

ORTHODOX BOOKLETS

Basic substantial teaching on what
Orthodox Christians believe



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WHY THE CHURCH?

Orthodox Parish of St Bega, St Mungo, and St Herbert
Fr John Musther, 16 Greta Villas, KESWICK, Cumbria CA12 5LJ
www.orthodoxcumbria.org.uk

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Why the Question?

It is interesting that this question should be asked at all. For the first Christians there was no question. The church existed. They were the church. The church was how every Christian was bonded to each other. It made no sense to ask 'why the church'.

The situation remained like this for a thousand years. The church existed. There was absolutely no reason to question why. It was only when, in the West, the church became corrupt in the most obvious of ways that questions began to arise as to whether such a corrupt institution could possibly be God's will and whether Christians might actually get on a lot better without it.

After further centuries of corruption and unrest, the Reformers decided they could do without the 'church' as they knew it. In the name of interpreting the scriptures, they did away with the Pope, the priests and the mass, they did away with the Virgin Mary, the Saints, and the way of holiness. They did away with anything that smacked to them, even a little, of 'works'. Once these steps had been taken it is not surprising they thought they could do away with the church altogether. All that was deemed necessary was a meeting to interpret the scriptures and the individual could get on with his life accordingly.

The Reformers wanted the church to be like the one in the New Testament. Unfortunately their perceptions as to what this church was like fell very wide of the mark. Their

interpretation of the scriptures would never have been understood by those who produced the scriptures; which is another way of saying that their reading of the scriptures was the product of their own imagination.

This will still make little or no difference to those who have reacted strongly against anything to do with the 'church', that is, in their view, with 'Roman Catholics'. They will deny there is any need for a church because in their view it is only a man-made 'institution'. They may accept that there are reasons of convenience why Christians should meet together, to encourage one another and so on. Others take this to its logical conclusion: Christians do not need to meet because anyone can pick up the scriptures and God will guide him in his walk with God.

Such thinking depends on the presupposition that the church is corrupt and should be done away with. However, if there is a church which is not corrupt this thinking falls to the ground.

Those who reject the church in this way will tend to tar every church with the same brush. Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox have popes or patriarchs, have priests, liturgies, 'worship' the Virgin Mary, believe in Saints, have gold vessels, rich vestments, go in for a lot of 'works', have icons - and so 'self-evidently' are to be rejected. There is little point in discussing things with minds set in such boxes. Their whole view of history is distorted.

Orthodox do not have to apologise for the existence of the church. Nor do we have to defend it. We simply have to 'live it', or rather 'be' it.

Nor do Orthodox have to adopt the Protestant agenda and find a scriptural justification for every jot and tittle.

Jesus himself 'justifies' the church. Jesus himself brought it into existence.

People say that Jesus made no mention of the institution. He did not prescribe for its meetings. But Orthodox do not see the church as an institution. They see it as those who are together alive in him and who receive his divine life through the means he has chosen. They meet together because this is the only way to receive his Body and Blood as one and thus 'become' the branches of the Vine in which his divine life flows.

The church exists because on the Day of the Resurrection the apostles met together and Jesus came into their midst, gave them his peace, and breathed upon them the Holy Spirit. No one should interpret the peace of God and the gift of the Holy Spirit as something which is simply consolation for the individual; that would be to ascribed to the individualist assumptions of the 'theology' of the 'Enlightenment' which shaped Protestant thought in the eighteenth century. Rather, God's peace embraces all. The work of the Holy Spirit is to bind all into the unity of the One Christ that they may together, as God's priests in his Kingdom, be a perfect and acceptable offering to the Father.

It is sometimes said the church is not a 'central topic' in the New Testament. The implication is that whatever is said about it is of secondary importance to the 'real topic', e.g. evangelism, and at best marginal to it.

This opinion evaluates the church on the basis of the

number of times the word or concept for it appears. This is a fallacy. It fails to allow for the fact that the entire scriptures flow from the life of the church. The Gospels were written for the churches, the letters were written to the churches. Without the church there would have been no scriptures.

The church is the fundamental reality of the New Testament. Not one word can be understood properly apart from the church or separately from its life and practice.

To interpret the scriptures in a way which minimises the church or in contradiction to its life is un-historical and therefore not acceptable.

This approach will seem threatening to those who believe they can 'get at the truth' apart from the church. They seek to establish a 'text' which is free of church interpretation ('dogma') and to write a 'history' stripped of the church's 'distortion'.

