

Ecclesiology - The Church

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

To speak of the Church is to speak of the Body into which every believer is baptized and from which every servant serves. Ecclesiology is therefore not an abstract chapter of dogmatics but the very air in which the Christian life breathes. In this lesson, we trace the doctrine of the Church as received by the Fathers and the apostles by examining the following topics:

- **The Kingdom of God:** Its three expressions.
- **Elements of the Church:** The constitutive components of a true Church.
- **Scriptural Mystery:** The images and symbols Scripture uses to unveil the mystery of the Church.
- **History and Purpose:** The Church's story from Eden to Pentecost, and up to the Second Coming.
- **Visibility and Invisibility:** The Church's dual nature.
- **The Four Marks:** Those confessed by the Creed.
- **The Four Orders:** The structures the Holy Spirit has built into the life of the Church.

Along the way we speak frankly about what has harmed the unity of the Church — the heresies and schisms of history — not to exult in division but to teach the pre-servant to guard the flock from the errors that still walk abroad in our own generation.

What Is the Kingdom of God?

The Kingdom of God was the main subject of our Lord's ministry in Israel. It is the work of the Holy Trinity exercised over all creation. The Father sent His Son and His Spirit to establish that Kingdom on earth, fulfilling the long preparation of the prophets and the promises of the Old Covenant. The New Testament sets the Kingdom before us in three distinct but interconnected expressions.

The first is **the Kingdom within**. It is the reign of God in the heart of the baptized, accomplished by the work of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

“For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Romans 14:17

This Kingdom is established in us by Baptism and maintained in us by the Eucharist. Once a person is baptized, each of us becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit, and is grafted into the sweet olive tree which is the One, Holy, Universal, Apostolic Church of God.

The second is the **Kingdom on earth**, which is **the Church** herself. Our Lord established her as His Bride and His Body. He built her as a house, the Temple of God, with the apostles as her foundation. He ratified His covenant with her in His own Blood. And her life depends upon the presence of the Holy Spirit, who gives her being and guidance. That is why in the Creed the confession of faith in the Church

is placed immediately after the confession of faith in the Holy Spirit: the Church does not exist apart from the Spirit whose temple she is.

The third is the **Kingdom to come**. It begins on the day of Christ's second coming and the resurrection of the dead, when Christ will take His Church to His Father in glory, and every tear will be wiped away. This is the eschatological horizon that gives the whole present life of the Church its meaning — she is not merely a society in the world, but a pilgrim community moving toward the City whose builder and maker is God.

What Makes a Church?

The apostolic and patristic definition of a Church is triadic and exact. A Church is the community of baptized believers led by a canonical bishop — one who stands in apostolic succession — gathered around the Holy Eucharist. Three elements together: baptized believers, canonical bishop, and the Eucharist. Any one of them missing, and what remains may be a religious gathering, a devotional society, or a well-intentioned assembly, but it is not what the apostles called a Church.

This definition was not invented by later generations. It is the self-understanding of the Church from her earliest hour, and St. Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of St. John, sets it down for us with unmistakable clarity at the turn of the second century.

“Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize, or to celebrate a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve of, that is also pleasing to God.” — St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Smyrnaeans 8

The Orthodox Church defines the bishop's identity through his essential participation in the apostolic college as a whole, a unity expressed 'conciliarly'—through the synodal gathering of bishops—rather than through submission to the Bishop of Rome alone. While the Roman Catholic Church asserts that communion with the See of Rome is the necessary prerequisite for the 'fullness' that allows for a common celebration of the Eucharist, the Orthodox Church rejects this as an uncanonical addition. For the Orthodox, the Eucharist is the fundamental manifestation of the Church's life and is not a seal of administrative compliance with the Pope. Therefore, the Orthodox Church maintains that the constitutive bond of unity already exists within the collective episcopacy and the Eucharist itself; the assertion that this unity is deficient due to the absence of papal submission is viewed not as a lack, but as a preservation of the ancient, synodal structure that defines the Church's life.

On the other hand, most of the Protestant denominations define a Church simply as a group of believers, without requiring a bishop in apostolic succession and without receiving the Eucharist as the sacramental Body and Blood of the Lord. The Anglican and Episcopalian bodies retain bishops and a Eucharistic assembly in form, but these do not hold the same sacramental weight they hold in the apostolic Churches, and their own orders have been judged irregular by both Rome and Orthodoxy. We do not speak of this to disparage other believers; we speak of it because a pre-servant must know what the Church has always meant by the word Church, so that terms do not drift under him when the hard

questions come.

The Names and Three Senses of the Word 'Church'

The word itself is instructive. The Latin *ecclesia* is drawn from the Greek *ek-ka-lein*, meaning to call out of. The Church is an assembly of those called out — called out of the world, called out of darkness, called out of their own scattered lives into the one family of God. The same word was first used of the assembly of God's people at Mount Sinai; the first Christian community in Jerusalem took it up as the heir and continuation of the Church of the Old Covenant.

In the liturgy and in the Fathers the word is used in three overlapping senses, and a well-formed servant must hold them together without confusion.

- The Universal Church — the one, holy, universal, and apostolic Church of God across every land and every age. The deacon prays in the litanies, "pray for the peace of the one, holy, universal, and apostolic Church of God."
- The Local Community — the particular diocese or parish in a given place. The deacon prays, "pray for this holy Church."
- The Eucharistic Assembly — the concrete gathering of the faithful around the altar for the Divine Liturgy. The deacon prays, "and our assemblies."

The Church is at once the great Body spanning every tribe and tongue, the specific community in Houston or in Alexandria, and the particular assembly kneeling tonight before the altar. Each sense is real. Each sense depends on the other two. To collapse them — to speak as though only the invisible universal Church is real and the local parish is merely its expression, or as though only the parish is real and the universal is an abstraction — is to lose the full scriptural reality of the Body of Christ.

The Images and Symbols of the Church

Scripture does not define the Church by a single formula; it unveils her through a wealth of images, each of which teaches something the others cannot say alone. The Fathers gathered these images and arranged them as a kind of icon of the mystery. Seven of them stand out.

The first is **the People of God**. In the Old Testament the images of election gathered around this people — chosen, covenanted, set apart to fear God and do good. In the New Testament Christ becomes the head of the New Church, and the plan of salvation unfolded from the beginning is fulfilled: God willed to save not isolated individuals but a people, clothed with the dignity of His own children, sent as salt of the earth and light of the world, commanded to love one another, destined for the Kingdom of Heaven. At Chrismation each baptized person is anointed with the anointing of Christ and made a partaker of His priestly, prophetic, and royal offices — offering prayers and sacrifices on behalf of all creation, living in service to the poor and sick, witnessing to the faith in word and deed.

