

The Concept of Free Will

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Free will is the first of the ideological questions servants must learn to handle, because nearly every modern error — hedonism, determinism, moral relativism, and the gospel of self-expression — collapses at the point where the Church's teaching on freedom stands. Scripture opens with a God who sets before humanity life and death and invites a choice (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19-20), and the Fathers have guarded that same gift against two extremes: the fatalism that denies choice and the license that mistakes choice for autonomy from God. This lesson sets forth the Orthodox understanding of free will — as a true faculty given by God, bounded by responsibility, perfected by grace, and completed only in the service of righteousness. The lesson proceeds from the scriptural ground of human freedom, through the questions of accountability, limits, and self-harm, into the deeper question of what freedom actually is — not the absence of restraint, but liberation from sin through Christ. A servant of the Church must be able to teach this clearly to a generation that confuses freedom with appetite.

Freedom as Gift and Invitation

The Orthodox doctrine of free will does not begin with human autonomy; it begins at creation. God is under no constraint to create a creature capable of refusing Him, and yet He did so. Freedom is the shape of His image in us. Without it we could not love, because love that is compelled is not love at all. The opening of the covenant in Deuteronomy frames the whole moral life as a summons to choose:

"See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil... I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live, that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life." Deuteronomy 30:15, 19-20

Two things must be noticed in this passage, because modern readers frequently miss them. First, God does not merely permit the choice; He commands it, "choose life." Freedom is not a neutral field in which any outcome is equally welcome to Him. Second, the alternative is not between two goods but between life and death. The whole of Scripture assumes that freedom is ordered toward a real end, and that end is communion with God.

St. Basil the Great describes the interior structure that makes this choice possible:

"There is a certain balance constructed in the interior of each of us by our Creator, on which it is possible to judge the nature of things. 'I have set before you life and death, good and evil,' two natures contrary to each other. Balance them against each other in your own tribunal."

The human person is, in St. Basil's image, a living court of law, summoned every day to weigh and decide. God's foreknowledge of what we will choose does not force that choice; He knows because He sees, not because He compels.

Freedom and the Divine Image

The Fathers are united in teaching that free will belongs to the divine image in man. When Genesis records that God made humanity "in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Genesis 1:26), the image includes rationality, self-mastery, and the capacity to choose the good. A creature that could not choose could not bear that image. This is why the Church rejects every form of hard determinism, whether philosophical, theological, or scientific in disguise. To deny free will is to deny that humanity bears the image of God.

At the same time, the image does not make us gods. Freedom in the creature is always a participated freedom, bounded by the nature we have received. We are free in the way fish are free in the sea — within the medium that sustains us. To leap out of that medium in the name of freedom is not liberation but destruction. This is the first correction we must bring to the modern notion of freedom as raw possibility.

Because free will is a gift from God, it can only flourish when exercised toward the Giver. A freedom turned against its source hollows itself out. St. Paul's description of this self-undoing is precise: "For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Galatians 5:13). The call to liberty and the call to service are one call.

Accountability and Responsibility

A person who is not free cannot be held responsible. This principle is assumed everywhere in Scripture. Adam and Eve were free, and their disobedience was answered with a judgment that fit their freedom: "Then the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:9). The question is not addressed to a puppet. God interrogates them, hears their excuses, and pronounces consequences, because they were accountable (Genesis 3:9-19).

The same principle runs through the teaching of Christ. When Pilate claimed a power over Jesus that Pilate did not truly possess, the Lord answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin" (John 19:11). Degrees of knowledge and degrees of power produce degrees of responsibility, but responsibility itself is a given. To strip a person of responsibility in the name of compassion is to strip away their dignity.

Christ teaches that the reward of a good deed done freely is doubled, given in secret, kept for the age to come: "your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly" (Matthew 6:4, 6). And the punishment of a sin committed freely, if unrepented, is likewise carried into eternity. The Lord's warning is sobering:

"I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse

sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” Luke 13:3-5

Christ does not equate suffering with greater guilt; He uses calamity as a summons to repentance. Accountability before God is universal because freedom is universal.

Do We Have Absolute Freedom?

Modern culture often treats "freedom" as if it meant the absence of all constraint. This is a confusion. Absolute freedom belongs only to God, because only God is subject to no higher good. Creaturely freedom is always exercised within limits — the limits of our nature, the rights of our neighbors, and the commandments of God. To imagine that we can do whatever we please simply because we can imagine doing it is not a liberty the Scriptures recognize.

The Apostle teaches obedience to lawful authority not as a concession to power but as a recognition of God's ordering of the world:

“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.” Romans 13:1-2

This passage is not a license for tyranny. St. Augustine draws the correct distinction between temporal and spiritual obedience:

"Because we are made of soul and body and as long as we are in this life we make use of temporal things as a means of living this life, it is fitting that, as far as this life is concerned, we be subject to the authorities... But as far as the spiritual side is concerned, in which we believe in God and are called into His kingdom, it is not right for us to be subject to any man who seeks to overturn in us the very thing which God has been pleased to grant us so that we might obtain eternal life."

The Christian obeys the laws of the land in temporal matters. When an earthly authority commands what God forbids, however, the Christian must refuse, remembering the apostolic rule: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Freedom, therefore, is never a solvent for the commandments. It is exercised inside them.

Self-Inflicted Harm and the Sanctity of the Body

The notion that a person has an unqualified right to do as he wishes with his own body is a common argument in contemporary debates over suicide, euthanasia, recreational drug use, mutilation, and the destruction of health for pleasure. The Church answers this argument by denying its premise. The body is not simply our possession. It is a gift received and a gift redeemed, belonging by creation to God and by redemption to Christ. St. Paul writes:

“Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.” 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

The language is striking. We are "not our own." This is not a denial of personhood; it is a relocation of the self within the order of grace. A temple does not belong to itself; it belongs to the One who dwells there.

St. Cyprian presses the point with liturgical reverence:

"Let us glorify God and bear Him in a pure and spotless body, and with more perfect observance. Let those who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ submit to the rule of our Redeemer with the absolute obedience of servants. Let us take care not to bring anything unclean or defiled into the temple of God, lest He be offended and leave the abode where He dwells." THE DRESS OF VIRGINS 2.28

To harm one's body deliberately — through suicide, through chronic substance abuse, through the destructive use of pleasure — is not a neutral exercise of private freedom. It is a defilement of a sanctuary and a wound inflicted on a community that has invested in that person's life.

This is why the Church has always opposed suicide and the deliberate taking of innocent life, however it is dressed. The servant of Christ, when meeting those who suffer, does not respond with the logic of disposability. The response is care, companionship, prayer, and reminding the sufferer that his life is not only his own.

The Benefits of Restriction

A river with no banks is not a freer river; it is a swamp. The banks do not oppose the river; they preserve it. This image captures the Orthodox understanding of moral restriction. The commandments, the canons, the counsels of teachers, the disciplines of parents, and the structures of education and tradition are not enemies of freedom. They are the banks that keep freedom flowing toward life.

The young person who casts off education as a restraint on his autonomy does not become more free. He loses the one tool by which his freedom could be used well. The disciple who abandons the Church's discipline in the name of authenticity does not become more authentic. He becomes more captive to whichever passion governs him that day. True freedom grows where it is guarded, just as a tree grows where it is pruned.

St. Paul warned the Galatians against a false liberty that is really the loss of direction:

“You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ... For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Galatians 5:7, 13

Christian freedom is a freedom for service, not a freedom from discipline. The cry of our age that restriction is oppression must be met with patience and honesty: it is not restriction that enslaves, but unrestrained appetite.

