

EVANGELION
The Power of God

Fr. Deacon Ezra

Chapter 7
THE TRANSFORMING
POWER OF GOD

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CHAPTER 7 THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF GOD

It has been said Western Christianity is forensic and Eastern Christianity is therapeutic,¹ that is, for the West, God and Man have a legal relationship based on keeping the rules while for the East they have a healing relationship that transforms humanity.

Western Christianity understands the relationship between God and mankind in legal terms. Our relationship with God is based on assenting to and then keeping the rules of our relationship. Sin is the breaking of the rules and therefore, the breaking of the relationship with God. God decrees judgment upon all who sin, upon all who break the rules.

Much effort is given in the West to defining and assenting to the rules of God. Right belief is intellectual. Right belief is the giving of one's intellectual assent to the correctness of a doctrine, a rule, as well as acknowledging the correctness of the overall point of view that mankind is deserving of punishment at the hands of a Divine Judge.

Salvation for the West is about having the correct means of escaping punishment. But it offers no remedies that transform us. St. Paul lamented that he did not do the good he wanted to do but instead did the evil he did not wish to do. He was looking for a remedy that had the power to do what it said it would do. He was looking for a remedy that would transform him.

¹ Hiermonk Maximos (Michael Davies), "Therapeutic vs. Forensic (again!)," October 28, 2010, Holy Resurrection Monastery downloaded from www.hrmonline.org/?page_id=168&paged=3 on June 20, 2012. Hiermonk Maximos is an Eastern Catholic.

Orthodox Christianity is therapeutic. It transforms. It accomplishes the purpose for which it is.

“Salvation is not a matter of intellectual acceptance of truth; rather it is a person’s transformation and divinization by grace.”²

St. Paul asked, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?”³ St. Paul was not looking for an acquittal before some angry judge. He was looking for deliverance from death. He wanted set free from death.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”⁴ The contradiction between intellectual belief and how we live⁵ is overcome by God in the Incarnation. For what rules and regulations could not achieve and could not empower us to do in our lives, God has done through the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

It is not Hell but death that Adam and Eve chose. The issue is not Hell but death.⁶ “If salvation concerns anything less than eternal survival, that is, liberation from the natural ‘mortality’ of creation, it has no ontological relevance.”⁷ It is not rules and regulations that set us free from living in death. It is God himself that sets us free through his Resurrection.

² Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, “The Difference Between Orthodox Spirituality and Other Traditions,” Orthodox Christian Information Center downloaded from http://orthodoxinfo.com/inquirers/hierotheos_difference.aspx on 7/30/2009.

³ Romans 7:24.

⁴ Romans 7:25

⁵ This is the conflict between “mind” and “flesh” that St. Paul speaks of in Romans 7:25.

⁶ Peter Chopelas, “Heaven & Hell in the Afterlife, According to the Bible,” downloaded from http://aggreen.net/beliefs/heaven_hell.html on 06/20/2012.

⁷ John D. Zizoulas, *Communion & Otherness* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 36-37.

“Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁸ “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”⁹ “Death is swallowed up in victory. ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? ... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.’”¹⁰

I AM NOT ASHAMED

St. Paul knew the answer when he asked, “Who will set me free from this body of death?” He had experienced in his life the therapeutic power of God. He knew from experience that his own nature with its weakened will was sinful and perishable. He knew from experience he did not have the power within himself to transform himself into the person he wanted to be. He knew he could not become like God on his own. He knew the difference between being Saul and becoming the Paul God had created him to be.

St. Paul knew what it meant to be transformed from glory into glory. St. Paul knew what it was to walk with God in the cool of the evening and in so doing, he experienced the transforming power of God.

It was the transforming power of the Resurrected God in his own life that St. Paul proclaimed. It was not theological doctrines or academic theories that he proclaimed. He proclaimed the transforming power of a Person, our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:57.

⁹ Romans 8:1.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:54-57.

“For I am not ashamed of the Evangelion, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”¹¹

PLAYING IN A MUD PUDDLE

Two children were playing in mud puddle. One turns to the other and says, “You know, we’re going get in trouble when mom gets home.” The other child replied, “I know” and kept on playing.

The first one again said, “We’re going to get in trouble when mom gets home for being in this mud puddle.” “I know” the other one said and kept on playing.

If the first child really believed he was going to be in trouble for being in the mud puddle when his mother got home, what would he do?

He would get out of the mud puddle.

It is not his words, but what he does that shows what he believes. It is not what he believes in his head, what counts is what he believes in his feet.

¹¹ Romans 1:16. The term Evangelion as well as the title for the book both come from Romans 1:16 which reads in English, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. The Greek term translated gospel is Evangelion. I am not ashamed of the Evangelion for it is the power of God... In the German New Testament, Evangelion is transliterated as Evangelium. In the King James Evangelion was translated as Gospel.

THE CONVERSION OF KITES

Previously we spoke of a kite cutting the string of the one who flies it in order for the kite to be free to fly itself on its own. The disaster that now befalls the kite reveals that the kite is not free to do whatever it chooses. There is a limitation inbuilt in being a kite.

