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**THE FALSE GOSPEL OF
THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH**

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INTRODUCTION

I was born and raised in the Coptic Orthodox Church. The Coptic Church is part of the Oriental Orthodox Church, which is not in communion with the Eastern Orthodox Church. However, both churches have nearly the same theology and practice of worship. The Oriental Orthodox Church split from the rest of Christianity in 451 AD, due to the Council of Chalcedon, which they did not accept. They believe that Christ had two natures, but insist that those two natures are inseparable and united. The Oriental Orthodox believe Jesus is OF two natures, which is Miaphysitism. The Eastern Orthodox believe Jesus is IN two natures, which is Dyophysitism. Today, most theologians on either side believe they are both saying the same thing, just using different words. The reason for the continued division is due to the Anathemas that both churches placed on each other that can't be lifted, and the number of ecumenical councils each Orthodox Church accepts (3 for Oriental and 7 for Eastern Orthodox). So, it is very political with various strong opinions.

Now, I had spent the first 32 years of my life in the Coptic Orthodox Church. In fact, my parents didn't even name me. My brother and I were named by a monk. The reason for this is that originally, my parents could not get pregnant. So, they reached out to a monastery for help. Although the doctors treating my mother said it was a medical impossibility for her to have children, a monk told my parents that they would have two sons and gave us our names. So, when my mother became pregnant, to the shock of her doctors, they named me and later my brother after the names he chose for us.

Throughout my childhood, I was told by multiple Coptic Orthodox priests that I was destined to be a priest. However, I wanted nothing to do with it. Yet, my brother and I served as readers, which are like altar boys in the Roman Catholic Church, and I served as a Sunday school teacher at many renowned Coptic Orthodox Churches. Furthermore, my dad served the church as a deacon or diakon.

Now, our family was very much involved with the life of the Coptic Church, and we had an Orthodox Phronema, which is also known as an Orthodox worldview. So, we looked at everything throughout our lives through the lens of the Orthodox Church. Although the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox churches do not recognize each other as a true church, their similarities mean that they can both have an Orthodox Phronema. As *Eugenia Scarvelis Constantinou* says in one of the most popular modern Orthodox books, *Thinking Orthodox: Understanding and Acquiring the Orthodox Christian Mind*, “*The Catholic Church has deviated from the ancient Tradition significantly. But the Copts and other Oriental Orthodox have kept the same Phronema that the Eastern Orthodox have, and because of that we recognize Orthodox Phronema even when the Liturgy or particular customs are not exactly the same.*”¹

Now, my family hosted a myriad of priests, bishops, and monks at our home. During that time, countless church services were even performed at my parents’ home. That is why when a local Coptic Orthodox Church was being planted in our area, our childhood home was given the responsibility of caring for the altar items. Furthermore, in my college years, I took a course at my Coptic Orthodox Church that could count for seminary credit if I chose to go that route. I even wrote homilies and messages on the lives of the saints for my local priest, who used the writings in sermons and when visiting people in the congregation. I even considered studying the art of making icons. So, in many ways, I was truly an Orthodox of Orthodox.

However, the reality of the matter was that I was working to earn my salvation. I was working to see myself approved by men. This is the way of both the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Although the responsibility was my own, the leaders in the church didn’t help, but harmed us as they didn’t teach us the true Gospel. They often used allegorical interpretation and spent most of their efforts teaching about the saints and the reasons for liturgical practices. Although Scripture is read as part of the divine liturgy, it is often not expounded on, or if it is, it is often wildly taken out of context. So, the people were malnourished due to the lack of receiving biblical truth and sound doctrine. Some of our closest family friends were

¹ Eugenia Scarvelis Constantinou, *Thinking Orthodox: Understanding and Acquiring the Orthodox Christian Mind* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2020), 157-158.

Eastern Orthodox, and we attended service with them often, and that same malnourishment of Scripture was found at their churches just like in ours. Eventually, I began to question the Coptic Orthodox Church as I noticed many practices, like the veneration of the saints, were not found in Scripture at all. This was not the practice of the apostles as they claimed.