However it is the church of the second, third and even fourth centuries which holds the key to the secrets of the church of the first century. In the scriptures there are many elusive allusions as to events and practices which can only be resolved in this way. In any case the church did not describe everything openly anyway. Such a procedure, we are told, compromises 'scientific' history and academic professionalism. In reality all it requires is the recognition that throughout we are dealing with one and the same church, one and the same life, and one and the same practices. Any break in this unity is simply an alien perception imported from elsewhere.

The church of the first century kept its affairs out of the public gaze for very good reason. They were branded as atheistic, incestuous, and cannibals. The ministry of bishops, the practice of baptism, and the content of the liturgy however were maintained throughout. People want proof. The church simply says 'this is our life. If you are unwilling to understand, you understand nothing'.

The lack of 'proof' allows many Protestants to believe that their interpretations, derived from the Reformation, are correct. This keeps them in their delusion.

Others will say that to use tradition to interpret scripture is to run into another trouble. They say the Catholics appeal to tradition to maintain that the Pope is the successor to Peter, not merely as a matter of honour, but as a matter of authority and jurisdiction.

However when we speak of the church we speak of the church which is one, holy, apostolic and universal (catholic). From this perspective one can see where interpretations of scripture are neither apostolic, nor universal, nor holy, nor belong to the unity. The authority of the pope is just such a case in point.

Some just cannot believe that the life of the church and authentic Christianity are one and the same thing. This is due either because they see the Catholic church has made innovations and superimposed on what went before; or because all they know are moribund churches stuck in man-made traditions.

People are often amazed to discover there is a real alternative in Orthodoxy.

The Orthodox perspective is quite different. Orthodoxy

stands for wholeness: a wholeness of church and scripture, of tradition and scripture, of ministry and sacrament, of prayer and holiness, all of which truly go together.

The church is not an adjunct to the scripture nor an addition. It is the primary reality which makes sense of scripture.

The church is not an adjunct to the Gospel nor something added on after Jesus had gone. Rather the transition from Jesus to church is an integral part of one and the same work of God. If there had been no Jesus there would have been no church. If there had been no church, Jesus would be history.

The issue of the church drives us back to Jesus. Those who have not understood the church, may find they have not understood Jesus either.

Jesus said to Peter 'on this rock I will build my church'.

Most take this to refer to the faith Peter had when he believed that Jesus was the Messiah. With such a rock-like faith, it is said, that Jesus is who he is, all difficulties will be overcome and, so it continues, 'Christianity' will conquer the earth.

This position is curiously intellectual. The emphasis is on a belief to be accepted by the peoples of the earth. This hangs unrealistically in the air.

Others take this to refer to Peter and his successors the Popes whom they regard as 'head' of the church. At least this meaning has an intelligible concrete application.

In our booklet 'Who is Jesus?' we said there is no Jesus

now unless he is Risen. Jesus rose, not to prove he was true, but to show that the new unity of the divine and human, which was his through his obedience to God in all respects, could not be broken. Neither sin nor death nor darkness could prevent his divine life from flowing into human life in the church.

Jesus builds on what he has done. The Risen Jesus still has within himself that new divine-human unity which he has created. Now that he has risen he pours his divine life into the humanity unified with him. This divine-human unity is what the church is.

Peter and the apostles received the divine Light of Christ and the divine Life which was his. At Pentecost Peter was able to direct all who willed to repent and be baptised so that they too could participate in the new divine-human unity in Christ which was now open to all and which took on visible form in unity around the apostles.

Jesus does not build on Peter, on the faith that he has, or on what he has done. That would be altogether too singular. (Or, one could say Peter 'stands for' the church. That is possible. But Peter can never become the head of the church. Christ alone is head of the church.) Jesus builds on what he himself has done and that is why, in his next words, what he builds 'the gates of hell will not prevail against it'.

No power or force can take from Jesus what he has united in his own person. The church exists beyond time in Jesus. It will last for all time until all else will pass away. That is Jesus' victory which none can take from him. This is the victory which will conquer the world.

The church consists of all those who are alive in Christ, who belong to that unity of heaven and earth which exists in him. This may seem invisible – until we realise this church meets in every liturgy.