The kite still has the freedom to fly with the wind. It can move freely as the wind blows. But the kite, in choosing and claiming to exist independently, in choosing to exist without reference to the one who holds the string, has made itself a god unto itself. The disaster that happens reveals the truth that the kite was never intended to exist as its own god. The kite prefers the freedom of not being tied or attached or not being in relationship via the string with its owner, to having an orderly and disaster free “flying” because of having a relationship via the string with its owner.¹²

We must admit we are a creature whose existence depends upon being in relationship with the Creator. In baptism, we die to living a life independent from God, the string is attached, and we are resurrected to the new life of learning how to fly as one of God’s kites.

This is not an intellectual assent. It is an existential assent. I acknowledge my life was not designed to be lived independent of God. I acknowledge my life is designed to be connected with God by letting the Holy Spirit attach the string and by now flying/living attached. I am now forever and ever, amen, attached in my living... to God. It is with my life that I acknowledge and confess the truth by doing it. My words and my actions finally agree. I finally got out of the mud hole.

¹² John D. Zizoulas, *Being and Communion*, “The Fall is the refusal to acknowledge (our existence) is dependent on (a relationship) with God.” 102.

ADAM, WHERE ARE YOU?

God is real and our relationship with him is not based on keeping rules, it is based on “walking with him in the cool of the evening” i.e., it is based on being in relationship with God. God is calling each of us to walk with him in Paradise the same as he came looking for Adam (Adam, where are you?). Jeff, where are you? Erick, where are you? Herb, where are you? Glenn, where are you? Jerry, where are you? Joe where are you? Kathy, Tammy, Sherrie, Beth, Jill, where are you?

As each of us responds to *that* call either by saying Yes or No to walking with him, we are constantly being formed and transformed by our response to his call. Again and again, monthly, weekly, daily God comes looking for us, calling us by name, and interrupting our lives. And again and again we are transformed by our response to his call. This is *theosis*—becoming like God. *Theosis* is not generic. It is personal. *Theosis* is becoming the unique and unrepeatable person each of us is called to be.

God calls and we respond. God called Matthew and he left his tax table. God called and Peter left his nets. God calls and we leave our past and step into our future. We step into the freedom to be, to become who we don't even know we are meant to be.

This is the power of God: in responding again and again to God's call we become who God has called us to be. We become like God. This is *theosis*. This is salvation. And it is personal. It is also time to get out of the mud puddle.

AFTERWARD

THE BEGINNING

After the Allied invasion of Nazi Europe on D-Day, June 6, 1944, Winston Churchill remarked, “This is not the end, nor is it the beginning of the end. But it is the end of the beginning.” This book is a beginning. You stand at the beginning of your journey. You have finished this course, but you will not have reached your journey’s end. You have only reached the end of your beginning. This is not the end. Nor is it the beginning of the end. The end of the course is only the end of the beginning. Now let your journey begin.

This course is written with you in mind—an average American. You may be religious. You may not be religious at all. According to the polls, an average American says they are spiritual but they have no particular commitment to any religious beliefs.

This is not to suggest that most Americans do not know what religious beliefs are. The truth is, almost all Americans, even those who don’t believe anything, at least know what they don’t believe. Just mention a belief and the common response is, “Oh, I don’t believe *that*.” That’s who this book is written for—for those who don’t believe anything, and for those who once believed but aren’t so sure they believe anything anymore.

You hold in your hands the end of one beginning and the beginning of the next beginning. Let the new beginning begin.

AN UNSOLICITED COMMENT

The following are the unsolicited comments I received from a young combat veteran. She and her husband, also a combat veteran, had met while serving in Iraq. She had seen our ad in a local paper announcing *Evangelion: The Power of God*. She came alone the first week. Her husband came with her the following week. They were among the first to be part of this eight-week seminar being offered for the first time. I had not spoken with them after the last session. I received this email approximately twelve weeks after the seminar ended.

Deacon Ezra,

I am emailing you today because I am not great at talking on the phone and it is easier for me to gather my thoughts in an email. I have been attending services for the past couple of months since the end of your class. I have been reading the Orthodox Study Bible (it actually makes sense of things) and spending so much of my time praying.

At the very first evening of your class you spoke about "evangelion" and if you invite the power of God in your life you'll experience changes. Until a couple of weeks ago I hadn't thought of that night and how I prayed later that evening asking God to work in my life.

For the past few months I have seen a gradual change in myself that I have never experienced. The only way I can describe it is a craving that is getting stronger and stronger. With all the praying, reading and church I attend I just want more and more. I don't know what else I can do but just keep doing what I am doing.

I have attended many churches in the past, went to a Christian school when I was young and grew up in a Christian home, but never have I felt this way. I have never "really" wanted to be a Christian. The Christians I grew up knowing were judgmental and put more focus on what people were doing wrong, and all church consisted of was how not to go to hell.

While attending your class I think you opened a door for me spiritually. THANK YOU! I really want to learn more and want to be a follower of the Orthodox faith. It's so hard for me to put into words what I feel, but I am sure you have heard this kind of stuff before from others. It seems so foreign but feels so right. I hope that you can help me understand all of this. At the sake of sounding silly... I just want more and more of God! I don't know how else to say it.

(signed)

Courtney C.