The second is **the Body of Christ**. This image holds unity and diversity together. Christ is the head; the faithful are the members; the one Body has many members with many functions, yet is one living organism knit together by the Holy Spirit.

“Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body.” Ephesians 5:23

“And He is the head of the body, the church.” Colossians 1:18

“So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.”
Romans 12:5

“Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.” 1 Corinthians 12:27

So intimate is this image that St. Paul in places uses 'Christ' and 'Church' almost interchangeably — "so also is Christ," he says in 1 Corinthians 12:12, speaking of the Body. And from this unity he draws the indignant question, "Is Christ divided?" (1 Corinthians 1:13) Because there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5), there is only one Church, and outside her bounds salvation is not a thing the apostles dared to promise.

“He cannot have God for his Father who has not the Church for his mother... outside the Church there is no salvation.” — St. Cyprian of Carthage, On the Unity of the Church 6

The third is **the Bride of Christ**, for whom the Bridegroom handed Himself over and whom He washed with His own Blood. "I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ," says St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:2. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her" (Ephesians 5:25). And at the end of the Revelation of John, the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready, arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright — which is the righteous acts of the saints (Revelation 19:7-8).

The fourth is **the Sheepfold**. Christ is the Gate, by whom all must enter. He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. He is the Chief Shepherd who gathers His flock and knows each one by name.

The fifth is **the Temple of God**, the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Each person is a living stone, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Himself as the chief cornerstone. As the body is the house of the human soul, so the Holy Spirit is the soul of the Body of Christ — the Church. Without that indwelling Spirit, the stones remain stones; with Him, they are a living Temple.

The sixth is **the Cultivated Field** — the olive tree whose root is the people of the Old Covenant and whose new branches are the grafted Gentiles, and the vineyard in which Christ is the Vine, the faithful are the branches, and the Father is the Vinedresser. The image teaches both growth and dependence: no branch bears fruit of itself; every fruit is borne in communion with the Vine.

The seventh is **the Heavenly Jerusalem** — our mother who is from above (Galatians 4:26), the Bride of Christ whom He nourishes and cherishes (Ephesians 5:29). This final image carries the whole doctrine forward into eschatology: the Church is not only now; she is the city descending from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

The Beginning and the Purpose of the Church

The Church is not a later addition to the plan of salvation — she is its instrument and its goal. Her story runs through four great stages.

The first is the **Old Testament preparation**. The Church was, in a real sense, created in the paradise of Eden, where God's family lived with Him as His people. She was in the mind of God from the beginning, for the Church is simply the human family as God willed it to be. After the fall, God's plan of salvation was set quietly at work. He preserved a seed from corruption in the Ark of Noah. He called Abraham and his descendants out of the world and consecrated them, so that through them the whole world would be called. Through the Tabernacle and the Temple He sanctified them for their mission; through a succession of prophets He purged them of idolatry. Every step was preparing the ground on which the Church of the New Covenant would stand.

The second is **the institution of the Church by Christ Himself**. In the fullness of time He came and announced the Kingdom of God. Wherever the King was, there the Kingdom was present. He gathered the Twelve; He chose the Seventy; He established the Church on them. The Fathers read in the piercing of His side on the Cross a figure of her birth.

“As Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam's side, so the Church is formed from the side of Christ as He slept upon the Cross: for from His side came blood and water — blood for the Eucharist, water for Baptism — and from these the Church was formed.”
— St. John Chrysostom, Catechetical Homily 3

Thus the Church is born of Christ's total self-giving. And He did not leave her without form; He gave to His apostles the structure and order of her life.

The third is **the revelation of the Church by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost**. What had been instituted in the Upper Room and sealed at Calvary was now manifested to the world with power and with signs. The Holy Spirit constituted the hierarchy, distributed the gifts of service, and bestowed the spiritual gifts for the edification of every member. The Spirit remains the guide of the Church until the return of Christ; without Him she is nothing.

The fourth is **the final glorification of the Church at the Second Coming**. She will be taken to be with her Lord in His Father's house, and in that day she will be perfected — without spot or wrinkle or any such thing (Ephesians 5:27), conformed fully to the image of her Bridegroom, reflecting His holiness, righteousness, and love in their entirety. The journey from Eden to the heavenly Jerusalem will be complete.

The Church Visible and Invisible

The Church, like her Lord, is at once divine and human. She is the union of heaven and earth, the visible community and the heavenly company, the pilgrim on the way and the city at the end of the way. To deny either side of this mystery is to wound the Church.

In her visibility she is a community of believers united in faith and worship, with real buildings, real clergy, real parishes, real councils, and real sacraments. Those who speak as though the Church were purely invisible — a spiritual fellowship of all those anywhere who believe, with no visible structure or

sacramental life required — have cut the Church away from the apostolic reality. The apostles baptized, ordained, laid on hands, broke bread. There was always a visible assembly.

In her invisibility she is the communion of saints, living and departed, united in Christ by the Holy Spirit and partaking even now in the eternal life of God. Those who speak as though the Church were only the visible institution — as though the Body ended at what the eye can see — have forgotten the great cloud of witnesses, the choirs of angels, the saints before the throne. The Liturgy celebrated in our parish tonight is celebrated jointly with heaven; the Cherubic Hymn is not poetry but participation.

Christ gives Himself completely to His Church in the mysteries He instituted and entrusted to her. Through the mysteries we receive Christ and the Spirit; through Christ and the Spirit we come to the Father. The Church is the mystery of salvation — not one instrument among several for finding God, but the very Body of Christ in which the Father's saving will is enacted. This is the sober meaning of the saying of St. Cyprian that outside the Church there is no salvation. The saying is not a boast; it is a definition. To be saved is to be joined to Christ; to be joined to Christ is to be a living member of His Body; and His Body is the one Church.

The Four Marks: One, Holy, Universal, Apostolic

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed confesses four characteristics of the true Church. Every generation must ponder them, because every generation meets counterfeits that lack one or more of them.

The Church is One. She is one in faith, in doctrine, and in spiritual life.

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." Ephesians 4:4-6

Our Lord Himself prayed for this oneness on the night before His Passion — that they all may be one, as the Father is in Him and He in the Father, that the world may believe (John 17:20-21). And He foretold it to His disciples: "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16). He came that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad (John 11:52).