Then, I met my wife, who was also raised in the Coptic Orthodox Church and who also questioned their claims. This led to many years of searching for the truth and visiting all kinds of churches. Then a move to Texas changed everything. It was while we were in Texas that I was exposed to churches that truly took the Word of God seriously. So, within a matter of a few months after I heard the true Gospel for the first time, I repented, believed, and surrendered my life to the Lord after He had mercy on me and removed my horse blinders. I quickly read through the Bible for the first time, all the way through, and was blown away by the pure truth it contained, which was nothing like the man-made traditions I was exposed to in the Coptic Orthodox Church I was raised in or the Eastern Orthodox Churches I often visited.

My life verse became ***Romans 10:9-10***, which says, ***“Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”*** I went from pursuing my MBA to attending Seminary and eventually became a pastor and missionary. I am blessed to be married to my loving wife, Mercy. We reside in the Finger Lakes region of upstate NY and are blessed with two adorable and loving daughters. I am a missionary with Village Missions, and I am currently serving as pastor at Bethel Baptist Church of Gorham, NY. Along the journey, God gave me a burden to share the Gospel and to reach both the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox communities. This message today is a by-product of that calling.

Now, there are some critics who may object to me criticizing the Eastern Orthodox Church, as I was raised in the Oriental Orthodox Church. Even putting aside my time visiting many Eastern Orthodox Churches throughout my life and having a brother with whom I often speak on this subject, who is now part of the Eastern Orthodox Church, one does not need to be raised in the Eastern Orthodox Church to research it and see where it falls short when put to the test of Scripture. In fact, many who make this accusation were

themselves raised in a non-Eastern Orthodox Church and only recently converted into it. So, let us explore what the Eastern Orthodox Church actually teaches in its own words and see how it compares to the Word of God.

THE FALSE GOSPEL OF THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH

A DIFFERENT GOSPEL

John Stott, the well-known preacher and Bible commentator, once said:

*“To tamper with the gospel is to trouble the church... Indeed, the church's greatest troublemakers (now as then) are not those outside who oppose, ridicule, and persecute it, but those inside who try to change the gospel... Conversely, the only way to be a good churchman is to be a good gospel man. The best way to serve the church is to believe and to preach the gospel.”*²

This is certainly very true! Of all the epistles in the New Testament, the epistle that the apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians contained the most urgent and harshest rebuke. Why? Because the Galatians were being seduced by the Judaizers, an apostate group that regarded the Levitical laws of the Old Testament, such as circumcision, as still mandatory for all Christians. However, the apostle Paul was quick to instruct the church that to add any requirements to the Gospel is to preach a different gospel, and to preach a different gospel is to preach no gospel at all.

As we see recorded in the book of *Galatians* by the apostle Paul, who said, ***“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed”*** (*Galatians 1:8-9*).

In our current day, there are modern-day apostate “Judaizers” continuing to seduce the church. They claim to come from a line of unbroken apostolic succession. They claim to partake in the same practices that the apostles deposited to the church. They even claim to teach the Gospel despite being wolves in sheep’s clothing.

They are the Eastern Orthodox Church, and they have been seducing many, especially of late, of those who at one time identified as being Protestant. They make many bold claims about their origins and

² John R.W. Stott, “The Bible Speaks Today,” in *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968).

authority, which can sound appealing to those who only have a surface-level understanding of what the Eastern Orthodox Church actually teaches and to those who have a limited understanding of Scripture and church history.

So, let's start by covering a few basic problematic doctrines that the Eastern Orthodox Church holds, which are contradictory to Scripture, and ultimately lead to additional mandates being added to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

INFALLIBILITY OF THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH

First, we need to look at their doctrine of the infallibility of the Eastern Orthodox Church. This doctrine is officially found in 1672's *The Confession of Dositheus*. Decree 2 says, "*Wherefore, the witness also of the Catholic Church [Catholic Church here meaning the Eastern Orthodox Church] is, we believe, not of inferior authority to that of the Divine Scriptures. For one and the same Holy Spirit being the author of both, it is quite the same to be taught by the Scriptures and by the Catholic Church. Moreover, when any man speaks from himself he is liable to err, and to deceive, and be deceived; but the Catholic Church, as never having spoken, or speaking from herself, but from the Spirit of God — who being her teacher, she is ever unfailingly rich — it is impossible for her to in any wise err, or to at all deceive, or be deceived; but like the Divine Scriptures, is infallible, and has perpetual authority.*"³

