



Should we get emotional about Christ?

by the Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Eusebius Stephanou, Th.D.

One of the most common criticisms levelled at spiritual renewal is what its critics call “emotionalism”. Many priests, as well as laity, for example, are turned

off by the intensity, exuberance and joyous self-expression which are characteristic of witness and worship at renewal meetings.

This should not come as a surprise, since there is a growing aversion to religious expressiveness that is extending even to the familiar practices of Orthodox worship in the church. Some people feel self-conscious even about making the sign of the cross if the rest of the congregation are not doing it. Anyone expressing piety is regarded as causing a disturbance or as being ostentatious or sanctimonious.

In the Name of Order

In the name of order and sobriety we have shackled worshippers in religious straight-jackets. They have been deprived of the freedom of the Spirit. We have established stereotypes and excessive uniformity that have reduced worship to dull and barren formalism. I don't want to give the impression that I am opposed to order and discipline in worship. To be sure, order is of the utmost importance, but we have to admit that it has become an obsession with some priests to the exclusion of the spontaneity of the Spirit. It is as if they don't trust the Holy Spirit. They feel threatened by any measure of the freedom in worship.

The result has been that joy and gladness are sorely missing from our people in church. I remember one

young man, who was seeking salvation and the abundant life, made a remark that I can never forget: Father, our churches are like funeral homes. One Sunday, as I looked into the faces of the people and noticed the boredom and sadness. I felt the urge to stand up in front of the congregation and to shout: Jesus is risen! He is alive! Rejoice!

True that most of our people have a sad look on their faces as they leave church. One wonders: How can anyone not be happy after beholding and experiencing the Risen Christ at the Divine Liturgy? After all, is it not reliving the Lord's resurrection? After you've conversed with the living Christ you can't help but sense the inner joyful moving of the Holy Spirit. Your face will glow with the oil of sweet gladness.

When you've been with the Risen Lord, others will take notice. Something about you will reveal a special anointing. Your face radiates because your heart is set afire. It is inflamed with the fire of the Holy Spirit that the Risen Christ breathes into all who come close to Him, just as He did with His apostles in the upper room. Remember what Cleopas and the other disciple remarked after walking and fellowshiping with Jesus at Emmaus: “*Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us?*” (Luke 24:32)

Getting too Excited?

Those who have had a life-changing experience with Christ in the church and testify to being born-again are not be any stretch of the imagination perfect Christians. They are simply growing believers who still live with the excitement of the rebirth in the Holy Spirit that they had “*with awareness, knowledge, perception and experience*” to use the expression of St. Symeon the New Theologian. Such people have rediscovered a pearl of great price and their joy is enduring and undiminished. But they have much growing to do in the Holy Spirit. They don't claim to be better than others in the Church, but they do claim now to be better Christians than they were formerly.

Is it really fair to label an exuberant Christian “emotional?” A child of God who has experienced Jesus in the deeper encounter of the Holy Spirit cannot help but feel a joy that is truly ecstatic and that others who do not have the same experience can easily misunderstand. No one really has the right to set limits on the rapture with which the Holy Spirit floods the heart of the believer. It does not make sense to say: “Well, feel all the joy you want, but don't overdo it. Don't get emotional.”

The Lord has revealed to us that “*there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repents*” (Luke 15:7). Let me tell you dear reader, that if the angels in heaven get emotional in joy over souls on earth that discover Jesus, then no man, least of all a priest, has the authority to say: “Don't over-react about Christ. Don't get over-zealous.”

If a person who has met Jesus in a personal experience doesn't get emotional about it, believe me, then it can't be much of an experience. The Myrrh-bearing women got pret-

ty emotional when they discovered the empty tomb and were the first to proclaim the resurrection with “fear and ecstasy,” as narrated by Mark the evangelist. The trouble with the church today is that it’s all fear and no ecstasy.

Can you imagine the early, apostolic church believer saying: Yes, Jesus is our risen Messiah, but be careful not to get over-emotional about it.

The apostles got so excited over the Gospel they turned cities “upside down.” It seems as if God wants to do the same thing with the Church through the current end-time outpouring of His Holy Spirit. It’ll take some shaking to get the church back to its Apostolic fervor.

