

# Orthodoxy

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## ⚓ 1 Orthodox Christianity

### ⚓ 1.1 What Does “Orthodox” Mean?

The word Orthodox is derived from two Greek words: *orthos*, meaning “right, correct or true” and *doxa*, meaning “glory, honor, praise, worship”. It is generally used in the sense of “right worship”, but also means the “right teaching or doctrine”. That is because both these things are very closely connected. The term “orthodox” was used to show the difference between the right teaching of the early Christian Church instituted by the Apostles of Jesus Christ, and the heretical, or heterodox, new teachings introduced in later centuries.

Today, an astonishing number of religious groups, organizations and churches claim to be the successors of the early Church. But which church is the true successor? To answer this question, we need to compare what the Church originally believed and practised with what these groups and organizations proclaim.

According to Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), the orthodox person “is not the one who introduces new dogmas into the Church of God, but the one who possesses a life in accordance with the true faith”.

There is a living connection between the true faith and the right way of life. As Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow said,

*The Creed does not belong to you unless you have lived it.*

Others agree:

*For perfection of life the imitation of Christ is necessary. (Basil the Great +379, On the Spirit, Chapter XV)*

*Theology without action (praxis) is the theology of demons. (Maximus the Confessor, +662)*

## ‡1.2 What Does “Christian” Mean?

The word Christian comes from the Greek *christianos*. This is what the disciples were called in the beginning (Acts 11:26), because they were the followers of Christ and they lived according to his commandments.

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.  
(John 15:10-14)

Nowadays it is generally accepted in the so-called “Orthodox countries” that almost everyone considers himself to be a Christian; only very few reject this title. For instance, in Russia the majority of people are members of the “Orthodox Church”. In Bulgaria and Romania most of the inhabitants consider themselves to be Orthodox and only a few declare themselves officially to be non-Christians. Are all of them really Christians? How would they have been regarded by the apostles, who always emphasized that if somebody claimed to be a follower of Christ he had to live according to His example?

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practise the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:6-7)

Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. (1 John 2:4-6)

Contrary to Jesus' teaching, the institutionalized “Orthodox Church” accepts as its members people of whom they know very well that they very seldom attend the liturgy, who lead a worldly life and do not deal with spiritual things. Its official teaching is that Christ lives in these people because they have been baptized. But Jesus said:

And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:38-39)

Jesus answered him, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” (John 14:23)

Justin Martyr wrote:

*Those who are found not living as he taught should know that they are not really Christians, even if his teachings are on their lips, for he said that not those who merely profess but those who also do the works will be saved (cf. Matthew 13:42, 43; 7:15,16,19). (The First Apology of Justin, ch. 16)*

## ‡1.3 How Does Someone Become a Christian?

### ‡1.3.1 Are You a Christian Because You Have Been Baptized?

Let us read how Basil the Great understood baptism:

*Baptism symbolically signifies the putting off of the works of the flesh; as the apostle says, you were circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; buried with him in baptism. Baptism is not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience towards God. So in training us for the life that follows on the resurrection the Lord sets out all the manner of life required by the Gospel, laying down for us the law of gentleness, of endurance of wrong, of freedom from the defilement that comes of the love of pleasure, and from covetousness, to the end that we may of set purpose win beforehand and achieve all that the life to come of its inherent nature possesses. (On the Spirit, Chapter XV)*

*For as we believe in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, so are we also baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; first comes the confession, introducing us to salvation, and baptism follows, setting the seal upon our assent. (Chapter XII)*

The whole Bible speaks of a personal faith. A person can only be saved through his own faith. Baptism has its role and importance in Christianity. Nevertheless, the Bible points out clearly that baptism is of value only when it is accompanied by faith. This faith is manifested through submission to God's words.

But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John.... (Acts 8:12-14)

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:41)

So it is absurd to think that children will be saved through the evidence given by their godfather at their baptism. Moreover, in reality, in most cases the godfather does not lead a Christian life. How can he then guarantee that he will guide the child spiritually? How can he give testimony for the child's faith when his own faith is dead?

Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit. (*Matthew 15:14*)

### ‡ 1.3.2 Are You a Christian Because You Are a Good Person and You Try to Keep the Ten Commandments and You Do Not Harm Others?

Another popular idea is that you are Christian if you are a good person and try to keep the Ten Commandments, without harming anybody else.

To gain the right understanding we have to consider Jesus' words:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (*John 13:34-35*)

At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. (*1 John 2:8-11*)

To be a Christian it is not sufficient to avoid doing evil. Jesus showed us what it means to love actively and to devote ourselves to others.

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. (*1 John 3:14-18*)

We are not living in the Old Testament era any more. Through Jesus we have entered into a new spiritual era in which much more is required of us because the revelation we have received is greater. Keeping the Ten Commandments was a central requirement of the Law. Nevertheless, the Old Testament itself shows that real obedience goes beyond merely keeping the Ten Commandments (Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:17-18, Romans 13:10-12, Mark 12:28-34). How much more, then, does the New Testament require of us! Therefore, keeping the Ten Commandments is not enough—rather through the Holy Spirit we can grow in the knowledge and practice of what is good. The standard set by Jesus goes beyond evil and requires us to consciously pursue what is good.

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. (*James 4:17*)

Many passive members of the "Orthodox Church" set themselves different standards to live by according to their own desires; these standards are in turn accepted by the church. What Jesus revealed is that the aim

of a Christian is not to attain to a minimum level of Christianity in his life, but to strive for holiness.

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. (*Hebrews 12:14*)

*Those who profess to be Christ's will be recognized by their actions. For what matters is not a momentary act of professing, but being persistently motivated by faith. (The Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians, ch. 14:2)*

### ‡1.3.3 Many People Are Eager to Perform Formal Religious Activities, but Is That What Being a Christian Really Means?

Formal religious activities can ease a person's conscience: going to church, saying learned prayers, lighting candles, making the sign of the cross, venerating icons. These practices are performed by some people out of habit and by others out of conviction. Is this the way Jesus showed us to express our love for God and for other people? The Church which Paul describes in his letters is far from being a building where people come and go without saying a word to the others.

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. (*1 Corinthians 14:26*)

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (*Colossians 3:12-17*)

Seeking the spiritual edification of others is the worship desired by God and the fulfillment of Jesus' commandment.

### ‡1.3.4 Is Faith Alone Enough?

James says:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled", without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish

person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. (*James 2:14-26*)

Clement of Rome wrote in The Letter to the Church of Corinth:

*And we, therefore...are not justified of ourselves or by our wisdom or insight or religious devotion or the holy deeds we have done from the heart, but by that faith by which almighty God has justified all men from the very beginning. (ch. 32:4)*

*We should clothe ourselves with concord, being humble, self-controlled, far removed from all gossiping and slandering, and justified by our deeds, not by words. (ch. 30:3)*

According to Augustine:

*Without love faith can indeed exist, but can be of no avail. (Augustin, De Trin. XV 18, 32)*

Origen wrote:

*It is those who not only believe, but also enter upon the life that Jesus taught. (Origen: Against Celsus, Bk. III, ch. XXVIII)*

Cyprian (d. 258) did not consider it possible to have faith in Christ without doing what he commanded:

*How can a man say that he believes in Christ, if he does not do what Christ commanded him to do? From where will he attain the reward of faith, if he will not keep the faith of the commandment?...He will make no advancement in his walk toward salvation, for he does not keep the truth of the way of salvation. (The Treatises of Cyprian, Treatise I, ch. II)*

*...and every prophet who teacheth the truth, if he do not what he teacheth is a false prophet. (The Didache 11,10, English Translation by Charles H. Hoole)*

## ⚓ 2 Orthodox Tradition

### ⚓ 2.1 Where Can We Find the Orthodox Tradition of the Apostles and Early Church Fathers?

The Church's claim to Orthodoxy derives from the conviction that it has received the faith of the Apostles, as contained in the Apostolic Tradition, as interpreted by the consensus of early fathers in the councils, and as lived by the true Church throughout the ages, without change or interpolation.