So, the first problem we encounter with the Eastern Orthodox Church is that they claim, as a Church, to be just as infallible as the Scriptures. They believe that just as the Holy Spirit breathed out the Word of God and just as inerrant and infallible as the Bible is, so is the Eastern Orthodox Church just as inerrant and infallible when they speak in an official capacity. This unbiblical belief can be so damning and ultimately leads to a different gospel, which is directly related to the idolatry of saints.

³ *Holy Standards, The: The Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, ed. Joshua Schooping (Olyphant, PA: St. Theophan the Recluse Press, 2020), 27-28.

ICONS & THE INFALLIBILITY OF ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

The second unbiblical doctrine we need to understand when we are talking about the Eastern Orthodox Church is their belief in the infallibility of the ecumenical councils. The Eastern Orthodox Church believes in 7 ecumenical councils, and of these councils, the most problematic is the 7th one. The most disturbing feature of the council is the anathemas they declared on anyone who does not follow their teaching on the veneration of Icons.

So, here is just a sampling of the anathemas from the 7th *Ecumenical Council*, which is also known as 2nd *Nicaea*, and took place in 787 AD. *“To those who apply to the sacred images the sayings in divine Scripture against idols, anathema! To those who do not kiss the holy and venerable images, anathema! To those who call the sacred images idols, anathema! To those who say that Christians have recourse to the images as to gods, anathema! To those who knowingly communicate with those who insult and dishonor the sacred images, anathema!”*⁴

Eastern Orthodox apologists sometimes try to soften the meaning of an anathema. Yet, here is the definition of anathema by the Eastern Orthodox saint *John Maximovitch*, which is in line with what the writers of those anathemas from 2nd *Nicaea* believed:

“In the acts of the Councils and the further course of the New Testament Church of Christ, the word ‘anathema’ came to mean complete separation from the Church. ‘The Catholic and Apostolic Church [again this is the Eastern Orthodox Church being talked about here] anathematizes’, ‘let him be anathema’, ‘let it be anathema’, means a complete tearing away from the church. While in cases of ‘separation from the communion of the Church’ and other epitimia or penances laid on a person, the person remained a member of the Church, even though his participation in her grace-filled life was limited, those given over to anathema were thus completely torn away from her until their repentance. Realizing that she ([the] Eastern Orthodox Church) is unable to do anything for their salvation, in view of their stubbornness and hardness of heart, the earthly church lifts them up to the judgment of God. That judgment is merciful unto

⁴ Richard Price, *The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea (787)* (Liverpool, L69 7ZU: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 111-112.

repentant sinners, but fearsome for the stubborn enemies of God. 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God ... for our God is a consuming fire'. Anathema is not final damnation: until death repentance is possible. 'Anathema' is fearsome not because the Church wishes anyone evil or God seeks their damnation. They desire that all be saved. But it is fearsome to stand before the presence of God in the state of hardened evil: nothing is hidden from Him."⁵

So, according to the 7th Ecumenical Council, if one does not bow down and venerate icons or if someone speaks against the Eastern Orthodox Church's idolatrous practice of venerating icons, that person is a stubborn enemy of God. Their only chance of salvation is to repent and join the Eastern Orthodox Church.

That is rank blasphemy! Truly, what difference can be seen between the Judaizers of Paul's day and the Eastern Orthodox Church in our day? Both add mandatory requirements to the Gospel. Both condemn true, genuine believers, and both are themselves under true anathema by the authority of the Word of God for their false teachings and contradictory works-based gospels they peddle.

MARIOLOGY & THE INFALLIBILITY OF DIVINE LITURGY

Third, we need to understand that the Eastern Orthodox Church believes that any official readings and hymns recited within their divine liturgy are also considered infallible. Here are some problematic readings that make an idol out of Mary in the form of hymns, which are held to the same authority level as Scripture.

