Review of Nassif, *The Evangelical Theology of the Orthodox Church*

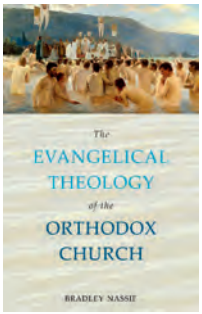
Marcela K. Perett

When I pick up a book that comes endorsed with impressive blurbs on the back cover and an appreciative foreword by one of the tradition's heavy-weights, my attention is piqued. Bradley Nassif's *The Evangelical Theology of the Orthodox Church* is one such book. The title is supposed to be provocative, suggesting that Evangelicalism has its place in the very heart of Orthodoxy and, as such, is not incompatible with it. The book is a collection of previously-published reflections on the relationship between Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism. Its text is a bit uneven, ranging from fairly accessible to mostly inaccessible (and this from one with a very high tolerance for dry, convoluted academic prose).

The Evangelical Theology of the Orthodox Church is divided into two parts. The first part traces the evangelical nature of the theology and practice as maintained and celebrated in Orthodox churches. Using numerous examples, Nassif argues the gospel is omnipresent in Orthodox liturgy, prayer, and spirituality (hence the book's title). The second part is explicit about putting the two traditions in dialogue with each other, offering a look at Evangelicalism through Orthodox eyes and vice versa, and anticipating and addressing difficulties. Here Nassif becomes more pastoral in approach, concluding that both traditions have much to learn from each other.

As mentioned, the first part of the book aims to describe the Orthodox Church that many of us know. Chapter 1, especially, is a veritable *tour de force* through Orthodox tradition, organized around the way in which the gospel is communicated to the faithful through the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. The author argues (here and throughout the entire book) that the gospel is absolutely central to every liturgical action performed in the Orthodox Church. The gospel is described as "the work of the Holy Trinity, through the incarnation of the Son, to restore humans to union with God, and communion with each other, for the good of the world and the glory of God" (27). I quote this description because it is key to what Nassif attempts to do in the book, namely to show that the Orthodox definition subsumes the gospel as defined by the Evangelical movement. But none of Nassif's theological forays end with the gospel, because, as he points out, the gospel is not a message but a person. Hence, the discussion inevitably progresses to *theosis*, the process whereby human lives are transformed by the gospel. The connection between the gospel and *theosis* is illuminating, but it is a connection few Evangelicals would embrace organically.

Chapter 2 addresses the question of scriptural interpretation as it was understood by (again) Saint John Chrysostom. As if to reassure Evangelical readers, Nassif concludes that Orthodoxy has a very high view of Scripture, holding that every letter of it is seen as equally



Bradley Nassif, *The Evangelical Theology of the Orthodox Church* (Yonkers: SVS Press, 2021).

inspired by God. The job of an exegete, such as Saint John Chrysostom, is to search out the meaning of salvation history by "using historical research under the guidance of the Holy Spirit" (66). This is by far the book's most difficult chapter: it uses highly theoretical language to describe Chrysostom's exegetical methods in the context of antiquity's exegetical practice. None of it feels like it describes an actual believer's experience of the Bible, however. In this way, the chapter perfectly encapsulates the Orthodox Church's failure to present to its faithful the Scriptures both as containing the Word of God (as past revelation) and as being the Word of God (God speaking to us now). In addition, the identity of approved Biblical interpreters is left ambiguous. As someone whose home parish would sanction a Bible study only with clergy present (a tough proposition if you want a women's group), I know that the Orthodox faithful's experience of the Bible is top-down, controlled, and anything but spontaneous. In other words, nothing that any self-respecting Evangelical would willingly accept. And although the Orthodox view of the Bible may be in harmony with that of the Evangelicals in many respects, in practice it would hardly be recognized as such.

In the third chapter, Nassif turns to the evangelical (or gospel) characteristics of Orthodox spirituality. It is really a chapter about what spiritual treasures can be accessed through the Church's prayers, rituals, and icons. Through participation in them, humanity can be transformed. Nassif uses the example of Saint Anthony to show what this kind of transformation might look like when embodied in an actual person who chooses to pursue God's riches over earthly ones.

Chapters 4 and 5 address questions of doctrine. In chapter 4, Nassif takes up the writings of Saint Mark the Monk on the role of grace. Really, though, the entire chapter is a very technical argument about the proper place of good works in the life of a Christian. Nassif addresses a number of misinterpretations that exist among Protestants about the role of good works in the life of an Orthodox Christian. In chapter five, Nassif turns to the thorny issue of justification by faith. Here is one of the few places where he actually states that the Evangelicals got something wrong. He argues that justification by faith ought not to be seen as the heart of the gospel and that it is more accurate to think of it as a gift and a consequence of the believer's prior participation in Christ. The discussion occasionally becomes so technical that it feels once again like a chapter in search of an audience: a reminder that what works as an academic paper does not always have real-faith-life relevance. But the conclusion is helpful: an interpretation of Luther's doctrine of justification by faith that Orthodox can embrace, even if not all Lutherans can.

The conclusion to part 1 is where the real work of this book takes place. In it, Nassif calls Orthodox clergy and laity (in that order) to "awaken to Christ and the core message of his salvation" (149). This follows from Nassif's (at times repetitive) argument in this section: Christ and his gospel are at the center of all that we do and believe as Orthodox Christians. In effect, Nassif calls for "internal evangelism and the recovery of the gospel as the jewel of the faith" (153). It is a stirring exhortation that can hardly be disagreed with. But there is a difficulty. Nassif calls for internal evangelism without resolving the main tension that, to me at least, lurks on every page like the proverbial elephant in the room. This is the tension between so-called implicit faith (participation in rituals and practices) and explicit faith

(ability to articulate what one believes as one participates). First made by the sixteenth century reformers, mostly to denigrate the faith of the illiterate, poorly-educated majority, this distinction has powered much of the development of Protestantism since the Reformation.

