

For Protestants

Some Information about Orthodoxy for Protestants

Over the past 35 years or so, there has been somewhat of a surge of Protestants converting to the Orthodox Faith. In the process of converting, there are usually some common themes in a prospective convert's concerns. In this article, we will look at some of the most typical areas of misunderstanding or some of the most common questions Protestants usually have for the Orthodox Church. Specifically, we will briefly cover:

1. How are Orthodoxy and Catholicism different?
2. What is the place of the Bible in the Orthodox Church?
3. Why do Orthodox worship the way they do?
4. How does the Orthodox Church understand salvation?
5. Do Orthodox worship Mary?
6. Why do you pray to the Saints?
7. What's with all the icons?
8. Why call your Priest "Father"?
9. Where can I learn more?

1. How are Orthodoxy and Catholicism different?

While it is not uncommon for some people to describe the Orthodox Church as "Catholicism without the Pope," this description goes well beyond being simply superficial. In fact, Orthodoxy and Catholicism differ not only in areas of administration and doctrine but in the very essence of their understanding of Jesus Christ, His Church, and His relationship with man.

Before getting into this more essential difference, let's just list the basic outward differences in administration, doctrine, and practice:

1. Catholicism believes in Papal supremacy (the Pope is the Bishop over the entire Church) whereas Orthodoxy views all Bishops as equal and practices a conciliar model (that is, the Church is governed through councils, as modeled in Acts 15).
2. Catholicism believes that the Pope is infallible in matters of faith; Orthodoxy accepts no single man as infallible except for Christ.
3. Catholicism believes in a place called Purgatory which the Orthodox reject.
4. Catholicism teaches the Immaculate Conception (that is, that Mary was born without Original Sin), while the Orthodox Church does not accept this.
5. Catholicism teaches the *filioque*, that is, the belief that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*, while the Orthodox Church teaches that the Father is the only Godhead and thus the Holy Spirit proceeds only from Him, while proceeding *through the Son*.

6. Roman Catholicism believes in the development of doctrine... that is, that the revelation to the Church is granted more and more over time. The Orthodox Church believes that fullness of the Faith was given to the Apostles on Pentecost, though this fullness can be described or expressed in different ways as time goes on.

To this list could be added dozens upon dozens of other differences, ranging from the very significant to the far more minor, including the fact that Orthodox Priests can be married and usually have beards.

All of these differences, however, cause Orthodoxy and Catholicism to simply appear to be simply two options of very similar Faiths. The reality, however, is that the differences run much deeper, causing the Churches to have very different “feels” and vastly different expressions of their Faith.

For the Orthodox Christian, there is a great emphasis on being *transfigured in Christ*. What does this mean? This means being emptied of one’s own will and ego, the “man of sin” within us dying, and seeking to have Christ dwell within us so that His light, emanating from our hearts, *deifies* – that is, makes God-like – *all* within us, body and soul. We seek to become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) or “joint-heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17). These are shocking statements! These mean that all that God is by nature, man will become by Grace. How does this happen?

Jesus taught us: “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:34-35).

Orthodoxy does not teach a moralistic way of life or a simply ethical system. This isn’t about “being a good person.” It is about being holy, and that can only occur if Christ dwells within us. Orthodox Christianity is often called a “mystical branch” of Christianity, but the insider perspective doesn’t see anything particularly “mystical” about Orthodoxy. This is simply how Christians are supposed to live. We live as if with one foot already in Heaven.

Roman Catholicism has, over the years, focused more and more on the ethical standards of Christian living and the authority of the Church; Orthodoxy focuses more on the transfiguration of the whole person and on the *freedom to be transfigured* that is brought about in the Church, not the outward structure. We see this especially in monasticism where, in Orthodoxy, there are no different “orders.” In Orthodox monasticism – even when a monastery has a special calling to run an orphanage or hospital or anything else – the *main* focus is always the same: to engage in the Christian practices of prayer, fasting, worship, humility, and love with the goal of increasing more and more in Grace so that Christ can dwell within us... so that we can say with St. Paul, “It is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

To put it in another way, Roman Catholicism has tended in the last millennium to focus more on scholastic theology... *thinking through* the Faith... whereas the Orthodox focus as always been on a therapeutic method... viewing the Church as the hospital for the

sickness of sin, and striving for health, which is to be filled with Grace and united with Christ.

