



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 174

Eastern Orthodox view of justification – The Orthodox Church teaches that though man has inherited a corrupt nature and is weakened by the fall, he still retains his moral freedom, and is by nature able to choose and do moral good, and to avoid and hate what is evil (Confession of Dositheus, Decree 14). The Church also teaches that as a result of the fall man only inherits Adam’s sinful nature but not his guilt. Such an understanding of the fall and human nature impacts the Orthodox understanding of justification and redemption, for Christ is seen primarily as the incarnate Lord rather than the suffering substitute, and His death as victory over death, breaking its power, which we participate in, rather than as the payment of the guilt of our sins which satisfies God’s justice and wrath, declaring us righteous in Him (John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 1979, page 161).

Commenting on Romans 3:26 the Orthodox Study Bible states, “Ongoing faith in Jesus is the way mankind receives God’s righteousness. Justification (being made righteous) by faith is not a one-time “not guilty” verdict, as some may teach. Rather, it is Christ living in us, and we in Him (Gal 2:2). Thus, to be justified is to be in communion with Jesus Christ in an ongoing, dynamic, and growing life with Him.” Commenting on Romans 4:11-12 the OSB states that righteousness being counted (imputed) “does not refer to a mere legal standing, but indicates that God’s righteousness is actually given to mankind by grace. This righteousness transforms the whole person, internally and externally. Those who say God’s righteousness is merely an external declaration or fiat that does not really become ours experientially miss the point and fall short of the truth.” Commenting on Galatians 3:6-9 the OSB states that to “account” refers to “faithful participation,” and to “justify” means “to make righteous and so to be righteous.” Regarding Acts 10:35 the OSB states that “Justification is not merely a once-time event, but a dynamic, ongoing process. In addition to faith, two conditions are given here: God accepts whoever fears Him and works righteousness. This does not deny justification by faith, but demonstrates clearly that justification is not by faith alone (Jam 2:24)” (see Confession of Dositheus, Decrees 13, 14).

In Orthodox theology the sacraments of the Church also play a prominent role with respect to salvation. The Church teaches that through the sacraments divine grace necessary for justification (or salvation) is administered, enabling the participants to become communicants in the redemptive work of Christ. Thus the sacraments are necessary and efficacious causes of salvation (John Karmiris, *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 1995, page 24). Participation in the sacrament of baptism is necessary for salvation, through which the participant is “born anew,” enters into a right relationship with God, becomes a member of Christ’s body, and begins his path toward becoming a partaker of the divine nature. Other sacraments of the Church, such as chrismation or the Eucharist, are also necessary for salvation. In the sacrament of chrismation the believer receives the Holy Spirit and His gifts; and through the sacrament of the Eucharist the believer continues in his justification (or salvation), being progressively made righteous.

Thus, we see that the Orthodox Church clearly rejects justification as a legal declaration, grounded on the righteousness of Christ alone, which is imputed to our account through faith alone. Instead the Church combines regeneration, justification and sanctification in the overall process of salvation, teaching that this begins with the sacrament of baptism, where our sins are forgiven, we are born again and become members of the body of Christ; and this salvation is maintained through a life of continuous obedience, as we participate in the other sacraments, perform works of righteousness, and repent of our sins; and in all this we are actively cooperating with God’s grace, becoming more and more righteous.

This is justification or salvation by faith plus works, which is contrary to the teachings of the Bible, on the one hand diminishing and disparaging the perfection, sufficiency and glory of the work and righteousness of Christ on our behalf, and on the other hand elevating and valuing the works of man, which will always be tarnished with sin in this life and thus unacceptable before God for our salvation.