The Akathist Hymn to the Most Holy Theotokos calls Mary the "*propitiation of the whole world*"⁶ and the "*restoration of men.*"⁷ She is said to be the "*forgiveness for many who have stumbled.*"⁸ It also

⁵ John Maximovitch, *Orthodox Life*, vol. 27 (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1977), 18-19.

⁶ *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, ed. John Mikitish and Hieromonk Herman (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Monastery Press, 2019), 207.

⁷ *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, ed. Mikitish and Herman, 210.

⁸ *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, ed. Mikitish and Herman, 211.

says that she “*taketh away the filth of sin,*”⁹ and the congregation of the Orthodox church proclaims that she is the “*salvation of my soul.*”¹⁰

Simply put, this is complete blasphemy and a total bastardization of the pure and true Gospel message found in Scripture and preached by our Lord Jesus and the apostles. The false claim that this is hyperbolic or poetic language is an Eastern Orthodox apologetics tactic and is very deceptive, since in reality, this very same language is not only used in hymns but is also used in Eastern Orthodox homilies and prayers.

For example, in *The Mother of the Light* prayerbook, the second prayer says this to Mary, “*heal my miserable soul [because] I do not dare ask, nor do I have anyone to entreat on my behalf, the loving God to heal my many sins and incurable wounds.*”¹¹ This is one of a myriad of examples in this prayerbook from the ninth century, which is highly regarded as having faithful prayers to Mary. So, even in Orthodox prayer books, Mary is seen as a necessary person to go through in order to get to God. In fact, tremendous shame is put on the sinner, and they are urged not to go to God directly, but instead to go to Mary, who is presented as more compassionate, for they claim she will then go on the sinner’s behalf to God.

Additionally, this attitude is seen in messages by prominent saints of the church, like *Gregory Palamas*. He says in his *53rd Homily in Paragraph 37*, “*She (Mary) alone forms the boundary between created and uncreated nature, and no one can come to God except through her and the mediator born of her, and none of God’s gifts can be bestowed on angels or men except through her.*”¹²

This is not hyperbolic or poetic language being used here, but simply the same doctrine of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which is found all throughout their hymns, prayerbooks, and teachings from their very own saints. However, the Word of God is clear to those with ears to listen and who approach God

⁹ *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, ed. Mikitish and Herman, 215.

¹⁰ *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, ed. Mikitish and Herman, 216.

¹¹ *Mother of the Light: Prayers to the Theotokos*, trans. Maximos Constas (Columbia, MO: Newrome Press, 2018), 3.

¹² Gregory Palamas, *The Homilies*, trans. Christopher Veniamin (Waymart, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2009), 431.

with humility. Jesus said, ***“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).***

Jesus never said that Mary was part of the salvation equation or that one was ever encouraged to go to her for anything. The Word of God is also clear that it is the Holy Spirit and not Mary who bestows gifts to believers, as it says, ***“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.” (1 Corinthians 12:7-11).***

Again, Mary is nowhere to be found. So, we have a choice: Are we going to listen to men and the “wisdom” they teach, or are we going to follow and obey the Word of God? Are we going to follow a different gospel filled with the innovations of men, or are we going to follow the true Gospel as found in Scripture?

In another supposed infallible Orthodox hymn, *The Entry of the Most Holy Theotokos into the Temple*, we find the strange and unbiblical belief that the Eastern Orthodox Church holds about Mary, as a 3-year-old, going to live in the Holy of Holies for a number of years. Clearly, this is a violation of God’s law as found in ***Leviticus 16***, which says that the only person allowed in the Holy of Holies is the High Priest, and he is only allowed once a year on the Day of Atonement.

Ignoring for a moment the ludicrousness of this claim and just focusing on the words of this hymn, we find even more wicked beliefs in contrast to the Gospel. It says in this hymn that Mary is the *“acceptable sacrifice”*¹³ and *“the ewe-lamb of God without spot, the dove without blemish.”*¹⁴ It says she possessed *“a*

¹³ “Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple,” Orthodox Christianity, <https://orthochristian.com/66118.html>.