2. What is the place of the Bible in the Orthodox Church?

The Orthodox Church has an immense love for the Holy Scriptures. A book of the Gospels sits in the center of every Orthodox altar, and the faithful are encouraged to prayerfully read the Bible daily. The Bible is a miracle. It has, however, a proper place... and that is within the greater miracle of the Church.

The verses most commonly used to defend the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* are 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

These two verses, however, do not claim that the Scriptures are all-sufficient for the faithful; they are *profitable* in equipping man for all of the things listed, but just as Aspirin is profitable for those in pain, it is not all one needs. How can we be certain of this? The question we should ask is: "When St. Paul wrote these words, what did he mean by 'the Scriptures'?" In fact, the New Testament had been neither compiled nor completed at this time, so St. Paul was writing about what we call the Old Testament. Certainly, no Christian today would argue that the New Testament is not necessary because the Old Testament is alone sufficient for true faith?

Beyond this, the Scriptures provide very clear teachings regarding the higher authority of the Church. The Church is "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), the "body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27, among others), the "the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:23). This last one is especially significant, as the *Church* is called the *fullness of Christ*, meaning that the Scriptures are just a *part* of the fullness given in the Church. Beyond this, Christ promised to send the Church the Holy Spirit Who would "guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). These are important words: *all truth*. So finding the true Church – which has always been a visible reality containing invisible truths and Grace – is the key.

We see this even in the forming of the New Testament. Many are surprised to learn that there was a great deal of debate concerning the inclusion of various books of the New Testament, some of which were eventually accepted and some of which were ultimately rejected. In fact, it wasn't until the year 367 that the first complete list of New Testament books comes down to us in a letter from St. Athanasius the Great! Is this not remarkable!? For over 300 years, many parishes did not have a complete New Testament, and the Church as a whole was not fully convinced about what was and was not to be included in the New Testament! And yet, there was no great sense of urgency, for the belief was that, within the true Church, the fullness of Faith was already available... even without a complete Bible.

In the long process of figuring out the New Testament canon (list of books to be included), we see that the Church was placed above the Scriptures. The Church wrote the Scriptures; the Church decided what was included in the Scriptures; and the Church properly interprets the Scriptures. Without the Church, we are left with an infallible book but without an infallible interpreter, and this leads to hundreds and thousands of disagreements about what the Bible actually means... and hence, hundreds or thousands of denominations. An infallible interpreter must, then, exist, and Christ – and the Scriptures – promise that the true Church is that interpreter.

3. **Why do Orthodox worship the way they do?**

Orthodox worship is liturgical and very embellished; it includes a lot of chanting, incense, iconography, elaborate vestments, and other things. The reason for this is that Orthodox worship looks both backwards and forwards in time: it looks backwards to Jewish worship, out of which it grew, and forward to the eternal worship that will occur in Heaven, which it seeks to model itself after. What does this all mean?

The Apostles learned worship from the Jewish Temple. In fact, they continued to worship in the Temple with Christ and immediately after His ascension. When Christian worship was moved into the homes of the faithful and eventually to their own churches, all of their worship was modeled after the Jewish worship which they knew so well. So Orthodox worship has Apostolic roots. We worship as the Apostles worshipped. This is not *exactly* like Jewish worship, of course, since Jewish worship was a *shadow* of New Testament worship... just as New Testament worship is a shadow of Heavenly worship.

We see the continuity in our worship by looking back to St. Justin Martyr (AD 100-165), who, writing in the 2nd century, offered small descriptions of Christian worship. His description fits exactly what the Orthodox do in the Divine Liturgy (the Eucharistic service of the Church) today.

On the other hand, Orthodox worship looks forward to the worship of Heaven. What does Heavenly worship look like? We get glimpses of this in the Bible. Perhaps the best description of Heavenly worship comes from Isaiah 6:

In the year that King Uzziah died, 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!”

And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.

So I said:

“Woe is me, for I am undone!

Because I am a man of unclean lips,

And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;

For my eyes have seen the King,

The Lord of hosts.”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said:

“Behold, this has touched your lips;

Your iniquity is taken away,

And your sin purged.”

