6. The Orthodox perspective

Eastern Orthodoxy is the second-largest Christian communion (roughly 220–260 million people), organized as a family of self-governing churches (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Russia, Greece, Romania, Serbia and others) united in faith and sacraments rather than under a single head. It shares with Catholicism the first seven Ecumenical Councils, bishops in apostolic succession, the sacraments, the veneration of Mary and the saints, icons and prayer for the dead. It agrees with Baptists in rejecting the papacy as Rome defines it, and in rejecting purgatory, indulgences and the Immaculate Conception as dogmas. For someone weighing Protestant and Catholic claims, Orthodoxy is the main third option that also claims direct continuity with the ancient church.

How Orthodoxy differs from Catholicism

Authority

Orthodox: Holy Tradition, with Scripture at its heart; the Ecumenical Councils as received by the whole Church; no single infallible bishop.

Catholic: Scripture and Tradition interpreted by the Magisterium, with the pope as its head; papal infallibility (1870).

The pope

Orthodox: In the first millennium Rome held a primacy of honor, "first among equals"; universal jurisdiction is rejected.

Catholic: The pope has full, supreme and universal jurisdiction (Vatican I).

Filioque

Orthodox: The Spirit proceeds from the Father (original Nicene Creed, 381); the Western addition "and the Son" (Toledo 589; adopted in Rome c. 1014) was added without an ecumenical council.

Catholic: The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, as from one principle; the phrase is legitimate and complementary to the Eastern formula (CCC 246–248).

Salvation

Orthodox: *Theosis* (deification): becoming by grace what God is by nature, through cooperation (synergy) with God over a lifetime. Less legal language.

Catholic: Justification and sanctification by grace, with merit and satisfaction; also teaches deification (CCC 460) but frames it more juridically.

Original sin

Orthodox: "Ancestral sin": we inherit mortality and a tendency to sin, not Adam's guilt.

Catholic: We inherit a fallen nature deprived of original holiness, not personal guilt (CCC 404–405); differences are partly of emphasis.

Purgatory and indulgences

Orthodox: Pray for the dead and believe it helps them, but reject purgatory as a place of satisfaction, and indulgences.

Catholic: Purgatory defined (Lyons II, Florence, Trent); indulgences retained.

Mary

Orthodox: *Theotokos*, ever-virgin, all-holy; her Dormition and bodily assumption celebrated; the Immaculate Conception not accepted as defined.

Catholic: All of these, plus the Immaculate Conception (1854) and Assumption (1950) as dogmas.

Sacraments

Orthodox: Infants receive baptism, chrismation (confirmation) and Communion together; leavened bread; Communion in both kinds for all.

Catholic: Confirmation and First Communion usually delayed to the age of reason (Latin rite); unleavened bread.

Clergy

Orthodox: Married men may be ordained priests; bishops are celibate monks.

Catholic: Latin priests celibate (Eastern Catholics may marry).

Development of doctrine

Orthodox: Viewed with suspicion; the faith is preserved, not developed. Hence no new dogmas since 787.

Catholic: Doctrine develops organically (Newman); later councils define further.

How Orthodoxy answers the Baptist

On most points in Parts I–IV the Orthodox stand with Catholics against Baptists: baptismal regeneration, infant baptism, the real presence, the Eucharist as sacrifice, confession, bishops, intercession of the saints, icons and prayer for the dead. Their distinctive contribution is the argument that these practices are apostolic without depending on Rome: if they were Roman inventions, the Eastern churches that rejected Rome's authority would not share them. This "two witnesses" argument is one of the stronger historical points against the claim that sacramental Christianity was a medieval Roman development.

Why some evangelicals become Orthodox

- **Historical continuity without the papacy:** converts such as Peter Gillquist and the Evangelical Orthodox Church (received into the Antiochian Archdiocese in 1987) and Frank Schaeffer looked for the "New Testament church" and concluded it was Orthodoxy.
- **Liturgy and mysticism:** ancient worship, the Jesus Prayer, fasting and an emphasis on transformation rather than legal categories.
- **Fewer late dogmas:** no papal infallibility, Immaculate Conception or purgatory as defined, which evangelicals often find the hardest Catholic claims.

Questions Orthodox Christians put to both sides

To Catholics: If the pope had universal jurisdiction from the beginning, why did the first seven Ecumenical Councils meet in the East, called by emperors, and why did Constantinople I (381) and Chalcedon (451, canon 28) rank Constantinople second "because it is New Rome"?

