

10 Questions about Orthodox Christianity



 FINDING THE **TRUE FAITH**

Introduction

This is my attempt to answer questions I've been asked about Orthodox Christianity by friends and family. It is intended to be a conversation starter, so use it as a jumping off point if you want to learn more. The most important things to do are:

Ask a priest. This ebook is not the authoritative position of the Orthodox Church. Speaking with a canonical Orthodox priest is the best way to understand what the Church teaches on any of the topics discussed here. If you're planning to visit an Orthodox service, contact the priest and let him know you'll be coming.

Read. There's more information on Orthodoxy online than you could ever read. Not all of it is helpful, so be selective. The [Orthodox Church in America](#) and [Antiochian Archdiocese](#) websites are good places to start. [Ancient Faith](#) is also an excellent source of Orthodox teaching.

Pray. If you're from another Christian tradition – or no tradition at all – and are seeking the true faith of the first Christians, spend time in prayer that God will help you on this journey.

1

What is Orthodoxy?

“We do not change the boundaries marked out by our Fathers. We keep the Tradition we have received. If we begin to lay down the Law of the Church even in the smallest things, the whole edifice will fall to the ground in no short time.”

— St. John of Damascus

The Orthodox Church is the oldest Christian Church in the world. Founded by Jesus Christ, its beginnings are chronicled in the Acts of The Apostles. It has existed in an unbroken continuity since then. No other Christian church or fellowship can accurately claim this.

The term “orthodox” means “right belief” or “right practice,” and as such we follow the teaching of Jesus and His apostles, and maintain those teachings and practices as taught by the very first Christians.

The Eastern Orthodox Church is one of the largest Christian fellowships in the world, second only to the Roman Catholic Church. Around the world, people from other Christian traditions who desire a connection to an ancient Christian faith are coming home to Orthodoxy.

2 Greek, Russian... what's the difference?

"The Holy Orthodox Church has never perceptibly changed from Apostolic times, and, therefore, no one can go astray in finding out what she teaches."

— St. Raphael of Brooklyn

There is only one Orthodox Christian Church, often referred to as the Eastern Orthodox Church. All canonical Orthodox churches are in communion with one another, and all Orthodox believers share the same faith, practice the same liturgy and receive the same sacraments.

At the turn of the 20th Century, many immigrants did not speak English, and found that the Church was a refuge where they could be among their own people. While this has led to the ethnic character of many Orthodox parishes, they are not denominations in the way Protestant churches are.

The Orthodox Church is not divided. It is the one true Church, and all Orthodox Christians are brethren in Christ, regardless of language, culture or location.

3 I've got the Holy Bible. Isn't that all I need?

“Stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.”

— 2 Thessalonians 2:15

The Gospels and the Epistles are honored and read in every Orthodoxy liturgy. But in the first decades after Christ's death and resurrection there was no written Bible as we know it today. Christians worshiped Christ long before there was a Bible to read.

The early churches that spread across the Roman Empire read from the Jewish scriptures (our Old Testament) for years, occasionally receiving a letter from one of the Apostles. Eventually these letters, as well as the most revered written accounts of Christ's ministry, were collected into what is our New Testament. The Orthodox understand that the Bible came from the Church, not the other way around.

Holy Tradition, which includes scripture, the use of icons, and the Holy Eucharist, are interconnected gifts through which we worship God. Both Holy Tradition and written Scripture are our inheritance from the fathers of the Church, and we hold fast to both.

4 What do you believe about Mary?

"I have been amazed that some are utterly in doubt as to whether or not the Holy Virgin is able to be called the Mother of God. For if our Lord Jesus Christ is God, how should the Holy Virgin who bore him not be the Mother of God?"

— St. Cyril of Alexandria

Orthodox Christians believe that Mary is the mother of God, and that she was chosen by God for this special purpose. Whereas Eve said "no" to God, Mary said "yes." We believe that she was sinless of her own free will, and ever-virgin. Orthodox Christians revere her as the *Theotokos*, or God-bearer.

We do not pray "to" Mary, as we do to God. Instead, Orthodox Christians ask her to intercede on our behalf to her Son, Jesus. This leads to the question of whether we pray to the dead.

Orthodox Christians believe that physical death is not the end of our existence. Just as we ask our friends and family to pray for us, we ask those who have departed this life to pray for us. As the mother of Christ, Mary holds a very special place in the hearts of Orthodox Christians, and her prayers to her Son are seen as being of great value.

5 Isn't having icons in church a form of idolatry?

“Possibly a contentious unbeliever will maintain that we worshiping images in our churches are convicted of praying to lifeless idols. Far be it from us to do this. Faith makes Christians, and God, who cannot deceive, works miracles.”

— St. John of Damascus

God commanded the people of Israel not to make any painting or sculpture for the purpose of worshiping it as a god. But this is not the purpose of icons in Orthodoxy.

