

Dogmatic Theology



DOGMA & THEOLOGY

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Unit 1

Chapter

1.1 Understanding God

Faith, Dogma and Knowledge of God

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Does Dogma really matter?

Suppose a well respected servant suddenly leaves the Orthodox Faith for a non-sacramental church. Upon inquiring why, the servant challenges you to read scripture and find God's vision on the sacraments, implying their lack of reality. Naturally, one will be quite inquisitive and seriously attempt to re-read scripture with a closer keen eye. Subsequently attending bible studies, in quest of these answers. Your questions, in an inquisitive behavior, turn more and more dogmatic, upon which point another attendee in exasperation shares their feelings: "enough with these dogmatic questions, they are not practical!"

Naturally, this raises a question: are all these dogmatic questions a waste of time? Were all these questions really all that necessary as long as we were all on the page that Christ is our Savior? Does anything else really matter? Does dogma really matter? Does Theology matter?

To answer these questions, it's essential to understand the significance of dogma and theology in shaping our faith. Let us first differentiate the terminologies.

What is dogma, doctrine and theology?

To fully grasp the level of importance of dogma, we must first differentiate the terminologies that often get intertwined: dogma, doctrine and theology. In the following table is presented the definition of each term and a practical biblical example. The table will show that dogma defines, doctrine titles and theology reflects.

	Dogma	Doctrine	Theology
Definition	The unchanging, non-negotiable core elements of the Orthodox Christian faith. Dogma is defined mainly by Ecumenical Councils. Dogma is not subject to debate or interpretation.	The ways in which dogma is explained to those who are learning it. The Oxford English Dictionary defines doctrine as follows: "That which is taught. a. In the most general sense: Instruction, teaching; a body of instruction or teaching. b. esp. That which is taught or laid down as true concerning a particular subject or department of knowledge, as religion, politics, science, etc.; a belief, theoretical opinion; a dogma, tenet."	Expansive, creative reflections and applications of dogma and doctrine.

Example

Jesus Christ is fully both God and man.

Referred to as the “Incarnation”.

An emphasis on how divinity has become truly united with humanity in the person of Jesus Christ.

Note, here the emphasis is actually on how God became human, not on a precise insistence on the fullness of both natures.

Because of the Incarnation, we engage God sacramentally.

To reiterate, dogma then defines, doctrine titles and theology reflects!

Importance of knowing God

Dogma is critical. We cannot know God and at the same time not imitate Him to some degree. Does that mean a theological scholar is like God? Absolutely not. There could very well be very knowledgeable people about many religious matters; but little knowledge of God. At least, little true knowledge of God. At times, their very knowledge, and love thereof, prevents them from coming to the knowledge of the truth.

Knowledge that is not accompanied by diligence is dangerous – no matter whether the knowledge is of an academic character or of a mystical character. For this reason St. Paul says: “Knowledge puffs up.” (1 Corinthians 8:1) Yet, we cannot *truly* know God and at the same time not imitate Him to some degree. Imitating Him and conforming to His image is itself a result of such *true* knowledge.

It is for this reason that the Scriptures tell us that “by their fruit you shall know them.” (Matthew 7:16) If someone claims knowledge of God, but his life is not in conformity with the commandments of Christ, then we know that what we are hearing is largely delusional in character.

There is a beautiful story in Lives of the Desert Fathers: One of the Fathers was in prayer when the devil sought to trick him. A demon appeared in the cell of the monk (who was in prayer) and said, “I am the angel Gabriel sent from God.” Without looking up the monk replied, “Have you not been sent to another? For I am a sinner. I am not worthy for an angel to visit me.” The demon disappeared, defeated by the humility of the monk.

This is a description of the proper state of our heart. We desire to know God, but we want to know Him deeply enough, that we refuse to settle for anything less. Much of modern religious experience, as witnessed by its fruit, has little to do with the true God.

Before continuing, consider asking yourself, what is the relation between faith and knowledge – which comes first?

Knowledge of God begins with ...

Many early church fathers clearly tell us that faith precedes the knowledge of God. The knowledge of God is not merely some scholastic achievement rather an expression and extension of one’s faith. God is invisible and incomprehensible, and the wisdom of God hidden in a mystery; consequently, many parts of this learning can not be embraced by knowledge, but may be received by faith. “Faith, say, is

the eye which enlightens every man's conscience; it gives man knowledge. For, as the prophet says, 'If ye will not believe, ye shall not understand.'" St. Cyril of Jerusalem

This principle of working based on faith and developing knowledge based on faith is not simply a religious principle but St. Cyril meditates and says it extends even to non-believers in many of their day to day work: "It is not only amongst us, who hear the name of Christ, that faith is made so great a thing; but every thing which is done in the world, even by men who are unconnected with the Church, is done by faith. Agriculture is founded on faith; for no one who did not believe that he should gather in the increase of the fruits of the earth would undertake the labor of husbandry. Mariners are guided by faith when they entrust their fate to a slight plank, and prefer the agitation of the unstable waters to the more stable element of the earth. They give themselves up to uncertain expectations, and retain for themselves nothing but faith, to which they trust more than to any anchors."

Here, St. Cyril shows how agriculture, a fundamental human activity, is rooted in faith. Farmers toil the land, trusting that their efforts will yield a bountiful harvest. Without this belief in future returns, the arduous labor of husbandry would be futile. Mariners, too, live on this principle. They entrust their lives to the fragile planks of ships, navigating treacherous waters with faith as their guide. The vast expanse of the ocean may seem daunting compared to the stability of the land, yet mariners choose to venture forth, driven by hope and faith in a favorable outcome.

St. Cyril's observation highlights the power of faith. It permeates various aspects of human existence, even among those who may not identify as religious. Faith serves as a guiding force, inspiring individuals to undertake endeavors that require trust in the unknown and the unpredictable. It is a testament to the human capacity for hope, optimism, and unwavering belief in the potential for positive outcomes, regardless of the odds.

Knowledge of God is His delight

Josiah, a young boy blessed with an inquisitive mind and a deep yearning for spiritual truth, embarked on a remarkable journey of faith at the tender age of eight. From that tender age, Josiah dedicated himself to seeking understanding of the divine, driven by an unyielding desire to know God more intimately. "For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, **he began to seek the God of his father David**; and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the wooden images, the carved images, and the molded images." Josiah's pursuit of knowledge was not a fleeting interest but a lifelong commitment that shaped his character and influenced his actions as a king.

Growing up in a time of religious turmoil and idolatry, Josiah recognized the importance of turning away from false gods and wholeheartedly embracing the worship of the one true God. He immersed himself in the study of the scriptures, seeking wisdom and guidance from the words of the prophets. Through his diligent study, Josiah gained profound insights into the nature of God, His laws, and His love for His people.

Josiah's love for God was not mere intellectual curiosity but a genuine desire to live in accordance with His will. He implemented religious reforms, purging the land of pagan practices and restoring the temple to its former glory. His unwavering commitment to righteousness extended to social justice as

well, as he worked tirelessly to ensure fairness and compassion for the marginalized and oppressed. Josiah's true internal desire for the knowledge of God left a lasting impact on his kingdom and beyond.

In the 8th century BC, during a time of great material prosperity yet spiritual bankruptcy, the prophet Hosea witnessed to the northern ten tribes of Israel. He announced the coming judgment upon them at the hands of the Assyrians, which came to pass in 722 BC. In the midst of this impending doom, Hosea delivered a message of hope and restoration. He called the people to repent and return to the Lord, promising that God would heal their wounds and raise them up on the third day.

"Come, and let us return to the Lord; For He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; On the third day He will raise us up, That we may live in His sight. **Let us know, Let us pursue the knowledge of the Lord.**" (Hosea 6:1,6)

In response, God emphasizes that His delight is not in sacrifices and offerings alone, but in the genuine knowledge and pursuit of Him.

"For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, And the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:6)

Here, we see God clearly expressing His desire for us to get to know Him. More than the rituals and external religious acts, which played a significant role in the salvation of mankind, God longs for a deeper connection with His people. The true God can be known. This is one of the first and most important things to understand about Him. God not only desires to be known but also takes delight in revealing Himself to those who have accepted His movement toward them and His revelation.

Knowing God is not merely a task or an obligation, but the very purpose and goal of human existence. It is through this knowledge that we find true fulfillment and meaning in life. As the verse from John 17:3 states, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

As previously mentioned, this knowledge of God extends beyond mere intellectual understanding. It encompasses a deep, personal, and intimate relationship with the Creator. It is a journey of faith, trust, and surrender, where we open our hearts and minds to the divine presence within us. When we know God, we come to understand our place in the universe, our purpose, and our ultimate destiny.

Saint Athanasius, an early church father, beautifully expresses the transformative power of contemplating God and His Word. He says, "... the contemplation of God, and the Word which is from Him, suffice to nourish those who hear, and stand to them in place of all food. For the angels are not otherwise sustained than by beholding the face of the Father and of the Savior who is in heaven."

This contemplation is not a passive or idle activity but an active engagement with the divine. It involves seeking God through prayer, meditation, and the study of His Word. It is a process of continually growing in our understanding and appreciation of His character, His love, and His wisdom. As we immerse ourselves in this contemplation, our hearts and minds are nourished. We find solace, strength, and guidance in the midst of life's challenges. We begin to see the world through God's eyes, developing a deeper compassion for others and a greater understanding of our own purpose.

The knowledge of God is not limited to a select few but is accessible to all who seek Him with a sincere heart. It is through this knowledge that we experience true life. And as we continue to grow in our understanding of God, we come to realize that the journey of knowing Him is an eternal adventure, filled with wonder, awe, and the promise of endless discovery.

Ignorance of God is death

As the world grows in diverse theistic and atheistic teachings, Christians are more and more tempted to grow indifferent to their surroundings. "To each their own" one might think. Is the sheer indifference to living a Christian life a tragedy, something unfortunate, inconvenient, relevant, irrelevant, none of our business? Should our faith be PASSIVE or ACTIVE with these individuals?

False concepts about God that abound in the world do not please Him. It does not please Him that some people think Him to be a part of creation, while some think He is an impersonal force. Or that others think that the Godhead is not one single but various and multiple as the polytheists do. Or to have monistic monotheistic model theists affirming that the one god who exists is not a father. He does not have a son. Such erroneous concepts of God are not just unfortunate. Those are tragic. Not in passing 'all to their own' or 'that is sad'. It is a tragic event painful to Your Father!

Are we guilty of sins committed unwillingly, or unknowingly? If those sins are unrepented, how does God perceive them? In reading Leviticus 5:17-19, one comes to see that we are indeed guilty of sins committed willingly and unknowingly.

"If a person sins, and commits any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the Lord, though he does not know it, **yet he is guilty and shall bear his iniquity.** 18 And he shall bring to the priest a ram without blemish from the flock, with your valuation, as a trespass offering. So the priest shall make atonement for him regarding his ignorance in which he erred and did not know it, and it shall be forgiven him. 19 It is a trespass offering; he has certainly trespassed against the Lord." – Lev 5:17-19

Clearly, atonement is required for unwilling and unknowingly committed sins. A desire and will that Christ, the true High Priest, offers the atonement on our behalf is necessary for salvation. Thus, to some degree, ignorance of God is death. Without this simple basic knowledge, how will those sins come to be atoned?

To affirm that all religions are true in their affirmations about God is to say that God is both created and uncreated. He's both all powerful and not all powerful; both personal and impersonal; both single in nature and supreme; at the same time multiple and divided in nature and without a clear supremacy of power. Of course to say such a thing is utter nonsense. And an insult to the true God. Such teachings about God are not only a denial of His self revelation, but also of the fact that He has labored to make himself known to us. So that we can actually have meaningful communion. This is what you do with people you love. You want them to know you and you want to know them. Faith is not passive.

God's continuous Revelation

God's existence and nature transcend human comprehension. He is not a mere product of our imagination or a result of intellectual deduction. Rather, our understanding of God stems from His own revelation toward us. Through His outstretched hands, He seeks us, inviting us into a profound relationship.

The created cosmos serves as a daily testament to God's glory. As Psalm 19:1-2 NKJV beautifully expresses, "The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, And night unto night reveals knowledge." The intricate beauty and order of the universe, from the celestial bodies to the smallest living organisms, speak volumes about the majesty and wisdom of its Creator.

However, there are certain aspects of the Lord God Almighty that remain beyond our limited human understanding. No mere mortal has ever gazed upon God's true essence, nor can any created being fully comprehend His nature. Scripture confirms this, stating that "no one has ever seen God" (John 1:18 NKJV).

Even the truths that God has chosen to reveal to us in His wisdom for our salvation can be challenging to grasp, especially given our inherent limitations and biases. Our personal perspectives, often clouded by sin and worldly desires, can hinder our comprehension of divine mysteries. That's why Jesus emphasized the importance of purity of heart in Matthew 5:8, saying, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

A cleansed heart allows us to perceive God's presence and understand His ways more clearly. By seeking holiness and living in accordance with His commandments, we open ourselves up to a deeper revelation of His nature. It is through a humble and devoted heart that we can truly encounter God and experience the profound joy and peace that come from knowing Him.

Discerning proper Dogma - Theology and Prayer

Theology, far from being a mere propagation of ideas about God, holds a profound connection with prayer. It is through the act of prayer that we truly come to know and understand the Divine. No human, no creature, should dare to speak about the Lord God without a sense of trepidation and deep circumspection. We do not use God's name casually in our everyday language or invoke it flippantly. It is a sacred and awe-inspiring name that deserves our utmost reverence.

Why, then, do we make the sign of the cross before we speak about God? This simple gesture is a reminder of the profound mystery and majesty of the Divine. It is a way of acknowledging that we are approaching a subject that is beyond our full comprehension, and that we do so with humility and respect. The act of making the cross also serves as a prayer in itself, invoking the protection and guidance of God as we embark on our theological inquiries.

As the ancient Christian writer Evagrius once said, "He who prays is a theologian, and a theologian is the one who prays." These words capture the essence of the relationship between prayer and theology. Prayer is not simply a means of asking God for favors or making requests. It is a way of communing with the Divine, of opening our hearts and minds to God's presence and grace. Through prayer, we enter into a dialogue with God, and it is in this dialogue that we come to know Him more deeply.

Theology, in turn, is not merely an intellectual exercise or a body of abstract ideas. It is a living, breathing tradition that is rooted in prayer and contemplation. True theologians are not simply scholars who study about God, but people who have a deep personal relationship with Him. They are people who have spent countless hours in prayer, seeking to know and understand God more fully.

It is through this combination of prayer and theology that we come to a deeper understanding of God and our relationship with Him. Prayer helps us to open our hearts and minds to God's presence, while theology provides us with the language and concepts we need to articulate our understanding of Him. Together, prayer and theology form a powerful path to spiritual growth and transformation.

Discernment of proper Dogma - Basis of Judgement

A judge uses the law, the jury and the work of prosecutors and lawyers to discern the fate of the accused. When it comes to discernment in Christianity, the judge (you, the individual) has what as its means of discernment? Which of the following is the most governing authority of discerning proper dogma/teachings? Feelings/Conscience, Scripture, Holy Tradition or The Law? Let us look at each separately.

Feelings/Conscience

As narrated in the Bible, during creation God imprinted into the nature of man His Divine Image, which draws man toward everything that is morally good and averts him from everything that is morally evil. As a distinct human faculty, conscience provides a sense of goodness or blameworthiness in our conduct and quality of character, urging us to do right and be good.

Because it is an integral part of human nature, it is active in all people—regardless of their age, race, education, or development. However, this conscience may be corrupted due to sin, and should not be counted as a basis for discernment: “To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled.” (Titus 1:15). Furthermore, the conscience is often intermixed with feelings and feelings and emotions are highly deceptive: The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9)

The Law

Just as judges and lawyers govern our society based on laws, God's law serves as the standard for our conduct. Not as those who focus only on the law have a haram / halal perspective. The Law is not a list of dos and don'ts—the things you need to do to make God happy. In Christ, the Law is more about preserving proper worship of God. God's commandments are invaluable instructions on how to interact with God and how to interact with man.

The law represents God's expressed will, demonstrating His holiness, justice, and goodness. It is intended to bless and guide us. The Law has a role in revealing our sins. “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” (Romans 3:20). However, the written law does not directly address all matters, rather the law teaches us the spirit of that which needs to be achieved.

Scripture/The Revealed Word of God

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). St. Basil the Great says, 'The hearers taught in the Scriptures ought to test what is said by teachers and accept that which agrees with the Scriptures but reject what is foreign'. 'Therefore let God-inspired Scripture decide between us; and on whichever side be found doctrines in harmony with the word of God, in favor of that side will be cast the vote of truth'

St. John Chrysostom says, 'Everything in the divine Scriptures is clear and straightforward; they inform us about all that is necessary' (Epis 2 ad Thess 3,4) and St. Origen says, "It is necessary to take the Holy Scriptures as witnesses; for our comments and statements without these witnesses are not trustworthy."

However, Scripture in the Orthodox view is not as those that follow only scripture who are called sola scriptura. Orthodox Christians hold to both Tradition and the Scriptures, as both are seen as coming from the Holy Spirit. St. Paul twice specifically calls Christians to follow the Traditions of the church. 2 Thessalonians 3:6 says, “But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.” And in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.”

Holy Tradition

Holy Tradition is that same faith that Jesus taught to the Apostles and that they gave to their disciples, preserved in the Church and especially in its leadership through Apostolic succession (Jude 1:3).

St. Anthony says, "Wherefore keep yourselves all the more untainted by them, and observe the TRADITIONS of the FATHERS, and chiefly the holy faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, which you have learned from the SCRIPTURE, AND of which you have often been put in mind BY ME." We are a church that looks at it all. Which is what Holy Tradition is. Encapsulates all that matters.

Holy Tradition encapsulates the the Scripture, which teaches us the Law and which in turn encapsulate that which feeds our conscience “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul” (Psalm 19:7)

Holding on to doctrine

While some argue that dogmatic questions are impractical and unnecessary, they serve several vital purposes. Dogma offers a foundation for our beliefs, helping us to articulate and clarify our understanding of God and the world. It also provides a shared language and framework for all believers, allowing them to communicate and engage in meaningful dialogue. Moreover, dogmatic questions lead to deeper spiritual growth and understanding.

By grappling with complex theological concepts, we challenge our assumptions and biases, fostering a more nuanced and mature faith. This process of inquiry and reflection can bring us closer to God and strengthen our connection to our traditions. Theological questions also have practical implications for

our daily lives. They shape our moral decision-making, ethical considerations, and attitudes towards the world around us. By engaging in theological discussions, we can develop a more informed and compassionate approach to life's challenges and opportunities.

The significance of dogma and theology cannot be dismissed as mere intellectual exercises. They are essential components of faith, providing a foundation for our beliefs, fostering spiritual growth, and guiding our practical actions. While it's important to approach dogmatic questions with humility and openness, they are anything but a waste of time. They are an invitation to explore the depths of our faith, connect with others, and deepen our understanding of the divine.



Review Questions

1. What is Dogma? (A. The unchanging, non-negotiable core elements of the Orthodox Christian faith. Dogma is defined mainly by Ecumenical Councils.)
2. What is Theology? (A. Expansive, creative reflections and applications of dogma and doctrine)
3. What is true knowledge? (A. Knowledge that is not accompanied by diligence is dangerous. We cannot know God and at the same time not imitate Him to some degree. Imitating Him and conforming to His image is itself a result of such true knowledge.)
4. True or false: Knowledge of God begins with Faith. (A. True. Many early church fathers clearly tell us that faith precedes the knowledge of God.)
5. What is the agnostics and atheists approach? (A. It is an approach to emotions and feeling. Their atheism is not due to dispassionate reasoning, but the effect of emotional or relational discomfort with what they perceived God to be.
6. If the Law is not a list of dos and don'ts—the things you need to do to make God happy, what is it? (A. The Law in Christ, is more about preserving proper worship of God. God's commandments are invaluable instructions on how to interact with God and how to interact with man.

The Holy Trinity

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

The Holy Trinity is a Mystery

The concept of the Holy Trinity has been a focal point of theological discourse throughout the history of Christianity, sparking debates and occasionally leading to the emergence of heresies. Within the Coptic Orthodox Church, there is a clear distinction between monotheism and polytheism. Monotheism, stemming from the Greek word "mono" meaning "one," asserts the belief in a singular God. On the other hand, polytheism refers to the belief in multiple deities. As Coptic Orthodox Christians, we firmly adhere to monotheism, recognizing the existence of only one true God.

However, there is a common misconception that the Holy Trinity is simply a form of monotheism, equating the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as three manifestations of the same God. This interpretation is incorrect and fails to grasp the profound mystery of the Trinity. The Holy Trinity comprises three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person possesses their unique role, or hypostasis, within the Godhead. While they embody their own individual "Person," they are united in essence, forming the inseparable Holy Trinity.

The analogy of a triangle is often used to illustrate this concept. Just as a triangle consists of three distinct sides, each with its unique properties, the Holy Trinity comprises three distinct persons. However, much like the sides of a triangle collectively form a single geometric shape, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit collaborate and act as one unified entity.

Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that while the Holy Trinity comprises three distinct persons, whose roles remain distinct, they are not separate entities. Rather, they coexist harmoniously, supporting and complementing one another, forming the one true God. This profound mystery lies at the heart of the Coptic Orthodox faith, and it is through this understanding that we come to appreciate the depth and richness of our Christian tradition.

Key terms

Within the realm of theology, two fundamental terms hold great significance: Essence and Person. Essence, often referred to as substance or nature, encapsulates the inherent qualities that define the identity of something. It delves into the question of "WHAT" something truly is, transcending physical characteristics or external appearances.

On the other hand, Person, also known as Hypostasis, addresses the question of "WHO" someone is. It encompasses the distinct individuality of a being, their unique personality, and their specific role within a larger entity. While multiple individuals may share similar essential characteristics, their personhood sets them apart as distinct and separate entities.

In the context of the Holy Trinity, this distinction between Essence and Person becomes crucial. While the Trinity is acknowledged as ONE in Essence, it simultaneously comprises THREE distinct Persons:

the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit. This profound mystery defies human comprehension, but it is a cornerstone of Christian faith.

As Saint Athanasius, the theologian of the early Church, eloquently stated, "The Trinity, praised, revered and adored, is one and indivisible and without degrees. It is united without confusion, just as the One God is also distinguished without separation." Saint Athanasius further illustrates this concept by referencing a passage from the Book of Isaiah (Chapter 6) and the Book of Revelation (Chapter 4:8), where venerable creatures offer praises three times, saying "Holy, Holy, Holy." This threefold repetition, he argues, signifies the distinct perfection of the Three Persons within the Trinity. "For the fact of those venerable living creatures (Isa/ 6; Rev 4:8) offering their praises three times, saying 'Holy, Holy, Holy,' proves that the Three Persons are perfect, just as in saying 'Lord,' they declare the One Essence"

Moreover, the declaration of "Lord" in these passages points to the singular Essence that unites the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Saint Athanasius emphasizes that the Trinity maintains its unity while simultaneously preserving the distinctness of each Person.

Many of our Fathers, such as St. Cyril of Alexandria, have been adamant about the essence of the Holy Trinity stating, "for the whole Holy Trinity opens out, as if it were into three distinct or separate Persons, it is as though it contracts into the one nature of Deity." This profound understanding of the Trinity as ONE in Essence but THREE in Persons has served as a cornerstone of Christian theology for centuries. It encapsulates the mystery of a single divine being existing in three distinct and interdependent manifestations.

To Each His Own

Each "Person" of the Trinity possesses a unique name and plays a specific role in our lives. This differentiation is crucial for understanding our relationship with God. Consider the example of Andrew and Peter. Although both are male, they are distinct individuals with distinct names. Similarly, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while all being aspects of God, are distinct "Persons" with distinct roles.

For instance, when we pray "Our Father," we are addressing God the Father, not Jesus Christ, His Beloved Son. This distinction highlights the importance of recognizing each Person of the Trinity when approaching, defining, and forming a relationship with God.

The independence of the Father and Son is further emphasized in the Bible. In John 5:22, it is stated that "the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son." This verse clearly acknowledges that the Father and Son are not the same "Person."

Another instance of this distinction can be found in Acts 1:7, where Jesus tells His disciples, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority." This verse converges with a later verse in Matthew 24:36, which states, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but my Father only." These verses highlight the Father's exclusive knowledge of certain aspects of God's plan, further emphasizing His distinctiveness from the Son.

The Epiphany Regarding the Holy Trinity

The baptism of Jesus Christ, often referred to as the "Baptism of Christ" or the "Epiphany," holds immense significance in the Church. The term "Epiphany" itself means "a moment of sudden revelation or insight," and this event certainly embodies that definition. During this pivotal moment, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the three distinct yet equal Persons of the Trinity, were all revealed.

As Jesus emerged from the water after being baptized by John the Baptist, the heavens opened up above Him. In a remarkable display of divine revelation, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and alighted upon Jesus, symbolizing the Spirit's anointing and empowering of Him for His earthly ministry. At the same time, a voice came from heaven, declaring, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

This event affirmed the identity and mission of Jesus as the Son of God. It also signified the Father's love and approval of His Son, emphasizing the unique and intimate relationship between them. Additionally, it provided a glimpse into the unity and cooperation within the Trinity, as each Person played a distinct role in this momentous occasion.

The baptism of Christ is also recognized as a theophany, a visible manifestation of God to humankind. Through His physical presence at the baptism, God the Father made Himself known to those present, demonstrating His involvement in the life and ministry of His Son. This event not only confirmed Jesus' divine nature but also served as a powerful reminder of God's ongoing presence and guidance in the world.

The baptism of Christ is one of the most significant instances in the New Testament of the Holy Trinity's nature as well as existence, with St. Augustine of Hippo explaining, "Here then we have the Trinity presented in a clear way: the Father in the voice, the Son in the man, the Holy Spirit in the dove. This only needs to be barely mentioned, for it is so obvious for anyone to see. Here the recognition of the Trinity is conveyed to us so plainly that it hardly leaves any room for doubt or hesitation."

Analogies for the Trinity

Throughout history, various analogies have been employed to illustrate the concept of the Trinity, each shedding light on different aspects while ultimately falling short of fully capturing its profound mystery. By harmonizing these analogies, we can gain a multifaceted understanding of the Trinity.

One common analogy is that of the Sun, which comprises three distinct components: the sun, its light, and its heat. This analogy emphasizes the idea of three distinct entities existing within a single entity. However, it does not adequately explain the Essence of the Trinity, as the Essence of light differs from that of the physical Sun and the heat. Similarly, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct in nature.

Another analogy is the "3-In-1" analogy. Recall from earlier the example of Andrew and Peter; they are distinct individuals despite sharing the same male gender. Now, imagine three individuals: Peter, Andrew, and John. All three possess the same human essence, yet they are distinct human beings. Peter is not Andrew or John, and vice versa. Each has unique attributes such as hair color and nose shape, yet they are all human beings. Now, consider that all three exist within one another: Andrew within Peter, Peter within Andrew, John within Peter, John within Andrew, and so on. Additionally, this being that contains all three permeates the entire cosmos. However, it is crucial to remember that they remain distinct entities.

Applying this analogy to the Holy Trinity, we understand that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in Essence, meaning they are all divine. They exist within one another, implying that the Father is within the Son, the Son within the Father, the Holy Spirit within the Father, the Father within the Holy Spirit, the Son within the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit within the Son. We profess our belief in one God with three hypostases (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in one essence.

