

# ORTHODOX BOOKLETS

**Basic substantial teaching on what  
Orthodox Christians believe**



## 6

### WHAT IS TRADITION?

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# WHAT IS TRADITION?

Tradition has a bad name in many contemporary churches. There is a lot of bad tradition. Ways of doing things have accumulated over the years and the forces of conservatism resist making changes. The words 'dead', 'dull' and 'boring' are often heard, along with a desire to make things 'appealing', 'interesting' and 'relevant'. There is conflict and often deadlock between these forces. Many go off and do their own thing.

We must understand this situation. It is real enough. It results from a series of historical situations in the West which reach back 50, 100, 500 or even 1000 years. There has been a sequence of conflicts where the need for change has been resisted so much that instead of the church being able to resolve tensions 'organically', that is by preserving unity and truth, some Christians have seen fit to break unity in order to pursue truth as they see it. The result has been huge splits in the church and multiple small fractures running into the thousands. The consequence has been a Christianity in which unity has been fragmented almost ad infinitum; and truth has become so distorted in the process that few believe there is such a thing any longer.

A further consequence has been that a mode of interpreting scripture has become common which is individualised and not only outside the church but even against the church. This has become so widespread that people feel they can believe what they choose to believe and that they can cut out of the scriptures anything with which they do not agree, whether that be the

supernatural or doctrines such as the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. In the name of modern thinking people think they can reinvent Christianity in any shape or form they wish. They may produce something that may preserve a connection with traditional views or something which is quite unrecognisable. Or they may rehash views rejected long ago but which for various reasons have become fashionable again, like the Gnostic Christ, the Arian Christ and so on.

The result is that confusion reigns in contemporary culture and in many contemporary churches also.

Or, in other churches there may be clear teaching but that teaching is wedded to one or other of the upheavals in Christianity and set about by a fundamentalist view of everything. Everything is either in or out, white and black. Attractive though this may appear at first to some, the rigidity and unbending nature of this mentality soon betrays itself, and with it every form of lack of compassion.

Both these situations prove extremely difficult for seekers to find their bearings and cut through the muddle.

In the New Testament we see two things. Paul can say 'I pass on to you the tradition I have received'. Jesus can also rebuke the Pharisees for 'following the traditions of men'. These verses alert us straightaway to the fact there is tradition which is good and healthy and even necessary; and that there is tradition which is false and impedes true relationship with God.

There is tradition which reveals Christ; and there is tradition which does not reveal him.

True tradition reveals Christ. The tradition to which Paul

refers reveals Christ as the Risen Lord.

The Gospels themselves insist that Christ died and rose again 'according to the scriptures'. These scriptures were in the first place the Old Testament. The purpose of the rest of the scriptures is to testify to the power of the Risen Christ in the church.

## **Tradition in the Old Testament**

The Old Testament should not be underrated. It is an amazing collection of many different books of many different types. Some books are historical, though containing epic and legendary material. Some books weave a lot of material together but the connection between this material is not always obvious; sometimes these connections appear distinctly odd; sometimes there are what appears to be duplicate accounts of the same story. Other books contain prophecies, poetry, aphorisms, songs, and even fiction as a true mode of communication.

This collection of books may appear at first sight to be both puzzling and daunting. But first they have to be taken as they are. We have to resist the temptation to simplify them and straighten them out just for the sake of our impoverished viewpoint. The parts and the whole only make sense in terms of the ongoing history and expectations of the people to whom they belonged and for whom they were written.

The books then correspond to the tradition of faith and practice of an actual people. For a Jew to understand them he had to identify with that people, with the actual Jewish community. He or she found their place in the community by accepting its faith and observing its

practices. The tradition was given. A Jew did not make up his own faith or his own religious practice.

However within the continuing tradition there was also diversity. The diversity meant there was a certain freedom to find one's home in the historic community without undue regimentation or coercion. Each generation could choose the emphases it made and find a measure of originality with which to handle the sacred tradition. The course of history and the different content of the different books bears this out.

The people were on a pilgrimage. The pilgrimage gave roots but also helped them face issues. The pilgrimage gave them a history, and an identity, and also gave them a future. The pilgrimage acted to prevent them getting complacent, and also gave them a challenge. In reality this was not comfortable. They were participant in a mystery which defied analysis and an easy projection. Their God seemed often to be outrageous. There were many times when faith seemed all too much.

To read the Old Testament may be difficult but it can be very rewarding. Readers must develop a feel for the unity and the diversity, for the pilgrimage, for the mystery, and for God who is beyond understanding, for the Incomprehensible. We must let the tradition overtake us, swallow us up. We must feel ourselves part of it, we must identify with it. We have to see ourselves within it and not set ourselves apart from it. It must become living tradition, one to which we are connected, which shapes us, which speaks to us, which resonates in our heart. Tradition then becomes deep, rich, inexhaustible, one which is infinitely larger than us, and one which will be continuing long after we have left the scene.

