

## **Heaven and Earth are Filled with Thy Glory: Eastern Orthodoxy**

I was asked to name my top 10 favorite theologians. I thought this would be easy, but I have been thinking about it for the last couple of days. So, here I go. This is not in order of how favorite the 10 are but a chronological listing of 10 theologians. I am not going to stop and defend my choices because that would take the rest of the lesson. You can probably guess a good many of them.

Augustine has to be first. I probably read Augustine as much as I read anybody. The second was a hard choice, but I chose Bernard of Clairvaux, a Catholic theologian from the medieval period. My third choice was not very hard, and it was Luther. The fourth was very easy: John Calvin. The fifth was Jonathan Edwards. The sixth you may not have guessed because I have not talked as much about him, but I love to read John Newton, the evangelical pastor in England. He is the author of “Amazing Grace.” I particularly love to read his letters, “Cardiphonia.” They were letters of the heart—his letters of spiritual counsel. There is some wonderful theology in John Newton. B. B. Warfield is next. Princeton has to be pretty high on my list. I would love to put in Dr. Alexander and the Hodges too, but I chose Warfield for the nineteenth century. Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian, is eighth. Then, I had to go back to Princeton for Gresham Machem. Finally, my last choice was fairly easy, and that is Francis Schaeffer. Schaeffer had a tremendous impact on my life as a young minister both by his teaching here at Covenant Seminary and by my visits to Switzerland. I took long walks with him in the mountains of Switzerland. One time in my life I made the mistake of trying to sound like Dr. Schaeffer. I did not quite understand what he was talking about all of the time, but I said it anyway. People then did not know what I was talking about. Schaeffer has a unique way of expressing himself. So, if you read Francis Schaeffer or any of these theologians, really let them percolate through your own heart, spirit, and soul. Do not just try to sound like somebody. If you want to sound like somebody, you ought to sound like yourself. But it is good to be nourished by some of the great people of the past.

Today we are going to talk about the Eastern Orthodox Church. The full name of that church is the Holy Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Eastern Church. Christianity, as you know, is divided into three major traditions: the Catholic tradition, the Protestant tradition, and the Orthodox tradition. The Catholic and Protestant Churches are largely Western in their origins but are now worldwide. The Orthodox Church comes from the East, and it is also now a worldwide church. The Orthodox Church is sometimes called the Eastern Orthodox Church and occasionally the Greek Orthodox Church, although the Greek Orthodox Church is really only one church in a family of churches known as Orthodoxy. These churches make up a family of 13 independent, self-governing churches. Each has its own head, patriarch, archbishop, or metropolitan. There is no pope. There is not one head of the Orthodox Church as there is of the Roman Catholic Church. The Patriarch of Constantinople is esteemed as the ecumenical, or universal, patriarch, but that is a title of honor, not of power. The Patriarch of Constantinople cannot direct the Orthodox Church or the other churches. He has special honor but no control over the other Orthodox bodies.

Today in the world, there are perhaps close to 200 million Eastern Orthodox adherents. Many of those are in Russia—perhaps as many as 100 million Orthodox believers. There are at least six million Orthodox Christians in the United States.

As we try to think of Eastern Orthodoxy, it is interesting to try to attempt to get some of the heart, the feeling, or the pulse of this great body of Christian people. It is sometimes said that Catholics elevate Peter and so emphasize authority—“You are Peter, on this rock I will build my church.” And it is said that Protestants emphasize Paul and so emphasize theology—justification by faith and some of the other

great teachings of Paul in Romans and elsewhere. It is said that the Orthodox Church elevates John and so emphasizes love and humility. There is probably a grain of truth in all of that, although I expect that each of those traditions tries to emphasize authority, doctrine, and love. But, certainly one of the marks of the Orthodox Church is its piety, which is so often expressed in self-emptying or humility. There are many Orthodox monks, not in orders like we have in the West in the Catholic Church but independent houses of monks throughout the East. One of the great themes of monastic life in Eastern Orthodoxy is self-emptying or kenoticism, as it is called. So, love and humility can be looked at as the theme of the Eastern Church.