According to the Orthodox teaching the main criteria for the right tradition are:

- It must not contain contradictions to the Apostolic Tradition, the Holy Scripture and itself.
- It must have been accepted and kept by the apostolic churches.

- It must be accepted by the majority of the early church fathers and teachers.

If any tradition does not fulfil these criteria it cannot be right therefore it cannot be admitted and kept.

Thus, a faithful Orthodox believer must thoroughly check every teaching according to these principles and accept only what really belongs to the Apostolic tradition, as the first Christians did:

Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. (*Acts 17:11*)

We will now address some examples of important teachings of the “Orthodox Church” which do not adhere to the above mentioned criteria concerning the right tradition.

## ✠ 2.2 The Veneration of Icons

The veneration of icons lacks any biblical or ancient Christian support before the year 300, which means that someone who defends icon veneration must assume that this practice is based on the simple faith and the unwritten tradition of the church and especially on the liturgy. In this way the authority of their “Holy Tradition” supersedes the authority of the Bible and constitutes the basis for the existence of icons. It appears that Church practice is more important for them than what the Bible says. Jesus said:

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (*John 4:23-24*)

God is spirit; that is why Jesus says that we can only truly worship the Father in spirit and truth. Our worship is very closely related to our practical life. God’s nature is holiness and righteousness. Similarly, we ourselves are called to strive to be changed into his likeness (into the likeness of his character). This requires wholehearted devotion to God till the end of our lives.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (*2 Corinthians 3:18*)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (*Romans 12:1-2*)

Moreover, the cult of icons is clear evidence of having a false understanding of God’s nature. Some of the icons depict the Trinity as an old man, a young man and a dove. God’s being surpasses anything that is created. He is Spirit, therefore we cannot put him into a form—not even in our mind—since through this we would limit him to our human understanding.

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! (*1 Kings 8:27*)

Among all the icons, Andrei Rublev's icon of the Holy Trinity represents the climax of how far one can go in the wrong direction. Although the icon is kept in the State Tretyakov gallery in Moscow rather than in an "Orthodox Church", we find reproductions of this icon in many places. The painter—a Russian monk from the fifteenth century who is venerated as a saint by the Russian "Orthodox Church"—wanted to depict the mystery of the Holy Trinity by illustrating the narrative in Genesis (chapter 18) where three angels visit Abraham. In the painting there are three men with wings sitting around a table.

But there is a great difference between what Abraham experienced from God while speaking with the angels, and what Jesus revealed to us in his person and through the Holy Spirit, about God, the Trinity. We cannot say that God revealed himself to Abraham as the Trinity in the persons of the three angels.

No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (*John 1:18*)

The Bible calls Jesus "the image (Greek: *eikon*) of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15), because He revealed God. It does not mean that Jesus revealed to us the material body of the Father, because there is no such thing. His revelation was a spiritual one, he revealed HIM to us.

...he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen. (*1 Timothy 6:15-16*)

*It is true, indeed, that the Divine beauty is not adorned with any shape or endowment of form, by any beauty of colour, but is contemplated as excellence in unspeakable bliss. As then painters transfer human forms to their pictures by the means of certain colours, laying on their copy the proper and corresponding tints, so that the beauty of the original may be accurately transferred to the likeness, so I would have you understand that our Maker also, painting the portrait to resemble His own beauty, by the addition of virtues, as it were with colours, shows in us His own sovereignty: and manifold and varied are the tints, so to say, by which His true form is portrayed: not red, or white, or the blending of these, whatever it may be called, nor a touch of black that paints the eyebrow and the eye, and shades, by some combination, the depressions in the figure, and all such arts which the hands of painters contrive, but instead of these, purity, freedom from passion, blessedness, alienation from all evil, and all those attributes of the like kind which help to form in men the likeness of God: with such hues as these did the Maker of His own image mark our nature. And if you were to examine the other points also by which the Divine beauty is expressed, you will find that to them too the likeness in the image which we present is perfectly preserved. The Godhead is mind and word: for "in the beginning was the Word" and the followers of Paul "have the mind of Christ" which "speaks" in them: humanity too is not far removed from these: you see in yourself word and understanding, an imitation of the very Mind and Word. Again, God is love, and the fount of love: for this the great John declares, that "love is of God," and "God is love": the Fashioner of our nature has made this to be our feature too: for "hereby," He says, "shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye love one another": -thus, if this be absent, the whole stamp of the likeness is transformed. (Gregory of Nazians, On the Making of Man, ch.V, 1-2)*

