



Introducing the Orthodox Church

Introduction

The following pages are offered as an excellent yet concise explanation of the Orthodox Faith. It is our hope that this will bear fruit among those who have been raised in the faith, the recent convert and also, those faithfully searching for the Church of the Apostles.

This work first appeared in the *The Orthodox Study Bible* published by Thomas Nelson in Nashville, TN and is offered here in its entirety. The impact of *The Orthodox Study Bible* upon the Orthodox in America and others seeking to understand Orthodoxy cannot be measured. It seems that faithful everywhere are using it and prospering greatly.

Those who read these pages and wish to learn more are encouraged to purchase an *Orthodox Study Bible* and continue to discover how intimately Orthodoxy is united to Holy Scripture. The volume also contains 27 separate articles on various topics and their scriptural foundation. Also included in the OSB is a concordance, glossary, lectionary and many other study guides and helps.

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The publication of *The Orthodox Study Bible* begs a question: exactly what is the Orthodox Church? Many people have heard of the Russian Orthodox Church, which celebrated its one thousandth birthday in 1988, or the Greek Orthodox Church, which was born centuries earlier. But Orthodoxy itself— what is it, and what are its historic roots?

The Church in the New Testament

To answer the question, go back to the pages of the New Testament, specifically to the Book of Acts and the birth of the Church at Pentecost. On that day the Holy Spirit descended on the Twelve Apostles and those gathered in the Upper Room, and by afternoon some three thousand souls believed in Christ and were baptized. The Scriptures record that when the first Christian community began, “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42).

From Jerusalem, faith in Christ spread throughout Judea, to Samaria (Acts 8:5-39), to Antioch and to the Gentiles (Acts 11:19-26). Soon there were new converts and new Churches throughout Asia Minor and the Roman Empire as recorded in Acts and the Epistles.

The Church, of course, was not simply another organization in Roman society. The Lord Jesus Christ had given the promise of the Holy Spirit to “guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). With the fulfillment of that promise beginning with Pentecost, the Church bore more than mere institutional status. She is not an organization with mystery, but a mystery with organization. St. Paul called the Church “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22). The Church is a dynamic organism, the living body of Jesus Christ. She makes an indelible impact in the world, and those who live in her life and faith are personally transformed.

But the New Testament also reveals that the Church had her share of problems. All was not perfection. Some individuals within the Church even sought to lead her off the path the apostles established, and they had to be dealt with along with the errors they invented. Even whole local communities lapsed on occasion and were called to repentance. The church in Laodicea is a vivid example (Rev. 3:14-22). Discipline was administered for the sake of purity in the Church. But there was growth and maturation, even as the Church was attacked from within and without. The same Spirit who gave her birth gave her power for purity and correction, and she stood strong and grew, eventually invading the whole of the Roman Empire.

The Early Centuries

As the Church moves from the pages of the New Testament and on into the succeeding centuries of her history, her growth and development can be traced in terms of specific categories. The first is a category important for all Christian people: *doctrine*. Did she maintain the truth of God as given by Christ and His Apostles? Second, what about *worship*? Is there a discernible way in which the people of God have offered a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to Him? Third, consider Church *government*. What sort of polity did the Church practice?

1. *Doctrine*: Not only did the Church begin under the teaching of the Apostles, but she was also instructed to “stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle” (2 Thess. 2:15). The Apostle Paul insisted that those matters delivered by him and his fellow apostles, both in person and in the writings that would come to be called the New Testament, be adhered to carefully. Thus followed such appropriate warnings as “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us” (2 Thess. 3:6). The doctrines taught by Christ and His disciples are to be safeguarded by “the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15) and are not open for renegotiation. And the Church was still young when a way had to be found for providing this safeguard.

Midway through the first century, a dispute arose in Antioch over adherence to Old Testament laws. The matter could not be settled there; outside help was needed. The leaders of the Antiochian Church, the community which had earlier dispatched Paul and Barnabas as missionaries, brought the matter to Jerusalem for consideration by the apostles and elders there. The matter was discussed, debated, and a written decision was forthcoming.