Leaping and Praising God

When you experience the redeeming and healing power of the Holy Spirit, you’re not going to sit back in the pew with all due religious propriety. You’re going to externalize what is transpiring on the inside of you. When the lame man received his healing at the hand of Peter, he didn’t walk home. He went *“leaping and praising God.”* (Acts 3:8). Peter didn’t tell him: “Now don’t make a scene in front of all those people just because God healed you. After all, we want to keep our good name.”

Jesus taught us not only to “rejoice,” but to *“leap with joy”* (Luke 6:23). John the Baptist couldn’t wait. He leaped with joy from his mother’s womb as soon as his mother *“Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary.”*

That’s really getting emotional, dear reader, when even an unborn baby gets excited upon coming close to Jesus in His own mother’s womb. **When Jesus is present there’s no special season to rejoice. You rejoice in season and out of season. You don’t look up the book of rules. You don’t check the rubrics!**

There’s no denying it. Orthodox believers who have had a deeper experience of the Holy Spirit sure get excited over Jesus. That’s the point. Don’t you see it? It’s a real experience of Jesus in a deeper relationship. God help us if we are not impressed with the intense love for Jesus that floods the being of a fellow-believer. It is not enough that Jesus is being loved and lifted up in glory and praise? Is this not the final criterion, after all is said and done? Is this really not authentic Orthodoxy?

In my earlier years in the priesthood, I would have said the same thing. “Don’t over react. Don’t get emotional in worship. Don’t overdo the exuberance. Remember you’re an Orthodox – not a holy roller!”

Finding a New Joy in Christ

Since the day the Lord led me into the deeper experience of the Holy Spirit at an Orthodox prayer meeting in Huntington, West Virginia, my whole life and attitude have been changed, indeed revolutionized. It was God’s answer to my quest for a life of spiritual power and victory. I knew there was something missing in my personal life and in the Church. I have to confess in all humility that the joy I feel now I had never felt in my spiritual life in all my years as a “conservative” teacher of Orthodox theology and as a pastor.

I had the reputation of being a strict, uncompromising Orthodox, indeed to the point of being a legalist. I still consider myself a strict Orthodox, but then I knew the Holy Spirit only with the intellect. Now I know Jesus and the Spirit with my heart.

Joy doesn’t come naturally. It is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Now I have the capacity to experience joy in knowing Jesus Christ. Formerly it was a fear that sapped the joy out of my Christian life. True that we must

work out holiness “with fear and trembling,” but not to the exclusion of joy. It is not fearing God, but fearing lest we disobey God’s ordinances that is expected of His true children.

God commands that we love Him not only with *“all our mind,”* but also *“with all our heart.”* The heart is the seat of the affective faculty of the personality, that is, of feeling and emotion. To be emotional is not evil in itself. There are bad emotions, as for example, anger and sorrow. But there are also good emotions, as love and joy.

God’s word says: *“Now there abideth faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.”* Heaven will be a blissful experience of love. Love is part of God’s very nature, because *“God is love.”* If you don’t get emotional about God from now, you’re not going to enjoy Heaven. If you know Jesus Christ only with your mind and not with your heart also, you really lack a personal relationship of love with the Lord. Christ is merely a doctrine for you and one of the articles of the Church’s Creed.

A God of Love

Do you know, friend, what kind of God we confess and serve? He does not look at us from somewhere in space. **He does not relate to us from a distance. He is close to us. He indwells the world He created and especially man whom He made as His crown creation in His image and likeness.**

As awesome and majestic that God is, He makes Himself accessible in His Son Jesus Christ. The God Who is infinite and Whom the universe cannot contain desires to make you (body and soul) His habitation. The wonder of His boundless love and caring!

The scriptures tell us: *“So God loved the world that He gave His on-*

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ly-begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him might not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). God not only gave His Son to us, but He delivered Him up to death, as an atoning sacrifice for our deliverance from “the wages of sin,” sickness, oppression and death.

What happens to those who believe this truth? “*That we might not perish...*” To perish is the lot of those who remain under the universal judgement of God incurred by the entry of sin into the world. All humanity came under the curse of Adam because of the initial act of disobedience. Sin leads man to perdition, that is, eternal separation from God, called in the Bible “*outer darkness,*” prepared for the Devil and His ministering angels.

So, obviously there is much at stake here. It is our decision what we will do with Christ that will determine our eternal state. Can anyone afford to be uncertain about his eternal destiny?

