to God and seek His help. To receive grace, therefore, three things are required at the same time: condemnation of moral evil and sin, exertion to be free of it, and turning towards God.' (A footnote adds that he does not wish to imply that 'these first steps can be taken through human strength alone, without divine aid', but that he is not here seeking to resolve the problem of human freedom and divine action, rather to describe the part taken by the human person.) He clearly describes this process as 'spiritual rebirth... new birth according to the Spirit'; and at this stage there is nothing about the sacraments.

But all this changes in Solovyev's section on 'The Church'. Here he presents the three elements central to the life of the church: the hierarchy, the confession of faith, and the sacraments which 'are the source of the life of Christ in us.' In this section, therefore, salvation suddenly becomes sacramental: 'Catholic and divine is the sacrament of baptism, for it gives the natural man the opportunity to step afresh into the structure of the universal body of Christ, by purifying him invisibly from the contamination of original sin... Catholic and divine is the sacrament of confession (second baptism). In confession man consciously and freely forsakes everything that is contaminated in his personal life... he receives forgiveness for all of this and is placed in a position afresh and consciously to partake of the unity of God and of men... Catholic and divine is the sacrament of the eucharist or of communion. Through this sacrament man receives in his body the body of Christ... he links himself to Christ... and so he comes in reality to have a part in the complete and divine-human, spiritual and bodily unity...' (Where a fellowship is not under the historic hierarchy, however, its sacraments are not valid, he says; a fellowship marked by the 'absence of the hierarchical succession from Christ' will 'necessarily lack also the divine grace of the sacraments which should be ministered by the priesthood; and as a result of this absence of the life of grace, lacking a real communion with God'. Solovyev's views force him here to see Protestants as fundamentally estranged from God's grace.) Is new birth then received in the sacraments, or by repentance and faith as the overall direction of Solovyev's earlier argument had implied? We cannot say.

it is, it often happens that an adult comes to church and wants to receive Baptism. This is good, of course, but it is a little early to rejoice. Let us remember that the Lord said, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved." Saved, that is, joined to Christ. But notice, first he must believe... People are baptized, and they think that with this everything is done... It would indeed be better to remain honestly an unbeliever than to deceive yourself, other people, and God... Baptism is not only the gift of God's grace, but also the taking on yourself of responsibility towards God; it expresses your intention to live according to His will' (Orthodox Worship, pp.104-05). It is not entirely clear where the new birth comes in this process.

⁴⁸ What follows would be more acceptable to the semi-Arminian than to the Calvinist type of evangelical. But it cannot be regarded as 'off the evangelical spectrum'.

So we are faced with diversity and paradox. The Orthodox emphasis on 'apophatic theology', where spiritual realities cannot adequately be embodied in verbal terms, consciously does not lend itself to clear 'either/or' answers on questions like these. But it is disappointing to find this same lack of clarity about the fundamental heart of the gospel even among Orthodox believers associated with the renewal movement stemming from Alexander Men.⁴⁹ I remember asking one friend about the relative significance of conversion and baptism; she replied that, for God, there was no distinction, because time does not exist. (She added that in Orthodoxy there is a thirst for paradox, because paradox explains things much better than rationalistic constructions can do; and that to try to cover spiritual reality with words is, to the Orthodox, a rather serious mistake.) For myself at least, such an approach is unhelpful in understanding whether or not we are proclaiming rather different gospels, and different ways to salvation.

In practice, we probably have to face a wide range of understandings of the gospel among ordinary Orthodox. Nonetheless, we may expect a basic doubt that 'faith alone' can be enough for salvation, without the ongoing sacramental process of baptism and the Eucharist. Indeed, if it is true (as Luther said) that we are justified by faith alone but faith is never alone, it is also true that faith that did not motivate us to ongoing church involvement (as it must also to good works) would be a very strange kind of faith. But we need to consider how this ambiguity develops through a lifetime of church involvement in a local Orthodox congregation. Preaching that would clarify such questions is not often a strong feature of average Orthodox congregational life; and so one wonders how much the average churchgoer will be confronted clearly with the centrality of true heart-repentance and conversion. In contrast, the importance of the sacraments is clearly enacted, over and over again, in the liturgy. The tendency, then, as year succeeds year, is to underline the sacraments' centrality to the life of grace, rather than the biblical insistence on the crucial, conscious step of heart-repentance and faith in response to the Word of God. (See, for example, Acts 20:21, or Ephesians 2:8-9; or the careful way Paul argues the primacy of faith over the old testament sacrament of circumcision in Romans 4:9-12. Or, perhaps most relevantly, his very clear distinction of the gospel from baptism in 1 Corinthians 1:17: 'Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.')

The consequence of such church involvement, as time goes on, will surely be to train the worshippers in an understanding of salvation that is significantly different from the new testament. And Paul has some very serious things to say about the catastrophic nature of any move away from the biblical gospel (Galatians 1:8).

SALVATION (2): THE CERTAINTY OF FORGIVENESS

But this question of baptism or conversion, of where we find the crucial moment of saving grace and new birth, is not the only problem.

What really seems to divide the evangelical understanding from Orthodoxy is the issue of once-for-all justification and forgiveness of sins. It often seems that, for Orthodox, communion with God and the indwelling of the Spirit come at, or at least towards, the end of a lifetime's development, and that process is what matters. In other words, there is in practice little distinction between the moment of justification and the process of sanctification. This is an important issue for us to clarify, because in the New Testament (eg Romans 3, or Romans 11:6) the nature of our justification is presented as a matter demanding great care and attention.

⁴⁹ Indeed, even Men himself is not always clear, at least in [Orthodox Worship](#). He includes there a sermon of his own on the doctrine of purgatory, where he explains how the damned become lost after death, and then adds, 'But the one who here, in this earthly life, lays up for himself spiritual treasures of prayer, good deeds, and struggle with his own sins, who brings himself nearer to the Gospel ideal, even before death begins to sprout the wings that will carry him into eternity' (p.99). This does sound like salvation by works, although at this point he is not presenting the part played by grace. But then on p.103 he says clearly, 'The Apostle Paul teaches us that we are saved, not by our own virtues and merits - which we do not possess, but that Christ saves us, the healing gift of His love saves us.'

For Bible-based Christians, once-for-all justification must be central to salvation. It means we are saved from God's holy wrath and 'counted righteous' by God at the crucial moment of our new birth; and everything else in our spiritual life follows from that. Once for all, we have passed from death into life, been 'made alive with Christ', 'raised up with Christ' and 'seated with Him in the heavenly realms' (Eph 2:4-6).⁵⁰ But Orthodox thought is far less interested in this vital moment of justification than in the ongoing process that leads to theosis ('deification') and transfiguration. (The 'most famous exposition of Orthodox dogmatics, that of John of Damascus, does not even mention justification', observes Benz.⁵¹ Meyendorff describes 'sanctification rather than justification' as one of the important 'Orthodox intuitions about the nature of Christian faith.'⁵²) Theologically, Orthodoxy might seem to have reversed the biblical order of justification and sanctification - to be presenting the Christian life in terms of Romans 6-8, without first working through the vital preparatory issues in Romans 1-5. And practically, it seems to pay the price of this under-emphasis on justification and regeneration by a loss of certainty of personal relationship with Christ, 'in Christ', here and now.

