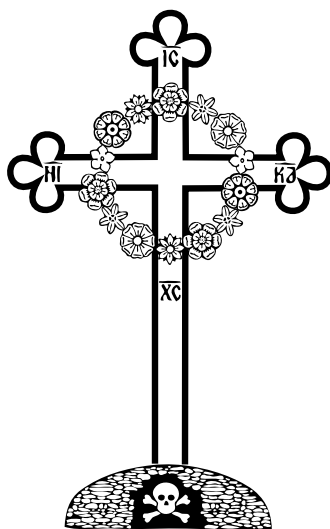


# THE CHURCH, TRADITION, SCRIPTURE, TRUTH, AND CHRISTIAN LIFE

Some Heresies of Evangelicalism  
and an Orthodox Response

by  
Hierodeacon Gregory



CENTER FOR TRADITIONALIST  
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Orthodoxy is the very criterion of Christianity established by the Lord Jesus Christ Who said, *"I will build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*<sup>1</sup> This Evangelical promise of the Savior must always be the touchstone of any apologetic presentation of our Faith in these turbulent days of political ecumenism, when there has arisen *a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the ship*<sup>2</sup> of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. But *The Prince of Peace*,<sup>3</sup> Who bestows *the peace of God, which passeth all understanding*,<sup>4</sup> calms the winds and waves of heresy by commanding, *"Peace, be still,"*<sup>5</sup> hereby teaching us that there is *a time to keep silence, and a time to speak*.<sup>6</sup> Now is decidedly a time for Orthodox Christians to speak, and to speak manfully, *that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive*.<sup>7</sup> One of the contrary winds currently buffeting the Ship of Orthodoxy is Evangelicalism, and many of the passengers of this salvific vessel, as well as others seeking passage aboard Her, have been swept away by the blustering force of this pietistic gale.

### **The Church, Tradition, Scripture, and Truth**

Evangelicalism—"America's folk religion"<sup>8</sup>—broadly

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<sup>1</sup> St. Matthew 16:18.

<sup>2</sup> St. Mark 4:37.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 9:6.

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 4:7.

<sup>5</sup> St. Mark 4:39.

<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:7.

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 4:14.

designates the popular movement within conservative Protestantism which champions the Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura* and upholds all of its theologically concomitant features as normative for Christianity. This version of Christianity is a direct modern counterpart of such historically salient Protestant movements as Puritanism, Pietism, and Revivalism, all of which emphasize common ideals: expository preaching, congregational singing, proselytizing fervor, private devotions, *etc.* Evangelicalism can thus be termed (albeit somewhat oxymoronically) “traditional Protestantism,” inasmuch as it remains faithful in spirit to the *ahistorical* conception of Christianity (with regard to an Orthodox notion of Christian history) engendered by Martin Luther, whose Reformation of the Latin Papacy was grounded in “...presuppositions that entered the history of Christian thought 1500 years after our Lord altered the very nature of humanity by entering human existence as God and Man.”<sup>9</sup> Luther and his fellow Reformers, with Papism as their reference point, redefined Christianity as being principally an *Evangelical* faith and only incidentally as an *ecclesial* one; hence the appellation “Evangelical,” which the first generation of Lutherans and subsequent generations of Protestants adopted for themselves.<sup>10</sup>

However, Saint Paul the Apostle—“in whom Christ Himself spoke”<sup>11</sup> (as Saint John Chrysostomos is so wont to

<sup>8</sup> Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, expanded ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> [Father] Georges Florovsky, *The Byzantine Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers*, trans. Raymond Miller, Anne-Marie Döllinger-Labriolle, and Helmut Wilhelm Schmiedel, Vol. 10 of *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, ed. Richard S. Haugh (Vaduz: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Note that “...in Europe, the word [Evangelical] may be used as the equivalent of Protestant, or still more narrowly, as meaning Lutheran.” (Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960], *s.v.* “Evangelical,” by Loraine Boettner.)