¹⁴ “Entrance of the Mother of God.”

body that was never subject to the taint of sin,”¹⁵ and the Orthodox faithfully sing to her, *“through you we have been reconciled with God.”*¹⁶

Again, not a single prophet, apostle, or our Lord Himself ever made these outlandish claims, and we have no reason to engage in this idolatrous and blasphemous behavior. It is shocking to me that the average Orthodox catechumen is purposely not presented with this kind of doctrine upfront, and many people born into the church far too easily take what their priests, bishops, and patriarchs teach to be inerrant and infallible, despite, as we have seen, the numerous contradictions to Scripture.

Again, the Scriptures have spoken on this matter as it says in the epistle to the *Romans*, ***“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6-8).*** Christ died for us, and the writers of Scripture never felt the need to mention any contribution of Mary. So, are we going to speak in a manner similar to God’s Word or put our faith in men like Gregory Palamas or the leaders of the Eastern Orthodox Church?

Are we to call Mary *“the ewe-lamb of God without spot”*¹⁷ or are we going to trust in what God says in Scripture? *1 Peter* makes it clear when it says, ***“Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1:18-19).***

Christ is the spotless lamb and not anyone else. Christ is the only person to ever walk this earth who is sinless, and not anyone else. That includes Mary. She was a sinner in need of a Savior just like the rest of mankind. In fact, look at Jesus’s attitude toward a woman who was praising Mary as found in *Luke 11:27-28*, which says, ***“As he said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to***

¹⁵ “Entrance of the Mother of God.”

¹⁶ “Entrance of the Mother of God.”

¹⁷ “Entrance of the Mother of God.”

him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!’ But he said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’”

This woman said nothing shocking by the standards of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In fact, she would be viewed as not praising Mary enough, as we have seen with the outlandish praise and veneration that they give Mary. The woman’s comments really don’t even come close to the language used in canonical hymns, prayers, and homilies by the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Yet, Jesus’ words are bold and clear. He says, ***“Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it” (Luke 11:28)!*** That is, Mary is truly blessed as Scripture has revealed, but the greater and true blessing that should be our focus is found in those who hear the Word of God and obey it! That is where the true blessing is found! Overt blessing, praising, and veneration of Mary that goes beyond the language and practices of Scripture is never encouraged. So, it is ironic then that the Eastern Orthodox Church’s mandatory veneration of Mary can only be achieved either by being totally ignorant of God’s Word or simply ignoring it.

REJECTION OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

Fourth, let us take the time to examine how the Eastern Orthodox worldview rejects the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. Their dismissal of this doctrine is cemented in documents like *The Confession of Dositheus*, which again is an infallible text viewed on the same level of Scripture by the Eastern Orthodox Church and it says this in *Decree 13*, *“We believe a man to be not simply justified through faith alone, but through faith which works through love, that is to say, through faith and works. But [the idea] that faith can fulfill the function of a hand that lays hold on the righteousness which is in Christ, and can then apply it unto us for salvation, we know to be far from all Orthodoxy. For faith so understood would be possible in all, and so none could miss salvation, which is obviously false. But on the contrary, we rather believe that it is not the correlative of faith, but the faith which is in us, justifies through works, with Christ. But we regard works not as witnesses certifying our calling, but as being fruits in themselves, through*

which faith becomes efficacious, and as in themselves meriting, through the Divine promises that each of the Faithful may receive what is done through his own body, whether it be good or bad.”¹⁸

So, there is no denying the fact that the theological system of the Eastern Orthodox Church is a merit-based system in which one earns the right to salvation. This is not a gift from God as Scripture teaches, but a right due to the individual based on their performance. The Orthodox Church may concede that faith is necessary, but it also claims that faith is not enough. They view good works as a necessary means of salvation and reveal how the work of Christ on the cross was not enough for them.

