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APPENDIX:

Idealism and the Slavic Church

Have you ever heard a believer say something like: “I don’t sin any longer;” “No, I never lust after a woman in my heart;” “My husband and I never argue;” or “How could a Christian be disobedient to the Word? That can only be true of an unbeliever.”?

It has been comments like these which have caused me to stand in bewilderment. How can some of my Slavic brothers and sisters in Christ say things like this? Do they understand something about the Christian life which I don’t? Are they living a victorious faith up and beyond what I or others I know have ever experienced? Or have they simply redefined what lust is, what an argument is, what sin is, etc., so that they can say in their hearts that they are pure, godly Christians, and never do these things? In other words are they somehow deceived?



When reading the Bible, I see that Christians do sin, such as in Paul’s confession of his personal weaknesses in Romans 7. It is also evident when he reproves the Ephesians in chapter 4, telling them to no longer walk as the Gentiles, for they did not learn Christ in that way. Paul admonishes the Corinthian believers in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, stating that they were walking like men of flesh. James even calls his readers adulteresses and sinners (Jam. 4:4,8; 5:19-20). So the fact that believers sin is not an unknown phenomenon.

At times when I minister in the Slavic culture, I am cautious not to share too much about my own personal struggles because I may be looked down upon as unspiritual. It makes me wonder if others do not feel the same pressure, both Slavs and non-Slavs alike. Am I just feeling insecure or is there actually a pressure like this in their culture? Are Christians no longer sinners once they come to Christ, or do they still sin even though they have been saved by the grace of God? Do Slavic believers indeed not struggle with sin, or is there something in their Christian culture which causes them to see things from a different perspective?

Before I begin, I want to say that idealism is not just an issue in the Slavic church. Believers anywhere in the world can have the same view of the Christian life; but because I have seen this particular view so often in the Slavic church, this article will be focused on them. The goal of this article is to help you better understand idealism and its effect upon an individual’s faith.

What is idealism?

As I considered this issue, I have come to the conclusion that idealistic thinking is a chief factor why some Slavic believers claim to live an almost sinless or even sinless life. Why? Because idealism looks at life from the perspective that one should and can (focus on the word "can") live according to a set of ideals or standards that are in themselves perfect ("ideal"). I am not questioning that Christianity provides such a set of standards or that a Christian is expected to live according to these standards; this goes without saying. The issue at hand which idealism asserts is that these ideals can be attained on a regular, consistent basis in life. Juxtaposing these views for further clarification, the idealist, while understanding the imperfections of his world, himself, and of life -- especially when illuminated by the standards given by God in the Bible -- is ultimately claiming a form of perfection in an imperfect world.

Therefore, in this article, idealism will refer to a pattern of thinking, a philosophy of life. Because I will be applying this definition to the church within a conservative Christian worldview, my definition will be labeled as "Christian idealism." Christian idealism then is a paradigm of perfection (ideals) which the adherent (idealist) believes is attainable on a daily, consistent basis in the Christian life. The associated question then which this article discusses is: "Can these standards be met every day by every Christian on a regular, consistent basis?" Or putting it another way, "Can Christians live an almost perfect or even perfect Christian life this side of heaven as some claim?"

How is idealism seen in the Slavic church?

When discussing this issue with a Ukrainian pastor he said, "Randy, you do not need to say any more. I know exactly what you are talking about." He then went on to explain how for years in the Ukrainian church what was stressed were the externals, not the individual's walk with God nor his personal time of Bible reading and prayer. "Being at church, dressing right, singing, these things made you a good Christian," he said. A Ukrainian Christian woman said to me about this issue, "How is it that believers can be so concerned about the outside of a person when what God judges is the heart?"

Once when training a group of Ukrainian pastors, while discussing the topic of the pastor's family, I asked the question: "Do pastors and their wives in Ukraine ever argue with each other?" There was silence for a couple of seconds and then their heads began to nod, signifying yes, they do. I then went on to say that one aspect of Ukrainian culture that I do not understand is when Christians seem to imply that they do not sin. In response to this one pastor, while reaching his left hand out as far to the left as he could said, "Here you have sinners." Then stretching his right hand out as far to the right as he could said, "Here you have saints." He then explained that in the Slavic evangelical church you are at one extreme or the other, there is no in-between." After he finished, another pastor stood and said, "Sadly to say, our people lie. They can stand and look you in the eyes with a smile on their face, but inwardly they may be angry at you and ready to explode."