I wonder if this is the kind of "internal evangelism" that is being advocated here. Does the author embrace the idea that a theological reality is operative in a believer's heart only if it is also understood on a cognitive level? If so, then his call constitutes a kind of reformation. I would also suggest that this approach does not reflect the experience of the saints (whose experience this book values highly), nor does it fit with the twice-repeated episode from the Russian *Primary Chronicle* in which Orthodoxy was judged to be the vehicle for divine truth based on its beauty, not the theological awareness of its worshipers.

In Section 2, Nassif turns to a comparative study of the two faith communities, demarcating and measuring the common ground between them. Nassif has his work cut out for him. In Chapter 6, he sets out the four criteria of the Evangelical movement (and warns that they are accepted by only some in the Evangelical community). These criteria he compares with a selection of "representative" church fathers and central elements of the Church's tradition from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries. It is all very elaborate and, one feels, aimed at an Evangelical audience in an effort further to explain and demystify Orthodoxy in light of the central tenets of Evangelicalism.

The usual suspects rear their heads. There is another attempt to present a corrected understanding of justification by faith, one that Evangelicals can recognize and that Orthodox can live with. This is actually a serious issue, and Nassif does some impressive theologizing to build a bridge between two seemingly irreconcilable views. Instead of presenting justification as either "transactional" (an external freeing from debt) or "transformational" (gradual growth in Christlikeness, that is, deification), Nassif presents the two views as an opportunity for the two sides to learn from each other.

His discussion of the Bible and of Evangelical "Biblicism" (the second criterion of the Evangelical movement) follows, and it is here that Nassif's optimism about the possibility of mutual learning becomes even more strained. He repeats his conclusion from Chapter 2, that on the subject of Biblical exegesis "Orthodox marriage with evangelicalism is harmonious" (195). However, he does not address the difference between what Orthodoxy believes about the Bible and what that looks like in practice.

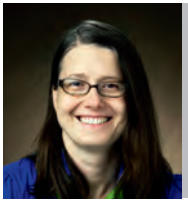
In a welcome contrast, Nassif shows that his third and fourth criteria—conversionism and activism—present less difficulty for a genuine coming-together between Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism. Conversionism is a way of thinking about how an individual might claim and experience her own conversion to Christianity. Here Nassif discusses the baptismal liturgy and its meaning in the life of a Christian. Activism entails witnessing to non-Christians and encouraging them to become Christians. Historically, this has happened through liturgy, although Nassif acknowledges that other means can and should be used. The central argument here is that both criteria are also central to the Orthodox experience, even if not in a way that Evangelicals would naturally recognize as their own.

In his conclusion to the second part, Nassif offers two analogies of the

relationship between Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism. One is of concentric circles, with the smaller circle being Evangelicalism, which is encompassed and exceeded by the larger one, Orthodoxy. The other analogy is of a relationship between "a seed (Evangelicalism) and the more developed and mature tree (Orthodoxy)" (223). These images illustrate the theological differences, a maximalist view of the gospel versus a narrower one—but they are also completely ahistorical. A seed naturally grows into a tree (and this image, I think, encourages us to believe that the seed of Evangelicalism could naturally grow into the tree of Orthodoxy), but in the case of the two traditions, Evangelicalism came after Orthodoxy. In other words, the Evangelical movement and its narrower view of the gospel represent a conscious and deliberate rejection of a more encompassing view. And while it is true that the Reformation rejected Roman Catholicism and not Orthodoxy, this is because of an accident of geography, not because Orthodoxy met the Reformers' full approval.

This brings me to the biggest weakness of this book. While it succeeds as a theological comparison between Orthodoxy and (parts of) Evangelicalism, offering lots of hope in the process, it fails to address even the most basic issues that resulted from the sixteenth-century Reformation. If any rapprochement between any Protestant movement and Orthodoxy is to take place, it will not be sufficient simply to tell Protestants to stop being picky about which part of the Tradition they embrace (as Nassif does in the book's conclusion). They have a reason to be picky, and the reason is called the Reformation. Pretending that it did not happen is not a strong option. We will have to acknowledge the Reformation and the way in which, in the West, where we reside, it changed the very notion of what religion is and how it operates, to say nothing of related categories such as belief, community, and salvation.

In that process, *The Evangelical Theology of the Orthodox Church* is a welcome beginning. Because it focuses solely on theology, it often deals with various issues of church life proscriptively (what they should be) and not descriptively (what they are). However, in one way at least, Nassif's book reflects Orthodoxy as it is experienced by many: These three hundred pages of well-footnoted material do not contain a single reference to a female author. Inadvertently, we find a church as we have actually experienced it, namely uninterested in women's voices. Women are erased here, much as they are from Nassif's retelling of the conversion of Saint Anthony in chapter 3. In it, Anthony is reported to have given away all of his inherited possessions and departed for the desert to live a life of famous sanctity. But the narrative, however inspiring, leaves out a complication. Anthony's decision to part with his family wealth destroyed his sister's prospects. Deprived of a dowry and a chance to marry, she was placed in a community of nuns and lived out her days anonymously. As with other life-size silences in this book, it would be an excellent step forward to acknowledge them. ✠



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