It is essential to recognize that within the Trinity, there is diversity but never division. The Trinity exists in unity without requiring uniformity. This mystery transcends human understanding, but through analogies and contemplation, we can deepen our appreciation for the complexity and beauty of the Trinity.

Biblical Usage

The concept of the Holy Trinity, comprising the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit, is profoundly established in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The Old Testament, specifically in Genesis Chapter 1, sets the stage for the existence of a triune God. It narrates the act of creation, stating that "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." (Genesis 1:1-3) Each 'Person' of the Holy Trinity is clearly established long before the arrival of Christ, as He exists as the Word of God.

Moreover, the Old Testament reinforces the notion of the Holy Trinity in Genesis 1:26, where it is written, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." The plurality of the action of creation of man implies This verse suggests that God exists alongside the two other 'Persons' of the Holy Trinity.

The New Testament further elaborates on the distinctions within the Trinity. In 2 Corinthians 13:14, the Apostle Paul writes, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit..." This verse acknowledges the unique attributes and roles of each person of the Trinity: the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

In John 5:30, Jesus Christ himself declares, "...I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me." This statement illustrates the submission of the Son to the will of the Father, emphasizing their distinct persons while acknowledging their unity in purpose. Similarly, in Matthew 28:19, Jesus commands his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This instruction underscores the inseparable nature of the Trinity and the recognition that true knowledge of God involves understanding Him as three distinct but interconnected persons.

Hypostatic Union of the Trinity

The word 'Hypostasis', meaning 'Person', finds its roots in the Greek language. The term is derived from two Greek words: "hypo," meaning "under" or "sub," and "stasis," meaning "stance" or "existence." Together, these elements combine to form the concept of hypostasis, which can be understood as "substance" or "person."

To grasp the essence of hypostasis, it is helpful to consider the analogy of a triangle. In this analogy, the hypostasis of the Father represents the source and origin of all that exists. Uncreated and unbegotten, the Father stands as the supreme being, from whom all creation flows. The hypostasis of the Son, on the other hand, is begotten of the Father. This relationship between the Father and the Son is often described as "eternal generation," emphasizing the unique and intimate bond between them. Through this generation, the Son shares in the divine nature of the Father, yet maintains a distinct hypostasis or personhood.

Lastly, the hypostasis of the Holy Spirit completes the Trinity. The Spirit proceeds from the Father. This procession signifies the dynamic and interactive nature of the divine relationship. The Holy Spirit, as the Spirit of God, partakes in the divine essence while possessing a distinct hypostasis.

It is essential to emphasize that the concept of hypostasis does not imply separation or division within the Godhead. Rather, it affirms the unity and oneness of God while acknowledging the distinct personal characteristics of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each hypostasis fully possesses the divine nature, yet they are distinct in their personal relations and roles within the Trinity.

Understanding the hypostases of the Trinity is crucial for comprehending the multifaceted nature of God and the intricacies of Christian doctrine. Let us slowly dive into each hypostasis.

The Father

Within the Holy Trinity, the Father stands as the ultimate source, the wellspring from which all creation flows. Far from being an abstract, distant religious entity, He is a present, loving Being who yearns to be known and cherished by His children. As Christ proclaimed in the Gospel of John, "If anyone loves Me, they will keep My word, and My Father will love them. We will come to them and make Our home with them" (John 14:23).

This profound verse reveals the Father's desire for intimate relationship with humanity. He longs to dwell within our hearts, to walk with us through life's journey, and to share His love and wisdom with us. Through His presence, we find comfort, guidance, and strength to navigate the challenges and uncertainties of this world.

The relationship between the Father and the other two persons in the Trinity, the Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit, is defined through the concepts of "begetting" and "procession." Begetting refers to the eternal generation of the Son from the Father, while procession describes the eternal proceeding of the Holy Spirit from the Father. These timeless actions demonstrate the mystical, internal connections within God and the dynamic life He holds within Himself.

It is through the Son, Jesus Christ, that we have access to the Father. As Christ Himself declared, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). Christ's life, death, and resurrection provide the bridge that spans the chasm between humanity and God, making reconciliation and relationship with the Father possible.

One of Lord Jesus Christ's primary goals during His earthly ministry was to guide people to His Father along with Himself. He taught His disciples about the Father's love, mercy, and grace, revealing His

character and attributes through His words and actions. Christ's teachings and example invite us to embrace the Father's love and to experience the transformative power of His presence in our lives.

The Son

The second Person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ, is referred to as the Son of God, the Word, or Logos. This concept finds its basis in the opening chapter of the Gospel of St. John, which likens the relationship between thought and word to that of the Father and the Son.

Thought, originating from within itself, utters a word, much like the Prophet's declaration, "My heart hath poured forth a good word" (Ps. 45:1). Thought and word, though distinct and occupying separate spaces—thought remaining in the heart while the word is on the tongue and lips—are inseparable and codependent. Thought gives rise to word, and word, in turn, communicates thought to the listener.

St. Dionysius of Alexandria provides further insight by explaining that thought is like a word hidden within, while word is thought brought forth. Thought transforms into word, and word carries thought to the ears of the listener. This process allows thought, through the medium of the word, to be instilled in the souls of those who hear it.

“Our thought utters from itself the word according to what the Prophet has said: ‘My heart hath poured forth a good word’ (Ps. 45:1). Thought and word are separate one from the other, and each occupies its special and separate place: while thought remains and moves the heart, the word is on the tongue and the lips. However, they are inseparable, and not for one moment are they deprived of each other. Thought does not exist without word, nor word without thought, having received its existence in thought. Thought is, as it were, a word hidden within, and word is thought which has come without. Thought is transformed into word, and word transmits thought to the hearers. In this way, thought, with the help of the word, is instilled in the souls of the listeners, entering them together with the word. Thought, coming from itself, is as it were the father of the word: and the word is, as it were, the son of the thought. Before the thought the word was impossible, and the word does not come from anywhere outside, but rather from the thought itself. Thus also, the Father, the greatest and all-embracing Thought, has a Son, the Word, His first Interpreter and Herald.” - St. Dionysius of Alexandria explains,

In this analogy, thought, emerging from itself, can be seen as the father of the word, and the word, as the son of thought. Before thought, the word cannot exist, and the word originates not from an external source but from thought itself. Similarly, the Father, the greatest and all-encompassing Thought, has a Son, the Word, who serves as His primary interpreter and messenger.

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is often referred to as the 'wind' or 'breath' of God. While human language and understanding can never fully encapsulate the divine nature, we can attempt to describe the Spirit's role in relation to the Father and the Son.

The Spirit resides within us, guiding and empowering us as believers. Through the Spirit, we experience God's presence and work in our lives. Just as the Son Jesus Christ reveals the Father to us,

so the Spirit reveals the Son to us. Through the Spirit's work, the teachings and life of Christ become real and personal to us.

In John 15:26, Jesus promises “But when the Helper (i.e. the Holy Spirit) comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me” (John 15:26). Moreover, in John 14:16-17, Jesus assures us that the Holy Spirit can be known personally. “And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you” (John 14:16, 17).

There is a beautiful prayer in the Agpeya - Third Hour expressed to the Holy Spirit: “O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of truth who is present in all places and fills all, the treasury of good things and the Life-Giver, graciously come, and dwell in us and purify us from all defilement, O Good One, and save our souls” This prayer expresses our constant dependence on the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. It acknowledges the Spirit as the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, and the Life-Giver. This prayer reminds us of the essential role of the Holy Spirit in our spiritual lives and encourages us to seek His presence and guidance daily.

Learning from the Trinity

In the following quote by Bishop Kallistos Ware, an Eastern church father, he emphasizes the profound connection between our love for one another and our faith in the Triune God. A genuine confession of faith in the Trinity is only possible when we demonstrate mutual love towards each other, mirroring the loving relationships within the Trinity. He asserts that love for one another serves as a precondition for faith in the Trinity, while faith in the Trinity, in turn, amplifies and gives deeper meaning to our love.

He also challenges the perception of the doctrine of the Trinity as an abstruse theological concept reserved for specialists. He argues that it should have a transformative impact on our daily lives, urging us to recognize that as beings made in the image of God the Trinity, we are called to replicate the mystery of mutual love that exists within the Trinity on earth.

A genuine confession of faith in the Triune God can be made only by those who, after the likeness of the Trinity, show love mutually towards each other. There is an integral connection between our love for one another and our faith in the Trinity: the first is a precondition for the second, and in its turn the second gives full strength and meaning to the first. So far, from being pushed into the corner and treated as a piece of abstruse theologizing of interest only to specialists, the doctrine of the Trinity ought to have upon our daily life an effect that is nothing less than revolutionary. Made after the image of God the Trinity, human beings are called to reproduce on earth the mystery of mutual love that the Trinity lives in heaven.” (Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*)

This quote highlights the inseparable nature of faith and love in the Christian understanding of the Trinity. It encourages us to see our relationships with others as reflections of the divine love and

community within the Godhead and to strive for a life of love and unity that mirrors the Trinity's perfect communion.

Therefore, as we seek to know and love God, let us turn our hearts toward the Father. Through His Son, Jesus Christ, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can enter into a personal and intimate relationship with the Father, experiencing His love, grace, and peace in our lives.



Review Questions

1. As Coptic orthodox Christians, believing in the Holy Trinity, what is our primary religious orientation? (A: Monotheistic.)
2. Why do we call the sacrament of Baptism, 'the Baptism of Christ'? (A: Baptism marks our personal identification and connection with Christ. We are united with him and devote our loyalty and service to Christ.)
3. What is an appropriate analogy to describe the nature of the Holy Trinity? (A: the 3-in-1 analogy/ triangle analogy.)
4. What is an instance in the Holy Bible wherein the Holy Trinity is portrayed? (A: the Baptism of Christ, in the book of Matthew.)
5. Are God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit equal in relation to each other? (A: No.)
6. How is it possible for three separate entities to exist as one? (A: They exist in one Essence, with differing roles.)
7. Within the Trinity, there is diversity and division. True or False? (A: False.)
8. What evidence is there for the existence of the Holy Trinity in Genesis? (A: See Genesis 1)
9. What is the difference between a 'Person' and their Essence? (A: Person is their role/ identity, while Essence refers to their nature.)
10. Can the Sun be used as an appropriate analogy for the Holy Trinity? Why or why not? (A: No, because the Essence of the light is different from that of the physical Sun, as well as different from the heat.)



Books



Supplementary Material



The Meaning of the Holy Trinity

[Bishop Youssef on the Holy Trinity](#)

The Nature of Christ

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Is Christ more Divine than Human?

The nature of Christ has been a contentious issue throughout history, with numerous heresies emerging to challenge its significance. One of the most notable divisions within the church occurred in 451 AD at the Council of Chalcedon, where monophysitism, which emphasized the unity of Christ's divine and human natures, was addressed. However, some churches, now known as the Non-Chalcedonian or Oriental Orthodox Churches, rejected the council's decisions, insisting on preserving the unity between Christ's humanity and divinity.

At the heart of this dispute lies the fundamental question: Did Jesus Christ possess one or two natures? Understanding the answer to this question is crucial for our salvation and for recognizing God's empathy toward us. The belief in the One Nature of the Incarnate Logos is essential, necessary, and fundamental for one's redemption. This belief affirms that Jesus Christ, the Logos, fully assumed human nature while remaining fully divine.

The significance of this belief lies in its implications for our redemption. Redemption requires an unlimited propitiation, a sacrifice capable of forgiving the countless sins of all people throughout time, not just those of an individual. Only the Incarnation of God, the Logos, offered this generous solution through His Divine Power. By becoming fully human, Christ experienced our limitations, temptations, and sufferings, demonstrating His empathy and solidarity with humanity.

Moreover, Christ's human nature facilitated His substitutionary death on the cross. As a perfect and sinless man, He offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, reconciling us with God. Through His sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection, He conquered sin and death, providing the means for our salvation and eternal life. Seeing this ultimate mystical unity between human and divine, St. Paul says: "For had they known it, they would not have ***crucified the Lord of Glory***." (1 Cor. 2:8) and instead they "...denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted unto you and killed the Prince of Life..." (Acts 3:14)

Understanding the nature of Christ as both fully human and fully divine is essential for our faith and understanding of redemption. It assures us that in Christ, we have a Savior who understands our struggles and experiences and who has offered the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. By embracing the belief in the One Nature of the Incarnate Logos, we acknowledge His divinity, humanity, and sacrificial love, which grants us forgiveness, reconciliation with God, and the promise of eternal life.

The Orthodox Concept

The Lord Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Logos, is God Himself. He assumed a perfect human nature, uniting His Divine nature with His human nature. This union is complete and permanent, never divided or separated. His Godhead never departed from His manhood, even for an instant. As we say in the liturgy: "his divinity never departed from his humanity for a single moment nor a twinkling of an eye."

After the schism in 451 AD, the Coptic Orthodox Church rejected the Council of Chalcedon and its theological positions. They, along with other churches, were incorrectly accused of being "Monophysites," believing in only one nature of Christ. The Syrians, Armenians, Ethiopians, and Indians also share this belief and are known as "Non-Chalcedonian" Orthodox Churches. Though the Non-Chalcedonian church do indeed believe in 'One Nature', it must be specified as 'One Nature out of Two', or also known as 'Miaphysite'. The one Nature of God the Incarnate Logos" as St. Cyril calls it.

On the other hand, the Chalcedonian Catholic and Greek Churches believe in the two natures of Christ. The Protestant Church also holds this belief. These churches are known as "Diophysites," believers in the two natures of Christ. These Roman (or Chalcedonian) Orthodox Churches include Constantinople, Greece, Cyprus, Russia, Romania, Hungary, and Serbia, as well as the Roman Orthodox Churches of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, America, and the St. Catherine Monastery in the Sinai desert.

According to our belief, the Divine nature united with the human nature in the womb of St. Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. This unity occurred from the first moment of the Holy pregnancy. As a result of this union, a single nature emerged from the combination of the two, rather than two separate natures coexisting.

Heresies Against the One Nature

The nature of Christ has faced numerous challenges throughout history, with various heresies emerging to question His divinity and humanity. One such heresy is Arianism, proposed by Arius, who denied the Divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Arius believed that Christ was not consubstantial with the Father, meaning He was not of the same essence or nature. He asserted that Christ was created, diminishing His divine status. Despite being condemned by the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., Arianism's roots persist to this day, causing disputes and suspicion within the Church.

Another notable heresy is Apollinarianism, championed by Apollinarius, who acknowledged the Divine Nature of Christ but denied His complete human nature. Apollinarius proposed that Christ did not possess a soul and that His human nature was incomplete, with the Logos (the divine aspect of Christ) providing the necessary life. This notion was perceived as incomplete and heretical, and the Holy Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. condemned Apollinarianism, rejecting its claims.

Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople in 428 A.D., also sparked controversy with his heresy. He refused to refer to the Virgin Mary as "Mother of God" (Theotokos) and instead promoted the title "Mother of Jesus" (Christokos). Nestorius argued that St. Mary gave birth to a mere human, and that Divinity later descended and filled this human. His teachings essentially separated the divine and human aspects of Christ, which led to his excommunication by the Holy Ecumenical Council of Ephesus held in 431 A.D.

Lastly, Eutyches, an archimandrite in Constantinople, vehemently opposed the Nestorian heresy. In his zeal to emphasize the unity of the two natures in Christ, he fell into another heresy. Eutyches claimed that the human nature of Christ was absorbed and dissolved into the Divine nature like a drop of vinegar in the ocean. This teaching effectively denied the reality of Christ's human nature and was condemned as heretical.

These heresies reflect a diversity of perspectives on the nature of Christ, ranging from denying His divinity to disputing the completeness of His humanity. The early Church faced the challenge of discerning the truth amid these conflicting viewpoints, ultimately affirming the orthodox understanding that Christ is both fully divine and fully human.

Doctrines Regarding the Nature of Christ

Miaphysitism, Monophysitism, Dyophysitism, Docetism, and Nestorianism are then the doctrines related to the nature of Christ that have been debated throughout Christian history.

Miaphysitism asserts that Jesus Christ possesses a single, unified nature that is both human and divine. This nature is often referred to as the "nature of the Incarnate Logos." Miaphysitism emphasizes the unity of Christ's person and the inseparability of his human and divine attributes.

Monophysitism, in contrast, teaches that Jesus Christ has a single, divine nature. Monophysites believe that Christ's human nature was absorbed into his divine nature, resulting in a single, divine nature. This doctrine was popular in the early church, but it was eventually rejected as heretical at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD.

Dyophysitism, on the other hand, teaches that Jesus Christ has two distinct natures, human and divine. These two natures are united in the person of Christ, but they remain distinct and unmixed. Dyophysitism emphasizes the full humanity and divinity of Christ and is the Christological doctrine taught in non-Oriental Orthodox churches.

Docetism is a Christian doctrine that teaches that Jesus Christ was not a real, physical human being, but rather a spiritual entity. Docetists believe that Christ's human body was an illusion or a mere appearance. This doctrine was popular in the early church but was eventually rejected as heretical.

Nestorianism is a Christian doctrine that teaches that Jesus Christ has two separate persons, one human and one divine. Nestorians believe that the human person of Christ is distinct from the divine person of Christ and that the two are united only by a moral union. This doctrine was condemned as heretical at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD.

The Miaphysitism is a doctrine that holds that Jesus Christ has a single, unified nature that is both human and divine. This doctrine emphasizes the unity of Christ's person and the inseparability of his human and divine attributes.

The Nature of the Union

Coptic Orthodox belief holds that the union of the two natures of Christ is unique, distinct from any other type of union. This union is characterized by several key attributes. Firstly, it is without mingling, unlike the union of wheat and barley or salt and sugar. This means that the two natures of Christ remain distinct and do not merge or fuse together. Secondly, the union is without confusion, unlike the union of milk and tea. Although the two natures are distinct, they are perfectly united without causing any confusion or blending of their properties. Thirdly, the union is without alteration, meaning that neither nature is affected or changed by the union. Each nature retains its unique properties and characteristics. Fourthly, the union is without transmutation, meaning that neither nature is

transformed or converted into the other. This misconception of transmutation leads to the belief that one element can change into another through processes such as radioactive decay or nuclear bombardment.

To further illustrate the Coptic Orthodox belief in the union of Christ's two natures, certain analogies are employed. One such analogy is the union of iron and fire, as espoused by St. Cyril the Great and St. Dioscorus. When iron is ignited in fire, the two unite, but the iron does not change into fire, nor does the fire change into iron. While this analogy may not be perfect, as the union of iron and fire is not permanent, it serves to convey the idea that the two natures of Christ are united without being transformed or altered. Another analogy used is the union of the soul and the body, as described by St. Cyril, St. Augustine, and others. In this analogy, the nature of the soul unites with the physical, earthly nature of the body to form a union of one nature, which is the human nature we experience today.

Just as we say that human nature is one nature consisting of two elements, we can also say about the Incarnate Logos that He is one entity of two elements. Although a human being is formed of these two 'natures,' one would never claim that a person is two but rather one. All of a person's actions are attributed to this one nature, not solely to the soul or the body alone. "He is not bi-natured, to one we kneel down and to the other we do not, but He is rather of One Nature - the Incarnate Logos - that is one with His Body and before whom we kneel down in one genuflection" (St. Athanasius). This understanding of the union of Christ's two natures is central to Coptic Orthodox belief and distinguishes it from other theological interpretations.

Miracles of the Incarnate Logos

In the Holy Bible, who was speaking with the blind man? It was not just human nature. This is evident from the Lord Jesus Christ's own words, when He confirms to the blind man that "it is He that talks with you, the Son of God" (John 9:37). The Son of God is a reference to Jesus Christ's Divine nature, as He is the second person of the Trinity. Therefore, it was not merely the human nature of Jesus Christ that was speaking with the blind man, but also in union with His Divine nature.

One can also consider the miracles performed by Jesus Christ, such as walking on water and rebuking the wind. These miracles were beyond the capabilities of human nature alone and could only be performed by someone with Divine power. Therefore, it is clear that when Jesus Christ walked on water and rebuked the wind, it was the whole Incarnate Logos that was acting.

Additionally, the same could be said about other miraculous events performed by Jesus Christ, such as giving sight to the man born blind, turning water into wine, and the bleeding woman touching Him for healing. All these events demonstrate the Incarnate Logos. It is important to note, that in the non-chalcedonian perspective, we cannot separate the natures and proclaim just the Divine Nature performed the miracle but rather refer solely and mystically to the Incarnate Logos. It is 'in thought alone,' as St. Cyril said, that one could expound and give account to one nature. Jesus Christ is not merely a human being but the Incarnate Logos, the second person of the Trinity, who possesses both Divine and human natures.

The One Nature at the Birth of Christ

The birth of Jesus Christ, as recounted in the Bible, holds profound significance for Christians. At the heart of this event lies the question of who the Virgin Mary gave birth to. About who did the angel proclaim: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you, therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born of you will be called the Son of God." (Lk. 1:35)? While some may argue that she solely gave birth to the Godhead, others believe it was only the manhood. However, a deeper understanding reveals that the Virgin Mary gave birth to both God and man, in the form of the Incarnate God.

The prophecy in Isaiah 9:6 foretells the birth of a Child who would possess divine attributes such as "for unto Us a Child is born, unto Us a Son is given and the government will be upon His shoulder, and His Name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." This passage suggests that the Virgin Mary gave birth to more than just a human being. Moreover, the account in Galatians 4:4 emphasizes that God sent forth His Son, born of a woman. "But when the fullness of time was come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, according to Law." This verse highlights the human aspect of Jesus Christ's birth.

Rejecting the heresy of Nestorius, which claims that the Divine and human natures of Christ are separate, Christians recognize that the Virgin Mary gave birth to the Incarnate God. The inseparable union of these two natures is essential for understanding the significance of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

Numerous verses from the Bible depict and substantiate both the Divine and human nature of Jesus Christ. For instance, in John 1:1, we read, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This verse establishes the pre-existence and divinity of Jesus Christ. Conversely, in Luke 2:7, we find, "And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." This verse portrays the human birth and humble beginnings of Jesus Christ.

The significance of the Virgin Mary's birth-giving extends beyond the theological debate surrounding the nature of Jesus Christ. It serves as a reminder of God's love and condescension toward humanity. Elizabeth, her cousin clearly saw this, and thus proclaimed: "But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me." (Lk. 1:43) By taking on human flesh, Jesus Christ bridged the gap between God and man, making it possible for us to experience salvation and eternal life.

The One Nature during the sufferings of Christ

How can we describe the sufferings of Christ if divinity is not susceptible to pain, yet the human nature within Him endured suffering while united with the Divine nature? It was this unified Nature that bore the pain, despite the Divine nature's immunity to suffering. Through His humanity, Christ suffered during crucifixion. As both man and God, His physical death offered limitless atonement for humankind, as stated in Acts 20:28: "...to shepherd the Church to God which He purchased with His Own Blood."

The holy fathers used the analogy of a red-hot iron to explain this concept, equating the Divine Nature united with Christ's human nature. When a blacksmith strikes the red-hot iron, the hammer impacts both the iron and the fire united with it. The iron bends (suffers), while the fire remains untouched despite bending with the iron.

Christ, the Incarnate Logos, embodies a unique nature that encompasses the characteristics of both His Divine and human natures. While His Divine nature is impervious to death, His human nature possesses the susceptibility to mortality. Crucially, at the time of Christ's death, there was no separation between these two natures.

On the third day, His soul, eternally united with His Godhead, returned to unite with His body, which also remained inseparably connected to His divine essence. This event marked the resurrection of Christ. Throughout this process, His Divinity never departed from either His soul or His body.

"The soul left the body, but His Divinity never departed, neither from His Soul nor from His Body. His Soul, likewise, whilst united with His Godhead, descended into hell to preach those who died in the faith and to open to them the gates of Paradise and let them enter. Yet His Body, also united with His Godhead, remained in the grave. " This is a saying from the Syrian fraction, concerning the death of Christ. The prayer emphasizes the indivisible unity of Christ's Divine and human natures, even in the face of death. They underscore that His Divinity remained present in both His soul and His body throughout the period of the Resurrection.

“Son of Man” vs. “Son of God”

No doubt, the term "Son of Man" denotes the human nature of Christ, just as the phrase, "Son of God," denotes His Divinity. "No one has ascended up to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man which is in heaven. "(John 3:13) However, our Lord Jesus Christ used the term "Son of Man" on several occasions where He meant "Son of God." "For the *Son of Man* is Lord even of the Sabbath." (Matthew 12:8) The Son of man is thus in heaven and on earth. Similarly, the Lord uses the term "Son of Man" to demonstrate his Lordship: "For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." (Matt. 12:8)

For those skeptical regarding the human nature of Christ, the Holy Bible portrays many instances of our Lord being referred to as "Son of Man," thereby evidencing his humanity. Recall his many miracles, such as that of the paralytic, "But that you may know that the *Son of Man* has power on earth to forgive sins"—then He said to the paralytic, "He said to the paralytic, 'Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.' And he arose and departed to his house." (Matthew 9:6-7) Not only does Christ show his authority of forgiveness but also demonstrates how the "Son of Man" is Lord and Judge: "For the Son of man will come in the Glory of His Father with His angels and then He will reward every man according to his works. " (Matt. 16:27)

The New Testament additionally uses this prevalent phrase to speak of what may come, such as the book of Matthew describing "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...' " (Matthew 25:31-34). Also in the same book, "the Son of Man will come in the Glory of His Father with His angels and then He will reward every man according to his works." (Matthew 16:27) Our Lord, Jesus Christ does not encompass only the nature of humanity, for these predictions and as His works, are far beyond the capability of any regular man. His Divine nature is what allows one to, God

willing, "...see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of Power, and coming in the clouds of heaven." (Matthew 26:63-65). The "Son of Man" is then seen and described as full of glory and seated at the right hand of the Father!

The book of Matthew is not the sole book of the Bible wherein this phenomenon is observed: throughout the book of Acts we are told that one saw "...the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" (Acts 7:56). In summation, one needs to be aware of the duality of the nature of Christ, be it one nature altogether, as what shall you do "...if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before?" (John 6:62)



Review Questions

1. Does Christ have one or two natures? (A: One Nature)
2. What did St. Cyril call the nature of Christ? (A: The Incarnate Logos)
3. What is the difference between monophysites & miaphysites? (A: Miaphysitism is a doctrine that teaches the existence of a unified, but compound, nature of Jesus Christ, (one nature of both the human and divine nature, which is the "the nature of the Incarnate Logos.") Contrastingly, monophysitism is a doctrine that teaches the existence of a single nature.)
4. What is the doctrine of the Chalcedonian church? (A: They believe in the two natures of Christ.)
5. What is Arius heresy? (A: Arius denied the Divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ; he considered that Christ was not consubstantial with the Father and that He was created. The roots of Arianism still exist until this day. Even after being condemned in 325 A.D. by the Council of Nicea, Arius and his followers caused trouble, dissension and suspicions within the Holy Church.)
6. What is Apollinarius heresy? (A: Apollinarius preached the Divine Nature of Christ, but did not believe in His complete human nature; he considered that the human nature of Christ was not in need of a soul and thus He was without soul because God the Logos provided the needed life. As this implied that the human nature of Christ was incomplete, the Holy Ecumenical Council of Constantinople held in 381 A.D. condemned Apollinarius and rejected his idea declaring it a heresy.)
7. What is Eutyches heresy? (A: Eutyches was an archimandrite of a monastery in Constantinople. He zealously opposed the Nestorian heresy and was so highly concerned about the unity of the two natures in Christ, which Nestorus tore apart, that he fell into another heresy. Eutyches said that the human nature was absorbed and dissolved in the Divine nature as a drop of vinegar in the ocean.)
8. When did the Divine nature unite with the human nature? (A: At the first moment of

the Holy pregnancy)

9. To whom did St. Mary give birth? (A: Son of Man)
10. Does the term "Son of Man" refer to the human nature or to the one nature, the Incarnate Logos? (A: It refers to the one nature, as our Lord Jesus Christ used the term "Son of Man" on several occasions when He meant "Son of God.")
11. Who did suffer on the cross? (A: The human element of Christ, as his Divinity could not suffer.)
12. What did happen when Christ died on the cross? (A: No separation occurred between the Divine nature and the human nature at the moment of Christ's death.)
13. What did happen at the resurrection? (A: On the third day His soul, united with His Godhead, came to unite with His body which was also united with His Godhead; Thus resurrection took place.)



