



The Eastern Orthodox Church

Keeping faith with Christ yesterday, today, and unto the ages

One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism

One God and Father of all



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Most people in America have little or no knowledge of the Orthodox Christian Church. Very often when someone hears of it, they are curious to know about its beliefs and how it differs from Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The following summary may help to answer some of these questions.

The Orthodox Christian Church can clearly trace its roots historically back to the first Church in Jerusalem, where the Church began and the Apostle James was the first bishop. Then, as the Church spread into Antioch, Alexandria and eventually all parts of the world, those who were ordained by the Apostles and their successors continued to spread and guard the Christian faith into the next and succeeding generations, down to the present time. Many of the early successors to the Apostles wrote letters to their flocks, just as the Apostles had done. In these letters, they explain and teach the faith as they received it from the Apostles. These writings can still be read today and include such names as Polycarp, Ignatius, Iraeneus, Clement, Cyril, Athanasius, Basil, and Chrysostom. The Orthodox Church traces its life and teachings from the Apostles, through their successors, to the present day, holding the same Faith unchanged.

The Orthodox Church has given birth to millions of believers through the centuries. It has also offered up millions of martyrs under Idolator Muslim and Communist governments. Over 200 million people, mostly in Russia, Greece and the Balkans, claim to be Orthodox today.

Many people are not aware that for the first 1,000 years of Church history there was only one Christian Church in the entire world holding the same doctrine, the same worship, and the same

way of life and government. The myriad of new and conflicting groups that exist today, all claiming to be the various Churches of Christ, is a modern phenomenon, unknown in the early Church. For those first 1,000 years, the Church was simply known as the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. The word Orthodox was added later to distinguish those who continued to hold the Apostolic Faith unchanged from those who were introducing changes yet still calling themselves the Christian Church. The word Orthodox means true teaching and true worship – the glory of the Church.

Likewise, many are not aware that all the questions and debates about what the Christian Faith is or isn't, and what the Church should or shouldn't believe and teach, and how the Bible should or shouldn't be interpreted have already been decided by the Church in the first 1,000 years. When questions and debates arose about various beliefs, the Church's bishops, the successors to the Apostles, gathered in councils to clarify what the Church had received from the Apostles and held from the beginning. The first such council is recorded already in the fifteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles and is known as the Council of Jerusalem. This became the pattern for resolving debates and questions. Over the next several hundred years there were seven such major or worldwide councils and numerous local councils that clarified and explained the true and correct understanding of the Christian Faith. From these councils came the Christian understanding of the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, the determination of which books to include in the New Testament, and many other clarifications and explanations of the Orthodox Christian Faith.

Christ the Savior taught that He would build His Church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. He also told His disciples that the Holy Spirit would guide the Church into all truth. Because of faith in the promises of Christ, Orthodox Christians believe that the Church which Christ established has been preserved

Here then is a brief summary of the Orthodox Faith and some of what distinguishes it from others groups. The Orthodox Church believes that its teachings are best perceived and known through its worship. The ancient Liturgy and Divine Services of the early Church are followed, and it is in these services that the Faith of the Church is proclaimed and experienced. The Divine Liturgy is patterned after the worship that God revealed to Israel of old but substitutes the reality of Christ in the place of the ancient symbols and types. This same pattern of worship is described in the ninth chapter of *Saint Paul's letter to the Hebrews* as an earthly pattern of the heavenly worship. We also get glimpses of this same worship taking place around the throne of God in the *Revelation of Saint John*. . . The Church believes that in her worship she enters into and worships in one Faith and one Spirit with all the faithful on earth and with the saints and angels in heaven. Through the worship of the Church, Orthodox Christians experience Life and Truth as the Body of Christ and enter into union with the Holy Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Orthodox Christians understand their Faith to be much more than just an ancient creed or ancient tradition. It is understood to be the Way or path of salvation for sinners who hunger and thirst for Life and Righteousness and desire union with God. The Church is understood to be the Kingdom of God on earth that leads to eternal life.



in unity by the Holy Spirit down through the centuries and will exist to the end of time among those who hold the Apostolic doctrine, worship, and way of life unchanged.

