

GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH OF THE ASSUMPTION

Studies in the Faith

The Eastern & Western Churches



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CHURCH
OF THE
ASSUMPTION**

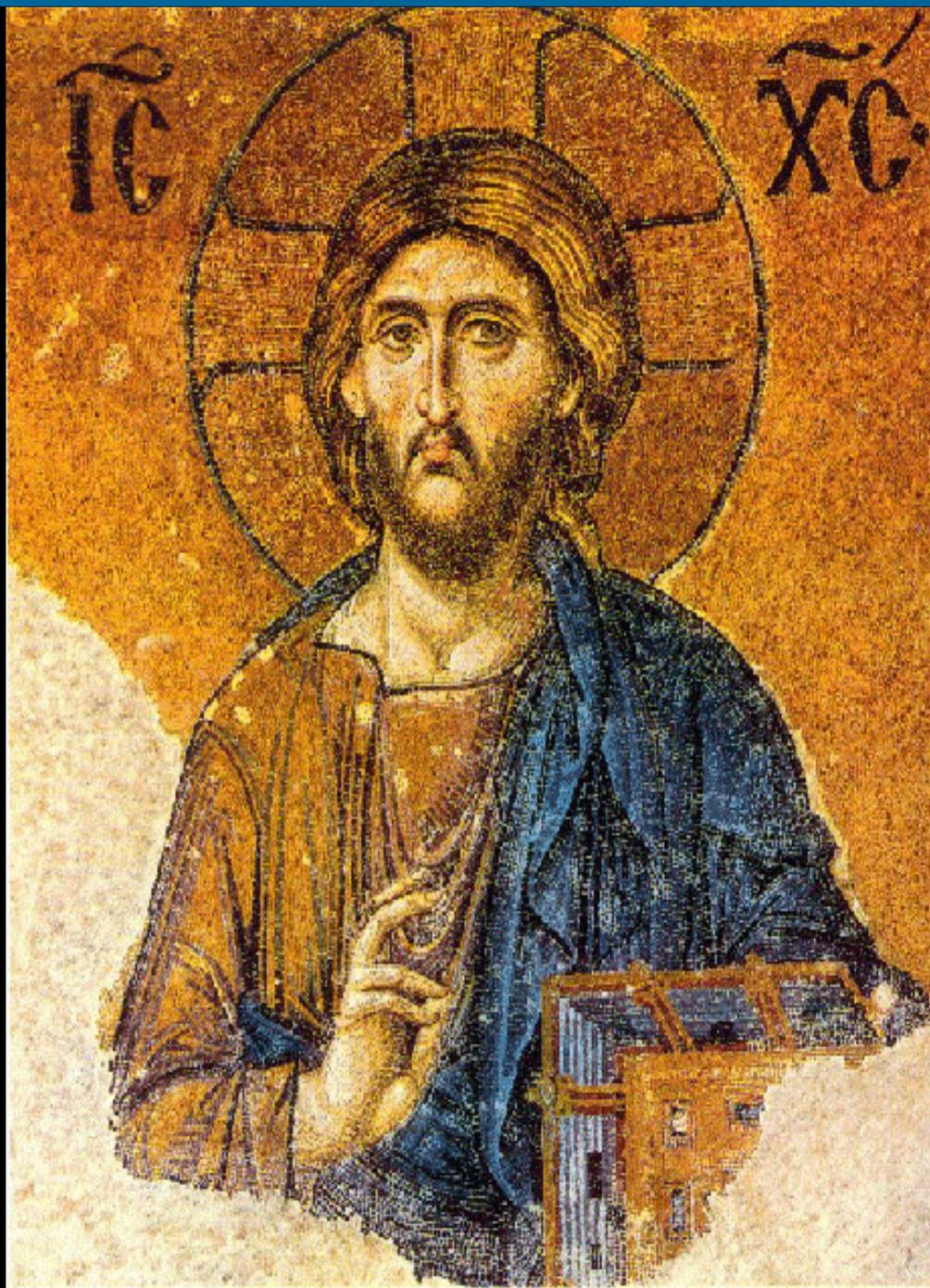
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PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY: AN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE

WHAT IS PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY?