The unity of the Church is constituted by seven bonds which St. Paul sets out in a single breath:

- One Body — realized in the Eucharist: "For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread." (1 Corinthians 10:17)
- One Spirit — the Holy Spirit dwelling in all the faithful
- One Hope — the hope of eternal life in Christ
- One Lord — Jesus Christ, the one Mediator
- One Faith — the Creed confessed by the undivided Church
- One Baptism — the single baptism for the remission of sins
- One God and Father — the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, above all and through all and in us

all

The Church is Holy. She is holy because she is the Body of Christ, who is Holy. She is set apart for God, and she is called to live a life of holiness. Her holiness is not the sum of the personal merits of her members but the sanctifying presence of Christ within her, mediated through the mysteries and through the work of the Holy Spirit. And yet she is also called to make that holiness visible. Her members, cleansed in the mysteries, are sanctified progressively so that they may be filled more and more with the Holy Spirit. Like the Israelites at Sinai they must be clean in body, soul, and heart as they come to Communion; like the apostles in the Upper Room they must hear the words of Christ and examine their own hearts before receiving His Body and Blood. Holiness is never a matter of private preference — it affects the whole Church. Where the holiness of the members is lacking, the power of prayer is lacking and the manifestation of miracles is lacking. Every member bears a real weight in the sanctity of the whole.

The Church is Universal — in Greek *katholikē*, whence the word catholic. Here a pastoral note must be sounded, because the word has been much abused. In modern English, especially in non-religious circles, the adjective "catholic" has been so tightly fused with the proper noun "Roman Catholic" that the two are heard as synonyms. They are not. The word *katholikē* is drawn from the Greek phrase *kath' holon*, referring to the whole; it passed into Latin as *catholicus*, meaning universal. The Church is catholic because she is sent to the whole of the human race — to every nation, every language, every color, every age. The Coptic Orthodox Church is as fully catholic as any other apostolic Church — she is the one, holy, *katholikē*, apostolic Church confessed in the Creed.

The Church is Apostolic. She was founded upon the apostles and maintains apostolic succession — the unbroken ordination by which every canonical bishop today stands in a line of hands traceable to the Twelve. The apostolic fathers, who are the generation immediately after the apostles, are the first witnesses that this succession was preserved and taken with the utmost seriousness.

“Having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.” Ephesians 2:20

And apostolicity is not only genealogical; it is doctrinal. The teaching of the Church must remain the teaching of the apostles, and any departure from it is condemned by the apostles themselves in the strongest possible terms.

“But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.” Galatians 1:8-9

What Has Hurt the Unity of the Church

Because the Church is the Body of Christ, nothing in history has been more tragic than the wounds inflicted upon her unity. Two kinds of wounds must be named.

The first is heresy — the corruption of apostolic doctrine. The history of the first centuries is a history of

the Church, gathered in councils, naming heresies and confessing the faith against them.

Category	Example	Error
Christological	Arianism	Denied the full divinity of the Son
Christological	Nestorianism	Divided the one Christ into two persons
Christological	(Eutychian) Monophysitism	Fused the two natures into one mixed nature
Pneumatological	Macedonianism/ Pneumatomachian	Denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit
Soteriological	Pelagianism	Denied original sin and the necessity of grace
Soteriological	Gnosticism	Made salvation a matter of secret knowledge
Ecclesiological	Donatism	Tied sacramental validity to the moral purity of the minister
Ecclesiological	Montanism	Set new private revelation above the apostolic deposit

We note carefully, with the precision the Orthodox tradition has always insisted upon, that the Oriental Orthodox Churches — the Coptic, the Syriac, the Armenian, the Ethiopian, the Eritrean, and the Indian — have never embraced the Eutychian heresy sometimes called Monophysitism. Our faith, confessed with St. Cyril, is the one incarnate nature of God the Word — a union without confusion, without change, without division, without separation. The caricature painted by adversaries in the fifth century does not describe us and never has.

The second wound is schism — the breaking of communion where doctrine might or might not be at stake. The Great Schism of 1054 divided the Latin West from the Byzantine East over a complex set of theological, political, and cultural differences, culminating in the filioque and the claim of papal supremacy. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century separated vast portions of Western Christendom from Rome, over disagreements about doctrine, authority, and the sacraments. Beneath these great ruptures a continual stream of lesser schisms has run, each with its own immediate cause and its lasting bitterness.

One clarification is essential, because it is often misstated. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 was not itself a schism; it was an ecumenical council that addressed the Christological question. The schism which the Oriental Orthodox Churches sustained at that council was not, on our side, a rejection of the right understanding of Christ — it was a rejection of the Tome of Leo's formulations and of the political and ecclesial pressures that were felt to be imposing them. Modern theological dialogues between the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox have repeatedly confessed that both families understand the same Christological faith in different languages. A pre-servant must be able to speak carefully about this, because the easy account that makes the Copts heretics of Chalcedon is neither historically fair

nor theologically true.

Beyond heresy and schism, lesser forces still chip at unity: cultural and ethnic pride, political and social partisanship, personal ambition, failure to love and to forgive. The doctrine of the Church is also an examination of conscience. Every member is either healing her unity or helping to wound it.

The Orders of the Church

The Holy Spirit has structured the life of the Church in orders, each with its own dignity and service.

The Laity are the People of God — the saints, the faithful, the brethren. The word itself comes from the Greek *laos*, the people of God, and from this body the other three orders emerge. The laity hold the general priesthood of all believers; they are not a passive audience for the clergy but the living Body from which and for which the clergy serve. In a real sense, technically, the clergy are themselves laity — members of the people of God called to a particular service.

The Deacons — literally, servants — are ordained for two inseparable labors. First, they serve the altar, assisting the priest in the liturgy. Second, they serve the material needs of the people, especially widows, orphans, and the poor. Their origin is narrated in Acts 6, where the apostles laid hands on Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus. The Church has never permitted the diaconal order to drift entirely into the sanctuary; a deacon with no care for the poor is a deacon who has forgotten the first page of his own history.

The Presbyters — the elders, whose Greek word *presbyteros* became the Latin *presbyter*, the Old English *preost*, and finally our modern priest — are ordained to rule and to labor in the word and to teach the true doctrine of the local congregation. They administer the sacraments under the bishop, preach the Gospel, and shepherd the parish.

The Bishop is the overseer of the congregation. Sometimes in the New Testament the words *episkopos* (overseer) and *presbyteros* (elder) are used interchangeably, and the full separation of the two offices into distinct ranks was a development of the late apostolic and sub-apostolic age. But the office of bishop as a distinct rank is already in the New Testament — the Twelve themselves held it, and Acts 1:20 speaks of the office from which Judas had fallen, a word that can literally be translated as *bishopric*. The apostles in turn consecrated others to succeed them — Timothy, Titus, and many more. Outside the New Testament, the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, at the beginning of the second century, already speak of Christians as laity at one with the bishop, the presbyters, and the deacons — the four orders fully in place.

In the Orthodox Church authority resides in all orders, with the bishop providing the center of unity. His authority is not over the Church but within the Church. He is, as the Liturgy calls him, an icon of Christ, the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. In the larger matters that concern more than a single diocese, the Holy Synod — a council of bishops — exercises authority together, in the pattern of the Council of the Apostles at Jerusalem in Acts 15. No bishop is a sovereign; no diocese is a congregation unto itself; no order of the Church can dispense with the others.