In this description, we see that the entire Temple was filled with the Lord’s glory (an Orthodox church is beautifully adorned and elaborate), that the Temple was filled with smoke (we use incense in every service), and Isaiah is given a coal that purges away his sins (an image of Holy Communion). Beyond this, we understand the sense of awe we would all have in this scene... This sense of awe is presented to everyone who pays close attention to the words and beauty of Orthodox services. We pray aloud, but inwardly, we are struck dumb and humbled at the greatness of God.

This is perhaps the most important this for Orthodox Christians: our worship, which was and is revealed by God to the Church, is God-centered, first and foremost. It exists to benefit man, but man is benefited when he steps out of the way and allows all of his focus to be on God and not himself. This is why we worship the way we do.

4. How does the Orthodox Church understand salvation?

There are two ways that we could approach this question. The first is to talk about what Jesus Christ’s sacrifice on the cross did for us. The second is to talk about whether we are saved through faith or works.

With the first question, we run into a lot of problems when we try to wrap the entire Divine work of Christ's incarnation, sacrifice, and resurrection into a single paradigm. Do we believe in a substitutionary theory, a ransom theory, a penal theory? The sacrifice of Christ was far too great to be explained by only one paradigm, so each attempt to do so is too limiting in its perspective. Each has its problems. We are trying to explain a Divine mystery in human terms, and this is never a perfect method.

What we know is that, in the Fall, Adam and Eve caused this created world to be severed from its Source of Life – God – causing sin, disease, corruption, the reign of the devil, and death to enter in. In the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, this created world and the Uncreated God were reunited, and death – in its attempt to overtake He Who is Life – could not contain Him, and shattered. Along with death, corruption and the devil were handed a terrible blow. Now, we have the ability to unite with Christ and thus with the same Divinity that conquered these things... In uniting with Christ, we can make His victory our own.

In this (necessarily simplified and incomplete) explanation, there is again no single paradigm to contain all that happened. What we can say is that the Orthodox Church, while never devaluing the sacrifice on the cross, also places great emphasis on the incarnation and the resurrection. ALL of these things played a role in our salvation. But salvation is just too vast, too deep, too grand, too incredible to fit into one paradigm or one explanation. (For more on this topic, see <http://holypostlescheyenne.com/our-faith/salvation/>).

As for the second approach, do Orthodox believe that we are saved by faith or by works? We do best to first quote St. Paul in Ephesians 2:8 which tells us that we are saved (1) *by grace*(2) *through faith*. What do these things mean?

Firstly, the Scriptures and all of Church history make it clear that Grace is not a “yes or no” prospect; what we mean here is that it is not simply a question of whether one has Grace or not. Grace is something that one can grow in and that can grow in oneself. So we seek, throughout the Christian life, to gain *greater* Grace.

As for the term “faith,” we know that faith is not a simple mental concept. What does St. James tell us in the 2nd chapter of his epistle?:

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus 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 without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!... For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

This tells us that true Christian faith is an *active* thing. When St. Paul tells us that one is not saved by the works of the Law, we should remember that he is speaking about the Law of Moses, not a living of one's faith in Christ. For even St. Paul, in Romans 2, writes:

But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds": eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

The point is that "faith" and "works" are intimately united. If one engages in heartfelt prayer for the world, great humility and selflessness, fasting, generous almsgiving, and practices true Christian love, is this not evidence of great faith?

So the purpose of faith is to *be active*, and we are mainly active in seeking to conquer the man of sin, to drive out the darkness of sin and egoism that drive God away and remove us from experiencing His true love. "Pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate," (Proverbs 8:13) God tells us.

The more we humble and empty ourselves of such things, the more room we have to be filled with the Grace of God. So are Orthodox Christians saved? We *were* saved in baptism, we *are being saved* through active faith, and we have *hope* for our salvation when Christ comes again.

5. Do Orthodox worship Mary?

The Orthodox Church worships God in Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and God in Trinity alone. Knowing that many in God have become exceedingly holy, however, we *veneratethe* Saints (see more on the term "veneration" in the next section), especially the first among them, Mary.