[The Nature of Christ](#)

The Holy Spirit

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Who is the Holy Spirit: A power or a person?

At the heart of Christian belief about God is the question of who the Holy Spirit truly is. Is the Holy Spirit merely a divine power or influence, or is He truly a Person? Can a mere power help or intercede? Can a power possess a mind or act with intention? Holy Scripture itself answers these questions with clarity.

The Apostle Paul writes:

“Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.”

(Romans 8:26–27, NKJV)

In this passage, St. Paul attributes to the Holy Spirit actions that presuppose personal agency. The Spirit helps, intercedes, possesses a mind, and acts according to the will of God. These are not the actions of an impersonal force. Intercession requires awareness, intention, and relationship. Scripture therefore presents the Holy Spirit as a living Person who actively participates in the life of believers.

This biblical witness is fully consistent with the faith of the Church. In the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, we confess:

*We believe, “in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, ... who, **with the Father and the Son.**” (The Creed)*

This confession, in the creed, places the Holy Spirit not among created forces, but within the very life of God Himself. Scripture describes the Holy Spirit in personal terms, not as power, when it says that He teaches, guides, comforts, and intercedes (John 14:26; Romans 8:14). He possesses emotions, intellect, and will (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Corinthians 2:10–14; 1 Corinthians 12:11). The Holy Spirit spoke to Philip and gave counsel to the Church at Jerusalem (Acts 8:29; Acts 15:28). He was sinned against and lied to (Acts 5:3–4).

Each of these testimonies leads to the same theological conclusion. The Holy Spirit does not act as an impersonal force, but as a Person. He is the Third Person (Hypostasis) of the Holy Trinity, one in essence with the Father and the Son.

For the servant of the Church, this truth is not merely theoretical. To believe in the Holy Spirit as a Person is to recognize that the Christian life is lived in real communion with Him. He teaches, guides,

sanctifies, and intercedes, and He calls believers to holiness, obedience, and deeper participation in the life of God.

Can a mere power be a witness?

This question follows naturally from the previous observations. Can the Holy Spirit, often described as the power of God, truly function as a witness? This question follows naturally from the scriptural testimony concerning the personal nature of the Holy Spirit.

Witnessing is not a mechanical act. Witnessing typically involves perception, understanding, and the ability to communicate. Can a force or power possess these qualities? These are qualities that belong to a personal subject, not to an impersonal force.

Holy Scripture explicitly identifies the Holy Spirit as a witness. The apostles declare:

“And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

(Acts 5:32, NKJV)

In this passage, the Holy Spirit is presented alongside the apostles as a witness to the saving work of God. The Holy Spirit is not described as a passive power operating through them, but as one who actively bears witness together with them.

The Holy Spirit’s role as a witness is closely connected to His mission to reveal Christ. Our Lord Himself teaches that the Spirit bears witness to Him:

“But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.”

(John 15:26, NKJV)

Here, Christ attributes testimony directly to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit “testifies” of Christ, revealing the truth of who Christ is and what He has accomplished. This witnessing role is not limited to the apostolic age but continues in the life of the Church, as the Spirit enables believers to confess Christ faithfully before the world.

It is therefore theologically inaccurate to describe the Holy Spirit merely as a power of God. Scripture reveals Him as the divine Person who knows, testifies, and participates in God’s saving work. He is not a separate being alongside God, but a distinct divine Person (Hypostasis) within the one Holy Trinity, who shares fully in the divine knowledge and will.

For the servant of the Church, this reminds us that Christian witness is never merely a human effort. When the Church proclaims Christ, she does so in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, who bears witness from within her. True testimony to Christ depends not on human persuasion alone, but on fidelity to the Spirit who reveals the truth and confirms it in the hearts of those who hear.

Can a mere power experience grief?

If witnessing presupposes awareness, grief presupposes something even deeper.

Can the Holy Spirit, as the power of God, experience emotions such as grief? Grief is a complex emotion requiring substantial self-awareness and relational capacity.

Holy Scripture speaks with clarity on this point. St. Paul exhorts believers:

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”

(Ephesians 4:30, NKJV)

This command would be unintelligible if the Holy Spirit were merely an impersonal force. Scripture attributes to the Holy Spirit the capacity to be grieved, which reveals His personal and relational presence within the life of the believer. The Holy Spirit seals believers for redemption and remains actively involved in their journey toward salvation.

Our Lord Jesus Christ further explains the guiding role of the Holy Spirit:

“However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.”

(John 16:13, NKJV)

The Spirit’s guidance is not coercive, but faithful and patient. He leads believers into truth and remains at work even when they stumble. The reality of human weakness does not negate God’s love. Rather, God continues to call His people to repentance and restoration.

Christ also teaches that the Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin:

“And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.”

(John 16:8, NKJV)

This conviction must be understood correctly. The convicting work of the Holy Spirit is not intended to condemn, but to awaken the conscience, reveal the truth of our condition, and lead us back to God through repentance. When believers respond humbly to this conviction, the Spirit restores communion and strengthens them in righteousness.

It's crucial that we, as believers, remain sensitive to this inner voice and yield to His guidance. Resisting the Holy Spirit's promptings only leads to spiritual stagnation and a deeper entrenchment in sin.

Can a mere power guide or speak?

The Bible provides numerous examples of the Holy Spirit's active role in guiding and directing God's people. The book of Acts provides clear examples of the Holy Spirit’s active guidance in the life of the Church. While the early Christians ministered and prayed, Scripture records:

“As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’”
(Acts 13:2, NKJV)

Here, the Holy Spirit **speaks, calls, and appoints**. The Holy Spirit specifically calls out Barnabas and Saul for the missionary work God had prepared for them.

Similarly, in Acts 20:22-23, the Holy Spirit compels Paul to go to Jerusalem, despite the dangers and hardships that awaited him.

“And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me.”
(Acts 20:22–23, NKJV)

The Holy Spirit does not promise Paul ease or safety, but truth and preparation. **His guidance is not meant to remove all suffering, but to strengthen believers to walk faithfully in God’s will**, even through hardship. In Acts 21:11, the prophet Agabus, through the Holy Spirit, foretells St. Paul's impending arrest in Jerusalem. This prophecy wasn't meant to discourage St. Paul but to prepare him for the trials ahead. It's a reminder that the Holy Spirit doesn't shield us from all difficulties but equips us to face them with faith and courage.

Similarly, in Acts 28:25, we witness the Holy Spirit speaking through the prophet Isaiah to a hardened and unbelieving audience. This illustrates that **the Holy Spirit's work** isn't limited to believers but **extends to those who are still far from God**. The Spirit's convicting power can penetrate even the hardest hearts, drawing them towards repentance and salvation.

The Apostle Paul further warns that discernment is necessary within the Church:

“Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons.”
(1 Timothy 4:1, NKJV)

This warning underscores the **importance of remaining attentive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit**, especially in times of confusion and false teaching. The Spirit is the source of truth and discernment for the Church.

The Inspiration of Scripture and the Work of the Holy Spirit

When the Church speaks about the inspiration of Holy Scripture, she confesses a profound theological truth. The Bible is not merely a collection of human writings about God, nor is it the product of a blind or mechanical process. Rather, Holy Scripture is the Word of God given through the active and living work of the Holy Spirit.

The Apostle Paul writes:

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”

(2 Timothy 3:16, NKJV)

The affirmation that **Scripture is "God-breathed"** encapsulates this truth. The original Greek term "θεοπνευστος" portrays the Holy Spirit's active role in the formation of Scripture. It underscores that **the Bible's words are** not merely human thoughts about God but are, in a mysterious and profound way, **the very words of God Himself**.

At the same time, the Church rejects the idea that inspiration is a form of mechanical dictation. **The Holy Spirit did not erase the personalities, styles, or historical circumstances of the human authors**. Instead, He worked through their intellect, language, culture, and free will, guiding them so that what they wrote is truly God's word and faithfully communicates His saving truth.

St. Peter the Apostle confirms this understanding:

“For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

(2 Peter 1:21, NKJV)

This verse highlights the cooperation between divine action and human response. The prophets and apostles truly spoke and wrote, yet they did so under the movement and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is therefore both divine in origin and human in expression.

Because the Holy Spirit is the primary author of Scripture, the Bible carries divine authority and reliability in matters of faith and salvation. At the same time, Scripture must be read within the life of the Church, where the same Holy Spirit who inspired the texts continues to guide their faithful interpretation.

Is the Holy Spirit equal to the Father and the Son in Divinity?

Yes, the Holy Spirit is unequivocally equal to the Father and the Son in Divinity, according to a multitude of scriptural references and theological interpretations. This is a cornerstone of Christian belief, affirming the Holy Trinity—one God in three co-equal, co-eternal persons.

Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself reveals this equality when He commands His disciples:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

(Matthew 28:19, NKJV)

Notice here it is said, “in the name” and not the names (also 1 Jn. 5:7). His Divinity is proven also, that He is the Spirit of Life (Rom. 8:2; Ezek. 37:9, 10), capable of resurrecting the dead. Who can raise the dead except God alone?

The Creed confesses this same truth when it calls the Holy Spirit “the Giver of Life” and “the Speaker to the prophets.” This confession is grounded in Scripture, as the Apostle Peter writes:

“For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

(2 Peter 1:21, NKJV, see also 2 Tim. 3:16; Acts 28:25)

The divinity of the Holy Spirit is also revealed with particular clarity in the account of Ananias and Sapphira. St. Peter confronts Ananias, saying:

“But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.’”

(Acts 5:3-4, NKJV)

In this passage, lying to the Holy Spirit is explicitly identified as lying to God. Scripture does not permit the interpretation that the Holy Spirit is merely a power or instrument of God. He is addressed as God Himself, worthy of reverence and fear.

The Holy Spirit exhibits attributes that are unique to God.

Creator:

- “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. (Genesis 1:1-2)

Eternal:

- “how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:14).
- Eternal existence belongs to God alone. Indeed, every other being has been created at some point in time. The fact that the Holy Spirit is eternal is further evidence of His deity. Origen asserts the divinity of the Holy Spirit, “*The Spirit Himself is in the Law and in the Gospel; He is ever with the Father and the Son; like the Father and the Son He always is and was and will be.*”

Unbounded:

- “For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.” (1 Corinthians 2:10) (What bounded being could search the depths of God?).
- Since God’s ways are unfathomable to us, but known to the Holy Spirit, this is another indication that the Holy Spirit is God Himself.

Omnipresent:

- “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?” (Psalm 139:7) and “Because the spirit of the Lord has filled the world,” (Wisdom 1:7)
- The Spirit of the Lord is the same as the presence of the Lord. He is everywhere. We find that Jesus said the Holy Spirit would indwell all believers. We read the following in the gospel of

John, “the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.” (John 14:17). The fact that He can indwell each of us at the same time shows that He is everywhere present.

Omniscient:

- “Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.” (1 Corinthians 2:11) (To know the things of God is to know the unknowable).
- Someone must be a human being to know things about humans. Likewise only God can know the intimate things pertaining to God. Since the Holy Spirit knows the things of God, He therefore must be God.

What is the role of the Holy Spirit and how does He interact with us?

The Holy Spirit actively works within the life of every believer and within the life of the Church. His work is not limited to a single function, but encompasses a unified and life-giving ministry that leads humanity into communion with God. Scripture reveals the Holy Spirit as Intercessor, Helper, Comforter, Advocate, Convictor, Sanctifier, and the One who leads people to Christ. These roles are distinct in expression, yet inseparable in purpose.

<i>Role of the Holy Spirit</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Biblical Reference</i>
Intercessor	the Holy Spirit functions as our Intercessor. Recognizing our human limitations and the inherent struggle to articulate our deepest needs and desires in prayer, the Spirit intervenes. He bridges the gap between our fallibility and God's omniscience, interceding on our behalf with "groanings which cannot be uttered."	<i>“Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession.” - Romans 8:26</i>
Helper/Comforter/Advocate (παρακλητος)	The Holy Spirit is seen as a source of comfort and assistance to believers. In times of trouble or need, the Holy Spirit is believed to come alongside believers to provide guidance, strength, and support. The Holy Spirit's role as Comforter is particularly significant. In a world filled with trials and tribulations, the Spirit provides a wellspring of peace and consolation. He empowers believers to navigate life's challenges with resilience and hope, reminding them of God's unwavering love and faithfulness.	<i>“But the [παρακλητος], the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.” - John 14:26</i> (N.B. The Greek word παρακλητος is alternatively translated as intercessor, helper, comforter, or advocate.)

Convicts	The Spirit's conviction centers on sin, righteousness, and judgment. He exposes the reality of sin, leading individuals to repentance and a recognition of their need for a Savior. Furthermore, the Spirit illuminates the standard of righteousness established by God, revealing the disparity between human efforts and divine perfection. The convicting work of the Holy Spirit is not intended to condemn but to lead individuals to repentance and transformation. It is a vital aspect of the role of the Spirit, prompting a change of heart and a turning towards God.	<i>"Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment"</i> - John 16:7-8
Strengthens against the Flesh	In our flesh (our human nature) there are forces that are much stronger than ourselves. The Holy Spirit will strengthen us, so that every time we are tempted, we do not yield to the lusts of the flesh.	<i>"Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh ... those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit."</i> - Galatians 5:16-25
Leads to Christ	One of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to lead unbelievers to the faith. This happened to Cornelius the Gentile when God's Spirit worked in him and even gave him gifts and led him to faith. So, unless the Holy Spirit works in an unbeliever, he cannot attain faith. It is up to the individual to accept or to quench the Holy Spirit and His work.	<i>"no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit"</i> - 1 Corinthians 12:3

Does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father only or from the Father and the Son?

The question of the procession of the Holy Spirit touches the inner life of the Holy Trinity and must therefore be addressed with precision, reverence, and fidelity to Scripture and the faith of the Church. The Church distinguishes carefully between the **eternal procession** of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity and the **temporal mission** of the Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation.

Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches explicitly concerning the Spirit's eternal origin:

"But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me."
(John 15:26, NKJV)

In this verse, Christ reveals two distinct truths. First, the Holy Spirit **proceeds from the Father**. This refers to the Spirit's eternal origin within the Holy Trinity. The Father alone is the source and origin (arche) within the Godhead. Second, Christ says that He will **send** the Spirit to the disciples. This refers

not to the Spirit's eternal origin, but to His mission in time for the salvation and sanctification of the Church.

The Church therefore confesses that the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father alone, while being sent into the world by the Son from the Father. This distinction safeguards the unique personal property of the Father as the source within the Trinity, while also affirming the Son's active role in the revelation and sending of the Spirit in history.

This understanding is reflected in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which confesses the Holy Spirit as the one "who proceeds from the Father." The Creed does not speak of procession from the Son, but consistently maintains the Father as the source of the Spirit's eternal being

At the same time, Scripture affirms the intimate relationship between the Son and the Spirit. The Spirit is sent in the name of the Son (John 14:26), testifies of the Son (John 15:26), and glorifies the Son by revealing His truth to the Church (John 16:14). These statements describe the Spirit's work in the economy of salvation, not His eternal origin within the Trinity..

Patristic Teaching on the Holy Spirit

The teaching of the Church concerning the Holy Spirit is not a later theological development, but is deeply rooted in Scripture and faithfully articulated by the Fathers of the Church. Among the most important patristic witnesses to the divinity and personhood of the Holy Spirit are St. Basil the Great and St. Athanasius the Apostolic. Their writings provide clarity and guidance, especially in response to early misunderstandings that attempted to reduce the Holy Spirit to a created power.

St. Basil the Great: The Holy Spirit in Doxology and Worship

In his treatise *On the Holy Spirit* (c. 375 AD), St. Basil addresses objections raised against the Church's liturgical language, particularly the use of doxologies that glorify the Holy Spirit together with the Father and the Son. His concern is not merely linguistic, but deeply theological. How the Church prays and glorifies God reflects what she believes about God.

St. Basil writes:

"But finally let us look, one by one, at the references to the Holy Spirit in the divine Scriptures, and, like good bankers, let us judge whether He has anything in common with the creatures, or whether He pertains to God... that we may call Him either a creature or else other than the creatures, pertaining to and one with the Godhead which is in the unoriginated Triad."

St. Basil's argument is clear. If the Holy Spirit shares the works, attributes, and worship proper to God, then He cannot be a creature. Basil insists that Scripture itself provides the standard by which the Spirit must be confessed as divine.

He further explains his concern regarding liturgical expressions:

"Lately when praying with the people, and using the full doxology to God the Father in both forms, at one time with the Son together with the Holy Spirit, and at another

through the Son in the Holy Spirit, I was attacked by some of those present on the ground that I was introducing novel and contradictory terms.”

St. Basil clarifies that these doxological forms do not contradict one another. Rather, they express the same Trinitarian faith from different perspectives. To glorify the Father with the Son and the Holy Spirit is to confess the equality of the three divine Persons. To glorify the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit is to confess the order revealed in salvation without diminishing divinity.

St. Basil reminds us that Orthodox worship is not accidental or poetic excess. It is theology expressed in prayer. To worship the Holy Spirit together with the Father and the Son is to confess that He is true God and worthy of glory.

St. Athanasius the Apostolic: The Holy Spirit Is Not a Creature

St. Athanasius, in his *First Letter to Serapion* (late 330s AD), addresses those who accepted the divinity of the Son but denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. He responds by returning consistently to Scripture and to the Church’s rule of faith.

St. Athanasius writes:

“The creatures came from nothing, having a beginning from which they came into being. For, ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth’ and all that is in them. **The Holy Spirit is said to be from God.** For no one, it says, ‘knoweth the things of man save the spirit of the man which is in him. Even so, the things of God none knoweth save the Spirit of God. But we received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God.’ **What kinship could there be, judging by the above, between the Spirit and the creatures? For the creatures were not; but God has being, and the Spirit is from Him.** That which is from God could not be from that which is not, nor could it be a creature; lest, by their judgment, he also from whom the Spirit is should be considered a creature.”

Athanasius draws a sharp distinction between creation and the Holy Spirit. All created things come into existence from nothing. The Holy Spirit, however, is said to be “from God.” That which is from God cannot be counted among created things, for otherwise God Himself would be reduced to the level of a creature.

St. Athanasius further emphasizes the Spirit’s unique capacity to know and reveal God:

“Even so, the things of God none knoweth save the Spirit of God... That which is from God could not be from that which is not, nor could it be a creature.”

By appealing to 1 Corinthians 2, Athanasius shows that the Spirit’s knowledge of God is not external or partial. The Spirit knows God as God knows Himself. Such knowledge belongs only to God and therefore confirms the Spirit’s full divinity.

The Holy Spirit in the Liturgical Life of the Church

The Church does not merely speak about the Holy Spirit in theological terms; she lives by the Holy Spirit and confesses Him continuously in worship. The Holy Spirit gives life to the Church, and through the Church He grants the holy Mysteries. As St. Augustine teaches, "What the soul is to man's body, the Holy Spirit is to the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is the Church. The Holy Spirit does in the whole Church what the soul does in the members of the one body."

The presence and work of the Holy Spirit are evident in every sacrament of the Church. Nothing in the sacramental life is accomplished apart from Him. Through His descent, invocation, and indwelling, the Holy Spirit makes the saving work of Christ effective in the lives of the faithful.

The Holy Spirit in the Eucharist

In the Divine Liturgy, the Church explicitly calls upon the Holy Spirit to accomplish the mystery of the Eucharist. During the epiclesis, the priest asks for two inseparable works: the sanctification of the gifts and the sanctification of the people.

The priest prays:

"We ask You, O Lord our God, we Your sinful and unworthy servants, that Your Holy Spirit may descend **upon us and upon these gifts** set forth, and purify them, change them, and manifest them as a sanctification of Your saints."

Following the Fraction, the Church proclaims:

"The Holies for the holy. Blessed be the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God; the sanctification is by the Holy Spirit. Amen."

These prayers reveal the Church's faith that the transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, as well as the sanctification of those who partake, is accomplished by the Holy Spirit. The Eucharist is therefore both a revelation of Christ's real presence and a work of the Spirit who unites the faithful to Him.

The Holy Spirit in Baptism

Holy Baptism is the sacrament of new birth, regeneration, and incorporation into the Body of Christ. This new life is granted through the Holy Spirit. St. Paul the Apostle writes:

"But according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit."
(Titus 3:5, NKJV)

In the baptismal prayers, the Church repeatedly invokes the Holy Spirit upon the water and upon those who are to be baptized. The priest asks that the water may become living water, water of purification, water of renewal, and water of sonship through the descent of the Holy Spirit.

The Church prays over the water:

“And upon the descent of Your Holy Spirit on it, **grant it the blessing of the Jordan.** Amen. Give it power that it may become **water of life.** Amen. **Holy water.** Amen. **Water that purifies from sins.** Amen. **Water for the washing of the new birth.** Amen. And **water of sonship.** Amen....And that the light of the truth may shine within them [who are baptized] through the Holy Spirit, and that they may gain the eternal life and the blessed hope.”

Through the Holy Spirit, ordinary water becomes a means of divine life. The baptized are cleansed from sin, illumined, and reborn as children of God.

Similarly, the prayer over those approaching to be baptized, that they may receive the Holy Spirit, become temples of the Holy Spirit, be guarded through the grace of the Holy Spirit, be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, receive the “gift of Your Holy and co-essential Spirit...” “...through [the waters] and Your Holy Spirit, You may renew the birth of Your servants, who have presented themselves...”

The Holy Spirit in Chrismation (Myron)

Immediately following Baptism, the newly baptized receive the sacrament of Holy Chrismation. In this mystery, the believer is sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit and becomes a dwelling place of God. The Apostle Paul teaches:

“Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God?”

(1 Corinthians 6:19, NKJV)

Through the anointing with the holy Myron, the Church confesses that the faithful receive the same Holy Spirit who descended upon the apostles at Pentecost. This is not a repetition of Pentecost as a historical event, but a personal participation in the same divine gift.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem explains:

“Christ bathed in the river Jordan, imparting to its waters the fragrance of His divinity, and when He came up from them the Holy Spirit descended upon Him, like resting upon like. **So we also, after coming up from the sacred waters of baptism, were anointed with chrism, which signifies the Holy Spirit, by Whom Christ was anointed** and of Whom blessed Isaiah prophesied in the name of the Lord: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor.”

Chrismation is therefore the believer’s personal Pentecost, empowering him or her to live a life of holiness, witness, and obedience to God.

“O Lord who alone are mighty, who performs every wonder and nothing is impossible for You, rather by Your will, Your power works in all things. Grant the Holy Spirit in the pouring out of the holy Myron. Let it be a life-giving seal and a confirmation to Your servants, through Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.”

During the anointing, the priest proclaims:

- **While anointing the head and face:** “An unction of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”
- **While anointing right leg:** “The perfection of the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the breastplate of the faith and the truth. Amen.”
- **After anointing the priest breathes in the face of the newly baptized saying:** “Receive the Holy Spirit and be a purified vessel; through Jesus Christ our Lord, To whom is the glory...”
- **While clothing the child:** “...send down upon them the grace of Your Holy Spirit, the Paraclete.”
- **While tying the zunnar:** “Grant Your servants that they may be filled with the grace of Your Holy Spirit.”
- **After the “ΑΧΙΟC...” chant:** “Receive the Holy Spirit, O you who have received the holy Baptism....Receive the Spirit of Comfort. Receive the Spirit of joy through the powerful King. Receive the Spirit of rejoicing through Immanuel our God...Receive the Spirit that is full of glory...You have become a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit.”

The Church further prays consistently that the newly baptized may be filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, strengthened in faith, and preserved in purity.

The Holy Spirit in Confession and Repentance

The sacrament of Confession is an encounter with the forgiving and healing work of the Holy Spirit. The authority to forgive sins was given by Christ through the outpouring of the Spirit. Scripture records:

“And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”

(John 20:22–23, NKJV)

Through the Holy Spirit, sins are forgiven, consciences are cleansed, and communion with God is restored. The Spirit works both in the penitent, who is moved to repentance, and in the priest, who pronounces absolution in the name of Christ.

The Holy Spirit in Matrimony

In the sacrament of Holy Matrimony, the Holy Spirit sanctifies the union of a man and a woman and establishes their communion in love. The couple, already temples of the Holy Spirit, are united not only in one flesh but also in one spiritual bond sealed by the Spirit.

During the crowning prayers, the Church asks:

“Sanctify them, O Holy Spirit. Amen.”

And during the command to the Bridegroom:

“My blessed son, who is supported by the grace of the Holy Spirit, you are required to

receive your wife...”

Marriage thus becomes a path of holiness, where love, fidelity, and sacrifice are sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit dwelling within both spouses.

The Holy Spirit in the Priesthood

The priesthood is the vehicle that God, through His Son, chose to maintain the regular flow of His grace and blessings through the sacraments. The Divine power and authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, was first given to the Apostles.

“And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit...’
(John 20:22, NKJV)

The sacrament of the Priesthood is accomplished through the descent and working of the Holy Spirit. Through ordination, the Spirit grants authority, grace, and responsibility to serve the Church and minister the holy Mysteries.

During ordination, the Church prays:

“**Fill him with the Holy Spirit** and grace and counsel, fearing You, so that he may shepherd Your people...just as you looked over Your people whom You chose and commanded Your servant Moses to choose for himself presbyters whom You ordained by an uncreated Holy Spirit which proceeds from You.”

“...may this ordination to the presbyterate be pleasing to You which has been performed on this your servant **through the coming of Your most-holy Spirit.**”

The laying on of hands is accompanied by prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit, who consecrates the ordained and enables him to serve faithfully in the apostolic ministry. In the final exposition, the church confesses:

“Truly great is the gift which you have received from Jesus Christ through laying the hand of priesthood, which was laid upon you and the blowing of the Holy Spirit.”

“**The Holy Spirit the paraclete descended upon you** and now you are worthy to carry the awesome and holy and blessed mysteries of Immanuel our Lord in your hands.”

The Holy Spirit in the Unction of the Sick

The sacrament of the Unction of the Sick is a ministry of healing and consolation through the Holy Spirit. The Church prays for both spiritual and, if God wills, physical healing.