Jesus said to Thomas:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.” (*John 14:6-11*)

Is there a contradiction between these passages? On the one hand, no one can see the Father, while on the other hand, Jesus showed us the Father. He must, then, be referring to a different kind of seeing. The passages point to the fact that believers can see God, through faith, in a spiritual way. This seeing was mediated by Jesus who reflected the Father’s nature by revealing his love. He did not mean that through his physical form we can see the Father, but his words and his whole life were in accordance with the Father’s will; Jesus’ devotion reflected God’s unconditional love for people. Christians “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ...So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (*Romans 10:14,17*)

That is why those who followed Jesus endeavoured to hand down what they heard from him—and this has been faithfully preserved in the New Testament—without ever making any reference to his appearance.

Jesus promised salvation to those who believe in his words; he did not speak about his face. The Bible strongly emphasizes faith in contrast to sight.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ...By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. (*Hebrews 11:1,3*)

Jesus said to Thomas:

Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. (*John 20:29*)

The condition of being saved which Jesus spoke of points out what real faith in God means—that is listening to his words and putting them into practice.

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life. (*John 5:24*)

Many Orthodox people have icons in their houses, but few of them read and know the Bible, and even fewer practise what is written in it.

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:12)

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:17-18)

## ✠2.3 Veneration of Mary

Similarly to the veneration of icons, the veneration of Mary and of the saints stand at the centre of “Orthodox Church” practice and represent one of the central issues in salvation, despite the fact that the historical evidence from the first four centuries remains silent on this matter. There is no written record of prayers being addressed to Mary, nor any mention of her protective power or that Christians sought her help. Her role is rather seen within the overall plan of God’s salvation. Outside of the gospels Mary is only mentioned once by Paul in Galatians 4:4—and the attention given to her by early apostolic writers was similar.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. (Galatians 4:4-5)

In God’s plan of salvation emphasis is not placed on the means by which God incarnated, but rather what this means for mankind.

For more details on this subject see our article about [Mary](#).

The Orthodox tradition traces icons of Mary back to Luke, who is considered to be the first person to paint an icon of Mary. This, they claim, gives Marian iconography its apostolic authority. However, there are no examples of icons painted by Luke which have survived and there are no known copies of the Theotokos of Vladimir older than the tenth century. [1] Thus, the idea that the icons of Mary are supported by apostolic authority is discredited.

Historically, the development of the cult of the icon of Mary coincided with the rise of the cult of saints and their icons.

## ✠2.4 Veneration of Saints

Although the hierarchical position of the saints is perceived to be lower than Mary’s, they nevertheless occupy a significant place within Orthodox theology and worship, particularly in regard to the use of icons. Little attention was given to the saints in the first centuries of Christianity. Despite this fact, the saints play a significant role in Orthodox worship today. Their dogmatic and ecclesiastical value was affirmed by the Council of Nicaea (787) which declared their role as intercessors next to Mary.

*Whoever does not confess that all the saints who pleased God, those before the law as well as those under grace, are worthy to be praised; whoever does not pray to the saints as to*

*those who want to mediate for people according to the tradition of the church should be anathematized. (VIIth Ecumenical Council—Nicaea 787)*

Was this really the tradition of the apostles and of the Church in the first centuries? Who are the saints to whom Paul addressed his letters? For instance in Philippians 1:1 he writes:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, TO ALL THE SAINTS in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons....

and there are many other similar passages such as 1 Corinthians 1:2, Romans 1:7 and others.