Actually, the statements made in the introduction that seem to imply perfection in the Christian life are ones I heard personally while talking with Slavic believers. I also recall hearing a pastor say once, "We need to pray for the sinners." Which ones I wonder, those in or outside of the church? Please understand that I am not trying to say that there are no differences between believers and unbelievers. In no way do I want to detract from this glorious truth. Yes, it is true that when a person believes he becomes a child of God, for God at the point of salvation adopts us into His family. Therefore we no longer are children of Satan. We are His! We are saved! We have His Holy Spirit living within us. We are assured of eternal life with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN! So there are major distinctions. Yet, we need to remember that it was only a gift by God's grace that this occurred, referring to our salvation and all that accompanies it. We need to remember that we still have a sin nature. We need to be humble because of our place in the family of God and not proud, not forgetting where we came from, and how we personally fall short of God's standards (Rom. 3:23 states we continue to fall short). This is easy to do when God is our standard of perfection (Mat. 5:48). It becomes difficult when we, others, our traditions or personal ideals become our standard of perfection.

Are idealistic and biblical thinking compatible?

To answer this question we need to see how Christian idealism compares with the Scriptures.

One reason I believe that some may hold to Christian idealism is due to statements made in the epistle of 1 John. Here John wrote: "No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him" (3:6); "the one who practices sin is of the devil" (3:8); and "No one who is born of God practices sin" (3:9). Of course it is imperative that we understand these verses in context of the chapter as well as in context of the epistle. First let's look at 1 John 3:4-9:

- 4 "Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.
- 5 You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.
- 6 No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.
- 7 Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous;
- 8 the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.
- 9 No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God."

The key word in this passage is "practices." It is clear that those who "practice" sin, in other words, those whose lives are characterized by living sinfully, are "practicing lawlessness." Such people do not know God. Christ came to take away sin (3:5), and those who belong to Him will not "practice" sin because they "abide in" (remain, continue in obedience to and fellowship with) Him. Those who do not abide in Him have not seen Him or know Him (3:6). Those who "practice" or live a life of righteousness are righteous (3:7), but those who "practice" sin are of the devil (3:8). So the true believer will not "practice" sin because he is born of God and God's seed,

God's nature (John 1:13; 2 Pet. 1:4) abides in him (3:9). This is a clear contrast which shows a major distinction between the believer and the unbeliever; the believer being characterized by righteous living and the unbeliever by unrighteous living. However this passage is not a pronouncement concerning if Christians sin or not. Christians still sin; it is just that they should not "practice" sin. Though this passage does not focus on the sin of believers, another passage in this epistle does.

John makes it clear in his first chapter of this epistle that Christians do sin. Two issues which John addresses are:

1. "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us." - vs. 8 (emphasis added; present tense)
2. "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us." - vs. 10 (emphasis added; perfect tense; a past action)

In verse 8 John gives a warning when he says, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us." Please note that John was speaking about himself and his readers in the present tense (verb "have"), not the past. In so doing, he was speaking of their current condition, stating that they sin. As John did in this verse, the genuine believer will admit that he is a sinner; for the one who says that he has no sin, or in other words does not sin, is "deceiving" himself and is not living or speaking in accordance with the truth. Sin is deceptive!

John goes on to say in verse 10, "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us." Please note John wrote about himself and his readers as a past, completed action (verb "have sinned," perfect tense). What John is saying is that, in contrast to a believer who confesses his sin and consequently receives forgiveness and cleansing (vs. 9; "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."), a believer who denies that he sinned (the focus is on completed acts of sin which collaborates his current condition) makes God out to be a liar. John says that such a believer is not living or speaking in accordance with the truth of God's Word ("the truth is not in us," vs. 8). How does a believer who denies his sin make God a liar? Verse 5 makes it clear that "God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." God as light exposes sin (John 3:20). Consequently when God exposes our sin and we deny it, we are asserting that what He showed us is not true, making Him a liar. Yet if we confess our sin (vs. 9), "the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin" (vs. 7, "cleanses" is in present tense, this being an ongoing process). God is "faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (vs. 9). So it is clear from 1 John that Christians sin, even believers such as the Apostle John who included himself in these verses.