The church arose in the bosom of this tradition. To the first Christians tradition was a living tradition. The church saw itself intimately connected with the story of the Jewish people. The Old Testament had not yet been identified and it did not belong to a thing of the past. This tradition spoke to the church of the living Christ. It profoundly shaped its worship of the Lord Jesus. Jesus spoke to them from all its books, they saw him in all its pages. This tradition shaped the church's faith, its practice and doctrine. Christians were the 'new Israel', the true inheritors of all its promises. The church, far from overthrowing the Old Testament, drank deeply of its riches and found them inexhaustible. In this the early church determined for ever the unity and continuity of the Old and the New Covenant.

## **Tradition in the New Testament**

There is however one difference between the Old and the New. The Old Testament teaches that the Creation was made out of nothing. However this was not true of the church. The church was born out of what Christ had done. When Christ came he brought about the creation of a new divine-human unity which had never existed before. This divine - human unity now exists in the Risen Christ. Christ's divine life is poured into the church and constitutes its very being and existence.

With Adam came disobedience. With Christ came the obedience of his humanity to his divinity in all things. Sin did not enter him, there was no darkness in him, and death had no hold over him. The unity of the divine and human entered a new phase: it became eternal, potentially open to all and encompassing all. It was

possible, in the church, for all to enter in and find themselves not merely united in Christ but to be one with him and with one another.

The church is constituted by effective participation in Christ's own divine life. The church is the place where he reigns, where he dwells and is made manifest. The church's life comes from its union with Christ. At the same time the Holy Spirit moves and directs the church and enables it to see and do the will of God.

The living tradition exists to recognise this truth in all aspects. Tradition expresses the primordial reality that Christ lives in the church and that the Holy Spirit expresses the church's faithfulness to Christ by bringing to fruition the way of holiness that exists in him. Tradition is very much the vehicle for the church's life – the deep, mysterious, tangible yet intangible, indefinable, yet definitely life.

Those who understand this realise that tradition is something in which one lives because one lives in Christ, in union with him in the deeply mysterious life of communion with God the Trinity and with all those who belong to him. One no more questions the reality of this tradition just as one does not question the reality of the air we breathe, the water we drink or the food we eat.

Those who do not live in this tradition have no idea of what tradition is. They reduce it to 'beliefs not found in scripture' or even to their eyes 'contrary to scripture'. They assert a concept of scripture over against a concept of tradition. In reality no such rivalry exists. There is no such division. Christ is our life; Christ comes to us in all the ways of his choosing – sacrament, liturgy, scripture,

ministry, doctrine, prayer and spiritual life. He comes to us in all these and they each clothe us with the garments of Christ himself.

The Orthodox Christian experiences the flow of Christ's divine life into him through the church and therefore through the living tradition. He experiences the flow of his life not through his head but into his heart. He experiences this deeply and does not try to make an abstract of it through his head. He no more tries to pick and choose between the different elements of tradition, no more tries to impose his own interpretation on them than the Jew who lived the tradition he inherited and with which he totally identified himself. If an Orthodox eschews critical rational analysis in this respect, it is not in order to be obscurantist. He simply prefers to submit himself to the discovery of truth which only true commitment brings. In any case such is the richness and profundity of tradition that it takes most, if not all, of a lifetime to grow in the wealth of grace which Christ himself bestows through faithfulness to tradition.

The word that most obviously comes to mind when an Orthodox thinks of tradition is celebration. There is so much to celebrate as day by day we worship with the church, as we pray with the church and rejoice with the saints. We pray the very words the saints used, we follow in the very steps they trod. Everywhere we experience the presence of the Risen Christ. With celebration comes such encouragement; the burden of self-striving is banished, the mind set free from programmes of much 'study' and 'training' and learning of systems. Rather we let Christ do the work on our hearts so that he does the changing, he does the growing – and we know above all

that it is through him and not of ourselves that we grow from grace to grace our life-long.

Tradition is nothing if it does not reveal Christ. The constituent elements of tradition, sacraments, liturgies scriptures, bishops, and councils are all nothing unless they manifest Christ. All these things belong to tradition simply because down the centuries from the beginning until now, they have been and are experienced as revealing Christ.

The church, from the beginning, was inescapably, in the nature of things, involved in 'handing on' ('traditioning') its obedience to Christ in terms of its faith, practice, worship, discipline and holiness. The very first writer we have, Paul, spoke of how accounts of the resurrection were passed on to him, how the eucharist was to be celebrated in the way he had received; above all he spoke of how this obedience bestowed upon him the 'mind of Christ'. The essential process of 'handing on' involved setting up communities in towns and cities everywhere, finding leaders and training them in holiness, so that he could hand over and leave them.

The message had to be passed on, good order had to be set up, and quality of spiritual life sought in all things. None of this was repetition or the dead hand of tradition. It was a creative process as the Gospel spread from one place to another, crossing religious, cultural, social and linguistic divides as it did so.

It has to be clearly stated that tradition is not about a list of how-to-do its and sundry bits and pieces of information. It is the life of holiness which is handed on, true conformity to the life of union with Christ. That is

what being the church, or a Christian, is about.