Orthodox complain that western theology is built on an over-legal understanding of salvation, drawn from Augustine's Romanized context.⁵³ But this is incorrect. The emphasis on the cross as an atonement for our sins comes, not from Augustine, but from God's own Word, most obviously in Romans. (Or indeed from the even less Latinized Isaiah, which speaks of the Servant 'pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him... the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all'(Isa 53:4-6).) And in Romans, justification is clearly a free gift to be received once for all. It is not the distant future culmination of a lifelong salvational process: 'Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, *we have* peace with God' (5:1). In contrast, Orthodoxy generally emphasises not a moment in which we are 'declared righteous', but a lifelong process in which we are 'becoming righteous' by the continuous acquisition of grace from the Holy Spirit through the sacraments. 'What is of decisive importance', says Bulgakov, 'is not complete freedom from sin, but the road that leads toward it... Salvation is, fundamentally, a process, in which light is separated from darkness and sin is vanquished. In attaining a certain quantitative degree, victory over sin accomplishes a qualitative change as well, as a result of which the sinner becomes just and holy.'⁵⁴

Is this difference important? Surely it is. It is often said that a crucial sign as to whether a Catholic is born again or not is whether they have assurance of salvation; that is, whether they experience the door of salvation as something they have passed through, or something they are striving uncertainly towards. Is this relevant in the Orthodox context?⁵⁵ The frequent repetition of the prayer 'Lord have

⁵⁰ This is the case whatever position we may take on the issue that divides evangelicals as to whether a believer, once born again, still has the power to 'fall from grace' and forfeit this salvation, placing himself back under the judgment of God.

⁵¹ Quoted Stamoolis, p.135.

⁵² Meyendorff, in Eastern Orthodox Theology, ed. Clendenin, p.93.

⁵³ This assertion is made by Solovyev, for example. However, Lossky clearly endorses the substitutionary atonement, as Clendenin notes (Eastern Orthodox Christianity, p.158).

⁵⁴ Bulgakov, pp.97,96. In fact this 'lifelong process' can even continue after death. That is why prayers for the dead occupy, as Bulgakov says, 'an important place in the Orthodox Church.... They can ameliorate the state of the souls of sinners, and liberate them from the place of distress, and snatch them from hell. This action, of course, supposes not only intercession before the Creator, but a direct action on the soul, an awakening of the powers of the soul, making it worthy of pardon'(p.182). (This idea of the saving power of human action brings Bulgakov perilously close to linking salvation to human merit: 'Our prayers for the dead can... even snatch from hell and lead to paradise those whose condition does not present unsurmountable obstacles'(p.136).)

⁵⁵ Once again, however, Orthodoxy defies absolute doctrinal generalization. Although Lossky affirms (not entirely helpfully) that 'the life in Christ' is an unceasing struggle for the acquisition of transfiguring grace, yet, he adds, once we are within the Church we 'no longer run the risk of losing irremediably our communion with God, for we are included in one body in which the blood of Christ circulates, purifying us

mercy', used several times in the Orthodox service, and especially the 'extraordinarily important... Jesus Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner... surely the most classic of all Orthodox prayers'⁵⁶, might be said to work against the assurance of our having actually received mercy, that is such a clear and joyous mark of the new testament. (See, for example, 1 John 5:13, Rom 8:33ff, Rom 8:1; etc!) The question is whether we have been accepted, forgiven, brought into the heart of God, or not.

The remarkable thing is that the architecture of the Orthodox church (or 'temple', to use the Russian word). actually expresses the exclusion of the ordinary believer. In many churches (though to the strong discomfort of some in the Alexander Men movement⁵⁷) there is a visible barrier (or 'iconostasis'), dividing off, as in the Old Testament temple, a holiest place into which only the priests can pass, hidden from the eyes of the ordinary believers.

Now to anyone acquainted with Hebrews this is very troubling. Hebrews 9 describes the arrangement in the Old Testament temple, where there was 'behind a second curtain, a room called the Most Holy Place... Only the high priest entered the inner room', and explains, '... The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed.' This in turn illustrated the fact that 'the gifts and sacrifices offered' (in the Old Testament time) were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper'(vv3,7-9). In other words, the Old Testament temple was so designed as to demonstrate that our sins were not yet forgiven, that we were not yet free to come into Christ's presence.

But then Jesus died; and, significantly, that 'curtain' was ripped from top to bottom (Luke 23:45). So now, says Hebrews, 'since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience'(10:19-22). It is a confidence Paul expresses with joy: 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come' (2 Cor 5:17). We no longer stand with guilty consciences, excluded from the Most Holy Place; rather, we are welcomed into the very heart of God. We who 'believe in the name of the Son of God' - justified by faith - can 'know that you have eternal life', says John (1 John 5:13).

But the architecture of the Orthodox 'temple' has recreated the barrier. What does that say to our spirituality? Surely, that the ordinary believer doesn't belong in the deepest heart of God. And practically this is very important. This writer's impression is that Orthodox experience often tends to be marked not so much by joyous certainty of acceptance into the very presence of God - 'full assurance of faith', 'cleansed from a guilty conscience' - as by an ongoing grieving for sin, a sense of exclusion still from the Most Holy Place⁵⁸; a fear of a barrier remaining, of sins still unatoned and of

from all sin... This presence of the Holy Spirit in us, which is the condition of our deification, cannot be lost. The notion of a state of grace of which members of the church can be deprived... is foreign to Eastern tradition'(pp.179-80). That is clear - though evangelicals will still be deeply uneasy insofar as this state of security is seen as arising from the sacraments (the point of 'the blood of Christ circulates', it would seem) rather than from 'repentance'. The 'either/or' in this case is of practical importance: Lossky is close to tying salvation to the partaking of the Eucharist.

⁵⁶ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, pp.279,312; cf Bulgakov p.147.

⁵⁷ Cf Men, *Orthodox Worship*, p.35.

⁵⁸ The problem, in other words, is that we've lost our grasp of the enormous change brought us in God's gift of free, once-for-all new birth by faith; and we've moved into thinking of spiritual life as something that comes (or goes) *insofar as* we keep up a repeated participation in the sacraments. In practice, this means our spirituality becomes marked by a sense of uncertainty and distance from God. The 'holy place' of His heart is no longer where we naturally belong, as our home; instead, it becomes somewhere we might possibly get to one day, if we do everything right. Paul's gospel offers us far more than that (cf too John's confidence in 1 John 5:13-14): new birth through faith leading to a joyous assurance of absolute closeness to God.

God still needing to be pacified; I have so much guilt, I dare not enter his holy presence.⁵⁹ A spirituality of sadness often results, rather than of the joy God intends for us and the sense of His love extending into every part of our lives. And this can be crippling. I recall a conscientious Orthodox woman explaining how her sense of being guilty and sinful meant she could not be active in sharing her faith. Obviously there are also implications for our prayer-lives⁶⁰: as our confidence of direct access to Christ is weakened, we feel a need for someone holier to do our praying for us - or else we have confidence only to pray to someone lesser than God: to saints, to Mary, to angels. (What a loss - for ourselves and, we dare say, for the Father who longs for our company!) There can be psychological implications too. Historically, it does even seem that the poets and writers (eg Biely) who followed in the steps of Solovyev early this century are marked not by a sense of triumphant faith but rather of despair at the tragic nature of existence (turning indeed into cynicism).

New Testament spirituality is radically different, in ways we must never lose sight of. It rejoices over the sense of direct intimacy with God. Its writers are thrilled because all the barriers have been broken, once and for all; Christ has died for our sins, and by faith we may all come into God's very heart. To someone trapped in the frustration of attempting to acquire an increasing degree of grace, and yet finding that theosis and sanctity remain as far away as ever, the biblical gospel's assurance of full acceptance by God can be an enormous liberation. But this is something we must not compromise in our message.