But today there are about as many different understandings and interpretations of the Bible and the Christian Faith as there are people. From Martin Luther, to Charles Finney, to Alexander Campbell, to Joseph Smith, to Benny Hinn and countless others, with new ones appearing everyday, there are thousands of different interpretations of the Bible. Because of individual interpretations, there are also thousands of different groups and denominations. Each one claims to be the Church of Christ, to follow nothing but the Bible, and to be led by the same Holy Spirit even though they hold different and conflicting beliefs. We know this cannot be true since the Holy Spirit does not contradict Himself, and, according to the Bible itself, there is only one Christian Faith and one Christian Church just as there is only one true God. Someone has jokingly but correctly quipped, “The Reformation rejected the pope but ended up making as many popes as there are individuals.”

In the final analysis our own personal beliefs and interpretations about the Christian Faith matter very little. One may be as good or as bad as another. What is important is what the Church has always taught and held unchanged from the beginning to the present.

The Church has always taught that truth is not determined by individual opinions or by “private interpretations” (II Peter 1:20) but by that truth which the Holy Spirit established through the Apostles that has been preserved and handed down through the Church unchanged in each succeeding generation to the present day. The Bible calls this the “Faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) and tells us to hold fast to the Apostolic Tradition that has been handed down, both spoken and written (II Thess. 2:15). To allow for numerous different Christian Faiths and numerous private interpretations is to render the Christian Faith relative and uncertain. To reduce the truth to just one or a few beliefs would mean that

much of what Christ and the Apostles taught is of little or no value or importance, as would be their teachings about the Church, how we are saved, and how we are to work out our salvation within the Church. Furthermore, it would ignore the teachings of Christ Himself who told His Apostles to make disciples by “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20).

From the earliest recorded history of the Church, we see that the beliefs of the Church were set forth in creeds or statements of faith (creed simply means “I believe”) in order to clarify the teachings and make it easy for people to understand and remember. The major and universal creed of the Church was hammered out by the first two Ecumenical (worldwide) Councils at Nicea in A.D. 325 and at Constantinople A.D. 381, by some of the same bishops who also determined and confirmed which books would be included in the New Testament. The Nicene Creed was in response to those who taught things about Christ and the Holy Spirit that were contrary to the Apostolic Teachings. The Nicene Creed acted as a fence to guard the True Faith of the Church and provides a brief summary of the teachings of the Orthodox Christian Church.

THE NICENE CREED

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and of all things, visible and invisible.

The Creed sets forth the Faith of the Church in the one true God revealed through the Prophets and Apostles as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God in three Persons, one in essence, unconfused and undivided – a profound mystery. In particular this first article of the Creed confesses God the Father as the Godhead of the Holy Trinity, Who is the creator and source of all things, visible and invisible. In this article, the Church rejects any idea of the possibility of any other God, or that the world is the result of blind fate or evolutionary chance without divine creation, order, and purpose.

In Protestantism today, being a Christian is seen mostly as a born again experience based on personal feelings. The focus of this faith is primarily on the death of Christ as a substitute for man’s sins. Almost everything else is relegated to a secondary position.

In the Church, the faith of the individual is personal but also corporate. It cannot be separated from the Church as the Body of Christ, and its focus is the entire Gospel or Faith of Christ encompassing all that Christ was, is, and all that He did and taught. All of this is necessary and related to our salvation since salvation is not viewed simply as a legal declaration of pardon but as the redemption of the whole person through union with the Holy Trinity in the Body of Christ – the Church.

In the Orthodox Church salvation is not a one-time event but a lifelong process. The Church teaches that we *have been saved* in our Baptism, we *are being saved* in our daily walk, and we *will be saved* at the last day if we hold fast our profession of faith to the end.