It is also said that Eastern Orthodox people like to debate things. They debate theology and issues in ecclesiastical life. One of the most important spokesmen for Orthodoxy today is Timothy Ware. When he became Orthodox, he took the name Kallistos Ware. He has written a number of books on Orthodoxy and is known as one of the most outstanding spokesmen for the Orthodox tradition. He tells the story that he was once in Greece, and he tells about the fact that one of the features of the Greek (Orthodox) people in modern times is an enthusiasm for ecclesiastical controversy. He said, "On a recent occasion in central Athens, I was delayed by a massive traffic jam. This was caused, as my taxi driver explained, by a riot of unemployed theologians." Well, this could happen in Athens. I suppose that, in the West, we would say that we have had our share of theological controversy and debate both in the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church.

An important feature of Eastern Orthodoxy is its emphasis on worship—its love of beauty in liturgy and transcendence in worship. This is why I have taken the title of this lecture from the Orthodox Liturgy: "Heaven and Earth are Filled with Thy Glory." A Protestant once asked an Orthodox priest exactly what it was that his church believed. The priest replied, "It would be better to ask not what we believe but how we worship." I think that answer probably does get close to the heart of the Orthodox attitude toward Christianity. Let us begin with a prayer from the Orthodox liturgy. We will pray these words as we think of Eastern Orthodoxy in this lesson. Let us pray.

*"It is proper and right to praise, bless, glorify, thank, and worship Thee in all places of Your dominion, for Thou art God ineffable, beyond comprehension, invisible, beyond understanding, ever-existing, and always the same—Thou and Thy only begotten Son and Thy Holy Spirit. Thou hast brought us from non-being into being, and when we fell, Thou raised us up again, and Thou didst not cease doing everything until Thou leadest us to heaven and grantest us Thy kingdom to come. For all of these things we thank Thee and Thy only begotten Son and Thy Holy Spirit, for all things of which we know and of which we do not know, for benefits apparent and unseen that have been bestowed upon us. Holy, holy, holy, Lord Sabaoth, heaven and earth are filled with Thy glory. Praise the Lord in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest." Amen.*

As we take a quick look at Orthodox history, we have to go back to the date 1054. The date in Western church history is, undoubtedly, 1517 when Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, which is the symbolic act that broke the Western church into two parts. However, the church had already divided prior to 1517. It divided in 1054, and that is the date that Orthodox people will think about, talk about, and argue about. Actually, the Orthodox see Protestants and Catholics as two sides of one Western coin—there is not that much difference. We think there is a lot of difference, and there is a lot of difference in many ways. But, in the Orthodox tradition, they see themselves as the continuing Orthodox Church, the church of the apostles. They see the Western churches as having departed from that tradition in various ways.

The original patriarchs, or leaders, of the Orthodox Church were in the eastern part of the Mediterranean—the Patriarch of Jerusalem, of Antioch, of Alexandria, and then of Constantinople, the new Rome founded by Constantine. He moved the capital from Rome to what was to be called Constantinople. This patriarch, as I have said, became the ecumenical, or universal, patriarch. The theory in Orthodoxy is that these patriarchs and the churches under these patriarchs have parallel jurisdiction. One is not above another. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople has that honorary position of prestige, but his power is the same as that of the other patriarchs in Eastern Orthodoxy. It does mean that these patriarchs sometimes clash. In recent months, the Patriarch of Constantinople has carried on quite a struggle with the Patriarch of Moscow, Russia in order to see who is going to bring unto his jurisdiction certain churches in Eastern Europe.

So the significant date was 1054. There were originally four patriarchs, but now there are five, as we will later see with the Patriarch of Russia.

Let me mention several important theologians in the Eastern Church. Symeon, “the new theologian” as he was called, would certainly top any list. He was important during the tenth century. He was called “the new theologian,” which is a title of honor for him in Orthodoxy. *The* theologian was Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the great Cappadocians. He is referred to in the Greek Church, the Eastern Church, as *the* theologian. When Symeon was called “the new theologian,” it brought him alongside of Gregory of Nazianzus as one of the important theologians in Orthodoxy.