Freedom From Sin

True freedom is not simply the power to choose among options; it is freedom from sin. A will that is dominated by passion is not a free will at all, because it can no longer choose the good it recognizes. Christ's own definition is the standard: "Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

This is why the Church has always read the Exodus typologically. The Israelites' departure from Egypt — the house of bondage and the land of fleshpots — through the waters of the Red Sea into the wilderness is a figure of baptism and the moral pilgrimage of the Christian. Egypt represents the comfort of sin, the Red Sea represents baptism, the wilderness represents the life of discipline. A soul that refuses to leave Egypt, however eloquently it speaks of freedom, remains enslaved.

St. Augustine describes the stages of this liberation:

"The first stage of freedom, then, is to abstain from sins — such as murder, adultery, any sexual sins, theft, fraud, sacrilege, and others of that sort. When someone has started getting free from these (and every Christian ought to be so), they begin to raise their head towards freedom. Do not then abuse your freedom for the purpose of sinning freely. Rather, use it in order not to sin at all. Your will is free only if it is godly. You will be free if you become the servant of righteousness."

The paradox at the heart of the Gospel is that the servant of God is the only free man.

St. Cyril of Alexandria adds that no one can be truly free who is set free by someone who does not himself possess freedom. Only the Son — "God of God and the genuine and free fruit of the essence that reigns over all" — can bestow real liberty:

"Because he is wisdom and light and power by nature, he makes those who are ignorant wise. He enlightens those in darkness, and he strengthens those who are weak... when the Son himself wills to free anyone, infusing his own good into them, they are called free indeed."

Every program of human liberation that bypasses Christ ends in a subtler servitude.

Internal and External Freedom

The Orthodox tradition distinguishes two aspects of freedom that must never be separated. Internal freedom is liberation from the passions — from hatred, lust, envy, cruelty, laziness, and greed. External freedom is the capacity to act upon the world according to one's will. When internal freedom is present, external freedom is exercised well. When internal freedom is absent, external freedom becomes dangerous.

A person who has not mastered anger will use his tongue and his hands to wound. A person who has not mastered lust will use beauty and companionship to consume. A person who has not mastered laziness will use time and resources to waste. In every case, the external capacity becomes a weapon turned against others and against the self. This is the tragedy of a culture that maximizes external freedom while neglecting the interior life: it produces people who have every right and no virtue.

The priority, then, is always the interior first. We do not wait until we are perfect to act; but we recognize that the cultivation of virtue is what makes action Christian. Monastic formation, spiritual direction, fasting, almsgiving, and the sacramental life are not add-ons to the Christian life. They are the very training that makes freedom usable.

The Virtue of Self-Control

Real freedom is attained by restraint. The person who refuses every discipline spoils himself, and the spoiled self is not a free self. This is the point on which the ancient Greek wisdom, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Fathers all converge. Proverbs states it with great economy: "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls" (Proverbs 25:28). A city without walls is a city that belongs to whoever shows up to plunder it. So too a soul without self-control.

The Epistle of James gives this principle extended attention, particularly in regard to the tongue:

"For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!" James 3:2-5

The Apostle does not praise the person who has no passions; he praises the person who has brought his passions under a rider. The image is exact. The horse is powerful and useful, but only when bridled. The passions are strong and, under control, can be turned toward service. Untamed, they throw the rider.

St. John Cassian warns of what is lost without this virtue:

"How injurious the absence of [self-control] is... herein lies wisdom, herein lies intelligence and understanding without which our inward house cannot be built and spiritual riches cannot be gathered together. As it is written, 'A house is built with wisdom, and again it is set up with intelligence. With understanding the storehouses are filled with all precious riches and good things.'"

The spiritual life is a house; self-control is the foundation.

The Tongue and the Sound Mind

A generation that has deified self-expression needs to hear the Fathers on the tongue. St. Augustine notes the humility required: "Note that the comparison is taken from the beasts which we are able to tame. The horse does not tame itself, nor does a man do so. A man is needed in order to tame a horse, and in the same way, God is needed in order to tame a man." The taming of speech is not a self-improvement project. It is a work of grace.

St. Jerome gives the sternest of warnings: "The sword kills the body, but the tongue kills the soul. The tongue knows no moderation — either it is a great good or it is a great evil. It is a great good when it acknowledges that Christ is God, and a great evil when it denies that... What more monstrous sin is there than blasphemy against God? The devil did not fall because he committed theft, murder, or adultery; he fell because of his tongue. He said: 'I will scale the heavens; above the stars I will set up my throne, I will be like the Most High.'" Satan's primordial sin was a speech-act. Pride found its voice, and that voice became the first falsehood.

St. Cyril of Alexandria completes the teaching: "The effective proof of a sound mind and perfect thought is to have nothing faulty on our tongue and to keep our mouths closed when necessary... For the most useful talent is to be able to speak wisdom when talking about how to live well. Foolish talk should be foreign to the saints." The servant of Christ is not known chiefly by the volume of his speech, but by its weight.

These counsels contradict almost every rule of a social-media culture in which unfiltered self-expression is treated as the highest virtue. The Church offers a different criterion: speech is Christian when it blesses God and builds up the neighbor. Anything else is not liberty; it is the fire James described.

Pastoral Implications for the Servant

The servant of the Church will meet three distortions of free will again and again, and must be prepared to answer each.

The first distortion is fatalism — the claim that we are determined by genes, by upbringing, by trauma, by our algorithms, by our wounds, and therefore not truly responsible. The Church answers that wounds and weaknesses are real and must be addressed with compassion, but that freedom is also real. No Christian account of the person reduces the soul to a product of forces. To tell a struggler that he is merely a function of his past is to abandon him to that past.

The second distortion is license — the claim that freedom is the absence of moral limits. This is the cultural air we breathe. The servant meets it not with a lecture but with a better vision of freedom: freedom as communion with God, freedom as virtue, freedom as the shape of a life that is finally going somewhere.

The third distortion is despair — the claim that because I cannot change, I am not free. This is the sorrow that visits the addict, the long-term sinner, the weary penitent. The Church's answer is the Gospel itself. Christ has set us free. His grace is stronger than our habit. Repentance is a door that never closes in this life.

We are born with free will, but freedom is not self-evident; it must be learned. We can, like Adam and Eve, squander it in transgression; we can, like the saints, offer it back to the Giver in obedience and love. The Church teaches us to weigh our thoughts, words, and actions against the standard of the Kingdom, remembering that the time on earth shapes the age to come. God is merciful, but His mercy is not indifference. He wills our freedom to be completed in Him.

St. Justin Martyr summarizes the matter with characteristic clarity:

"As in the beginning He created us when we were not, so do we consider that, in like manner, those who choose what is pleasing to Him are, on account of their choice, deemed worthy of incorruption and of fellowship with Him. For the coming into being at first was not in our own power; and in order that we may follow those things which please Him, choosing them by means of the rational faculties He has Himself endowed us with, He both persuades us and leads us to faith."

Being was not ours to choose; the direction of our being is.