There are a number of other passages which show clearly that believers struggle with sin. In 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, Paul said, "brethren":

- I could not speak to you as to spiritual men;
- I had to speak to you as to men of flesh;
- I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able *to receive it*;
- You are still fleshly;
- For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?

Here Paul addresses Christian men whom he describes as resembling unbelievers. Not only did Paul make statements like this, but the writer of Hebrews wrote something very similar in Hebrews 5: “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (Heb. 5:12-14). They too were not mature, and as a result acted like infants who needed milk. They were not accustomed “to the word of righteousness,” and therefore did not “have their senses trained to discern good and evil.”

Ephesians 4:18-19 is another eye-opening passage. Paul begins by describing unbelievers as follows:

- 18 “being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart;
- 19 and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.”

What is so interesting is what he said to the Ephesian believers in verses 17, 20 and 21. In verse 17 he said:

“So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind.”

This “futility of mind” is what Paul described in verses 18 and 19. This was the manner in which the Ephesian believers were no longer to walk. Why? Because as Paul said in verses 20-21:

“But you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus.”

Believers within the Ephesian church were living as they had before becoming Christians; that is, if they had truly accepted Christ at all. It was hard to tell by their behavior if they were believers or unbelievers. It is interesting that this reproof follows Ephesians 4:11-16. Here Paul spoke about the ministry of the apostle, prophet, evangelist and pastor-teacher, that of bringing the members of their churches to spiritual maturity. When this happens, the members of the church will live more and more in Christ-likeness and not like the world.

At this point it has been established that immature believers sin for they are not accustomed to righteousness, but what about mature believers? Do they still sin, or are they immune from sin due to their maturity? Some teach this, sighting verses like 1 Corinthians 2:16 (“For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.”) and Galatians 2:20 (“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”).

It is true that believers have the mind of Christ and that Christ lives within them; but the question is, "Do these truths nullify the fact that Christians have sin natures and still sin?" They definitely are reasons why Christians should not desire to sin or practice sin. But they do not nullify the fact that believers still have a sin nature which battles against their new nature (Rom. 6:6,12; 13:14; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:5-10) and against the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16,24-26). Neither passage states that a believer will or can live a perfect or near perfect life because they have the mind of Christ and because Christ lives within them. Both simply state the fact that as a result of our new life in Christ we have the capacity to live for Christ, something that was not possible before salvation. The question then is, "Can we live an almost sinless life as a mature believer?" Earlier we saw that this is not possible for immature believers, and that even the Apostle John stated that he still sinned. For further verification we will now look at the life of the Apostle Paul in Romans 7, where in his own words he writes about his personal weaknesses. But first we need to establish the context of this passage in order to understand about which period of Paul's life he wrote about. I say this because some believe that in verses 14-25 Paul was speaking about his life before accepting Christ and in other verses about his life after accepting Christ. There are different key factors which determine which period Paul was referring to. In this discussion we will consider three of them.

To establish context, in the first portion of Romans 7, verses 1-13, Paul talks about sin and its relationship to the Law and the negative consequence sin had in a person's life. In this context Paul was speaking about life before Christ. He then makes a transition in verse 14. Whereas he made it clear in the previous context that sin was the culprit which worked through the Law to deceive and kill (vs. 11), he will now show that sin takes opportunity through his flesh (vss. 16-17,20) causing him to do the very things he hates (vs. 15). One difference that Paul makes clear between the Law and himself is that where the Law was spiritual, Paul himself because of his flesh was not spiritual (vs. 14). So where sin worked through both the Law and Paul, he agreed with the Law confessing that it was good (vs. 16).

