

A Compendium of General Information On The Russian Orthodox Church

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Introduction & Purpose

Those traveling into districts of the former Soviet Union find themselves confronted with teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church. There have been many mistakes and embarrassing statements made by Americans who failed to understand this Christian belief system. This compendium is offered as an elementary introduction to the basic beliefs of the Eastern Orthodox Church. It is neither intended to be comprehensive nor an authority. The information contained in this has been gleaned from various sources that are credited whenever possible. Other sources include personal knowledge, letters from Ukrainians, and various research efforts. The author would like to keep this material current as well as expanding so that it can be useful to those spreading the gospel message. To this end he solicits comments and additional information that can be appended to this material.

General Information Regarding the Russian Orthodox Church

The Russian Orthodox Church is a division of the Eastern Orthodox Church. In Church History the Lord's Church was established on Acts 2 and later apostatized. The apostate church developed until two cities became controlling centers for religious thought and practice. The Western Church was governed by the Patriarch of Rome and the Eastern Church was governed by the Patriarch of Constantinople. Jealousy continued to develop until the two centers denounced each other and governed those within their sphere of influence. Several factors were responsible for this division and some of these factors exist even today. Many Americans assume the Eastern Orthodox Church is identical to the Roman Church and they make false assumptions about image worship, baptism, mechanical music, priestly conduct, etc. It is inadvisable for the Bible teacher to assume the Eastern Orthodox Church does things like the Roman Catholic Church.

A critical aspect of the Eastern Orthodox Church is its nationalistic affiliations. Unlike the Roman "Catholic" (Universal) Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church is divided by nationalism. Hence there will be differences between them that are rooted in the peculiar nation's ethnicity. One significant point to remember is that the Orthodox Church does not recognize the Pope and in fact

are often totally ignorant about what the Roman Catholic Church has done in history. Another critical factor to remember is that the digression of the Eastern Orthodox Church is often restricted to the departures from 100-313 A.D. and consequently the modern departures of the Roman Catholic Church are unknown. To dwell upon these modern digressions is to waste precious study opportunities.¹

Major Beliefs of the Russian Orthodox Church

Beliefs Regarding Religious Authority

Members of the Russian Orthodox Church will quickly agree that they should follow the Bible. They will agree to what is often presented as evidence for biblical authority in religious belief and practice. The problem is that their concept of biblical authority is vastly different from the New Testament concept. Their biblical authority rests upon a Bible that includes the Apocrypha Books. From these non-canonical books one is able to support several doctrines that are without Scriptural support from the 66 canonical books. The Orthodox Church also believes the Bible is the “book of the Church.” This phrase has an interesting meaning. The Orthodox Church teaches that it is a part of the “continuing Pentecost.” This means that the Orthodox Church teaches that God is still revealing His will to man just as He did on Pentecost. This revelation comes through the Orthodox Church. Thus, the Orthodox Church teaches that its traditions and interpretations are on the same level with Holy Scripture. Hence the Bible teacher needs to remember that “biblical authority” does not mean the same to the Ukrainians as to Americans! The Orthodox Church accepts the Greek Septuagint version of the Old Testament rather than the Hebrew. Orthodoxy believes the changes in the LXX were inspired by the Holy Spirit and are thus a part of God’s continuing revelation to the Church.

The Russian Orthodox Church esteems the works of “holy fathers” of the Church as sacred. This respected group includes preachers, pastors, etc., anyone

¹A good resource that is useful will be Owen Olbricht, **Scriptural Answers To Religious Error 1**. In this volume the reader will find good reference materials on departures from 100-300 A.D. which help to explain the religious practices and beliefs of the Russian Orthodox Church. See pps. 9-22.

who is a theologian, spiritual teacher, expositor, and defender of Christianity. Their writings are based on texts of the Bible and are offered as the result of a perfect knowledge of theological studies. These writings will be cited as an authority of equal validity with the Bible. This is commonly referred to as the “Living Voice of the Church” and is another example of the “continuing Pentecost” concept underlying the Orthodox Church dogmas.