Like so many of the Orthodox theologians, Symeon was a poet. We do not usually think of theology and poetry going together. Perhaps they should go together more than they do in the West. As you read theology in the East, you feel like you are reading poetry. For instance, here is a little bit from Symeon speaking to God: “How in Your essence totally divine do You mingle yourself with grass? You, the light, are joined to the grass in a union without confusion, and the grass becomes light. It is transfigured yet unchanged.” This is theology. You see how Western theology appears rationalistic and logical to the Eastern mind, especially since Eastern Christians are used to reading Symeon and other theologian poets.

Saint Gregory Palamas was another theologian of importance to the Eastern Church. He lived in the fourteenth century and was especially involved in the Hesychast controversy in the fourteenth century. The word “hesychast” means silence or stillness. This controversy had to do with how one prays, how one approaches God in prayer. The Hesychasts developed a very precise method of prayer. Their method was silence with the constant invocation of the name of Jesus. It was sometimes called the “Jesus prayer,” particularly in Russian Church history. The “Jesus prayer” would go something like this: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” The Hesychasts attempted to pray on one level by silence but on the other level by the constant repetition of those words. So, they were praying without ceasing by saying the “Jesus prayer” over and over again. That was to lead to a vision of the divine light and not only illumination but also identification with God, as we will see in a moment. This approach to prayer has become an accepted pattern in many Eastern Orthodox churches and with many Eastern Orthodox people.

If you tried to find a book apart from the Bible to epitomize Eastern Orthodoxy, what would that book be? With the Roman Catholic Church we would quickly turn to Thomas Aquinas—not one book but a lot of books. In order to epitomize Catholic theology and the Reformed church we would turn right away to Calvin’s *Institutes*. However, in Eastern Orthodoxy there is no one book like that—like the *Institutes* or like the theology of Thomas Aquinas—but a collection of writings known as the *Philokalia*. The word *philokalia* means “the love of the beautiful.” Actually, this is a big book. In fact, in the English

translation it is four or five volumes and has as many as 2000 pages. Not all of the last of those volumes have been translated today, but most of the *Philokalia* is available in English now. That book is a collection of Orthodox texts going back to the fourth century all the way through the fifteenth century. These texts were compiled by a man named Nicodemos of Athos. It was published in the late eighteenth century. It brings together the choicest spiritual writings in the history of Eastern Orthodoxy. It is like devotional writings. Some of it sounds more like theology, some sounds like poetry, and some sounds like spiritual devotional writings. The Eastern Orthodox Church does not make much of a distinction between those categories. So, these are large volumes of works collected by Nicodemos that represent the spiritual life of the church. Most of us will probably not read too much of that collection, but if you plan to minister in Eastern Europe, Russia, or Ukraine, it would be good for you to know these writings and to spend time trying to absorb the spirituality of the *Philokalia*.

As we go on with the history of the Orthodox Church, we need to look next at Moscow, “the third Rome.” One of the great dates or events in the history of Eastern Orthodoxy, of course, was the conversion of Russia and Ukraine in about 1000. These vast territories and large numbers of people were converted to Christianity—to the specific Eastern form of Christianity, not to the Latin/Roman form. With the conversion of Russia around 1000 (1000 years ago), the Orthodox Church certainly took a further move to the East, and perhaps as many as half of all the Orthodox people in the world today are Russian Orthodox. There is an old Russian saying that goes, “What good is a road that does not lead to a church.” That shows something of the importance of the Orthodox Church in the life of the great land of Russia.

Russia became even more important for the Orthodox world when Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453. This meant that the homeland, the spiritual center of Orthodoxy, for 1000 years was now under the control of Muslims. The great church of Justinian—the church called Hagia Sophia, the Holy Wisdom—became a mosque. Today, I think it is a museum. It was no longer the Christian church that it was built to be. The patriarch of Constantinople still lives in Constantinople, but the Orthodox Church that he directly serves is very small—just several thousand people who are still Orthodox members in what is now the land of Turkey. Despite the importance of Constantinople in the history of the Orthodox Church, the new center became Moscow, “the new Rome” or “the third Rome,” as it was called. Rome was the first Rome, Constantinople was the second Rome, and Moscow was the third Rome. Two Romes have fallen. The third stands. According to one of the sixteenth-century Orthodox teachers, a fourth, there shall not be. This is the Orthodox view—that the church has, in a sense, moved from Rome to Constantinople (even though that is still part of the Orthodox Church) to the third Rome, which is Moscow.