The first key factor to establish which period of Paul's life he was referring to, before or after salvation, is seen in verse 14. Here Paul said, "For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin." The word "flesh" brings out the idea that Paul in his humanness was "fleshly." In other words Paul, as all believers, had an "old self" which was evil in its nature (cf. Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9). Having this nature of sin resident within him, Paul was simply stating a fact which is true for all mankind. Accompanying this statement, Paul adds the fact that he was "sold into bondage to sin." The word "sold" is important because in Greek it is in the perfect tense meaning that the sale of Paul into the bondage of sin was a completed act which took place in the past. This was a one-time event of which the results remained with him until his death. Romans 3:9 corroborates this truth when it says: "What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin." The phrase "under sin" is the same Greek phrase used in verse 14 ("into sin"). So Paul is simply stating that all people -- Jews and Greeks of which Paul was one -- were "under sin." This is true for all people, for at our conception we received a nature of sin, and at that point we were "sold into bondage to sin." Therefore this is not a state which changes once a person comes to Christ because he will have this nature until death. This becomes clearer when looking at verse 18; "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not." When Paul says that nothing good dwells in him, he is specific when he says, "that is, in my flesh." Later in

verse 21 he said, “I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.” This is something that all believers will admit if they are honest with themselves.

A second key factor in this passage is that when Paul spoke about his dilemma, he did so in the present tense (“I do,” “I do not do,” “I know,” “I want,” etc.), not in past tense. Paul’s experience was a present reality, not something he was recalling from memory. Paul even used the words “I am” (or its equivalent) eight times in phrases which makes it clear that what he was writing about was what he was facing at the time of his writing. So these verses are not speaking about his experience before accepting Christ, but about his life as a believer, as an Apostle.

A third key factor in this passage is observed in the following phrases which Paul made about himself:

- “But if I do the very thing I do not want *to do*” (vs. 16)
- “for the willing is present in me” (the desire to do good) (vs. 18)
- “For the good that I want” (to do) (vs. 19)
- “But if I am doing the very thing I do not want” (to do) (vs. 20)
- “the one who wants to do good” (his desire) (vs. 21)

The question one must ask is, “Are these the statements of an unbeliever?” The main desire one sees here is Paul wanting to do what is right, what is correct, what is good. A struggle is observed, that between his old and new natures. Paul wanted to do good, but he had this part of his being which constantly fought against him, his flesh. This is seen clearly in the following verses:

- “For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I *would* like to *do*, but I am doing the very thing I hate.” (vs. 15)
- “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not.” (vs. 18)
- “For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.” (vs. 19)
- “I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.” (vs. 21)

Though unbelievers may not like aspects of their behavior, such as a drunkard despising his addiction to alcohol, they generally do not refer to their struggle as “sin” like Paul did. Five times in this passage Paul speaks about sin as the prominent issue (vss. 14,17,20,23,25). Unbelievers will generally speak about “their problem,” “their weakness,” “their struggle,” “their disease,” or maybe “their demon,” but not about their sin. This is the difference. Paul defined it specifically as his struggle. Therefore in Romans 7:14-25, Paul is speaking about his struggles with sin as a mature Christian, as an Apostle. This is the same problem that all believers struggle with, immature and mature alike. Actually, even the Apostle Peter and Barnabas had fallen into the sin of hypocrisy for which Paul publically rebuked Peter (Gal. 2:11-14). We see that sin is a universal problem for everyone, even believers.

As a generalization, it is the mature believers like the Apostles Paul and John who are able to recognize their true situation and spiritual state, “who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (Heb. 5:14). On the other

hand, it is the immature believers who are “not accustomed to the word of righteousness,” for they are infants (Heb. 5:13) and do not assess themselves rightly. Such people may think that they do not sin, or that they are perfected in righteousness, when in reality they are not.

I know at this point some might be thinking, “Why are you focusing so much on the fact that believers sin? You are opening the door for Christians to justify living unholy lives.” For clarification, this is not my aim. We need to remember that the Scriptures are clear that genuine believers will not live in habitual sin. Not only did we see that earlier in 1 John 3, but Paul said in Romans 6:1-2:

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?”

Then later in verses 12-15 Paul said:

“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!”