The Orthodox Church believes that the unity of the Faith is preserved through the succession of bishops who hold and pass on the same Faith they received, going all the way back to the Apostles. This succession of the same Faith is essential for the Church’s existence and for the continuing grace of the Holy Spirit from one generation to the next. It is not only an historical succession but also a spiritual succession of the same Faith and Life – the Life of the Holy Spirit. Each Orthodox Christian is accountable to a Spiritual Father. All the clergy are accountable to their bishop. Each bishop is accountable to the Synods and Councils of the Church and to all the people as the Body of Christ. Thus, the Church throughout the world holds the same Faith, follows the same worship, way of life, and government under Orthodox bishops, or else it is not Orthodox, even if it bears the name Orthodox. Orthodoxy is not a denomination or mere organization but the Body of Christ united in the same Faith by the Holy Spirit under faithful shepherds or bishops.

Apostolic times including its way of worship, its way of life, and its government. The third main deviation of the Reformation was the teaching that man is saved by Grace alone, through Faith alone. The Orthodox Church teaches that we are saved by Grace but not without the cooperation of the human will, without which, the Grace of God is received in vain. The Church also understands Grace, not as a mere legal pronouncement of forgiveness, but as the transforming Life of the Holy Spirit within.

The Church would agree that the Bible teaches that man is saved by faith, but nowhere does it say “faith alone” as though faith can exist in isolation from love and obedience. (Martin Luther added the word “alone” in his German translation of Romans 3:28 but the original Greek simply says “by faith” and does not include the word “alone”.) The only place where the words “faith alone” are used is in the Epistle of St. James where he writes that we are not saved by “faith alone”: “Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well; the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith alone” (James 3:19-24). It is no wonder that Martin Luther called the book of James an “epistle of straw” and considered removing it from the New Testament. The Reformers made a sharp distinction and separation between faith and works and justification and sanctification, teaching that works and obedience contribute nothing to our salvation. The Church does not make this sharp separation but teaches that faith and works, and justification and sanctification are different sides of the same coin, so to speak, and all are necessary to salvation. The Church teaches that the faith that saves is a faith that works and obeys through love and can never stand alone as a mere belief, knowledge, or intellectual assent. The Orthodox Church does not consider obedience or works to be meritorious but essential to faith and thus to salvation.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-Begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages; Light of Light, true God of true God; begotten, not made; being of one essence with the Father; by Whom all things were made.

Some began to teach that Christ was not fully and truly God but a creation of God the Father. The Church used the words of this article to leave no doubt as to the Church’s teaching that Christ is begotten, not made, and eternally exists as the second person of the Holy Trinity. He is of the same essence as God the Father, and with the Father and the Holy Spirit created all things in the beginning.

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from the Heavens, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man.

In this article the meaning and nature of Christ’s mission to earth is confessed. He came to save or rescue humanity from sin, death, and the devil. God the eternal WORD became incarnate, i.e., took on human flesh and became truly and fully man in order to partake of our nature, bear our sins, and destroy death so that we could become partakers of His divine and eternal nature. The Incarnation was the result of the conception by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Thus, Christ is confessed to be the God-Man. He is God by the Holy Spirit, and man by the flesh of Mary. Anything less than this God-Man cannot be our Savior. The Church honors the Virgin Mary as one who is “blessed among women” because she bore God in the flesh. The Church does not worship her as God but venerates her as the first of the Redeemed and the example of how we must receive Christ in humility, faith, and obedience in order for Him to be born in us. Holding firmly to the Virgin Birth, the Church calls Mary by the Greek term Theotokos, meaning God-bearer, and in this way guards the teaching that the Christ born in the flesh of the Virgin was and is truly God enfleshed or incarnate.

And was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried.

Here the historical reality of Christ is confessed. The Church teaches that Christ is not just a nice story but that He really existed in time and place as recorded in the Gospels and as confirmed also in secular history. Furthermore, he died a real death. He truly died and was buried, having suffered on the Cross as the Lamb of God. In Him our sins were nailed to the Cross, and humanity and all of creation was redeemed. By this love and mercy He draws us to be reconciled with God the Father and makes it possible for us to be reunited with God both now and in eternity. In the Orthodox Faith, this is the essence of the meaning of the Incarnation and our salvation.

And arose again on the third day according to the Scriptures.

