

This is a chapter from *The Non-Orthodox: The Orthodox Teaching on Christians Outside of the Church*. This book was originally published in 1999 by Regina Orthodox Press in Salisbury, MA (Frank Schaeffer's publishing house). For the complete book, as well as reviews and related articles, go to <http://orthodoxinfo.com/inquirers/status.aspx>. (© Patrick Barnes, 1999, 2004)

## VI. Can the Non-Orthodox Be Called "Christians"?

It should be apparent by now that knowledgeable Orthodox Christians employ the term "Christian" rather loosely when referring to the heterodox. This is akin to referring respectfully to a Roman Catholic clergyman as a "Priest" or to a Lutheran confessional body as a "church." In a way, we are using these terms according to *oikonomia*.

When, however, the term "Christian" is used with attention to theological accuracy and consistency—*i.e.*, according to *akribeia*—, it means an organic union with Christ, which is inseparably linked to membership in the Church—His Body. Just as "falling in love" is quite different from being united in marriage as "one flesh" (Eph. 5:28-32; Gen. 2:24), conversion to Christ is different than union with Him in the Mystery of Holy Baptism. The former are inclinations of the heart; the latter are the organic realities.

In the divine-human organism of the Church every believer is like a living cell that becomes an integral part of it, and lives with wonderworking, divine-human power. For to be a member of the Church means: to become incarnated with the God-man, to share His body (Eph. 3:6), to become an organic part of His divine-human body (Eph. 5:30; 1 Cor. 12:12-13), in a word: to become divine-human in the entire reality of one's human personality. If one attains this, he has attained a divine-human monism of life, and has a living and immortal sense that he has passed over from death into life (cf. Jn. 5:24; 3:36; 11:25-26). Moreover, he ceaselessly senses with all his being that the Church, as a divine-human organism, is the God-man extended into the ages.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, in his address to those who had been sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit (Chrismated) immediately following Baptism, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem could say:

Having been baptized into Christ, and put on Christ, ye have been made conformable to the Son of God; for God having foreordained us unto adoption as sons, made us to be conformed to the body of Christ's glory. Having therefore become partakers of Christ, ye are properly called Christs, and of you God said, Touch not My Christ, or anointed. Now ye have been made Christs, by receiving the antitype of the Holy Ghost; and all things have been wrought in you by imitation, because ye are images of Christ. He washed in the river Jordan, and having imparted of the fragrance of His Godhead to the

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<sup>67</sup> *The Struggle for Faith*, trans. the Rt. Rev. Archimandrite Todor Mika, S.T.M., and the Very Rev. Dr. Stevan Scott (Grayslake, Illinois: The Serbian Orthodox Diocese of the United States of America and Canada, 1989), p. 127. Cf. Eph. 4:4-5, 15-16; 5:25ff; 1 Cor. 6:15,19 with Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16.

waters, He came up from them; and the Holy Ghost in the fullness of His being lighted on Him, like resting upon like. And to you in like manner, after you had come up from the pool of the sacred streams, there was given an Unction, the anti-type of that wherewith Christ was anointed; and this is the Holy Ghost;... Having been counted worthy of this Holy Chrism, ye are called Christians, verifying the name also by your new birth. For before you were deemed worthy of this grace, *ye had properly no right to this title*, but were advancing on your way towards being Christians.<sup>68</sup>

The Holy Russian New Martyr Hilarion, in his brilliant little book *Christianity or the Church?*, provides further insight into these Patristic concepts when he discusses how the term “Christian” was used in the early Church:

Before anything else, the [early] Christians became conscious of themselves as members of the Church. The Christian community referred to itself as a “Church” in preference to all other names. The word “Church” (*ekklesia*) appears one hundred and ten times in the New Testament, while such words as “Christianity” and similar words with the same ending are completely unknown in the New Testament. After the descent of the Holy Spirit on Christ’s disciples and apostles, the Church came into being as a visible community with a spiritual interrelation amongst its members. . . . What did it mean at that time to be a Christian?