Review Questions

1. When are we permitted to practice external freedom? (A: Once one is freed from sin internally.)
2. True or false. One's thoughts do not have to be subject to self control. (A: False)
3. What is true freedom, from the Christian perspective? (A: True freedom is not the ability to do as we please but freedom from sin.)
4. What is the purpose of our freedom? (A: It allows autonomy; it makes us accountable for whatever we do, whether good or evil.)
5. What are certain benefits of restriction? (A: Restrictions are useful because they prevent one from doing harm to oneself, others, or to the community; also they lead to the prevention of breaking God's commandments.)
6. True or false? Your body belongs to you, and you alone. (A: False)
7. What is the fallacy in one doing what they please with no self control? (A: They are in fact dominated by lusts, riches, etc.)

The Problem of Pain and Suffering

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Why Does a Good, All-Powerful God Permit Pain?

No question is more frequently hurled at the Church than this: if God is all-powerful and all-good, why does He permit pain? The question is ancient, but it comes to you with new urgency in a generation that has lost the vocabulary of theodicy. A servant who cannot answer it will be silent when his people most need him to speak. This lesson trains you to respond with scriptural depth, patristic clarity, and pastoral care. It distinguishes what God created from what entered through human free will, sets out the Orthodox understanding of evil as a privation rather than a substance, and refuses both the easy optimism of the prosperity gospel and the faithless cynicism that treats suffering as proof of God's absence. The Cross is the standard against which every Christian account of pain must be measured: the greatest tragedy in history was also the means of the world's salvation. If the Cross can be both, so can the sufferings of those who follow the Crucified.

Why the Question Demands an Answer

Every servant will one day be asked why a loved one died young, why a child was born with a handicap, why a nation was swallowed in war, why a disease took the devout while sparing the profane. The question isn't a philosopher's puzzle. It comes from the mouth of the mourner and the face of the confused. To answer it with a shrug is pastoral dishonesty; to answer it with a formula is worse. The Church has thought deeply about the coexistence of pain and divine goodness, and those thoughts are entrusted to you so that you may pass them on with compassion.

Two False Answers to Refuse

Two false answers must be refused at the outset. The first denies God's power: if God were stronger He would stop suffering; since suffering continues, He must be limited. The second denies God's goodness: if God tolerates suffering He cannot be good. Both answers share a hidden assumption — that God's role in the world is to remove every painful circumstance. This assumption isn't found in Scripture, and it isn't found in the Cross. The Orthodox answer doesn't dissolve the pain; it places the pain inside a story large enough to hold it.

The Parable of the Vinedressers

Christ Himself gave you a parable that puts this same question in the mouth of a landowner rather than a philosopher:

“A certain man planted a vineyard, leased it to vinedressers, and went into a far country for a long time. Now at vintage-time he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that

they might give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the vinedressers beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent another servant; and they beat him also, treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And again he sent a third; and they wounded him also and cast him out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son. Probably they will respect him when they see him.'" Luke 20:9-13, NKJV

Notice the shape of the complaint hiding inside this parable. Three servants are beaten, shamed, wounded, and cast out — and still the owner does nothing but send a fourth, his own beloved son, into the very violence that consumed the others. It's the same objection people raise against God when they see the innocent suffer and heaven appear silent: why does He tolerate the violence, and why would He send someone He loves into the middle of it? A philosopher has posed the same difficulty in a more abstract form for centuries: God is said to be all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing. If He is all-powerful, He can abolish evil. If He is all-good, He wants to abolish evil. Yet evil remains. So either He is not powerful enough, or He does not truly want to, or He does not know. Can all three attributes stand alongside the plain fact of pain and suffering in the world? The rest of this lesson answers that question, one attribute at a time.

God's Power and the Gift of Free Will

God is almighty, but His almightiness doesn't contradict His own decisions. When God chose to create a creature in His image, He chose to create a creature capable of love, and love is not love when it's compelled. A world in which every act was automatically righteous would be a world without persons, without virtue, and without real love. To demand that God create such a world is to demand that He unmake the very creature we are.

Can God Make a Mistake?

Being all-powerful doesn't mean God can do absolutely anything imaginable. Can He make a mistake? Can He make a round square? He cannot, and will not, change something He has already defined, because to do so would contradict His own nature, not limit His power. In the same way, God chose to create human beings with free will, and once that choice was made, it fell to them, rather than to God, whether sin would enter the world. That's what free will means. Built into the very situation of God deciding to create human beings with free will is the possibility of evil and, consequently, the suffering that results. A world with free will but without the possibility of sin is a self-contradiction — and a man without free will is a man with no potential to love. So the question isn't whether God is powerful enough to stop evil; it's whether removing the possibility of evil would also remove the very capacity for love He gave you in the first place. Both pain and suffering can coexist with God's omnipotence, because omnipotence was never the same thing as the abolition of your freedom.

From this decision follows an unavoidable consequence: a creature that can freely love can freely refuse. Free will is not a bug in creation; it's a feature of the image of God. The possibility of sin is the shadow of the possibility of love. Sin itself is not God's creation, but the space in which sin became possible is the space of freedom, and freedom is a gift.

God has bound Himself by His own gift. He will not rescind the freedom He gave. He persuades, woos, warns, and waits, but He does not override. This explains why the world in which you live is not a world of continual miraculous intervention. It's a world in which God respects the image He has made.

God's Goodness and the Surgeon's Knife

Consider a man who regularly sedates another human being, opens his chest, and holds a beating heart in his hand. Out of context, he's a monster — the kind of thing you'd call a serial killer if you heard about it secondhand. In context, he's a cardiothoracic surgeon, sedating a patient to spare him pain and opening his chest to save his life. The act is identical; the judgment is transformed entirely by knowledge of purpose. When you condemn God for the presence of pain in a world He made, you're often condemning the surgeon before you've learned that the knife is not the end of the story. If a doctor's cutting can be a mercy you don't yet understand, how much more the actions of your Creator?

This analogy isn't a trick. It's a reminder that your position as a creature is necessarily partial. You see a piece of the work. God sees the whole. This doesn't mean pain is an illusion; the surgery is real. It means that real pain can serve a real good that isn't yet visible to the one who suffers it.

Presence, Not Platitudes

This is the point at which you must tread carefully. It's cruel to tell the bereaved that their suffering is "for the best" as though the statement itself were the answer. The better ministry is presence: to sit with the sufferer as Christ sat with Mary and Martha outside Lazarus' tomb, weeping before He raised him (John 11:35). God's goodness isn't proved by the absence of tears; it's proved by the One who wept with us.

God's Knowledge and the Paradigm of the Cross

The Limits of Human Tragedy

Think of how many people die of starvation somewhere in the world at this very hour — a hardship that a single season of rain in the right place could have relieved. The human concept of tragedy isn't always the full story; you rarely see the whole chain of causes, choices, and consequences that produced a given sorrow, let alone the good God may yet draw from it. The clearest example of this asymmetry is the Cross itself.

The deepest answer the Church gives to the problem of pain is not a syllogism but an event. On Good Friday the sinless Son of God hung on a Roman cross, forsaken, mocked, and tortured to death. By every human measure, that day was a catastrophe.

"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Matthew 27:46, NKJV

is the cry of a world in which the devil seems to have won. Christ is bearing so much pain, so much agony, so much shame, that the devil looks on assuming triumph and victory.

Yet the Church confesses that this was the very moment of your salvation. The tragedy became the triumph. The defeat became the victory. The grave was not the end. From the standpoint of Sunday

morning, Friday afternoon looks entirely different. The Resurrection doesn't erase the Crucifixion; it transfigures it. What if this is the paradigm of the whole human situation — that when you bleed and when you suffer, as Christ did, the same reversal is at work, and this is simply God's way of defeating the devil?