Peter made it clear in 1 Peter 2:16:

“Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but *use it* as bondslaves of God.”

It is apparent that Christians are not to sin. This however does not change the fact that Christians do sin and that believers and unbelievers alike have a sin nature. Yet, the fact remains that believers have been regenerated (John 14:16-17; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:19; Titus 3:5); they have a new nature (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10); they are clothed with Christ (Gal. 3:27; cf. Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10); and they have the Holy Spirit living within them (John 14:16-17; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:19) to empower them (Eph. 3:16; 6:10; Col. 1:11). Because this is true, genuine believers will not “practice” sin, but they will “practice” righteousness. This should characterize their life for in so doing they will show their love for God (John 14:21-24; 1 John 5:3).

What characteristics comprise a biblical thinker?

Because idealism and biblical thinking are not compatible, defining those characteristics which comprise a biblical thinker is vital. Therefore to answer this question I contemplated two things: 1) those characteristics which comprise an effective student of the Bible, and 2) those characteristics needed to properly apply Scripture. How one studies the Scriptures and the qualities necessary to apply them correctly should correlate to how one thinks biblically. As a result, I came up with a list of four characteristics of a biblical thinker:

1. He is critical in his thinking.
2. He is humble before God and His Word.
3. He is honest in his assessment of Scripture.

4. He is effectual in his application of Scripture.

A critical thinker is a person who is careful in his investigation, evaluation and conclusions reached when studying the Word of God. He is a person who analyzes carefully the facts and information before him. He uses whatever resources are available to come to a proper understanding of the issues at hand. He observes, correlates, and reflects. This principle is seen in 2 Timothy 2:15 which states, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth." It is evident that the person who handles the Word of God is to "be diligent" (making every effort) to handle (correctly utilize) the Word of God accurately. Therefore when he diligently studies, correctly understands, accurately utilizes, and applies the Word of God, such a person will be approved by Him and not ashamed when he one day stands before Jesus for judgment. So a biblical thinker must be a critical thinker.

Next, the biblical thinker is humble. As James and Peter said, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (Jam. 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5). We see this truth in union with the Word of God in James 1:21. Here James wrote, "Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and *all* that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls." In humility we are to "receive" (accept and grasp hold of) the Word of God which was planted in us when we heard it. It is this Word that is able to save people. It is the powerful, perfect, authoritative Word of God. It is this Word of God about which Paul said: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Thus it is the "inspired" Word of God which completes us. Therefore we, as imperfect people, are to humbly welcome and embrace what God has to say to us. Pride will obstruct this process, hindering us from recognizing or admitting our needs, keeping us from receiving God's reproof. This is why one needs to adhere to James' words in the next verse where he said, "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves" (Jam. 1:22). In humility we are to accept and carry out the instructions of God's Word, not just consider them. This is the result of a humble attitude which a biblical thinker must have.

The biblical thinker also needs to be honest. Continuing on in James 1, verses 23-25: "For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does." When a person looks into the Word of God as into a mirror, he must honestly evaluate what he sees and act accordingly. This is wisdom, applying the knowledge he has. If a believer is not honest with himself, not willing to sincerely consider what he saw and do what God has shown him, then he will not grow or even decline in his spiritual growth. Therefore to be a biblical thinker, a person must be honest with God's Word, not pushing aside truth he is not willing to deal with as irrelevant.

Lastly, looking again at James 1:25, we see that a biblical thinker is an effectual doer. James said, "But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does." In this verse the one who abides by the

Word of God and lives it out in his life is an “effectual” doer. In other words, he is one who is occupied with (“effectual”) applying (“doer”) the Word of God to his life. He sees and then does, this in contrast to the person who is a “forgetful hearer;” not abiding in or applying the Word of God. Effective application is to be the end result of reading, studying, teaching and/or preaching the Word of God. A person with this goal is an effectual, biblical thinker and one who will please and honor God throughout his life.