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church." For the first one thousand years Christianity was united in faith, worship, and leadership. Then in A.D. 1054 this unity was shattered in the Great Schism of 1054 when Cardinal Humbert and the papal legates placed the bull of excommunication upon the altar of Hagia Sophia. After the Great Schism of 1054 the patriarchate of Rome became formally separated from the other four patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. Then 500 years later disaster struck again when Martin Luther in 1517 posted his 95 Theses on the doors of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany sparking the Protestant Reformation that was to divide Western Christianity into Roman Catholic and Protestant camps. (It is important to keep in mind that with the Great Schism the Church did not split in two but rather the Church of Rome broke off from the one holy catholic and apostolic Church and went its own way. There has always been one Church; it has never been divided into two halves or into many fragments.)

The term "Protestant" comes from the Reformers protesting against the abuses and excesses of medieval Catholicism. The rallying cry of the Protestants was: sola gratia (grace alone), sola fide (faith alone), sola scriptura (scripture alone). Each of them separately and together comprised an attack on the theological and sacramental system of the Roman Catholic Church. It is important to keep in mind that what the Protestant Reformers were reacting against was not the Church of the Seven Ecumenical Councils but against post - A.D. 1054 medieval Roman Catholicism which added significantly to Holy Tradition. To put it simplistically, where Roman Catholicism committed the sin of adding to Holy Tradition, Protestantism committed the sin of subtracting from Holy Tradition.

Early Protestantism can be divided into four groups: Lutheran, Reformed (Calvinist), Zwinglian, and Radical Anabaptist. Over the next several centuries these groups would splinter off into new denominations (1600s – Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers; 1700s – Methodists, Moravians, New England Puritans, 1800s – Southern Baptists, Plymouth Brethren, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventists, Churches of Christ, Holiness Churches, Nazarene Churches; 1900s – the Assemblies of God, Four Square Churches, Calvary Chapel, seeker-friendly churches > Willow Creek).

As an example of this, all you have to do is look at the religion section of the Saturday newspaper and see a smorgasbord of religious options. If a non-Christian were to look for a church which one would they choose?

PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS

One of the striking aspects of Protestant Christianity is the bewildering diversity of Protestant denominations and diversity even within denominations. Protestant denominations can vary according to (1) theological beliefs, (2) worship styles, (3) church government, (4) spiritual experience, and (5) morality.

Theological Beliefs: Protestants vary from theological liberals who question the deity of Christ, the Bible as divine revelation, the Virgin Birth of Christ, the historicity of the Christ's resurrection, and Christ's second coming to theological conservatives who believe in all of the above.

Worship Styles: Protestants vary from the liturgical worship of the Lutherans and Episcopalians, to the sermon centered worship of the majority of most Protestant churches, to the exuberant worship of

the Pentecostals.

Church Government: There are three major polities: episcopal, which is hierarchical and gives one person authority over the churches in the area, Presbyterian which is collegial and gives a group of elders authority over the churches in the area, and congregational which is independent and gives the denomination little or no authority over the local parish in matters of faith and practice.

Spiritual Experience: Where the mainline denominations tend not to emphasize individual experience of conversion to Christ, the Baptists, Evangelicals, and Fundamentalists stress the "born-again" experience as necessary for being saved. Where the Baptists, Evangelicals and Fundamentalists stress "salvation" as a one-time event, the Pentecostals stress "salvation" as a two-step process, accepting Christ followed by the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the sign of speaking in tongues.

Morality: Conservatives and liberals differ strongly over moral issues like: abortion, homosexuality, homosexual marriages, sex outside of marriage, euthanasia. Among the conservative Protestants there are differences of opinion as to whether it is right to smoke, drink alcohol, engage in dancing, go to movies or wear make-up.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PROTESTANTISM AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY?

On the denominational spectrum, the Episcopalians and Lutherans are probably the closest to the Orthodox Church: they recite the Nicene Creed and they celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday. The Baptists on the other hand are on the opposite end of the spectrum, they shudder when they hear the word 'creed and celebrate 'the ordinance of the Lord's Supper' at most only once a month or even as infrequently as four times a year. The Pentecostals and charismatics emphasize spontaneous 'Spirit led' worship as opposed to the formality of liturgical worship in the Orthodox Church. The 'seeker friendly' churches emphasize making the church accessible to the un-churched which means stripping the Sunday worship service of traditional religious symbols and terminology and encouraging people to come dressed casually.