If this is how God works in the central moment of history, you have no warrant to assume He works otherwise in your own sufferings. When you bleed, you cannot see how God could use your bleeding; but you worship a God who has shown, in His own blood, that He can. This is not a platitude. It's the shape of redemption itself.

The Bear in the Trap: Perspective and Pain

An old image used in pastoral teaching: a bear has stepped into a leghold trap. A hunter finds it, pities it, and decides to free it. The hunter cannot explain himself to the bear, so he tranquilizes it. To the bear, the dart feels like an attack. To release the trap's spring, the hunter must first push the bear's paw deeper into the jaws of the trap. In its drugged confusion, the bear is convinced this is its final torture. He doesn't realize the hunter is acting out of compassion, not cruelty.

The bear's conclusion is wrong. It's wrong not because its pain is unreal, but because its perspective is too narrow to interpret its pain. This is the condition of the rational creature before the infinite God. You may feel the dart and the deeper push and assume you've been forsaken. You are not the best judge of your own situation.

The analogy is humbling, not dismissive. It doesn't say that every instance of suffering is a good trick you're too small to see. It says that small creatures are poorly positioned to issue final verdicts on the goodness of a Creator whose purposes exceed their sight. The right response to that asymmetry is not rage but trust, and trust is learned by knowing Christ.

Evil Is Not a Thing God Made

Return for a moment to the parable of the vinedressers. Even after three servants are turned away bloodied, the owner sends his own son — because pain and evil are so often accompanied by an opportunity to do good. There was an opportunity for the vinedressers to change, an opportunity for a second chance. Some would have taken it; instead, they squandered it. It's when you squander your own free will that you choose to inflict pain, not only on yourself, but on others. The vineyard was never the place where God's power, goodness, or knowledge failed — it was the place where human freedom went wrong.

The Fathers developed a precise metaphysical response to those who ask where evil came from. Evil is not a rival substance, not an eternal counter-force, not a thing that God made. St. Basil the Great is unambiguous:

"It is impious to say that evil has its origin from God, because nothing contrary is produced by the contrary. Life does not generate death, nor is darkness the beginning of light, nor is disease the maker of health... No one who is in this world will deny that evil exists. What, then, do we say? That evil is not a living and animated substance, but

a condition of the soul which is opposed to virtue and which springs up in the slothful because of their falling away from good.” St. Basil the Great, Hexaemeron, Homily 2

This is the Orthodox doctrine that evil is a privation — a lack of the good that ought to be present. Darkness is the absence of light. Blindness is the absence of sight. Evil is the absence of the goodness a creature was made to have. This teaching refuses the dualism of ancient Manichaeism and the modern cinematic habit of imagining the devil as God's equal and opposite. God has no equal, and evil has no independent existence.

This refusal matters pastorally. If evil were a substance, it would have power over God. If it were a substance, the universe would be two-headed, and fear would be rational. Because it's a privation, the remedy is not to be rescued from a stronger thing but to be reunited with the God who is, always, the source of being and good. This is the conclusive answer to the philosopher's trilemma: the presence of evil in the world does not disprove that God is all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing — it simply reveals that evil was never a rival power to begin with, but the wound left by creatures who were free to turn away from the Good and did.

Two Kinds of Trial

The Fathers distinguish two categories of suffering you will meet as a servant. The first is the natural trial. These are the afflictions that arise from the present condition of a fallen cosmos:

- Natural disasters — earthquakes, storms, famines, and similar upheavals of the created order.
- Natural birth handicaps — congenital disorders and conditions present from birth.
- The wearing away of the body — aging, disease, and the ordinary decline of mortal life.

These are not punishments directed at specific persons. They are the ache of a creation "subjected to futility" (Romans 8:20) that groans in expectation of its redemption.

The second is the personal trial. This is suffering that arises within the web of human freedom:

- Due to personal sin — the pain a person brings upon himself through his own choices.
- Due to others' sin and freedom — the pain a sinner inflicts upon the innocent, including abuse, betrayal, and injustice.
- Innocent trial allowed by God — sorrow permitted for purposes of formation in souls dear to Him, as with Job.

The two often overlap. A natural disaster is made worse by greed or neglect; a personal sorrow intertwines with the frailty of your mortal nature. You don't need a formula that sorts every grief into a tidy box. You need a framework in which to hear, pray with, and walk beside the one who grieves. This framework is the Church's.

Why Pain Exists at All

The Liturgy of St. Basil locates the origin of death at a precise point: not in God, but in the envy of the

devil. The Anaphora prays:

“O God, the Great, the Eternal, who formed man in incorruption; and death, which entered into the world through the envy of the devil, You have destroyed by the life-giving manifestation of Your Only-Begotten Son, our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ.” Liturgy of St. Basil, Prayer of Reconciliation

Most Orthodox dogma will often revolve around Creation and the fall of man. God created everything good, in incorruption. As sin was introduced into the world, so was, as a consequence — not in the sense of punishment, but in the sense of what sin brought along with it — death, corruption, and, essentially, evil. St. Athanasius gives the classical narrative of how this happened. God placed humanity in paradise and appended a single condition. Obedience would preserve incorruption; transgression would release corruption:

“For bringing them [humanity] into His own paradise, He gave them a law, so that if they guarded the grace and remained good, they might have the life of paradise — without sorrow, pain, or care — besides having the promise of their incorruptibility in heaven; but if they were to transgress and turning away become wicked, they would know themselves enduring the corruption of death according to nature, and no longer live in paradise, but thereafter dying outside of it, would remain in death and in corruption.” St. Athanasius, On the Incarnation 3

Two points stand out. First, the fall is not an arbitrary punishment imposed from outside; it's the natural consequence of turning away from the Source of life. Second, the fall is not the end of the story. The same Father who narrates the fall wrote On the Incarnation to announce the cure. It's thus your own free will, exercised by Adam and exercised again by each of you, that stands at the source of the world's pain — never God's design, and never His pleasure.

The Prosperity Gospel Rejected

One of the loudest distortions of this teaching in our time is the prosperity gospel — the claim that God blesses the righteous with material comfort and punishes the unrighteous with disaster. This framework maps Christianity onto a transactional grid: obedience produces wealth, suffering proves sin. It's the opposite of what Scripture teaches.

The prosperity gospel collapses in the face of Job, whose integrity was the cause of his trials, not the remedy against them. It collapses in the face of the Beatitudes, which call blessed those who mourn and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake (Matthew 5:4, 10). It collapses in the face of the Apostles, who were beaten and imprisoned not because they failed but because they succeeded. It collapses, most of all, in the face of Christ Himself, whose earthly life ended in apparent catastrophe.

You must be able to say plainly that this teaching is unorthodox. Pain is not always punishment, and prosperity is not always blessing. Every time something good happens in your life, it's tempting to say God blessed you for being good — or, when disaster strikes, that God is angry with you. This is incorrect. The Father chastens those He loves (Hebrews 12:6), but He also permits the wicked to

flourish for a time (Psalm 73). To judge someone's standing with God by the visible state of their finances or their health is a habit no Christian should keep.

Suffering as Formation and Joy

The apostolic writings take a surprising turn. Rather than treat suffering as a neutral hardship, they treat it as an occasion of joy. St. James opens his epistle with a command that startles every reader: "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience" (James 1:2-3). St. Paul writes with the same confidence:

"And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." Romans 5:3-5

Paul isn't glorifying pain. He's confessing that pain, when joined to Christ, does work in the soul that comfort cannot accomplish. Character is forged in fire; hope is born when the lesser securities have failed. This is why the same Apostle can write, from the depths of his own suffering:

"We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed — always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." 2 Corinthians 4:8-10

You are not asked to enjoy pain. You are invited into a way of seeing pain in which the life of Jesus becomes visible through the sufferings of Jesus' members.