The prayer proclaims:

“That the grace of Your Holy Spirit may dwell on him; cleanse him from all his sins; forgive

all his transgressions; and deliver him from every affliction.”

Through this sacrament, the Holy Spirit strengthens the sick, forgives sins, and grants peace, enabling the faithful to unite their suffering with the saving Passion of Christ.

Concluding Liturgical Perspective

Through the Church’s worship and sacraments, the Holy Spirit is continually confessed as the Giver of Life and the Sanctifier of the faithful. What the Church believes, she prays. What she prays, she lives. The Holy Spirit is not an abstract doctrine, but the living God who acts within the Church, transforms the faithful, and leads them into communion with the Father through the Son.

For servants of the Church, this liturgical confession is foundational. To serve faithfully is to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, to minister with reverence, and to live in obedience to the divine life given through the Mysteries.



Review Questions

1. **Why is it theologically incorrect to describe the Holy Spirit as merely a power or force?**
[Because Scripture attributes to the Holy Spirit personal actions such as interceding, speaking, guiding, willing, and being grieved, which require personhood, not impersonal force.]
2. **Which biblical passage explicitly speaks of the Holy Spirit having a “mind,” and why is this significant?**
[Romans 8:26–27; it shows that the Holy Spirit possesses intellect and personal agency, confirming His personhood.]
3. **How does the Creed affirm the divinity of the Holy Spirit?**
[By calling Him “the Lord, the Giver of Life,” and confessing that He is worshiped and glorified with the Father and the Son.]
4. **What does Acts 5:3–4 teach us about the Holy Spirit’s divine nature?**
[That lying to the Holy Spirit is identified as lying to God, which affirms the Spirit’s full divinity.]
5. **Why is the Holy Spirit’s ability to be grieved important for understanding our spiritual life?**
[Because it shows that the Holy Spirit is personally and relationally present within believers, and that sin damages communion with Him.]
6. **How does the Holy Spirit act as a witness to Christ according to Scripture?**
[He testifies to Christ (John 15:26) and bears witness together with the apostles (Acts 5:32).]
7. **What is meant by the Holy Spirit convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment?**
[The Spirit reveals the truth about sin and calls people to repentance, not condemnation, leading them back to God.]
8. **Why must inspiration of Scripture not be understood as mechanical dictation?**
[Because the Holy Spirit worked through the free will, language, and personality of the human authors while preserving divine truth.]
9. **What is the difference between the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit and His temporal sending?**

[The Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father within the Trinity, but is sent by the Son from the Father in time for salvation.]

10. **How do St. Basil and St. Athanasius defend the divinity of the Holy Spirit?**
[By showing that the Spirit is not a creature, is worshiped with the Father and the Son, and possesses divine knowledge and attributes.]
11. **How does the Holy Spirit work in the sacrament of the Eucharist?**
[Through the epiclesis, He sanctifies the gifts and the faithful, making communion with Christ possible.]
12. **What role does the Holy Spirit play in Baptism and Chrismation?**
[In Baptism, He grants regeneration and new birth; in Chrismation, He seals the believer with the fullness of His gifts.]
13. **How does the Holy Spirit act in Confession and Repentance?**
[He grants forgiveness, healing, and restoration through the authority given by Christ to the Church.]
14. **How does the Holy Spirit operate in the Priesthood?**
[Through ordination, He grants grace, authority, and responsibility to minister the Mysteries and shepherd the Church.]
15. **What does the Unction of the Sick reveal about the Holy Spirit's work?**
[That the Spirit brings healing, forgiveness, strength, and peace, according to God's will.]



Books



Supplementary Material

[Patristics](#)

[Origen and the Holy Spirit](#)

Divine Providence and Theodicy

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Divine Providence and Theodicy

God actively cares for, guides, and oversees the world He created. He, in His love for His creation, provides. This is Divine Providence, which teaches us that God is not distant from human life, nor is He uninvolved in what happens to us. Instead, God is present, attentive, and working wisely, even when His work is not immediately visible.

To understand divine providence, it helps to begin with how God acts in real human situations, not with abstract ideas. One clear example is Christ's encounter with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11). This was a moment filled with danger, injustice, fear, and human cruelty. The woman was surrounded by accusers and faced certain death according to the law as it was being used against her.

Christ's response shows divine providence in action. He does not react impulsively. He does not deny justice, nor does He abandon mercy. Through wisdom, silence, and authority, He guides the situation toward repentance and life rather than condemnation and death. The outcome is not accidental. It is the result of God's wise and deliberate involvement in a human crisis.

This example helps us understand an important truth: divine providence is not simply about God controlling events from a distance. It is about God **guiding situations toward what leads to life**, even when circumstances seem chaotic or unjust.

Once we see providence at work in concrete situations, deeper questions naturally arise. People often ask:

- If God is guiding the world, how do our choices still matter?
- If God is good, why does He allow suffering and injustice?
- If God already knows everything, does prayer truly make a difference?

These questions are not signs of weak faith. They are honest questions that arise from real life. Divine providence does not ignore these questions, nor does it give shallow answers. Instead, it teaches us how to live faithfully while holding together two truths at the same time: God is in control, and human responsibility is real.

The Church therefore teaches divine providence in a balanced way. God does not force human beings to do good, nor does He abandon the world to chance. He governs wisely, patiently, and lovingly, working even through human weakness and failure, without becoming the cause of evil Himself.

At its core, divine providence answers a very practical question:

How should we live, knowing that God is present and active, even when we do not fully

understand what He is doing?

Is God in Control?

After understanding that God is actively involved in human life, a natural question follows: **Is God in control of everything?** This question matters because it shapes how we understand responsibility, suffering, prayer, and trust.

Many people imagine God's control in an extreme way. They picture God directing every moment like a pilot steering an airplane, controlling every turn, every movement, and every outcome. If this were true, human freedom would be only an illusion, and personal responsibility would have little meaning.

One helpful distinction is between **sustaining** and **micromanaging**. God is the Sustainer of creation. He upholds existence itself and preserves the order of the world He created. At the same time, God has granted human beings real freedom and responsibility within that created order.

God is truly in control, but His control is not the same as constant interference. God created the world with order, purpose, and structure, and He continues to sustain it at every moment. Nothing exists apart from Him. At the same time, God has given human beings real freedom. Our choices are not imaginary. They shape our lives and affect others in serious ways.

This relationship can be described through analogy. God is like a perfect engineer who designs and sustains a system with wisdom and purpose. Human beings operate within that system, making real choices that can either align with or deviate from the Creator's design. When we live according to God's design, life grows healthier and more ordered. When we reject it, confusion and harm follow, not because God has lost control, but because freedom has been misused.

This explains why consequences exist. If a person repeatedly makes harmful choices, the damage that follows is not proof that God is absent. It is proof that freedom is real. God allows human beings to experience the weight of their choices, while still remaining present and able to guide, correct, and restore.

Several important clarifications help prevent misunderstanding:

- God's control does not mean He approves of everything that happens
- Human freedom does not mean life is random or outside God's care
- God remains able to bring good even out of human failure

Divine providence teaches that God governs wisely, not forcefully. He does not remove freedom in order to prevent every mistake. Instead, He patiently works within history and human lives, guiding all things toward what leads to life.

This understanding protects us from two dangers. It protects us from blaming God for evil, and it protects us from believing that everything depends entirely on us. God is in control, yet our choices matter. Both truths stand together.

God's Guidance, Prayer, and Our Response

If God is present and involved in our lives, then prayer naturally becomes important. Prayer is not a way to give God information He does not have, and it is not a method for forcing God to do what we want. Instead, prayer is how we learn to listen, to trust, and to respond to God's guidance.

God knows our needs before we speak, yet He still calls us to pray. This shows that prayer is not mainly about changing God, but about changing us. Through prayer, our hearts become more open to God's wisdom, and our choices become more aligned with His will.

Scripture expresses this relationship clearly:

“In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall direct your paths.”
(Proverbs 3:6, NKJV)

This verse does not promise that life will be easy or free of difficulty. It promises direction. Acknowledging God means seeking Him before acting, trusting Him during uncertainty, and returning to Him when we fall.

When prayer is neglected, life does not suddenly stop working. People may continue their routines and responsibilities. However, over time, life becomes disconnected from its deeper purpose. Confusion increases, peace decreases, and decisions are made without spiritual clarity. This does not happen because God has withdrawn His care, but because the person has stopped listening.

It is important to clarify what prayer does and does not do:

- Prayer does not force God to change His plan
- Prayer does not remove human responsibility
- Prayer does not guarantee immediate solutions

At the same time:

- Prayer opens the heart to God's guidance
- Prayer strengthens us to endure what we cannot change
- Prayer helps us recognize when God is calling us to act

God's providence does not depend on human prayer in order to function. God is always at work. Yet God chooses to involve us in what He is doing. When we pray, repent, and seek His will, we become willing participants in His guidance rather than resistant ones.

Divine providence, then, is not fate. It is a living relationship. God guides, and we respond. God calls, and we choose whether to listen. Prayer is where this relationship becomes real in daily life.

St. Augustine Regarding the Wholehearted Confession

Trust in divine providence is most severely tested in the presence of suffering. St. Augustine addresses

this challenge by linking faith in providence with wholehearted confession. To doubt God's providence in particular circumstances is, for Augustine, to hold a divided heart.

“Whoever entertains doubts about God's providence in any particular way does not confess to God with a whole heart. Wholehearted confession is, rather, the mark of the person who already discerns the hidden things of the wisdom of God, and how great is His invisible reward, the person who says, 'We even rejoice in our sufferings.' Such people understand that all the hardships that are imposed on the body either offer training to those who have turned to God, or warn them to turn or else prepare the stubborn for the final and just judgment; and so they see that all things that the foolish think happen somehow by chance and at random, without any divine direction, are to be referred to the guidance of divine providence.” St. Augustine

St. Augustine teaches that those who truly trust in God's providence learn to interpret suffering within a larger framework of divine wisdom. He echoes the apostolic teaching:

“We even rejoice in our sufferings.”
(Romans 5:3, NKJV)

This rejoicing does not deny pain or trivialize loss. Rather, it expresses confidence that suffering is not meaningless. St. Augustine explains that hardships serve different purposes depending on the spiritual condition of the person:

- For the faithful, suffering may function as spiritual discipline
- For the wavering, it may serve as a call to repentance
- For the stubborn, it may prepare for just judgment

In every case, he insists that events are not governed by chance. What appears random to human perception is, in fact, ordered within divine providence, even when its purpose remains hidden.

A vivid illustration of this trust is the priest who must proclaim the resurrection while grieving the loss of his own child. Such an act does not erase grief, but it anchors grief in hope. The doctrine of providence moves from theory to lived confession in precisely these moments.

Divine providence, therefore, does not promise the absence of suffering. It promises that suffering is never outside God's wise governance. This conviction forms endurance, humility, and hope, and it guards believers from both despair and accusation against God.

God or Chance?

If God is sovereign, is anything by chance? What about coincidences? The Gospel's answer is unmistakable: God is passionately involved in the details of our lives.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not

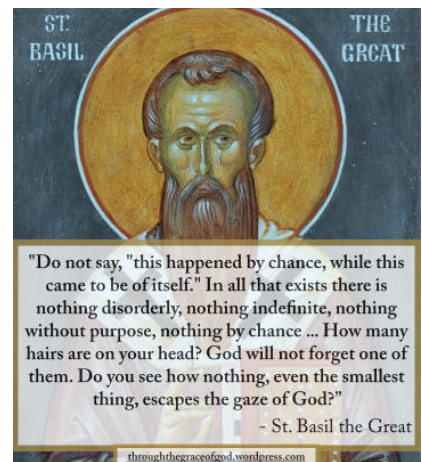
fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.” Matthew 10:29-31, NKJV

A second passage drives the point still deeper. When the collectors of the temple tax approached Peter, the Lord anticipated the need even before Peter spoke of it, and He ordered a detail so small and so specific that it could only belong to the realm of providence:

“Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money; take that and give it to them for Me and you.” Matthew 17:27, NKJV

Nothing is by chance. All things have reason. We must not reduce events that appear to be luck to mere accident without recognizing divine purpose or future implications. Consider a person who walks along and notices a hundred-dollar bill on the ground. To one mind, this is only luck. To one who has the word of God ingrained in his heart, this finding comes with purpose - perhaps to return it to its rightful owner, perhaps to give it to the Church, perhaps to support someone in need. Or consider a more common occurrence: a person sees an accident and thinks, 'Thank God, I am so fortunate, while that person is so unfortunate.' Yet perhaps the Lord is calling that witness to be a good Samaritan.

Divine providence does not erase chance by denying human freedom; it shows that what human beings call chance is in fact woven into a divine purpose. The belief in providence does not flatten the mystery of our existence. It invites us to discern God's presence in everyday experiences and to respond with faith, compassion, and a sense of purpose. Each detail of our lives — the interruption, the encounter, the lost item found, the unexpected call — may be the very place where God is at work.



Cause of Evil/ Tribulations

There are three causes for the afflictions we meet on earth: ourselves, God, and the devil. There is a story that is said of the Desert Fathers, regarding how not to blame the devil for everything that happens. A novice monk during the Great Fast was bound by the rule to keep the fast, but he decided instead to break it by boiling an egg in secret. He hid in his cell, took a candle and an egg, placed the egg on a spoon, and held it over the flame to cook it so that no one would notice. At that very moment another monk passed by, saw him through the window, and entered the cell to speak with him. Caught in the act, the novice reflexively claimed the devil had made him do it.

The story says that the devil himself then appeared to both monks and declared, 'I am innocent of this sin. I am actually standing here learning from him, so that I may tempt other monks in the same way, that they too may fall during the Great Fast.' The moral is clear: we cannot always blame the devil or our circumstances. Each person makes his own decisions, and we are responsible for our own choices. If we cannot shift blame to others, we must acknowledge and own our faults.

This tripartite understanding of causality gives us a framework for interpreting events and actions within a spiritual context. It acknowledges both divine and demonic influences while emphasizing the central role of human free will.

- Us — the significance of personal agency and the capacity to make choices that either align with or deviate from the life of grace.
- God — the divine presence and the possibility of guidance, consolation, and correction in human life.
- The Devil — the reality of temptation and the existence of forces that seek to lead souls astray.

Every effect follows from a previous action. Lung cancer is most often caused by smoking. Unhealthy diets lead to heart disease and diabetes. The most common cause of liver cirrhosis is alcohol consumption. Environmental hazards spring from reckless behavior. These consequences happen because of disordered choices, and our bad choices help the enemy's warfare against us without him having to work very hard. Other calamities, however, may simply be tests of faith.

“For You have given us the authority to tread on serpents and scorpions and upon all the power of the enemy.” Prayer of Thanksgiving (cf. Luke 10:19, NKJV)

This powerful petition is an antidote to every pain and affliction we may encounter, whether instigated by the enemy's envy or permitted by God as a summons to return. If we turn to God in such moments, we will endure and overcome.

St Basil says “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 ... Accordingly, they say, if it is not uncreated, nor created by God, whence does it have its nature? 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.”...Evil is not a living and animated substance, but a condition of the soul which is opposed to virtue. (St Basil the Great – Hexaemeron, Homily 2:4-5)

Did God Create Evil?

Having seen that we must take honest stock of our own responsibility, the next question demands an answer: what, then, is evil, and where does it come from?

God does not interfere with our abuses of the freedom He has given us. He has granted us the ability to choose between what is of Him, and therefore good, and what is not of Him, and therefore evil. Evil is real. Suffering is real. Death is real. These are all part of the world in which we live. We do not yet dwell

in the Kingdom of Heaven in its fullness; we live in a world where evil, sin, and death are a regular part of our experience.

The Church, through St. Basil the Great, teaches a doctrine that protects us from two errors at once — blaming God for evil, and imagining evil as a rival creation standing over against Him.

“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 2:4-5

St. Basil's distinction is one of the most important safeguards in Orthodox teaching. Evil is not a thing. It is not a substance that God created and then released into the world. Evil has no independent existence of its own. It is a condition, a privation, a turning away. It arises where creatures who were made for the good withdraw themselves from the good. Darkness is not a thing that fights light; darkness is the absence of light. So too evil, as the Fathers teach, is not a creation standing beside God's creation; it is the distortion and disfigurement of what God made good.

This teaching shields us from despair. If evil were a substance, it could in principle be stronger than God. But evil has no being apart from the wills it corrupts. It depends on the good it parasitizes, and it has no independent force. This is why the Resurrection of Christ is the definitive answer to evil: evil has no foothold in the risen Lord, and therefore it has no final word over those who are in Him.

It also shields us from a second error: blaming God. If evil is a condition of the soul springing up through the misuse of freedom, then God is not its author. He creates freedom; He does not create the corrupt uses of freedom. Evil enters the world where the soul falls away from the good. God remains the source only of good, and even within the world that has been wounded by evil, He continues to work toward the restoration of all things.

Evil, suffering, and death are undeniable realities of the human experience. They are not illusions or figments of our imagination. They are stark reminders of the fallen nature of a world marred by sin and its consequences. We are called to acknowledge the existence of evil and suffering not as a cause for despair, but as a call to action. We are summoned to confront evil, to alleviate suffering, and to bring hope to a world often shrouded in darkness — to be agents of God's love, beacons of light in a world often consumed by shadows.

While we may not fully understand the reasons for the existence of evil and suffering, we can trust in God's ultimate plan for redemption and restoration. We can have faith that even in the midst of darkness, His light continues to shine, and we can hold onto the hope that one day evil will be vanquished, suffering eradicated, and death defeated. Until that day, we must continue to strive for a world that reflects God's love, justice, and mercy — choosing good over evil, love over hate, hope over

despair. We are not citizens of this world alone; we are also citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, called to live as such even now.

Providence and Freedom

God saves only the willing. This is one of the most important phrases in Orthodox soteriology, and it clarifies the relationship between divine providence and human freedom. Providence does not override the will; it cooperates with it. To save the unwilling would be an act of compulsion — and God does not compel the soul. To save the willing, however, is the act of One who shows grace.

St. Clement of Alexandria expresses this with a striking image: God provides a fairer wind for more willing souls. The sail is set by the soul; the wind is given by God. And if the soul abandons its eagerness early, the wind which God provides is thereby obstructed. The wind still blows, but the sail no longer catches it. We may picture humanity as a child seeking to hold his Father's hand in the midst of adversity, the Father's hand is outstretched, but the child must reach out in turn. This is the very heart of the Proverb:

“In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.” Proverbs 3:6, NKJV

St. Anthony the Great distilled the synergy of human effort and divine grace into a brief and powerful rule. To those who desired salvation, he counseled three things:

- Always have God before the mind — a constant remembrance of God that permeates every aspect of life and fosters unbroken spiritual awareness.
- Do all things according to the Scriptures — grounding every action and decision in the revealed Word of God rather than in the shifting impulses of the heart.
- Wherever you are, do not leave that place easily — steadfastness and perseverance, resisting the restless movement of the soul that wants to escape the work of repentance.

These three counsels, practiced in tandem, create fertile ground for grace to operate. They are the human response to God's initiative of love and mercy. Salvation, then, is not the passive reception of divine favor; it is an active participation in God's redemptive work.

On Worry and Providence

St. John Chrysostom returns to the theme of providence in his commentary on the teaching of our Lord concerning worry. He takes the Lord's simple analogy — can anyone, by worrying, add a single cubit to his stature? — and draws out its far-reaching implication for the life of prayer and labor.

“Do you see how Jesus clarifies what has been obscure by comparing it to what is obvious? Can you add one cubit, or even the slightest measure, to your physical lifespan by worrying about it? By being anxious about possessions can you add one moment to your life? And so it is clear that it is not our diligence but the providence of God, even where we seem to be active, that ultimately accomplishes everything. In the

light of God's providence, none of our cares, or anxieties, or toils — or any other such things — will ever come to anything, but all will utterly pass away.” St. John Chrysostom — Homily 21.3

Even in areas where we perceive ourselves to be actively in control, it is ultimately God's plan that prevails. Our efforts, while important, are not the sole determinants of outcomes. This understanding should lead us to a place of surrender and trust in God's wisdom and timing. Our worries, anxieties, and tireless efforts, when viewed through the lens of providence, are seen as fleeting and ultimately inconsequential — like dust in the wind.

This is not a call to passivity or inaction. Rather, it is a call to a shift in perspective. We are summoned to act with diligence and faith, but also to relinquish the need for control and to surrender our anxieties to God.

Similarly, St. Augustine, in his treatise on the two cities, describes how the devil, the prince of the impious city, stirs up his own instruments against the City of God that sojourns in this world — and yet, providence will not allow any lasting harm.

“And thus the devil, the prince of the impious city, when he stirs up his own vessels against the city of God that sojourns in this world, is permitted to do her no harm. For without doubt the divine providence procures for her both consolation through prosperity, that she may not be broken by adversity, and trial through adversity, that she may not be corrupted by prosperity; and thus each is tempered by the other, as we recognize in the Psalms that voice which arises from no other cause, 'According to the multitude of my griefs in my heart, Thy consolations have delighted my soul.' Hence also is that saying of the apostle, 'Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation.'” St. Augustine — City of God 18.51

What appears accidental is rarely accidental; what feels meaningless rarely is. The Church calls us to shape our lives in light of this truth, cultivating the virtues that correspond to providence: faith that God is at work, hope that He is working toward our good, and love that answers His governance with grateful obedience. In this threefold life we find the peace that the world cannot give — the peace of those who know themselves to be held, in every circumstance, by a loving and all-powerful God.

God's Providence is Marvelous

St. John Chrysostom, in contemplating the providence of God in the life of Sarah before Pharaoh, is moved to wonder — a wonder that invites us to see how God acts especially where human strength has run out.

“What imagination could adequately conceive amazement at these events? What tongue could manage to express this amazement? A woman dazzling in her beauty is closeted with an Egyptian partner, who is king and tyrant, of such frenzy and incontinent disposition, and yet she leaves his presence untouched, with her peerless chastity intact. Such, you see, God's providence is always marvelous, and surprising.

Whenever things are given up as hopeless by human beings, then He personally gives evidence of His invincible power in every circumstance.” St. John Chrysostom

The situation, humanly speaking, appeared hopeless. Yet it is precisely when human efforts and expectations falter that divine providence reveals its fullest strength. His reflection is a reminder that God's ways are not our ways, that His plans transcend our limited understanding, and that the moments in which we feel most powerless are often the very moments in which He is most gloriously at work.



Review Questions

1. True or false? God saves only the willing. (A: True)
2. True or false? God interferes with our abuses of freedom. (A: False)
3. What does St Augustine say about the temptations placed before us? (A: He explains that the devil stirs up his own vessels against the city of God is permitted to do her no harm)
4. What is the wholehearted confession? (A: It is the mark of the person who already discerns the hidden things of the wisdom of God, and how great his invisible reward will be.)
5. What is an analogy to explain God's providence? (A: The pilot and engineer.)
6. True or false? God offers us guidance, rather than controlling our affairs. (A: True)
7. What is one, of many, rewards of belief in God's providence? (A: None of our cares, anxieties, or toils—or any other such things—will pass away.)
8. Define divine providence. (A: God's sovereign guidance and control, allowing omniscience as well as privacy.)
9. True or false? Some things happen by chance. (A: False)
10. What is the effect of the Prayer of Thanksgiving? (A: It is an antidote to every pain and affliction, whether instigated by Satan or a direct message from God.)

Chapter

1.2 Soteriology & Eschatology

Chapter 1.2 gathers four lessons that together set out the Orthodox doctrine of salvation from beginning to end. The first lesson presses into the person of Christ and the grace that flows from Him into the souls of His people, carefully distinguishing the patristic doctrine of grace from both Pelagian self-help and Protestant monergism. The second lesson walks through the whole economy of salvation — the divine initiative, the Old Testament types, the sacramental reality of the Cross, the mysteries as vessels of grace, and the three tenses of salvation past, present, and future. The third lesson lifts the eye to the horizon and speaks of the Second Coming — the destruction of Jerusalem as a type, the times of restoration, the conversion of Israel, the Antichrist, and the new heaven and new earth. The fourth lesson answers the Protestant error of unconditional predestination, holds firmly to the apostolic teaching of election according to God's foreknowledge, and protects the pre-servant from two closely related spiritual diseases — despair on one side and presumption on the other.

Christology and the Grace of God

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Christology is the heart of Christian confession, and in the Coptic Orthodox tradition no name guards that heart more faithfully than St. Cyril of Alexandria, who taught the Church to confess 'the One Nature of the Incarnate Logos.' This lesson examines what that phrase does — and does not — mean, distinguishing the Orthodox hypostatic union from every mixture, fusion, or division of persons. From this foundation we turn to grace: the undeserved favor of God that flows from the Incarnation and reaches into every corner of the Christian life. We consider how the Fathers defined grace, how the Pelagian error denied our need for it, how grace is prefigured in the Old Covenant and fulfilled in Christ, how it works within us to will and to do, and how the sacraments of the Church become the very vessels through which grace is administered. We also consider the gifts of grace — prayer, faith, the indwelling Spirit, seasoned speech, the mind of Christ, strength over the passions, authority over evil — and, soberly, the possibility that grace may be withdrawn from those who persistently refuse to cooperate with it. Christology and grace are not two doctrines but one: the Word became flesh so that what belongs to Him by nature might become ours by grace.

The One Nature of the Incarnate Logos

St. Cyril of Alexandria's profound declaration — 'The One Nature of the Incarnate Logos' — is the cornerstone of our Christological confession. The phrase has been repeated through the centuries, but it has also been misread, both by those who oppose it and by those who have not been properly taught its meaning. Because so much hangs on reading St. Cyril rightly, the Church has always insisted that the phrase be received with the utmost precision.

By 'One Nature,' St. Cyril does not mean that the divine and human natures are mixed into a new, third nature. Each nature retains its distinct properties and essence: the divine remains eternal, uncreated, and possessing all the attributes of God; the human remains finite, created, and possessing all the attributes of humanity, except for sin. The union does not produce a hybrid. It does not turn divinity into humanity, nor humanity into divinity. It does not result in a *tertium quid* — some third thing neither God nor man.

Neither does 'One Nature' mean a union of two persons. The Incarnation did not bring together two subjects side by side, as if Christ were a divine person keeping company with a human person. There is one subject in Christ — one Person, one Hypostasis. The term 'hypostasis' is central here. It refers to the concrete, individual existence of a being. In Christ there is one Hypostasis, one Person, who fully possesses both natures. This is the mystery the Church calls the Hypostatic Union.

St. Cyril himself guarded this with the analogy of iron in fire: there is no mixing or mingling of the natures themselves, as though they ceased to be what they are, but there is a communion of properties. The iron retains its nature; the fire retains its nature. Yet when the iron is set in the fire, the iron truly burns and the fire is truly borne by the iron. So it is with Christ: the humanity truly bears the actions of God, and the divinity is truly present in every human act, yet without confusion of natures.

The Actions and Sayings of Christ

One of the most important practical consequences of the hypostatic union concerns how we read the Gospels. Every action and every saying of Christ must be attributed to the one Person of our Lord Jesus Christ — not to one nature in isolation. The Orthodox Church refuses to dissect Christ into moments that belong only to the divine or only to the human.