Just as the Ark of the Covenant was engraved with images to remind us of heavenly things, icons are an aid to worship. They remind us of the “great cloud of witnesses” that have gone before us. We venerate icons in the way we would hold dear a photograph of a cherished loved one who has passed on.

In the early church, illiteracy was common, and having written scripture was of little use unless there was someone to read it to the people. Icons are a method of conveying the Gospel through a visual medium. They are created with very specific rules so that they correctly tell the story of Christ and His salvation of Man through his death, burial and resurrection.

6 Is Orthodoxy just another version of Catholicism?

“We hear it remarked that it matters not what one believes if he does right. But if one does not believe right, he does not do the right thing — that is, if his belief is sincere and carried out in practice. If one believes that which is wrong, and still acts otherwise from force of circumstance, he is wrong in heart.”

— St. Sebastian Dabovich

During His earthly ministry Christ instituted His Church. His missionaries to the world spread the Good News and founded churches across the Roman Empire.

For over 1000 years there was a single Christian communion that spread throughout the world. Over time, cracks developed in that communion. Incorrect doctrine began to find a foothold in the Roman Church, eventually leading to its split with the other churches planted by the apostles of Jesus.

The Protestant Reformation was a split with the Catholic Church in the 16th Century. All Protestant denominations have roots in the Reformation, and there are now over 30,000 different Christian denominations.

But Christ instituted one Church, and that Church still exists today. It is ancient. It is unchanged. It is Orthodox.

7 Do you believe that faith alone saves us?

“If we make every effort to avoid death of the body, still more should it be our endeavor to avoid death of the soul. There is no obstacle for a man who wants to be saved other than negligence and laziness of soul.”

— St. Anthony the Great

Christ came into this world to save us from sin. Through His death Christ defeated death and sin. He calls each of us to a right relationship with only Him.

To say that we are saved by faith and not works misunderstands the nature of both. Faith in Christ is itself an act, as is the acceptance of Christ as our Savior. To say that our works in this life are unimportant is to dispute the words of James (“faith without works is dead”) and Paul (“faith working through love”).

If we are truly seeking the salvation of Christ, a change begins to occur in us. Our thoughts, words and deeds begin to reflect His love for us and ours for Him. We may stumble, but we never stop trying to draw closer to God’s salvation.

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware **has said this** about the Orthodox position on salvation: “I have been saved, I am saved, and I am being saved.”

8 Do you confess your sins to a priest?

“Do not be ashamed to enter again into the Church. Be ashamed when you sin. Do not be ashamed when you repent.”

— *St. John Chrysostom*

Orthodox Christians confess our sins to God. Often we do this in the presence of a priest, who is a witness and an aid to our confession. The priest is not there to humiliate or to condemn us. He is there to help us understand that sin is a wound, and true repentance is a medicine.

In the early church, confession was done in front of the entire congregation! This later became impractical, and priests took on this responsibility as confessor. Confessing aloud in the presence of a priest brings with it the understanding of the seriousness of sin and the freedom that comes with confession and repentance.

When we sin, we are turning away from our relationship with God. Turning back to him and away from our sins is the beginning of repairing that relationship. A priest helps guide us to repentance through his wisdom and experience.

9 Do you have to be Orthodox to be saved?

“One should not seek among others the truth that can be easily gotten from the Church. For in her, as in a rich treasury, the apostles have placed all that pertains to truth, so that everyone can drink this beverage of life. She is the door of life.”

— St. Irenaeus of Lyons

There is an expression in Orthodoxy: We know where the Church is, but we cannot be sure where it is not.

God has revealed Truth to the whole world, and there are many expressions of belief that contain some grain of that truth. But Christ is the only way to communion with God, and the fullest expression of this is within the Church instituted by Christ.

Jesus alone will ultimately judge who is and is not saved. It is not for us to speculate. The task of any Christian is to seek Christ where He may be found, and the fullness of the Gospel may only be found in the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

10 What does Orthodoxy have to say to the modern world?

“Let us plant ourselves upon the rock of faith and the Tradition of the Church, removing not the landmarks set by our holy fathers, nor giving room to those who are anxious to introduce novelties and to undermine the structure of God’s holy ecumenical and apostolic Church.

— St. John of Damascus

In an age of “anything goes” religion, where anyone who can quote bible verses can start a church, the Orthodox Church stands as an unchanging guardian of the Tradition of the first Christians.

The Orthodox Church brings the entire being into the worship of God. All the senses are engaged. Everything in an Orthodox liturgy is for the worship of God. Nothing in an Orthodox service is put in place for the sake of an emotional reaction or an altered state of mind. It is there to direct all of our being toward the worship of God.

The best way to see what Orthodoxy has to say is to attend a liturgy. You’ll be welcomed with open arms to experience the fullest expression of Christianity – the True Faith.

Come and see.