Job, the Man Born Blind, and the Purpose of Encounter

The Book of Job doesn't offer a tidy theodicy. What it offers is an encounter. After chapter upon chapter of argument, God finally speaks — and speaks not to explain Job's suffering but to declare His own majesty:

"Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ... Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know!" Job 38:1-5

Repentance Without Sin

At first hearing this seems harsh. It isn't. Job had asked to see God, and God has come to him. And Job's response is not resentment but worship: "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). This is striking, because the entire book has been a defense of Job's righteousness — and yet the encounter with God still moves him to repent. The answer to Job's suffering was not an explanation. It was God.

The same pattern emerges in the Lord's teaching concerning the man born blind. The disciples ask

whose sin caused his condition. Christ refuses the transactional frame: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him" (John 9:3). The suffering of that man was an opportunity, not a verdict. The encounter with Christ transformed him from darkness into light. Every authentic encounter with Christ is transformative, and very often that encounter comes to you in the very place you would have most wished to avoid.

Pain as Vocation

When you see tragedy in the world — a pandemic, a war, a famine, a local sorrow — the right response is not endless commentary on the brokenness but entrance into the work of healing. Firefighters, police officers, paramedics, and physicians didn't become competent by avoiding the disaster; they became competent by training toward it. The Church must learn the same discipline. The pain of the world is the place where servants are made.

This is the very shape of the Incarnation. Christ did not abolish flesh; He took it — a corrupted flesh, a dying flesh — and gave it life and transformed it. He took something powerless and gave it power. He did not avoid death; He entered it. He did not overcome the tomb by keeping His distance from it, but by descending into it. You, following Christ, walk toward the suffering of others, not away from it, and bring with you the prayer, the sacraments, the compassion, and the sure hope that transform suffering into a door.

"Pain and suffering have come into your life, but remember: pain, sorrow, suffering are but the kiss of Jesus — a sign that you have come so close to Him that He can kiss you."
attributed to Mother Teresa of Calcutta

This is not a sentiment to recite mechanically. It's a truth to carry into the hospital, the funeral home, and the confession booth, for yourself and for those you serve.



Review Questions

1. Encountering God is always seen as a _____. (A: Blessing)
2. What are the two types of pain and suffering that we encounter throughout our lives? (A: Natural and personal trials.)
3. Why do pain and suffering exist? (A: God did not create it, instead when man fell into sin, pain and suffering followed as a natural consequence.)
4. Does God change things He has already defined? (A: False)
5. Why is the prosperity Gospel wrong in its belief? (A: God doesn't punish the unrighteous with disaster and bless the righteous with blessings.)

Heresies: Universalism

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Universalism is the teaching that every soul, without exception, will ultimately be saved — some versions extending the claim to Satan and the demons. It has returned in our time with new confidence, dressed in the language of love, inclusion, and the rejection of a judgmental God. Pre-servants will meet it among friends, on social media, in paperback apologetics, and in progressive groups. It must be answered — not harshly, but truthfully — because it tampers with the Gospel itself. The Orthodox Church does not teach that God delights in the damnation of any. She teaches that He wills the salvation of all and has made the full provision for it in Christ, while honoring the freedom He gave His creatures and warning us, from the lips of the Lord Himself, that some will refuse that salvation to the end. This lesson sets out what universalism is, traces its history, examines its strongest arguments, and answers it from Scripture and Tradition. The goal is to equip the servant to defend the hope that is in him with firmness and gentleness, neither softening the Lord's warnings nor caricaturing those who have been persuaded by this error.

What Universalism Claims

Universalism — also called universal salvation, universal restoration, universal reconciliation, or universal restitution — is the doctrine that in the end every soul is saved and united to God. Strong versions teach that even Satan and the fallen angels are finally reconciled. Milder versions teach that every human being, regardless of faith or repentance, will at last be brought into the Kingdom.

The emotional appeal of this teaching is obvious. The thought that loved ones, neighbors, or even enemies might suffer eternally is grievous; the thought that anyone would, is harder still. Universalism promises to remove that grief by promising that no one is finally lost. It answers the anxiety of modern Christians who have been taught to view any exclusive claim as intolerant, and it aligns tidily with the reigning instinct of the culture that all sincere paths must lead to the same summit.

But the question for the servant is not whether a doctrine is comforting. It is whether it is true. A teaching that contradicts the explicit words of Christ cannot console a Christian, however softly it is spoken. And this teaching, whatever else may be said of it, contradicts the explicit words of Christ.

A Short History of the Error

The roots of universalism in the Christian world are most often traced to the third-century Alexandrian scholar Origen, who advanced a teaching called apokatastasis — the restoration of all things. Origen was a brilliant and complicated figure. He opposed Gnostic dualism with such zeal that he concluded hell could not be eternal, arguing instead that it was a remedial station through which every creature, at last, would pass into blessedness. This doctrine, along with other speculations, was condemned at

the Eastern Church's Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553. The universal position of the Church from that moment has been clear: the doctrine that every soul must finally be saved is a heresy.

St. Clement of Alexandria, Origen's predecessor, is sometimes invoked by universalists, but the scholarly consensus is that St. Clement did not teach apokatastasis as Origen did. The Fathers who followed — St. Basil, St. Gregory the Theologian, St. John Chrysostom, St. Cyril, St. John of Damascus — continued to teach the reality of an eternal heaven and an eternal hell, distinguished sharply between the doctrine of God's universal saving will and the false doctrine of universal automatic salvation.

In later centuries the error reappeared, usually at moments when theology became detached from the liturgy and the consensus of the Fathers. In seventeenth-century England it was taken up by figures such as Gerrard Winstanley, Richard Coppin, and Jane Leade; in eighteenth-century France and America it was spread by George de Benneville and John Murray, leading to the Universalist Church of America and its eventual merger with Unitarianism. In our day it has reappeared within Protestant academic circles and among those who are drawn to its pastoral appeal while being less attentive to its historical condemnation.

The Core Beliefs of Universalism

The universalist case rests on a handful of threads woven tightly together. Stripped to essentials, they are these: God is love, and love cannot eternally condemn; Christ's work on the Cross was sufficient for all, and so must save all; a temporary purgation after death can cleanse whatever remains, after which every soul enters heaven; and the exclusive language of Scripture must be re-read in light of the universal scope of redemption.

Passages are then marshaled — Acts 3:21 on the "restoration of all things," Colossians 1:20 on reconciling "all things" through the blood of His Cross, Romans 5:18 on the "free gift" that "came to all men," Hebrews 2:9 that Christ tasted death "for everyone," and 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 on God becoming "all in all." Philippians 2:10-11 is read as a prediction that every creature will at last confess Christ as Lord, and confession is treated as equivalent to salvation.

The servant must admit what is true in this picture: God does desire the salvation of all. "Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). "The Lord is... not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). This is apostolic teaching, and no Christian may contradict it. But from "God wills the salvation of all" it does not follow that "all will be saved." The will of God encounters a creature He has made capable of refusing. And refusal, sustained to the end, has consequences the Lord has named with His own mouth.

Varieties of the Error

Within universalism itself there are divisions, and the servant should know them so that he can answer precisely.