In summary, a person who thinks biblically and then speaks and acts biblically is a person who is characterized in his thinking as:

- Critical - 2 Tim. 2:15
- Humble - James 1:21-22
- Honest - James 1:23-25
- Effectual - James 1:25

To be without these character qualities can lead believers to various unbiblical paradigms, such as to Christian idealism. This occurs because a believer who is not critical in his thinking will be receptive to many forms of error since he is not accurately handling the Word of truth. This is the main reason for Christian idealism, an incorrect understanding of the Word of God. Though for the most part many Christian idealists desire to live righteously before God, they go about it in an unbiblical manner. Their misunderstanding of the Scriptures leads them to attempt to live a victorious Christian life in the flesh, not by the grace of God. Since living a perfect life is impossible due to our sinful nature, the Christian idealist in his zeal to honor God creates a set of standards that he, in his flesh, is able to achieve. The application of the four characteristics of a biblical thinker however will eliminate Christian idealism as well as other forms of error. (See the chapter on Bible Study Methods. The information in this chapter will help one understand the Scriptures in their appropriate context, helping the Bible student to become a more critical thinker.)

Christian idealism and legalistic behavior in the church

Biblical thinking will not only eliminate Christian idealism, but it will also eliminate the associated legalism apparent in churches where it flourishes. I define legalism in this context as the mindset that believes obedience to a set of insignificant, superficial standards is pleasing to God. This is directly tied to Christian idealism because one aspect of this belief system is attainable rules which give the Christian idealist a sense of godliness when living in accordance with them. Legalism can also be observed by believers who are characterized by their use of the Bible to authenticate their personal convictions on their opinions, on issues which the Bible speaks nothing about (cf. Rom. 10:2). Linking their personal views to the Bible gives what they say authority.

When considering this issue, I would like to begin with these words King David spoke to God:

“For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.” (Psa. 51:16-17)

A similar thought was made to King Saul in the form of a rebuke:

“Samuel said, ‘Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, *and* to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from *being* king.’” (1 Sam. 15:22-23)

Though God demanded animal sacrifices from the Israelites, the prerequisite to His acceptance of them was a humble, broken and obedient heart. God did not render as important external things which the sacrifices became when offered from a heart that was not fully surrendered to Him. Therefore believing that mere obedience to a set of rules done from an improper heart pleases God is misguided. The Pharisees did this, thus Jesus said to them:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (Mat. 23:23-28)

What a strong rebuke to these unbelieving Pharisees! But do believers ever have such tendencies to focus on the outside of the cup rather than the inside? Do we “neglect the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness” and focus on things that make a person look like a Christian on the outside, though his heart on the inside is not pleasing to God? I believe some do this because it is so much easier to live according to a simple set of man-made rules than work at growing in our faith on a daily basis. Specifically for the Christian idealist, living according to a set of such rules means that he does not have to face the reality of his sin; for in his mind he is a good Christian.

Jesus had even more strong words for the Pharisees and Scribes in a related passage. Mark recorded the following:

“The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, ‘Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?’ And He said to them, ‘Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.” Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men. He was also saying to them, ‘You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God

in order to keep your tradition. For Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother"; and, "He who speaks evil of father or mother, is to be put to death"; but you say, "If a man says to *his* father or *his* mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given *to God*)," you no longer permit him to do anything for *his* father or *his* mother; *thus* invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that." After He called the crowd to Him again, He *began* saying to them, 'Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man.'" (Mark 7:5-15)

Here Jesus focuses on the main issue -- the heart, not on the externals. The Jews had elevated their traditions above the Law of God, thus invalidating the Word of God. They were honoring God with their lips though their hearts were far from Him. Once a Ukrainian pastor who pastors a church of over 1,000 members said to me: "I have been thinking about no longer preaching messages on the issues of head coverings, makeup, jewelry, how people dress, etc. Instead I believe that I should focus my preaching on changing the hearts of the people; because when hearts change, people change and will do what is right." AMEN! He realized that he needed to work on the inside and not on the outside, no longer trying to make people conform to a set of insignificant rules. This is like a mechanic who, when trying to get a car to run better, paints the outside of the car and does not fix the engine. This is how many church leaders function. Jesus on the other hand wanted to get His listeners to understand that God is not pleased only with the externals and traditions which become more important than the Word of God. It is a man's heart that is the source of everything which he does, the source of all his external behavior. For when the heart is right, the externals will be right as well.

