


November 2019

Book Review: The Victory of the Cross: Salvation in Eastern Orthodoxy

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Recommended Citation

Crego, Paul (2019) "Book Review: The Victory of the Cross: Salvation in Eastern Orthodoxy," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 39 : Iss. 6 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol39/iss6/8>

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James R. Payton, Jr., *The Victory of the Cross: Salvation in Eastern Orthodoxy*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019. xx, 201pp. \$25.00 (paperback), 978-0-8038-5256-7

Reviewer: Paul Crego, Library of Congress, retired

The Victory of the Cross: Salvation in Eastern Orthodoxy is the latest book by James R. Payton, Jr., emeritus professor of history at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario, Canada. His previous books include *Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition*. He also edited *A Patristic Treasure: Early Church Wisdom for Today*.

In addition to the academic study of Orthodox Churches, James Payton's career has included leadership in Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe, a multid denominational organization that maintained contact with Christians and others in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and the nations that emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union and the dismembering of some countries in Eastern Europe.

The present volume is an important description of the many facets of the doctrine of salvation among the Orthodox Churches. Importantly, Payton also spends a good portion of the book elucidating the differences in the Orthodox doctrine of salvation as compared to doctrines of salvation among the various churches of the Christian West, with both the Roman Catholic Church and general Protestantism included. In the preface he ambitiously sets the following standard: "In this book, I will be writing from an Orthodox perspective – not "play -acting" as I were myself Orthodox, but instead to present the richness and integrality of the Orthodox view on Salvation effectively, relying on the abundant resources Orthodoxy draws on for its teaching and worship." (x)

The intended audience of *The Victory of the Cross* is primarily Protestants and Roman Catholics who wish to gain a greater knowledge of Orthodox Christian doctrine, and especially those who have been intimidated by the number of languages that are native to the Orthodox community. Payton almost exclusively provides sources in the English language, some in translation, to help take down the barriers to further study.

One of the great strengths of this book is that the liturgy of the Orthodox Church is recognized as a primary source of Orthodox doctrine, second only to the Scriptures, and in conjunction with the writers of the Early Church. The Orthodox Church, more than all other Christian churches consciously follows the ancient dictum, *legem credendi lex statuat*

supplicandi [the rule of prayer forms the rule of belief]. Any study of Orthodox beliefs, therefore, must include study of what is said in the rich heritage of its words of worship.

The Table of Contents give us a list of the topics covered: 1. Introduction; 2. Setting the Stage: Viewing the Cross; 3. The Need for Salvation; 4. The Focus on the Savior; 5. The Economy of Salvation: How God Saved Humanity; 6. Deification: The Goal of Salvation; 7. Becoming like God: The Path of Salvation; 8. The Sign of the Cross.

Prof. Payton correctly points out that the Orthodox proclamation of the victory of Christ's salvation is already manifest on the cross: when Jesus, as reported in the Gospel of John, says that "It is finished," it is a statement of victory. It is not a statement of despair that the story is finished and that there will be nothing more to report. Rather, it is an assertion, that all that follows is wrapped up together in the working out of our salvation. The death of the human Christ is real, to be sure, but the cross is exulted because the story is continued in the resurrection.

Payton compares the Western and Eastern views of the cross in this context: "Western Christianity ... sees the crucified Christ as a suffering victim, enduring the divine judgment and paying the legal penalty for our sins. By contrast, Orthodoxy sees the cross as an emblem of victory." (9)

In the third chapter, "The Need for Salvation," Payton points to another of the most important distinctions between East and West in Christian thought. Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches emphasize the doctrine of original sin that has been inherited by the descendants of Adam and Eve. This doctrine has dominated the way in which the need for salvation has been expressed in the West. In response to the inherited sin, the second person of the Trinity became human in order to assuage a distant and angry God (see Anselm of Canterbury's *Cur Deus Homo?* [Why did God become human?]). In the East there is no less an issue of sin, but Adam and Eve sinned, as it were, on their own behalf; as does each human being. So, sin is taken seriously, but we all have responsibility for our own. The need for salvation for the Orthodox, then, grows out of this "solidarity" in sinful behavior.

Chapters four and five discuss the "who" and "how" of salvation. Payton points out the importance for the Orthodox of seeing the Christ the Savior expressed typologically throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, even though the original writer and the reader may not be aware that this is so. He points out how this is richly expressed in the hymnody of Orthodoxy. The "how"

concentrates on the life of Christ, as deity incarnate in the fullness of humanity, and in his willing suffering and death upon the cross.

In chapters six and seven, “Deification: The Goal of Salvation” and “Becoming like God: The Path of Salvation,” Dr. Payton describes the way in which the Orthodox understanding of Sanctification is a critical part of the whole doctrine of salvation. He is careful to report that this does not mean that humans become deified by nature as God is deity, but that humans, by the grace of God and the process of synergy achieve the *likeness* of God. The Orthodox understanding of Genesis 1:26 in which God announces that humankind, male and female is being created in “the image and likeness of God.” The image of God, in the Orthodox understanding is the foundation of human identity, and even our sinfulness has not negated that image. Likeness, on the other hand, is the goal of salvation. As he begins chapter seven Payton points out this goal: “Turning now to consider how we are to achieve, through divine salvation our original created purpose – to attain God’s likeness ... ” The Sacraments are taught as means of coming to this goal of salvation. The event of Christ’s Transfiguration is understood as a prefiguring of our destiny is an important topic in this discussion.

Payton’s apparatus, in addition to footnotes, includes a topical “Appendix on Orthodox Usage of Biblical Terms for the Reception of Salvation” a bibliography, also arranged topically, subject, name, and Scripture indexes. My only request in the context of apparatus, if there is a second edition, would be to identify all of the particular services that are referenced by the footnotes in the text.

This book, while beyond the beginner’s level, would certainly be valuable for persons who wish to gain insight into the core of Orthodox Christian belief on salvation. It would be especially valuable for Christians in Roman Catholic and Protestant seminaries where little is taught about Orthodoxy.