James, the brother of the Lord and the first bishop of Jerusalem, put forth the solution to the problem. This settlement, agreed to by all concerned at what is known as the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 11:19-26), set the pattern for the use of church councils in the centuries ahead to settle doctrinal and moral issues that arose. Thus, throughout the history of the Church, we find scores of such councils on various levels to settle matters of dispute and to deal with those who do not adhere to the apostolic faith.

The first three hundred years of Christian history were also marked by the appearance of certain heresies or false teachings such as secret philosophic schemes for the elite (Gnosticism), dazzling prophetic aberrations (Montanism), and grave errors regarding the three Persons of the Trinity (Sabellianism). Then, in the early fourth century, a heresy with potential for Church-wide disruption

appeared, propagated by one Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, Egypt. He denied the eternity of the Son of God, claiming contrary to the apostles' doctrine that the Son was a created being who came into existence at a point in time, and thus was not truly God. This deadly error struck the Church like a cancer. Turmoil spread almost everywhere. The first Church-wide, or Ecumenical Council met in Nicea in A.D. 325 to address this issue. Some 318 bishops, along with many priests, deacons, and laymen rejected the new teaching of Arius and his associates, upholding the apostles' doctrine of Christ, affirming the eternity of the Son and His consubstantiality with the Father. Their proclamation of the apostolic teaching concerning Christ included a creed, which, with the additions concerning the Holy Spirit made in 381 at the Council of Constantinople, forms the document today called the Nicene Creed.

Between the years 325 and 787, seven such Church-wide conclaves were held, meeting in the cities of Nicea; Ephesus, Chalcedon, and Constantinople. Known as the Seven Ecumenical Councils, all dealt first and foremost with some specific challenge to the apostolic teaching about Jesus Christ. The Third Ecumenical Council (431 A.D.), for instance, condemned the Nestorians—those who would divide Christ into two persons, one human and the other divine. The Nestorians were concentrated in Persia and eastward, and when some of the Nestorian bishops would not accept the decision of the Council, the Church experienced the first territorial schism. Evangelistically active, the Nestorians formed communities in Arabia, India, and as far away as China. A remnant still carries on a precarious existence in Kurdistan, Iraq, Syria, and the United States.

Among the issues addressed by the Fourth Ecumenical Council (451 A.D.) was the heresy of the Monophysites, who claimed that there is but one nature in Christ. Some claimed that the two natures in Christ were mingled into one, making Him neither God nor man. Others believed that the divine nature had swallowed up the human nature, and still other Monophysites believed that the Son had left His divine nature behind when He became man. Again, a segment of the church departed with the heretics. The Monophysite church still exists in Syria, Armenia, and Egypt. There is encouraging news, however, for the churches which left after the Council have worked out an agreement with the Orthodox Church, satisfying Orthodox theologians of their doctrinal correctness. Consequently, a break of some 1500 years is on the verge of being healed.

For the first thousand years of Christian history, the entire Church, save for the heretics, embraced and defended the New Testament apostolic faith. There was no consequential division. This one faith, preserved through all trials, attacks and tests, this apostolic doctrine was called “the Orthodox faith.”

2. *Worship*: Doctrinal purity was tenaciously maintained, but true Christianity is far more than adherence to a set of correct beliefs alone. The life of the Church is centrally expressed in her worship and adoration of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus Himself told the woman at the well, “the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him” (John 4:23).

At the Last Supper, Jesus instituted the Eucharist, the communion service, when He took bread and wine, gave a blessing, and said to His disciples, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me” and “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you” (Luke 22:19, 21). The Church participated in communion at least each Lord’s Day (Acts 20:7, 11). From such first and second century sources as the *Didache*, the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch and the writings of St. Justin Martyr, we are assured the Eucharist is the very center of Christian worship from the apostolic era on.