It is disappointing to sense a lack of clarity among some of the followers of Alexander Men, after his death, on some of these issues. For Men himself was quite clear on these points: 'Today we have heard the words of the apostle Paul: "Now is the day of salvation." That means that it is today, here and now that the Lord gives salvation... Jesus told Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house." Today. In my country people often talk about salvation, considering it to be a long way away, maybe sometime after death. In so doing, they forget that in Revelation we are told we can receive salvation now, today, if we want it... I remember one old lady who loved to keep on saying, "No, I shall never be saved". Many people even consider themselves pious by believing that they cannot be saved.... The apostle... answers us by saying that not only is it possible for us to be saved, but also that everything for this has already been done.'⁶¹

But not all Orthodox influenced by Men have this clarity, so that although personal responsibility for conversion (something his followers see as one of his key contributions) is still emphasised, the sacramental process of baptism, confession and communion can come (as in Solovyev) to seem equally important. This is probably connected with the fact that many of those influenced by Men have an unusual degree of ecumenical-mindedness; yet this can result in a closer sense of brotherhood with Catholicism (particularly because of a shared experience of the eucharist and of faith in Mary, one believer suggested to me) than with evangelicalism.⁶² Lazouta, in an unpublished paper, suggests that though Men himself often preached as an evangelical would, there remains 'an important question. The works of A.Men are not systematized in any separate, reformed teaching, and his church remains Orthodox. There is, therefore, no guarantee that in the future A.Men's spirit will not merge with traditionalistic Orthodoxy.' Men's calling was as a preacher and apologist rather than a doctrinal theologian; and one wonders whether his contribution was defined with sufficient theological clarity to enable his successors to be a genuinely Bible-based, gospel movement, rather

⁵⁹ This sense of a guilty conscience is precisely the issue again in Hebrews 10: 'Since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near to God... in full assurance of faith, *having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience*' (vv19-22).

⁶⁰ Again, I think specifically of some Nizhny Novgorod students who felt they were far too bad sinners to have their prayers answered. 1 John 3:21-22 is relevant on the whole issue of our basis for confidence before God and its results in prayer.

⁶¹ Quoted by Dmitri Lazouta in an unpublished paper, 'Alexander Men'.

⁶² It is interesting that the criticism of opponents like Andrei Kuraev is that Men diverges from Orthodoxy in the direction of Catholicism, not of evangelicalism.

than a vaguer 'renewal' impulse.⁶³ Which way this stream eventually develops is one of the crucial questions for the future of the church in Russia, and indeed the nation itself.

PREACHING THE CROSS

What is the place of the atonement in Orthodox doctrine?

'The most striking feature in the Orthodox approach to the Incarnate Christ', says Ware, is 'an overwhelming sense of His divine glory', focusing on the transfiguration and resurrection.⁶⁴ In itself this is praiseworthy - and a healthy corrective both to the morbidity of some Catholic devotion (as Lossky suggests) and to the lost perspectives of liberal Protestantism. But there are other aspects of Orthodoxy that, combined with this emphasis on the glorified rather than the suffering Christ, may make us wonder whether Orthodoxy may sometimes be in danger of misplacing the heart of the gospel, and losing sight of the atonement.

Four things at least point this way. First, there is an emphasis in Orthodoxy on deification rather than redemption, as Ware notes.⁶⁵ Second, there is sometimes, perhaps, a tendency to view the incarnation - Christ's union with our nature - as the means of our salvation in itself, which obviously tends to downgrade the significance of the cross.⁶⁶ Thirdly, there is the tendency to emphasise the cross as victory over evil forces rather than as a sacrifice for sin⁶⁷ (though Bulgakov cannot be faulted in this regard); and there is the tendency for salvation to be viewed more as an almost automatic process leading on from 'full forgiveness' at infant baptism⁶⁸ than from a conversion resulting from coming face to face with the cross. All these factors make us wonder whether Christ's death on the cross for our sins may easily become bypassed.

If so, it is very serious. As in the previous section, the question is what lies at the heart of the gospel message; whether the focus of what we want to communicate is on confronting the cross in repentant faith and becoming assured that there our sins were paid for and forgiven, once and for all. ('The cross alone is our theology', said Luther.) It is noticeable that the chapter summarizing Orthodox

⁶³ Also, one should not overemphasise the extent to which Men diverged from the Orthodox mainstream. While in significant ways he can be viewed as an evangelical (with particular parallels with C S Lewis), it is also clear that in very important respects he stands in the tradition of Solovyev, though without some of the problems that complicate Solovyev's thought. It is worth speculating how Men might have developed and written differently if he had had an evangelical intelligentsia to dialogue with; but communism had done its best to strangle that.

⁶⁴ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, pp.230-31. Is there perhaps a problem here that Orthodoxy can move towards docetism, losing something of the real humanity of Christ? ('The cult of the humanity of Christ', says Lossky, 'is foreign to Eastern tradition; or, rather, this deified humanity always assumes for the Orthodox Christian that same glorious form under which it appeared to the disciples on Mount Tabor' (p.243, my emphasis).) And might the use of icons contribute to this loss of Christ's humanity?

⁶⁵ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, p.56.

⁶⁶ Argyris Petrou, in an unpublished paper 'Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism: areas of convergence and divergence', suggests that in Orthodoxy 'Deification is made possible through Christ's hypostatic union of His natures and not through the atonement. Theosis is something made possible through the incarnation... Incarnation is seen as salvific *per se*, and the cross becomes a moral example for humanity.' What is very surprising is the way that the incarnation appears central where we might expect the cross even in Alexander Men. See especially the close and summation of his famous final lecture: 'So if we once again ask ourselves the question, what is the essence of Christianity, then we must answer: it is God-manhood, the joining of the finite and temporal human spirit with the eternal Divinity, it is the sanctification of the flesh, for from that moment when the Son of Man took our joys and our sufferings, our love, our labours, from that moment, nature, the world, everything in which he was, in which he rejoiced, as a man and as a God-man, no longer is rejected, no longer is degraded but is raised up to a new level, and is sanctified.' (*Christianity for the Twenty-First Century*, pp.191-92.) In *Son of Man*, too, the 'central mystery of the Gospel' is the incarnation, not the crucifixion (p.4).

⁶⁷ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, pp.232-34.

⁶⁸ Ware, p.284.

teaching in Arseniev's Russian Piety says almost nothing about Christ's death as a payment for sins. Zernov likewise admits⁶⁹ that Dostoievsky 'never spoke about Christ's redemptive work'; in his books the transforming 'experience of redemption' comes from the vision of Christ's example, the 'glimpse of His glory and beauty'. Even more surprising is the complete absence of any reference to the cross in Alexander Men's article 'Basics of a Christian Worldview': the 'faith of a Christian' focuses on Christ, the 'mystery of the Trinity as evidence of the love of God', and the 'coming to earth of the God-man' as a 'call for people to respond to the love of God'; but the atonement is unmentioned.⁷⁰ In Solovyev too, the exposition of repentance as foundation for the spiritual life at the start of God, Man and the Church is splendid; yet what is omitted is the cross as the basis for that repentance. 'We must receive forgiveness of our sins (through the truth)', and through asking 'Forgive us our sins'; but the atonement that makes forgiveness possible at all seems to be lost sight of. For Paul, in contrast, 'Christ died for our sins' is 'what... I passed on to you as of first importance... by this gospel you are saved' (1 Corinthians 15:2-3, cf 1:17-23, 2:2). If that is downgraded, we must be doubtful as to whether we have the same gospel.

Bulgakov says some remarkable things on this topic. 'Certainly for all Christianity, the Passion of Christ is sacred; the whole Christian world bows before the Cross... But it is not the image of Christ crucified that has possessed the soul of the Orthodox people. It is more the image of Christ, meek and lowly, Lamb of God, Who has taken on Himself the sins of the world, and Who has humbled himself to take a human form... He who submitted without a murmur to outrage and dishonour, and Who answered these with love. The way of spiritual poverty, which contains all the other "beatitudes", is, above all, revealed to the Orthodox soul. The sanctity it seeks... appears in the form of abnegation and supreme humility.'⁷¹ Something may make us uncomfortable here; the cross is present, along with the rest of Christ's life and sufferings; yet it is the ideal of ascetic sanctity that takes the central position. In contrast to Bulgakov's words about the 'image of Christ crucified' that has not 'possessed the soul of the Orthodox people', we think of Paul's summary of the heart of his gospel: 'We preach *Christ crucified*' (1 Cor 1:23). 'I resolved to know nothing while I was with you', he adds, 'except Jesus Christ and him crucified... The message of the cross... is the power of God' (1 Cor 2:2, 1:18).⁷²

There seems a major difference here between Paul's faith and (for example) Bulgakov's. And we may well feel deeply uneasy about any spiritual tradition that has not been totally dominated by the cross, the root and heart of the biblical gospel.

WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?

There are several important questions here. When we and our Orthodox friends set out to 'make disciples', do we have the same end in view? The Orthodox concept of discipleship: is it Bible-based? Is it prayer-based? Is it world-oriented? Is it Christ-centred?

⁶⁹ Nicolas Zernov, Three Russian Masters, p.107.

⁷⁰ Men, Christianity for the Twenty-First Century, pp.68-71 (originally in Kultura i Dukhovnoe Voskhozhdenie (1992)). The cross, and atonement for sin, is also completely missing from Men's remarkable final lecture before his death; see his exposition of the meaning of salvation and faith with which the lecture closes (Christianity for the Twenty-First Century, pp.189-92).

⁷¹ Bulgakov, p.150. In this context it is worth noting Zernov's observation that the translators of the Slavonic Bible 'were not afraid to replace the literal rendering of the Greek words by terms which seemed to them better to express the essence... "To be baptised" becomes in Slavonic no longer "to be immersed", but "to take the Cross"'. But then we notice what kind of theology of the cross underlies Zernov's definition of that important phrase: 'to accept one's cross of suffering and renunciation, and to achieve through it regeneration and resurrection'(p.22). That is hardly what the new testament has in mind as the way to 'achieve regeneration'.

⁷² We should note also the central place of Christ's death to reconcile us to God, when Paul summarizes his message in Colossians 1:21-23 ('This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven').

The first issue concerns the *place of Scripture*. Evangelicals believe that as we encounter the Word of God, we encounter the very presence of God; we take seriously the words of Jesus, 'The words I have spoken to you are Spirit, and they are life' (John 6:63). We notice that for Paul, being filled with the Spirit and letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly seem very closely related, if not synonymous (see how closely Ephesians 5:18-20 resembles Colossians 3:16-17). In Ephesians 6, we note that God's Word is the 'sword of the Spirit', our essential protection against satanic attack; which is why the classic old testament temptation begins with Satan querying, 'Did God really say...?' (Genesis 3:1), and the classic new testament one starts by Jesus insisting that we live by the words that come from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4). God's Word, then, is central to the Church's survival; and also to its growth - we note in Acts that, for Luke, church growth basically meant the increased spread of the Word, so that, repeatedly, his way of announcing the growth of the church is to say that 'The Word of God continued to increase and spread'.⁷³ For us, therefore, the task of 'making disciples' is a task of fostering the 'increasing and spreading of the Word', by sharing it in personal conversation, encouraging each other to feed on it in personal Bible study, and exposing ourselves to it in biblically-oriented preaching and in small Bible study groups.

This vision will be shared by many in the Alexander Men stream (again one thinks also of Alexander Borisov, both in practice in his leadership in the Russian Bible Society, and in print in his appeals for every believer to read the Bible daily). But elsewhere in Orthodoxy we may encounter a different approach as to what discipleship is centrally about. Schmemmann, in his essay 'The Missionary Imperative in the Orthodox Tradition', describes Orthodoxy as 'a church whose life is centred almost exclusively on the liturgy and the sacraments'.⁷⁴ In practice this may seem to involve a displacement of the Word.⁷⁵ And here we confront not only a historical weakness in individual Bible reading, but also a more basic philosophical issue.

According to Lossky, 'the fundamental characteristic of the whole theological tradition of the Eastern Church'⁷⁶ is a 'negative' or 'apophatic' theology - theology far more committed to what cannot be said about God than to what can be said (see the whole of Lossky's ch.2). Lossky cites (pseudo-)Dionysius the Areopagite (the fount of negative theology) to the effect that the 'theology of affirmation', based on statements about God, 'leads us to some knowledge of God, but is an imperfect way. The perfect way... is the second - which leads us finally to total ignorance... Proceeding by negations one ascends from the inferior degrees of being to the highest, by progressively setting aside all that can be known, in order to draw near to the Unknown in the darkness of absolute ignorance'⁷⁷; until finally 'even prayer itself ceases... Nature remains without motion, without action, without the memory of earthly things... the "spiritual silence" which is above prayer'.⁷⁸

As one reads Lossky's work, it is impossible not to feel the power of his writing, and indeed the truth of his awareness that God far transcends all our formulations and understandings. He conveys a deep sense of the awe and majesty of the God whose words are indeed far higher than our words, and His thoughts unutterably beyond our thoughts. The problem is whether, ultimately, the Orthodox approach contains an overemphasis that leads in a different direction from the New Testament, and ultimately downgrades the place of the revelation in which God has chosen deliberately to speak about Himself.

⁷³ See Acts 6:7, 12:24, or 19:20.

⁷⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, 'The Missionary Imperative in the Orthodox Tradition', in Clendenin, *Theology*, p.196.

⁷⁵ I think of one student who stopped reading his Bible on becoming Orthodox, since, he said, tradition, liturgy and the Eucharist were the ways God communicates with us. One hopes this would be unusual.

⁷⁶ Lossky, p.26.

⁷⁷ Lossky, p.25. Alexander Men is much more positive about affirmative, verbal theology; see *Christianity for the Twenty-First Century*, pp.45-46. It is not surprising, therefore, that he emphasises Bible reading much more than does the Orthodox mainstream.

⁷⁸ Lossky, p.208.

For God is revealed to us not, primarily, as the Unknown God (cf Acts 17:23, and Paul's reaction: 'What you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you'). Rather, He revealed Himself as the Word who 'has made the Father known' (John 1:18). 'In the beginning was the Word'; God chooses to reveal Himself in a Name that focuses on the communicability rather than the incommunicability of His Nature. It has been suggested that overemphasis on the incommunicability of God has more resemblance to an eastern than a biblical mysticism⁷⁹; alternatively, Bray argues that pseudo-Dionysius' spirituality of the ascent of the celestial ladder is more neo-platonist than biblical.⁸⁰ (Somehow, reading ch.2 of Lossky, one wonders whether this whole non-verbal approach did not owe its dominance to the lack of Bibles to read in the Reformationless East.)

But the practical point here is that this 'negative' approach can undermine the motivation for Bible study, for studying 'words about God'. Ware gives prominence to a very striking story from the Sayings of the Desert Fathers: 'The old man...said to Abba Joseph, "And what do you think the text means?" He replied, "I do not know." Then Abba Antony said, "Truly, Abba Joseph has found the way, for he said: I do not know".'⁸¹ The Bible certainly has a place in Orthodox theology; but nonverbal experience is supreme. We have to ask whether this kind of spirituality does not set different goals from what Scripture challenges us to do in 'making disciples' - helping them grow more like Christ through lives of worship-and-service that are centred on the Bible.

⁷⁹ Macaulay and Barrs (pp.46,192) criticise the contentless mysticism beyond words espoused by pseudo-Dionysius and Lossky as being indistinguishable from that of eastern religion, and compare the repetitive use of the Jesus Prayer (designed, says Lossky, to drive away 'every external thought or image' (p.210)) with a Hindu mantra. That may be unfair; but one suspects that the tradition of a mystical approach to the divine that deliberately shuns verbal content may inadvertently prove a fertile seedbed for New Age philosophies. Even Lossky admits uneasily that the mystical tradition originated by pseudo-Dionysius is not automatically trinitarian, having affinities with Hindu, neo-platonist and Islamic mysticism (see his treatment in 'Apophysis and Trinitarian Theology', in Clendenin, Eastern Orthodox Theology, pp.152-53). Men says the same in Christianity for the Twenty-First Century, pp.45,46,79. (However, Men emphasises the 'Christ-centredness' and 'meeting with Christ' of the Jesus Prayer, that distinguishes it from a mantra; p.188.)