The Family as a Church

There is one last dimension of ecclesiology which must not be omitted, because it touches every home a pre-servant will ever enter. The Christian family itself is a Church — a little Church, a domestic Church, the Church in miniature — where the faith is first received, first lived, and first handed on.

St. Paul takes this for granted in the most casual way in his letters.

“Likewise greet the church that is in their house.” Romans 16:5 (of Priscilla and Aquila)

“Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.” 1 Corinthians 16:19

The home of this blessed couple was considered a Church because our Lord had promised, "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). The family of St. Timothy was also a Church, for the faith that dwelt in him had dwelt first in his grandmother Lois and in his mother Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5) — three generations of the same domestic liturgy of faith.

The family as Church is not a sentimental metaphor. It is a dogmatic reality. The parents exercise a priesthood over their household. The table becomes a lesser altar. The evening prayers are a lesser liturgy. The faith of the grandmother is a true apostolic succession, conveyed by catechesis and example to the mother, and by the mother to the child. Every Coptic household that prays the hours together, that reads the Gospel in the evening, that teaches its children to fast and to give, is an ecclesia within the Ecclesia. The servant's work in the larger Church rests on what is happening, or failing to happen, in these thousands of little Churches under thousands of roofs. Any ecclesiology that forgets the home has forgotten where the flock is actually fed.



Review Questions

- What is the Kingdom of God? (A. The kingdom of God is the dominion of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.)
- 2. What do we refer to by ecclesiology? (A. The assembly in the Old Testament (Heb. Koheleth) is translated ‘ekklesia’ in Greek, which we translate as ‘church’. The Christian doctrine of the Church is referred to as ‘ecclesiology’.)
- What are two images of the Church? (A. Temple of God and Body of Christ.)
- What are the Orthodox Creed four Characteristics of the True Church? (A. One, Holy, Universal, and Apostolic)
- What We’ve Seen that Hurts the oneness of the Church? (A. Heresies (e.g. Nature of Christ, the Person of the Holy Spirit, etc.) and Schisms (e.g. Council of Chalcedon)
- What is the meaning of the church to be universal, “Catholic”? (A. Universal: Includes the whole world, every nation on earth, every language and color.)
- What are the four orders of the Church? (A. Laity; Deacons; The Presbyters; The

Bishop.)

Progressivism

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

A movement has arisen in our generation that calls itself Christian, speaks with a reverential tone about Jesus, and even claims a love for the Scriptures, while quietly re-interpreting every central doctrine of the faith. It goes by several names — progressive Christianity, the emerging church, the reforming church — but at bottom it is an attempt to redefine what it means to be a Christian. It sounds like the real thing: the same vocabulary, some of the same hymns, often the same buildings that once housed a faithful, apostolic congregation. Strip away the vocabulary, though, and what is left is a fake representation of the true gospel, wearing the true gospel's clothes.

You will meet this movement's ideas before you ever meet its name — in a classroom, at work, scrolling through a friend's feed, or from a pulpit that used to be trustworthy. Our Lord warned us plainly that wolves would come to us in sheep's clothing, and the souls in your care are already touched by this movement's teaching long before anyone hands them a book with "progressive Christianity" on the cover. This lesson sets out the movement's self-description, walks doctrine by doctrine through what it has re-defined, and places each claim beside the apostolic and patristic faith of the Orthodox Church. The tone here is firm, because the stakes are exactly what the movement itself says they are: nothing less than who God is, what the Cross accomplished, and what a human being actually needs in order to be saved.

The Shape of the Movement

Progressive Christianity is, in a word, progressive. The adjective does the theological work: faith gets reframed as a journey of constant evolution, an ongoing search in which the old requirement of absolutes has quietly dropped away. Looked at this way, you're encouraged to keep moving, keep re-interpreting, keep adapting doctrine to the surrounding culture as that culture itself moves. What was once confessed as revealed truth gets spoken of instead as one perspective among many — reverently held, and just as reverently revised whenever the moral imagination of the age changes.

The movement names its own animating impulse as *inclusion*. What it offers the seeker is a place at the table, a welcome that asks **nothing to be surrendered**: not a sexual practice, not a religious heritage, not a theological doubt. Scripture gets honored as one source of truth rather than the container of absolute truth, sitting alongside personal experience, reason, and the insights of other religions as co-equal voices in the conversation.

Stated in its own words, the program sounds humane and appealing. A typical self-description opens with a list of rejections: we aren't fundamentalists; we don't believe the Bible is inerrant; we don't think creationism belongs in science classrooms; we don't believe God hates gay people; we don't believe people of other faiths are hell-bound unless they convert; we don't deny a woman's right to choose what happens to her body. Every clause reads as a release from something harsh, and the

weary reader is invited to feel relieved.

But a movement defined mainly by what it refuses to believe eventually has to answer for what it still affirms. Examined doctrine by doctrine, a different picture emerges — one that isn't a modest modernization of the apostolic faith but a substantively different religion wearing its clothes. That's the examination this lesson makes, doctrine by doctrine, following the movement's own list of departures.

1. We are Perfect

The first doctrine the movement offers is a strikingly simple one: you don't need to repent, because you are perfect just as you are. It sounds like good news, and in a culture exhausted by shame, it's meant to. But it rests on rejecting the doctrine of original sin altogether — the teaching that Adam's fall introduced into the human race a real corruption, a real inclination toward evil, a real rupture with God. In its place, progressive Christianity offers what it calls original blessing. Progressives don't usually deny that sin exists in some fashion; they deny that we inherit any sinful nature from our first parents. What separates you from God, on this account, isn't real corruption but your own self-imposed shame, and the remedy isn't repentance but self-acceptance. You were never actually separated from God, the teaching goes — you are beloved and accepted exactly as you are, and the only task left is to realize it.

The Orthodox doctrine of ancestral sin is more careful than the caricature either the old Reformers or the progressives now attack. We don't teach, with St. Augustine's Western successors, that infants bear personal guilt for Adam's transgression. But we do teach what the Fathers taught and what Scripture plainly says: a corruption entered the race through Adam — a real inclination toward sin, a real bondage to death — which every person inherits and every person also personally ratifies by his own consent to sin. Baptism cleanses the nature and unites you to Christ; the life of repentance and the mysteries work that cleansing out progressively, over a lifetime. The doctrine of original blessing, by denying the inherited corruption, empties the meaning of Baptism, empties the meaning of repentance, and — worse, pastorally — leaves you with no honest account of the ugliness you already know is in your own heart.