In our times we hear many various answers such as: “To be a Christian means to recognize Christ’s teaching, to try and fulfill His commandments.” This, of course, is the best of such answers. The first Christians, however, answered the question in a completely different way. From the very first pages of its history, Christianity appears before us in the form of an harmonious and unanimous community. *Outside of this community there were no Christians. To come to believe in Christ, to become a Christian—this meant uniting with the Church.* This is repeatedly expressed in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, where we read that the Lord daily added the saved to the Church (Acts 2:47; 5:13-14). Each new believer was like a branch grafted to the tree of Church life.<sup>69</sup>

Therefore, properly speaking, to be a Christian is to be “in Christ” and in His Church, which is normally<sup>70</sup> effected through triple immersion in the blessed waters.

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<sup>68</sup> *Catechetical Lecture XXI, “On Chrism,”* trans. Edwin Hamilton Gifford, D.D., *NPNF* 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., Vol. 7, pp. 147, 150, emphasis ours.

<sup>69</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 17-18, emphasis ours.

<sup>70</sup> As Hieromonk Haralampos of Holy Transfiguration Monastery once pointed out to me:

There are other ways to enter the Church that do not apply to most people. For example, the thief on the cross was assured that he would be in Paradise with Christ, though he was not baptized. There are also numerous examples of martyrs whose only baptism was one of blood. Others have even been baptized *in extremis* without the use of water. However, in this case the baptism would be later “corrected” by the Church if possible.

There is also the issue of “catechumens”—those who are undergoing “catechesis” (instruction) and are awaiting to be fully received into the Church. They are properly called “Christians” since they have fled to the Church and placed themselves under Her pastoral care and authority. They are truly “Christians”—

## Further Biblical and Patristic Considerations

One possible way of looking at the status of heterodox believers is to compare them to New Testament “God-fearers” like Cornelius (Acts 10:2) or the Roman centurion (who, by the way, had greater faith than anyone in Israel; Saint Matt. 8:10).

Virtue has its own value, wherever it is to be found. And yet these virtues are insufficient in themselves, without faith in Christ and reception into His Church. Before meeting the Apostle Peter, Cornelius neither believed aright concerning God, nor taught others the truth. But God, beholding his diligence in that which he knew, and foreseeing also how willingly he would embrace the truth, brought him to know Christ in a wondrous manner. . . .

Saint John Chrysostom, commenting on [Acts 10:2ff], has written, “. . .if He did not overlook the Magi, nor the Ethiopian, nor the thief, nor the harlot, much more them that work righteousness, and are willing, shall He in anywise not overlook.” The righteousness of Cornelius was not overlooked by God; it prepared him to receive the Gospel and so to be joined to the Church, wherein was the fulfillment and reward of that righteousness.<sup>71</sup>

A related example from the Old Testament may help, as well. Rahab, who was not visibly in the covenant community (Israel), nonetheless feared God (Joshua 2:8-21; cf. Saint Matt. 21:31); she is listed in the “Hall of Faith” (Hebrews 11:31) for her righteous act of hiding the three spies. Does anyone doubt her eternal destiny? Regarding the Old Testament Saints, the Greek Orthodox theologian John Karimiris writes:

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though imperfect or incomplete—according to historical terminology. Perhaps a more modern designation would be “probationers,” “postulants,” or “candidates.” When baptized, they will be perfect Christians (*teleioi*); we would say “full Christians.”

Today, however, to be called a “Christian” is a fuzzy term when you consider that the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses pose as “Christian ‘churches.’” It is also not uncommon to run into someone who claims to be Christian simply because they agree with some of the teachings of Christ. However, mental assent is not the same as faith unto good works, as St. James tells us: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder” (2:19, RSV).

<sup>71</sup> The Reverend Dorraine Snogren, “Holy Tradition, The Road That Leads Home”, *The True Vine*, Issue 5 (Spring 1990), pp. 8-9. Mr. Carlton makes similar statements in his book *The Way*:

I have come to view my Protestant past in a way similar to the way the Fathers of the Church viewed the history of Israel—as a preparation for the Christian Gospel. Historically, of course, Protestantism represents a movement *away* from the historical Church rather than a movement toward it. Nonetheless, Christ did not abandon the Christians of the West, in spite of the increase of heresies. If in no other way, He was and is present in the Holy Scriptures. While Protestantism, in all of its variety, is a heresy, God works in the lives of individuals to bring them to the fulness of the truth. (*Op. cit.*, p. 27).