⁸⁰ Bray describes the scheme of Dionysius, championed by Lossky, as having 'little understanding of sin, which became an inevitable consequence of finitude rather than the fruit of disobedience to the law of God. The passion of Christ lost its atoning significance, and became instead a mortification of the flesh which turned the fleeting ecstasy of the transfiguration into the eternal glory of the ascension. Christ was the Saviour in that he opened the gates of heaven to anyone prepared to work his way there by mystical experience.' (Creeds, Councils and Christ (1984), p.91). Lossky himself denies the charge of neo-platonism in pp.29-34, and he cannot be said to be weak on sin and repentance, as we have seen (pp.204ff). But the path of spiritual growth or ascent that he advocates in the 'negative' tradition of pseudo-Dionysius seems indeed a sanctification by effort more than by grace. 'One must abandon all that is impure and even all that is pure. One must then scale the most sublime heights of sanctity leaving behind one all the divine luminaries, all the heavenly sounds and words.... This way of ascent... is compared by Dionysius to Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai to meet with God.'(p.27) And that, we may feel, is precisely what is wrong: that Sinai was given to show us that any human ascent to try to meet with God (such as that of neoplatonism) ultimately is doomed to failure; and we only can know union with God when grace comes down to our level. Significantly, Lossky himself later describes 'affirmative theology, the theology of the "divine names"' as 'a way which comes down towards us' (p.39). (One is reminded of Paul's rather relevant words in Romans 10:6-8: 'The righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'"' Instead, 'What does it say? "The Word is near you"'. That Word that has come to us from God, rather than our human struggle for ascent, holds the key to spirituality and salvation.)

⁸¹ Ware, The Orthodox Way, p.12. There can be other problems too. The website of the liberal World Student Christian Federation recently told a story of a WSCF student based in St Petersburg for some months, whose efforts at setting up a Bible study were rejected by Orthodox students on the grounds that he was wrong to be giving attention to a passage that was not selected by the Church's liturgies for that day. This was a reasonable enough position, if indeed the Tradition of the Church is the fundamental revelation of the Spirit.

So that is the first issue we must face regarding the biblical and Orthodox understandings of discipleship. A second question goes with it, namely the *place of 'everyday' prayer* in mainstream Orthodox spirituality.

For the new testament, personalized prayer on any and all occasions and for any and all matters is an essential part of spiritual warfare. 'Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests', says Paul at the close of his account of our armour for spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6: '... Be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth words may be given me.' Here again the Orthodox mainstream faces difficulties as a result of its enormous emphasis on the importance of what has been revealed through the ongoing Tradition of the Church. My mind turns to a friend who was uncomfortable even to give thanks extempore for food, if this would involve a prayer that was not validated by having a place in the Church's liturgy.⁸² (Which was entirely reasonable, given his theology.) Of course many evangelicals make use of liturgy; probably nearly all of us employ certain repeated phrases at some point or other of our church services, or our private devotions. Yet if we are serious about fostering in those we disciple a sense of God not only as unimaginably distant but also as our 'Abba', our Father (as Paul puts it with astounding familiarity), then the cultivation of informal, non-liturgical, personal prayer is crucial. (Here again the Men renewal movement is a refreshing encouragement; Borisov emphasises that talking with God is a dialogue characterised by freedom to express what we really feel and think, and that much is lost in relationship with God if only the traditional forms of prayer are used.⁸³)

A third issue concerns what we understand as the goal and *ideal of discipleship*. Can we share the Orthodox commitment to be the ascetic, monastic vision? The whole Orthodox spirituality of discipline and ascent seems to imply the monastic life as something of an ideal ('Monasticism is simply the highest degree of' conversion, of 'the will turned towards God', says Lossky⁸⁴). We may feel that this approach to discipleship, with its emphasis on ascetic withdrawal for the task of private spiritual ascent, does not fit the emphasis on outward-going, world-oriented love and mission as the very shape of discipleship that we find in apostolic Christianity.⁸⁵ (See, for example, John 17:14-19; or the Great Commission with which Matthew summarizes Jesus' last forty days of teaching, in the closing verses of his gospel.) As a shorthand we might compare the goals expressed in Isaac the Syrian's three stages on the way to personal union with God - penitence, purification from the passions, acquisition of perfect (Godward) love (ie, religious ecstasy)⁸⁶ - with the more outward-oriented longing of a recent evangelical song about union with Christ: 'More love, more power/ More of You in my life!'. Which is closer to the biblical understanding of what discipleship means?

But finally, and most importantly, there is the question of the *centrality of Christ*. It is difficult to avoid a sense that, in some streams of Orthodoxy, pure devotion to Christ can sometimes find itself almost in competition with other concerns. Take, for example, these remarks of Bulgakov: 'We are conscious, at one time, both of the immediate nearness and dearness of Christ and of the presence of our Lord and Judge. It is naturally necessary to hide ourselves in awe before the Judge of all, and here we take refuge beneath the protection of the Virgin and the Saints. For they belong to our race and kind. With them we may speak in our language of human frailty.'⁸⁷

⁸² And of a student who, for the same genuinely logical reason, stopped praying 'extempore' altogether after converting to Orthodoxy.

⁸³ Borisov, pp.166-68. And cf Men on the life of Christ: 'Neither temple activity nor even communal prayer could replace one-on-one communion with God, a secret discussion with the Father' (Son of Man, p.60).

⁸⁴ Lossky, p.200.

⁸⁵ Alexander Men is much more biblical on these issues, and much more critical of the wrong kind of asceticism; for example in Christianity for the Twenty-First Century, pp.72-73.

⁸⁶ Lossky, pp.204, 209.

⁸⁷ Bulgakov, p.122. To this I would add a sense that sometimes, when a person converts from evangelicalism to Orthodoxy, personal devotion to Christ sometimes seems to fade beneath commitment to the Church.

There are several things to puzzle us here. Why, if (as Bulgakov also insists) the Virgin was free from 'any individual sin'⁸⁸, can she share 'our language of human frailty' more than can Christ? And what does such a distinction do to the genuineness of Christ's incarnation as a fully human being? But again the practical issue is what this means for the focus of true discipleship. Who is to be the focus of our (and our disciples') love and worship: Mary or Christ? We may feel more uneasy still as we read Lossky, who quotes approvingly St Dmitri of Rostov's answer to the question as to 'why the Word of God delayed... His incarnation to save fallen humanity. But before the middle of the 6th Millennium since the fall of Adam, it was not possible to find a virgin pure in body as well as in spirit. There was only one such... worthy to become the church and the temple of the Holy Spirit.'⁸⁹ Mary's own goodness, it seems, made salvation possible. And now it 'is through her that men and angels receive grace. No gift is received in the Church without the assistance of the Mother of God.' Lossky quotes an Orthodox hymn: 'Let us hymn the Glory of the universe, Flower of the human race, who gave birth to the master, Gate of heaven, the Virgin Mary... She who has overthrown the middle wall of enmity; she who has brought in peace and thrown open the Kingdom'.⁹⁰ 'Overthrown the middle wall': somehow Mary here has acquired a perfection enabling her to take over what, from Ephesians 2:14, one would have seen as the work of God the Son; surely one cannot deny that Lossky's words make her, in effect, co-Redeemer. 'She is our glorified prototype, the one who speaks for us all before the throne of the Son', says Arseniev⁹¹; 'She is the one who represents mankind in the divine glory.' We should also listen to the overwhelming force of Bulgakov's comments on this topic: 'Love and veneration for the Virgin is the soul of Orthodox piety... A faith in Christ which does not include His virgin birth and the veneration of His Mother is another faith, another Christianity from that of the Orthodox Church... She is the justification, the end and the meaning of creation. She is, in this sense, the glory of the world. In her God is already "all in all".'⁹² We may wonder what fifty years' immersion in the life of a local Orthodox congregations will do to a believer in terms of these relative priorities. (Again Borisov speaks here as a sane voice within Orthodoxy, cautioning against allowing respect for Mary, the saints and the Church to replace the centrality of Christ.⁹³)