You are a child of God, dear reader, and a coheir with Christ of

the kingdom of Heaven. One who waits for his inheritance does not guess or wonder, after he has seen the last will and testament of the testator. The child of God who has received the Spirit of adoption knows with certainty that He has a legal right to the inheritance of his Father. The one who is washed in the blood of the Lamb and whose name is written in the Lamb’s book of life lives with that blessed assurance that puts him at peace.

Receiving Jesus Christ into our hearts and lives in a life-changing encounter with Him is the source of our certainty. We don’t have to wait to die to find out whether we will go to Heaven or to Hell. We don’t believe in a God Who is morbid and sadistic and Who keeps us guessing. **Jesus over and over again reassures us in His word that if we belong to Him, to die is to join Him in His place of glory. To die is “to be present with the Lord.”**

What did you say St. Symeon?
“*It is necessary to examine ourselves and to know our souls with certain-*

ty, whether or not we have received the Lord Jesus evangelized to us, and whether or not we possess Him in our very selves, as the evangelist John says, “Let us know whether or not we have received authority from God to become children of God” (Moral Discourses X).

Such an assurance that we are truly children of God does not come by pleading our baptismal certificate. Neither is instruction on the sacramental theology of the Church enough for the certainty we need to have about our standing with God.

It is God’s Spirit that will flood you with the love that relates you to the Lord more intimately and joyfully. An intimacy with Jesus comes as the fruit of the Holy Spirit and not with exertion and effort on your part. But don’t expect to get intimate with Jesus without getting emotional, and intimate we must get, because to be united with Jesus in that deeper, inner unity requires intimacy. It is not for the few who have a mystical inclination, but the inheritance of every child of God.

The Seventh Day

Joseph Abbate / President

“*But beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day*” (2nd Peter 3:8). After Jesus had risen from the dead, we often forget that He was on the earth for 40 days, also visiting with his disciples on at least 3 different occasions as recorded in the New Testament. Just imagine for a moment the discussions which took place, and all of the many questions the disciples were asking Jesus. We can read an example of this in the book of Acts: “*When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, will thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?*” (Acts 1:6). The subject of the end times were on the minds of the Disciples.

When St. Peter writes about the conditions on earth just before the return of Jesus, it is very interesting that he describes that “one day as is a thousand years”. He mentions this

while writing about the conditions of the world at the time God created the earth, the destruction of the planet through the deluge of the great flood, to the return of Jesus when at this time, instead of a flood of water, “*the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up*” (2nd Peter 3:10).

Not many people, realize that a prevalent teaching of the early Church was the belief that since God created the earth in six days, that the world would endure six thousand years before the return of Jesus in glory to establish His kingdom on planet earth. This teaching originates from the scripture passage in Genesis describing the creation: “*And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made*” (Gen. 2:2).

First Century writings, such as the Fragments of Papias and Epistle of

Barnabas describe the issue. We find in Barnabas: “*Therefore, children, in six days, or in six thousand years, all the prophecies will be fulfilled*”. Then it says, “*He rested on the seventh day.*” *This signifies at the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus, He will destroy the Antichrist, judge the ungodly, and change the sun, moon, and stars. Then He will truly rest during Millennial Reign, which is the seventh day.*” (Epistle of Barnabas 15; 7-9).

This tradition had been passed on by some of the most prominent Christian writers and apologists of the Second Century, such as Saints Irenaeus and Justin Martyr. “*The day of the Lord is as a thousand years, and in six days created things were completed. It is evident, therefore, they will come to an end in the six thousandth year.*” (Irenaeus, Against Heresies 5. 28).

I do not wish to get embroiled into the different views on the complexities of the “Millennium”. I am simply shedding light on this portion of the

eschatological tradition regarding a six thousand year period of the earth. **If we Orthodox have the stance on the importance of both History and Scripture handed down directly from Apostolic Succession, then it is crucial to note that it would be odd that the Church writers which received these teachings could have been so mistaken at such an early period.**