Consider this: Why did Jesus wait so long to come in the flesh after the Fall? As He prepared the world for His coming, He also had to be born of one who was especially pure and who loved God beyond anything the world had known. The womb of the Virgin was to contain within it He Who exists in all places! Her womb, then, would become the new Ark of the Covenant!

In seeking such purity, God chose Mary. But what if Mary had said "No"? All that we talk about with salvation – all that Christ did for us – was made possible because a single person – Mary – gave God her "Yes." And Jesus clearly had a special love for His

mother, even giving her over to the care of John, the Apostle He especially loved, while suffering on the cross (John 19:26). Knowing all of this, in imitating Christ, shouldn't we have a special love for Mary as well, thanking her for her obedience to God and example and making our salvation possible!

And besides all of this, Mary's own veneration is Biblical and was prophesied. Recall what she said in Luke 1:48 "For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed."

Thus, in following the Scriptures, we call Mary "blessed" and venerate her. As for the greater question of what veneration is, this will be answered in the next question:

6. Why do you pray to the Saints?

If we were to give nuance to our answer, the Orthodox Church does not truly *pray* to the Saints but simply asks for their intercessions. What does this mean? Is this even possible? And what does it mean to venerate the Saints?

To answer these questions, let's look at a few different areas of the New Testament. First, let's look at Matthew 17. In this chapter, we read about the Transfiguration of Jesus in which, taking Peter, James, and John up a mountain, Jesus begins to shine with a brilliant light. In verse 3, we are told, "And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him."

While there is debate concerning whether Elijah had ever died after being taken up to the Heavens in a chariot (2 Kings 2:11), there is absolutely no question that Moses did die. And yet, here he is, speaking with Christ. How is this possible?

St. Paul gives us the answer to this in Philippians 1:21 when he says, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." To this, we could add numerous other verses. For the Christian, life continues on after death. In fact, life *increases* as, in our nearness to Christ, we experience true life as God intended it for man before sin entered the world. So for the saved, death is not the end of existence in the least but is actually a gain, and in the next life, the saved can converse directly with Christ.

The next question is whether the dead are even aware of us and our situation. To answer this, we can look to Luke 16:19-31 and the story of the rich man and Lazarus. In this story, an unmerciful rich man and a beggar at his door named Lazarus both die. Lazarus is taken to Paradise and the rich man to Hell. Tormented in Hell, the rich man sees Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham and makes a request to Abraham: "I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him (Lazarus) to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment" (v. 27-28).

The rich man, in his torment, is still worried about his own family and what will become of them. If those suffering in Hell – even those who showed little mercy to others during their lives – could have such a concern, would not those who displayed love during their lives and are now with Christ not have similar concerns?

A Saint in the Orthodox Church is one who has been recognized for their great abundance of Grace. Because, as James tells us in his epistle, “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (5:16), the Orthodox Church asks the intercessions of Saints because of their nearness to God. This is really little different than asking our friends and family to pray for us. It is simply another declaration of belief that Christ has destroyed death and saved us.

As for the veneration of the Saints, in thanking Saints for their prayers and intercessions and seeing in them a model of how to follow Christ in purity and holiness, we offer them special honor and gratitude. This is all veneration is. Far from being worship, it is simply bestowing thanks and honor to someone *precisely because* they are filled with the One we actually *doworship*: Jesus Christ.

7. What's with all the icons?

For a longer explanation of the use of icons, see the following article:<http://holyapostlescheyenne.com/our-faith/praying-with-icons/>. For our purposes here, we will just offer a brief summary of Orthodox beliefs.

God forbade the use of idols in the Old Testament (cf. Exodus 20:4) mainly for two reasons: the Israelites were prone to worshipping idols of foreign nations and the true God had never been seen... and therefore He couldn't be depicted in statues or sculptures. But the prohibition on *idols* was not an absolute prohibition on all *images*. How do we know this? God *commanded* that images adorn the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25) and the curtains of the Temple for instance.

With the coming of Jesus, however, everything changed. First, true worship was revealed, especially when the Trinity was first revealed at the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3). Second, now that God became man in Jesus Christ, God *could be seen* in His human form. Just as we would travel back in time and take a picture of Jesus if we could, so we would paint a picture of Him if we did not have those cameras.