The pastoral damage runs deep. When you're told that your estrangement from God is only a misperception, and that the cure is simply to re-imagine yourself as already accepted, you're handed a counterfeit peace. You can no longer cry out with the Publican, "God, be merciful to me a sinner" — because this gospel has already told you there's no sinner there to be merciful to. In place of the Cross, you're handed a mirror.

2. The Cross Is Cosmic Child Abuse

The second doctrine strikes directly at the Cross. In progressive teaching, the death of Christ is often called horrific or unnecessary — on the theory that he didn't die for the salvation of the world at all, but simply to show us how to forgive our enemies by letting himself be crucified by angry people. The traditional teaching that the Father required the Son's self-offering gets read as an indictment of God's own character, turning him into a cosmic abuser. The phrase used in popular writing is blunt: cosmic

child abuse.

This needs a careful answer. The objection fastens on one particular Western, juridical theory of the Atonement — penal substitution, as certain Reformed writers developed it — and attacks it as though it were the only Christian account of the Cross. It isn't. The Orthodox doctrine of the Cross is ancient, rich, and entirely untouched by this caricature. We don't teach that an angry Father punished an innocent Son to be placated. We teach that God himself, out of his own free love, took flesh in the person of the Son, descended to the place of human death and bondage, and there trampled down death by his own death: Christus Victor, the paschal victory, the self-offering of the Son who is one in essence with the Father and the Spirit. St. Irenaeus captured the whole logic of it in a single line:

"[He] did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself." — St. Irenaeus, Against Heresies V, Preface

The Father didn't send a second person against his will into suffering. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one God, and the self-offering at Calvary is the self-offering of the one God for his creation. Rightly understood, the Atonement isn't child abuse — it's the deepest revelation of divine love: God himself bearing what we brought upon ourselves, and rising from under it. The progressive critique has mistaken one small Western setting for the jewel itself, and thrown out both together.

The Person of Christ: "Big Brother" in Place of the Son of God

A closely related move touches the person of Christ himself. In much progressive teaching, Jesus isn't so much the divine Son of God as a moral example to follow — a kind of big brother who walked a path we're now invited to walk too. The point of his life, on this reading, is to set a pattern. The divinity the Creed confesses — very God of very God, of one essence with the Father — gets quietly set aside, and what's left is an exemplary teacher.

The apostolic confession knows no such Christ. St. John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). St. Thomas, before the risen body of the Lord, cries out, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). St. Paul writes that in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Colossians 2:9). The Church at Nicaea, meeting while the living memory of the apostles was still only generations old, confessed him begotten, not made, one in essence with the Father. St. Athanasius put the weight of the whole doctrine in a single sentence:

"He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God. He manifested Himself by means of a body in order that we might perceive the Mind of the unseen Father. He endured shame from men that we might inherit immortality." — St. Athanasius, On the Incarnation 54

If Christ is only a moral example, that sentence is nonsense. Only if Christ is God Incarnate can the Incarnation carry the weight the Fathers put on it; can it actually raise you from corruption, actually grant you participation in the divine nature, and actually open paradise to the thief on the cross. A merely exemplary Jesus can give you an ethic. He cannot save you.

Closely attached to this reduction of Christ's divinity is a reduction of the Trinity itself. Some

progressives go no further than denying the full deity of Christ; others go further still, embracing pantheism (the teaching that the universe itself is God) or panentheism, in which God is in all and all is in God in a way that makes God dependent on his own creation. Each of these departures sets aside the doctrine of the Holy Trinity the Church has confessed for two thousand years. A church that has lost the Trinity has lost the name of the Christian God.

3. Sexual Immorality Is Holy

The third doctrine covers a comprehensive shift on questions of sexuality and gender. There's an almost universal acceptance of same-sex relationships and marriage, an affirmation of transgender identity as a valid expression of the self, and a rejection of what's called cisgender normativity. One widely circulated statement of the position puts it this way: the idea that sex should be between one man and one woman within the covenant of marriage for life "was not just incorrect, but harmful. Christians should pursue sexual fulfillment as defined by the World Health Organization as being grounded in consent." A Christianity that didn't affirm these developments would, on the progressive account, be morally deficient.

Here you need to be both clear and kind at once. The Orthodox Church confesses with Scripture that God created humankind male and female in his own image (Genesis 1:27), that marriage is the one-flesh union of a man and a woman (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6), and that the body isn't a neutral vehicle for the will but a sacred part of the person, knit together in the womb by God (Psalm 139:13). The pastoral reality of human sexuality is vast and varied, and every parish holds souls who struggle with desires and identities the Church cannot bless. Your duty toward them is the same duty you owe every struggling soul: love them, walk with them, call them to chastity the same way the Church calls every unmarried Christian to chastity, and refuse to abandon the teaching of Scripture and the Fathers for the comfort of either the struggling person or the surrounding culture.

The progressive program asks for more than pastoral gentleness. It asks for the redefinition of marriage, doctrinal approval of same-sex sexual unions, and the affirmation of gender as self-chosen rather than given by God — a redefinition the apostolic Church has no authority to grant. This isn't hard-heartedness toward anyone's suffering; the Church has carried that suffering alongside strugglers for centuries. It's simply that no servant of Christ has the standing to revise what Christ and his apostles delivered. A servant who loves the sheep will not feed them poisoned grass because they like the color.

4. The Bible Is an Ancient Story Book

The fourth doctrine concerns the Bible itself. One widely used framework for progressive Christian education describes Scripture as something closer to a book of suggestions and possibilities than an authoritative standard for truth. In progressive churches generally, the biblical writers get treated as well-meaning ancient people doing their best to understand God within the limits of their own times and cultures — voices worth hearing, but not necessarily speaking for God. On this account, the Bible is contradictory, not internally coherent, and not binding on the conscience of the contemporary Christian.

The apostolic answer is direct. St. Paul writes to Timothy that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God — the Greek word is *theopneustos*, God-breathed — and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). St. Peter writes that no prophecy of Scripture came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). The Orthodox Church has never taught a mechanical inerrancy of the kind certain Protestant fundamentalisms teach; we read Scripture within the mind of the Fathers, in the Liturgy, through the same Spirit who gave it. But we confess that the Spirit who moved the prophets and apostles still speaks through their words, and a church that treats the Bible as a travel journal will, before long, find itself writing a new journal of its own.

“If anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.” Galatians 1:9

St. Paul’s solemn warning stands over this entire subject. A progressive Christianity that has reserved the right to revise the gospel it received is, by the apostle’s own measure, carrying a burden it hasn’t yet weighed.