The fifth patriarch—the patriarch of Russia—was added in 1589. In the seventeenth century, there was a schism of some of the Orthodox people in Russia who called themselves “Old Believers.” If you read the novels of Dostoevsky, you will come across these “Old Believers.” They were people who felt that the Orthodox Church was being influenced too much by Westernization and by liturgical changes that more represented the Roman Catholic practices. So, some of the Orthodox became “Old Believers,” as they are called. Timothy Ward describes them this way: “Rigid in their outlook and excessively nationalistic, they get embodied much that is generally admirable in the piety of holy Russia.”

Peter the Great became the ruler of Russia. He abolished the Moscow patriarchate. For some years, there was no patriarch in Moscow. Peter the Great replaced that person with the Holy Synod, which was an arm of the state. Gradually, Orthodoxy became a kind of department of religion of the Russian state. The state, then, ruled the church until 1917. The patriarchate was restored in 1917, but that was the date when Lennon and the Bolsheviks came to power with all of their calculated hostility toward religion.

Perhaps 50 million people were killed, 50,000 priests vanished, 100 monasteries were closed, 60 seminaries were closed, and almost all of the churches were closed.

When you think of the history of Orthodoxy, it really is a history of suffering. First the Muslims overran the eastern Mediterranean and Constantinople. Then, the communists attempted to obliterate the Orthodox witness in Russia and Eastern Europe. There is a lot of debate as to the conduct of the remaining Orthodox leaders during the communist period. It is well documented that the Orthodox leaders did compromise with the Soviet state. The question is, was that necessity or was it capitulation? But, with the fall of communism in the last decade, there has been the beginning of a new day for the Eastern Orthodox Church and for all believers in Ukraine and Russia, although we do have some concerns that particularly in Russia there might be new restrictions that would give the Orthodox Church control over other religious groups within the country.

Some years ago, a friend of mine, Dr. Glen Konet, who was pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina, went to Ukraine. He made many visits there over the last several years in order to minister in an evangelical church. It is called a “Baptist” church although that word is used more for evangelicals in Ukraine and Moscow than strictly speaking Baptist. Although, I suppose the people are Baptists. But, it is nice to think of a First Presbyterian Church assisting an evangelical church in Vinnitsa even if that church is called Vinnitsa Baptist Church. On one occasion when Dr. Konet came back to Columbia he said this about his visit to the church in the Ukraine:

How mistaken the communists were when they allowed the older women to continue worshipping together. The communists thought, “We will wipe out religion, but we do not have to worry about these old women. They will not do any harm. They can continue to worship. We will put our emphasis on the young people and try to prevent them from becoming Christian.” It was the older women who were considered no threat to the new order, but it was they whose prayers and faithfulness over all those barren years held the church together and raised up a generation of men and young people to serve the Lord. The church we attended—the Baptist church in Vinnitsa—is a beautiful, magnificent building. It has a very Eastern Orthodox style of architecture. Yes, the church we attended was crowded with these older women at the very front [this was in 1992], for they had been the stalwarts, the defenders, and the maintainers of Christ’s Gospel. Behind them, alongside them, in the balcony, and outside the windows were the fruit of their faithfulness. We must never underestimate the place and power of godly women. To them go the laurels in the church in Ukraine.

I did not want to give this lesson and omit that point because I have been trying to emphasize that sometimes the forgotten people of history, whose names we do not know, play a major role in the advancement of God’s kingdom. These older women of Ukraine who prayed and believed God during those dark years are heroes in church history as much as the people that I have named.