So while the apostolic ministry of bishops, the apostolic sacraments and liturgies, the apostolic scriptures, and the decisions of ecumenical councils, each in their own way testify to Christ, there is also another fundamental axis and that is the father-disciple relationship. The Desert Fathers, in bringing to the consciousness of the whole church the highest call of holiness, established this relationship as the bedrock of tradition in all its creativity and continuity. Such relationships were profoundly creative: they produced holy lives. There is nothing more worthwhile in all the world than that.

Tradition is called the 'Living Tradition' because the life of holiness is passed on from generation to generation because it is lived and shared together, father with disciple and disciple with the next disciple. This tradition can be traced down the centuries in place after place, in country after country and often from person to person. We can go today to monasteries founded in the fourth century (that is as early as you can get) and see the same life of holiness still being lived there – and even flourishing. In other places caves and nearby ruined churches testify to centuries old contributions to the chain. In yet other places the life has been lived faithfully and prayerfully without attracting the attention of history. Even today one can meet people before whom one stands, as it were, before the holy men of old. Then we see the Living Tradition personified before our very eyes.

Everything in the church has its place because of its contribution to the way of holiness. Doctrine, sacraments, liturgies, ministries, councils, canons belong to tradition for this reason. None of these should be regarded as

simply the paraphernalia of church-life. They were created by the Holy Spirit and they take life from the Holy Spirit. If one leaves the Holy Spirit out of tradition, of course, it will be dead. If a bishop, a parish, or a monastery ceases to live by the Holy Spirit, of course, it will be without life. But once allow the Holy Spirit in – as Orthodox do in the introductory prayers at the beginning of every service – then the Spirit will be at work drawing, inspiring, challenging each person to be refashioned in the likeness of Christ.

Where anyone has been baptised into Christ and acknowledges that he is Lord, the self has entered the process of dying. We cannot use the old wineskin of the self to hold the new life of Christ given to us. If you see the church handling things, or tradition used, without intelligence, it is clear what the cause is – not tradition, but a self who does not wish to die.

The Orthodox church has preserved an ‘ascetical’ attitude to its life. That is Orthodox understand that everything in the church in all its aspects has as its purpose to direct us into and along the way of holiness. Everything is there to ‘train’ us, shape and form us as we leave behind the self and put on Christ.

This has to be understood with rigour. Tradition must never become a sentimental affair simply because ‘this is how it has always been done’. Neither is the church meant to be a collection of museum items collecting dust, ‘hoary’ with antiquity. Yes, things may have been done this way for centuries but in reality churches adapt – and they always have done. For example icons have been governed by appropriate traditions for centuries but new icons continually appear. More importantly new

missionary situations have always stimulated original responses.

There is no simple resolution between old and new. The old in tradition requires profound respect. The new must be discerned with humility and brought to fruition with patience, - and this in the context of preserving unity in love.

Change is not a matter of making things easier. Programmes generated by reformers are so easily generated by lack of respect, lack of patience, by much human energy, by a shortfall in love which results in a break of unity. It cannot be said too often: God is in charge of the church and he knows how to move things forward in a way which maintains the bonds of love and preserves unity.

Orthodoxy focuses on change of heart, of faithfulness to God in all the vicissitudes of daily life, and on that humility which allows God to take over control, thus guarding against the tendency to exalt any other name but his. The first call on anyone who wants to understand tradition is to work on acquiring these virtues. They will find this so demanding that by the time they have acquired them, tradition, viewed merely from the outside as a matter of 'externals', will have disappeared.

Tradition provides a structure for unity and a structure for truth.

The structure of unity is provided by Christ, the apostles and the bishops. That structure is expressed 'in large' by the ecumenical councils and 'in small', in the local church, by the weekly celebration of the Eucharist.

Tradition provides a structure for truth by the 'canon' of faith. This was first done by the 'rule of faith' in the early church and then by the Nicene Creed.

This canon provides the structure of faith in the Trinity and of belief in Christ as both divine and human by which all interpretation of scripture must conform in order to be faithful to the Gospel.

The liturgy forms another canon, the canon for worship.

The lives and teachings of the Saints form another canon, the canon of holiness.

History teaches how important these canons are for unity and truth. There is something very sad when they are fractured. But none of this implies rigidity. The astonishing richness of the liturgy and the astonishing variety of the saints testifies everywhere to creativity.

There's a phrase 'life is complicated enough'. What each one of us needs most of all is clear guidance. We do not want conflicting voices, we do not need competing claims. There is so much to do. We need to get on with the pursuit of holiness. It is so sad to see Christians falling out with one another when they all need is to be attaining holiness. Nothing has been as debilitating as this to the Christian witness to the one true God and his holiness.

There comes a point when we must eschew fratricide and infighting. We must renounce it in our heart just as we renounce the world, the self and the Evil One. We must concentrate on the one thing necessary, giving our whole attention to God. We must be channels of love, for the world badly needs it.

Let tradition in the profoundest sense be our guide and let us attain to the holiness which calls us.



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