5. Feelings Are Emphasized Over Facts

The fifth doctrine is more a method than a single teaching, and in some ways it’s the key that unlocks all the others. Personal consciousness, experience, preference, and opinion get valued over objective truth; a person’s feelings become the center of their motives and actions, and doctrine gets shaped to match. St. Augustine diagnosed exactly this move sixteen centuries ago, and the intervening centuries haven’t improved on his precision:

“For to believe what you please, and not to believe what you please, is to believe yourselves, and not the gospel.” — St. Augustine, *Contra Faustum* XVII.3

That’s the progressive method in a single sentence: sift the Gospel and keep whatever commends itself to the modern conscience, discarding the rest. The result isn’t an adjusted Christianity. It’s a religion of the self wearing Christian vocabulary. Our Lord foresaw this possibility and warned his disciples about it in the plainest terms:

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.” Matthew 7:15

Feelings matter, the Church has never asked you to be a Stoic, but a feeling is not a fact, and a doctrine tested only against how it makes you feel has stopped being doctrine at all.

6. Christianity Is Not the Only Truth

The sixth doctrine gives up Christianity’s claim to be the only way to God. One popular defense of the position argues that “the power of the Christian faith to transform lives does not require it to be exclusively true. Exclusivity is born out of fear... We believe there are many truths and God welcomes

them all.” This shows up in two related forms.

The first is universalism, or universal reconciliation. The dominant view of heaven and hell in progressive Christianity holds that no one will ultimately be punished, and that everyone — regardless of faith, repentance, or participation in the Church — will eventually be saved and restored to God. Some progressives still affirm that Jesus is the only way, but add that he’ll eventually save everyone by that way whether or not they ever come to know him. It’s a sentimental doctrine pastorally, but it can’t be squared with our Lord’s own plain words about the narrow way, the wide way, and the two ultimate destinies (Matthew 7:13-14; Matthew 25:31-46). The Orthodox hope for the salvation of the world is real, and it’s a real prayer — but it’s a hope that respects the freedom God has given, and so it can’t presume on a universal outcome that would empty that freedom of its meaning.

The second is religious pluralism, often summed up in the idea that everyone gets a seat at the table: all creeds are true in their own way, and everyone who holds one is equally accepted by God. Many progressives add pantheism, panentheism, and perennialism to this mix — perennialism being the teaching that different religions only look different on the surface, while sharing, at their core, the same truth and the same source, discoverable through mysticism and contemplative practice.

The apostolic witness is unambiguous. Our Lord said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). St. Peter said before the Sanhedrin, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The exclusivity of Christ isn’t a later ecclesiastical boast — it’s the unbroken confession of the apostles, the martyrs, and the Fathers, and without it the whole missionary task falls apart. The pluralist consolation — that no one needs to convert, because every path leads equally to God — might sound pleasant at a university symposium, but it empties the Great Commission, empties the blood of the martyrs, and empties the Lord’s own words.

7. The Gospel of Social Justice

The seventh doctrine reframes the Gospel itself as social transformation. In progressive preaching, the Good News stops being the news that God has come to save sinners and reconcile them to himself in Christ; it becomes news of overturning unjust structures, lifting up the oppressed, and correcting inequities, with social justice issues becoming the heart of the message and what a person does mattering more than what they believe. The Orthodox Church has always taught that a faithful Christian life produces works of mercy, care for the poor, defense of the vulnerable, and a public witness for justice — the Fathers thundered against the exploitation of the poor long before any modern movement thought to. But when those works become the Gospel itself, and the world gets read entirely through a secular grid of oppressor and oppressed, the Cross and the empty tomb quietly disappear from the sermon. A Christianity with no Cross isn’t the faith once delivered. It’s a civic religion of activism with crosses hung on the walls for decoration.

Progressive Christianity in Action

All of this can sound abstract until you hear it in an ordinary conversation. It rarely announces itself as a doctrine — it shows up in a sentence, at coffee hour or in a text message: I disagree with St. Paul on

that issue. The Bible “contains” the word of God. That verse doesn’t resonate with me. I thought homosexuality was a sin until I actually met and became friends with some gay people. I just can’t believe Jesus would send good people to hell. The church’s historic position on sexuality is archaic and needs to be updated for a modern framework. The Bible is a human book. God wouldn’t punish sinners — he is love. It’s not our job to judge others, just to love them. Sin doesn’t separate us from God — we’re made in his image, and he called us good. We don’t really need to preach the gospel — we just need to show love by bringing justice to the oppressed and provision to the needy.

Every one of these sentences sounds reasonable on its own, and some of them contain a fragment of truth badly applied. That’s exactly how the movement spreads: not through a manifesto handed to you all at once, but one plausible-sounding sentence at a time, each one quietly assuming that Scripture, the Fathers, and two thousand years of the Church’s discernment are less trustworthy than how a claim strikes you personally.

St. Augustine’s Diagnosis, and Ours

The problem underneath all seven doctrines was never really a list of individual errors. It’s a single method, and St. Augustine named it with a precision that sixteen centuries haven’t improved on: believing what you like in the Gospel and rejecting what you don’t is a way of believing yourself, not the Gospel.

Your task in this atmosphere isn’t to become suspicious of every unfamiliar idea, and it isn’t to weaponize the word heresy against every brother or sister who phrases something awkwardly. Your task is simply to know the faith — the faith received from the apostles, confessed in the Creed, unfolded by the Fathers, celebrated in the Liturgy — and to teach it clearly. A servant well-formed in the faith can sit across from a progressive friend in charity and in sober confidence, able to say what the Church teaches and why, able to listen without panic to what that friend is struggling with, and able, by the grace of God, to call the friend back to the one Gospel that doesn’t need revising — because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16).



Review Questions

1. What is the underlying message of the Progressive Christianity movement? (A. It is one of acceptance.)
2. What is Progressive Christianity? (A. It is characterized by a willingness to question tradition, acceptance of human diversity, a strong emphasis on social justice and care for the poor and the oppressed, and environmental stewardship of the earth.)
3. Do they believe that Jesus is the Son of God? (A. No, they He is just a moral example for us to follow.)
4. Is the Bible for them the Word of God? (A. No, they do not believe that it is an inspired, infallible, and authoritative Word of God.)
5. What is their view on marriage? (A. They accept same-sex relationships and marriage, a belief in the validity of transgenderism, and a rejection of cisgender norms.)
6. What is their view of Pluralism? (A. They believe that all creeds and religions are true in their own way and the people who embrace them are equally accepted by God.)

Moral Relativism

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

The last lesson of this unit confronts what has become, in our generation, the default ethical atmosphere of the Western world. Moral relativism teaches, in its many forms, that there are no universally binding moral truths — that what is right or wrong depends upon the individual, the culture, the calculus of pleasure and pain, or the motive behind the act, but never upon any fixed good revealed by God and written into the nature of things. The tragedy is that this atmosphere is now the air our young people breathe in schools, in films, on every social platform they open. The Barna Research Group's finding that 81% of young Americans now believe that all truth is relative to the individual and his or her circumstances is not a statistic to shake the head over; it is a description of the catechetical challenge lying before every servant. This lesson sets out the three great secular accounts of ethics — cultural relativism, utilitarianism, and Kantianism — examines where each fails, and then lays before the servant the Orthodox vision of morality as the pure love of God worked out in the heart and the life.