Icons of Jesus and the Saints are not objects of worship for the Orthodox Church. We venerate the images and the figures depicted (showing them honor and respect), but we worship God in Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and God alone.

While kissing seems like an act of worship to many, if we lived in various other parts of the world, we would see kissing in a much different way. In Romania, for instance, not only do people offer kisses on the cheek when they meet, but it is common for younger

people to make a bow before and kiss the hand of an elderly person out of a sign of respect. So kissing an icon is a lot like kissing the picture of a deceased relative: we do this out of love and respect, not worship. The icons of Saints and Angels for the Orthodox, then, are like family photos.

Finally, because we have icons all around us of holy figures, thus surrounding ourselves with a “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), we have numerous example to look at of figures who lived valiant spiritual lives and endured great suffering and torments for Christ... We see examples to inspire us and to follow.

Iconography in the Church goes all the way back to the time of the Apostles. In the 8th century, there were many who questioned the use of icons, and the entire Church met as a whole to discuss this issue. At the 7th Holy and Ecumenical Synod in Nicaea in 787 AD, the Church – the “pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15) – declared the use of icons in the Church to be valid and holy. This decision was not challenged again for over 700 years! And it continues to be upheld in the Orthodox Church until even today! Certainly, the same Christ Who promised to be with the Church “always, even unto the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20) and Who promised to send the Holy Spirit to lead the Church into “all truth” (John 16:13), would not have allowed the use of icons if He did not bless them! And this is why, even today, we see many miracle worked through icons, including healings and an endless stream of myrrh, a fragrant oil! (for one such example, see <http://www.orthodoxhawaii.org/icons.html>)

8. Why call your Priest “Father”?

One of the things that can make Protestants very uncomfortable around an Orthodox Priest is when they hear the Priest referred to as “Father.” Didn’t Jesus say to call no man “father” in Matthew 23:9, after all?

We miss the deeper purpose of Christ’s teaching here, however, if we think that His point merely concerned the use of a word. After all, this verse is virtually never used to reprimand children for saying “father” or “dad” or “papa” or any other such term. Further, Christ also said not to call anyone “teacher” in the next verse... Yet we refer to our instructors in school as “teachers” and “professors” without hesitation.

Certainly, Christ was not concerned with the word itself... so there must be a deeper meaning here. This is further evidenced by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:15-17 when he writes, “For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.”

Here, St. Paul calls himself a “father” to the Corinthians, as well someone who teaches everywhere (and thus a “teacher”)!

So what is going on here? When we look at the context of Matthew 23:9, we see that Christ is instructing the Apostles by assailing the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. They “love to be called ‘Rabbi’ and to command others to do that which they would not fulfill. They sought the praise of men and not to please God. The Orthodox Priest is called “Father” knowing that this term is granted because he is an ordained Priest of Almighty God. Woe to the Priest who, like the Pharisees, uses this name for his own pride and egoism! Instead, this term is given out of respect for the God in Whose ministry the Priest serves. Christ’s command, then, was about the spirit of the title in which we serve, not the title itself.

9. Where can I learn more?

Firstly, we welcome you to join us for our services or any other Orthodox church in your area. Remember that we go to Orthodox parishes to seek out Christ in His fullness... People make mistakes, and while a particular experience in a parish may not be ideal, it doesn’t mean that the entire Faith is somehow invalid. I think you’ll find, however, that most parishes are warm and welcoming. We would certainly love to have you visit ours!

Beyond that, there are innumerable resources out there to learn about the Orthodox Faith. The following are 4 books which many Protestants have found especially helpful:

1. *The Orthodox Church* by Timothy (Kallistos) Ware
2. *Wisdom for Today from the Early Church* by David Ford
3. *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith* by Peter Gillquist
4. *The Way: What Every Protestant Should Know about the Orthodox Faith* by Clark Carlton

Beyond this, feel free to email our Priest with any questions. And above all: pray! If you believe that Orthodoxy may be your true home, pray for God’s guidance in all sincerity and humility and with continuous longing, and He will reveal the truth to you!

We pray that God guides you in all your pursuits to salvation and perfect love in Him!