Also, just as the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets were read in the Temple worship and the synagogue in Israel, so the Church also immediately gave high priority to the public reading of Scripture and to preaching in her worship, along with the Eucharistic meal.

Even before the middle of the first century, Christian worship was known by the term liturgy which literally means “the common work” or “the work of the people.” The early liturgy of the Church’s worship was composed of two essential parts: (1) the liturgy of the word, including hymns, Scripture reading, and preaching and (2) the liturgy of the faithful, composed of intercessory prayers, the kiss of peace, and the Eucharist. From virtually the beginning, Christian worship has had a definable shape or form which continues to this day.

Modern Christians advocating freedom from liturgy in worship are sometimes surprised to learn that spontaneity was never the practice in the ancient Church! A basic pattern or shape of Christian worship was observed from the start, and, as the Church grew and matured, liturgy matured as well. Hymns, Scripture readings, and prayers were intertwined in the basic foundation. A clear, purposeful procession through the year was forthcoming, which marked and joined in word, song, and praise the birth, ministry, death, Resurrection, and Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, and sanctified crucial aspects of Christian life and experience. The Christian life was lived in reality in the worship of the Church. Far from being just a boring routine, the ritual worship of the historic Church participated in the unfolding drama of the richness and mystery of the Gospel itself!

Further, specific landmarks in our salvation and walk with Christ were celebrated and sanctified. Baptism and the anointing with oil, or chrismation, were there from the start. Marriage, healing, confession of sin, and ordination to the

ministry of the gospel are other early rites in the Church. On each of these occasions Christians understood that in a great mystery, grace and power from God were being given according to the individual need of each person. The Church saw these events as holy moments in her life and called them mysteries or sacraments.

3. *Government:* No one seriously questions whether the apostles of Christ led the Church at her beginning. They had been given the commission to preach the Gospel (Matt. 28:19, 20) and the authority to forgive or retain sins (John 20:23). Theirs was by no means a preaching-only mission! They built the Church under Christ's headship. To govern it, three definite and permanent offices, as taught in the New Testament, were in evidence.

a. *The office of bishop.* The apostles themselves were the first bishops in the Church. Even before Pentecost, after Judas had turned traitor, Peter declared in applying Psalm 109:8, "Let another take his office" (Acts 1:20). This refers, of course, to the office of bishop. Some have mistakenly argued the office of bishop was a later invention. Quite to the contrary, the apostles were themselves bishops, and they appointed bishops to succeed them to oversee the Church in each locality.

Occasionally, the objection is still heard that the office of bishop and presbyter were originally identical. The terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament while the apostles were present, with a bishop being the presiding elder in a local church. After the apostles' deaths, however, the offices of bishop and presbyter became distinct throughout the Church. Ignatius of Antioch, consecrated bishop by A.D. 70 in the Church from which Paul and Barnabas had been sent out, writes just after the turn of the century that bishops appointed by the apostles, surrounded by their presbyters, were everywhere in the Church.

b. *The office of presbyter.* Elders or presbyters are mentioned very early in the life of the Church in Acts and the Epistles. Evidently in each place a Christian community developed, elders were appointed by the apostles to pastor the people.

As time passed, presbyters were referred to in the short form of the word as "prests," then as "priests," in full view of the fact that the Old Covenant priesthood had been fulfilled in Christ and that the Church is corporately a priesthood of believers. The priest was not understood as an intermediary between God and the people nor as a dispenser of grace. The role of the priest was to be the presence of Christ in the Christian community, and in the very capacity of being the presence of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ, the priest was to safeguard the flock of God.

c. *The office of deacon.* The third order or office in the government of the New

Testament Church was the deacon. At first the apostles fulfilled this office themselves, but with the rapid growth of the Church, seven initial deacons were selected (Acts 6:1-7) to help carry the responsibility of service to those in need. One of these deacons, Stephen, became the first martyr of the Church.

Through the centuries, the deacons have not only served the material needs of the Church but have held a key role in the liturgical life of the Church as well. Often called “the eyes and ears of the bishop,” many deacons have become priests and ultimately entered the episcopal office.