WHAT DO PROTESTANTS THINK ABOUT ORTHODOXY?

Most Protestants don't even know that Orthodoxy even exist except as an exotic branch of Christianity overseas. At a recent leadership class sponsored by New Hope Christian Fellowship (the newest and fastest growing church in Hawaii), the class was surprised to learn that there exists in Hawaii an Orthodox church.

However the few Protestants who have visited Orthodox services have been overwhelmed by the strong ethnic flavor of the Orthodox parishes. This leaves the impression that Orthodoxy is for the Greeks or Russians but not for them. Or they may think that Orthodox worship is "dead" because it is liturgical, e.g., doesn't use spontaneous prayers, or contemporary music, or have sermons half an hour long.

HOW SHOULD ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS RELATE TO PROTESTANTS?

The important thing is relating to the person you're with, not their denominational label. In the case of Protestantism, denominational affiliation are almost useless. Your Protestant friend can be a theological conservative who belongs to the liberal United Church of Christ, or they can be an exuberant charismatic who belongs to the liturgical Episcopal Church, or they can be a liberal thinking Baptist.



➔ In relating to Protestants the important thing is to build bridges, not walls. By building bridges we can encourage dialogue and understanding between Protestants and Orthodoxy. Think of Protestants as long lost relatives who haven't yet discovered their family roots.

A word of advice: If your Protestant friend is satisfied with their religion don't push Orthodoxy but let your life be a witness to them. However if your Protestant friend seems to be unhappy or dissatisfied with their current situation consider inviting them to check out Orthodoxy. However be ready to answer their questions. Be ready to help them deal with the culture shock.

If Orthodoxy is indeed what it claims to be: the one holy catholic and apostolic Church then we need to bear witness to this reality. A vibrant Orthodox witness to Protestants depends on two things: (1) a healthy and strong Orthodox life (fervent participation in the Liturgy) and (2) a good grasp of Holy Tradition (especially the Scriptures).

In closing: The major difference is that where Orthodoxy claims to have the fullness of the faith as received from the apostles, Protestantism claims to have a Bible based faith. Thus, Protestantism tends towards minimalism asking: What is the minimum that is needed for me to be saved?, Orthodoxy tends towards maximalism asking: How can I love God with my whole heart, soul, mind and body?

PROTESTANTISM AND ORTHODOXY: A COMPARISON

JESUS CHRIST

O *rthodoxy*: Jesus Christ is the center of Orthodox faith and worship. He is "very God of very God" and of "one essence with the Father". He is the Lord, the *Pantocrator* (the all ruling one), and the Savior of the world. All Scriptures bear witness to Jesus Christ the Son of God. The Ecumenical Councils with the guidance of the Holy Spirit officially defined the correct understanding of who Jesus is and condemned as heresy false teachings about Christ.

Protestantism: Conservative Protestants will adhere to the Christology of the Nicene Creed. Liberal Protestants will reject orthodox Christology for more a "contemporary" understanding, i.e., Jesus as an enlightened being, the historical Jesus who lies behind the "Christ" of the creeds and the New Testament, the Christ event, the radical who challenged the structures of power. Radicals will go so far as to replace Christ with "Christa" a female Christ.

THE BIBLE

Orthodoxy: The Bible is the divinely inspired, inerrant and authoritative Word of God. The Bible is an integral part of Holy Tradition. Because the Bible is God's gift to the Church, its proper place is in the Church, especially in the Liturgy. The Holy Spirit who inspired the Bible also guides the Church in its interpretation of Scripture (John 16:13, Ephesians 4:11-13). The Bible cannot be understood apart from Tradition, but must be understood within the context of Tradition.

