



## Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism (Counterpoints)

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To some Western evangelicals, the practices of Eastern Orthodoxy seem mysterious and perhaps even unbiblical. Then again, from an Orthodox perspective, evangelicals lack the spiritual roots provided by centuries-old church traditions. Are the differences between these two branches of Christianity so sharp that to shake hands is to compromise the gospel itself? Or is there room for agreement? Are Eastern Orthodoxy and evangelicalism at all compatible? Yes, no, maybe? This book allows five leading authorities to present their different views, have them critiqued by their fellow authors, and respond to the critiques. Writing from an Orthodox perspective with a strong appreciation for evangelicalism, Bradley Nassif makes a case for compatibility. Michael Horton and Vladimir Berzonsky take the opposite stance from their respective evangelical and Orthodox backgrounds. And George Hancock-Stefan (evangelical) and Edward Rommen (Orthodox) each offer a qualified “perhaps.” The interactive Counterpoints forum is ideal for comparing and contrasting the different positions to understand the strengths and weaknesses of these two important branches of Christianity and to form a personal conclusion regarding their compatibility. The Counterpoints series provides a forum for comparison and critique of different views on issues important to Christians. Counterpoints books address two categories: Church Life and Bible and Theology. Complete your library with other books in the Counterpoints series.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **From the Back Cover**

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### **About the Author**

Stanley N. Gundry is executive vice president and editor-in-chief for the Zondervan Corporation. He has been an influential figure in the Evangelical Theological Society, serving as president of ETS and on its executive committee, and is adjunct professor of Historical Theology at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary. He is the author of seven books and has written many articles appearing in popular and academic periodicals.

James J. Stamoolis (D. Theol., University of Stellenbosch) consults with educational and missionary agencies. He has been a missionary, an educator, and a missionary executive. He is the author of *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today* and many articles in journals and encyclopedias.

Bradley Nassif (PhD, Fordham University) is a professor of Biblical & Theological Studies at North Park University, Chicago, IL. He is the co-editor of *The Philokalia: Exploring a Classic Text of Orthodox Spirituality* and general editor of *New Perspectives on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff*.

Michael Horton (PhD, DD) is Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary California. Author of many books, including *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, he also hosts the *White Horse Inn* radio program. He lives with his wife, Lisa, and four children in Escondido, California.

Vladimir Berzonsky (D.Min., Ashland Theological Seminary) is pastor of Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Parma, Ohio, and the author of *The Gift of Love* and *In the Image and Likeness of God*.

George Hancock-Stefan (Ph.D., Trinity International University) is the pastor of Central Baptist Church, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, and a seasoned teacher of church history and missions at several seminaries.

Edward Rommen (D.Theol., University of Munich; D.Miss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is an Orthodox priest and pastor of Holy Transfiguration Orthodox Mission in Raleigh, North Carolina. He is the coauthor of *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models*.

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Chapter One ARE EASTERN ORTHODOXY AND EVANGELICALISM COMPATIBLE? YES The Evangelical Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church Bradley Nassif ARE EASTERN ORTHODOXY AND EVANGELICALISM COMPATIBLE? YES The Evangelical Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church Bradley Nassif SETTING THE STAGE: A PERSONAL WORD If postmodernism has taught us anything, it has made us aware that we always interpret reality through the eyes of our own history---our family upbringing, educational background, cultural context, and religious community. My background is deeply rooted in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. I am a Lebanese Christian who grew up in America in the Antiochian Orthodox Church (formally named the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East, whose patriarch resides in Damascus, Syria). It is among the most ancient and revered patriarchates in the Orthodox world, dating back to the great christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries---and even back to the first century, where the New Testament reports in Acts 11:26 that 'the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.' The late Father John Meyendorff was my doctoral mentor with whom I specialized in Greek patristic theology and exegesis. I am also deeply indebted to evangelical Christians who helped bring me into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ during my high school years. Over the past decade I have been a visiting or adjunct professor of Orthodox studies at leading evangelical schools such as Fuller Theological Seminary, Regent College, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Much of my work has been devoted to introducing evangelical students and faculty to the riches of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, and many of these evangelicals have become friends and colleagues. In the early 1990s I founded a Pan-Orthodox, Pan-Evangelical organization named the Society for the Study of Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism. For the past decade we've held annual meetings to explore the areas of convergence and divergence between our two traditions. I share these brief biographical excerpts because readers may appreciate knowing that I have not just thought about Orthodox and evangelical compatibility, but I've lived it most of my life. I'm also convinced that my personal history has been a theological asset to the exposition of Orthodox theology, not a confessional liability, because it has given me firsthand knowledge of the very best and the very worst in the Orthodox and evangelical worlds. There are plenty of negative experiences one could point to on both sides, by virtue of which one could argue that the positive stance I've adopted here is nothing more than wishful thinking. I know as an insider how disillusioning it can be to see how deep and widespread the ignorance of Orthodox Church members can be concerning their own faith, how low their levels of personal commitment sometimes are, and how bigoted they sometimes act toward other Christians. On the other hand, I have witnessed the hubris of some evangelical Christians, which is often tied to historical amnesia and an idolatrous self-confidence in their own exegetical skills. I've also been a deeply wounded casualty of the broken promises and highly unethical behavior of certain evangelical leaders. But I must quickly add that the good in both communities far outweighs the bad. So I write this chapter under no romantic illusions. I bring to this essay both an intimate academic knowledge and an intimate experiential knowledge of both communities, from the top down and