Suggested Approach—In order for one to follow God there must be a realization of the proper authority in religious practice/beliefs (cf Mt 21:23-27). Until the Bible alone is recognized as the sole authority in religious practice/belief one will continue to look to “The Living Voice Of The Church” and its traditions. In matters inconsequential to salvation this poses no problem. However in matters related to salvation this dependence upon a dual religious authority cannot lead one to reconciliation with God. A suggested approach to this dilemma is to show the validity of the Scriptures (the 66 canonical books), and then bring into contrast the conflicts of Tradition with God’s revelation. I have found it best to illustrate this with Traditional practices outside of Orthodoxy and after agreement has been reached on several examples gently show how the present Orthodox traditions conflict with Scripture. After this has been done a simple question asks, “Which should we follow?” should conclusively reveal the appropriate response. Each teacher should realize that Tradition has a strong hold on adherents and it will take repeated teaching and longsuffering to overcome the bondage of traditionalism. Additional help may be found in various tracts that have been written by brethren who have come out of the bondage to traditionalism.

Beliefs Regarding Salvation

BAPTISM. The Russian Orthodox Church teaches that in order for one to be saved s/he must believe and be baptized. According to their beliefs baptism is a “sacrament by which a believer is immersed three times, or is sprinkled three times, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit unto the remission of his sins.” While this sounds biblical there are some factors associated with it that reveal the Orthodox practice of baptism is not in harmony with the Bible. These are briefly discussed: First, the “sacramental” concept of baptism is unbiblical. A “sacrament” is an outward work to God’s commands and does not practically involve faith. According to the sacramental concept the sacrament is the means by which God’s grace is achieved. Thus if one is baptized then s/he is

saved regardless of faith (this is the underlying logic of infant baptism). This sacramental concept underlies all sacraments practiced. Second, the Orthodox Church practices a triune immersion which is not taught by the Scriptures. Third, the Orthodox Church allows sprinkling (actually water is poured on the baptismal candidate three times in the name of the Godhead). Fourth, this concept of salvation should exclude infants being baptized, however the Russian Orthodox Church immerses infants. This contradicts their dogma that those who are baptized must be believers.

MAN. The Russian Orthodox Church teaches that man inherits a sinful nature. Even small children whose minds have not developed to discern between good and evil are considered “sinful.” Evil exists in every person in spite of age, sex, and personality. Evil does not exist by itself but it exists as an entity within every one of God’s creatures. Viewed in this way the sin of Adam and Eve created this evil presence in everyone.

REPENTANCE. The Russian Orthodox Church teaches that repentance is a sacrament by which one confesses that sins are visibly forgiven by a priest and invisibly forgiven by Jesus. The Orthodox Church teaches that Jesus gave the Apostles power to forgive sins and this power was transferred to Bishops and priests (Ac 19:18). In some situations a priest may ban a member from participation in the Lord’s Supper. Restitution depends upon the sinner’s repentance and depends upon whether the priest judges it to be adequate for the sin committed and sincere. A sinner is given time for prayer and good deeds until the need for the next repentance. This prohibition is viewed as originating with the Lord’s parable in Lk 15:11-32.

General Beliefs And Practices

The following topics are common beliefs/practices in the Russian Orthodox Church. Understanding these factors will enable the Bible teacher to anticipate student’s needs as the lessons are presented.

THE HOLY SPIRIT. The Russian Orthodox Church believes that the gifts of the Holy Spirit still exist through the Church. The transmission of these Gifts is the duty of the Church hierarchy (the Bishops, Presbyters, Deacons). According to the Church’s teaching one Bishop is able to transmit the Gifts of the Holy Spirit by

laying hands on all of the Church officials in his district. In the Russian Orthodox Church all Bishops are equal and there is no Archbishop in the Orthodox hierarchy. The “Anointing” of the Spirit in the Russian Orthodox Church is a sacrament by which a believer receives the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. This anointing occurs through the use of a special oil that has been blessed by the Priests (called the Holy Chrism). The Orthodox dogma states that this anointing was first done by the Apostles via the laying on of hands. They cite as evidence these texts: Ac 8:14-17; 19:2-6. As the early Church grew and believers multiplied so that the Apostles and Bishops could not personally lay hands on all believers, a “Holy Chrism” was introduced to the Church and became the means by which the Holy Spirit’s anointing was possible to multitudes of believers. In our modern time the Orthodox dogmas teach that any priest can grease a believer with a Chrism. Usually this anointing is done right after one is baptized. The anointing is made by the Holy Chrism being placed on the forehead, eyes, ears, lips, hands, and chest. A cross-shaped mark is made and the words, “A seal of a gift of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” are spoken. According to dogma this practice is validated by James 5:14,15. “Unction” is viewed as another sacrament by which God offers healing to the sick in body. This is achieved by prayers in the Church in the porticle for the sick and by the sick being anointed with “Holy Oil.” This practice is validated by appeals to James 5:14,15; Mark 6:12-13. Unction must be done by a Bishop or Priest who applies the Holy Oil and says a prayer.

