



It Takes Love to Stay in the Church

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

This following article is from 1993. Are you one of those who have left the Orthodox Church, or who are entertaining the thought of leaving the Orthodox Church for greener pastures? You need

to remember that the Lord is looking for men and woman who are willing to serve as yielded vessels of His redeeming compassion for His Orthodox people.

The Lord did not establish the Orthodox Church on the day of Pentecost so that He might discard it now in this last hour. The New Pentecost does not mean God is beginning a new Church from scratch. Instead, He is taking the original One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of the Nicene Creed and renewing it – not replacing it.

When Jesus established the New Covenant in His precious Blood, He did not intend to dispose of the Old Covenant, but rather to complete it. He took the old He found and made something new of it. He started what already was there and built on that. This principle is summed up in the Lord's words: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets. I am not come to destroy but to fulfill” (Matt. 5:17).

I grant you, dear reader, that much of Orthodoxy has been reduced to religious legalism and religious formalism. The solution is not the elimination of the forms and structures of the worship and practice in the Orthodox Church. Rather, it is allowing them to be authentic expressions of an inner rebirth and the reverence that fol-

lows. The preaching of repentance and spiritual regeneration is the answer to the barren formalism that plagues the Orthodox Church.

Are you one of those who want to do away with religious externals in the Church after coming into a rebirth experience? Do you believe you are too spiritual now to have anything to do with religious symbolism and ritual?

True that much of the ritual in the Church has been reduced to religious routine and barren forms totally irrelevant to the deeper needs of the contemporary Orthodox believer. The answer is to “fulfill” them by relating them to our new experience of “worship in Spirit and in truth.”

For example, when we hear the priest intone in the Liturgy, “*Let us attend. The Holy Things to the saints!*” we can now relate to those words. Our rebirth experience helps us to understand what it means to be a “saint” and what sanctification means.

The external can minister to us when we remain free in the Spirit and yielded to the Spirit's leading. They serve no longer as ends in themselves, but as vehicles of divine grace. They also serve as tangible means which lift us up into the realm of the holy and into the divine Presence.

Destroying the Law?

Jesus was not iconoclastic. He left us an example of how we must treat the religious forms that have come down to us in the Church from past generations. True they could be a hindrance to spiritual worship, to worship “in Spirit and in truth” which alone is acceptable and well pleasing to God.

But this does not necessarily hold true in every case. It is the spiritual state of the worshipper that determines that. We can trust the Lord to “fulfill” them for us in our newly found, deeper relationship with Jesus Christ.

Once we come into a personal relationship with Jesus, it is a temptation with many to become intent on “destroying the law and the prophets.” Make no mistake about it. It is not the Holy Spirit that dictates such an overreaction. Rather, it is the extreme teaching of a few Pentecostal and Evangelical preachers who view all ritual and symbolism as idolatry and an abomination from which a believer is to turn away as swiftly as possible. They look at Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy as Babylon from which a true child of God must sever every connection at all costs.

Thank God not all Pentecostal preachers aim at pulling converted people away from their traditional Churches. As a matter of fact, I have known some who actually exhort those who become born again to go back to their Churches and witness for Christ to others to come into the same experience.

David DuPlessis, world-renowned Pentecostal from South Africa, told

an Orthodox audience a few years ago to stay in their Church and not to leave for another Church. I was there in person and can testify to it, since I heard him with my own ears.

I have been appalled at the extreme negative attitude of Greek Pentecostals toward the established Orthodox Church of Greece. Their pastors were quoted to me as saying that the Orthodox Communion was to be avoided "because it originated out of the pit of hell."

These pastors parrot the extreme teaching of some fanatical Pentecostal preachers from the U.S. who go to Athens and pass on their extreme views to the Greeks. They condemn the practice of lighting candles and the use of Icons as an abomination in the sight of God. They overreact to the abuses that prevail in the Orthodox Church. They throw the baby out with the bath water.

Thank God for Pentecostal teachers like Derek Prince and the late Gordon Lindsay who in effect hold to the Orthodox doctrine on the Holy Communion. They write and teach that the bread and the wine are truly the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist. The former holds that the unworthy Communion is the major cause of physical sickness among Christian believers. The latter in a taped message entitled "Communion" teaches a doctrine identical to the Orthodox teaching on the Communion of Saints during the celebration of the Eucharist.

Under the influence of Pentecostal teachers some of our Orthodox who are in the renewal are prepared to discard the traditions and usages in the Orthodox Church. Rather than

devoting their attention and energy to witnessing for the Gospel in love toward their fellow Orthodox, they begin to question certain traditions in the Church.