His miracles are not merely displays of divine power with no human reference; they are the acts of the one Person, Jesus Christ, who is both fully God and fully Man. His teachings are not merely the wisdom of a human sage; they are the words of the one Person, the divine Logos, the Word of God who has taken flesh. His suffering and death are not merely human experiences to be pitied; they are the redemptive acts of the one Person who is at once God and Man, and who offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

This unity of attribution has far-reaching consequences for our salvation. When we confess that God suffered in the flesh, we do not mean that the divine nature was altered in its eternal being; we mean that the one Person who bore our flesh truly bore our suffering, and therefore our suffering has been taken up into the life of God. When we say that Christ died for us, we confess not that a human being died while a divine being looked on, but that the one Person who is the Word made flesh entered into death itself and trampled it.

The blessing of this mystery reaches to us. The Incarnation opens to humanity the possibility of being united to God and restoring the image and likeness through grace. This is what St. Peter means when he writes:

“By which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.” 2 Peter 1:4, NKJV

Why Christology Matters

St. Cyril of Alexandria treats the importance of Christology at great length in his Commentary on the Gospel of St. John. Why does it matter? Because it answers the question of what went wrong with humanity and how God has answered.

“But when he was led astray by the deception of the devil, he despised the creator. He trampled on the law that was marked out for him and grieved his benefactor. The benefactor took back the grace that was given to him. When, for the first time, the one who came to life heard, ‘Earth you are, and to earth you will return,’ the likeness to God

was then marked with a false stamp through the sin that rushed in, and the engraving was no longer distinct. It became more obscure in him, so to speak, and darkened by the transgression. When the human race reached a great multitude and sin ruled over all of them, it thoroughly plundered the soul of each one, and nature was stripped of the original grace. The Spirit also departed completely, and the rational creature fell into utter irrationality, not even recognizing the creator himself.” St. Cyril of Alexandria — Commentary on the Gospel of St. John, Vol. 1, pp. 81-82

This is the condition St. Cyril describes: the likeness of God stamped with a false image, nature stripped of its original grace, the Spirit departed, and rational creatures fallen into irrationality so deep they no longer recognize the Creator. Into this ruin the Incarnation enters — not as a philosophical adjustment but as a restoration of nature at its very source.

“Justly marvel at the incomparable mercy of the divine nature toward us, which graces those whom he has made with what belongs to him and shares with his creatures what belongs to himself alone.” St. Cyril of Alexandria — Commentary on the Gospel of St. John, Vol. 2, p. 307

The Incarnation is therefore the pivotal act of divine restoration. Through Christ the divine image within humanity is renewed, not merely returned to an original state but elevated to a higher communion with God. The theme that runs through the whole of St. Cyril's teaching is that through the redemptive work of Christ, we are granted the opportunity to participate in the divine nature. This is the ultimate goal of human existence. Christology is therefore never a mere academic discipline. It is the dynamic truth that shapes our understanding of God, humanity, and the purpose of our being.

What Is Grace?

Grace is best defined, in the Fathers' usage, as everything that God bestows upon a human being. It is the undeserved, unearned favor of God — His boundless love poured out upon creatures who could never claim it as their right. Every blessing we receive, whether spiritual or material, has its source in the grace of God. We do not summon it by our merit; we receive it as gift.

Precisely because grace is central to salvation, the Church has always guarded it against two opposite errors. The first extreme is the claim that grace alone saves, such that human cooperation plays no part. This is the error of grace without response, and it opens the door to lawless living: if nothing we do matters, then any manner of life is permitted. The Orthodox Church refuses this. The second extreme is the claim that grace is not truly necessary, such that the human will can reach salvation by its own effort. This is the error of effort without grace, and it falsely exalts man to the place of his own savior. The Orthodox Church refuses this as well.

Between these extremes stands the confession of the Church: salvation is by grace, received through faith, and lived out in works that are themselves the fruit of grace at work within us. Grace is never a license to neglect the life of the Gospel, and effort is never an achievement that can dispense with

grace. Both operate together in what the Fathers call synergy — a cooperation of divine initiative and human response.

The Pelagian Error

Pelagius was a British monk and theologian who lived from about 355 to 425 A.D. He was well versed in Greek and Latin and known for his rigorous ascetic life. His teaching, however, fell into a serious error that the Church was compelled to condemn. The heresy that bears his name is founded on the denial of original sin and the claim that salvation can be achieved through human effort without the work of divine grace.

Pelagius argued that Adam's sin affected only Adam himself, transmitting no inherited condition to his descendants. He held that human beings are born with a clean slate, possessing the full freedom and natural ability to choose good over evil without any interior assistance from God. In his view, man could save himself; grace was reduced to an external aid — perhaps the teaching of Christ or the example of the saints — rather than the inward power of God transforming the soul.

This position stood in direct opposition to the teaching of the Church. The Fathers, preeminently St. Augustine in the West and the Greek Fathers in the East, taught that Adam's sin corrupted the human condition, leaving all of humanity in need of an interior healing that can come only from God. Salvation, in their teaching, is impossible without the grace of God freely given through Jesus Christ. Human effort without grace cannot cross the distance between fallen man and holy God.

The Pelagian heresy was condemned at the Council of Carthage in 418 A.D., where St. Augustine played a decisive role, and again at the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. — the same council that upheld St. Cyril's Christology against Nestorius. The condemnation of Pelagianism protects us from a subtle but devastating error: the notion that we can be good without God. No amount of moral effort, however sincere, can substitute for the healing action of grace within the soul. Yet this condemnation does not swing to the opposite error. It does not make man a passive object. Grace operates within freedom, and freedom without grace can only imitate what grace alone can accomplish.

Grace in the Orthodox View

In the Orthodox Church, salvation is not reduced to a legal transaction nor a forensic declaration. It is a dynamic and ongoing process of healing, renewal, and **participation in the divine life**. It begins in baptism, grows through the sacramental life of the Church, and is consummated in the mercy of God at the Last Judgment. By His mercy we are justified by faith and empowered by Him for good works. We are saved at the Last Day not because we have perfectly kept the Law, but because the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone lived in complete righteousness and alone was resurrected to eternal life, is the way to the Father.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:23, NKJV

This verse tells us that even if we should keep the Law in its fullest sense, we would still fall short of the glory of God, for we would still die and still need salvation. The Lord Jesus Christ has fulfilled the Law in our place:

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.’” John 14:6, NKJV

The Orthodox Church does not despise the Law but receives it as a preparation for the coming of Christ. The Law reveals our sinfulness and our need for a Savior. As St. Paul writes, 'Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin' (Romans 3:20, NKJV). In His perfect obedience and sacrifice on the Cross, Christ fulfilled the Law and established a New Covenant based on grace and love. St. Paul therefore writes, 'I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain' (Galatians 2:21, NKJV).

The sacraments of the Church are the channels of this divine grace. Through Baptism we enter the Body of Christ and begin the journey of salvation. Through the Eucharist we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, entering into communion with Him and with one another. Through Chrismation we are sealed with the Holy Spirit. Through Confession we are restored when we fall. Through Holy Matrimony and Holy Orders we are set apart for specific vocations of service. In each, grace is not merely symbolized; it is conveyed.

Grace Prefigured in the Old Testament

Of all the creations of God, only humanity was made in His image and likeness, for He formed us with His own hands. No other creature was formed directly by the hands of God. After the creation, Scripture tells us, 'God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good' (Genesis 1:31). The Hebrew word rendered 'good' here — *tov* — carries the richer sense of 'beautiful, bountiful, cheerful, fine, good, gracious.' Humanity was made in a state of grace, a state of beauty and bounty, in harmony with its Creator.

After the fall, man was corrupted and lost this original state of grace. Yet even in the Old Covenant, grace did not disappear; it appeared in anticipations and foreshadowings. Figures such as Abraham, Lot, and Moses found grace in the eyes of the Lord, though the fullness of grace had not yet come. Scripture says of Noah:

“But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord... Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God.” Genesis 6:8-9, NKJV

And again of Noah's obedience: 'And Noah did according to all that the Lord commanded him' (Genesis 7:5, NKJV). The grace given to Noah was not earned; it was freely bestowed. Yet Noah's righteousness and obedience were the true response to that grace. This is the pattern the Old Testament reveals again and again — a pattern in which God freely gives, and the servant of God responds in faith and obedience, though the full remedy for sin has not yet come.

“And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.” John 1:16, NKJV

This phrase 'grace for grace' points to the continuous outpouring of divine favor. It builds upon the foundation of God's grace in the Old Testament and culminates in the abundant grace offered through the sacrifice of Christ. The Mosaic Law served its purpose in revealing God's holiness and humanity's sinfulness, but it could not accomplish what only the Cross of Christ could accomplish. The Law pointed forward; the Gospel fulfills.

The Work of Grace in Our Lives

The cause of all good in us, and of every spiritual growth we experience, is that God works in us to do His will. St. Paul puts this with great clarity:

“For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”
Philippians 2:13, NKJV

Our spiritual aspirations and our actions are not merely products of our own initiative. They are divinely inspired and enabled. Grace operates within us, shaping our desires and strengthening our wills so that our choices may conform to His perfect plan. St. Augustine expresses the same truth in his treatise *On the Grace of Christ*:

“It is not that the will or the deed is not ours, but without His aid we neither will nor do anything good.” St. Augustine — *On the Grace of Christ*, 26

This sentence holds together the full Orthodox teaching. The will is truly ours. The deed is truly ours. But without the aid of grace, neither the will nor the deed achieves any good. Grace does not erase our agency; it empowers it. The synergy between human cooperation and divine enablement is not competition — it is communion.

The gifts of grace appear in rich diversity, and yet they are united in one source. In 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, St. Paul lists a variety of spiritual gifts: the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, different kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. These gifts differ in expression but share one source:

“There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all.” 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, NKJV

Each gift is distributed according to the sovereign will of the Spirit, but each is given for the profit of all. Grace is never a private possession; it is a ministry. The one who receives a gift receives it as a trust for the Body of Christ.

The Gifts of Grace

The gifts of grace are many. Among them are prayer and faith, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, seasoned speech, the mind of Christ, the strength to overcome the conditions of our fallen nature, authority over evil, endurance in tribulation, and the ultimate gift of salvation itself.

Concerning the indwelling of the Spirit, St. Cyril of Alexandria writes:

“Christ did not receive the Spirit for Himself but rather for us in Himself. For all good things come to us through Him. Our forefather Adam did not preserve the grace of the Spirit, since he was turned by deception to disobedience and sin. And so in him our entire nature ultimately lost the God-given good. Therefore, God the Word, who knows no turning, had to become human so that by receiving the Spirit as a human He might preserve the good permanently in our nature.” St. Cyril of Alexandria — Commentary on the Gospel of St. John

Concerning seasoned speech, St. Paul writes, 'Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one' (Colossians 4:6, NKJV). Concerning the mind of Christ, he writes, 'For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ' (1 Corinthians 2:16, NKJV).

Grace also gives us strength over the passions that belong to fallen human nature. Concerning grief and sorrow, St. Cyril teaches on John 11:33 that Christ 'was troubled by the Spirit' — that is, by the power of the Holy Spirit He rebuked His own flesh so that it might not indulge grief without restraint. 'The flesh,' St. Cyril writes, 'is being rebuked by the Spirit and taught to have feelings beyond its own nature... so that by the energies of His Spirit He might strengthen the weaknesses of the flesh.' So too concerning fear, St. Cyril teaches on John 12:27 that in Christ fear was stirred up but immediately subdued by the divine power, so that our nature might be transformed into 'incomparable boldness.' So too concerning gluttony: 'By eating we were conquered in Adam; by abstinence we conquered in Christ.' Christ fasted forty days and forty nights (Matthew 4:2), and the Tuesday Psalm of Midnight Praises sings, 'Your holy name, O my Lord Jesus, saved them from all their afflictions. For them it was a living food, which filled their souls, and their bodies too.'

St. Cyril summarizes the pattern with striking precision: 'Just as death was destroyed in no other way than the Savior dying, so it is with each of the passions of the flesh. If He had not been afraid, our nature would not have been freed from fear. If He had not grieved, there could never have been any deliverance from grief. If He had not been troubled and alarmed, there would have been no escape from these conditions. For every human experience, you will find the same corresponding experience in Christ.'

Grace also gives us authority over evil. In the Life of Antony, St. Athanasius records the boasting of a demon who finally admits, 'I tricked many, and I vanquished many, but just now, waging my attack on you and your labors, as I have upon many others, I was too weak.' St. Anthony answers boldly, 'You, then, are much to be despised, for you are black of mind, and like a powerless child. From now on you cause me no anxiety, for the Lord is my helper.' At these words, St. Athanasius writes, the demon immediately fled. The Lord has promised us strength from on high:

“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” John 16:33, NKJV

The Removal of Grace

Is it possible that divine grace may abandon a person? The answer of the Church is soberly yes. Grace may abandon a person either temporarily, in order to lead him to repentance, or permanently, if the person insists on refusing to interact with it. In biblical language this complete removal is spoken of in the phrase 'a debased mind':

“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.” Romans 1:28, NKJV

Temporary withdrawal, on the other hand, is a fatherly discipline. It may come for the person's own benefit, that he might recognize his dependence and return. In Isaiah the Lord addresses the soul:

“For a mere moment I have forsaken you, but with great mercies I will gather you.” Isaiah 54:7, NKJV

The temporary withdrawal of grace is not divine indifference but divine pedagogy — a strategy to awaken the slumbering conscience, rekindle the flame of faith, and guide the erring soul back to the path of righteousness. It is the loving Father letting go of the child's hand for a moment so that the child learns what it means to reach back.

Complete abandonment, however, is the consequence of persistent and deliberate rejection. God, in His respect for human freedom, allows persons to choose their own path, even when that path leads away from Him. This is not an arbitrary act of divine wrath but the natural consequence of a soul that has set itself against the very source of its life. We are given this warning not to terrify us but to make us vigilant. The same Father who calls the prodigal home is the Father who will not force the son to stay.

The Grace of the Gospel

The New Testament offers a rich multitude of verses that unfold the wonder of grace. Three passages, taken together, hold the balance the Church has always kept.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” Ephesians 2:8-10, NKJV

St. Paul's words here hold two truths together. Salvation is attained 'by grace through faith' — it is not earned, not merited, not achieved by human accomplishment. And yet salvation is 'for good works' —

believers are created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand. Grace does not cancel works; it creates them. Works do not cause salvation; they flow from it.

“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.” Romans 3:28, NKJV

Justification does not come through the Mosaic Law. It is faith in Jesus Christ that brings about our right standing before God. And yet this is no faith that leaves works behind. St. James speaks to a misunderstanding that was already threatening the apostolic community:

“Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” James 2:17, NKJV

There is no contradiction between St. Paul and St. James. St. Paul refuses a faith that is merely the keeping of external laws; St. James refuses a faith that is merely intellectual assent. The one true faith is neither — it is a faith that is alive, that moves, that feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, visits the sick, and forgives the enemy.

St. Jerome, contemplating the difference between the old and the new, writes in Letter 75:

'For in place of the grace of the law, which has passed away, we have received the abiding grace of the gospel, and, instead of the shadows and figures of the ancient covenant, truth has come by Jesus Christ.'

The grace of the Gospel is not a new quantity of the same grace that was given to Moses; it is the fulfillment of every shadow, the realization of every figure, the truth to which the whole Old Covenant pointed. This grace is not temporary but abiding. It rests upon the Church as the very breath of her life, and it calls each one of us to respond with faith, sacrament, and a life of love.



Review Questions

1. What does One Nature mean in the saying “The One Nature of the Incarnate Logos”? (A: One Nature = One hypostasis = One Person out of two natures)
2. There was mixing/mingling of the natures in Christ. (A: False)
3. All actions and sayings in the Gospels are attributed to the one Person of Jesus Christ only and not to individual natures. (A: True)
4. What is the relation between Grace, Faith, and Works? (A: By grace we are saved through faith which is directed from God and not our own works. One cannot happen without the other)
5. Out of all the creatures of God only mankind was made in the image and likeness of God. (A: True)
6. Explain the Pelagian heresy and what is its main teaching. (A: The Pelagian heresy was founded on the idea that denies the original sin of humans and instead believes in the work of grace in salvation of man)
7. What does St. Peter mean when he says that we become “partakers of the divine nature”? (A: His incarnation blesses us with the ability of being united with Him and restoring our image and likeness through grace.)
8. What are the two extremes individuals tend to believe grace encompasses? (A: The idea that grace alone saves individuals from eternal death. The other extreme is that grace is not needed for salvation)
9. Is it possible for grace to be removed? When would this be the case? (A: Yes. This occurs when an individual insists on refusing to interact with it. This can also occur for the purpose of leading one to repentance)
10. When did we start receiving God's grace? (A: God's grace was not given to us by the person's works but was given to us like the bible says, God's grace in your life began "before the foundation of the world".)

Salvation in the Orthodox Perspective

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

A Divine Initiative, Not a Human Aspiration

Salvation, in Orthodox theology, is not man reaching for God; it is God bending down in love toward man. You don't climb a ladder to heaven by merit or effort — the ladder descended to you, in the Person of Jesus Christ. Scripture insists on this order before it says anything else:

“How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” Hebrews 2:3, NKJV

Salvation is called great because it isn't a human aspiration that God has accepted, but a divine initiative that God has brought to you. You do not ascend; He descends. You do not reach up; He bends down. St. Irenaeus put the whole logic of the Incarnation in a single line: the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, “did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.” The story of salvation isn't primarily about escaping punishment, though it does deliver you from judgment — it's about union with God, the healing and elevation of your nature into communion with Him.

The blood of Christ, in which this salvation is sealed, is not a legal transaction. It is life poured out. Salvation didn't come through law, philosophy, or force, but through the precious blood of the Son of God. Scripture is emphatic:

“Without shedding of blood there is no remission.” Hebrews 9:22, NKJV

As Orthodox Christians you don't read the Cross as a moment in which the Father punishes the Son in your place. The Cross is the moment in which the Son offers Himself to the Father through the eternal Spirit, and the love of the Holy Trinity is revealed in its fullness. The blood of Christ is the currency of divine love, not the price of wrath appeased. The whole of Orthodox soteriology is built on this foundation.

The Blood of Christ and Salvation

Blood as the Seal of the New Covenant

Salvation is only available through the blood of Christ. “Without shedding of blood, there is no remission” (Hebrews 9:22). The Passover lamb was a symbol of our Lord: “For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7). Through the blood of the lamb, the Israelites were saved from death: “Now the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:13). And through this precious Blood, sins are remitted and you enter a new

covenant with God: “This is My blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28).

Typology: The Old Testament as a Map to Golgotha

Typology here is not metaphor — it is prophecy through shadow. Every sacrifice in the Old Testament, every ritual washing, every drop of blood that fell from the altar of the Tabernacle was a whisper of the Incarnate Logos. The Orthodox Church reads the Old Testament not as discarded history but as a map pointing toward Golgotha ... from:

- Adam's covering with garments of skin (Genesis 3:21), a type of the Lamb slain to cover our nakedness, to
- the ram in Isaac's place (Genesis 22:13), a substitute, yes, but also a revelation that “God will provide for Himself the Lamb,” to
- the blood on the doorposts (Exodus 12:13), a seal against death fulfilled in the blood on the wood of the Cross

These events foreshadowed a greater offering, the sinless, spotless sacrifice of Christ. Through this blood the New Covenant was established. You are no longer bound to the letter of the Law but to life in the Spirit: purchased, washed, and redeemed.

Blood in the Life of the Church

The blood of Christ is not confined to Calvary. It flows through the Mysteries, and preeminently through the Eucharist. When the priest elevates the chalice and proclaims that what is given is for the remission of sins and eternal life to those who partake of it, this is no empty ritual. St. Cyril of Jerusalem taught the newly baptized to trust exactly this: “Consider therefore the Bread and the Wine not as bare elements, for they are, according to the Lord's declaration, the Body and Blood of Christ.” This is why the Orthodox faithful approach the chalice with fear and love — not a servile fear, but the holy awe of those who know they are receiving not merely grace but the very Person of Christ. The Scriptures, read with the mind of the Church, bear continual witness to the centrality of this Blood:

Scripture	Verse
Acts 20:28	“Shepherd the Church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ”
Romans 5:9	“Having now been justified by His blood , we shall be saved from wrath through Him.”
Ephesians 1:7 / Col. 1:14	“In Him we have redemption through His blood. ”
Ephesians 2:13	“In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ. ”
Colossians 1:20	“Having made peace through the blood of His cross.”
Hebrews 9:12	“Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the most Holy place once for all , having obtained eternal redemption.” - Hebrews 9:12

Hebrews 9:14	“...How much more shall the blood of Christ , who through the eternal spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”
Hebrews 10:19	“Therefore brethren having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus. ”
Hebrews 10:29	“Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will be thought worthy who has trampled the son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?”
Hebrews 12:24	“...To Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel ”
Hebrews 13:20–21	“Now may the God of peace ... through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will.”
1 Peter 1:18–19	“You were not redeemed with corruptible things ...but with the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.”
1 John 5:8	“There are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood ; and these three agree as one.”
1 John 1:7	“... The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”
Revelation 1:5	“... To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood ... ”
Revelation 5:9	“... You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood ... ”
Revelation 7:14	“These are the ones who came out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. ”
Revelation 12:11	“And they overcame him by the blood of the lamb ... ”

Each passage lifts the veil and reveals the mystery hidden for ages and generations: Christ crucified, Christ risen, Christ alive in His Church. When the Holy Scriptures are read prayerfully and with the mind of the Church, they cease to be isolated verses and become a means by which the soul contemplates Christ, crucified and risen.

The Church: Purchased by Blood

Take the first of them. “Shepherd the Church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). The Church is not a religious organization, not merely a community of like-minded believers — she is the very Body of Christ, purchased not with gold or silver but with the divine blood of the Son of God. To understand this verse is to understand the dignity of the Church: she is the bride for whom Christ died, the living temple of the Holy Spirit, not a man-made construct. To treat her lightly, to neglect her sacraments, her teachings, her unity is to forget the cost at which she was bought. St. John Chrysostom, commenting on this verse, drives the point home:

“...which He has purchased with His own blood.” It shows how precious the concern is; that the peril is about no small matters, seeing that even His own blood He spared not.

He indeed, that he might reconcile those who were enemies, poured out even His blood. — St. John Chrysostom, Homily 44 on the Acts of the Apostles

He does not say “with His blood” but “with His own blood” showing the intensity of the sacrifice. He who shed it was not man only, but God. Approach the Church, then, not as a critic or a consumer, but as one beholding a mystery. Love her because He loved her first, and gave Himself for her.

A Sacred Responsibility

One of the most sobering verses in the New Testament follows the same thread:

*“Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and **insulted the Spirit of grace?**” (Hebrews 10:29).*

To despise the Blood of Christ is to insult the very Spirit who sanctifies you. Salvation is not only a gift — it is a responsibility. You are accountable to grace. The blood of Christ is not common, not ordinary; it is sacred, powerful, divine, the means by which you are set apart for God. When you fall into sin after baptism, the Church calls you to repentance through confession and tears — not because you've lost God's love, but because you must not grow cold to the cost of your redemption.

Blood as a Weapon in Spiritual Warfare

Revelation shifts the focus from contemplation to warfare:

“And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death” (Revelation 12:11).

The blood of Christ is not only your cleansing, it is your weapon. When the devil accuses you of sin, you don't argue your own righteousness; you plead the blood. You don't turn inward under guilt; you turn outward, toward the altar, toward the Cross, toward the Lamb who was slain. The blood of the Lamb is the foundation of the martyrs' courage and the faithful's perseverance. Even today, the Church is persecuted, her children martyred, her teachings mocked yet the blood remains the victory. It is not something shed only long ago; it is ever present, ever powerful, ever interceding.

Christ's Blood Compared to Abel's

The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ speaks better things than that of Abel, because the blood of Abel was seeking revenge. God said to Cain, “The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10) — while the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ was seeking forgiveness of sins: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Forgiveness Before the Cross

Forgiveness stands at the center of our understanding of salvation. Yet when we speak of those who lived before the Cross of Christ, we must tread carefully and precisely. Many were declared righteous in

the Old Testament — Noah, Abraham, Moses, David — yet Paradise remained closed. Why? Because the remission of sins was not yet accomplished in essence; it was only anticipated in shadow.

Scripture does not say David was forgiven, but rather that his sin was 'put away' (2 Samuel 12:13). The Hebrew phrase carries a legal nuance — a sin deferred, set aside temporarily. Why not 'forgiven'? Because, as Hebrews solemnly reminds us, 'without the shedding of blood there is no remission' (Hebrews 9:22). The blood of animals, offered year after year, could never cleanse the conscience nor satisfy divine justice (cf. Hebrews 10:1-4). The sacrifices of the Old Covenant functioned as placeholders, pointing forward to a greater Sacrifice.

What happened, then, to the sins of the righteous before Christ's crucifixion? They were not erased; they were transferred. The ledger of every righteous man bore the ink of sin, but through faith and covenantal obedience, that debt was placed upon the One to come. In the fullness of time, Christ carried those ledgers to the Cross.

Our Lord's words to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven you' (Luke 5:20, NKJV), must be understood within this framework. They were not a retroactive cancellation but a prophetic promise, issued by the One who knew precisely what He would pay. The authority of forgiveness was real, yet the transaction would be settled on the Cross. The same pattern appears in the case of the sinful woman who washed His feet with her tears (Luke 7), of the tax collector who cried, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' (Luke 18:13, NKJV), and of Zacchaeus the publican (Luke 19). To each of these, Christ extended forgiveness, not because the Cross was unnecessary, but precisely because it was certain.

Conditions for Salvation

Christ said His blood is shed for many (Matthew 26:28), but in reality only few are saved (Matthew 7:13-14; John 6:52-66). Salvation, in Orthodox theology, is neither a blanket pardon nor a transactional exchange — it is union with God, a healing, a restoration, a participation in divine life. While the Cross is the foundation and fountain of this gift, its benefits aren't automatically distributed; they are mediated through conditions divinely instituted for your free cooperation. As St. Paul wrote, "We then, as workers together with Him, also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain" (2 Corinthians 6:1). God doesn't impose salvation; He offers it, and you have to receive it rightly.

The First Condition: Faith

The first condition is faith — the root of your response. Without it, no other condition can take root. "Without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Hebrews 11:6). But this faith isn't passive belief or intellectual agreement; it's living trust, obedient assent, fidelity to the covenantal promises of God. Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3), but that belief compelled him to leave his homeland, to offer up Isaac, to live as a stranger awaiting a better country. Even before the Cross, faith was necessary. After the Cross, faith has to be placed not just in God generically but in Jesus Christ specifically; crucified, risen, ascended, and returning.

The Second Condition: The Sacramental Life

The second condition is the sacramental life — Baptism, Confirmation, Repentance and Confession, and the Eucharist. These are the saving Mysteries through which Christ's saving work is applied to you personally, and this lesson returns to each of them in turn below.

The Third Condition: Good Works

The third condition is good works — the fruit of authentic faith. “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). The one who truly believes is the one who feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, visits the sick, forgives the enemy, and bears the Cross. Works without faith are barren; faith without works is a corpse. Salvation is synergistic — not in that you merit it, but in that God honors human freedom and asks for your cooperation. As St. Augustine wrote, “He who created you without you will not save you without you”.