the bottom up. It is precisely because of---and in spite of---these many perspective-shaping experiences that I am quite certain our two traditions will never see full communion in my lifetime (barring an intervention by the Holy Spirit). I'm not sure there should even be full communion. But in order to lay a common ground for mutual exploration and to increase the level of theological communication between our two estranged communities, I accepted the invitation to participate in this volume by identifying areas of convergence and divergence through a brief overview of the evangelical theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

**SETTING THE STAGE: WHAT I HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH** Goals I have three goals for this chapter: (1) to define evangelical identity and use the definition to measure the common ground between Eastern Orthodox and Protestant evangelical theology;<sup>1</sup> (2) to see how the distinctive theological themes that comprise the identity of contemporary evangelicalism were interpreted by the classical tradition of the Greek church fathers from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries; and (3) to assess the similarities and differences between the classical and contemporary versions of the evangelical faith as the basis for viewing the extent of conflict and compatibility between both the Orthodox and the Protestant evangelical communities today. Method The strength of our conclusions will depend largely on the reliability of the research method applied. My procedure will not try to address the distressing diversity of evangelicalism but to constructively set forth our common consent to the evangelical faith in a way that is faithful to the Orthodox vision of life in Christ. I will contend that there are no core disagreements between evangelicals and Eastern Orthodox over the issues that define the evangelical movement, issues that are also present in the Eastern Orthodox Church. There are major differences, however, over the The Evangelical Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church | 29 1The best supplementary reading to this chapter is Donald Fairbairn's *Eastern Orthodoxy Through Western Eyes* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2002). A comprehensive summary in one convenient location of all known sources, leaders, and dialogues dealing with Orthodoxy and evangelicalism between 1990 and 2003 can be found in Bradley Nassif's 'Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism: The Status of an Emerging Global Dialogue' in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, rev. ed., ed. Daniel Clendenin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003). extent to which the Orthodox understand and manifest, as evangelicals do not, those larger principles of evangelical identity through the church's incarnational Trinitarian vision of life. I will first carefully define the meaning of the term evangelical and then measure the components of this definition against the theological norms that have guided Orthodox church life for nearly two thousand years: the dogmatic definitions of its church fathers and councils, liturgies, spirituality, iconography, architecture, and mission theology. I'll discuss contemporary ecumenical documents that have been produced by the Orthodox Church as their official responses to specific doctrinal issues raised in their dialogues with Protestants and Catholics---documents previously unexamined for their relevance to the evangelical movement. I will also briefly document how the current work of leading evangelical scholars has been inadvertently moving the evangelical movement toward a rediscovery of the creative relevance of the Christian East in its classical theology, spirituality, and worship---often far more attractively than we Orthodox are doing for ourselves! Using simultaneously the historical and systematic disciplines to compare Orthodox and evangelical theology runs the obvious risk of generalizing at the expense of analytic research. Given the ecumenical task at hand, however, a panoramic overview of the evangelical theology of the Orthodox Church appears to be what is most urgently needed in order to correct the nearsightedness of those seemingly unable to see the forest for the trees.

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