Inclusivist universalists hold that all are saved through Christ's work whether they consciously know Him or not. Exclusivist universalists hold that salvation still requires confession of Christ, but that every

person will at last confess Him — if not in this life, then after it, on the authority of Philippians 2. Strong or "ultra" universalists deny any suffering after death: every soul goes directly to heaven. Purgatorial universalists teach a postmortem purification, not identical with the Roman Catholic purgatory but similar in aim, through which all souls are eventually cleansed and welcomed into the Kingdom.

These variations share a common error: they make final salvation automatic rather than responsive. They treat God's saving will as a force that overrides human freedom rather than a love that invites it. The Church's answer to all of them is the same: the Gospel is not a mechanism; it is a marriage. A marriage requires yes from both sides, and the yes may be refused.

Answering Universalism from Scripture

The Lord Himself teaches unambiguously that some will reject salvation and that the rejection is final. The words are not our invention; they are His:

"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Matthew 10:28

"And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Matthew 25:46

The word used in Matthew 25:46 for the punishment of the wicked and the life of the righteous is the same Greek word, *aiōnios*. If "eternal life" is without end, then "eternal punishment" in the same sentence is without end. To cut the verse in half — treating the first half as an everlasting promise and the second as a temporary warning — is not exegesis. It is evasion. The Lord returns to this theme repeatedly.

- In the parable of the wheat and the tares, the tares are not purified; they are burned (Matthew 13:24-30).
- In the parable of the net, the bad fish are cast away at the end of the age (Matthew 13:47-50).
- In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Christ divides His own Kingdom from the outer darkness (Matthew 25:31-46).
- In the parable of the ten virgins, the door is shut — and the Lord speaks five words that no universalist has ever been able to erase: "I do not know you" (Matthew 25:12).
- In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, a great gulf is fixed between heaven and hell, and none can cross it (Luke 16:26).

The apostolic witness reinforces what the Lord teaches. St. Paul warns of everlasting destruction (2 Thessalonians 1:9), and St. John closes the New Testament with two visions — the Lake of Fire into which the devil, the beast, and the false prophet are cast "forever and ever" (Revelation 20:10), and the Book of Life outside of which no one enters the City of God (Revelation 20:15; 21:27). This is not the margin of Scripture. It is the heart of its warning.

Answering Universalism from the Fathers

The Orthodox tradition has always held together the seriousness of divine judgment with the profound hope of divine mercy. This is not the same as universalism. St. Basil the Great is explicit that hell is eternal: "If at some time there were to be an end to eternal punishment, eternal life would also, at some time, have an end." St. John Chrysostom preaches on the reality of hell repeatedly, not to terrify but to move his people to repentance. St. Ephrem the Syrian, the great hymnographer of Paradise, sings of the separation fixed between the company of the saints and those who have rejected the Bridegroom.

Some Fathers — notably St. Gregory of Nyssa — have used language that sounds to modern ears like apokatastasis. Careful reading shows that St. Gregory, while expressing profound confidence in the victory of God's love and in the purifying work of judgment, does not deny the reality of eternal loss for those who persist in rejection. Where his language is ambiguous, the Church's conciliar teaching is clear and normative. The individual opinions of a Father, however venerated, are read in the light of the whole Tradition, not set above it.

The Church, then, allows room for hopeful prayer — we pray for the departed, we trust the mercy of God — but she does not permit us to teach as doctrine that all will be saved. The line between hope and presumption is precisely the line between Orthodox teaching and the universalist error.

The Love of God and the Justice of God

The universalist often argues that God is love, and love cannot condemn. The answer is that God is love, and that the God of Scripture is not a sentimental abstraction but the living Holy One who is also just, holy, and wrathful against sin. These are not competing attributes to be traded against each other. They are one character seen from different angles.

St. John the Apostle, the same apostle of love who wrote "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), also wrote: "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). The same pen that gave us the sweetest teaching on divine love gave us one of the sternest warnings about unbelief. To choose between these verses is not to honor St. John; it refuses his testimony.

Psalms 136 holds both together in one sustained cry. Every verse of that Psalm ends with "His mercy endures forever," and in the very middle the Psalmist sings of the God "who struck down great kings" and "slew famous kings" (Psalm 136:17-18). Mercy and judgment do not cancel each other. They are the two hands by which God holds the world.

The Question of Justice

There is a particular form of the universalist claim that deserves a direct answer. If all are saved in the end, what happens to justice? Universalism speaks tenderly of the repentance of the sinner but rarely of the tears of the sinner's victims. If Hitler, Stalin, and Mao — men whose careers are measured in millions of deaths — at last enter the same blessedness as their victims without repentance, without reckoning, without any word from the God who sees every falling sparrow, then the claim that God is just becomes empty.

The Cross does not render justice unnecessary. It fulfills justice. In Christ Crucified, God's mercy and wrath meet at one point, and sin is actually dealt with. But the Cross does not apply itself automatically. It is received by faith, by repentance, by baptism, by the life of the Church. A sinner who refuses it to the end is not justified by the Cross he refused. This is why the Lord can say, in the same breath, that He is the Savior of the world (John 4:42) and that whoever does not believe is condemned already (John 3:18).

Pre-servants must keep this balance in their own preaching. A Gospel that soft-pedals judgment is not the Gospel St. Paul preached, and it will not produce the kind of repentance that changes lives. A Gospel that dwells on judgment without the infinite mercy of Christ is not the Gospel either. The servant holds both truths in one message, because Christ did.

Why Universalism Is Spiritually Dangerous

The error is not merely academic. It is pastorally corrosive in at least three ways.

First, universalism **removes urgency from evangelism**. If every person is saved regardless of whether he hears the Gospel, the labor of preaching becomes optional, the cost of missions becomes unintelligible, and the urgency that drove the apostles through Roman prisons and imperial edicts dissolves. St. Paul did not say, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of possibilities"; he said, "How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?" (Romans 10:14).

Second, universalism **devalues repentance**. If final reconciliation is guaranteed, the command to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17) becomes advisory rather than urgent. The sinner is free to delay, to postpone, to sin his way through a life with the assurance that all roads eventually lead home. This is not mercy. It is a lie that will cost souls their struggle.

Third, universalism **cheapens the Cross**. The death of the Son of God becomes a ceremonial gesture rather than a decisive rescue. If all are saved in the end either way, the blood of Christ is reduced to a symbolic solidarity with suffering. The apostolic preaching will not permit this. "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 Cross is not a symbol; it is the actual ground of our reconciliation, and it has to be received.

How to Speak to Someone Drawn to Universalism

The servant will meet sincere people who have come to this position honestly. Some have lost a child; some have a beloved friend who died outside the faith; some are simply repelled by the caricatures of hell they have encountered in bad preaching. The answer to them is not contempt. It is truth spoken with tenderness.

Three things can be said at almost any conversation of this kind. First, the Church teaches that God desires the salvation of every person; our hope for the departed is real, and our prayers are real. Second, the Church teaches that freedom is real; God has made us capable of saying yes or no to Him, and He does not override that freedom. Third, the Church teaches that the Lord's warnings about hell

are His words, not ours — and a Christian has no authority to edit them out in order to spare our feelings.

The pastoral offer is not damnation-talk but life-talk. We can say, truthfully, that the Church's answer to the grief behind the universalist question is not universalism but prayer, the Divine Liturgy, the commemoration of the departed, and the confidence that God is more merciful than we can imagine — while still being the God who has warned us what our refusals cost.