Necessary Clarifications

A few clarifications keep these conditions from being misapplied. Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist don't apply directly to the people of the Old Testament, because they draw their saving efficacy from the blood of the Lord and the work of the Holy Spirit, which belong to the New Testament. Even so, the Old Testament faithful had symbols of these Sacraments — circumcision, for instance, standing in symbolically for Baptism (Colossians 2:11-12). The conditions above apply to normal, responsible adults while challenged individuals and infants who don't possess the intellectual capacity to understand and believe, could lighten expectation of the condition of faith.

The Sacrament of the Priesthood administers to you the saving Sacraments and so plays a major role in your salvation — you don't have to become a priest to be saved, but you need priests for your salvation, since they are “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Corinthians 4:1). It thus must be said that the conditions for salvation differ based on one's capacity and the dispensation in which one lives:

- Faith remains a universal requirement, yet infants and the mentally disabled are not judged by the same measure as responsible adults.
- The Holy Sacraments, especially Baptism, Chrismation, and the Eucharist, are essential for those living after the Cross.
- The priesthood is indispensable—not as a personal condition for salvation, but because priests are “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1). Through them, we receive what Christ purchased for us.

Salvation Is the Story of Your Whole Life

Salvation is not merely a singular historical event relegated to the past; it's an ongoing, dynamic reality encompassing the entirety of human existence. St. Paul's words capture the paradox: “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

A Threefold Understanding: Saved, Being Saved, Will Be Saved

To grasp the Orthodox concept of salvation, hold it in a threefold lens:

- **Past:** You believe that **you have been saved**, having put on our Lord Jesus Christ in Baptism, the initial step in the journey.
- **Present:** You believe that **you are being saved** through the sacramental life of the Church, an ongoing process nourished by regular reception of the Eucharist, confession, and the other sacraments.
- **Future:** And you believe that **you will be saved**, by God's mercy, on the Last Day of Judgment — the eschatological dimension in which the fullness of God's Kingdom will be realized.

This understanding is a journey initiated through Baptism, nurtured through the Church's sacramental life, and ultimately fulfilled in the age to come. It calls for a lifelong commitment to spiritual growth, since salvation is not a static state but an ongoing process of drawing closer to God.

The Sacraments: The Grace-Filled Means of Salvation

The story of salvation starts with faith, repentance, and Baptism, and continues through the whole sacramental life of the Church. What follows traces each of the Mysteries in turn: what each one gives you, and why none of them is optional.

Baptism: Death and Rebirth

To many modern Christians, Baptism is reduced to a symbol — a public declaration or outward ritual. But in the ancient Church, and throughout the Orthodox Tradition, Baptism is the very door to salvation. It is not a sign of salvation already achieved; it is the means by which salvation begins in you. It is nothing less than participation in the Pascha of Christ: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

A Real Union, Not a Symbol

St. Paul is not being poetic here — he speaks of a real union. In Baptism the old man is buried and the new man rises. Just as Christ died and was buried, so you descend into the waters; just as He rose, so you emerge from the font, not only cleansed but reborn. St. Cyril of Jerusalem described exactly this to the newly baptized: after you were led to the holy pool of Divine Baptism and asked whether you believed in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and had made that saving confession,

You were led by the hand to the holy pool of divine Baptism... and each of you was asked, 'Do you believe?'... you descended three times into the water, and ascended again; here also hinting by a symbol at the three days burial of Christ. — St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lecture 20 (Mystagogic Catechesis II), §4

Tomb and Womb

The Baptismal font is a tomb and a womb — a place of death and rebirth. You do not emerge as an improved version of yourself; you emerge as a new creation. Salvation is not abstract, believed only in the mind; it is embodied, lived, received, entered into. It begins at the font, where the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection becomes yours.

“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” John 3:5

“Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?” Romans 6:3

“Repent, and let everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” Acts 2:38

What Baptism Accomplishes

This remission includes original sin as well as all actual sins committed before Baptism. In Baptism you are buried with the Lord Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:12); you die and rise with Him in the newness of life (Romans 6:4): “Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin” (Romans 6:6). Through Baptism you become a child of God and a member of His body, the Church: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

Chrismation: The Gift of the Spirit

Following Baptism, the Orthodox Church immediately administers Confirmation — anointing with holy Myron — as the personal Pentecost of every believer. Just as the Apostles received the Holy Spirit through fiery tongues, so you receive Him through the anointing of the body.

“You were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.” Ephesians 1:13

“You have an anointing from the Holy One.” 1 John 2:20

Becoming a Temple of the Spirit

You consequently become a temple of the Holy Spirit: “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God” (1 Corinthians 6:19). Confirmation is not optional; it is essential — without the Spirit, Baptism would be incomplete. Salvation is not simply forgiveness; it is divine life dwelling in you. As a result of your response to the work of the Holy Spirit within you, you grow spiritually and bear the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

The Rite of Anointing

The anointing is made on the forehead, eyes, nostrils, mouth, ears, chest, hands, and feet — sanctifying the whole person. The priest proclaims, “The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit,” and the people answer, “Amen.” This is the divine signature, the imprint of the King upon His newly born servant.

The Eucharist: Communion with the Crucified and Risen Christ

At the Last Supper, our Lord took the cup and said, “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28). When we receive this cup at the altar, we are

not merely remembering a past event. We are receiving, here and now, the very blood by which God accomplished our salvation—the blood that inaugurated a new covenant between God and mankind.

"This Is My Blood": Not a Symbol, But a Mystery

The Eucharist is not a metaphor—it is a mystery. St. Ignatius of Antioch made this the test of true faith itself, writing against those who denied it: "Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions... they abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again." Notice that Ignatius ties the Eucharist to both the cross and the resurrection in a single breath: the flesh that suffered is the same flesh the Father raised. Communion is never severed from either.

Because this is no ordinary bread and cup, Scripture speaks of it with the highest possible language. St. Paul charges the elders of Ephesus to "shepherd the Church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28), and the author of Hebrews asks, "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:14). This is why St. John can write, "There are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one" (1 John 5:8)—the Church has long read this as pointing to baptism and the Eucharist, the two mysteries through which the Spirit applies Christ's saving work to us personally.

The Blood That Saves, Now Given to Us

Scripture describes what Christ's blood accomplished at the cross, and it is this same blood we receive at communion. Our salvation was an act of great mercy: our Father offered His Son for our sins and for the sins of all who came before, "having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him" (Romans 5:9), because "the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7) and "in Him we have redemption through His blood" (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14). Our Savior "loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood" (Revelation 1:5), "having made peace through the blood of His cross" (Colossians 1:20). None of this is abstract history. Each time we approach the chalice, we are brought into direct contact with the event that accomplished it.

Better Than the Blood of Abel

Scripture calls Jesus "the Mediator of the new covenant, and... the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel" (Hebrews 12:24). The comparison is deliberate. The blood of Abel cried out for justice against his murderer—God said to Cain, "The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground" (Genesis 4:10). The blood of Christ cries out for something else entirely: forgiveness. As He hung on the cross, He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). Abel's blood demanded an accounting. Christ's blood, which we receive at the altar, pleads mercy on our behalf.

Communion with the Risen Christ

Yet the Eucharist does not leave us at the cross. Christ Himself said, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven... whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day... He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him" (John 6:51–56).

This is communion with a living Lord, not a memorial of a dead one. St. Paul makes the same point: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16)—a present-tense fellowship with the risen Christ, sustained every time the Church gathers at His table.

It is fitting that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized the risen Jesus not in His teaching but "in the breaking of bread" (Luke 24:30–31). The Eucharist has always been the place where the Church meets her risen Lord face to face. And because we are united to Him in this mystery, we are united also to His resurrection life: "if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection" (Romans 6:5).

The Eucharist, then, holds together what must never be separated: the blood shed on the cross for the remission of sins, and the living, risen Christ who gives Himself to us at the altar. In receiving Communion, we do not merely recall His death—we partake of His life. As St. Paul writes, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26): a death that saves us, proclaimed by a Church already living in the power of His resurrection.

Repentance & Confession: Human Fallibility

Renewed, Not Infallible

Unfortunately, you still sin after being baptized and confirmed. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Baptism truly renews us, as St. Paul says, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17), raised to "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). This renewal, however, does not make us infallible. The Church has always taught that the nature we receive in Baptism is pure yet still liable to sin, much as Adam's nature was before the fall: capable of standing, but also capable of falling. The gift of regeneration you receive in Baptism does not cancel the gift of free will. God renews the will; He does not remove it.

The Difference After Baptism

There is a difference, though, between people who sin without being baptized, living a life of wickedness, and those who sin after Baptism. The latter have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them to rebuke them and lead them to repentance. Because of this indwelling presence, sin after Baptism is meant to be temporary—a fall to be gotten up from, not a permanent condition.

It becomes permanent only when a person, by his or her own free will, refuses that call to repentance altogether. Scripture describes this refusal in the strongest possible terms. St. Paul, in the book of Hebrews, warns that one who deliberately tramples the gift of salvation "has insulted the Spirit of grace" (Hebrews 10:29), a willful, final rejection of the very grace that would restore him. This is not the same thing as any single sin, however serious; it is the settled refusal of grace itself, the kind of hardened rejection Christ calls blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, "which will not be forgiven" (Luke 12:10); not because God's mercy runs out, but because the one who rejects the Spirit's call has cut off the only means by which mercy reaches him.

The Path Back: Repentance and Confession

This is why the ordinary Christian life is not one of despair but of return. Through repentance and confession you are restored: "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5). "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

That restoration is renewed after confession each time you approach the Holy Eucharist, as the priest says in the Divine Liturgy, "given for us salvation, remission of sins, and eternal life to those who partake of it"—recalling Christ's own words, "whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life" (John 6:54). The Eucharist does not re-earn your salvation as though it were lost and regained each time; it is the continual means by which the one salvation given to you in Baptism is sustained, renewed, and deepened as you return to God in confession and repentance.

Working with Grace: The Test of Your Faith

Salvation is not a moment, nor a singular transaction of grace; it shaped by faith, refined through trials, sustained by the sacraments, and sealed in enduring love for Christ. It's a journey in which you walk not merely as a recipient of divine mercy but as a combatant in a lifelong spiritual struggle.

Scripture reminds you from the very beginning that your life is a proving ground for your faith:

"Now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6-7).

These trials aren't random cruelty; they're purposeful refinement, gold tested by fire and they come within an invisible war: "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against... the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). The devil stalks the earth like a lion (1 Peter 5:8), but you're called to resist him, clothed in the armor of God and watchful in prayer. As St. Paul reminds you elsewhere, you "must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

Enduring to the End

It is not enough merely to begin the race. Our Lord made it clear: "He who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 10:22). Salvation is not a sprint but a pilgrimage. St. Paul understood this when he wrote of disciplining his own body, "lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:27). He exhorted the faithful to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12) and to "conduct yourselves throughout the time of your sojourning here in fear" (1 Peter 1:17).

Kept by the Power of God

This vigilant perseverance is only possible through the sustaining power of Christ. You are “kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:5). Your salvation isn't static; it's a narrative whose final chapter is unveiled on the last day. That's why the Lord says, “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

The Lamb: Beginning, Sustenance, and Hope

The foundation of this long journey is the Lamb of God. In Him is your beginning, your sustenance, and your final hope. “Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7). His blood is the seal of the New Covenant: “Without the shedding of blood there is no remission” (Hebrews 9:22). Just as the Israelites were saved from death through the blood of the lamb (Exodus 12:13), you too are saved by Christ's blood, which marks your heart and consecrates your life: “And they overcame him by the blood of the lamb” (Revelation 12:11).

Called to Follow His Pattern

This Lamb is not only your Redeemer but also your model in purity and a renewed start: “These are the ones who came out of the great tribulation and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14). He endured, and so you too must endure. He suffered, and so you must not be surprised by suffering. He was misunderstood, and you, too, should expect resistance. As you walk the path of salvation, keep your eyes fixed on Him: “You were not redeemed with corruptible things... but with the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

A Solemn Warning

Yet not all welcomed Him, even though His blood was poured out for all — and the rejection of the Son of God is a solemn warning: “Of how much worse punishment... will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot... and insulted the Spirit of grace?” (Hebrews 10:29). This makes your calling urgent. Christ's sacrifice is not to be taken lightly, for He did not enter a sanctuary made with hands but the true heavenly Holy of Holies, to bring eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:12).

Living as a Faithful Steward

Your story of salvation continues. You live each day not as a passive recipient of grace but as a faithful steward of the mystery entrusted to you. With the sacraments as your nourishment, repentance as your daily posture, and the Lamb as your guide, you press on to the very end. Since the spiritual struggle and warfare takes up your whole life, salvation is indeed the story of your whole life — and your enduring, saving grace. And He who endures shall inherit all things, and God will be his God, and he shall be His son (Revelation 21:7).



Review Questions

1. What symbol is our Lord compared to throughout the Old and New Testament? (A: a

lamb)

2. How can we adequately use the salvation that our Lord has generously provided us? (A: Baptism, repentance, confession, and leading a holy life in Christ.)
3. Name one instance of foreshadowing of Christ's bloodshed. (A: Hebrews 12:24)
4. True or false? Jesus is mentioned in the Old Testament. (A: True)
5. What are the saving sacraments? (A: Baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, repentance, and confession.)
6. How is the symbol of blood used differently in the Old vs. New Testament, specifically regarding Abel? (A: Blood in the Old Testament was shed out of revenge, as with Abel and Cain, whereas after Christ's sacrifice in the New Testament it came to symbolize forgiveness.)
7. How does Baptism factor into our salvation and journey to heaven? (A: In Baptism we are buried with our Lord Jesus Christ, and it serves as a regeneration for each of us in Christ.)
8. True or false? After Baptism you are no longer liable to sin. (A: False)
9. True or false? We receive renewed salvation every week during the Holy Eucharist. (A: True)
10. Why does Paradise remain closed to the Old Testament righteous until the Cross? (A: Because "without shedding of blood there is no remission" — their sins were put away, not yet forgiven, until Christ's blood was shed.)

Primary Patristic Sources	Further Reading
Against Heresies, Book V, Preface — St. Irenaeus of Lyons Catechetical Lectures 20 & 22 (Mystagogic Catecheses II & IV)— St. Cyril of Jerusalem Homily 44 on the Acts of the Apostles — St. John Chrysostom	To the Smyrnaeans, ch. 7 (primary source) — St. Ignatius of Antioch Sermon 169.13 (cited in CCC 1847) — St. Augustine of Hippo The Orthodox Way — Metropolitan Kallistos Ware

The Second Coming

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

A Doctrine of Watchfulness, Not Speculation

The Church confesses that the Lord Jesus Christ 'shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.' This lesson studies the Second Coming not as a topic of speculation but as a doctrine of watchfulness. You'll consider Christ's omnipresence in the time between His ascension and His return; the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 as a type of the final coming; the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as an abiding presence of the Son; the unknowable hour of His return; and the signs that precede His appearing, including the Antichrist, the Great Tribulation, and the renewal of all things in the New Heaven and New Earth. The Church places this entire mystery before you neither to instill fear nor to inflame curiosity about dates, but to form in you a life of vigilance, repentance, and sustaining hope. 'Watch therefore,' our Lord says, 'for you do not know when the master of the house is coming.'

Present With Power

Christ's First Coming and Second Coming don't negate the fact that He is omnipresent. The First Coming extends from His Nativity to His Ascension. In the time between the First and Second Comings, His presence remains with you, especially in the Eucharist and wherever two or three are gathered in His name.

"And He said to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power.'" Mark 9:1, NKJV

A Threefold Fulfillment

In parallel sayings, the Lord tells His disciples that some standing with Him will not taste death till they see the Kingdom of God (Luke 9:27) and the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom (Matthew 16:28). The Church has long contemplated these sayings, and the Fathers have seen in them a threefold fulfillment:

- the Transfiguration, in which the divine glory was shown to Peter, James, and John;
- the Resurrection and Pentecost, by which the Kingdom was inaugurated in power; and
- the ongoing reality of the Kingdom as it breaks into the world through the Mysteries and the lives of the faithful.

Already and Not Yet

These interpretations aren't rivals to one another. Each opens a dimension of the same truth: the Kingdom is both already and not yet. It's already present through the Eucharist, the Church, and the life of grace; it's not yet consummated in the fullness that awaits the Second Coming. This tension is deeply pastoral. It keeps you from dreaming of the Kingdom as only a future prize and from reducing it to a

merely present experience. You live between the two advents, receiving the first and waiting for the second.

Two Comings Already Glimpsed in History

This coming of Christ was already apparent on two occasions in the first century, each showing His Kingdom present with power through the preaching of the Gospel by the early Christians: the judgment that fell on Jerusalem, and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Both deserve a closer look, because both teach you something about how God comes.

The Destruction of Jerusalem

The destruction of the city of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is reckoned by the Fathers as a 'coming' of Christ; a coming in judgment upon the city that rejected Him. Our Lord foretold it plainly:

“See! Your house is left to you desolate.” Matthew 23:38, NKJV

“When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” Matthew 10:23, NKJV

In the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21), the Lord intertwines His words concerning the destruction of the Temple with the language of His Second Coming. This isn't confusion. The events of A.D. 70 are a type; a shadow prefiguring the final judgment. What happened to Jerusalem stands as a solemn witness that the Lord isn't indifferent to the rejection of His voice, and that every 'house' built apart from Him will finally be found desolate. The destruction of the Temple therefore matters for your spiritual vigilance. It teaches you to read history with the eyes of faith and to recognize that God's comings, whether in judgment or in mercy, are woven through the fabric of time.

The Descent of the Holy Spirit

The prophet Joel foretold signs in connection with the Day of the Lord, and he connected these signs to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit:

“The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord.” Joel 2:31, NKJV

Pentecost as a Coming of the Lord

At Pentecost this prophecy began to find its fulfillment. The Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles; they spoke in tongues; and the proclamation of the Gospel went forth into the world. The Fathers of the Church understood this descent as a 'coming' or 'presence' of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, for the Spirit who descended is the Spirit of the Son.

“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you... What is this power except the Son Himself — 'Christ the power of God' (1 Corinthians 1:24)?” St. Athanasius — Discourse Against the Arians

St. Athanasius equates the promised power of the Spirit with the Son. The arrival of the Spirit is not an independent act but an extension of the Son's power, revealing the unity within the Godhead. Christ told the Apostles they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:8), and St. Paul names Christ Himself as 'the power of God' (1 Corinthians 1:24). Pentecost, in other words, isn't simply an isolated event in the past; it's a continuation of Christ's ministry in the life of His Church.

Every Divine Liturgy, every anointing, every breath of repentance is a participation in this same descent. The Lord hasn't left you alone between His comings. He is present with you by the Spirit, who is Himself the presence of the Son until the Son returns in glory.

When Is Christ Coming?

Throughout the New Testament, the theme of Christ's Second Coming is consistently accompanied by an emphasis on its unpredictability. The Lord Himself repeatedly stressed that the precise timing of His return would remain unknown until the moment it occurs. This is not a puzzle withheld to tantalize us; it is a pastoral strategy intended to form in us a constant readiness.

“Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” Matthew 24:44, NKJV

“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Mark 13:32, NKJV

“Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming — in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning — lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!” Mark 13:35-37, NKJV

The Book of Acts likewise records the Lord's answer to the disciples' last question before His Ascension: 'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority' (Acts 1:7, NKJV). The consistent message of the New Testament is clear: the time of Christ's return is unknown and unpredictable. Attempts to calculate the date are not only futile; they miss the whole point of the teaching. The unknown hour is itself the lesson. It calls the Church to vigilance — to live each day as though today were the day, and to live each day faithfully as though our days were many.

What Events Will Happen Before the Second Coming?

Before walking through the signs themselves, keep three things in mind. First, the element of surprise is part of the teaching itself — these events aren't given so you can chart a timeline, but so you recognize the pattern when it appears. Second, it's possible some of these things have already occurred in part and will occur again, more fully, before the end. Third, some incidents may be repeated metaphorically

rather than literally, echoing earlier fulfillments without being identical to them. With that caution in place, three things happen in the time between the Ascension and the Second Coming.

1. All Things Restored

The period between the Lord's Ascension and His Second Coming holds a special name in the apostolic preaching. It's called the 'times of restoration.'

"Whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began." Acts 3:21, NKJV

These moments of restoration aren't reserved only for the final day. They began long before, at least by the time of St. John the Baptist. The Lord Himself said:

"Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him." Matthew 17:11-12, NKJV

The groundwork for the restoration of all things was laid before the Lord's Ascension and continues to unfold through the ministry of the Church. Hebrews calls this the 'time of reformation' (Hebrews 9:10, NKJV) — an age in which the shadows of the Old Covenant give way to the reality of the Gospel. This current age is therefore dynamic and evolving. It's marked by the ongoing process of restoration initiated in the preaching of the Baptist and fulfilled at the coming of the Lord. It's a time in which external observances alone don't suffice; what's required is the living relationship of faith in Christ nourished by the Mysteries of the Church.

2. The Conversion of Israel and the Times of the Gentiles

St. Paul unfolds a profound mystery concerning the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles in the economy of salvation.

"For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob.'" Romans 11:25-26, NKJV

A partial blindness, the Apostle teaches, has come upon Israel. It isn't permanent but temporary, lasting until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. When that fullness is attained, a turning point will occur, and 'all Israel will be saved.' This doesn't require that every Jewish individual receive Christ; it speaks of a national restoration and a profound spiritual awakening. The Apostle's teaching is undergirded by the Lord's own prophecy:

"They will... be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." Luke 21:24, NKJV

The relationship between Jew and Gentile in the divine economy isn't one of replacement but of grafting. The Gentiles are grafted into the olive tree of Israel, becoming partakers of the promises

originally bestowed upon the patriarchs. You wait not for the triumph of one branch over another but for the ingathering of all into the one Body of Christ.

3. The Beginning of Sorrows and the Great Tribulation

The Lord describes a progression of signs that will precede His return. These signs fall into two stages: the Beginning of Sorrows and the Great Tribulation. The Beginning of Sorrows is characterized by:

- False christs: deceptive figures claiming the name and role of the Messiah, drawing many astray.
- Wars and rumors of wars: global conflicts and escalating tensions producing fear and instability.
- Famines: widespread hunger and food shortage causing suffering.
- Pestilences: deadly diseases sweeping the world.
- Earthquakes: natural disasters bringing destruction and displacement.
- The spread of the Gospel: the proclamation of the Gospel to all the world in spite of these troubles.

The Great Tribulation intensifies these signs. The deception becomes more convincing, with false christs and false prophets performing signs and wonders. The love of many grows cold. A general falling away, an apostasy of widespread scope, takes place. And at length the Antichrist is revealed. These prophecies are given not to instill fear but to cultivate spiritual preparedness.

“It is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour... He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son.” 1 John 2:18, 22, NKJV

The first century already witnessed many antichrists in the form of false teachers. Every generation of the Church has seen its own. The pattern continues until the final Antichrist is revealed. In every age, you're called to discern, to resist, and to remain grounded in the truth of the Father and the Son.

The Antichrist

St. Paul gives the clearest apostolic warning concerning the Antichrist:

“Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.” 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, NKJV

A Cryptic Number

The Antichrist is marked by blasphemous self-deification and opposition to God. The Book of Revelation identifies him by a cryptic number:

“Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon... Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: his number is 666.” Revelation 13:11, 18, NKJV

A Traditional Reading: The Tribe of Dan

A traditional interpretation holds that this figure will arise from the tribe of Dan. The patriarchal prophecy calls Dan 'a serpent by the way, a viper by the path that bites the horse's heels so that its rider shall fall backward' (Genesis 49:17, NKJV). The name of Dan is also absent from the list of tribes in Revelation 7:4-8, which has fueled this traditional reading. These clues offer some insight, but the full identity of the Antichrist remains hidden until the appointed hour. The Church doesn't speculate concerning names and dates; she preaches vigilance. The Lord has given you enough to recognize the pattern and to remain faithful. The particulars belong to God.

What Will Happen at the Second Coming

The Lord's return will unfold with a series of manifestations, each a glorious and terrifying sign of the Kingdom established in power.

First: Universal Disturbance

'Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken' (Matthew 24:29, NKJV). St. Luke records the same disturbance from another angle: 'And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken' (Luke 21:25-26, NKJV). St. Peter adds: 'The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up' (2 Peter 3:10, NKJV).

Second: The Sign of the Son of Man

'Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn' (Matthew 24:30, NKJV). The Fathers identify this sign with the Holy Cross, which will shine with a brilliance clearly visible to all when the sun and moon have been darkened. The Cross, which was once the scandal, will be revealed as the throne.

Third: The Appearing of Christ in Glory

'They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory' (Matthew 24:30, NKJV; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27). 'Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him' (Revelation 1:7, NKJV). No one will escape witnessing this return.

Fourth: The Trumpet and the Resurrection of the Dead

'Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed — in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed' (1 Corinthians 15:51-52, NKJV). The Lord Himself will 'send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other' (Matthew 24:31, NKJV). St. Paul continues: 'For the Lord Himself

will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air' (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, NKJV).

Fifth: The Trepidation of the Wicked

Even on His way to the Cross, the Lord warned of this day: 'Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" And to the hills, "Cover us!"' (Luke 23:30, NKJV). At the Second Coming this cry becomes universal. The kings of the earth, the great men, and the mighty will hide themselves in caves and in the rocks of the mountains, saying to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!' (Revelation 6:15-17, NKJV). Earthly power will offer no refuge in that day.

Sixth: The Final Judgment

'When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world..." Then He will say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels..." (Matthew 25:31-41, NKJV). The judgment isn't based on abstract knowledge but on the fruit of faith: deeds of love and mercy done for the least of the Lord's brethren are done unto Him.

The New Heaven and the New Earth

After the judgment, the vision of St. John opens upon the eternal dwelling of the redeemed:

"Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.'" Revelation 21:1-4, NKJV

This is not merely the restoration of what was lost; it is a renewal, a transformation into something greater than Eden. The sea, often a biblical image of chaos and separation, is no more. The Holy City descends from God, adorned as a bride for her Husband, signifying the intimate union between God and His people. The tabernacle of God is no longer a temporary structure; it is His permanent dwelling with us. Tears, death, sorrow, and pain — every weight humanity has borne since the fall — are eradicated.

“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” 1 Corinthians 2:9, NKJV (cf. Isaiah 64:4)

Living in Anticipation

The hour of Christ's coming is unknown, and as our Lord has said, He will come like a thief in the night. It is therefore for us to stay awake and to watch, lest we miss our time of visitation. The eschatological hope presented in these passages is not a distant ornament added to the Christian life; it is the very light by which we see our present path. It gives purpose to our days, steadies our courage in trials, and fuels our longing for the One who first loved us. This is the life of the Church: living in anticipation of the glorious day when Christ will return and establish His eternal Kingdom.



Review Questions

1. Do we know when Jesus Christ is coming again? (A: NO we don't know and in Mark 13:32 Matthew 24:44 it tells us that we do not know the day or the hour.)
2. In the book of Revelations, it says the “Beast’s” name or his number, what is it? (A: 666)
3. What are some of the signs that will happen before the second coming? (A: Universal destruction, the sign of the son of man, the appearance of Christ in His glory, trumpet and rapture, trepidation of the Wicked, judgment: recompence & chastisement, heaven.)