After that, the question of Orthodoxy's encouragement to true believers to pray to the saints, the angels, and even deceased parents⁹⁴, may seem somewhat less of an issue; particularly once we take into account Orthodoxy's insistence that it is not worship that is given to the saints but respectful veneration, that they 'are not mediators between God and man - this would set aside the Unique Mediator, which is Christ'⁹⁵; along with the reasonable suggestion that, if it is acceptable to request someone's prayers for us on earth, there is no reason to cease to do so once they have joined that

⁸⁸ Bulgakov, p.117.

⁸⁹ Lossky, p.140.

⁹⁰ Lossky, pp.194-95.

⁹¹ Arseniev, p.41.

⁹² Bulgakov, pp.116,118. The degree to which this concerns Bulgakov may be judged by his remark that the mother of Jesus (rather than, as Scripture indicates, Mary Magdalene) 'was the first to participate in his Resurrection'(p.117). In passing, we might wonder whether Orthodoxy's vehement insistence that Mary remained perpetually virgin (despite Matthew 1:25) implies for its doctrine of sexuality - whether to be 'non-virgin' doesn't become inevitably second-rate, with human sexuality thereby being downgraded.

⁹³ Borisov, p.156. Is Luke 11:27-28 relevant to all this? There a woman cries out to Jesus, 'Blessed is the mother who gave you birth.' Jesus does not encourage her attitude, turning her instead towards the Word: 'He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."'

⁹⁴ Ware, Orthodox Church, p.260.

⁹⁵ Bulgakov, p.119. And Khomiakov carefully distinguishes the Orthodox approach from Catholicism: 'Taking it as a first principle that the life of the spiritual world is nothing but love and communion at prayer, she' (the Orthodox Church) 'prays for the dead, even though she rejects the fable of purgatory... she asks for the intercession of the saints', though not looking for merit from their prayers and 'not acknowledging the necessity for any intercession other than that of our Divine Mediator' (in Schmemmann, p.54). It is worth noting that Alexander Men taught the importance both of praying for the dead and praying to the saints; and indeed my understanding is that, now Men himself has been martyred, some at least of his followers pray to him and make regular visits to his tomb.

`great cloud of witnesses' surrounding us of which the writer of Hebrews is so acutely aware (12:1). We may wonder whether our differences over such veneration should be regarded more as a cultural or denominational differences on the level of (for some of us) speaking in tongues - ie, disturbingly alien to traditions from which we maybe come⁹⁶ but not a fundamental gospel issue; meaning that we might be willing for our converts to get involved in church circles where they are liable to pick up such practices.

Or is there something more fundamental at stake? We may have questions: does Scripture anywhere indicate that such a relationship with departed parents, saints or angels is possible? Is it even permissible (see Deuteronomy 18:11)?⁹⁷ Perhaps God indicates that in His immense grace He wants our prayers for Himself? Does Scripture imply that the human tendency towards animism, polytheism and magic is so strong that our dealings with the supernatural should be directly with God alone? (Is it significant that Orthodox cultures, like Catholic ones, have a propensity towards occultism?) Our concern here is not just with what is taught by the alert theologian but what is practised at the local folk-religion level; when we consider how easily such veneration can slide into something more closely resembling magic, the intercession of numerous spiritual figures until we find one that seems to work.

(Our concern may be deepened when we think of the important place of Solovyev in the development of modern Orthodox thought, and the extent of his interests, until late in life, in the occult. One major reason why he came to London in 1875, writes Zernov, was that it was the centre of the spiritualist movement: `On his arrival in England he plunged into the study and practice of mysticism. He read widely, and attended the meetings of spiritualists and other occultists, without finding what he sought. He lived in a state of expectancy, and believed that some important revelation would shortly be given him.... Solovyev's expectations were justified. In the Reading Room of the British Museum occurred the decisive event which altered the whole course of his life', the vision of the female figure of Sophia, the Divine Wisdom, that would be crucial for his future philosophy (and Bulgakov's).⁹⁸ We have to ask whether there is something in Solovyev here that is less Christian than Swedenborgian, something owing dangerously much to his occult explorations?)

In His infinite grace, our God desires our attention for Himself; and that is why our discipling must be safeguard our prayer-life as something exclusively Christ-centred. `I want to know Christ', says Paul, `I count everything loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ' (Phil 3:8,10). `Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love' (Eph 6:24). Nothing must take His place; fostering that yearning for Christ, to an ever-deepening degree, must be the goal at the heart of our discipling; and no alternative.

CONCLUSION

There is far more that could be said. The above represents a subjective selection of the issues, and is incomplete. To this writer, it is not clear how serious a barrier is posed by the Orthodox view(s) of communion, particularly given the Orthodox insistence that though the Eucharist is a true sacrifice, it is a timeless entering into Christ's sacrifice made `once only, for all time', rather than either a new sacrifice or a repetition of Calvary.⁹⁹ (O'Callaghan¹⁰⁰ even describes it in these terms: `Christ's sacrifice is not repeated, but we offer Christ's sacrifice on Calvary to God in union with our prayers and

⁹⁶ Except when we are singing `Angels, help us to adore Him', or `Yet she on earth hath union/With God the Three in One/And mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is one', or `Saints and angels, give ye glory to His Name'!

⁹⁷ Or Isaiah 8:19: `Should not a people enquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?'

⁹⁸ Nicolas Zernov, *Three Russian Prophets* (1944), pp.120-21.

⁹⁹ Ware, *Orthodox Church*, pp.292-94. On the other hand, we should also take careful note of the way Hebrews 1:3 (for example) speaks, that Christ completed His sacrifice and then `sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high'; the sacrifice is finished.

¹⁰⁰ Paul O'Callaghan, *An Eastern Orthodox Response to Evangelical Claims* (Minneapolis, 1984), p.21.

intercessions. It is the supreme form of "pleading the blood of Jesus" as evangelicals say.) The theology of icons likewise seems capable of wide variation. It may be that, for some people, the belief that they are a source of divine energy can lead into a 'magical' approach that sees grace as a mystical power, rather than accepting it as God's gift of once-for-all salvation through the cross; but that is not inevitable.¹⁰¹ (Although any evangelical should feel uncomfortable about the pastoral implications of an attitude to icons that goes as far as the position adopted by the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, that icons were 'of an equal benefit to us as the gospel narrative'. I have heard it argued that the icon has held the place in Orthodoxy that the Bible does in evangelicalism; evangelicals may feel that what can be received from the icon is inevitably a great deal less full and less practical for discipleship.) This writer would also suggest that westerners should not feel they have the only right or biblical way of looking at the filiogue issue that served as the final pretext for the original division of West from East.¹⁰² But the preceding sections have sought to focus on four central issues - the fundamental basis for life and doctrine, the gospel's meaning, the cross, and the nature of discipleship - on which in practice it is essential to know where we stand and what we are teaching.