Carlton is a convert from the Baptist confession.

It should be noted that many of the saints and just men [and women] who are mentioned in the *Old Testament*, such as Abel, Enoch, Noe [Noah], Daniel, Job, Lot, *et al.*, belonged neither to the race nor to the religion of Israel, but were outside positive divine Revelation, which begins with Abraham. They are commonly called 'Gentiles.' Hence there are discussions on 'Gentile and pagan Saints,' as for example in J. Daniélou, *Les saints paiens de l' Ancien Testament*, Paris, 1956, pp. 10ff.<sup>72</sup>

Eusebius also points out in his *Ecclesiastical History*:

Of these, some excellent men lived before the flood, others of the sons and descendants of Noah lived after it, among them Abraham, whom the Hebrews celebrate as their own founder and forefather. If any one should assert that all those who have enjoyed the testimony of righteousness, from Abraham himself back to the first man, *were Christians in fact if not in name, he would not go beyond the truth.* For that which the name indicates, that the Christian man, through the knowledge and the teaching of Christ, is distinguished for temperance and righteousness, for patience in life and manly virtue, and for a profession of piety toward the one and only God over all—all that was zealously practiced by them not less than by us.<sup>73</sup>

He was speaking of the faithful *prior* to the New Covenant. Thus, Eusebius' use of the term "Christian" for those who were virtuous and professed faith in God helps to guide our thinking about those believers separated from the Church.

The writings of Saint Gregory the Theologian (Nazianzen) also bear witness to an economic use of the term "Christian," especially in the following passage from a *Funeral Oration on his Father*, Saint Gregory the Elder (+374). His father had lived a virtuous life prior to his conversion as a member of what seems to have been—given our limited knowledge of it—a monotheistic sect called the Hypsistarii. He later became the Bishop of Nazianzus and was one of the Consecrators of Saint Basil the Great. Describing his father, Saint Gregory writes:

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<sup>72</sup> John Karmiris, "The Ecclesiology of the Three Hierarchs," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. VI, No. 2 (Winter 1960-1961), p. 150 fn. 22. For a discussion of the Old Testament Saints and their relation to the Church, consult pp. 146-165. He presents the Patristic consensus that the Church began with Abraham. Among his numerous citations, he quotes St. John Chrysostom, in his exposition of Ephesians 4:5:

Now what is this one body? The faithful throughout the whole world, both which are, and which have been, and which shall be. And again, they that before Christ's coming pleased God, are "one body." How so? Because they also knew Christ. Whence does this appear? "Your father Abraham," saith He, "rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it, and was glad." (John viii. 56.) And again, "If ye had believed Moses," He saith, "ye would have believed Me, for he wrote of Me." (John v. 46.) And the prophets too would not have written of One, of whom they knew not what they said; whereas they both knew Him, and worshipped Him. Thus then were they also "one body." ("Homily X," rev. Rev. Gross Alexander, *NPNF* 1<sup>st</sup> ser., Vol. 13, p. 99)

<sup>73</sup> Book I. 4, as cited in Karmiris, *op. cit.*, p. 152, emphasis ours.

He sprang from a stock unrenowned, and not well suited for piety, for I am not ashamed of his origin, in my confidence in the close of his life, one that was not planted in the house of God, but far removed and estranged, the combined product of two of the greatest opposites—Greek error and legal imposture, some parts of each of which it escaped, of others it was compounded. For, on the one side, they reject idols and sacrifices, but reverence fire and lights; on the other, they observe the Sabbath and petty regulations as to certain meats, but despise circumcision. These lowly men call themselves Hypsistarii, and the Almighty is, so they say, the only object of their worship. What was the result of this double tendency to impiety? I know not whether to praise more highly *the grace which called him*, or his own purpose.