What Is Moral Relativism?

Moral relativism, in the broadest sense, is the claim that when it comes to questions of right and wrong there are no universally objective answers. Morality is held to be the product of the individual, or of the culture, or of some inner calculation, but not the deliverance of any absolute standard outside the self. In its popular form the claim runs something like this: since people disagree about moral questions, and since different cultures have held different moral rules across history, there can be no fixed truth of the matter. Only subjective opinions exist, no more weighty than a preference for one flavor of ice cream over another or one football team over another. Morality is not objective; it is an individual matter; moral truth depends on the individual who holds it.

This posture has much in common with contemporary New Age thought, which prioritizes individual spiritual experience and personal truth over any received doctrine, any established moral code, any external authority that might correct the self. Both movements raise the autonomy of the individual into an absolute, and both reject any external standard by which that individual might be judged.

The prevalence of this view in our own generation has now been measured. The Barna Research Group has reported that 81% of young Americans agree that all truth is relative to the individual and his or her circumstances. Almost nothing in the moral landscape of the generation we are forming has escaped this premise. The children in our Sunday School, the teenagers in our youth groups, the young adults entering marriage — all have been catechized into this view by the culture before they ever came to us. A servant who cannot engage moral relativism clearly and patiently will be outmatched before he opens his Bible.

The first pastoral task in the face of the claim is to notice that it is self-contradictory. If moral relativism is true, then the statement "moral relativism is true" is itself only one opinion among many, with no

more claim on us than any other. If it is false, then there is at least one objective moral truth after all — namely, that moral relativism is wrong. The position collapses upon its first serious examination. But that does not make it less tenacious; the weakness of a creed has never by itself prevented its wide acceptance. It can only be dismantled one form at a time, and we must examine each.

Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is the form of relativism that locates moral authority in the culture rather than the individual. Each culture, it is said, has its own set of morals, and outsiders have no right to judge those morals by standards drawn from elsewhere. If a given culture considers a practice permissible, who are we — the question is asked in a tone of sophisticated humility — to tell them they are wrong?

The first thing to notice is that the very claim contains a moral absolute of its own. The cultural relativist is insisting, with great firmness, that it is always morally obligatory to respect other cultures — not to judge them, not to impose upon them, not to hold them to any outside standard. But if that duty of respect is real, then it cannot itself come from culture, because cultures differ about it as they differ about everything else. The relativist must therefore be drawing the duty of non-judgment from some source outside any particular culture — which is precisely the universal moral order he claimed does not exist. The ground cuts out from under his argument while he is still speaking it.

The second thing to notice is that cross-cultural moral disagreement is often not what it looks like. Many disputes that appear at first to concern fundamental values turn out, on closer examination, to concern differences in the perception of facts.

- The debate over abortion is frequently presented as a collision between a culture that values human life and a culture that does not. But both sides, in the great majority of cases, agree that innocent human persons are inviolable. They disagree about whether the unborn child is in fact a human person. The dispute is a factual one dressed up as a values dispute.
- The genocidal crimes of the twentieth century depended on the same kind of fact-level distortion. Hitler did not disagree with the universal moral rule against the murder of innocents; he classified his victims as sub-human so that the rule would not apply to them. The values were shared; the deception was factual.

Closer study therefore narrows the range of genuine moral disagreement across cultures and reveals, beneath the surface diversity, a remarkable common substrate. All cultures, without exception, value human life at some level. All cultures prohibit some form of murder, however narrowly they draw the circle of the protected. All cultures prohibit theft within the community, all cultures prohibit betrayal of trust, all cultures prohibit the violation of the helpless. These commonalities are not accidents; they are the visible trace of what St. Paul calls the law written on the heart, by which even the Gentiles who did not have the revealed law show the work of the law inscribed in their own conscience (Romans 2:14-15).

Cultural relativism breaks down most plainly at the point where a practice is objectively harmful. Female genital mutilation, the burning of widows, the ritual killing of twins, the enslavement of defeated peoples — each of these has been a cultural norm somewhere in history, and each has been brought to an end not by a more successful culture imposing its taste but by the gradual recognition

that the practice violates a real good that transcends culture. The cultural relativist, consistently applied, has no tools with which to call any of these practices evil. The fact that he still, in his heart, wants to call them evil is the proof that his theory is wrong.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is the form of ethics that locates moral worth not in any fixed standard but in the calculation of pleasure against pain. Its classical formulation is given by Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century.

“Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do.” — Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789)

From this foundation the theory builds outward. Actions that cause pleasure are permissible; actions that cause pain are impermissible. In the social application — the form associated with John Stuart Mill — the greatest-happiness principle states that the right action is the one that produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people within a given society or group. Ethics becomes arithmetic: pleasure on one side of the ledger, pain on the other, and the action with the higher net balance wins.

A first look at the theory makes it seem simple. A closer look reveals a tangle.

- Many actions produce a mixture of pleasure and pain. A medical treatment may cause immediate pain and deliver long-term health. Marriage may involve years of sacrifice that feel painful and deliver a depth of joy that feels pleasant. How is the calculus run?
- The experience of pleasure and pain is subjective. What brings pleasure to one person brings pain to another. Whose pleasure is to count, and whose pain?
- Pleasures differ in kind as well as in quantity. An hour of intellectual contemplation and an hour of physical indulgence may register the same intensity on the utilitarian meter, yet most moral intuitions rightly protest that they are not equivalent. Utilitarianism has no satisfactory way to rank qualitative differences.
- Consequences extend indefinitely into the future. An action pleasant today may prove devastating in a generation. How far down the chain is the calculation required to go?
- Most damningly, the greatest-happiness principle can be used to justify the trampling of individual rights. If enslaving a minority produces greater total happiness than freeing them, the utilitarian calculus has no in-principle objection. The person becomes a unit of utility, not an image of God.

The deep defect of utilitarianism is that it has reduced the good to the pleasant. But Scripture and the Fathers know of goods that are not pleasant — martyrdom, chastity in the face of every desire, fasting, the care of the leper, the forgiveness of the enemy. The Cross itself is the decisive refutation of the theory. On any utilitarian calculus, the Cross is an evil: it produced immense pain in the innocent and no measurable pleasure at all in the moment. Yet the Cross is the supreme good, the central event of human history, the self-offering of God. A theory that cannot see the Cross as good cannot be the

theory by which we read the moral world.