In their doctrine of soteriology, they are contributing members of salvation with God. Yet, they seem to pass over key passages like ***John 1:12-13*** that say otherwise. Here, John the Beloved Disciple records, ***“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”*** God could not be clearer. We are not born again by the will of man or the will of the flesh. We are born again solely by the very will of God!

Many in the Orthodox camp falsely claim that James denies the doctrine of faith alone. Yet, that is just another example of how the apologists of the Eastern Orthodox tradition have a history of using poor hermeneutics. The ground zero passage in question is ***James 2:14-26***, which says, ***“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed***

¹⁸ *Holy Standards*, ed. Schooping, 48-49.

by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.”

Yet, this passage must come into harmony and not conflict with other passages like *Ephesians 2:8-9*, in which Paul, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, says, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*

There is no doubt that with the right systematic theology in mind and utilizing faithful hermeneutics, both these passages will complement each other. What is necessary, and oftentimes carelessly overlooked, is how key terms are defined. In the epistle of James, when the Lord’s brother is talking about how *“a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24)*, we must interpret this in context and not practice cherry-picking just to make a passage fit one’s worldview. The *“faith”* being talked about here is the faith James calls *“dead”* in *James 2:17*, and that faith is contrary to genuine saving faith, which is mentioned in *James 2:18* and *22*. To fail to make that distinction is to miss the whole point of this passage.

So, James is saying that legitimate saving faith always and without exception produces good works. In other words, the tree of faith determines the kind of fruits it produces. It is not the other way around. Paul then is not in conflict with James but agrees with him when he says that we are *“saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works” (Ephesians 2:8-9)*. In the Eastern Orthodox mindset, with its adherence to man-made doctrines, they are not able to faithfully interact with passages like *Ephesians 2:8-9*, and quite frankly, they are not even able to faithfully interact with most of Scripture, and that is why they use tradition and the sayings of the church fathers as a crutch. This is just a page from the playbook of the Pharisees and scribes who did the same thing with their own traditions and rabbis.

Fifth, although not officially dubbed a heresy by them, the Eastern Orthodox Church goes to great lengths to minimize and, most of the time, outright denies the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement despite its clear evidence in Scripture and church history. Take, for instance, this remark found in the video, *“Orthodoxy and the Atonement,”* by Frederica Mathewes-Green, author of the wildly popular Orthodox book, *Welcome to the Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity*. She says regarding the forgiveness of sin, *“We just believe that God just forgives us. He doesn’t expect anyone to pay. It isn’t that he gets a third party to pay. He just lets it go.”*¹⁹

This is not just a one-off opinion but the view of most in the Eastern Orthodox Church. They criticize those who hold to the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement as wrongly viewing the atonement in legal terms, like that in a courtroom. But where did that language come from? Were our sins just forgiven because God just forgave us out of the blue, or did Someone have to pay for those sins that were committed?

As always, let us look to the Word of God for the answer. The Old Testament Scriptures record in Isaiah this powerful truth, which says, ***“But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).*** Additionally, the New Testament confirms this truth. Just look at what the apostle Peter says in his epistle, ***“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).***

Clearly, this is a picture of the Father crushing the Son. Clearly, this is a picture of Jesus receiving the full wrath of God on the cross. Clearly, if the Father could have just forgiven us of our sins without Jesus having to go to the cross, then that would have happened.

Jesus even pleaded with the Father to take away this cup of wrath when He said, ***“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).***

¹⁹ Frederica Mathewes-Green, “Orthodoxy and the Atonement,” posted January 18, 2016, by Theoria, YouTube, 6 min. 49 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55Z7S7wn77k&t=2s>.

So, the plan of salvation is not as insignificant as Frederica Mathewes-Green or the Eastern Orthodox Church claims. Jesus, in a very real sense, took our place on the cross and absorbed the full wrath of God that was meant for us, wicked sinners. To minimize or reject this is to reject the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ! This is yet another strike against the Orthodox Church that proves they peddle another gospel.

