

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)

## Epilogue: Orthodoxy's "Exclusive Openness"

Doubtless that some readers, especially Protestants, consider the Traditional position presented herein to be too "exclusive." Similarly, Orthodox Christians involved in evangelism or the Ecumenical Movement may have concerns that such a teaching on the boundaries of the Church is unnecessarily offensive and hinders progress towards Christian unity.

Is it true—as some smitten by the bug of "ecumenical diplomacy" today say—that this concept of the Church is outdated and should be jettisoned in the interest of "love for our separated 'brethren?'" Absolutely not. How can God honor efforts to witness or restore unity when Holy Tradition is trampled under foot? Does not a desire to dilute the truth constitute a lack of faith in God or a belief that one should "take things into his own hands" rather than trust God? Do not these words of Saint Paul apply?

For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ.<sup>123</sup>

We maintain that love for all of mankind, the fulfillment of the Great Commission (Saint Matt. 28:19), and efforts to heal Christian divisions are in no way incompatible with so-called "Orthodox exclusivism." In fact, there is ample reason to believe that such apostolic (*i.e.*, "sent out") endeavors are aided by it.

[T]he primacy [or exclusive claims] of the Orthodox Church need not be a stumbling-block to dialogue with the non-Orthodox Christian world, but a point of attraction. For we . . . hold to our beliefs not out of arrogance, but out of love for our traditions. We do not think that we hold in our hands something which is ours, but which is universal, catholic, and the domain of all those who confess Christ. We, in the final analysis, are the ecumenists, for we have maintained the integrity of the Faith at the same time that we offer it to others in the pure form in which it was handed down to us from the Apostles.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Galatians 1:10.

<sup>124</sup> Archbishop Chrysostomos, Forward to Father Daniel Degy-ansky, *Orthodox Christianity and the Spirit of Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. by Bishop Auxetnios (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1992), p. 4.

[W]e must not be afraid to say that the realm of Orthodox Christian experience is the exclusive domain of salvation. In so doing, we affirm where we know salvation to be, but do not presume, in defiance of the Providence of God, to state with boldness where it is not. And if our truth is an exclusive truth, it is made open. . .by our ability to see virtue even among those in error. This principle is reified by our constant commitment to love and hospitality. A perfect example of this was a visit made by some American Uniates to Metropolitan Cyprian several years ago. His Eminence received his guests as brothers and treated them with great affection. Yet, one evening, while offering them a beautiful dinner on the veranda of his cell, he told them: "Love dictates that I tell you that you are heretics and must become Orthodox." One of the clergymen, in fact, is now a Priest in the Antiochian Archdiocese. It is our openness to the virtues of those in error, our readiness to be ridiculed and embarrassed by our "exclusivity," and our love of the truth which ultimately make us Orthodox and open to all things, being all things to all men for the sake of their salvation.<sup>125</sup>

Though we trust that these brief remarks will challenge some of our Orthodox readers to reconsider their reactions, we suspect that many Protestants are offended by any ecclesiological exclusivity. On their behalf we might point out that Jesus was quite "exclusive" when He said "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life: no man cometh unto the Father, except by Me" (Saint John 14:6). Consistent reasoning with Holy Scripture should lead one to conclude that if the Church is His Body (Ephesians 1:22-23) then no one can come to the Father except through the Church. This is why Saint Cyprian could say, "He cannot have God as his Father who does not have the Church as his Mother." Though these are "hard sayings" (Saint John 6:60), Holy Scripture clearly teaches that Jesus Christ, as encountered through His Church, is the only Door to the narrow way which leads to Life (Saint John 10:7; Saint Matt. 7:13-14).

Despite the Orthodox polemics occasionally aimed at heterodox proselytizers in an effort to guard the flock, non-Orthodox Christians should know that the Church heartily welcomes those who inquire into our Holy Orthodox Faith. With this in mind we cannot think of a more fitting and eloquent conclusion than to offer these words of Saint Hilarion:

I hope that. . .you will be convinced that the teaching I have presented on the unity of the Church and on the unity of Her life of grace serves the work of Christian union, and not for separation. Union with the Church, adherence to the living body of the one Church of Christ, is placed highest of all. *It should be of no importance to a man who joins the Church what he was:* it is important and saving for him only that he, by becoming united with the Church, becomes a member of the Body of Christ.

Therefore, we will not close our eyes to sad reality, we will not be afraid to confess that we do not all belong to the one Church of Christ! To speak of union and annihilate and obscure the idea of the one Church of Christ for the sake of it—will this be profitable for the work of unity? . . .I pray to God to grant me, a young man, to live to

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<sup>125</sup> "The Exclusive Openness of Truth," *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XI, No. 4 (1994), p. 8 (emphases theirs).

the time, when we will both be together in the One Church of Christ and when, on the different hemispheres of our planet, we will have Communion in the one Bread.<sup>126</sup>

In the Church is found the fullness of God's Grace and truth. Her boundaries are open to all who willingly embrace Her. Catholicity is preserved in Her uniqueness. All are welcome with open arms.

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<sup>126</sup> *Unity of the Church*, pp. 71-72