The authority of the bishop, presbyter, and deacon was not anciently understood as being apart from the people but always from among the people. In turn the people of God were called to submit to those who ruled over them (Heb. 13:17), and they were also called to give their agreement to the direction of the leaders for the Church. On a number of occasions in history, that “Amen” was not forthcoming, and the bishops of the Church took note and changed course. Later in history, many Church leaders departed from the ancient model and usurped authority for themselves. In the minds of some, this brought the ancient model into question, but the problem was not in the model. It was in the deviation.

Also it was the ministry of the apostles that brought the people of God together as the laity. Far from being just observers, the laity are vital in the effectiveness of the Church. They are the recipients and active users of the gifts and grace of the Spirit. Each member of the laity has a role in the life and function of the Church. Each is to supply something to the whole (1 Cor. 12:7). The responsibility of the bishops, the priests, and the deacons is to be sure that this is a reality for the laity.

The worship of the Church at the close of its first one thousand years had substantially the same shape from place to place. The doctrine was the same. The whole Church confessed one creed, the same in every place, and had weathered many attacks. The government of the Church was recognisably one everywhere, and this One Church was the Orthodox Church.

Disagreements Between West and East

Tensions began to mount as the first millennium was drawing to a close. While numerous doctrinal, political, economic, and cultural factors were working to separate the Church in an East-West division, two major issues ultimately emerged above others: (1) that one man, the Pope of Rome, considered himself the universal bishop of the Church and (2) the addition of a novel clause to the Church’s creed.

1. *The Papacy:* Among the Twelve, Saint Peter was early acknowledged as the leader. He was spokesman for the Twelve before and after Pentecost. He was the

first bishop of Antioch and later bishop of Rome. No one challenged his role.

After the death of the apostles, as leadership in the Church developed, the bishop of Rome came to be recognized as first in honor, even though all bishops were equals. But after nearly three hundred years, the bishop of Rome slowly began to assume a role of superiority over the others, ultimately claiming to be the only true successor to Peter. The vast majority of the other bishops of the Church never questioned Rome's primacy of honor, but they patently rejected the Roman bishop's claim as the universal head of the Church on earth. This assumption of papal power became one major factor in rending the Roman Church, and all those it could gather with it, from the historic Orthodox Church.

2. *The Addition to the Creed:* A disagreement concerning the Holy Spirit also began to develop in the Church. Does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father? Or does He proceed from the Father and the Son?

Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches, "But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who *proceeds from the Father*, He will testify of Me" (John 15:26). This is the basic statement in the New Testament about the Holy Spirit "proceeding," and it is clear: He "proceeds from the Father." Thus, when the ancient council at Constantinople (A.D. 381) reaffirmed the Creed of Nicea (A.D. 325), it expanded that Creed to proclaim these familiar words: "And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-Giver, Who proceeds from the Father, Who is worshiped and glorified together with the Father and the Son . . ."

Two hundred years later, however, at a local council in Toledo, Spain (A.D. 589), King Reccared declared, "The Holy Spirit also should be confessed by us and taught to proceed from the Father and the Son." The king may have meant well, but he was contradicting Jesus' teaching, confessed by the entire Church, concerning the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, the local Spanish council agreed with his error, and, centuries later, in what was at least partially a politically motivated move, the Pope of Rome unilaterally changed the universal creed of the Church *without* an ecumenical council. Though this change was initially rejected in both east and west even by some of Rome's closest neighboring bishops, the Pope managed to eventually get the West to capitulate. The consequence, of course, in the Western Church has been the tendency to relegate the Holy Spirit to a lesser place than God the Father and God the Son. The change may appear small, but the consequences have proven disastrously immense. This issue, with the Pope departing from the Orthodox doctrine of the Church, became another instrumental cause separating the Roman Church from the historic Orthodox Church, the New Testament Church.

