

Worshipping the Undivided Trinity: An Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy

Written by Robert Miclean

Week 1: *What the Orthodox Church is and what it is not: An Introduction to both the Orthodox Church and this course, answering basic questions.*

Welcome...

Prayer...

Our story of the Orthodox Church begins in the book of Matthew with the Great Commission, in which Jesus says to His disciples (minus Judas), “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’” (Matt. 28:18-20).

Jesus founded His Church, the Orthodox Church, by His Apostles. The Orthodox have always believed that there was and is ONE Church. This is what all Christians once believed. Denominationalism is to the Orthodox a *western* problem, a problem that stems from the Roman Catholic separation from the Church in the East, that is, the Orthodox. How can the Church, which is Christ’s Body, be divided?

The Church was founded by Christ to be an *organism*—the living Body of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This Church that He founded was to be both a visible and invisible reality, a channel of grace and healing, linking heaven and earth, bringing the love, grace, and Truth of God to shed forth its light in this world. And this transmission of God’s grace and power, which Christ entrusted to the Church that He Himself founded, would be accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost.

And so, according to this early Christian and Orthodox belief, when we read in Acts, chapter 2, the description of the life of the first church, we are really reading the history of the Orthodox Church: “*And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in (the) prayers*” (Acts 2:42). The Orthodox Church has been there since the beginning as a spiritual hospital for this sin-sick world, which God loves and wishes to redeem more than anything else. As St. Paul writes to the Ephesians, “Christ loved the Church, and gave Himself up for it” (Eph. 5:25).

The word “Orthodox” is not a *name* as such as much as it is a distinction. The Orthodox have no concept of denominationalism, as I have noted, but simply see themselves as the Church that was there since the beginning, which has kept the Faith for these 2,000 years *in spite of* heresies, schisms, and all that the forces of evil could devise against Christ’s Church (show timeline).

Well, what does ‘Orthodox’ mean then, you might be asking? The word, “Orthodox” comes from the Greek words “Ortho-doxa,” which literally means “right glory,” that is, “right worship.” The Orthodox were those early Christians who, from the beginning of the Church, upheld the Apostolic teaching against those who, on their own, wanted to take the Church into schism or heresy. Thus, the Orthodox are those Christians who upheld the “right teaching,” the interpretation of the Gospel and Apostolic Faith, which they had inherited from those who came before them beginning at the founding of the Church by Christ and His Apostles. The Orthodox Christians are those who did not stray from the Apostolic Faith, but kept it and passed it on to others, in keeping with the Great Commission.

In this course, as we hear the story of the Orthodox Church, we’ll uncover the schemes of some of the major heresies that threatened the Apostolic Faith. This is important because it is in the face of error and heresy that the Church came to articulate many of the doctrines that define the Christian Faith.

Some common truths about the Orthodox Church—what it is and what it is not:

1. ‘Orthodox’: Are they Jewish? No, not exactly. The fact is though that Orthodox *Christians* are the inheritors of those Jews who followed the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus the Christ. It is true that the earliest Orthodox Christians were Jewish, after all, JESUS was a Jew as were His Apostles. And the first bishops and missionaries of the Church Christ founded were also Jews.

In this sense, the association with Judaism is more accurate than inaccurate. If we are going to strive to understand the faith and worship of the Orthodox Church, we have to start with Judaism. Arguably, without Judaism we cannot otherwise understand Christianity. For at its heart, Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism because Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Law. *He* is the culmination of the promise of God’s Covenantal promises to Israel. We must always keep before us in our hearts and minds the truth that Jesus came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). Apropos, the first Christians did not see themselves as distinct from Judaism, but rather as *the faithful in the midst of Judaism*—those who had accepted the Anointed One, the long-awaited Messiah—Jesus.

2. Orthodox worship is ethereal. There seem to be two polls present in many churches today when it comes to music—one adheres to hymns, music and a format that dates back a couple hundred years and another is contemporary and seeks to incorporate the current cultural fads into worship.

But Orthodox worship is *neither* contemporary nor ‘traditional’, but rather eternal. For 2,000 years the Orthodox have been worshipping God in continuity with their ancestors in the Church and yet Orthodox worship appears timeless. There is something truly heavenly about Orthodox worship. And once one gets over the initial shock of its difference from western modes of worship—be they Roman Catholic or Protestant—the worshipper comes to be drawn up into this heavenly worship. For the Orthodox, this

ethereal, heavenly worship is not just sentiment but theology. The Orthodox truly believe and are assured by the Holy Scriptures and the practice of the Church through the centuries that when we worship, we join our voices with the Angels and Saints in praise of the one True God, the undivided Trinity. The icons of Christ, His Mother, the Saints, the Archangels, all surround us and remind us that they are cheering us on, both in our worship as well as in our daily effort to live for Christ.

It's with this understanding that the Orthodox sing in the Divine Liturgy (the Eucharistic liturgy of the Church) the so-called Cherubic Hymn: "*We who mystically represent the Cherubim, and sing to the life-giving Trinity the thrice-holy hymn, let us now lay aside all earthly care: that we may receive the King of all, who comes invisibly upborne by the Angelic Hosts.*"

This is also in continuity with Old Testament Temple worship in Israel. Remember the vision of Isaiah in the Temple? "*I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!'" (Is. 6:1-3).*

This is the same God who inspired Moses to spend six chapters (Ex. 25-31) on the vestments, furnishings, and artifacts of Yahwistic worship, clearly demonstrating His concern to enjoin the physical and spiritual symbolism involved in worshipping God "in Spirit and in truth" (John 4:23). The "how" of worship is not *adiaphora*, or things "indifferent" to God. In the Temple, for instance, all the pieces of furniture, such as the altar, the golden lamp stands, the table with the Bread of the Presence, the altar of incense and the ark were *laden* with symbolic and real meaning since each depicted some aspect of Israel's encounter with God. Nothing in the Temple furniture or layout was "randomly selected or haphazardly placed."¹ God is not indifferent when it comes to how we worship Him.