Tradition Honored by Jesus

Again, let me reply by referring to the example of Jesus. He respected the established practices He found observed in the Judaism of His day. To take one example, when Jesus healed the one leper as recorded in Matthew 8:1f, He encouraged him to keep the practice of having the priest pronounce him healed. He said: "*See thou tell no man; but go thy way, show thyself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them.*"

Jesus rebuked the office-holders in Judaism, especially the scribes and pharisees, but He honored the religious ranks and treated them as legitimate. He did not come to do away with them, to destroy them, but to fulfill them. As a matter of fact, the Lord reinforced their authority by saying: "*The scribes and pharisees sit in Moses' seat. All, therefore, whatever they bid you observe, that observe and do. But do not ye after their works, for they say, and do not*" (Matt. 23:1f).

I hope, dear reader, you are not one of those born-again believers who question the authority of the Orthodox priest and dispute whether it is scriptural or not. The Holy Spirit causes the believer to honor the authority of the shepherd in the Church and to remain under his leadership in submission.

Jesus put into actual practice His declaration: "*Think not that I came to destroy the law and the prophets,*

I came not to destroy but to fulfill."

The purpose of God was to have His Son observe the law in order to fulfill it. He caused Jesus to be circumcised the eighth day and to receive the name Jesus on the day of His circumcision, and when the days of the purification of Mary ended, He was brought to Jerusalem to be presented to the Lord in compliance with the Mosaic law. "*Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord*" (Num. 3:13) and a sacrifice was offered according to what was prescribed by the law of the Lord. "*A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons*" (Lev. 12:2f).

Although Jesus was Lord of the Sabbath and of the law, yet He usually did not claim special exemption from the law. He conceivably could have, since he was given all authority by the Father in heaven and in earth. He honored the law which, after all, He Himself had instituted in the Old Covenant.

To take a further example, did not Jesus condescend to be baptized of John in the Jordan? John was not ready to accept such a thing and momentarily refused, saying, "*I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?*" (Matt. 3:14). But he conceded after Jesus insisted, saying, "*Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.*"

Jesus Identifies with what He Renews

Jesus was humble. It is in His nature to want to be part of what He intends to fulfill or to renew. He accepts it humbly, demonstrating a respect and an honor for the established religious practices of Israel. Jesus did His utmost not to offend the religious sensitivity of the Jews and especially of the Jewish leaders.

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How about you, dear reader? Are you trying to humbly identify with the Orthodox Church and her practices that the Lord desires to renew in this last hour?

Jesus never desired to give the impression that He was planning to establish a new religion separate and apart from the already existing Judaic religion. His objective was to fulfill the law and the prophets of the Old Covenant and not to deliberately throw them out, replacing them with something new.

Jesus taught in the synagogues and in the temple. *"He taught daily in the temple"* (Luke 19:47). He never set up a separate assembly, neither did He open up a building, as a separate place of worship and teaching. He didn't say, "Well, that's a dead Church over there, so, let's open up a new Church over here where everything will be in harmony with God's word."

It is marvelous how Jesus identified totally with God's people of Israel, even in their state of spiritual desolation. He did not, of course, justify their desolate condition by doing that. As a matter of fact, Jesus left the indictment with them just prior to His passion and death: *"Behold, your house is left unto you desolate"* (Matt. 23:38).

Jesus foretold the destruction of the temple. He was realistic. He predicted this disaster when He said, *"Verily I say unto you, there shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down"* (Matt. 24:2).

Jesus did not identify with the people of Israel for the purpose of varnishing over the sins of that nation. No. Not in the least. On the contrary, He kept warning them of the impending calamity that was to fall upon Jerusalem.

You, too, dear reader. Identifying with the Orthodox people does not in the least mean catering to their spiri-

tual weaknesses and sins of endorsing their disobedience. It means that God will honor your witness which is carried out in love and humility.

Jesus Stayed in the Temple

Jesus did not set up a new temple in opposition to the pharisees. He loved it as His Father's own home. It was the symbol of the Church. Perhaps the only instance in which Jesus expressed indignation was when He cast out the money changers from the temple. That indignation was not expressed in an act of replacing it with a new temple, but in an act of restoring the old one.



Doesn't that tell you something, dear reader? God doesn't want you to leave the Orthodox Church and look for another church to replace your traditional Church. He wants you to be active in the work of renewing the Orthodox Church.

It was painful for Jesus to see how they desecrated the house of His Father. For this reason, *"Jesus went into the Temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of them that sold doves, and said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer, but ye have made it a den of thieves"* (Matt. 12:12f).

I think it is time even now for anger. Yes, but let's not express that anger by leaving the Church. Let's show it by more zealously sharing in God's work of renewal in the Church. Help cleanse the Church of sin and disobedience by

cleansing your own personal life and then speaking out boldly against those who are responsible for the desolation of the Church.

