

January 4, 2009

The Sunday Before Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When St. Paul wrote to rebuke the Galatians, it was not for grievous moral offenses. He did not accuse them of murder, fornication, blasphemy, or theft. Nor did he reprimand them for slipping back to the ways of the world. Paul's indictment of the churches of Galatia was quite simply that they had replaced the Gospel with another teaching, which he identified as *kata anthron*, "according to man." They had substituted something else for the Gospel.

The Gospel Paul had preached in Galatia was God's revelation in His Son and the Holy Spirit. It was not, in the first instance, a declaration of man's duty, but of God's bounty in the fullness of time. Paul wrote, "when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!'" This message was the *evangel*, the Good News: the incarnation of God and the divinization of man. Any message replacing this one, Paul wrote, was "another gospel."

In the Epistle to the Galatians, the "other gospel" was justification by the works of the Mosaic Law. That is to say, those who preached this other gospel were not teaching something bad but something good.

Indeed, the really serious rivals of the Gospel will rarely be bad. It is easy to recognize evil things as inimical to the Gospel---like murder, urban violence, theft, war, sexual immorality, economic collapse, and the dissolution of marriage. Such matters, while they are certainly *opposed* to the Gospel, are less likely to rival or replace the Gospel.

Only good things normally suggest themselves as proper substitutes for the Gospel. It is rare that the Gospel is distorted by evil; it is much more likely to be corrupted by some lesser good. In the case of the Galatians, that lesser good was the Mosaic Law!

Thus, even in Paul's own day, Christians had already begun to replace the Gospel with some other message "according to man." That is to say, God's message was already being superceded by some human project.

Substitutions for the Gospel remain a constant temptation for Christians. These substitutions are not usually bad things. Commonly they are good things, such as world peace, family values, economic stability, the sanctity of human life, patriotism, ecological concern, or political activism for social justice. These are

not bad, obviously. They are good and desirable things. Some of these concerns, moreover, have arguably taken their rise in the human conscience as a result of the Gospel. But they are not the Gospel and should not become substitutes for---or rivals of---the Gospel.

Alas, such substitutions seem to be made all the time. In a recent symposium on environmental interests, for example, a well-known Orthodox bishop boasted, "Protecting the natural environment has been at the top of our [sic] pastoral concern and agenda for at least the last two decades." It happens that I have followed that bishop's ministry during those two decades, and he does not exaggerate: protecting the natural environment has indeed been at the top of his pastoral concern and agenda. My imagination, however, is somewhat challenged to picture St Paul making that priority his own.

This example of a modern substitution for the Gospel is hardly the most egregious. Far more serious, to my mind, are the many instances where Gospel is replaced by---or confused with---patriotism and nationalist agendas. Indeed, one suspects the fruits of evangelical efforts among the Orthodox in this country would be doubled, if our parish churches did not confuse the message by displaying national flags up there with the icons.

Even the jurisdictional unity of the Orthodox in this country---a goal devoutly to be sought---is sometimes recommended for the purpose of political advantage; often this unity is explicitly pursued, not in order to satisfy the theological requirements of the Gospel, but in order to gain for the Orthodox a stronger voice in the halls of government.

Political, economic, and social programs, I suppose, are the easiest substitutes for the Gospel, because their goals can be attained without personal faith, repentance, purity of heart, and similar inconveniences.

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php