<sup>11</sup> St. John Chrysostom, “The Gifts of the Holy Spirit,” in Vol. 3 of *The*

say)—specifically identifies the Body of Christ as *the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth*.<sup>12</sup> Despite *the words of faith and of good doctrine*<sup>13</sup> spoken by the Apostle of the Nations, Evangelicals contumaciously insist on using “pillar-and-ground-of-the-truth” language only when referring to the Holy Bible; indeed, “The Bible says...” is the shibboleth of Evangelicalism. When attempting to identify the Body of Christ, on the other hand, they feebly invoke the nebulous notion of an “invisible church,” a *theological fiction* which relativizes the ecclesial nature of Christianity by postulating an abstract Christian reality that can be experienced by an individual, independent of any church, whether Orthodox or Protestant. Saint Hilarion the New Hieromartyr thus pithily characterizes Protestantism as “Churchless Christianity” and declares: “It is Protestantism that openly proclaimed the greatest lie of all: that one can be a Christian while denying the Church.”<sup>14</sup> He articulates the Orthodox position *vis-à-vis* the Protestant view with no equivocation:

...[I]t must be considered as the most vital necessity of the present time to confess openly that indisputable truth that Christ created precisely the Church and that it is absurd to separate Christianity from the Church and to speak of some sort of Christianity apart from the Holy Orthodox Church of Christ.<sup>15</sup>

The assumption that there exists a higher or more expansive Christian standard than Orthodoxy, an “Evangelical” standard to which the Eastern Orthodox Church, as merely another church on the same level as the Roman Catholic

*Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, trans. and ed. M. F. Toal (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1959), p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Timothy 3:15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:6.

<sup>14</sup> Holy New-Martyr Archbishop Ilarion (Troitsky), *Christianity or the Church?*, (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1985), p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Church or the multitudinous Protestant denominations, can be subjected, is a mendacious *idée reçue* ingrained in Evangelical thought. Such thinking renders Evangelicalism hostile to Orthodox Christianity at the outset, for as Saint Hilarion rightly observes, “All the points of discord between...sectarians and the Orthodox Church come from the denial of the Church in the name of an imaginary ‘Evangelical Christianity.’”<sup>16</sup> Whenever one equates the Orthodox Church with non-Orthodox churches, he immediately abnegates the unique identity of Orthodoxy as *the pillar and ground of the truth*.<sup>17</sup>

*Like a man that without a foundation built an house upon the earth*,<sup>18</sup> Evangelicalism builds its “invisible church” on the flimsy foundation of personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord, God, and Savior. Christ Himself dismisses this as an unreliable litmus test of Christianity: “*Not every one that saith unto Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.*”<sup>19</sup> Such a subjective definition of who is and who is not a Christian is all too readily used preemptively to disenfranchise non-Evangelicals from Christendom, as Randall Balmer verifies:

*Christian*, in the vernacular of my evangelical subculture, was an exclusive, elitist term reserved for someone who had ‘prayed the prayer,’ had acknowledged personal sinfulness and the need for salvation, and ‘accepted Jesus into his heart.’<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> The uncritical acceptance of the “invisible church” theory is also fundamental to the panheresy of ecumenism: “The major impetus [of ecumenism]...comes from a recognition that *Christians are already one in Christ*, and must, in obedience to him, make their unity manifest.” (Robert McAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1965], p. 36.)

<sup>18</sup> St. Luke 6:49.

<sup>19</sup> St. Matthew 7:21.

<sup>20</sup> Balmer, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

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## SOME HERESIES OF EVANGELICALISM

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This short treatise is an uncompromising and seemingly polemical response to many of the sectarian ideas of Protestant Evangelicalism, a phenomenon with its intellectual roots in the Reformation but its ethos in American folk religion. Evangelicalism takes many of its theological ideas—its novel ecclesiology, its notion of Scriptural primacy, and its emphasis on personal revelation—from the Reformation; many of its more unsavory elements—a disdain for tradition, an appalling ignorance of the Christian East, and a provincialism foreign to Christian universalism—, however, are the products of rural America. That peculiar blend of Protestant reformism and American parochialism which characterizes the more militant Evangelical demands, it seems to me, the kind of treatment that this book provides—a treatment less polemical than blunt and honest. To break through the crust of religious and theological prejudice that often covers the fragile core of Protestant apologetics, one must employ heavy and sturdy tools. Deacon Father Gregory has done just that. But having reached the core of Protestant theory that underlies Evangelicalism, he treats the substance of Reformed thought with care, objectively and charitably pointing out its wrong assumptions, its psychological biases, and its historical myopia. This book is an especially useful tool for Orthodox who wish to understand Evangelicalism and how it differs from Orthodoxy—something of great urgency at a time when certain Evangelical groups, ignorant of its true beliefs and its essential opposition to the tenets of Evangelicalism itself, have superficially embraced our Faith.

*Bishop Chrysostomos of Etna and the  
St. Gregory Palamas Monastery*