Orthodoxy, being the Church of history, is the new house of God, the Body of Christ. It is the new temple, not made with hands, in which His Holy Spirit indwells. The moment some Orthodox come into a life-changing experience with Christ they entertain thoughts of leaving the Orthodox Church very often under the influence of Pentecostal preachers, or at the behest of former Orthodox now in the Pentecostal Church.

They hunt around for a new Church where there is more of the ministry of the word and more spiritual vitality. They contend that the Orthodox Church is spiritually dead and that they cannot grow in the Spirit so long as they stay in the Orthodox Church.

Stay in the Orthodox Church until they bodily remove you. Jesus was outspoken and bold in speaking out against sin and iniquity. He loved the house of His Father and kept going to the temple, teaching and healing the sick and afflicted, until they put Him to the Cross. Do you have that kind of love, patience and perseverance?

Prophesying Upon the Dry Bones

Jesus knew that Judaism was spiritually dead and through the Prophet Ezekiel God called the house of Israel "dry bones." Yet, Jesus stayed with the Jews in order to be used of His Father for their restoration.

It was Christ's love for God's people that compelled Him to be one with them. It was not mere obedience to His Father's will. How many of us Orthodox have such compassion for our fellow-Orthodox who do not know Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior? Don't you realize, dear reader, that the Lord made you a new creature in Christ and filled you with the Holy Spirit in order to use you for effective service in His cause of renewal?

God did not transform your life in that wonderful experience to which you often turn with fond memories simply so you can leave the Orthodox Church and find a more comfortable walk with Jesus. How can you turn your back to the Church in which you made your first acquaintance with Jesus Christ? How can you give up on the Orthodox when Jesus hasn't given up on them?

Think again of the compassion of Jesus. His love was a crucified love. But you can't take a little misunderstanding. You get offended so easily. Are you ready to go as far as Jesus did out of His pity to His people? Remember those words of Jesus with which He vividly expressed His deep pain over the rejection He suffered at the hands of the very people He loved? "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that kills the prophets, and stone them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and yet ye would not!*" (Matt. 23:37).

In this last hour when God is pouring out His Spirit upon all flesh He is looking for men and woman who are making themselves available to Him as yielded vessels "fit for the Master's use."

We have our Instructions

All of you who have come into a deeper experience of the Holy Spirit and have had a life-changing experience – we have our instructions: "*Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life.*"

I have demonstrated in many of my writings that Orthodoxy is the most Pentecostal and most charismatic Church. It's worship and theology is Pneumato-centric, that is, Spirit-centered and Spirit-anointed. The charismatic renewal can find

itself back at home in Orthodoxy if we make ourselves available to the Lord for humble service as yielded vessels.

Too many Orthodox, however, possess the fulness of the spiritual inheritance only legally. They do not possess it experientially. Pentecost is not really an experience for them, as it should be. Orthodoxy for most Orthodox is charismatic and the extension of Pentecost only in theory – not in experience. It is merely impressive theology, but abstract for most of the people in the Church – even for priests and theologians.

A Painful Experience

Thank God for the many dedicated bishops in the Church. They prove they are true spiritual shepherds who care for the spiritual welfare of the souls entrusted to their pastoral care. On the other hand, we cannot help get gravely concerned over a bishop whose words and deeds tend to quench the Spirit of God. Rank certainly does not guarantee righteousness and holiness before God.

Eye and ear witnesses have reported to us that at a Vesper Service held at the Greek Orthodox Church of New Port Richey, Florida, Bishop Philip from the Pulpit attacked those who read the Bible and attended Bible study prayer meetings on week days. He also directed that the sign at the front of the church be taken down, the reason being because it read at the top JESUS IS LORD.

In November of last year (1992), he publicly requested for a list of all those who claim they are born again so that he might "excommunicate" them! Has Bishop Philip ever read the teaching of St. John Chrysostom who states: "*Not to know the Scriptures is the cause of all evils*"?

I could think of a lot of other people in the churches the bishop could excommunicate – unrepentant adulterers, fornicators, swindlers, imposters and unbelievers who lay waste the Vineyard of the Lord. Why does a bishop of the church have to seek out the godly and zealous Orthodox Christians to condemn and excommunicate? All of Heaven shudders at this sacrilege!

What should our response be toward such church leaders? The same response of the believers in the Book of Acts. They prayed: "*Lord, behold their threatening, and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by thy holy child Jesus*" (Acts 4:30).

They prayed for more boldness to continue witnessing for Jesus Christ and for the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit to confirm the word of God. Following the example of the infant Apostolic Church, we, too, must pray for the boldness to press on in perfect obedience to the will of God for our personal renewal and the renewal of the whole Church at large – regardless of the cost! After all, JESUS IS LORD!

(Shortly after this article was originally published, The Patriarch had found Fr. Stephanou innocent of all charges brought against him by Bishop Philip).

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