St. Augustine wrote of the error in his own century: "Let no one be deceived, brethren, by those who promise impunity to everyone... The Scriptures cannot be broken." (Enchiridion 112). The servant must not be deceived either, and must help his people not to be deceived. The price of the error is too high.

The Mistake of Universalism

Universalism mistakes God's universal saving will for universal automatic salvation. It is not Orthodox. It was condemned in the person of Origen and has been refused by the consensus of the Fathers ever since. It is not supported by the words of Christ, whose teaching on final judgment is explicit, repeated, and unflinching. It is not required by the love of God, which includes holiness, justice, and wrath as parts of one character. It is not the better gospel; it is a different gospel, and St. Paul has already warned us what to do with different gospels (Galatians 1:8-9).

The Orthodox hope is richer. God does desire the salvation of every soul. The Cross is sufficient for every sin. The sacraments, the prayers of the Church, and the persevering love of the faithful are real means by which real persons are saved. We may hope for the salvation of those who have died in ways we do not fully understand; we pray for them; we commend them to the mercy of the God who is their Judge and ours. But we do not teach that hell will be empty, because our Lord has not taught us that. He has said something harder and more hopeful at once: "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24).

The servant preaches the narrow gate, opens it for all, and warns that it is narrow. This is the faith once for all delivered to the saints.



Review Questions

1. What is universal salvation? (A. It is the belief that all people eventually end up in heaven.)
2. What does George T. Knight claim about the origin of the idea of universalism? (A. He claims that Universalism was a widely held view among theologians in Early Christianity. These included such important figures such as Alexandrian scholar Origen as well as Clement of Alexandria, a Christian theologian.)
3. What is their belief? (A. Universalism applies passages like Acts 3:21 and Colossians 1:20 to mean that God intends to restore all things to their original state of purity)

through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:18; Hebrews 2:9), so that in the end everyone will be brought into a right relationship with God (1 Corinthians 15:24–28).

4. Name two types of universalism? (A. Ultra and Purgatorial)
5. Name two parables that reflect Jesus' teaching about hell. (A. The parable of the net and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus)
6. True or false: the universalists ignore God's justice. (A. True)

Heresies: Modalism

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Modalism is one of the oldest distortions of the Christian confession of God, and it has never fully gone away. Under various names — Sabellianism, Modalistic Monarchianism, and, in our own time, Oneness Pentecostalism and certain popularizations of Unitarianism — it denies that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three distinct Persons, reducing Them instead to three modes, masks, or roles played successively by a single divine Person. The Church has rejected this teaching since the third century because it undoes the Gospel at its root. If the Father is not a Person distinct from the Son, then the Son was not really sent, did not really pray to the Father, did not really offer Himself to the Father on the Cross, and does not really reign at the Father's right hand. Pre-servants need to know this heresy by name, recognize it in its modern forms, and be able to reply from the Scriptures and the Fathers. This lesson traces modalism to its source in Sabellius, sets out the Church's rebuttal, and walks the servant through the iconographic and patristic witness to the Holy Trinity, concluding with a pastoral note on why this doctrine matters for ordinary Christian life.

What Modalism Teaches

Modalism, sometimes called Modalistic Monarchianism, is the teaching that God is a single Person who has revealed Himself under three different modes — as Father in creation, as Son in redemption, and as Holy Spirit in sanctification. In this view, the Trinitarian names are temporary costumes worn by one actor. The Son and the Spirit are not eternal Persons; they are roles that appear in history and then fold back into the undifferentiated unity from which they came.

The instinct behind modalism is a sincere one: to protect the oneness of God but compromises the fullness of truth. The Scriptures are emphatic that the Lord our God is one (Deuteronomy 6:4). Early Christians who came into the Gospel from strict monotheism wrestled with how to confess three divine Persons without slipping into tritheism. Modalism seemed, to some, to solve the puzzle by identifying the three Persons with one another. The solution, however, violates the very Scriptures it claims to honor. The Father who speaks from heaven at the Baptism of Christ (Matthew 3:17), the Son who is baptized in the Jordan, and the Spirit descending as a dove are not one Person changing costumes. They are three Persons manifest at the same moment.

The modalist temptation is still with us. In our time it appears in popular preaching that speaks of God "wearing different hats," in sermons that compare the Trinity to ice, water, and steam (three modes of H₂O), and in the Oneness Pentecostal movement that rebaptizes converts "in Jesus' name only" on the explicit claim that Father, Son, and Spirit are titles of a single Person. Pre-servants must be able to name this error in its plain and modern clothing.

Sabellius and the Origin of the Error

The name associated most closely with modalism is Sabellius, a third-century priest whose teaching spread across the Pentapolis — the region of five cities in what is now eastern Libya. Most of what Sabellius actually wrote has been lost; we know his doctrine largely through the responses of those who refuted him, among them Dionysius of Alexandria, Dionysius of Rome, Tertullian of Carthage, and Hippolytus of Rome. From these witnesses the shape of his teaching is clear.

Sabellius taught that God is single and indivisible, and that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three modes of one divine Person. On his scheme, the One God successively revealed Himself to humanity — as the Father in the age of Creation, as the Son in the age of Redemption, and as the Spirit in the ongoing age of Sanctification and Regeneration. The three names describe sequential phases of divine activity, not eternal distinctions within God.

Dionysius of Rome wrote against this teaching with unusual directness: "Sabellius... blasphemes in saying that the Son Himself is the Father and vice versa." The charge is not that Sabellius held a small error. It is that he denies the relational life of God revealed in the Gospel.

Unitarianism and the Modern Return of the Error

The Reformation, in its more radical currents, produced Unitarianism — a movement that, while not identical to ancient Sabellianism, rests on the same refusal of Trinitarian distinction. Unitarianism emerged first in Eastern Europe in the sixteenth century and spread to Britain, North America, and beyond. It shares the modalist insistence on God's oneness at the expense of the Persons, and differs chiefly in the degree to which it denies the divinity of Christ altogether.

In our day, the modalist instinct reappears in several places: in the Oneness Pentecostal churches that regard themselves as apostolic precisely by denying the Trinity; in academic voices that present the Trinity as a belated philosophical imposition on a simpler biblical message; and in casual preaching that collapses the three Persons into three job descriptions. The servant should be alert to these forms and able to answer them patiently.

The answer is not, in the first instance, philosophical. It is biblical. Wherever the Scriptures speak of the Father sending the Son, the Son praying to the Father, or the Spirit proceeding from the Father — that is, on nearly every page of the New Testament — the modalist scheme collapses.

The Scriptural Witness to Three Persons

The Lord's own baptism is the fullest and clearest testimony to the three Persons at a single moment in history:

"When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'" (Matthew 3:16-17).

The Father speaks from heaven, the Son stands in the river, and the Spirit rests upon Him. Three Persons, one God — at one moment and in one act.

The Lord Himself teaches the distinction of Persons. He prays to His Father ("Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit," Luke 23:46). He speaks of being sent ("As the Father has sent Me, I also send you," John 20:21). He promises to send the Holy Spirit ("the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name," John 14:26). He commissions His disciples to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19) — a formula that Tertullian already invoked against modalism. Tertullian's reminder is as pointed today as it was in the third century: "Jesus commands them to baptize into the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — not into a unipersonal God."