HIGH VIEW OF ASCETICISM IN THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Sixth, I would like to look at the abusive and shocking ascetic practice of monasticism in the Eastern Orthodox Church. The best place to turn to get a picture of monastic life in the Eastern Orthodox Church is to look at *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by Saint John of the Ladder, aka Saint John Climacus. The reason for this is that this work is not only a timeless classic of Eastern Orthodox spiritual life. This book is considered essential reading for all monastics and laypeople alike in Eastern Orthodoxy. In fact, every year during the season of Lent, every single Eastern Orthodox monastery reads this book out loud all the way through, and lay congregants are encouraged to read the book as well. It is easily the most widely used handbook of the ascetical life in the Orthodox Church.

In *Step 5* (of which there are 30 steps in total), *Paragraph 5*, it says, “*They allowed themselves no rest, but reproached themselves, and drove away sleep with dishonors and insults.*”²⁰ Monks are encouraged to abuse their bodies by depriving them of sleep, and they are encouraged to go to great lengths to accomplish that goal. Dishonoring themselves and insulting themselves is just the tip of the iceberg. In *Step 5, Paragraph 7*, it is recorded as saying, “*Others stood in prayer with their hands tied behind their backs like criminals, their faces, darkened by sorrow, bent to the earth.*”²¹ So, they would tie their hands behind their backs to act like criminals and prostrate their faces low to the ground, and as *Step 5, Paragraph 8*, says, “*Others sat on the ground in sackcloth and ashes, hiding their faces between their knees, and*

²⁰ John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (New York City: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 48.

²¹ Climacus, *The Ladder*, 48.

striking the earth with their foreheads.”²² You heard that right. They would not just prostrate their faces to the ground. They abused their bodies. They actually smashed their heads on the ground.

Furthermore, the extreme abuse of one’s body does not stop there. Just look at what *Step 5, Paragraph 19*, says, “*From the number of their prostrations their knees seemed to have become wooden, their eyes dim and sunk deep within their sockets. They had no hair. Their cheeks were bruised and burnt by the scalding of hot tears. Their faces were pale and wasted. They were quite indistinguishable from corpses. Their breasts were livid from blows; and from their frequent beating of the chest, they spat blood.*”²³

Then, in *Step 5, Paragraph 25*, it says this shocking statement, “*And some prayed to become possessed by devils.*”²⁴ Yes, you read that right. They were actually praying to be possessed by demons in a twisted act of “humility.” How can you even call yourself a believer and pray to become possessed by demons? This is completely ludicrous and painful to hear. Yet, the author of this work, Saint John of the Ladder, could not compose his pleasure in seeing his fellow monks praying that demons would possess them as he said, “*And I, my friends, found so much pleasure in their grief that I forgot myself, and was wholly rapt in mind, and could not contain myself.*”²⁵

This is a complete insult to Christ! A mockery of what faithful Christianity looks like. God’s beautiful and perfect Word paints another picture and views these acts of asceticism in a very different light. Just take a look at what Paul said in his epistles as he wrote to the Colossians. ***“These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Colossians 2:23).***

²² Climacus, *The Ladder*, 48.

²³ Climacus, *The Ladder*, 51.

²⁴ Climacus, *The Ladder*, 53.

²⁵ Climacus, *The Ladder*, 53.

Finally, let's take a look at the root of all these problems. The Eastern Orthodoxy's low view of the Scriptures. Again, let's look at *The Confession of Dositheus*, but this time let's look at *Question 1*, which says, "*Should the Divine Scriptures be read in the vulgar tongue [common language] by all Christians? No. Because all Scripture is divinely inspired and profitable, we know, and necessarily so, that without [Scripture] it is impossible to be Orthodox at all. Nevertheless, they should not be read by all, but only by those who with fitting research have inquired into the deep things of the Spirit, and who know in what manner the Divine Scriptures ought to be searched, and taught, and finally read. But to those who are not so disciplined, or who cannot distinguish, or who understand only literally, or in any other way contrary to Orthodoxy what is contained in the Scriptures, the Catholic Church, knowing by experience the damage that can cause, forbids them to read [Scripture]. Indeed, it is permitted to every Orthodox to hear the Scriptures, that he may believe with the heart unto righteousness, and confess with the mouth unto salvation. But to read some parts of the Scriptures, and especially of the Old [Testament], is forbidden for these and other similar reasons. For it is the same thing to prohibit undisciplined persons from reading all the Sacred Scriptures, as to require infants to abstain from strong meats.*"²⁶