Suggested Approach—Those involved in teaching the Bible where the Russian Orthodox Church has strong influence will constantly be confronted with queries regarding the miraculous gifts and work of the Holy Spirit. Years of absence of the Bible has often led to a gross dependence upon superstition which negates biblical reason on this topic. Those thus teaching must prepare to address this issue repeatedly, consistently, and patiently. When questions of “genuine” miracles are asked the teacher must be prepared to respond so that the seeker is not offended yet taught the Truth in love. Diligent study, prior to going on campaigns, should focus upon the work of the Holy Spirit today. Careful attention must be given to how one can clearly explain that the miraculous has ceased and the Holy Spirit does not work independently from the Scriptures.² Some of the

²Some of the more helpful books to assist teachers in this critical study include: Ralph Weinhold, **THE HOLY SPIRIT**. TRUTH FOR TODAY, 202 S. Locust, Searcy, AR 72143, April 1995; Z.T. Sweeney, **The Spirit And The Word**. Gospel Advocate, Co., Nashville, TN.; H. Leo Boles, **The Holy Spirit: His Personality, Nature, And Work**. Gospel Advocate, Co., Nashville, TN; J.J. Turner & Edward P. Myers, **Doctrine Of The**

critical texts that should be studied and understood will include: 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 which speaks about the miraculous gifts ceasing; 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12 which foretells how Satan will deceive sincere believers by having his evil followers perform lying wonders; Matthew 7:21-23 which portrays the Lord condemning those who had performed mighty signs and wonders yet they were lost. The teacher must be prepared to answer this issue in a manner that is perceived as sincere and consistent with the Scriptures.

WORSHIP PRACTICES. The Russian Orthodox Church believes that its worship should follow the Old Testament tradition and begin in the evening. They will have services at 6:00 p.m., 9:00 p.m., 12:00 p.m., 1:00 a.m., and 6:00 a.m. The Orthodox Church has services every day. Sitting during services is perceived as disrespectful and is not accepted. The frequent discussion of mechanical instruments in worship is not an issue with the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox Church believes that mechanical instruments are sinful and this was one of the factors which led to the formal separation between Rome and Constantinople in 1054. Teachers should be aware of this and unless Protestant denominational worship error has been introduced to the students, there will only need to be a brief mention of mechanical instruments being sinful (actually this point is a “bridge-building” agreement to help persuade agreement on other critical issues).

The Orthodox Church practices regular Communion and commands its members to take Communion as often as possible, not less than once a year. Prior to taking Communion one is to confess sins (tell a Priest all sinful acts). Prior to this confession one should fast, attend several worship services, observe private prayer, and make peace with every associate. Here is a factor that most Americans fail to recognize when teaching about the Lord’s Supper. The Scripture commands that the Lord’s Supper be observed on the first day of the week.³ Most

Godhead. Quality Publications, Abilene, TX; Gus Nichols, **Lectures On The Holy Spirit.** Southern Christian University, Montgomery, AL. Note: Some of these books are out of print and can be located only in a library!

³This is evident by considering Acts 20:7. For those unprepared to explain this point it is suggested that a close study be made of Thomas B. Warren, **When Is An “Example” Binding?** p. 144-156. Here is an excellent discussion showing how we can absolutely know that Communion was taken on every Sunday by the early brethren and why their example compels modern believers to do the same thing.

Americans enter the East failing to recognize that their “first day of the week” is Monday NOT Sunday! Thus, when Americans teach that Communion is to be observed on the “first day of the week” and their interpreter is biblically ignorant, the lesson will shock those attending classes. This point underscores why it is critical for teachers to understand the cultural phrases and make sure their lessons clarify instead of confuse!

As Communion’s elements are considered these observations are noted with the observance of this act in the Russian Orthodox Church. The Communion “wine” is alcoholic. Those who have questions about this can be easily answered. The Lord’s Supper was instituted during the Passover observance and during this festival it will be remembered that all fermented substances (“leaven”) were to be purged from the homes. Anyone found with leaven (ferment) in his home was in open rebellion to God’s commands. Thus, the Jews were careful to “prepare” for the Passover by assuring that all fermented substances were taken out of the home.⁴ The Orthodox Church also uses leavened bread during Communion.