The answer is obvious; they are Christians who are contemporaries of Paul. As a matter of fact, sanctification (or being holy) is a condition for being called a Christian.

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:14-16)

Yes, it is true that there are Christians who are more obedient, but this does not entitle them to be venerated by other believers who are less obedient. And neither the apostles nor angels accepted worship—they clearly rejected all such attempts:

When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." (Acts 10:25-26)

When the people from Lystra wanted to worship Paul and Barnabas, they rejected it strictly, saying:

Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. (Acts 14:15)

Even the angel rejected John's worship:

Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God." For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. (Revelation 19:10)

God alone is to be worshipped!

Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'" (Matthew 4:10)

God does not need any other mediators; Jesus is the only mediator.

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5)

His mediatorship does not mean that a person cannot turn directly to the Father for help or salvation, but that he urged people to look for God, he showed them the way to him. It was God's plan that man should

have a relationship with him and that people can turn directly to him. God is merciful towards those who seek him with an open heart and he listens to their prayers. He alone is almighty and can intervene in a person's life. Furthermore, not even saints can do anything after their death for those who are on the earth, as is visible from the parable of poor Lazarus and Abraham:

And he said, "Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment." But Abraham said, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." And he said, "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead." (*Luke 16:27-31*)

In the Old Testament it was clear for the Jews that no-one, not even their greatest fathers, could help them after their death, but God alone:

For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name. (*Isaiah 63:16*)

## ⚓3 The Orthodox Church

### ⚓3.1 Which Church Is the Successor of the Apostolic Church?

Which Church follows the traditions of the Apostles? Many claim to, but who is right? We want to draw a parallel from the time of Jesus. When Jesus came and tried to uncover the sinful life of the Jews, the Pharisees wanted to kill him. They were very convinced of their truth that they kept the law and held to the right traditions, because they were Abraham's descendants.

They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house for ever; the son remains for ever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father."

They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did." They said to him, "We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not

believe me? Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God." (*John 8:33-47*)

Similarly, it is of no value if somebody can show historical continuity without having continuity in the way of life and spiritual content.

The uninterrupted apostolic succession of the Church is obviously disproved by the differences between the Church in the first century and today's "Orthodox Church". These differences are evident for anybody who reads the Bible and wants to practise Christianity as the apostles and the first Christians did:

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (*Acts 2:41-47*)

Can we see any resemblance between the today's "Orthodox Church" and these first Christians?

In another article you can read more about [the New Testament Church](#).

### ⚓ 3.2 Formalism and Rituals

Another important point to note is that already in the Old Testament God rejected formalism very strictly:

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?" says the Lord; "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause." (*Isaiah 1:10-17*)

The rituals have changed, but what Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees is still valid nowadays for those who perform some formal practices but do not practise justice and mercy and faithfulness:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides,

straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. (*Matthew 23:23-26*)

Irenaeus says concerning the Church:

*Nor does she perform anything by means of angelic invocations, or by incantations, or by any other wicked curious art; but, directing her prayers to the Lord, who made all things, in a pure, sincere, and straightforward spirit, and calling upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.... [2]*

## ✚ 4 Conclusion

So which church is really the Orthodox Church? Obviously not the one bearing this name, which in reality neither keeps the “orthodox teaching” of Christ and of the Apostles nor practises the “orthodox worship” of God which is pleasing to him. As we explained above, Jesus Christ never wanted people to perform formal religious practices, separated from their everyday life, but He wanted his disciples to follow his way of life:

And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (*Luke 9:23*)

This way of life is the worship which is pleasing to God; this is really what glorifies God—not carrying out some rituals without changing one’s life. Consequently, God builds his Orthodox Church not through a man-made institution but through his disciples, his followers, who devote their lives completely to him.

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### Footnotes

1. Ouspensky, *Theology*, pp. 60-62.
2. [Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book II, chapter XXXII,5.](#)

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