The reality of the church can never be described, just as the Body and Blood of Jesus can never be described. But when the Body and Blood enters the mouths and hearts of the faithful all are unified in Christ and with all the Saints – and this is the church.

We cannot say this church is invisible because it is visible in one place, round one altar, with one bishop, in one communion. This church, sanctified by communion, produces the visible, empirical fruit of saints quite distinct from anything that one can find in the world.

On the other hand we cannot call this church an 'institution'. Yes, it has a visible beginning; it is 'set up'. It has some administration to help it function. But the real modus vivendi is communion. That is what makes it, that is how and why it lives.

None of us understand the church until we realise that the faith by which it lives is itself a gift of God. That faith has clear and specific content which it is not ours to chop and change. That faith is directed towards living that one way of holiness which exists in Christ and which is central to living a life totally governed by Christ's divine life.

It has frequently happened that human beings have tried to make the church's faith a human philosophy which they can then teach the world and guide its affairs. It has frequently happened that human minds have tried to

grasp divine realities and make of them a system by which they can run the world. Neither has worked because neither can ever work.

Equally if anyone does not understand that the church is about participating in Christ's own divine-human unity and that faith must be directed towards living the way of holiness, they are doing something else, whatever that may be.

People have gone to the extent of founding another church. But how can anyone who does so belong to the church founded by Jesus? How will they receive Christ's divine life which he pours into his church through his Body and Blood and which makes the church what it is? As Paul asked 'Is Christ divided?' No, he cannot have two or more bodies.

Jesus was also speaking of the church when he said, 'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven'.

This is an extraordinary statement. It indicates the unity between the divine and human, between heaven and earth of which we have spoken.

The same authority in all the apostles is mentioned in Mt 18.18.

If the powers of heaven are real, so are those of the evil one, at least within the severe limitations imposed on them. The power to bind the evil one and to set people free has been frequently exercised down the ages in exorcism.

The power has also been exercised in excommunication.

The church has power to prevent abuse of the divine life which enters it by forbidding people, under certain conditions, to receive communion.

In a further application the church has had to take steps to preserve the faith by which it lives and require that faith to be held by all who wish to be baptised and receive communion. The church has also had cause to draw up canons to regulate baptism, ordination, marriage, or the lack of them, or fault in them.

However these things cannot be understood for what they are apart from that union of divine and human life which is of the essence of the church. Nor can they be reduced to mere rule-making,

What has been said also applies to verses 19-20, 'Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them'.

Some apply this to themselves when separated from the visible church and its hierarchy. This is to misunderstand the verses. The point of the passage is to assert the importance of unity, not to justify disunity. That unity is the unity of the church in heaven and earth and that unity is none other than the church in one place, around one altar in union with one bishop.

In the booklet 'Who is Jesus?' we have already shown it was the impact of the Risen Jesus which enabled the church to understand who Jesus is. Otherwise they could not have understood that he was the Son of God come in the flesh. Similarly with the church. The first Christians

could not have understood what the church was and is unless it understood the divine-human unity which exists in Christ. Just as it took time for the church to fully understand the identity of Jesus, it took time also to understand its own identity.

An early indication of this recognition is the strange story of Annas and Sapphira in Acts 4. This is a story of how not to meddle with the power of God in his church - the ultimate cautionary tale. Annas and Sapphira did not have to sell their property and give it to the church. But in doing so and lying about the price they failed to appreciate the power of God in the church, or more specifically the presence of the Holy Spirit, They lied to him – and the consequence was immediate and fatal. Not surprisingly the whole church went about in ‘great fear’.

Two other incidents indicate a growing awareness of what the church is. One is the Corinthians threatening to take each other to court, the other the collection for Jerusalem.

The reason for Christians not to go to court is that, if only Christians will listen, God is perfectly able to resolve issues. (That is the biggest cautionary tale of all – and it has not often been heard in the history of the church.) The divine power is able to bring unity to human life on earth in every dimension.

The collection by the churches for the poor in Jerusalem was not a ‘nice’ gesture’ simply because of need. It was a demonstration that in Christ there is a unity which has to be seen and respected.

This issue of unity shakes human perspectives to the

core. It is dangerous to the wallet and to every form of self-protection against one's 'brother and sister'.

The real cautionary tale is, 'do not belong to the church unless you wish to be turned inside out'.

Paul makes the Christians of Corinth aware of the danger of falling sick – or even dying - when anyone takes communion without recognising the Lord's Body.