Additional witnesses are abundant. In John 1:1 the Word is "with God" and "was God" — two truths that modalism cannot hold together. In John 17 the Son prays to the Father in words that would be incoherent if He were merely speaking to Himself under another name. In the apostolic benediction, the Apostle blesses the Church in the name of the three Persons: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14). Modalism is not a minor dispute about vocabulary. It is a denial of the God revealed on nearly every page of the New Testament.

Why the Trinitarian Baptism Matters

One of the sharpest places at which modalism is tested is the sacrament of baptism. St. Dionysius of Alexandria offered a striking pastoral rule:

"Those baptized in the name of three Persons... though baptized by heretics, shall not be rebaptized. But those converted from other heresies shall be perfected by the baptism of the Holy Church."

The implication is that the Trinitarian formula is not decorative; it is the very content that makes baptism valid. A baptism administered outside the Church, if performed with water and with the three-Personal name, is at least formally Trinitarian and is not simply void. A baptism administered with a non-Trinitarian formula is a different matter altogether.

This is why the Oneness movements, which explicitly reject the three Persons and baptize "in Jesus' name only," are treated by the Orthodox Church as outside the pale. It is not a quibble about words. The name under which we are baptized is the name of the God into whom we are baptized. To be baptized into a modalist God is to be baptized into a God who does not exist.

The servant will sometimes meet Christians who have been baptized in such traditions. The pastoral response is careful: to receive them into the Church through the ordinary sacramental means the Church prescribes, to explain what was missing in the formula they received, and to rejoice with them in the full Trinitarian grace given in Orthodox baptism.

The Icon of Theophany

The Church has long confessed the Trinity in her iconography as well as in her theology. The icon of the Theophany — the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan — is a direct visual reply to modalism. In it, the Father is represented by a hand or a heavenly voice from above, the Son stands in the river, and the

Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove. Three distinct Persons are shown at one historical moment, and the viewer is taught by the image what the modalist tries to deny.

The New Testament Epistles echo this confession. "Who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person" (Hebrews 1:3). "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Colossians 1:15). "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9). These verses teach the full deity of the Son, His distinctness from the Father, and His perfect unity with Him — exactly the Trinitarian confession that Sabellius denied.

The servant can point a catechumen to the Theophany icon with simple words: here is the Father's voice, the Son's body, the Spirit's descent. One event, three Persons. This is the faith into which you are baptized.

The Hospitality of Abraham

Perhaps the most celebrated Trinitarian icon in the Orthodox world is the Hospitality of Abraham, painted in its most famous form by St. Andrei Rublev in the fifteenth century. It depicts the scene in Genesis 18 in which Abraham welcomes three strangers to his tent and addresses them as "Lord." The Fathers have read that passage as a veiled theophany of the Trinity — Abraham's three guests as the three divine Persons, seated in unity and quiet attention around a single table.

The icon preaches the Trinity to the eye. Three figures share one bodily aspect, one posture, one divine identity, while remaining irreducibly three. They are not interchangeable modes of a single figure. They are three Persons, each turned toward the others in perfect communion. This is the visual rebuttal of Sabellius.

Pastorally, the icon also teaches hospitality. The Persons of the Trinity are shown welcoming Abraham's welcome. The Christian family gathered around its own table, the Church gathered around the Eucharistic table, is invited into the communion of the three Persons. Modalism has nothing to offer this table; there is no communion among modes.

The Trinity in the Orthodox Fathers

The Fathers spoke of the Trinity with care and with reverence for the mystery. St. Basil the Great insists that the oneness of God is not mathematical: "We do not count by addition, passing from the one to the many by increase; we do not say: one, two, three, or first, second and third." The three Persons are not a tally; they are the eternal life of the one God.

St. Basil also describes the economy of the divine acts in words that both preserve the Persons and insist on their unity: "Every divine action begins from the Father, proceeds through the Son, and is completed in the Holy Spirit." The acts are one act, because the God who acts is one; the Persons in that act are three, because the three Persons remain.

St. Athanasius the Apostolic — whose defense of Christ against Arius also guarded the whole Trinitarian confession — writes in the same key: "The Father plans and gives commands, the Son

performs and creates, while the Spirit nourishes and increases, and by degrees, man ascends toward the Perfect One." Once more: three Persons, one work.

St. Basil offers a striking image of the interconnection: "Just as he who grasps one end of a chain also pulls along with it the other end to himself, so he who draws the Spirit, through the Spirit draws both the Son and the Father along with it." To know any of the three Persons truly is to know the others, because the three are of one essence, one will, one love.

These witnesses are not dispensable. The servant who tries to speak of God without them risks falling, in one generation or the next, back into the error of Sabellius.

Why the Trinity Is a Cross for Human Thought

Orthodox teaching has always recognized that the Holy Trinity cannot be captured by analogy, reduced to logic, or packaged in illustration. St. Basil calls it a "cross for human ways of thought." This is not obscurantism; it is honesty. The doctrine is given by revelation, not by speculation, and it exceeds our measuring.

This is why every attempted illustration eventually fails. The familiar comparison of the Trinity to water, ice, and steam is a modalist illustration: H₂O in three states. The comparison to a man who is simultaneously a son, a husband, and a father is also modalist: one Person in three roles. The analogy of the shamrock — one clover with three leaves — slides toward tritheism, as do most attempts at three distinct physical parts. All such comparisons eventually shipwreck on one shore or another. The Fathers counsel silence at that point, and worship rather than diagram.

This silence is itself instructive. The Holy Trinity is not a puzzle to be solved but a communion into which to be drawn. Baptism, Eucharist, prayer, almsgiving, and the life of the Church are how the pre-servant enters that communion. Theology serves the entrance; it does not replace it.

Pastoral Implications: Why This Error Matters

A Christian who accepts modalism, whether consciously or by drift, loses several things at once. He loses the real sending of the Son: if the Father is not another Person, then there is no real sender and no real sent One — only a self-sent self. He loses the real Cross: the Son does not really offer Himself to the Father, because there is no Father to offer to. He loses the real prayer of Christ: all the hours Jesus spent in communion with His Father dissolve into a self-talk that mocks the Gospels.

He also loses the Christian life. The Christian is baptized into the three Persons, prays to the Father through the Son in the Spirit, and is fashioned by the Spirit into the likeness of the Son to the glory of the Father. Strip out the three Persons, and this whole pattern of devotion collapses. What remains is moral philosophy with a religious label.

Finally, he loses the communion of love that the Gospel puts at the center of reality. "God is love" (1 John 4:8) is only intelligible if God is three; otherwise there is no eternal Lover, Beloved, and the Love between them. Modalism renders the deepest sentence of the New Testament a figure of speech. Orthodox Trinitarianism keeps it a reality.

For these reasons the Church labors, generation after generation, to hand down the Trinity whole. The servant carries that labor forward. He learns the doctrine, tests modern phrasings against it, treasures the icons that teach it, and loves the God who is revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — not under three masks, but in three Persons, one in essence, worshiped and glorified together, now and forever.



Review Questions

1. What is sabellianism? (A: Sabellianism is the belief that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three different modes or aspects of God.)
2. What is the dogma of the Trinity? (A: The dogma of the Trinity is a cross for human ways of thought.)
3. Philosophical speculation has succeeded in rising to the mystery of the Holy Trinity. True or False? (A: False)
4. What does the Trinitarian view state? (A: The Trinitarian view recognizes the three distinct persons within the Godhead.)
5. What are the two icons used in Eastern orthodox iconography? (A: The Ancient of Days and the Hospitality of Abraham iconographies.)