God was present in His temple. And Orthodox Christians in the first century and today believe that Christ is present in the Eucharistic worship of His Church, feeding us with His mystical Body and Blood. In the Orthodox Church today, we continue to use candles and incense as well as icons and frescoes, which were used in the first centuries of the Church. In the Orthodox Church we use all our senses to worship the holy God of the universe.

So, like our Old Covenant Jewish forebears, it is the Orthodox belief that spiritual symbols, such as icons, the cross, candles, incense can all be channels of God's presence and grace. They remind us of the reality of our salvation in Jesus Christ and life in the Holy Trinity, of things that have been and of things that are yet to be (show picture of inside of an Orthodox Church).

¹ Robert Webber, *Worship Old and New*, p. 26.

The early third-century writing called *The Apostolic Tradition* of St. Hippolytus provides further evidence of the Jewish continuity in early Christian worship. His liturgical rites are heavily laden with Paschal themes. The “sealing” of the body at confirmation, for instance, is linked with Jewish circumcision as the “seal” of the Old Covenant.²

This practice of “sealing” the catechumen with holy oil is still practiced in the Orthodox Church today in direct continuity with the 1st century Orthodox Church and the Church’s roots in Judaism and the Abrahamic Covenant. At the Sacrament of Chrismation (or confirmation), which follows Baptism or, in the case of converts to Orthodoxy, is the rite of initiation, in many places the people all acclaim, “SEAL” as the priest anoints the neophyte, the one new Orthodox brother or sister.

Not only is Orthodox worship in continuity with Old Testament Jewish Temple worship, but it is also in continuity with the image of worship in heaven. St. John is caught up to heaven in the Spirit in the midst of the liturgical worship of heaven in which the Lord appeared to him “in the midst of the seven lampstands” (Rev. 1:13). And St. John says that “the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel’s hand,” as we read in Revelation 8:4.

3. We are ‘Catholic’ but not Roman Catholic. In the beginning, the Church was one; that is, there was ONE universal Church. All Christians belonged to this ONE Church. Schism was considered just as serious a **sin** as heresy. Either way, it meant departing from the Truth of God’s revelation and salvation that was the same for all who wished to follow the way of Christ.

It was the conviction of the early Church that the same Holy Spirit that fell upon the Apostles and believers at Pentecost also inspired the formation of the Trinitarian doctrine of the Church and the formation of the Nicene Creed in the 4th century and the Canonization of the Holy Scriptures, which you may be surprised to hear did not occur until the 4th century also. We’ll talk about the development of the Canon of Holy Scripture next week.

Suffice it to say, over time, the Roman Church began to separate from the Eastern Church in worship and beliefs. The Orthodox allowed clergy to marry; Rome did not. The Orthodox used leaven bread at the Eucharist; Rome did not. Rome then made more serious doctrinal changes. Rome changed the wording of the Creed—and did so independent of the Church that was still present in the lands where the Church was first founded and where the ancient Faith was still being faithfully proclaimed.

Rome then began to demand unilateral domination over the whole Church—in West *and* East. While accepting all the doctrinal canons of the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451, Rome refused Constantinople second place among the Patriarchates of the Church and refused to recognize Jerusalem. But Constantinople was then capitol of the Eastern

² The Rev. Gregory Dix, *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome* (SPCK: London, 1968), p. xl.

Roman Empire and the most influential Patriarchate of the East—the others being Antioch and Alexandria in Egypt.

The unilateral claims did not stop there. The Pope proclaimed himself “infallible.” In the early Church and up through the 9th century, controversies concerning Faith and Doctrine were decided in council—just as God had worked since the beginning and as we read in Acts 15 regarding the Council of Jerusalem, which met in 49 A.D to decide whether Gentile converts to Christianity had to be circumcised or not. But now, Rome was making unilateral decisions and enforcing them on the whole Church. Rome thought of Christ primarily as Victim; Orthodox thought of Christ as Victor (as manifested in the differences in crucifixes).

In this and many other ways, Rome and the Orthodox faithful in the East began to grow more and more separate in Faith and Worship. In 1054 what is now called the Great Schism occurred, in which both halves of what had been the one Church excommunicated each other.

As Rome continued to stray from the Orthodox Faith, the abuses of the Roman Church culminated in what came to be called the “Protestant Reformation.” Significantly, the Eastern Church, that is, the Orthodox Church has never had to have a Reformation. Indeed, though Orthodoxy was little known in the West at that time for obvious geographical reasons (show map), some of the reformers saw in the Orthodox Church much of what was missing in the Medieval Roman Church. If the Orthodox Church had been in places in the West, the history of the Protestant Reformation may have gone very differently. Indeed, many Protestants are discovering Orthodoxy today now that the Church is present and growing almost everywhere in the West.

As it was, the descendants of the Reformation, such as John Wesley, took great interest in the Orthodox Fathers of the Eastern Church. From them Wesley learned that the goal of the Christian life, of living for Christ, was to be more and more transformed into the image of Christ and growth in holiness. We’ll meet some of these Church Fathers from the first centuries of the Church in the weeks to come.