When a Christian partakes of the Body and Blood of the Lord, he or she receives Christ himself. His Body unites with our body, his Blood with our blood because we take him into ourselves through our stomach, through our heart and we are united with him in our very being.

All who receive him are, by that fact, obliged not to live in the self (and all its thoughts and feelings) but in Christ, standing in his victory over the self. If a person fails to recognise this they do not recognise what the gift of Christ is for – to live in the way holiness in him. This has consequences. The self persists. The self makes us sick. The self deals death

The warning is not about getting our doctrine right as some suppose. It is about understanding what the very nature of living in Christ is about and acting accordingly.

But everyone who receives Christ is a 'Christ-bearer' or 'God-bearer. We have to act and think accordingly in relation to our brothers and sisters.

Can we speak ill of anyone who in body and soul is a Christ-bearer? Can we ignore the needs of a brother or sister who is a God-bearer? Can we give what belongs to the self to them? Receiving communion is a scary business. It is a transforming event.

Paul used another term for the church – the Body of Christ. This too has profound implications for our view of each other and of our action one towards another.

He says ‘The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink’. (1 Cor 12.12-13)

‘Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others’. Rom 12.4-5

‘Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute?’ 1 Cor 6.15

‘Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf’. 1 Cor 10.17

For Paul the church is the consequence of Christ’s saving work and fulfilment of the divine purpose. The specific characteristic of this work is unity. Paul asserted this unity over against every division.

However this unity is a mystery which is beyond our comprehension. It transcends all natural divisions such as those of Jew and Gentiles, slave and free, male and female. It also transcends the individual dimensions of human life. We are all one in Christ and as such belong to one another. This has enormous implications: it directly challenges the will of each self to maintain its own life in existence; it constitutes a call to lay down our

lives all the time in love and service of others.

This is why the way of holiness lies at the heart of the very reason why the church was created. In him we must all manifest his holiness and so reveal his victory to the world

There is nothing in the world remotely like the church. And if you join the church be careful not to bring the world in with you.

The church is God's; it does not belong to men. God alone gives it growth and nothing of our doing can change this.

Paul speaks of the growth of the church in Christ. Christ is 'the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy' (Col 1.18); and 'the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow (2.19).

'And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Eph 1.22-23).

No other head will do. No other life will do.

Paul also refers to the 'church of the living God' as 'the pillar and foundation of the truth' (1 Tim 3.15. It is the pillar of truth because it is the place where the truth is set forth and the foundation of truth because without it there is no basis for the truth. This too is strong stuff.

No other pillar will do. No other foundation is possible.

In the course of time questions have arisen like 'is the church for saints or sinners?' The answer is it is for both. We all begin as sinners and we acknowledge that we are sinners till the day we die. But we are also called to be saints and Christ has the power to make us saints. These two things are not contradictory. We live in simultaneous realities, the one giving ground to the other. The one will fade away, the other will last for eternity. We all have to live in this tension.

It is still true many do not see the consequences of 'being' the church. Many are sick and spiritually dead because of this. But the hot coals lie under the surface. Where there is a heart and a will for the truth, the coals of holiness can burn hot and bright again.

Many see only the sinners. They do not know where the saints are or how to recognise them. They unquestionably exist in every generation including our own.

People have despised the church because it seems all too human and in the course of time has acted in an all too human way. However the church is still the only way by which human beings can participate in the divine-human unity of Christ. The worst possible place to be is outside the unity.

God is not ashamed to call the church his 'bride'. The church is 'one flesh' with Christ as husband and wife become one flesh (Eph 5.23). We do not have to go into flights of fantasy to understand this. St Teresa and St John of the Cross call the last stage of sanctification the 'spiritual marriage'. They spell out for anyone who has the will to understand the entire route to get there. The

question for each one of us is simply that of our priorities.

Nor should we minimise this reality for our bodies. The wonderful thing about the saints is that Christ is embodied in them. The divine energies become entirely one with the human energies so that it moves and directs them completely. They truly are effective Christ-bearers. The entire power of the Holy Spirit dwells in them. A complete transformation has taken place. The divine life once again is visible to our eyes in human form.

To meet a saint whether in the flesh or in the spirit is to have one's whole life and being opened like a kipper. Something enters into one's spirit and life is never the same again. You cannot close the wound. We have to follow and obey.

As a church member there is only one tragedy: not to be a saint.

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