Why do we see Christian idealism in the Slavic church?

I believe the reason we see Christian idealism in the Slavic church, and in other churches around the world, is because of a misunderstanding of grace. Emphatically, all true believers in the former Soviet Union would state that they have been saved by grace. This of course is true, and from what I have seen in practice, this is usually how they live. Yet what I hear them say (though they would probably strongly disagree with me on this point) is that they must maintain their salvation by their works. Why? Because if a believer can lose his salvation, then he must live up to a high standard so he can retain it. Therefore, it is as a result of his works that he keeps his salvation, not by God's grace. Now for some, this portion may be the most difficult to accept, but I ask you to prayerfully consider the following explanation.

Where does this misconception come from and how is it manifested? It is a logical conclusion I believe, that if a person thinks he can lose his salvation, he must then justify in his own mind that he is living a life worthy of retaining it. In other words, how can one admit that he lives an imperfect Christian life when it is his very imperfections that can cause him to lose his salvation? How can one admit that he argues with his wife, that he yells at his children, that he thinks impure thoughts or that he is not always completely honest in all that he says and does? If he believes that he can lose his salvation as a result of his imperfections, then how can he be honest with who he really is before Christ? This means he would have to face up to,

look at, and endeavor to have victory over his sin. It is easier to deceive oneself into believing that his life is almost perfect than to do this.

Now I will explain what I believe the Bible teaches on this issue. First, if we are saved by grace, then we retain our salvation by grace. As Ephesians 2:8-9 tell us: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." We have been saved by God's grace through our faith. This was a gift to us, not in any way the result of our works (past, present or future), "so that no one may boast." Please note that the word "saved" in this verse is in the perfect, past tense. What this means is that at some point in the past we were "saved" -- rescued from danger, kept from destruction and its resulting penalties. This is a finished, completed act, and it occurred the moment we believed. We are saved once and for all "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29; see Rom. 1:6; 8:30; 2 Tim. 1:9).

What are we saved from? The Apostle Paul said in Colossians 2:13, "When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions." (emphasis added). Jesus forgave us "all" of our sins, past, present and future. The Apostle John said in 1 John 1:6-7: "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin" (emphasis added). John also said in 1 John 2:12, "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake." "Your sins" (all of them is implied) have been forgiven. John wrote in Revelation 1 when speaking about Jesus: "To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood— and He has made us *to be* a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen" (vss. 5b-6, emphasis added). We have been released from our sins by His blood, not by our works. Please notice that the word "released" is an aorist, active participle; therefore it is in the past tense meaning that Jesus has completed this action of releasing us from all our sins. Because it is a finished act, this means that all of our sins have been forgiven, past, present and future. John makes it clear when this occurred -- at the time when Jesus shed His blood on the cross (Col. 1:20; 1 Pet. 3:18).

So how do we understand these verses in contrast to passages like Matthew 6:14-15 and 1 John 1:9? Matthew 6:14-15 says: "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." First John 1:9 states, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." If our sins are forgiven, then why are we told that we must confess our sins and forgive others in order for our sins to be forgiven? The issue at hand is not salvation; the issue is relationship. Though we are forgiven of all of our sins at salvation, which the passages above clearly show, we still have to reconcile with God and possibly with others for our daily sins. For example, if I purposely offend someone, I have just sinned. That sin was forgiven when I accepted Christ as my Savior. Though that is true, my sin has caused broken fellowship between the person I offended and myself and also between God and myself (cf. Psa. 41:4; 51:4). So I need to ask both for their forgiveness so that the relationships can be restored. So though all of our sins were forgiven at the cross, there still is the daily effects of our sins on ourselves and others. This is why we are

to go to those whom we have offended and be reconciled with them (cf. Mat. 5:23-24), why we are to confess our sins (1 John 1:9), and why we are to forgive others an unlimited amount each day (Mat. 18:21-22; cf. Eph. 4:32). Relationships must be restored. Therefore, “if possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men” (Rom. 12:18).

