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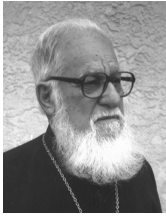
ORTHODOX EVANGELIST

“Do the work of an evangelist” - 2 Tim 4:5



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Are we emptying the Cross its power?

by

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We may have heard some very powerful messages regarding the Cross. It is of course central to our very faith and remains the most recognizable symbol of Christianity. Yet, have we ever thought that we can actually diminish its message and even empty its power?

Emptying the Cross of its power

But we have said there is power in the Cross, that is, in the message of the Cross, the kerygma which is a proclamation of the facts of the death and resurrection of Christ. If it is “*power unto salvation*,” then power is inherent in the word of God. Its impact that changes and renews the believer is not the result of persuasive power of the speaker. Conversion does not come with intellectual reasoning, with human wisdom and enticing words, but rather “*in the demonstration of the Spirit and power*.”

In fact, eloquence of speech can only interfere with the power of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul admitted that the Corinthians called his speech contemptible.” Apparently, he was not an impressive speaker. For this reason he cautions against leaning on the “*enticing words of wisdom*” in the ministry of evangelism.

The danger of relying on eloquence is simply put: “*lest the Cross of Christ be emptied*” (1 Cor. 1:17), emptied of its supernatural power and impact upon the heart.

This is the literal translation of the original Greek. It is incorrectly translated in the King James version: “should be made of none effect.” To lean on one's speaking skills is to imply there is no inherent power in the message of the Cross.

The priest or bishop who happens to be a gifted speaker is tempted to place his confidence on his natural speaking ability at the time he is ministering the word of God. Eloquence might impress the listeners, but their hearts and lives are not touched and transformed. Sinners are not led to a state of repentance and to a spontaneous surrender to Christ as their personal Savior for the forgiveness of their sins.

The bottom line is that **it is the anointing that counts**. It is the invisible unction of the Holy Spirit that makes the difference. Speaking the Gospel in apostolic power means speaking “in demonstration of the Spirit and power.” **Pious rhetoric and religious platitudes cannot bring souls to Christ for their salvation.** St. Paul made it emphatic: “*For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power*” (1 Cor. 4:20). Even the prophet Malachi said “*Ye have wearied the Lord with your words*”

(2:17). We have plenty of articulate speakers in our Churches. Too often, however, we offer our people religious verbiage. **We pass along to them a lot of religious information. We feed their intellect, while their hearts are impoverished.** No conjugal love is stirred up for the divine Spouse in preparation for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

The Message of the Cross

Satan trembles at the sight of the Cross. It reminds him of his defeat and of the fact he is now a toothless tiger. The problem is that not enough of our Church goes know and believe this, and, as a result, live defeated lives in a state of sin, depression or sickness. Too often, those who are the most religious and reverent have never experienced victorious living, “knowing Him and the power of His resurrection.” This widespread situation dramatizes the tragedy of spiritual desolation in our Orthodox Church.

But the message of the Cross is not only reserved for the Feast of the Elevation of the Cross or for Good Friday. Every week is a holy week. Every Friday is a Good Friday, and every Sunday is an Easter Sunday (Pascha). Nothing could displease God more than to omit mention of the Gospel at the pulpit when a priest or bishop is speaking. Each time God's word is preached, mention of the awesome acts of redemption should always be included regardless what the sermon topic might be. **No sermon is complete without proclaiming the atoning death of Christ.** St. Paul was emphatic when he said: “*We preach Christ crucified, and I determined not to know*

anything among you, except Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23).

The Sunday Liturgy is for those already evangelized. It does not take the place of the sermon. The pulpit and the altar declare the same message of the atoning death of Christ. The sermon topic should be the topic of the altar: “As often as you eat of this bread and drink of this cup, you declare the death of the Lord till He comes Back” (1 Cor. 11:26). At each liturgy we stand on the mount of Calvary. We act out the Gospel that the pulpit preaches.

Jesus, the Lamb of God

It was not the Great Commission the Apostles received from their Master that made the difference. It was their baptism in the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room that fired them up. It takes an experience of Pentecost for a priest or bishop to become consumed with Christ and the Gospel. **He cannot possibly silence or leave for some other service what burns in his heart – the reality that Jesus is the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world.**

Jesus was introduced by the Forerunner as the Lamb of God at the River Jordan. And, we in the ranks of the clergy, cannot do less than continue, like the great prophet of the wilderness, to call to attention to the Lamb Who now sits in glory at the right hand of the Father. Too many of our Orthodox Churches are living a wilderness experience only because they have not been introduced to Him Who can turn their inner wilderness into a fountain-spring of living waters.

Too often priests and bishops take

it for granted that the members of the congregation know the Gospel that they are already evangelized and know Jesus as their Savior in a personal relationship. The message of the Cross has been pushed to the backburner to such an extent that the mandate of Christ for the Church today is to re-evangelize His people.