Instead of trusting in the authority of the Scriptures, the Eastern Orthodox Church discourages individuals from reading the Word of God unless they subscribe to their man-made doctrines. These man-made innovations stem from what they claim was the practice of the apostles. However, since they have no actual proof of this, they appeal to oral tradition and an unwritten deposit of infallible holy tradition. Yet, this tactic is nothing new. The Pharisees were notorious for doing the very same thing. In their case, they appealed to oral traditions from Moses. Hence, they claimed to hold to their own unwritten deposit of infallible holy tradition, which they called "The Tradition of the Elders."

So, let's look at what Jesus has to say about that kind of unhealthy idolization of man-made traditions and man-centered doctrines. Let's take a look at **Mark 7:1-13**, which says, "**Now when the**

²⁶ *Holy Standards*, ed. Schooping, 68-69.

Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' And he said to them, 'Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.' And he said to them, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, 'Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban'' (that is, given to God)— then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."

So, in order to accept the Eastern Orthodox Church's false gospel, one must hold to Sola Ecclesia ("the Church alone"). The Eastern Orthodox Church believes in only this one sola. This can be concluded if one simply looks at their claims of being an infallible apostolic church and holding to the beliefs of an infallible holy tradition that is based on infallible ecumenical councils that themselves are based on infallible interpretations of Scripture, along with beliefs in an infallible consensus of the fathers.

So, based on this Orthodox dogma, one is saved by the Church alone, through the Church alone, in the Church alone, according to the Church alone, all for the glory of the Eastern Orthodox Church alone. Yet Protestants who see Scripture as the only true infallible and inerrant standard and authority stand by the Five Solas. Based on the Word of God, one is saved by Grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, according to Scripture alone, all for the glory of God alone.

THE TRUE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

So, if the Eastern Orthodox Church seems appealing, don't fall for the deceptive message they are touting. The Eastern Orthodox Church is an apostate church that promotes a different gospel contrary to the pure Gospel preached by Jesus Christ, the apostles, and those who genuinely have been born from above. For the true Gospel is exclusively found in the Word of God and makes no room for the foolishness of man to pollute it.

My message to the current members of the Eastern Orthodox Church, to catechumens interested in officially joining the church, and to those dangerously flirting with this church, I appeal to them through the words of Paul when he says, ***"O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'? Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith"*** (Galatians 3:1-9).

The Gospel is not about bowing down to an apostate church and the traditions of man. A true and genuine born-again believer embodies the reality found in the epistle to the *Galatians* when Paul says, ***"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me"*** (Galatians 2:20).

That new life is the new life that we live by faith. That means true Christians live a life where they genuinely believe with all their hearts and all their minds that God is the Creator of all things. They believe that He was, is, and will forever be, as He has no beginning or end. Our God, who is three persons in one

being, didn't need anything. He is totally self-sufficient. Yet, out of His love, He created mankind in His own image. Male and Female, He created them, and everything He created was good.

Nevertheless, the serpent, our enemy, led Adam and Eve to disobey God's command in an act of treason. That's when sin entered the world, and mankind fell. All hope seemed to be lost until God made a promise that from the seed of the woman, the Messiah would come. He would save His elect and crush the serpent's head.

That man, the Serpent-Crusher, is the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who was sent into our world by the Father in an act of love. Christ lived a perfect life and voluntarily took the place of us, wicked sinners, and on that cruel cross at Calvary, Jesus gave His life. Yet, the story did not end there. Three days later, God the Father raised God the Son from the dead by the power of God the Holy Spirit! The Trinity, all working in action together as they always do. So, for all who put their trust and faith in Christ. For all who genuinely repent and surrender. For all who acknowledge Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. For all who believe in Him, they will be saved and experience eternal life with Him! That is the Good News! That is the Gospel! Nothing more. Nothing less. As ***Romans 10:9-10*** says, ***“Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”***

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