

Faith or Works?

While there are strong theoretical differences between the Orthodox and Classical Protestants on faith, in reality, the gap is less severe.

Both Orthodox and Protestants concur theoretically that without God's act in the Incarnation, man could not leave his unnatural, sinful state and come to God. He requires grace. Having concurred on this, they disagree on the function of works. Part of the problem is that the Orthodox know that salvation is not a single event.

Rather, our salvation and our sanctification are part of a continuous process, so that to be technically correct, one cannot talk about having been saved without also talking about being in the process of being saved, and hoping finally at the Last Judgement that one will finally and decisively be saved. It is clear to both Protestants and Orthodox that good works are essential in the process of sanctification. Protestants acknowledge that true faith must of necessity produce good works. If one's faith does not produce works, they would warn the person to consider that they may not have a true faith. What they object to is saying that these good works save us.

It is dangerous to be too precise in these matters. We do know that Christ says that if we love Him we will obey Him. We must love Him to enter His Kingdom. We cannot love Him without faith. We cannot be saved without His saving Passion and Resurrection. We know that without works faith is dead. On all these, Protestants and Orthodox agree.

Protestantism's two views on election start with the same premise of *Sola Fide* (by faith alone). However, in practice, they both, by very

different routes make this statement far less extreme than it seems at first glance to the Orthodox. Those Protestants who believe in the possibility of losing one's salvation (as do the Orthodox), acknowledge that repeated, unrepented sin will cause one to lose one's salvation, because those who so indulge will eventually end up with a conscience so hardened that faith will die. Thus, works are necessary to salvation. Those who believe that one cannot lose one's salvation use a different approach. It is clear that many people who initially live in a very godly manner eventually turn their back on God. Those who believe in eternal security usually deal with such cases by saying that those in such circumstances never had true faith. However, such a person is indistinguishable during his/her pious stage from someone who will in fact persevere to the end. One cannot know whether one is merely deluding oneself or one has true faith. Only perseverance to the end, which involves good works done out of gratitude for God, demonstrates the genuineness of the faith in that system of belief. However, this too is not so far from saying that works are necessary to salvation.

The Orthodox concur that faith is the greatest of works (although this work too is a gift of God - we only offer back to God that which He first gives to us). Thus, the person who is converted on his death bed or on a cross, though he/she has no material works, does in fact have the work of faith. This is not so far, in concept if not in terminology, from the position held on this subject by either school of Protestant thought.

Certainly, our widow's mites of work add nothing to God's infinite supply of Goodness. Still, He honors them. We on earth see the necessity of works for ourselves to appropriate God's gift of salvation. To go beyond that into speculations about the exact function of grace and works seems to lead us back to this conclusion in the end.

There is a paradox here as in much of the Christian faith. God does everything, but still we must do something: we must cooperate.

Walk courageously and bravely, eagerly and faithfully, clothed with the weapons of light, faith, hope, humility, and love. By fixing your eyes on Jesus, the Author and perfecter of the faith (*Heb. 12:2*), you will defeat the three great enemies: the world, the ruler of the world, and the flesh, and all visible and invisible enemies. And when you win, do not say "We won," because this expression is prideful. Say: "Not us, but our faith in God." We are useless servants; Christ the true and perfect God and man won, and we did not do anything. And if we did something, it is not we who did it either, but rather the grace of God.

Father Philotheos Zervakos, Paternal Counsels, Vol. 1, St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite Publication Society, Aliquippa, PA. Trans. Fr. Nicholas Palis. p. 41

An Orthodox prayer:

My most merciful and all-merciful God and Lord Jesus Christ, Who of Thy great love didst come down and take flesh to save all: Again, O Savior, save me by Thy grace, I pray Thee. For if Thou shouldst save me for my works, this would not be a grace, but rather an obligation, not a grace or a gift. Yea, my Christ who art abundant in generosity and ineffable in mercy, Thou hast said: He that believeth in me shall live and shall never see death. If, then, faith in Thee saveth the desperate, lo, I believe; save me, for Thou art my God and Creator. Let my faith be reckoned in place of works, and seek not deeds which would justify me. But may my faith alone suffice instead of any deeds; may it answer for me, may it justify me, may it make me a partaker of Thine eternal glory. Let not Satan seize me and boast that he hath torn me from Thy hand and fold, O Word. But whether I will it or not, save me, O Christ my Savior. Go

before me quickly, quickly, for I am perishing!
Thou art my God from my mother's womb. Grant
that I may love Thee, O Lord, as formerly I loved
sin itself, and that I may work for Thee earnestly
and without laziness, as I once worked for deceit-
ful Satan...

*From the Canon to Jesus in Old Orthodox
Prayer Book, Priest Pimen Simon, Priest Theodore
Jurewicz and Hieromonk German Ciuba, trans. and
ed., pp. 150-151*

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