I already have affirmed that the Gospel is power – supernatural power, life-changing, regenerative, redeeming power. The Lord made it



clear. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Rebirth comes with hearing the message of the Cross. St. Paul teaches: “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17).

He became curse for us

In Deuteronomy 21:23 we read: “Cursed is everyone that hangs on a tree.” So, Christ was made a curse for us that we might receive the blessings of Abraham and “that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:14). It was the curse of Adam that Christ identified with and, consequently, paid our sin debt.

Christ exchanged places with us. He received the wages of sin which is death, while we who deserved condemnation and death received forgiveness and life. He was rejected, while the believer is

accepted. He took our rejection so we can find acceptance before the Father. He became curse and sin for us who knew no sin, so we could receive expiation, atonement and reconciliation with the Father.

What once was looked at with horror as an instrument of death, now is cherished as the instrument of life, indeed, everlasting life, and the sign of victory over death. What Satan used to kill the Son of God turned against him and became the assurance of his own obliteration. God's word makes it clear to us: “That through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the Devil” (Heb. 2:14). And in the Orthodox Easter anthem we sing: “...by His death, He has trampled under foot death, granting life to those in the tombs!”

The Cross, consequently, became the basis of all of God's provision for the believer. By His obedience to the Father to the point of dying on Calvary. Jesus met the demands of divine justice. “There is no longer any condemnation who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). But, I wonder how many Orthodox in the pew have accepted this truth as a redeeming experience in their relationship with the Lord? How many of our active Church members know that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God?” Many of them work hard for their local parish Church but have never had an actual salvation experience in Christ. Could anything be more tragic than this?

The Cross is not only the symbol of God's infinite love for us, but it is the visible declaration of the Gospel, the Good News: the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Calvary (Golgotha) is synonymous with the Cross. It marks the place where the atoning death of the Son of God occurred. The Cross speaks forth the message of salvation, because the “Gospel is the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16). It is the weapon we have for a crushing defeat of the Devil and of his kingdom of darkness.

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The Coming Famine

By Joseph Abbate
President

When the Lord came to the prophet Amos, He had warned him of a great famine which would befall the land of Israel. *“The days are coming declares the sovereign Lord, when I will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or thirst for water – but a famine of hearing the word of the Lord”* (Amos 8:11). It is truly a true sign of judgement when God withholds His word from being heard.

You may be asking yourself how this can be for our own time since we hear so many Christian teachers over the radio and television today. I would like to ask you this question: **are we really hearing the word of God over the airwaves and internet today? In order to find out the answer we need to listen closely to what they are teaching.** There are of course many outstanding Christian pastors and teachers today, yet one has to be extremely choosy today to find the genuine ones. You can almost count them on the fingers of your hands.

As I have brought up in a previous message, do we hear these key words such as: The Second Coming of Christ, Sin and Repentance of sin, Forgiveness, Warning signs of upcoming trials upon the world, Conversion, The atoning death and Resurrection of Jesus, etc? We find throughout the scriptures these key subjects in which we are commanded by Christ Himself to proclaim such as in (Luke 24:46-49). If we are not hearing these things taught in our Church then don't walk out but run. If you don't hear these basic fundamental teachings on the television or radio, then change the channel!

Just recently, a prominent

pastor asked his congregation to purchase him a private jet worth over 65 million dollars so he could preach the Gospel in different parts of the world. Can you imagine how many Mortgages can be paid off or homes purchased for people with that kind of money? It would make headline news if over a thousand people received a paid off home! It would also demonstrate Christian compassion. Another pastor bragged about the expensive cars he owned. **These pastors are not only being very bad examples for Christians, but they are preaching another Gospel!**

The sad thing is that they endanger not only their own souls but their congregations as well. Let me make myself clear that it is one thing for the Church to supply to those in need, and another thing for a government to mandate wealth distribution. Even though the Church has been doing a lousy job in fulfilling its duty does not mean that people should be looking to a government to distribute wealth. History demonstrates that governments which have done this in the past have ended up being abusive to the people which it claims to help. One of our most prominent founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin once said: *A government which is large enough to give you everything you want will also be strong enough to take away everything you have.* These same abusive governments eventually end up suppressing religious freedoms as well as freedom of speech.

But getting back to the Church, in teaching on other subjects and not on the true Gospel message, these pastors are omitting the Gospel and replacing it with another. St. Paul called it “Preaching another gospel” (2Cor. 11: 4). We Orthodox

which have been given the true doctrines, which had been founded by Christ Himself, in which we have over 2000 years of history and the original Greek scriptures, we are far more accountable for these reasons, *“For whom much is given, much is required”*. But another force is at work in the Church. St. Paul called it “The Mystery of Iniquity” and what makes it such a mystery is the fact that it was working in the Church itself. If it was working 2000 years ago, how far has it come over these 2000 years?