Protestantism: Conservative Protestants will affirm the Bible to be the divinely inspired, inerrant and authoritative Word of God but disavow the Bible as an integral part of Holy Tradition. Liberal Protestants will favor a more critical understanding of Bible making use of contemporary science and biblical scholarship. In the clash between fundamentalists and modernists, the extreme conservatives have tended to ignore the historical and human aspects of Scripture and depict the Bible as a divine book that dropped out of heaven, whereas the liberals have tended to reinterpret the Bible in the light of superior wisdom of modern science and question the veracity and the historicity of Scripture.

THE GOSPEL OF SALVATION

Orthodoxy: Orthodoxy emphasizes that God is Light and Life and that God created humanity to live in fellowship, i.e., in communion, with him. However when Adam and Eve turned away from God, they rejected him who is Light and Life and "fell" into sin, death and darkness. Orthodoxy emphasizes that sin, suffering, and death are the natural consequences of life apart from God. To save us God sent his Son to be incarnate of the Virgin Mary, to become a partaker of the human nature, and to be the New Adam. By the totality of his human existence: his birth, life, death, descent into hell, his resurrection, and his ascension into heaven, Jesus "summed up" the story of human existence or rewrote the story that went so wrong in Adam and Eve. The good news is that whoever turn away from their sins and put their trust in Jesus Christ, that is, accept him as their Lord and Savior, will be reinstated as children of God, just as the prodigal is welcomed home by his ever loving and ever waiting father. For Orthodoxy baptism is the means by which one turns away from sin and Satan, enters into a covenantal relationship with Christ, and "puts on Christ" becoming a child of God. Through the Eucharist we fulfill our highest calling to worship God and we enter into union with God as we feed on Christ's body and blood. We are once again children of God living in him who is Light and Life, and sharers in the divine nature (II Peter 1:4).

Protestantism: Protestants, like Roman Catholics, tend to understand salvation in legal terms: law, guilt, punishment, and acquittal. Western Christianity emphasizes that God is a holy God and that our fellowship with him depends on our keeping God's law. However when Adam and Eve turned away from God by breaking God's commandments, the legal punishments were put into effect. In other words sin, suffering, and death are understood as punishments imposed upon those who break God's laws. To save us God sent his Son to die on the cross as an atoning sacrifice paying the price for the sins of humanity. The good news is that whoever puts their faith in Jesus Christ will have their sins forgiven and be granted the right to fellowship with God in heaven. Among the Evangelicals baptism is the sign of one's faith in Christ and Holy Communion is the symbolic reminder of what Christ did for us on the cross.

THE CHURCH

Orthodoxy: Basic premise: The Church has never changed – the Church established by Jesus Christ has never changed in its theology, worship, and leadership. The Eastern Orthodox Church is the "one holy catholic and apostolic Church" confessed in the Nicene Creed. It is the same Church as the early Church. It is the Orthodox Church because it has kept Holy Tradition without change.

Protestantism: Basic premise: The Church needs to be reformed, i.e., brought back to its biblical and apostolic roots. The Church started out fine then went astray with Roman Catholicism. With the Protestant Reformation we have the return of the "true" Church. Many also believe that the "true church" is the invisible church comprised of all true believers in Christ". American Protestantism understands the church to be a voluntary association of like-minded believers. If you happen to disagree with your church's theology, you should go and find another church that is more compatible with your beliefs, or one that better meets your needs. There is no one true Church (with a capital "C") here on earth, it only exists in heaven.

TRADITION

Orthodoxy: Holy Tradition, with a capital "T", is the *package* that makes up the Christian Faith. It is the sacred deposit we have received from the Apostles of Jesus Christ: the Gospel message, the New Testament writings, the Liturgy, the Sacraments, the Episcopacy, the icons etc. To be an Orthodox Christian is to humbly *receive* Holy Tradition as it has been taught by the Apostles and their →

➔ successors the bishops, to vigilantly *guard* Holy Tradition against innovation and heresy, and to enthusiastically *transmit* Holy Tradition to the next generation.

Protestantism: "Tradition is a notoriously bad master, but it can be a useful servant," back cover of F.F. Bruce's *Tradition: Old and New*. Tradition is seen as something added on top of Scripture. Tradition is at best a useful supplement, or irrelevant trivia, or harmful deviation away from the Bible. Tradition has a negative connotation among Protestants because of its origins in the fight against Roman Catholicism in the 1500s. When Protestants think of Tradition they think of Roman Catholic teachings on the supremacy and infallibility of the Pope, purgatory, transubstantiation, the bodily assumption of Mary.