The Great Schism

Conflict between the Roman Pope and the East mounted—especially in the Pope’s dealings with the bishop, or patriarch, of Constantinople. The Pope even went so far as to claim the authority to decide who should be the bishop of Constantinople in marked violation of historical precedent. No longer operating within the government of the New Testament Church, the Pope appeared to be seeking by political means to bring the whole Church under his domination.

Bizarre intrigues followed, one upon the other, as a series of Roman popes pursued this unswerving goal of attempting to control all Christendom. Perhaps the most incredible incident of these political, religious, and even military schemes occurred in the year 1054. A cardinal, sent by the Pope, slapped a document on the altar of the Church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople during the Sunday worship, excommunicating the Patriarch of Constantinople from the Church.

The Pope, of course, had no legitimate right to do this, but the repercussions were staggering. Some dismal chapters of Church history were written during the next decades. The ultimate consequence of the Pope’s action was that the whole Roman Catholic Church ended up divided from the New Testament faith of Orthodox Christianity. The schism has never been healed.

As the centuries passed, conflict continued. Attempts at reunion failed, and the Roman Church drifted farther from its historical roots.

Further Divisions in the West

During the centuries after A.D. 1054, the growing distinction between east and west was becoming indelibly marked in history. The eastern Church maintained the full stream of New Testament faith, worship, and practice—all the while enduring great persecution. The western or Roman Church bogged down in many complex problems. Then, less than five centuries after Rome committed itself to its unilateral alteration of doctrine and practice, another upheaval occurred—this time *inside* the western gates.

Although many in the west had spoken out against Roman domination and practice in earlier years, now a little-known German monk named Martin Luther inadvertently launched an attack against certain Roman Catholic practices which ended up affecting world history. His list of Ninety-Five Theses was nailed to the Church door at Wittenberg in 1517, signaling the start of what came to be called the Protestant Reformation. Luther had intended no break with Rome, but he could not be reconciled to its papal system of government as well as other doctrinal issues. He was excommunicated in 1521, and the door to future unity in the west slammed shut with a resounding crash.

The reforms Luther sought in Germany were soon accompanied by demands of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, John Calvin in Geneva, and hundreds of others all over western Europe. Fueled by complex political, social, and economic factors in addition to the religious problems, the Reformation spread like a raging fire into virtually every nook and cranny of the Roman Church. The ecclesiastical monopoly to which it had grown accustomed was greatly diminished, and massive division replaced unity. The ripple effect of that division impacts even today as the Protestant movement continues to split.

If trouble on the European continent were not trouble enough, the Church of England was in the process of going its own way as well. Henry VIII, amidst his marital problems, replaced the Pope of Rome with himself as head of the Church of England. For only the few short years that Mary was on the throne did the Pope again have ascendancy in England. Elizabeth I returned England to Protestantism, and the English Church would soon experience even more division.

As decade followed decade in the west, the branches of Protestantism continued to divide. There were even branches that insisted they were neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic. All seemed to share a mutual dislike for the Bishop of Rome and the practices of his Church, and most wanted far less centralized forms of leadership. While some, such as the Lutherans and Anglicans, held on to certain forms of liturgy and sacrament, others, such as the Reformed Churches and the even more radical Anabaptists and their descendants, questioned and rejected many biblical ideas of hierarchy, sacrament, historic tradition, thinking they were freeing themselves of only Roman Catholicism. To this day, many sincere, modern, professing Christians will reject even the biblical data that speaks of historic Christian practice, simply because they think such historic practices are “Roman Catholic.” To use the old adage, they threw the baby out with the bathwater without even being aware of it.

Thus, while retaining in varying degrees portions of foundational Christianity, neither Protestantism nor Catholicism can lay historic claim to being the true New Testament Church. In dividing from Orthodox Christianity, Rome forfeited its place in the Church of the New Testament. In the divisions of the Reformation, the Protestants as well-meaning as they might have been—failed to return to the New Testament Church.