Noting that his father sacrificed a great deal in becoming a Christian, Saint Gregory goes on to observe:

*Even before he was of our fold, he was ours. His character made him one of us. For, as many of our own are not with us, whose life alienates them from the common body, so, many of those without are on our side, whose character anticipates their faith, and need only the name of that which indeed they possess. My father was one of these, an alien shoot, but inclined by his life towards us. He was so far advanced in self control, that he became at once most beloved and most modest, two qualities difficult to combine. What greater and more splendid testimony can there be to his justice than his exercise of a position second to none in the state, without enriching himself by a single farthing, although he saw everyone else casting the hands of Briareus upon the public funds, and swollen with ill-gotten gain? For thus do I term unrighteous wealth. Of his prudence this also is no slight proof, but in the course of my speech further details will be given. It was as a reward for such conduct, I think, that he attained to the faith.<sup>74</sup>*

Here it should be noted that Saint Gregory did not consider his father to be a Christian prior to Baptism, but rather, in context, “one of us”—that is, *in heart*. He speaks of a time “before he was of our fold,” and about a character that “*anticipates their faith*”—“a reward” for living a virtuous life thus far. This is made even more clear when later in the *Oration* he discusses how the prayers, fastings, and holiness of his mother for the salvation of her husband led to his desire to leave the sect and be Baptized:

He was approaching that regeneration by water and the Spirit, by which we confess to God the formation and completion of the Christlike man, and the transformation and reformation from the earthy to the Spirit. He was approaching the laver with warm

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<sup>74</sup> Trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, *NPNF 2<sup>nd</sup> ser.*, Vol. 7, p. 256, emphasis ours. Cf. the words of Fr. Seraphim (Rose) of Platina: “...and there are still others outside of the Orthodox Church who by God's grace, their hearts being open to His call, will undoubtedly yet be joined to genuine Holy Orthodoxy.” Speaking of all those who will comprise the future body of True Orthodox Christians, he concludes: “These ‘seven thousand’ [Romans 11:4] are the foundation of the future and only Orthodoxy of the latter times.” (*Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future, op. cit.*, pp. 183-184)

desire. . . . And as he was ascending out of the water, there flashed around him a light and a glory worthy of the disposition with which he approached the girt of faith.<sup>75</sup>

Therefore, one could understand Saint Gregory to be saying, “They [who are outside] need only the name [of ‘Christian’, given when one becomes a catechumen, and fully appropriated—*i.e.*, made real—through Baptism] of that which they indeed possess [a virtuous life].”

## Conclusion

On the basis of this cursory look at Holy Scripture and Patristic writings, it seems entirely permissible to call one a “Christian” who professes faith in Christ—without knowingly embracing heresies that attack the Holy Trinity or the Person of Christ—and who is striving to be obedient to His Commandments.<sup>76</sup> A failure to extend sincerely the courtesy of such a label causes unnecessary offense and gives the impression that heterodox Christians have no relationship with God at all. This would place them on the same level as pagans, which is decidedly not the case. In this regard we offer these wise and pastorally sensitive comments:

Of course, there is no reason to view these [heterodox] confessions and sects as on the same level with non-Christian religions. One cannot deny that the reading of the word of God has a beneficial influence upon everyone who seeks in it instruction and strengthening of faith, and that devout reflection on God the Creator, the Provider and Saviour, has an elevating power there among Protestants also. We cannot say that their prayers are totally fruitless if they come from a pure heart, for *in every nation he that feareth Him. . . is accepted with Him* (Acts 10:35). The Omnipresent Good Provider God is over them, and they are not deprived of God’s mercies. They help to restrain moral looseness, vices, and crimes; and they oppose the spread of atheism. But all this does not give us grounds to consider them as belonging to the Church.<sup>77</sup>

Concerning those who are never afforded the opportunity to encounter Orthodoxy it is perfectly acceptable to conclude that the God of Love may place them in His Heavenly Kingdom. Ultimately, God looks upon the heart of every man—having mercy upon those whom He chooses to have mercy (Romans 9:18)—and rewards each according to his intentions and deeds (Romans 2:6ff).

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 258-259.

<sup>76</sup> These qualifiers are added partly as a result of the author’s study of how *oikonomia* was justified by the Fathers in Canon 7 of the Second and Canon 95 of the Sixth Œcumenical Synods. They reflect personal opinion.

<sup>77</sup> *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology, op. cit.*, p. 244. On the salvific power of the Word of God for the conversion of sinners and the edification of believers see *The Path to Salvation*, pp. 119-123, 144-145.