Understanding that all of our sins are forgiven, we know that as we received our salvation by grace that we can only retain it by grace. Paul made this so clear in Galatians 3:3 when he said: “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” Of course not! So why do we so often try to live the Christian life according to the flesh and not by the Spirit. We are to “walk by the Spirit” so that we “will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16).

Peter stated in 1 Peter 1:3-5: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (emphasis added). Please notice the three points Peter made:

1. Christ is the One who caused us to be born again according to His great mercy (This was His action, not ours. He saved us; we did not save ourselves, so therefore how can we keep ourselves saved? We cannot. Only the Architect and Source of the process can do this. See John 1:13.)
2. Our inheritance is reserved in heaven for us [It is there with our name on it; it is awaiting our arrival. It is imperishable, undefiled and will not fade away. It is guarded, made sure (this verb is in the perfect tense); therefore this is a completed act. It is not there one moment and gone the next because we sin. It will always be awaiting us.]
3. We are protected by God’s power for our salvation. (Our salvation will not be lost because God is protecting it now, in the present, always.)

Paul told the Romans, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39). Not even believers who are “created things” can separate themselves from the love of Christ. It is impossibility!

Understanding that we are believers who sin, we do not have to try to make ourselves and others believe that we are living an almost sinless Christian life. We can simply admit that we are sinners saved by grace. We can admit that we are imperfect. We can simply state that it is our goal as imperfect people in an imperfect world to work at pleasing and living for God to the best of our ability in all that we do, though at times we will fail Him. We should never use our frailty and imperfections as an excuse to sin or live an undisciplined life. The Apostle Paul clearly stated: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” (Rom. 6:1-2). He also said later in chapter 6, “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!” (vs. 15). In Galatians 5:13 Paul said, “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only *do not turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” For the “so-called” believer who lives a life of

sin, turning his “freedom into an opportunity for the flesh,” one has to wonder if he is even a true believer. Freedom does not have to cause us to fall, though it can. It should be our companion with which we leave behind the bondage of sin and law and freely serve Christ.

Conclusion

We live in an imperfect world with imperfection all around us. If we are honest as Christians, we will admit that we too are imperfect. Christian idealism reaches for or claims perfection, but reality equals imperfection. Even the Scriptures paint a picture of the imperfections of Christians, of both immature and mature alike. Knowing this should be freeing, understanding that as Christians we do not have to portray a perfect life before others. For if we are portraying that we are living a perfect Christian life, then we are living a lie. As a result of this, dishonesty and pride will hinder us in our Christian growth, keeping us from seeking the spiritual help and prayer we need because of not wanting people to think we are spiritually weak and imperfect. The fact remains that we are imperfect. Living the perfect life this side of heaven is not possible because we still have a sin nature. Also, saying that we live a perfect life does not help us relate to unbelievers. If they know us, they will see the hypocrisy between the life we claim to live and our reality. We need to be honest with them, admitting that living the Christian life is not easy, that it is a challenge, that we fail at it more times than we want to admit. To tell unbelievers, as some do, that once you accept Jesus all of life’s problems will disappear is false advertising. Christians’ cars still break down, their marriages struggle, their children at times go wayward, their bills still need to be paid, they lose jobs, and they get sick and die. All one has to do is look at the life of the Apostle Paul to see that the life of a Christian is not easy (2 Cor. 11:23-28; Acts 9-28). Also, those who are living for the Lord face the added spiritual attacks of Satan which makes life more difficult (cf. Eph. 6:11-12; 1 Pet. 5:8-9). We need to be careful that we are honest in our portrayal of the Christian life.

Earlier I stated: “Emphatically, all true believers in the former Soviet Union would state that they have been saved by grace. This of course is true, and from what I have seen in practice, this is usually how they live.” Though Christian idealism exists in the Slavic church, I see that the average Slavic Christian lives by grace through faith. Though they may believe they can lose their salvation, I have never met a Christian who believes this who has ever lost it. They always hold on to the fact that God is merciful, that God loves them, and that they are accepted by Him as His children. This is why I stated earlier that though many believe that they can lose their salvation, I see them live for the most part as if they cannot. They live by grace.