The Church believes in a real bodily resurrection. As man, Christ died. As God, Christ's body did not suffer corruption in the grave but arose by His own will and power on the third day, opening heaven for humanity. Through union with Christ's death and resurrection, we have the hope of resurrection to eternal life. As the Church chants many times each year at Pascha (the Feast of the Resurrection), Christ is risen from the dead, by death hath He trampled down death, and on those in the graves hath He bestowed life.

And ascended into the Heavens, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father.

The Church teaches that Christ, in His glorified and resurrected body, ascended back to the right hand of God the Father where He reigns as our Mediator and High Priest. As God, He is omnipresent and therefore is never absent from His Church on earth, even as He reigns in the Heavens.

And shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead; Whose Kingdom shall have no end.

The problem is that there is no such thing as Scripture alone; it is always Scripture plus someone's interpretation. In the end, all the Protestant groups simply replaced the Roman tradition with the teachings of their leader or the tradition of their denomination. In the end, the choice is not between tradition or no tradition, but between the ancient and unchanging Holy and Apostolic Tradition of the Church or modern and newly invented traditions of men that change with cultures, fashions, fads, and people

The Church existed for almost three hundred years before the content of the New Testament, as we know it today, was fully decided. It existed by the teachings of the Apostolic Tradition passed from generation to generation, some of which had been written in the Gospels and the Epistles. Many writings were being circulated at that time, all claiming to be Apostolic Gospels and Epistles. Some were, but some were not. It was not until the fourth century that the bishops of the Church assembled in council and determined which books to include in the New Testament. It was based on the Holy Tradition that had existed in the Church from the beginning. Those Gospels and Epistles that agreed with this Tradition were included in the New Testament and those that didn't were excluded. The Church honors and venerates the Scriptures as the inspired word of God but believes the Church came first, before the Scriptures. The Church was created by the Holy Spirit and was based on the oral Apostolic Tradition, a part of which became the New Testament. The Church determined the content of the New Testament based on that oral tradition that already existed. The Reformers eventually came to teach that the Bible gave birth to the Church and was the sole determiner of the Church's beliefs. In the Orthodox Faith, the Bible is a major part of the Church's Holy Tradition but is not viewed as an unabridged manual of the Christian Faith. The Gospels and Epistles were not written with this intention, nor has this ever been the teaching of the Church. The Church holds to a vast treasury of written and oral tradition that has been preserved and passed down from

The main deviations that have grown out of the Protestant Reformation are the teachings that each individual can hold his own private interpretation of the Bible and the Christian Faith, and the doctrines of Scripture alone, Grace alone, and Faith alone.

The first deviation, the right of individual interpretation where each one decides for himself how to interpret the Bible and what to believe, gave birth to hundreds of new denominations with conflicting beliefs and the idea that the Christian Faith is relative, uncertain, or unknown rather than absolute. In effect, each individual became a little pope with sovereign authority, and the unity of one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, and one Church was eventually lost in Protestantism. The Orthodox Church teaches that the interpretation of the Bible and the Christian Faith must be derived from the Church, the pillar and ground of truth (I Tim. 3:15), as it has been handed down from the beginning.

The second main deviation, the teaching of Scripture alone, was a rejection of the man-made traditions that had crept into Rome. But instead of making the Biblical distinction between human tradition and the Apostolic or God-given Tradition, the Reformers eventually rejected all tradition as having any validity for the content of the Christian faith. While holding to Scripture alone, they failed to abide by the teaching of Scripture itself that we must hold fast to both the recorded and unrecorded Apostolic Tradition (II Thess. 2:15). It is interesting to note that in some modern translations of Scripture, such as the NIV, when the Greek word for tradition is used here in a positive way to encourage us to follow and hold the Apostolic Tradition, the translators change the word to read “teachings” rather than “traditions.” But where the Greek word for traditions refers to the bad or wrong traditions of man, i.e., traditions of the Pharisees, the translators used the word “traditions”. This is an obvious example of how Scripture can be used to make it agree with the translator’s personal “tradition.”

The Church teaches that Christ will come again at the end of this age, at a time known only to God, and that everyone will stand before Him to be judged. Those who have been united to His death and resurrection will enter eternal life; those who have rejected His Mercy and lived in opposition to it will suffer the eternal pain and consequence of sin.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life; Who proceedeth from the Father; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; Who spake by the Prophets.