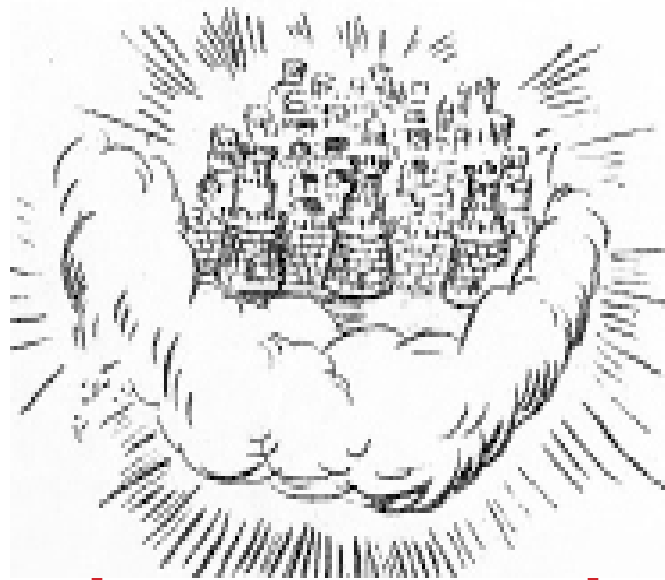
The Orthodox Church traditionally does not accept the position known as “sola scriptura”, but rather that the Church understands our authority of faith by both the Holy Scriptures and the historical traditions which have been directly handed down from the Lord Jesus Christ, to His Disciples, then from the Disciples to their followers, etc. Thus, we claim to have an unbroken line of authoritative teachings known as “Apostolic Succession”. It is an embedded tradition of the Orthodox Church. For example, the first century writer Papias stated: “*I was taught by the Apostle John, himself*” (Papias, fragment 6). Irenaeus and Justin Martyr were disciples of Polycarp, who was also a disciple of the Apostle John.

As we draw closer to the return of Jesus, it is apparent that current events are coinciding along with Bible prophecy. It looks by all appearances that the present age will soon come to a close. If this is the case, then it looks like the timing of apocalyptic events would match with the literal close of a six thousand year period. **This would then entail that the creation period of the earth should be taken as a literal “six day” period instead of just an allegorical interpretation of time, not to mention the teaching of a creation of earth through millions or even billions of years.**

It is an interesting note that not too long ago, writings from the prominent scientist Sir Isaac Newton were discovered. It was written in 1733. He called it: “*Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St. John*”. He was also enthralled with Bible prophecy. Among his notes was his personal belief that the nation of Israel would be restored sometime in the future. Through his mathematical equations of totaling

time periods found in Bible prophecy, he came to the conclusion that the end of the world would occur around the year 2060.

There are also ancient Jewish writings which share on the teachings of a six thousand year period. The ancient historian Josephus, which had described the “Epistle of Elijah”, as having existed before his lifetime, taught of a six thousand year period followed by a thousand years in which the Messiah would rule on the earth.



This teaching may also be found in the ancient Jewish works of “Tanna Debe Eliyyahu”. This writing positions the world into three separate ages. “The Age of Chaos”, “The Age of The Torah”, and “The Age of The Messiah”, when Christ returns to rule the world.

Of course, the early days of Christianity had initiated from the Holy Land. So it should not surprise anyone that many of these apocalyptic manuscripts would originate from this area of the globe. **However, as time had progressed, and Christianity spread throughout the Empire, The Jewish apocalyptic traditions had been replaced by Roman ones.** As Judea had been conquered by Rome, the Temple destroyed, and the Jewish Diaspora took place, the early Jewish themes of a literal Messianic Reign in Jerusalem became too crass, and “Replacement Theology”, (that the Church has replaced Israel), had become a prominent teaching in Western Christianity. The centrality of the early Jewish theological be-

liefs lost much of its relevance, and became distant to the Roman mind.

The New Jerusalem

The book of Revelation describes the culmination of the end times, with the descent of the “New Jerusalem”. We read: “*And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away, and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*

And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away”.

Saint Paul also alludes to the New Jerusalem. He is believed to have written the Epistle to the Hebrews. The writer of the Epistle stated: “*For we here have no permanent city, but we seek the city to come*” (Hebrews 13:14). He is mentioning a city which is not here yet, but the one to come. This, in no way means that we cannot have a taste of heaven now. After all, Jesus said that “*The Kingdom of Heaven is within you*”. Yet, as Father Stephanou would often say: “*The kingdom of heaven which is now internally in the life of the believer will then be manifested externally*”.

In his book, *An Orthodox Look at the Restoration of Israel*, Father Stephanou writes: “*No one can understand the consummation of the age, unless he is Jerusalem-conscious. The book of the Revelation ends with the account of the descent to earth of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem that “comes down from God out of heaven.” It is truly an awesome and dramatic event that defies rational explanation. It is a mystery that staggers the human imagination. Nevertheless, it is a reality revealed in scripture and an unmistakable occurrence every one of us will have to face sooner or later*”.