Let me talk briefly about Orthodox distinctives. One, of course, is the Bible. That is a distinctive for every Christian church. But, Orthodox people do not view the Bible the way Protestants do. It is not *sola Scriptura*. To them, it is impossible to have the Bible alone. It is impossible and not desirable. Scripture has to be interpreted comprehensively according to the church’s rule of faith. So, alongside of Scripture there is tradition, which becomes Scripture rightly understood, or the church’s understanding of the Bible. The Bible is the final authority, the Orthodox will say, but not the sole authority of Christian truth. Scripture is the supreme expression of God’s revelation, which finds fuller expression in tradition—namely, the seven ecumenical councils, the writings of the fathers, and the liturgy. Perhaps the simplest way to see Orthodox teaching on this is to say that infallibility for the Roman Catholic

Church resides in the pope. We saw that last time. Ever since Vatican I set forth that dogma, the pope is infallible when he teaches *ex cathedra*. For Protestants, infallibility resides in Scripture. Scripture alone is infallible. Infallibility for the Orthodox Church resides in the church. It is the church that is infallible, not the pope or the Bible alone. The Bible is infallible, but it cannot stand alone. It must be brought into the life of the church and interpreted by the church, and that interpretation by the church is the infallible word of God.

The second Orthodox distinctive is deification or what the Orthodox call "*theosis*." The deification of human nature is the goal of the Christian life. It is the central theme, the chief aim, the basic purpose, and the primary religious ideal of Orthodoxy. You will not hear Orthodox people saying, "You must be born again." They would say, "You must become one with God. You must be united with God. You must experience *theosis*." That teaching is based on scant biblical evidence, although there are some texts that could be used to support this, such as 2 Peter 1:4, which says, "...so that you may participate in the divine nature" and John 10:34-35, "Jesus answered them, 'Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods?'''" This idea is supported, to some extent, by some of the quotations that the Orthodox can draw from the early church fathers. By the way, the great hero of the fathers in Orthodoxy is not Augustine—he is that Western nationalistic thinker—but Athanasius of Alexandria. Athanasius, the hero of Nicaea, wrote, "God became man so that men might become gods." If any one sentence could summarize the idea of soteriology in the Eastern Church, it would be that sentence. A modern Greek Orthodox theologian has put it this way, "We are each destined to become a god, to be like God Himself, to be united with Him."

Now, that is not pantheism. Human nature is not lost. God is always separate from us. We are not absorbed into him. It is more of a relative rather than absolute transformation. Deification is likeness and union with God. How does one obtain this *theosis*? It is not easy. The grace of God is certainly there, but also human effort is required. A great deal of vigilance is required for bodily asceticism, fasting, vigils, contemplation, prayer, the science of stillness, and detachment from the world and false glitter of this life. So, by God's grace and by our constant effort, we can move toward *theosis*. If we avail ourselves of God's grace and lead a life of spiritual vigilance, we can hope for the glorious obtainment of likeness to God in so far as this is possible for man.

A third distinctive of Orthodoxy is a deep sense of the divine mystery in worship. Love and the cultivation of art are part of worship. If you go into an Orthodox church, you are struck by the fact that there are pictures everywhere of Mary and the saints in gold leaf and beautiful colors. The Orthodox love icons. There was an iconoclastic controversy that we studied about in medieval church history back in the eighth and ninth centuries, but that was settled in favor of the icons. The icons are instruments of worship in Orthodoxy. In the West, as we think of the church and the theology of the church, we think of books, texts, and words. In the East, the Orthodox people think of icons, music, and liturgy. You can see the difference there that has made it so hard for the Orthodox and Western Christians to really understand each other.

All of this leads to another very important point in Orthodoxy, and that is mystery—apophaticism, which is a big word that means "the dark." We tend to like to escape the dark into the light and find answers to our questions. The Eastern mind much prefers to leave the questions and live in the dark with occasional flashes of light. The darkness and the mystery are important for the Eastern Orthodox mind. Gregory Palamas, in talking about God, said (and you can see some of the mystery that comes through in this quotation), "God is both being and non-being. He is everywhere and nowhere. He has many names and cannot be named. He is ever moving, and He is immovable. And in a word, He is everything, and He is nothing."

Western theology, to the mind that would produce a definition of God like that, is going to sound too logical and too rational. I will not even get to the last lesson. There was one yet to come—“Future Christianity.” But, that is probably just as well because I am an historian and not a prophet.