Kantianism

The third great secular ethics is Kantianism, the theory associated with the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In sharp reaction against utilitarianism, Kant insisted that the moral worth of an action is determined not by its consequences but by the motive of the one who performs it. An action is right when it is done out of a sense of duty, according to a rule that the actor could will to be a universal law, treating every rational person as an end in himself and never merely as a means.

This is called the categorical imperative, and it has several admirable features. It refuses to reduce human beings to units of utility. It insists that a person must be treated with dignity and respect. It grounds morality in reason and duty rather than in feeling. And in its rejection of lying, of manipulation, of the use of another person as a mere tool, it recovers something that the utilitarian calculus had surrendered.

Yet Kantianism, for all its seriousness, cannot be the Christian ethic.

- Kant makes morality an exercise of autonomous reason — the human mind legislating to itself. The Christian tradition confesses that the moral law is not our self-legislation but God's revelation. We do not invent the good; we receive it.
- Kantianism describes right acts but cannot by itself produce a good person. It can tell us what the rational agent ought to will; it cannot give that agent the heart to will it. The Christian life is not only a matter of doing the right thing because duty commands; it is a matter of being transformed in the heart so that we want the right thing because we love God.
- Most fundamentally, Kantianism is another form of moral autonomy. The self is still at the center, now legislating rationally rather than preferring emotionally, but still sovereign. The Christian moral life begins with the recognition that the self is not sovereign and cannot be — that we are creatures, under a Creator, bound to a law not of our own making.

Kant saw more than the utilitarians; he did not see enough. The categorical imperative is a noble scaffolding on which the true moral life can be hung, but it is not itself that life.

Orthodox Morality: The Pure Love of God

Against each of these accounts the Orthodox Church holds out a different vision — older than cultural relativism, deeper than utilitarianism, warmer than Kantianism. It is a vision not of rules in isolation but of a whole transfigured life. The essence of Orthodox morality, and of every moral rule that falls within it, is love for God shown by the striving for purity of heart and by the love of neighbor. Our Lord Himself stated the principle when the lawyer tested Him:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” Matthew 22:37-40

And the goal set before us is not moderate improvement but the fullness of divine likeness:

“Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Matthew 5:48

This fundamentally changes the shape of the moral life. For the Christian, not merely our actions are important; every thought, every word, every deed is brought under the judgment of God and the purifying action of His grace. The Lord Himself pressed this interior reach of morality into the opening beatitudes and into the great reinterpretations of the old law: anger in the heart already has the seed of murder; the covetous look already has the seed of adultery. We are not only called to keep our hands clean. We are called to be clean in the heart from which the hands move.

Two texts of the New Testament stand as our primary ethical handbooks, and the Fathers return to them again and again.

The first is the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Here our Lord sets out the shape of the Christian life in its full interiority — the beatitudes, the prohibition of anger and lust in the heart, the teaching on almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, the command to love our enemies, the two ways set before every soul.

The second is the Epistle of St. James. Here the interior faith of the Sermon on the Mount is required to become active in the world — faith that works through love, speech controlled by the bridle of the Spirit, care for the widow and the orphan, plainness of dealing, patience under affliction, and the prayer of the righteous that avails much.

Taken together, these two texts frame the whole Orthodox moral vision: the interior purity of the Sermon enacted in the practical mercy of the Epistle. And this moral vision is carried into daily life by the spiritual disciplines that the Church has always practiced — prayer without ceasing, the regular fasts of the Calendar, almsgiving given in secret, frequent confession, frequent Communion. These are not optional add-ons to a moral code; they are the means by which the moral code itself becomes possible. A Christian ethic apart from the ascetical life is a code without the grace to keep it.

The Objective Ground of Orthodox Morality

Why is Orthodox morality not merely another preference in the marketplace of moral theories? Three reasons can be stated.

The first is that the Christian moral law is not the invention of the human mind but the revelation of the Creator of the human mind. The law was given at Sinai, deepened in the Sermon on the Mount, and summarized by the Lord Himself in the twin commandment of love. It is not a code we have constructed; it is a code we have received, from the One who made us and who knows what our flourishing actually is.

The second is that the moral law is written into the nature of things — into the very structure of the human person, into the pattern of human relations, into the design of the cosmos. This is why St. Paul can say that even the Gentiles who did not have the revealed law show the work of the law written on their hearts (Romans 2:14-15). The objective moral order is not arbitrary; it reflects the design by which we were made, so that violations of it damage the violator as surely as violations of physical law

damage a body thrown off a cliff. A culture that permits murder damages itself. A person who practices lust damages himself. The damage is not merely social consequence; it is the wound the nature takes when it is forced against its grain.

The third is that the moral law has a Person at its center. Every philosophical ethic, whether cultural or utilitarian or Kantian, ends up with a rule. Christian ethics ends up with a Face — the face of Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. To be moral is, at the deepest level, to become like Him, to put on the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5), to be transformed from glory to glory into His image (2 Corinthians 3:18). No rule can be this. Only a Person can, and only a Person who loves us and who has descended to us.

Teaching the Next Generation in a Relativist Age

A final word for the pre-servant, because the field in which this lesson must actually be preached is not a seminary but a Sunday School classroom, a youth meeting, a coffee shop after church.

The young person we speak to has almost certainly absorbed the Barna figure without knowing it. The claim that truth is relative to the individual will sound to them like common sense, and any challenge to it will feel to them like old-fashioned rigidity. The servant's task is not to shout at them; it is to love them patiently and to point out, gently and often, the internal contradictions in which they already live. They will object when someone steals from them. They will object when someone betrays them. They will object when a powerful culture oppresses a weak one. They will invoke, in those moments, the very objective morality they have said they do not believe in. We need not argue them into the objective moral order; we need only help them notice that they are already inside it.

And once they see that they are inside it, the question becomes who authored it, and what it is for. That is the question only Christ can answer. Our Lord did not give the world a philosophical refutation of cultural relativism; He gave the world Himself, broken and risen for every one of them. The servant who has been formed by Him has something to offer the relativist young person that no textbook can offer — a Person who loves them, a Body into which they may be grafted, a moral life that begins not with self-legislation but with baptismal death and resurrection. We are not selling a superior ethical theory. We are witnessing someone.



Review Questions

1. What is moral relativism? (A: Moral relativism suggests that when it comes to moral issues, there are no universally objective right or wrong answers.)
2. Moral relativism is also referred to as _____ beliefs. (A: New Age)
3. Morality is not _____. (A: objective)
4. How is cultural relativism different? (A: It is when morality is relative to one's culture, in which each culture has a different set of morals.)
5. What is the essence of orthodox morality? (A: The essence of orthodox morality

revolves around the love for God shown by striving for purity of heart and by love for our fellow man.)