THE SACRAMENTS

Orthodoxy: There are seven sacraments: Baptism, Chrismation, Holy Communion, Confession, Ordination, Marriage, and Holy Unction. The sacraments are more than symbolic rituals - something actually happens in the sacrament!

Protestantism: There are two sacraments: Baptism and Holy Communion. The power of the sacraments lies not in the sacraments themselves but in the Word of God present in the sacrament. A sacrament is an outward sign of an inward grace – it is a sign of that grace but does not necessarily impart that grace.

BAPTISM

Orthodoxy: Baptism is the means by which we become Christians, very much like how taking the oath of allegiance makes an immigrant a citizen of the United States. Baptism is the sacrament by which we are joined to Christ. In baptism we put off the old man and put on the new man which is in Christ. Through baptism we renounce Satan and accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. The Orthodox Church baptizes infants and adult converts.

Protestantism: Many Protestants especially Baptists and Fundamentalists see baptism as a symbol of one's faith in Christ. They would say that baptism is not necessary for salvation (only faith in Christ is necessary for salvation). Where the mainline Protestants accept the practice of infant baptism, the Baptists, Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, and Charismatics reject infant baptism and insist of people being baptized again because the original baptism was done when they had no understanding of what was happening.

HOLY COMMUNION

Orthodoxy: For Orthodoxy Holy Communion or the Eucharist is the Sacrament of sacraments. It lies at the heart of Christian faith and worship. In the Eucharist we receive Christ's body and blood and are united to him. The Eucharist is celebrated at every Sunday Liturgy. It is the climax of our worship.

Protestantism: Among Protestants there are a whole range of beliefs and practices. The Episcopal Church and the Lutheran Church celebrates it every Sunday. Others celebrate it on the first Sunday of the month, some only celebrate it four times a year. Some believe in some kind of real presence, others see it as a symbolic reminder of what Christ did for us on the cross. ■ **June 28, 1999 - Robert K. Arakaki**

ORTHODOXY AND THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

- I. Amongst all the Churches, it is with the Roman Catholic Church that we have the most common ground. There are, of course, doctrinal and canonical issues which need to be addressed, primarily the papal claims of infallibility, the issue of the *Filioque*, Purgatory and the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary.
- II. There is also a difference in approach to Theology. The west is very scholastic, almost legalistic from an Orthodox perspective. Sometimes, the Catholic Church sees our approach to theology as somewhat vague and ill-defined.
- III. There are also psychological barriers. Within this past century, for example, Catholics and Orthodox have confronted each other in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Croatia, Yugoslavia and the Ukraine, undergoing violence and even death at each other's hands and unfortunately some of these conflicts still continue. Most recently, with the fall of the Iron Curtain in Russia, the Catholic Church sent bishops into Russia to proselytize the Orthodox there.
- IV. Since Vatican II, many positive events have happened. In January 1964 Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras held a historic meeting at Jerusalem. This was the first occasion on which a Pope and an Ecumenical Patriarch has met face to face since the council of Florence in 1438. On December 7, 1965 the anathemas of 1054 were solemnly revoked at simultaneous ceremonies, in Rome by the Vatican Council and in Constantinople by the Holy Synod. This was, of course, a goodwill gesture only as communion has not been restored between the two churches, however the value of this symbolic gesture should not be underestimated.



- V. For us as Orthodox, the most problematic issue is the issue of Papal infallibility. We as Orthodox cannot accept the definitions of the First Vatican council of 1870, concerning the infallibility and the supreme universal jurisdiction of the Roman Pope. The Orthodox Church recognizes that in the early centuries of the Church, Rome was pre-eminent in its steadfast witness to the true faith; but we do not believe that, in his teaching ministry, the Pope possesses a special charisma or gift of grace that is not granted to his →

→ fellow bishops. We recognize him as first, but only as first among equals. He is the elder brother, the president of the synod, not the supreme ruler. The early Church was hierarchical but synodical, not hierarchical and monarchical. Hence we cannot concede to the Catholic Dogma of the supremacy of the Pope.



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