The Orthodox Church Today

That original Church, the Church of Peter, Paul, and the apostles—despite persecution political oppression, and desertion on certain of its flanks— miraculously carries on today the same faith and life of the Church of the New Testament. Admittedly, the style of Orthodoxy looks complicated to the modern Protestant

eye, but given a historical understanding of how the Church has progressed, it may be seen that the simple Christ-centered faith of the apostles is fully preserved in its doctrines, practices, services, and even in its architecture.

In Orthodoxy today, as in years gone by, the basics of Christian doctrine, worship, and government are never up for alteration. One cannot be an Orthodox priest, for example, and reject the divinity of Christ, His virgin birth, Resurrection, Ascension into heaven, and Second Coming. The Church simply has not left its course in nearly two thousand years. It is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. It is the New Testament Church.

Orthodoxy is also, in the words of one of her bishops, “the best kept secret in America.” Although there are more than 225 million Orthodox Christians in the world today, many in the west are not familiar with the Church. In North America for example, the Orthodox Church has, until recently, been largely restricted to ethnic boundaries, not spreading much beyond the parishes of the committed immigrants that brought the Church to the shores of this continent.

Still, the Holy Spirit has continued His work, causing new people to discover this Church of the New Testament. People have begun to find Orthodox Christianity through the writings of the early Church Fathers and through the humble witness of contemporary Orthodox Christians. Significant numbers of evangelical Episcopalians, and mainline Protestants are becoming Orthodox, and Orthodox student groups are springing up on campuses worldwide. The word is getting out.

What, then, is the Orthodox Church? It is the first Christian Church in history, the Church founded by the Lord Jesus Christ, described in the pages of the New Testament. Her history can be traced in unbroken continuity all the way back to Christ and His Twelve Apostles.

What is it that’s missing in the non-Orthodox Churches—even the best of them? Fullness. For the fullness of the New Testament faith is to be found only in the New Testament Church. Being in the Church does not guarantee all those in it will take advantage of the fullness of the faith, but that fullness is there for those who do.

For persons who seriously desire the fullness of Orthodox Christianity, action must be taken. Being aware of this ancient Church is not enough. There must be a return to this Church of the New Testament. In our day many people have taken ample time to investigate and decide about the Roman Catholic faith, the Baptist, the Lutheran, and so on, but relatively few have taken a serious look at the Orthodox Church. Three specific suggestions will provide those interested with a tangible means of becoming acquainted with Orthodox Christianity on a personal basis.

1. *Visit:* Look up “Orthodox” or “Eastern Orthodox” in the “Churches” section of the yellow pages or ask a neighbor the whereabouts of the nearest Orthodox parish. Pay a visit—several visits. Meet the priest, and ask him to help you study and learn. And be prepared to exercise patience sometimes a portion of the liturgy is not in English! The Service Book in the pew will help.

2. *Read:* There are a number of books and periodicals immensely helpful to people seeking to learn about the Orthodox Church. *The Orthodox Church* by KALLISTOS (Timothy) Ware (Penguin); *For the Life of the World* by Alexander Schmemmann (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press); *The Apostolic Fathers* edited by Jack N. Sparks (Light and Life Publishers), *Becoming Orthodox* by Peter E. Gillquist, and *Divine Energy* by Jon E. Braun and *AGAIN Magazine* (both by Conciliar Press).

3. *Write:* The people at Conciliar Press (P.O. Box 76, Ben Lomond, CA 95005-0076) have volunteered to answer questions regarding the Orthodox Church from *The Orthodox Study Bible* readers and to suggest further reading. Send your name and address with a request for information.

In a day when Christians are realising anew the centrality and importance of worship, of the Church as the body of Christ, and the need to preserve true Christian faith, the doors of Orthodoxy are open wide. The invitation is extended to “come and see.” Examine her faith, her worship, her history, her commitment to Christ, her love for God the Father, and her communion with the Holy Spirit.

For two thousand years the Orthodox Church has, by God’s mercy, kept the faith delivered to the saints. Within her walls is the fullness of the salvation which was realized when “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).