BELIEFS REGARDING SACRED OBJECTS

The Russian Orthodox Church teaches that the following hold a special and sacred place in the believer’s practice and belief. These items are briefly discussed here and an expanded discussion will be made in a future revision of this work.

THE VIRGIN MARY. Mary, the mother of Christ, is viewed as a sinless “superwoman.” She is not worshiped but is held in awed esteem. As the “Mother of our Lord” she is viewed as being closer to God than any man or angel. Some even place her closer than Christ!

GODLY SAINTS. These are people who have reportedly achieved spiritual perfection. The Orthodox Church teaches that it can add righteous men/women

⁴Those who feel inadequate to explain this point should study the following sources which will validate the point. William Patton, **BIBLE WINES: The Laws Of Fermentation And Wines Of The Ancients**, pages 82ff. Star Bible & Tract Corp., Ft. Worth, TX; Samuele Bacchiocchi, **Wine In The Bible: A biblical study on the use of alcoholic beverages**, p. 155ff. Biblical Perspectives, 4569 Lisa Ln., Berrien Springs, Michigan 49103; Jim McGuiggan, **The Bible, The Saint, & The Liquor Industry**. Pages 131-133. Star Bible Pub., Inc., Ft. Worth, Tx.

to the list of “saints.” Believers are encouraged to pray to these saints because their godly lives have placed them closer to God and prayers to the saints will receive a favorable reception by God. Believers are told that the saints and angels will help them in earthly struggles. The textual basis for this position is found in an appeal to John 15:14 where Christ’s friends solicit help from God.

HOLY CROSS, HOLY ICONS, HOLY RELICS. Because of biblical illiteracy and the influence of superstition, the frequent use of these items exist. Believers are told to bow when they see the saints dead bodies, or holy relics (bones, etc.). They are to kiss the crosses and icons to show homage. They are to place flowers and lit candles before crosses, icons, and relics to demonstrate their devotion.

PRAYERS FOR THE DEAD. The Russian Orthodox Church maintains that God is the God of “the living” (Lk 20:38) and that believers are to “pray for one another” (Jas 5:16). It is hence concluded that believers are to pray for their dead also. These prayers will help find forgiveness of sins even after one has died (according to the Orthodox dogma teaching of Matthew 12:32). The only sin that cannot be forgiven is blasphemy but all other sins can be forgiven while one is alive or after death if one’s friends will pray for him/her!

ANGEL KEEPERS. This is the belief in “Guardian Angels.” The Russian Orthodox Church teaches that every believer has his/her own “angel-keeper” whose singular aim is to warn against danger and save the believer from it. Psalm 91:10,11 is used to validate this dogma. Further, the angel-keepers are responsible for praying to God for his Christian and Matthew 18:10 is used to validate this dogma. When asked why some believers sin and others are harmed, the typical response is that the angel-keeper failed in his task and will be punished. If the angel-keeper does not prevent his Christian from sinning who is at fault? Is it the Christian or the angel-keeper? The typical response is that both will face punishment.⁵

⁵This whole issue of “angels” is as current in America as in eastern Europe. The invasive New Age philosophy has joined pagan myths with “Christian theology” and formed a mysticism that captivates many minds today. While eastern Europe may be excused for its superstitious inclinations because of 70 years of the Bible being banned, the West cannot find so easy an excuse! For those seeking material to study on this topic the following are suggested: Howard Blazer, **ANGELS: Their origin, nature, mission, destiny.** Parchment Press, 1136 Lipscomb Dr., Nashville, TN 37204; Edward P. Myers, **A Study Of Angels.** Howard Pub., Co., W. Monroe, LA; Wynelle F. Main, **An Investigation Of Angels.** Quality Pub., Abilene, TX.

Concluding Thoughts

It is admitted that the information in this report is brief. Hopefully it has been sufficient to make diligent teachers aware of the great challenge of reaching and teaching lost souls in Eastern Europe. It is urgent that all involved in evangelistic campaigns and edification tours to this region of the world be advised of practices, words, phrases, etc., that will help facilitate the teaching of God's Word. May all traveling to distant places go with the objective of God's teachers so long ago, "And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading...Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Nehemiah 8:8; Ezra 7:10).

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