During the feast of Pentecost, the Apostles and all those in the upper room were filled with the Holy Spirit. It is the specific day in which we can trace back the beginning of the Orthodox Church. There is however a time coming in the future in which the Holy Spirit will be removed from the earth. St. Paul had warned the Church of Thessalonica about this event: *“For the mystery of iniquity already works, until the One who is holding it back will be taken out of the way”* (2nd Thess. 2:7).

Who is the ONE who is restraining evil from overwhelming the world? The ONE is the Holy Spirit. Many Church Fathers and theologians have had their views on the subject, however, the question remains regarding in what exact manner will the Holy Spirit be removed from the earth? First the scriptures point out that there will be a falling away, (apostasy) in the Church first *“Having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof”* (2nd Tim. 3:5). Fr. Eusebius through the years has written volumes on the matter.

Second, there will be a removal of the Holy Spirit from the world. Does this mean that the Holy Spirit's present power is too weak to handle current situations in the world today? No, it does not mean this at all. As seen during

the time of Noah, there are limits to God's patience regarding the rebellion of mankind. If people do not wish to have God around in their lives then God will remove His hand of protection. There are some which believe that this scripture of 2nd Thessalonians depicts the Rapture of the Church and thus the Holy Spirit which resides in the believers would also be snatched away.

We can witness that the Holy Spirit is already being removed from the world in smaller increments as we draw closer to the return of Christ. So the removing of the Holy Spirit has not necessarily taken place at once, but that which remains will also be taken out of the way. You have heard the phrase "Be careful what you ask for, because you may get it". God in His justice will give the rebellious world everything it wants, to finally live their lives without God, without rules, and without convictions. But the end result will be hell on earth!

The world will be in complete spiritual famine without the presence of the Holy Spirit and His life sustaining strength and restraining power. Every evil imaginable will be unrestrained after the Lord has departed. As I had brought up in an earlier message, when people are desperate and live in troubled times, they will elect anyone who promises to get them out of it. Morals and patience get thrown out the window. They need food now. They want justice now!

Revolutionary France had a form of instant justice and gratification through the Guillotine. The French people had grown tired of the have and have-not classes of society. They also had also become weary of wars with England and other major powers at the time which had placed a strain on the economy of their country. The French people put into power Robespierre, whom later became so obsessed with power that the French people finally killed him.

With both revolutionary France

and revolutionary Russia, famine followed the wars, inner turmoil and strife. But what also took place after these events was the spiritual famine. For over 70 years the Soviet Union persecuted the Church. Godly priests were given a one-way ticket to Siberia and the wealthy lost their lands and business'. It amazes me even today that government systems such as the one in North Korea, which deny the very existence of God feel so threatened by a 2000 year old book called the Bible. The very penalty for owning one there is death.

We have already witnessed Christian persecutions on the rise all over the world. Here in America, Christians are being branded as intolerant and even hateful. Christian organizations have been targeted by institutions such as the



IRS and political groups with lawsuits. Back in the day the Emperor Nero blamed the Christians for burning down the City of Rome. They became the scapegoats for the Emperor's greed and insanity. They were later killed in the arenas for entertainment purposes. 2000 years later Hitler arrested many Christian pastors who were outspoken. Hitler came out with an edict that all crosses in churches were to be replaced by the swastika. German Christian pastors shared spaces in the concentration camps with Jewish people, as well as many others during the holocaust.

I am mentioning these historical events because it is very important to note that history repeats itself. It

will happen again, and we need to recognize it when this cycle restarts. These things will be on the rise again just before the Antichrist ascends to power. So, what do we need to do when we see these things? We need to prepare, but first, let me quote what Jesus said: *"When you see these things, lift up your heads, for your redemption is drawing near."*

I had shared this message at the Orthodox Renewal Conference in May. It was truly a blessed time, but everyone could sense that the world is headed for a time of turmoil. We see so much unrest, wars and financial troubles. We have not seen the end result of printing trillions of dollars. It also takes some time to witness global shifts in the economy as well as after effects of unrest in the Middle East. **There are just too many hot-spots around the world in too many geographic, political and economic avenues for the pot not to boil over!**

As the Prophet Ezekiel, we Christians are called to "**Sound the Trumpet**" of warning, or else we may be held responsible for their souls. The time is running out. How many pastors spoke about economic troubles before the crash of 2008? Not many! So we will sound the trumpet, even if others don't respond to the call. Together, we will call the Orthodox to repentance and to rededicate their lives to the Lord before it is too late and the coming famine envelopes the land.

We will also continue to ask for a greater measure of the Holy Spirit to fill us completely so we may show love and compassion and be a blessing and encouragement to all we come in contact with. Because in preparing for these things, we can also be situated to be a blessing to others when the time arises. We are not called to hide in a cave but to be the light of the world!