Catholic reply: Rome's legates presided or confirmed the councils, and Pope Leo rejected Chalcedon's canon 28. Imperial convocation was a practical arrangement, not a doctrinal claim.

To Catholics: How could a later council or pope add a dogma (the Filioque, the Immaculate Conception, infallibility) without the agreement of the whole Church, East and West?

Catholic reply: Doctrine develops under the guidance of the Spirit through the successor of Peter; the Eastern formula "from the Father through the Son" is compatible with the Filioque, as Florence (1439) argued.

To Baptists: If the sacramental faith was a Roman corruption, why do the Eastern churches, which never accepted Rome's authority, and even the non-Chalcedonian churches that split in 451 (Copts, Armenians, Ethiopians), share it?

Baptist reply: Shared practice shows these ideas are early, not that they are apostolic; corruption could have spread before the splits. Scripture remains the test.

To Baptists: If the church must be visible and continuous (Matt 16:18), where was it before 1609, if not in the churches that kept apostolic succession?

Baptist reply: Christ's church is the people of God wherever the gospel is believed; continuity of faith matters, not of institutions.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition regards the Orthodox claim, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

The Orthodox churches are true particular churches with apostolic succession and valid sacraments, "linked with us in closest intimacy," but full communion requires communion with the bishop of Rome. Rome's legates presided over or confirmed the early councils, and doctrine develops legitimately under Peter's successor.

Sources: Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio* 14–15; *Dominus Iesus* 17 (2000).

Orthodox

The Orthodox Church understands itself as the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, whose faith was "sealed in completeness" and cannot be added to or changed, guarded by the whole body of the faithful. It accepts the historical names of other churches and has taken part in dialogue since the Ecumenical Patriarchate's encyclical of 1920; Orthodox churches differ on ecumenism, and several did not attend the 2016 Council of Crete.

Sources: Holy and Great Council (Crete, 2016), *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World*, 1, 6; Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs (1848), §20; Ecumenical Patriarchate, encyclical "Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere" (1920).

Lutheran

The Church is known by the Gospel rightly taught and the sacraments rightly given, not by

Reformed

The catholic Church is "not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or certain people," and

unbroken succession, so Lutherans ask whether a church teaches the Gospel rather than only whether it is continuous. From about 1575 Lutheran theologians at Tübingen sent the Augsburg Confession to Patriarch Jeremias II, hoping he would recognize their faith; he replied three times, rejecting their distinctive teachings, and the exchange ended in 1581 without agreement.

Sources: Augsburg Confession VII; Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 16; the Tübingen–Jeremias correspondence (1576–1581).

every particular church is "more or less pure" and can err, so the Reformed do not accept any one body's claim to be the whole Church without error. Patriarch Cyril Lucaris published a Calvinist-leaning confession in 1629, which Orthodox synods (1638, 1642, 1672) condemned; a formal Reformed–Orthodox dialogue ran from 1988 to 2007.

Sources: Belgic Confession, arts. 27, 29; Westminster Confession 25.4–5; Confession of Cyril Lucaris (1629).

Anglican

Article XIX holds that the ancient churches of Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch, like Rome, "have erred," so ancient foundation alone does not free a church from error. Many Anglicans nonetheless regard the Orthodox as a true, apostolic part of the Church and have long sought closer union, from the Nonjuring bishops' proposals (1716–1725) to the agreed statements of the Anglican–Orthodox commission (Moscow 1976, Dublin 1984). The Orthodox, for their part, hold the Orthodox Church to be the one true Church.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles, XIX; the Nonjurors' *Proposals* (1716) and the patriarchs' reply (1723); Anglican–Orthodox Dublin Agreed Statement (1984).

Methodist

The Methodist article defines the visible Church by Word and sacraments but omits the Anglican clause saying that Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch and Rome "have erred." A dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Ecumenical Patriarchate began in 1990; it has issued no agreed statement on the Orthodox claim.

Sources: Methodist Articles of Religion (1784), XIII; World Methodist Council–Ecumenical Patriarchate meetings (1990–2000).

Baptist

Shared sacramental practice in the East shows that such beliefs are early, not that they are apostolic. Christ's church is wherever the gospel is believed: continuity of faith matters, not continuity of institutions.

Sources: Baptist Faith and Message (2000), art. VI.

Sources for Orthodox teaching: Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, *The Orthodox Church*; the Orthodox Church in America's teaching pages (oca.org/orthodoxy); the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, Ravenna Document (2007) on primacy. In 1965 Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras lifted the mutual excommunications of 1054.

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