It is questionable how far the official teaching of the Church will be what we encounter locally. As we have said, Orthodoxy is a tradition not strongly concerned with clarity of doctrinal formulation, beyond what has been inherited from the distant past; in addition the long years of communist oppression hindered the development of doctrinal training and materials. Thus one wonders what is most strongly communicated to the average local churchgoer, in churches centred around liturgy (in Church Slavonic) and the eucharist, and where often there is little teaching from the Bible. One evangelist told me that students he encountered in Belarus who went regularly to the Orthodox churches there 'don't understand anything - they know nothing about the Bible, the church and what they do there.' At that point, of course, the believer's doctrinal position can go in any number of ways.

In principle, there is no reason why a stream of genuine evangelicalism should not develop within Orthodoxy - though it might look unlike the varieties of evangelicalism that originated in the west. In the seventeenth century Orthodoxy had an Ecumenical Patriarch, Cyril Lukaris, who was consciously a thorough Calvinist, affirming the final authority of scripture and justification by faith - though after he was strangled and thrown into the Bosphorus, his views were condemned by no less than six local Councils within sixty years. It was a remarkable and critical moment. (Lossky quotes him as an awful example to be avoided.¹⁰³) In Romania today, one wing of the Lord's Army movement within Orthodoxy has deliberately affirmed the doctrinal basis of the Evangelical Alliance; and, in Russia itself, many evangelical Protestants regard Alexander Men himself as an evangelical. The question is whether over time, under the pressure of the authorities, his renewal movement will return to a mainstream Orthodox doctrinal position; it will be interesting to see how far the sense remains of the priority of such things as Bible exposition, small group Bible study, group intercession, and personal and collective evangelism. In the present tense political situation, however, major developments seem unlikely, and the Patriarchate sometimes seems concerned to make clear that deviations from the mainstream are unlikely to be tolerated. Perhaps the most creative attempts at fusion of biblical content with cultural expressions deriving from Orthodoxy will take place outside the mainstream.

¹⁰¹ Evangelicals are likely to feel less uneasy with the westerner Ware on this topic - 'Because icons are only symbols, Orthodox do not worship them, but reverence or venerate them'(p.40) - than with Lossky, the Russian, who goes rather further: 'An icon or a cross does not exist simply to direct our imagination during our prayers. It is a material centre in which there reposes an energy, a divine force, which unites itself to human art'(p.189). (Later he speaks of 'the manifestations of grace in relics, in places sanctified by appearances of the Virgin or by the prayer of saints, in holy wells, in wonder-working images'(p.191).) Lossky's fellow-Russian Bulgakov also has a good deal to say about the 'power of sanctification of the icon' (pp.140-42), which he argues stands in a tradition dating back 'even from pre-Christian antiquity'(p.142) - which is precisely the problem, some might feel.

¹⁰² For the Orthodox position see Vladimir Lossky, In the Image and Likeness of God (New York, 1985), pp.71-96.

¹⁰³ Lossky, Mystical Theology, p.186.

Meanwhile, both evangelicals and Orthodox would recognise that, biblically, leaders and teachers must be people who are not only born again but whose doctrine is truly in full accord with Scripture. Leaders, Paul says, must be people who 'hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by firm doctrine and refute those who oppose it' (Titus 1:9). One of the hardest things in a discussion like this is to avoid a sense of arrogance in raising the issues at all. Further, we sense our hearts warmed as we read some of these writers; and then to have to face the doctrinal issues can go severely against the grain.

However, it is important to recognise what we are doing in this exercise. We are not trying to determine who is born again and who has the Holy Spirit; but there is a crucial issue of whether leaders and teachers are indeed 'holding firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that (they) can encourage others by firm doctrine'. Probably at this point mainstream evangelicals and mainstream Orthodox can do no more than regretfully say of each other (as we ourselves would say of certain extreme fundamentalist or extreme charismatic groups) that, though we gladly recognise each other's submission to Christ, we cannot with confidence affirm that the other is indeed 'holding firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught'. We would hope that at this time our mainstream Orthodox acquaintances could dialogue with us on just such a basis (it would be a great improvement on the repression that sometimes occurs); and that they will accept it if, respectfully, we dialogue with them on the same basis.

At any rate Russian Orthodoxy deserves our prayers. As we have seen, there is reason to feel that in vital ways its mainstream understanding of the gospel and of discipleship differs very significantly from Scripture. But its unique place in Russian identity means that what it preaches and lives out is of tremendous significance for the life of this great country and its people; and, therefore, for the world as a whole. It is something we do well to pray for.

ADDITIONAL NOTE: SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

There are several other issues related to the doctrine of the Church that are worth reflecting on because of their significant social implications, and their ability perhaps to explain some of what we see in Russian history, though they are less important than those we have already examined.

First, we might consider the issue of freedom for diversity, as against authoritarianism. We noted a problem in Solovyev, that his doctrine of what is central to the Church leaves very little room for diversity. 'The hierarchical succession, which has its starting point in Christ, is the way whereby the grace of God spreads through His whole body, that is, through all the Church; belief in the dogma of His Incarnation, through which we confess that Christ is perfect man, is the witness to the truth of Christ; the holy sacraments are the source of the life of Christ in us. In the hierarchy, Christ Himself is present as the way; in the confession of faith, as truth; in the sacraments, as life... The human fellowship that possesses a true hierarchical succession coming from Christ, and confesses the true faith and has the true sacraments, has immediately everything necessary to constitute the Church; on the other hand, a fellowship that lacks one of these elements cannot be the Church.' If one of the three is missing, therefore, says Solovyev, the others are affected too: a fellowship marked by the 'absence of the hierarchical succession from Christ' will 'necessarily lack also the divine grace of the sacraments which should be ministered by the priesthood; and as a result of this absence of the life of grace, lacking a real communion with God, even the confession of faith becomes an abstract and lifeless formula.' That, of course, denies that most evangelical churches are truly churches at all. The problem here arises from Solovyev's (very Orthodox) concept of unity centred on mutual commitment to a visible, earthly hierarchy of bishops, rather than the 'invisible' unity of shared faith and life in the Spirit that evangelicals would confess. But what makes it really problematic is that the

beliefs forcing Solovyev to refuse to recognise evangelical communities as churches, are in fact beliefs central to the entire picture of the Church as he presents it.

But connected with this is another issue that ultimately extends very far; ultimately, it is the question of the entire goal of Christian activity. The tradition of Khomiakov and those who followed him presented a powerful vision of an entire Russian national community suffused by the Church. For an evangelical, there is a magnificent yet ultimately fatal idealism about this conception.

On the one hand, Khomiakov's emphasis on the Church as the free yet totally interconnected Body of Christ on earth, indwelt by the Spirit, the firstfruits of the new creation, is biblical and inspiring. His critique of the tendencies of Papal Catholicism to transform this into a hierarchical institution dominated by authoritarian control fits well with that of evangelicals. And, when he proceeds to criticise Protestants for allowing individualistic rationalism to become their guiding principle, we must recognise the validity of the challenge - even if we feel he has failed to understand both the difference between rationalistic liberal Protestants and Bible-based evangelicals, and the concept of an underlying spiritual unity beneath organisational and denominational diversity that informs the evangelical approach to the Church's unity.

But there is a problem. Khomiakov's vision is of the entire community permeated by the sacramental life of the Spirit, embodied in one united Church.¹⁰⁴ Nicolas Zernov cites in his study of Khomiakov the comment in the first Russian Chronicle that 'we are all one family, for all have been baptized in the same Christ.' But that is precisely the problem. The vision of an entire nation (Dostoevsky's 'our people') united in obedience to Christ is wonderful; the question is whether it is at all biblically realistic. If we ask what the new testament suggests will be the response to the true gospel, Jesus' words come to mind: the gate is narrow, and there are few that find it (Matthew 7:14). Here we do not find a picture of an entire nation unified in the life of the Spirit. Rather, we see a theme that also runs throughout the prophecy of Isaiah: many reject God's ways, and there is only a small remnant who find salvation in a rebellious world. Indeed, the whole of Christ's ministry seems repeatedly to force His hearers to the point of decision as to whether they will join this radical believing minority. Surrounded by the crowds - before the proclamation of the sermon on the mount, for example; or most notably when they would make Him into a theocratic king in John 6 - He does not preach the vision of a unified community that embraces everyone. Instead, He challenges them to decision with a proclamation of discipleship so radical that most of His hearers turn away. Ultimately, we must face up to the literally 'divisive' and uncompromising nature of Jesus' announcement that He had not come to bring peace (and unity) but a sword (Matthew 10:34). This points the way to a church made up only of real believers; it is not a vision of a 'baptized nation'.