Predestination

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Few doctrines have divided Christians more painfully than the doctrine of predestination. In one direction it has been pressed into a determinism that empties the Cross of its universal love; in another it has been softened into a sentimentality that denies the seriousness of the human response. The Orthodox Church refuses both extremes. We confess a God who foreknows all things because He is eternal, and who calls all to salvation because He is love, yet who will not override the freedom He Himself planted in the human heart. This lesson walks through the scriptural passages most often cited in this debate, places them within the mind of the Fathers, and shows why the Protestant doctrine of unconditional election and irresistible grace is a grave departure from the apostolic faith. Our aim is not to win an argument but to protect the souls entrusted to our teaching from a doctrine that produces either despair or false security, and to steady them in the humble, synergistic, sober hope that the Church has always held out.

Predestination According to Foreknowledge, Not According to Will

The decisive Orthodox distinction in this entire subject can be stated in a single sentence: predestination in the apostolic faith is grounded in the foreknowledge of God, not in a prior decree of His will that some should be saved and others damned. St. Paul never once teaches that God sovereignly chose certain individuals to salvation before creation while passing others over. He teaches something quite different, and far more consoling.

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.” Romans 8:28-30

The order of the sentence is the key. St. Paul does not say that God works all things for good in those whom God loves; he says that God works all things for good in those who love God. Salvation is not a package handed down to a passive recipient; it is a covenantal response from a heart that has chosen to love. And the predestination that follows flows from what God has already foreknown concerning that heart's love.

St. Peter makes the same point with the same precision when he greets the Christians of Asia Minor.

“Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” 1 Peter 1:2

The election is real. The foreknowledge is real. But the election is according to the foreknowledge, not the foreknowledge according to the election. The distinction is not a clever play of prepositions. It is the hinge on which two entirely different pictures of God turn. In one picture God looks down from eternity,

sees who will love Him, and honors that love with the gift of final glory. In the other picture God looks down from eternity, decrees that this soul shall be saved and that soul shall be damned regardless of anything they do, and then works history to bring about that decree. The first picture is the faith of the apostles. The second is not.

The Will of God That All Should Be Saved

Before turning to the harder verses, we must set down what the Scriptures say directly and without qualification about the will of God toward the human race. The verses are plain, and they govern every other passage we will read.

"Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:4)

"The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men." (Titus 2:11)

"He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world." (1 John 2:2)

These four witnesses together forbid any reading of any other passage of Scripture that ends in God's willing the damnation of some while willing the salvation of others. God's universal saving will is not one voice among many in the apostolic writings; it is the settled premise from which every other text must be read. When a particular verse seems to push against it, we have misread the verse – not caught the Spirit contradicting Himself.

On this premise the whole Orthodox doctrine of predestination rests. God desires the salvation of every person He has ever made. Christ died for every person He has ever made. The Holy Spirit is offered to every person He has ever made. What differs from soul to soul is not the offer but the response. And because that response lies in the free will God Himself has honored, predestination names what God foreknows the response will be, not what God has unilaterally decreed it must be.

Jacob and Esau: A Verse That Must Be Read in Context

Romans 9 is the chapter most often pressed into the service of an unconditional predestination, and verse 13 is the line most often pulled out of it.

"Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." Romans 9:13

Read alone, the verse is jarring. Read in its context, it tells a different story. The very next verse shows that St. Paul himself anticipated the objection his readers would raise — the same objection the Calvinist reading raises today — and he rejected it outright.

"What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!" Romans 9:14

If St. Paul's meaning had been that God arbitrarily decrees some to eternal loss before they are born, the charge of unrighteousness would be unanswerable, and the Apostle's indignant denial would be empty. St. Paul denies it because he does not teach it. He is speaking of God's choice of vessels and peoples in the outworking of the economy of salvation, not of the eternal destinies of individual souls. God loved Jacob and placed him in the line of promise. God loved Esau too — He willed his salvation as He wills every man's — but foreknew that Esau would despise his birthright and trade the heavenly for a bowl of soup. The love of God for both was equal; the hatred is directed at the godless choice Esau made against the promise.

The same pattern is visible in the very next apostolic example the chapter reaches toward.

“But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace.” Galatians 1:15

Here is St. Paul, set apart from the womb by the sovereign foreknowledge of God. And yet what do we find him doing for the first thirty years of his life? He is persecuting the very Church he was predestined to build. The man set apart from the womb was dragging Christians to prison. If predestination obliterated free will, this could not happen. But it did happen, because foreknowledge names what God knows, not what He compels. The One who knew from before the world that Saul would become Paul did not, in that knowing, reach down and move Saul's feet toward Damascus as a puppet's feet are moved. Saul walked his own road, chose his own rage, and at last, on the Damascus road, chose — in freedom — to fall before the voice that had always been calling him.

The Potter and the Clay

The second great passage of Romans 9 is the image of the potter and the clay, and here too the Calvinist reading and the Orthodox reading diverge sharply.

“Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?” Romans 9:21

A careless reading takes this to mean that the potter forms some lumps for honor and other lumps for dishonor according to no reason at all — a sheer bare act of sovereign will. But a careful reading, and a patristic reading, notes something the careless reading misses: the potter is wise, and the potter is just. It would be absurd that a wonderful lump of clay would come into the hands of this wise potter and that he would make of it a vessel for dishonor. And on the other hand, if the clay is rough and unfit to be a vessel for honor, the potter — bound by the nature of the material before him — will be obliged, because of its condition, to make of it a vessel for lesser use. The will of the potter is always to make every lump a vessel of honor. What the clay becomes depends, under the wise potter's hand, on what the clay is.

The prophet Jeremiah sets the full meaning of this image before us.

“Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel! The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull

down, and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it.” Jeremiah 18:6-10

This is the sovereignty of God rightly understood. The potter has absolute power. The potter also has absolute wisdom. And the potter exercises His power precisely by responding to the clay — blessing what turns toward Him, withdrawing the blessing from what turns against Him. Sovereignty does not mean indifference to the response of the thing He is shaping; it means that He is free to honor that response with absolute justice. The story of Nineveh is the standing biblical illustration. God told Jonah that in forty days the city would be overthrown. The city repented. God relented. Was God fickle? Was God's first word a lie? No. God's word was always conditioned on the clay, as every word of judgment is — and the city, once doomed, became the city saved.

The Protestant Heresy of Unconditional Election

Against this ancient and sober faith stands a doctrine that arose out of the Reformation and was hardened by Calvin into the teaching called unconditional election, commonly summarized under the acronym TULIP (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints). The doctrine holds that God, before the foundation of the world and without reference to any foreseen response, chose some human beings to eternal life and passed over the rest, leaving them in their sin. Christ died, on this reading, only for the elect. The grace given to the elect cannot be resisted. And the elect, once saved, cannot possibly fall away.

It is necessary to say plainly what the Orthodox Church has always said: this doctrine is a heresy. It contradicts the universal saving will of God. It contradicts the universal scope of the Atonement. It contradicts the plain testimony of Scripture that the Holy Spirit can be resisted, grieved, and insulted. And it produces two twin spiritual diseases that no pastor of souls can fail to recognize.

The first disease is despair. A soul that has come to believe it may not be among the chosen — that no amount of repentance or love or labor can change its eternal destiny if the secret decree has gone against it — is a soul thrown back upon itself with nothing to cling to. It cannot look at the Cross and know that Christ died for it, because the doctrine of limited atonement forbids that certainty. It cannot look at its own repentance and find evidence of God's working, because the doctrine teaches that the non-elect can mimic repentance and still perish. This is the soil on which Puritan despair grew thick, and it has not ceased to produce its bitter harvest wherever the doctrine is preached.

The second disease is presumption. The other soul under this teaching reasons that since it has once made a decision for Christ, since it feels itself among the elect, nothing now can separate it from salvation — not any sin, not any apostasy, not any return to the old life. This is the doctrine often preached in its popular form as "once saved, always saved," and it dissolves the fear of God and the moral seriousness of the Christian life into a cheap confidence that has no scriptural warrant. The Protestant teaching thus produces, in one household, the brother who trembles because he may not be

chosen, and the brother who presumes because he is certain he is. Both are without the sober hope of the Gospel.

Can a Believer Fall Away? The Testimony of Scripture

The whole Protestant system collapses the moment Scripture teaches that a true believer can fall from grace and perish. And that is precisely what Scripture teaches, plainly and in many places. We will take only the two clearest witnesses.

The first is St. Paul's olive-tree warning to the Gentile believers in Rome.

“And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.’ Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.” Romans 11:17-23

The grafting in is real. The standing in the tree is real. And yet St. Paul warns, in the same breath, that the grafted-in branch can be cut off. Not a hypothetical unconverted pew-sitter — the branch that is already drawing sap from the root. The warning would be empty if it could not happen. But St. Paul's warnings are never empty. A true believer can fall.

The second witness is even clearer, because it names the very doctrine Protestantism has invented.

“Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?” Hebrews 10:29

The person described here was sanctified by the blood of the covenant. He was a genuine partaker of grace. And he has fallen. The decisive phrase for our purposes is "insulted the Spirit of grace." The verb is active and intentional. The Spirit of grace has been resisted, spurned, pushed away. If grace were irresistible, as Protestant doctrine claims, the phrase would be impossible. Scripture here tells us not only that a believer can fall, but that the very mechanism by which he falls is the rejection of a grace that could have been received. The doctrine of irresistible grace is refuted in a single line of Scripture.

The Cautionary Case of Nicolaus the Deacon

The Book of Revelation refers, in the letters to the seven churches, to the deeds of a group called the Nicolaitans, and speaks of those deeds with divine severity.

"But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."

Revelation 2:6

Tradition identifies the namesake of that sect as Nicolaus of Antioch, one of the seven proto-deacons chosen by the apostles themselves, ordained alongside St. Stephen the Protomartyr. Acts 6 names him in the same breath with the others: "Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte from Antioch." He was chosen by the Spirit, laid hands upon by the apostles, set into the service of the Church. And he fell. He became a heretic. The sect that took his name was condemned by the risen Christ Himself in the words of Revelation.

This is not an obscure footnote. It is a case study, built into the foundational history of the Church, of a man who received the fullness of the Spirit's call and later rejected it. If he could not fall, the warnings of Scripture are theatre. If he could then every teaching that makes the believer's perseverance automatic falls to the ground with him. The Church remembers Nicolaus not to dishonor him but to warn us. No grace received today exempts us from the watchfulness required tomorrow.

Synergy: The Orthodox Vision of Grace and Freedom

What the Orthodox Church teaches instead of unconditional election and irresistible grace is the ancient doctrine of synergy; the co-working of divine grace and human freedom in the one work of salvation. It is the doctrine St. Paul preaches in a single breath without blushing at any tension:

"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." Philippians 2:12-13

The same verse speaks of what we do and of what God does, and sets the two in the most intimate cooperation. We work out our salvation. God works in us to enable both the willing and the doing. The Father's grace goes before, accompanies, and follows every good act of the will. But the will is our own, and it is ours to yield or to refuse. This is the balance the Fathers hold everywhere.

"He who made you without you will not save you without you." — St. Augustine, Sermon 169.13

One sentence, and the two errors are cut away. Against Pelagius and his modern descendants: He who made you without you — salvation is pure gift, not wages. Against Calvin and his modern descendants: will not save you without you — the gift must be received by a free and willing heart. The whole Orthodox doctrine of predestination lies between those two clauses. God wills all to be saved. Not all will be. What differs is not God's love — that is equal for every soul — but the response the soul freely gives. And because God is God, He has always known that response before the world was made. That is what predestination is. That is all it is.



Review Questions

1. If God wants us all to be saved, how come some people perish? (A: Despite God wanting all to be saved, not all are saved and that's because of their free will.)
2. Since God has the foreknowledge of who will use their free will to be saved and who will not, how is this freewill if it is predetermined? (A: God's foreknowledge of our actions does not interfere with our free will. Some may use it to gain salvation, some may use it to lose salvation.)
3. All things work together for good to those who God loves. (A: False, notice that St. Paul says that all things work together for good to those who love God, he did not say, to whom God loves.)
4. Can a believer perish? (A: Yes)

Chapter

1.3 Church & Culture

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.)

Unit 2

Chapter

2.1 Ideological Studies

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, Hexaameron, 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.)

Chapter

2.2 *Comparative Theology*

Orthodoxy & Catholicism

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Comparative theology, rightly practiced, is not a contest. It is the work of knowing our own faith well enough to recognize what others hold, to honor what is true in them, and to name, with charity and precision, where they have departed from the Apostolic Tradition. This lesson begins with the nearest of our separated brethren — the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman communion preserves many treasures: the Scriptures, Trinitarian baptism, the creedal faith, the veneration of the Mother of God, the monastic heritage, and a profound witness to the dignity of the human person. The differences that separate us are real, however, and the servant must be able to identify them clearly. This is not for the purpose of polemic satisfaction; it is for the protection of the flock and the clarity of our witness. A servant should be able to explain the filioque, the Immaculate Conception, papal infallibility, purgatory, mandatory priestly celibacy, or the theory of doctrinal development to serve his people in an age of easy confusion.

The Creedal Frame

The Creed we pray every day places us within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. "We believe in one God, the Father, the Pantocrator... And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life... And in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. We confess one baptism for the remission of sins." This is the measuring line by which every ecclesial claim must be tested.

Contemporary Christianity divides into four broad families: the Orthodox Church (itself comprising the Oriental Orthodox and the Eastern Orthodox), the Roman Catholic Church (including the many Eastern Catholic Churches in communion with Rome — Greek Catholic, Coptic Catholic, Maronite, and others), the Protestant communions that emerged from the Reformation, and the various sects and cults that have grown up outside historic Christianity altogether.

Our particular sorrow, as Orthodox, is that the Orthodox Church is itself divided between the Oriental Orthodox and the Eastern Orthodox families — a division rooted in the misunderstandings that surrounded the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. This lesson treats chiefly the separation between the Apostolic Orthodox Churches taken together and the Roman Catholic Church, a separation marked by the Great Schism of 1054 and by the doctrinal developments that followed.

The Great Schism of 1054

For the first few hundred years of Christian history, the great sees of the Church — Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem — shared the same faith, celebrated the same sacraments, and held one another in communion. After Chalcedon, Rome and Constantinople grew in tensions over the next few centuries. Latin-speaking Rome and Greek-speaking Constantinople drifted linguistically and culturally apart. The Western Empire fell; the Eastern Empire continued. Theological disputes that had been discussed as open questions began to harden into fixed positions. The Bishop

of Rome's pastoral authority over the West gradually became an insistence on authority over the whole Christian world.

Matters came to a head in 1053, when Patriarch Michael Cerularius of Constantinople ordered the closure of the Latin-rite churches in his city after Greek-rite churches in southern Italy had been forcibly Latinized. In 1054, legates from Rome entered Constantinople, excommunicated the Patriarch at the altar of Hagia Sophia, and were themselves excommunicated in return. The exchange was local; its consequences were catastrophic. The Schism settled slowly into the whole body of the Church. The Fourth Crusade in 1204, in which Latin Christians sacked Constantinople and defiled her churches, made reconciliation nearly impossible. Attempts at reunion over the following centuries — the Council of Lyons in 1274, the Council of Florence in 1439 — did not heal the wound.

The servant should know this history because the divisions of the Church are never only administrative. They issue, at last, in different accounts of the faith, and those differences affect the life of the faithful.

The Filioque

The most important of the doctrinal differences concerns the procession of the Holy Spirit. The original Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, composed by the first two Ecumenical Councils and received by the whole Church, confesses that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father." The Western Church, from the sixth century onward in certain regions and universally by the eleventh century, added the phrase "and from the Son" — in Latin, filioque. The addition was made without a council and without the consent of the Eastern patriarchates.

The Orthodox objection is twofold. The first is procedural. The Creed was the conciliar possession of the whole Church; no local church, however venerable, may alter it by its own authority. The second is theological. The Lord Himself testifies:

"But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me" (John 15:26).

Christ speaks of Himself as the one who sends the Spirit in time, but attributes the Spirit's eternal procession to the Father alone.

Orthodox Triadology safeguards the delicate order of unity and distinction within the Trinity. The Persons share everything in the one divine essence — Godhead, eternity, uncreatedness, goodness, omnipotence — with only three exceptions. The Father alone is unbegotten; the Son alone is eternally begotten; the Holy Spirit alone proceeds. The Father is the one fountain ("monarchy") from whom the Son is begotten and from whom the Spirit proceeds. The filioque blurs this, giving two Persons a shared role that belongs to one, and by implication subordinating the Spirit to the Father and the Son as if He were a joint product of Their common action.

This is not a trivial difference. It changes the inner portrait of the living God. For the Orthodox, it is also an instance of the larger problem: the doctrine was added unilaterally, and once such additions are permitted, others — the Immaculate Conception, papal infallibility, and others — follow.

The Immaculate Conception

Both Orthodox and Catholic Christians honor the Virgin Mary as the Theotokos — the Mother of God — and confess her perpetual virginity before, during, and after the birth of Christ. Both ask her for her intercession. Both keep feasts in her honor. On these great matters we are together.

The division comes at the doctrine defined by Pope Pius IX on 8 December 1854 in the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus*: "We declare, pronounce and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, in view of the merits of Christ Jesus the Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be firmly and constantly believed by all the faithful." This is the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

The Orthodox Church does not accept this definition. Several reasons stand together. First, the doctrine has no explicit patristic consensus. It was developed in the Latin West, debated for centuries by Catholic theologians (with Thomas Aquinas himself rejecting it), and only defined in 1854. Second, St. Athanasius explains that when Adam and Eve sinned 'They came under the law of death and could no longer live in paradise, but outside of it, to remain in a state of death and corruption.' Since God is just, He is the Father of Truth, He would not go back upon His word regarding death. However, God in His ultimate mercy had no choice but to send His Only Begotten Son to save us. The Son incarnated and became man, surrendering His body to the curse of death in place of ALL, offering it to the Father. Because of His ultimate justice, God would not make ANY exception; otherwise He would be breaching His justice. If there was another way for salvation while keeping justice and truth, why go through all this predicament and hassle. Was this all a show?

Third, the doctrine, however well intended, obscures the Virgin's own witness. St. Mary herself says in the Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47). Christ is her Savior as He is ours. She was purified and sanctified by the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation, as the Fathers confess, but she was not of another lineage than the rest of Adam's children. Her holiness is the crown of what grace can do within a faithful human life — which is why she is properly the model of every Christian.

The Role of the Pope

The Roman Catholic Church holds that the Bishop of Rome, as the successor of St. Peter, is the visible head of the whole Church on earth and the Vicar of Christ. Rome appeals to the Lord's words to Peter: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church" (Matthew 16:18). On the basis of that passage, refined over many centuries, Rome has defined the doctrine of Papal Infallibility. The definition of the First Vatican Council (1870) teaches that when the Pope speaks *ex cathedra* — from the chair of Peter — on matters of faith and morals, his definitions are protected by the Holy Spirit from error.

The Orthodox Church honors St. Peter and acknowledges his unique place among the Apostles. But Orthodoxy reads the Lord's words in their wider New Testament context. The "rock" upon which Christ builds His Church is most often read by the Fathers as Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16), a confession that is the faith of every true bishop, not the private

possession of one successor. St. Peter himself refers to Christ as the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4) and to all elders as fellow shepherds.

Orthodoxy teaches that every canonical bishop, when he speaks within the consensus of the Church and in communion with his brother bishops, stands as a "living icon of Christ" to his own people. St. Ignatius of Antioch gave the early form of this: "Wherever the bishop is, there let the people be, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church." The bishops together, gathered in council, have preserved the faith. No single bishop, not even the bishop of the first and most honored see, may legislate infallibly for all of Christendom.

The practical difference is large. In the Roman system, development and definition can come from the chair of Peter. In the Orthodox system, the fullness of truth is preserved by the whole body and expressed through the conciliar action of the bishops in union with their clergy and laity. Both systems claim to preserve the apostolic faith; the Orthodox claim rests on the conviction that the faith was once delivered and must not be added to, not even by the holiest patriarch.

Purgatory

The Roman Catholic Church teaches the doctrine of Purgatory:

"All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but, after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned" (Catechism of the Catholic Church §1030-1031).

Support is drawn from 2 Maccabees 12:44-46, in which Judas Maccabeus prays for the dead, and from Matthew 12:32, which speaks of a sin that will not be forgiven "either in this age or in the age to come."

The Orthodox Church does pray for the departed, believes that the prayers of the living benefit the departed, and teaches that the soul after death undergoes a particular examination and preparation. But the Orthodox tradition has never received Purgatory as a discrete third place with its specific sufferings, durations, and conditions. H.H. Pope Shenouda III raised a decisive pastoral question against the doctrine from 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17: "The dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord." Are the faithful who are alive on the Last Day, Pope Shenouda asks, exempt from Purgatory? Or does God show favoritism to the generation that happens to be alive at the Second Coming? The passage points us past a purgatorial mechanism to an eschatological encounter.

The Orthodox teaching is rather that the soul after death rests in the Lord, is assisted by the prayers and offerings of the Church, and awaits the final resurrection and the general judgment. The distinction between a purgatorial state that must be traversed and the rest of the saints in Christ is significant. The first is a doctrine requiring addition to revelation; the second is a confession of what has always been believed.

Mandatory Celibacy of the Priesthood

The Latin Church, since the eleventh and twelfth centuries and definitively since the Council of Trent, requires that its priests remain celibate. Celibate devotion has real theological beauty. A priest without the cares of family is, in certain measures, more free for pastoral availability, for prayer, and for counsel. St. Paul himself writes, "He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord — how he may please the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:32), and the Church has always honored celibacy as a high calling.

The Orthodox Church, however, does not regard celibacy as a requirement for the presbyterate. Orthodoxy preserves the apostolic pattern: bishops are chosen from among the celibate monastics, but priests and deacons may be either celibate (usually monks) or married before ordination. This is the pattern of the apostolic Church. Many of the Apostles themselves were married (1 Corinthians 9:5 — "Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?"). St. Peter had a wife whose mother the Lord healed (Matthew 8:14-15). St. Paul writes to Titus that a presbyter should be "the husband of one wife, having faithful children" (Titus 1:6), a direction that assumes a married clergy.

Married priests carry a distinctive pastoral gift. They have lived the realities their parishioners live — marriage, the raising of children, the pressures of household finance, the joys and sorrows of daily family life. Their counsel speaks from shared experience. Celibate priest-monks carry another gift — the witness of an undivided love for God and the flock. The Orthodox Church treasures both forms. What she does not do is make celibacy a universal requirement, because Scripture and the apostolic Tradition do not.

The Theory of Doctrinal Development

Perhaps the deepest difference underlying all the others is the Roman Catholic theory of doctrinal development. Popularized in the nineteenth century by John Henry Newman in *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, and assumed in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, this theory holds that Christ left His Church an original deposit of faith — a "seed" — which grows, matures, and unfolds new dogmas over time under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. On this view, later doctrines such as Papal Infallibility and the Immaculate Conception are not departures from the apostolic faith but its ripened fruit.

This framework explains much of modern Catholic theology. It provides the justification for defining new dogmas and for regarding scholastic and post-scholastic refinements as improvements upon the Fathers rather than as commentaries beneath them.

The Orthodox Church rejects this framework. The faith, St. Jude writes, was "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). The Apostolic deposit is complete. The Church grows in her understanding and articulation of the faith — answering new questions, refuting new heresies, producing new hymns and liturgies, canonizing new saints — but she does not acquire new dogmas. The Fathers are not a stage to be superseded. They are the enduring witnesses of the faith once given.

Everything external may change: vestments, languages, feasts, canons, and architectural styles. These are ways of carrying a single unchanging faith through new centuries. But the faith itself is one: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5). A Christian in the twenty-first century should, when he prays the Creed, be confessing the same faith that St. Athanasius confessed in the fourth and St. Ignatius in the first.

Lesser but Telling Differences

Several smaller differences are worth noting, because they reveal the shape of the larger division.

Orthodox Christians pray facing East. The direction is not ornamental. It is tied to the birth of Christ in the East (Matthew 2:1-2), to the Garden in the East (Genesis 2:8), to the prophecy that the Son of Righteousness will come from the East at the end of the age (Matthew 24:27), and to the vision of Ezekiel of the gate facing East through which the Lord enters (Ezekiel 44:1-2). To face East is to orient the body toward Paradise and toward the returning Christ. Roman Catholic practice varies; Orthodox practice does not.

Orthodox baptism is, properly, by threefold immersion. The Greek word baptizō means "to immerse," and the New Testament descriptions — Christ coming "up from the water" (Matthew 3:16); Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch going "down both into the water" and coming "up out of the water" (Acts 8:38-39) — assume the practice. Immersion also preaches the sacrament: the Christian is buried with Christ in the water and rises with Him (Romans 6:4). Roman Catholic practice has increasingly relied on the sprinkling or pouring of water, which preserves the form but not the full image.

Orthodox Eucharistic bread is leavened; Roman Catholic bread is unleavened. The Orthodox see in the leaven a sign of the living, risen Christ and of the Church's continuity with the Passover of Israel and the new creation; the Latin West has preferred the unleavened wafer on the analogy of the Passover itself. The difference is not the decisive one, but it is one of the visible markers of different liturgical sensibilities.

These smaller points stand as reminders that the Orthodox faith is embodied in gesture, direction, substance, and word. The ecumenical instinct that says "we are almost the same" is only half-true. Where we are the same, we rejoice together. Where we differ, the differences are not trivialities to be dismissed, but testimonies to the fullness that the Orthodox Church has been given to preserve.

Communion and Ecumenical Relations

One practical question will arise often in the servant's ministry. May an Orthodox Christian receive Holy Communion at a Roman Catholic altar, or invite a Roman Catholic friend to receive at an Orthodox altar? The answer of the Church is no. Communion is the sign and the seal of full ecclesial unity in faith, sacraments, and governance, and that unity does not at present exist between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. Shared communion would proclaim a unity that is not there; it would be a lie expressed at the altar.

This does not mean coldness. The Orthodox Christian honors his Roman Catholic neighbor, respects the tradition that has shaped him, and prays earnestly for the day when all the baptized are gathered

to one Lord's Table in one confessed faith. Dialogue has continued in recent decades through official commissions and local friendships. These conversations are valuable. They do not yet permit intercommunion.

The servant must know how to explain this to his people with both firmness and love. The firmness is the truth about sacramental communion; the love is for every sincere Christian reaching for Christ. A servant who treats the Roman Catholic Church as simply "another denomination" has underestimated her; a servant who treats her as enemy has underestimated Christ. The right posture is neither naive nor hostile.

Summary

The Roman Catholic Church preserves the Scriptures, Trinitarian baptism, the creedal faith in its essentials, the seven sacraments, a profound tradition of veneration for the Mother of God, a rich monastic and intellectual heritage, and a moral witness on many important questions of the age. We share much with her, and we mourn every point at which the shared inheritance has been obscured by later addition or by mutual alienation.

We differ from her on the filioque, on the Immaculate Conception, on the office of the Pope, on Purgatory, on the requirement of priestly celibacy, on the theory of doctrinal development, and on the practical consequences of these differences for communion and discipline. The servant must be able to name these differences clearly, explain them charitably, and defend the Orthodox position from Scripture and the Fathers.

The Lord prayed "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You" (John 17:21). This is the prayer of Christ, and the Church does not contradict her Head. But unity in the Lord's sense is unity in the truth, not the papering over of difference. The servant's work is to hold the truth in love, preserve the flock in the faith of the Apostles, and pray the Lord's prayer for unity with the humility of one who has first repented of his own uncharitable words and second insisted on the integrity of the faith once delivered.