The Church teaches that the Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Holy Trinity Who proceeds from the Father and is also worshipped and glorified as God. As the Lord and Giver of life, the Holy Spirit creates and sanctifies (makes holy) the Body of Christ – the Church, through the means God has appointed.

In One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

The Church teaches in accordance with Holy Scripture that there is one Church or Body of Christ. This Church is understood not merely as an invisible or hoped for dream but as something that is real, visible, and present wherever the Apostolic Faith is held and lived. This one Church is made holy by its union with Christ. It is Catholic, meaning the Church possesses the fullness of the Faith in all places and at all times. It is Apostolic, in that the Church holds the Apostolic Faith and is one in Spirit, truth, and life with the Church throughout the ages and the Church in Heaven. The bond of love with the Church in heaven moves us to ask for their intercessions, even as we ask members of the Church on earth to pray for us. We believe that the saints in heaven continually behold the face of God and intercede for the Church on earth.

I confess one baptism for the remission of sins.

The Church teaches that we are made members of the Body of Christ by the New Birth in the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit given in Holy Baptism by triple immer-

sion. Since Baptism is God's gift of grace to us rather than our work, obedience, or mere profession of faith, this gift of grace is given also to infants. After Baptism, the Gift of the Holy Spirit is given in the Church through Divine Anointing even as it was done at the hands of the Apostles in the Acts of the Apostles. This Divine life and union with God is then nourished and maintained in the Church through a personal love, faith, and participation in repentance, Confession, and the Eucharist, together with a struggle to overcome sin and to acquire the virtues of being like Christ through prayer, fasting, and good works. The Church believes that the Eucharist is the true Body and Blood of Christ given for the forgiveness and healing of sins and for union with Christ's death and resurrection.

I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come.

Here the Church confesses Her faith and hope in the eternal promises that Christ has given to His Church – the outcome of our union with Him in His Church.

As can be seen from this summary of the Creed, various Christian denominations hold much in common with the Orthodox Church but differ in many important ways. In addition to what has already been summarized, here are some further explanations of these differences.

The Orthodox Church does not make a distinction between the Orthodox Faith and the Christian Faith, believing them to be one and the same. The Church does not make a separation between Christ and the Church, believing that the Church is the Body of Christ, that Christ is the Head of the Body, and the two cannot be separated.

The Orthodox Church does not consider itself to be one of many denominations but rather the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ. This is not a statement of pride but a confession of faith and an historical reality. The Church does not make judgments about the eternal destiny of anyone since God

alone knows and judges the heart of each individual. The Church does, however, make judgments about truth and error, as the Apostles and the Church have done from the beginning. For the first 1,000 years of Church history, there were five major centers of Christianity: Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople and Rome. The first four were in the East, Rome was in the West. In the year 1054, after many years of conflict and growing apart, the bishop of Rome parted ways with the remaining bishops in the East; thus, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. All the bishops of the East rejected the papal teaching that the Pope was the head of the Church on earth. The Church had always held that each bishop presides only in his own diocese, that no one bishop can rule over all the other bishops, and that Christ alone is the head of the Church.

The Church at Rome also changed some of the words and meaning of the Nicene Creed. The Eastern Church said the teachings of the Church cannot be changed. Over the years, the bishop of Rome introduced numerous other changes and alterations to the Faith including adding the doctrines of the infallibility of the pope, the immaculate conception, the merit of works and indulgences for salvation, purgatory and others. Rome was greatly affected by the Western philosophical systems of rationalism and scholasticism introduced by Aquinas, Anselm, Augustine, and others, resulting in a different understanding about the Church and the doctrine of salvation, itself.

Some five hundred years after Rome's break with the East, Martin Luther, a German monk, rebelled against many of Rome's abuses. But instead of returning to the Orthodox Faith that had never changed, he gave birth to the Protestant Reformation that also introduced numerous other changes to the Apostolic Faith. The Lutheran Reformers did communicate with the Orthodox Church at the time but then decided to follow their own interpretations of Scripture.