And it is because Khomiakov's vision extends beyond what is feasible in a world where God has foreknown that many will choose the 'broad road that leads to destruction', that it overextends itself in an idealism which - like that of marxism - ultimately risks totalitarianism. If we think in terms of an entire community suffused by the life of Orthodoxy, we may soon be in danger of confusing the Church with the State. For the evangelical, the biblical vision of the Church is something that will never be attained on earth; the Church is semper reformanda, always needing to be reformed, and the larger and more powerful it gets the more temptation it will face and the more likely it is to need reformation. For Khomiakov, in contrast, the eternal Church is genuinely embodied in the visible Orthodox Church - which makes it harder to face up to the corruption and power-temptations of human institutions. (Of course to say 'human' is to take up the Protestant position?). And this can be doubly unfortunate as the Church comes closer to including the whole country, meaning it includes more people who should not have been recognised as believers in the first place - and who will use

¹⁰⁴ Zernov, p.38, says of the liturgy, 'The whole nation as one body enacted all the main stages of the Redemption... The main Russian achievement was to make the rhythm of the movement so perfect that the whole nation could act as one body in which every individual felt himself at unity with the others and yet spontaneous and free. This was the Russian ideal expressed by the word sobornost...'

power in practical ways that can turn Khomiakov's over-idealism about unity into something more like totalitarianism. (We have seen exactly the same thing in Western State Churches of past centuries; they too sought to include whole populations by baptism, they too ended up with not a few ungodly leaders, and they too could be viciously totalitarian.).

Thus we read Khomiakov's idealistic emphasis on 'the widely accepted Russian custom of treating only unanimous decisions as morally binding, since they... made it possible for people to hear objective truth, the voice of the Holy Spirit'¹⁰⁵ - and our minds go to the most obvious parallel in recent history, namely the unanimous elections of the communist period. If in our idealism we demand in this world the visible unity of the eternal Church, it may have to be achieved by manipulation or even by force - and those methods may indeed be used if the Church's leadership includes those who are indeed baptized but not truly born again. This overemphasis, this unrealistic dream, may well be what motivates some politically- and nationalistically-minded figures to seek to maintain the facade of Russia as a single-confession state - and to do it by totalitarian means if necessary (even at the price of denying what Khomiakov also wrote about the vital nature of freedom in religious belief). Protestantism, in contrast, sees the individual's free decision as central to the human drama; it is logical, therefore, for it to encourage a climate that has at least some regard for diversity and freedom of personal decision - and it is not coincidental that the rise of Protestantism and the rise of parliamentary democracy are historically linked. Kent Hill has suggested that the 'achilles heel' of Orthodoxy, the point at which it goes wrong, has tended to be the confusion in its relationship of the Church and the State; the attractive but ultimately unfortunate over-idealism of Khomiakov's 'dream of unity' of a Russian State totally suffused by Orthodoxy made this confusion and temptation to totalitarianism, if not inevitable, then all too probable.

We should also note two other problems. First, the unwillingness to accept a purified church of true believers only, that is therefore smaller than the nation as a whole, can lead to a public culture over-tolerant of corruption. Obviously if the Church is for the whole nation, then it must be entered by sacramental baptism (which can be made fairly universal for the population), not by the radical personal choice of faith (which only some will make).¹⁰⁶ And in practice, sacramentalism leads to uncertainty, as we have seen: if (but only if) you can keep up your sacramental observance right up to life's closing seconds, then you may reach heaven; but earlier than that there can be no assurance of salvation such as would result from a clear step of new birth. But this has consequences in terms of guilt, uncertainty, and frustration (which in practice can rebound into carelessness about sin¹⁰⁷). If there is no clear step of new birth into a totally new life, there cannot be so high an expectation of radically changed behaviour. Instead, the believer sins, goes to confession, takes the Eucharist, goes away, inevitably will sin again - and since no radical 'new birth' has taken place, this is to be expected. (1 John 3:9 is much more radical: 'No one who is born of God will continue to sin... He cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God'. The

¹⁰⁵ Zernov, p.72. Does such a theology also not make it very hard to face and handle disagreement, to affirm while disagreeing? 'To us, conflict is unbearable', one leader told me as she described the unacknowledged issues dividing churches in her region, 'whereas you westerners disagree and can yet work together.' And is there not often a further problem that, if conflict is 'unbearable', one overt disagreement means someone becomes marked as belonging to a hostile faction? 'Either you must be 100% with us or else 100% against us', it sometimes seems; but so uncompromising an expectation of unity leads either to authoritarianism or to conflict, division, and fragmentation.

¹⁰⁶ We may compare here Zernov's enthusiasm for the unifying moment when the bells ring out in Moscow at Easter at midnight: 'At that moment all Russians were once more united: Christians and agnostics, good and bad, all were one body, conscious of their common manhood, redeemed and released by the power that raised Christ from the dead. (p.39) Such a 'unifying moment' is wonderful, is deeply felt; but so broad a unity has a big price - despite the talk of the 'one body', Zernov has to settle for something (the shared experience of the bells) that is temporary and is far less than the eternal unity that comes from shared new birth and shared life in the Spirit.

¹⁰⁷ Might we say that there is at times a certain over-tolerance of sin in Dostoevski?

whole point there is that a new birth has clearly taken place, and, if it is real, it must make a genuine difference.)

Now there is a very obvious contrast between the public morality of Catholic cultures that are based on this kind of theology, and ones that have been Protestant where new birth and radical change of life were clearly taught. It is surely undeniable that Catholic European countries are marked by a much higher level of bribery and corruption than their (ex-)Protestant neighbours - which is one reason why most of the world's leading economies have arisen in Protestant countries. And it may well be that Orthodox cultures have had a similar problem, for the same basic reasons. The sacramentalist lack of clarity about a new birth that separates believers clearly from unbelievers is something mainstream Orthodoxy tends to share with Catholicism; and a weaker public morality may well have resulted that gives little basis for a strong legal system, strong business ethics, or consistent law enforcement. These problems serve in turn, of course, to paralyse economic growth. (It will be interesting to see how long the West's economic strength outlives its abandonment of its Protestant roots. Already there are clear signs of a widespread collapse of ethics in the business scene which in turn necessitates all kinds of controls that stifle growth.)

A final problem is the link that arises between this kind of 'national church' and nationalism; for it is not accidental, but rather an all too logical consequence of the identification of the Church and a 'holy' nation. Links between virulent nationalism and nominal religion have been evident throughout eastern Europe in recent years; and religions identified with the bulk of a community, and that blur the line between nominal and true believers, are particularly vulnerable. It has been tragic, in former Yugoslavia for example, to watch how little was done by church hierarchies (from the Pope downwards) to restrain the ethnic hate by clear church discipline. It is hard to see how someone can claim to be a true Orthodox (or Catholic, or Protestant), if they do not implement such central commands of Christ as 'Love your enemy'; even if they justify their acts of enmity by their loyalty to a supposedly divinely-chosen nation. But a theological system that puts more emphasis on baptizing a whole country than on the radical new birth of individuals may be very vulnerable in these regards.