Review Questions

1. What is a lesser difference between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches? (A: The method by which baptism is conducted)
2. What are three differences between the two churches, regarding doctrine? (Sample A: Role of pope, celibacy of priests, and purgatory belief.)
3. True or false? We can have communion within the Catholic Church. (A: false)
4. When did the Great Schism take place? (A: 1054)
5. What major event occurred in 1053? (A: Michael Cerularius ordered the closure of all Latin churches in Constantinople.)
6. What dangerous belief do Catholics hold about St Mary, the mother of Christ? (A:

They believe she was born without original sin.)

7. What did the Church of Rome add to the Creed, upon which we disagreed? (A: Filioque)
8. What is 'filioque,' and what is its origin? (A: It is a Latin word meaning "and the Son,")
9. True or false? We, as Orthodox Christians, reject Purgatory. (A: true)
10. What kind of bread did the Catholic church promote? (A: Unleavened bread.)

Mormonism/Latter Day Saints

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Of all the groups that present themselves as Christian in the public square, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — popularly called the Mormon Church — has cultivated one of the most public faces. Clean living, strong families, weekly family nights, principled abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, and many other modern indulgences, volunteerism, tithing, and a missionary presence on nearly every street in the developed world. Many a Christian family would do well to imitate their discipline. Behind the attractive face, however, lies a theological system that differs from Orthodox Christianity at nearly every decisive point — on the nature of God, on the Person of Christ, on the source of Scripture, on the means of salvation, and on the destiny of the human soul. The servant must be able to recognize Mormonism not as an eccentric variety of Christianity but as a distinct religious system, and to speak about it with truthful charity. This lesson sets out the history, the sources, the beliefs, and the Christian response, so that the servant can guard his flock without slandering his neighbor.

The Appeal and the Task

A young Orthodox mother meets a pair of Mormon missionaries at her door. They are polite, well-dressed, clean-cut, and articulate about Christ. They invite her to study the Book of Mormon. Her instinct, trained in a culture that mistakes civility for doctrinal agreement, may be to think of these young men as fellow Christians of a slightly different flavor. The servant's task is to help her see that the difference is larger than flavor.

The proper response to Mormonism is neither mockery nor paranoia. We do not caricature. We do not demonize. Neither do we soften what the Mormon Church actually teaches in order to be sociable. What we do is set Mormon doctrine against the apostolic faith, clearly and honestly, so that the faithful are not carried away by the attractive packaging of something fundamentally other.

It is worth noting at the outset that many Mormons sincerely believe themselves to be Christians, and the Church of Latter-day Saints has, in recent decades, emphasized its commitment to Jesus Christ in its public identity. The measure of whether a group is Christian, however, is not whether it uses Christ's name but whether it confesses the apostolic faith about Him. By that measure, Mormonism is not Christian.

History: Joseph Smith and the Founding

Mormonism was founded in the early nineteenth century in upstate New York by Joseph Smith Jr. (1805-1844). Smith claimed, at the age of fourteen, to have been visited in a vision by "two personages" whom he identified as God the Father and Jesus Christ. According to his account, these beings informed him that all existing Christian denominations were "wrong and corrupt" and that he had been chosen to restore the true Gospel.

Three years later, Smith reported a second supernatural experience. An angel named Moroni, he said, led him to a set of golden plates buried in a hill near his home, inscribed in "reformed Egyptian." Smith claimed to translate these plates, producing the Book of Mormon. On completion of the translation, Moroni reportedly took the plates away. No plates have ever been produced for independent examination, and no language called "reformed Egyptian" is known to the linguistic and archaeological professions.

Smith continued to receive what he called revelations throughout his life, guiding his growing community westward from New York to Ohio, Missouri, and finally Illinois. In 1844, Smith and his brother Hyrum were killed by a mob in Carthage, Illinois, during a period of violent controversy over his practices, particularly polygamy. Leadership of the movement then passed to Brigham Young, who led the community to the Utah Territory in 1847 and there exercised a theocratic authority while publicly defending polygamy as a commandment of God. Polygamy was officially abandoned by the LDS Church in 1890 under United States federal pressure, a matter we shall return to under the doctrine of "continuous revelation."

The Four Sources of Mormon Scripture

The LDS canon rests on four texts: the Bible (accepted "insofar as it is correctly translated" — the Eighth Article of Faith); the Book of Mormon; the Doctrine and Covenants; and the Pearl of Great Price. The phrase "insofar as it is correctly translated" effectively subordinates the Bible to the three later texts: wherever the Bible conflicts with them, Mormon theology judges the Bible to be mistranslated. This inverts the classical Christian doctrine of Scripture as the supreme written witness.

The Book of Mormon purports to narrate the history of two ancient civilizations, the Nephites and the Lamanites, who are said to have migrated from the Middle East to the Americas around 600 B.C. and to have received visits from the risen Christ before dying out in a great battle. More than two centuries after Smith's translation, there remains no archaeological, linguistic, genetic, or textual evidence to support the existence of these peoples as he described them, their script, or the golden plates from which the book is said to have come. The faith rests on the testimony of one man.

The Doctrine and Covenants is a collection of revelations Smith claimed to receive, introducing the most distinctive Mormon doctrines: a plurality of gods, God as an exalted man, the capacity of human beings to become gods, three degrees of heaven, polygamy, eternal progression, and baptism for the dead. Also included are prophecies that did not come to pass — a fact which, by the plain rule of Deuteronomy 18:22 ("when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously"), marks their author as a false prophet.

The Pearl of Great Price includes the Book of Abraham, which Smith claimed to have translated from Egyptian papyri he purchased. The papyri were thought to have been lost in the 1871 Chicago Fire, but portions were rediscovered in 1966. Both Mormon and non-Mormon Egyptologists have since examined them and determined that they are standard Egyptian funerary texts — instructions for

mummification — not the writings of the patriarch Abraham. The discovery has been an abiding embarrassment for the claim that Smith could translate unknown ancient languages.

The Mormon Doctrine of God

Here the decisive break with Christianity becomes unmistakable. Mormonism is not monotheistic. It teaches a plurality of gods. In the words of Joseph Smith himself: "I will preach on the plurality of Gods. I have always declared God to be a distinct personage. The Lord Jesus Christ is a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and the Holy Ghost is a distinct personage and a Spirit. And these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods." This is not the Christian Trinity. This is tritheism at best, and the Mormon doctrine goes further.

The Mormon God the Father is not eternal in the Christian sense. He was once a man living on another planet, who progressed through good works and obedience to divine laws until he attained godhood. He has a wife, a "Heavenly Mother." Together they begot countless spirit children in a pre-mortal existence. The first and greatest of these spirit children was Jesus. The second was Lucifer. All other human beings were also their spirit children, and all are therefore literal "spirit brothers and sisters" of Jesus and of Satan alike.

Beyond this God the Father stands another god who made him; beyond that, another; and so on without end. The Mormon cosmos is a spiritual pyramid scheme. Each god was once a man on a previous world. Each faithful Mormon man may, with sufficient obedience, attain his own godhood in a future universe — the doctrine called "eternal progression" or "exaltation." Lorenzo Snow, the fifth LDS president, summarized it in the couplet Mormons have long known by heart: "As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become."

Against this the Church confesses the Shema: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). We confess the eternal God who was not made, who has never been other than God, and who alone is God: "I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God" (Isaiah 44:6). There is no hidden council of gods above Him. There is no earlier god who made Him. The Christian God is not a man who made good; He is God eternally, and by His grace we are made His children, not His fellow gods.

The Mormon Jesus

Because Mormon theology denies the historic doctrine of God, it also denies the historic doctrine of Christ. The Mormon Jesus is not the eternal Son, consubstantial with the Father, begotten of the Father before all worlds. He is one of the Heavenly Father's countless spirit children, the eldest brother of humanity, and the spirit brother of Lucifer.

The Mormon account of the Lord's conception is gravely offensive to Christian reverence. Mormon teaching holds that Jesus was conceived through literal sexual relations between the Heavenly Father, who has a body of flesh and bone, and the Virgin Mary. This contradicts the Gospel's own witness: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that

Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). The Incarnation is a miracle; Mormon doctrine reduces it to biology.

In the classical apostolic faith, the Son of God is eternally God, "true God of true God, begotten not made, of one essence with the Father" (as the Nicene Creed confesses). He took flesh by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary. He lived without sin, died for our sins, rose bodily, and reigns. He is not a created being, not a spirit brother of Lucifer, not the elder child of a mother goddess. The Mormon Christ and the Christian Christ share a name. They do not share an identity.

The Mormon Doctrine of Salvation

Mormonism teaches that Christ's atonement secured general immortality for all human beings — everyone will be resurrected — but not personal salvation. Salvation from sin and exaltation to godhood must be earned. The requirements are faith in the Mormon Christ, repentance of all sins, baptism by immersion in the LDS Church, reception of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands of an LDS priesthood holder, and ongoing obedience to the commandments of the Mormon Church, including tithing, temple ordinances, celestial marriage, and continuing good works.

Three "degrees of glory" await the dead.

- The Celestial Kingdom is the highest — reserved for faithful Mormons who have received all temple ordinances and overcome sin in this life. These become gods on their own worlds in eternity.
- The Terrestrial Kingdom is intermediate — for good-hearted people, including non-Mormon Christians, who have lived decently without the fullness of Mormon teaching.
- The Telestial Kingdom is the lowest — for the wicked. Only a very small number — "sons of perdition," who have committed the unpardonable sin — go to hell in the traditional sense.

Against this scheme the apostolic Gospel is plain. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The Christian is not saved by his performance of religious ordinances in a system designed to produce gods. He is saved by the once-for-all sacrifice of the Son of God on the Cross, received in faith, sealed in baptism, nourished by the Eucharist, lived out in repentance and love. The end of the Christian hope is not to become a god on a future world. It is to behold God and to be made like Him by participation in His life — a far greater gift than the private divinity Mormonism offers.

Baptism for the Dead and Continuing Revelation

Two further Mormon doctrines require attention because they touch many ordinary Christian families.

The first is baptism for the dead. Mormons baptize living persons as proxies for deceased persons, including non-Mormon ancestors, in the belief that the dead can accept the Gospel in the afterlife if a living Mormon has been baptized on their behalf. This practice — carried out on an industrial scale in Mormon temples — has distressed many Jewish, Catholic, and Orthodox families whose deceased relatives have been posthumously "baptized" without consent. The single verse Mormons appeal to, 1 Corinthians 15:29, is addressed polemically in a passage about the resurrection and is not a command;

the practice it refers to (obscure even to New Testament scholars) is never commended, explained, or established as a Christian ordinance anywhere in the Scriptures or the Fathers.

The second is the doctrine of continuing revelation. The living LDS president is said to be a prophet who may receive new revelations that supersede any previous revelation, including the Bible, the Book of Mormon, or any other text. This doctrine is the mechanism by which Mormon teaching has been modified over time, sometimes dramatically — most publicly in 1890, when polygamy was abandoned under federal pressure, and in 1978, when Black men were at last admitted to the priesthood after more than a century of explicit racial exclusion taught by Brigham Young and others in the most emphatic terms. Before 1978, Mormon teaching held that persons of African descent bore "the mark of Cain"; after 1978, God was said to have changed His mind. This is not what Christians mean by revelation. The God of Scripture does not evolve. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). A prophet whose prophecies fail and whose doctrines are reversed by later prophets has, by Scripture's own test, failed the test.

The Apostolic Answer, Point by Point

The servant should be able to set the two systems side by side without hesitation.

Element of Faith	Historic Christianity	Mormonism
Supreme Being	One eternal God, Creator of all, existing as Trinity — Father, Son, Holy Spirit (Genesis 1; Deuteronomy 6:4; Matthew 28:19).	The Heavenly Father is an exalted man with a physical body of flesh and bone, who was once a man in a pre-existence.
Jesus Christ	The eternal Son, consubstantial with the Father, incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, perfect God and perfect Man (John 1:1-14).	The first-begotten spirit child of the Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother; spirit brother of Lucifer; conceived physically by the Father and Mary.
Work of Christ	The sinless Son offered Himself on the Cross for the sins of humanity; rose bodily; reigns at the Father's right hand (John 3:16).	His death guarantees universal resurrection; exaltation requires personal works, temple ordinances, and obedience. Suffered chiefly in Gethsemane.
Sources of Authority	The Old and New Testaments, interpreted within the apostolic Tradition guarded by the Church (2 Timothy 3:16-17).	The Bible as correctly translated; the Book of Mormon; the Doctrine and Covenants; the Pearl of Great Price; revelations of the current LDS prophet.

Humanity	Made in the image of God, distinct from God, fallen in Adam, to be restored in Christ (Genesis 1:26-28; Romans 3:23).	Pre-existent spirit children of the Heavenly Parents; gods in embryo; each person responsible for personal sin, not inheriting Adam's guilt.
Salvation	Restoration to communion with God by grace through faith, sealed in baptism, lived in repentance and love (Ephesians 2:8-9).	Exaltation to godhood through faith in Christ, repentance, baptism, laying on of hands, temple ordinances, celestial marriage, tithing, and continuing works.
Life After Death	Eternal communion with God (heaven) or eternal separation from God (hell) (Hebrews 9:27; Revelation 20-22).	Three degrees of glory (Celestial, Terrestrial, Telestial); only the worst are consigned to outer darkness with Satan.

The table lays bare what the pleasant missionaries at the door do not always say quickly. The differences are not cosmetic; they reach to the nature of God and the meaning of salvation.

Mormonism presents itself with a Christian vocabulary and a clean public face, but its theological substance diverges from historic Christianity at every decisive point. It denies the eternity of God by teaching that He was once a man. It denies the monotheism of Scripture by teaching a plurality of gods. It denies the unique divinity of Christ by making Him a created spirit brother of Lucifer. It denies the sufficiency of Scripture by introducing three additional books of contested origin. It denies the sufficiency of the Cross by requiring a program of temple ordinances and obedience for exaltation. It denies the unchangeableness of God by teaching a continuing revelation that has reversed prior revelations.

The servant owes Mormons honesty about what they actually teach, charity in every personal encounter, and clarity in the pulpit and in the catechism classroom. He does not accept the premise that Mormonism is simply another branch of Christianity. It is a new religion that uses Christian names. The faithful must be taught the difference.

The positive task is greater than the negative one. We do not want merely to keep our people out of the Mormon Church; we want to form them so deeply in the true faith that no alternative proves sustainable. The Orthodox parish that teaches, worships, prays, loves, and lives the apostolic Gospel is the answer — to Mormonism and to every other system that offers a partial good at the price of the whole truth.



Review Questions

1. Who founded the Church of Latter Day Saints? (A: Joseph Smith)

2. What texts do they follow? (A: The Book of Mormon, the Bible, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price)
3. Where did God come from? (A: He was created by another god.)
4. How are Jesus and Lucifer related? (A: They are brothers and the first spirit children of the father god and his goddess wife)
5. What is continuous revelation? (A: The current prophet can receive new revelations from God that contradict previous revelations.)
6. What are their two types of worship. (A: Chapel worship and Temple worship)
7. Where did the Book of Mormon come from? (A: Golden tablets buried near Joseph Smith's house.)
8. How was Jesus born according to Mormons? (A: The father god had sexual relations with St. Mary.)
9. What is Jesus' role in salvation? (A: He had to die in order for all humans to be resurrected, but this is not sufficient for personal salvation)
10. Why do we not consider Mormons to be Christians? (A: They are polytheistic, they do not believe in the Trinity, they believe Jesus was created)

Hinduism, Buddhism, Humanism

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

We turn now from groups that claim the name of Christ to worldviews that do not — or at least, worldviews that assign to Christ a place entirely foreign to the Gospel. Hinduism and Buddhism were born in India centuries before the Incarnation and remain dominant across Asia; humanism is a secular philosophy of the West with deep roots in the Renaissance and wide reach in our own cultural moment. The three are not neatly parallel. Hinduism is a vast and ancient family of religions without a single founder, creed, or scripture. Buddhism began in the sixth century before Christ as a reform within the Indian religious world. Humanism is not a religion at all but a philosophy that has seeped so thoroughly into modern life that many who hold it do not recognize it as a doctrine. Yet the three meet in the servant's path in similar ways: not usually through doctrinal confrontation, but through yoga studios and meditation apps, through the quiet premise that all paths lead to God or that no path is needed at all, through a culture that tells our young people they are the authors of their own meaning. The servant must learn to recognize these ideas when they appear in borrowed Christian vocabulary, to answer them charitably but firmly from Scripture and the Fathers, and to proclaim the Gospel of the crucified and risen Christ as the one way to the Father.

A subtle presence

A congregant of Coptic Orthodox Church is unlikely to be asked by a Hindu friend to debate the Vedas, or by a Buddhist monk to dispute the Four Noble Truths. The encounter is almost always quieter and more subtle. A child in the church's youth program will come home from school having been told that her yoga class teacher asked her to chant "namaste" to the divine within; a college student will hear from a philosophy professor that Christianity is simply one culturally conditioned path among many; a young professional will describe a mindfulness app whose meditations are framed as "spiritual but not religious." None of these moments announce themselves as theological confrontations. All of them are.

The three systems treated in this lesson differ in many respects, but they share three premises that collide with the Christian faith.

The first is that ultimate reality is either impersonal (Hinduism's Brahman, Buddhism's Nirvana) or simply absent (humanism's secular universe) — never the personal, self-revealing God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The second is that salvation, if it is spoken of at all, is achieved by the effort of the seeker — through karmic merit, ascetic discipline, meditative insight, or human reason — never received as a gift from a God who acts first.

The third is that Jesus Christ, if He is acknowledged, is reduced to a teacher among teachers, an avatar among avatars, an enlightened one among the enlightened, a moral exemplar among moral exemplars — never confessed as the only-begotten Son of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, by whom all things were made.

It is that third premise which makes comparative theology at this point not optional but pastoral. The servants who will pass these traditions on to the next generation must first see where the Gospel is being quietly displaced in their own parishioners' lives. This lesson is written to help them see.

The Aryan Conquest

During the fourth century B.C., Aryans – the same people that developed Greek culture – conquered much of present-day India. Their pantheon of gods, similar to that of the Greeks, combined with indigenous Indian traditions of meditation to form a loose combination of beliefs and practices that came to be known as Hinduism. Hinduism is not really one religion, but many different religions that interact and blend with one another. There is no known founder and no creedal statements of faith. In fact, there is no agreed upon authority save the voluminous sacred body of texts, Vedas, which were written over 1400 year period. The contents of the Vedas are practically unknown to most Hindus and the texts are seldom drawn upon for information or advice. Interestingly, one can be a good Hindu and believe in one god, many gods, or no god at all!

For Hindus, contradictory ideas are not a problem as all reality is seen as “one” . There are, however, two foundational concepts that almost all Hindus believe: reincarnation and karma.

1. Reincarnation: The process that the atman (soul) must endure on the wheel of samsara (thousands of lives of suffering though reincarnations) before reaching moksha. Moksha is when the soul reaches the infinite and no longer endures suffering. In some forms of hinduism, the soul may be reincarnated in plants, animals or objects.
2. Karma: The cumulative value of one's life is good minus bad, which determines your next life in the reincarnation cycle.

A growing popular idea in today's society comes from the Hindu's Vedantic Motto: The world's religions offer varying approaches to God, each one true and valid, each religion offering the world a unique and irreplaceable path to God-realization.

Hinduism — Their gods

The Hindu Trimurti — Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, Shiva the destroyer — presides over a pantheon of hundreds of thousands of gods and demigods, some of whom are not morally upright by any standard a Christian would recognize. Above the Trimurti stands Brahman, the impersonal all-pervading essence with which the atman (the true self) seeks to be reabsorbed. Salvation is not the healing of a broken relationship but the dissolving of individual identity into an ultimate oneness. The paths to this dissolution are usually grouped as three yogas:

- karma yoga – selfless action without attachment to results,

- jnana yoga – disciplined knowledge attained through meditation and the guidance of a guru, and
- bhakti yoga – devotion to a chosen deity.

How Hinduism Speaks of Jesus

Some Hindus treat Jesus with considerable reverence but always on their own terms. He is regarded as an avatar, one among many divine incarnations who descend to restore cosmic balance, or as a guru, a spiritual teacher of unusual wisdom. His teachings are prized, particularly those that can be rearranged under the category of non-violence (ahimsa) or inward enlightenment. What is refused is precisely what the Gospel insists upon: that this particular Galilean carpenter is the only-begotten Son of the living God, that He was born of a virgin in the flesh of our flesh, that He was crucified once for all under Pontius Pilate for the sins of the world, that He rose bodily from the tomb on the third day, and that He alone is the way, the truth, and the life.

A growing motto attributed to the Hindu Vedantic tradition captures the heart of the matter: "The world's religions offer varying approaches to God, each one true and valid, each religion offering the world a unique and irreplaceable path to God-realization." This motto sounds generous. In fact it empties the Gospel of its content, because the Gospel is the announcement not of a path but of a Person — and this Person will not consent to be one of many. "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me'" (John 14:6). "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).

Answering Hinduism

We answer from four places at once: from the person of Jesus Christ, from the doctrine of creation, from the doctrine of the soul, and from the shape of time itself.

From Christ Himself

The very own words of Christ Himself forbid the Vedantic motto. He does not say "I am one of the ways" but "I am the way." He does not say "I offer one truth" but "I am the truth." He does not say "I show you a path to life" but "I am the life." Hinduism may honor Him as an avatar or a guru; Christianity cannot accept the honor on those terms, because the honor is diminishing. A man who claims to be the Truth is either the Truth or a blasphemer; He cannot be safely filed beside Krishna and the Buddha.

From the doctrine of creation

The Hindu imagination dissolves the boundary between Creator and creation: the atman is a spark of Brahman; the self is divine at its root. Genesis refuses this picture. God speaks and the world is called into being out of nothing; human beings are made in His image but are not pieces of His substance. We are creatures — glorious creatures, loved creatures, destined creatures — but creatures. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1); "Let Us make man in Our image,

according to Our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). The distance between God and the soul is not an illusion to be overcome; it is the space in which communion is possible.

From the doctrine of the soul

The Hindu seeker wants to be absorbed into Brahman as a drop is reabsorbed into the ocean. The Christian hope is exactly the opposite: not the erasure of the self but its glorification. "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2). In heaven we shall not be less ourselves, but more — each one recognized, each one named, each one loved in a particularity no cosmic absorption could preserve.

From the shape of time

Reincarnation pictures time as a wheel turning endlessly toward moksha. Scripture pictures time as an arrow loosed toward judgment and resurrection. "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). This single mortal life is not one of ten thousand rehearsals; it is the one arena in which we accept or refuse the grace offered in Christ. Because Christ has conquered death in His own flesh, we are not condemned to repeat the cycle; we are invited to enter, once, through the narrow gate of His Cross into an eternity that does not need to be earned and will not be exhausted.

Buddhism — Enlightenment Through the Middle Way

Buddhism emerged from the Hindu world in the sixth century before Christ, when a prince of the Shakya clan named Siddhartha Gautama left his palace life, attempted extreme asceticism, and at last found what he called the Middle Way between indulgence and self-mortification. Seated beneath the Bodhi tree, he attained what his followers would call enlightenment, and became the Buddha — the Awakened One. He preached for forty-five years and died around 483 B.C. What he taught is not a revelation received from a personal God; Buddhism has no Supreme Being in the Christian sense. The Buddha explicitly set aside questions about God as "not conducive to edification." His word to his hearers was: rely upon yourself, not upon any deity.

The whole of classical Buddhist doctrine hangs upon the Four Noble Truths.

- First, that all of life is suffering (dukkha) — not only overt pain, but the subtle ache of impermanence.
- Second, that the cause of suffering is craving (tanha) — our desperate attachment to things that must pass away.
- Third, that suffering can cease, through the extinction of craving; this cessation is Nirvana, a state not of personal immortality but of the quenching of the flame of self.
- Fourth, that the path to Nirvana is the Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration — a program of ethical conduct, mental discipline, and meditative insight.

Buddhism's view of the human person is the doctrine of anatta, no-self: there is no permanent unchanging soul, only a stream of fleeting mental and physical components (the skandhas) that are

bundled together for a lifetime and dissolved at death, though the karmic momentum continues into another bundle. Jesus, when He is mentioned, is seen as a teacher who may have attained Buddhahood or at least a high measure of enlightenment — again, one of many, not the unique and eternal Son of God.

Solomon and the Buddha — Two Responses to Vanity

Five hundred years before Siddhartha Gautama sat beneath the Bodhi tree, another man surveyed the human condition and came to strikingly similar conclusions about its emptiness. King Solomon — whose wisdom, Scripture tells us, spread across the ancient world (1 Kings 4:31) — wrote in Ecclesiastes that all is "vanity of vanities" under the sun, that every toil is a chasing after wind, that wealth, pleasure, learning, and power alike cannot fill the human heart. To this point Solomon and the Buddha agree. The diagnosis is almost the same.

The prescription is utterly different. The Buddha concludes that the solution is the extinction of craving and eventually of the self itself: to stop desiring is to stop suffering. Solomon concludes otherwise. At the end of his long search he writes: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all" (Eccl. 12:13). His son's psalmist puts the Christian answer still more positively: "Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4). The problem is not that we desire; the problem is that we desire the wrong things. St. Augustine — who had tasted every pleasure the Mediterranean world could offer — summarized the matter in the opening lines of the Confessions: "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You."

Where the Buddha teaches us to extinguish desire, Christ teaches us to reorder it. Where the Buddha offers release from suffering through detachment, Christ offers both a new kind of suffering — the carrying of the Cross in fellowship with Him — and a hope that the Buddha cannot give, namely, that this suffering will be swallowed up in resurrection. "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18).

Answering Buddhism

The Buddhist diagnosis of suffering is more honest than most modern alternatives. It refuses to pretend that the world is well; it refuses to drown its sorrow in distraction. To this extent, the Christian can begin any conversation with a Buddhist in genuine sympathy. Where we must part company is in the account of the cause of suffering, in the nature of the self, and in the remedy.

The cause of suffering, for the Buddhist, is craving rooted in ignorance. For the Christian, it is sin rooted in a rebellion of the creature against the Creator — a personal rupture in a personal relationship. Suffering is not the fabric of existence; it is the wound of a good creation gone wrong. "For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope" (Rom. 8:20).

The self, for the Buddhist, is an illusion to be dissolved. For the Christian, the self is a gift to be healed. Each soul is willed into being by God, stamped with His image, known by name, loved with a particular love, destined for a particular glory. To teach a child that the self is a bundle of impermanent skandhas

to be extinguished is to teach her that the love of the Father is also an illusion — for love requires a beloved who persists.

The remedy, for the Buddhist, is the Eightfold Path — a disciplined climb by one's own effort toward a goal in which the climber himself is finally extinguished. The Christian remedy is the Cross: not our climb up toward God, but God's descent toward us. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). The Christian walks a narrow way, too — but not alone; the Shepherd walks it with us, and at its end stands not Nirvana but the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Humanism — Man at the Center

Humanism is not an organized religion. It is a philosophical and ethical stance that places the human being at the center of its concern and appoints human reason and empathy as sufficient sources of meaning. Its classical genealogy is traced to the Renaissance recovery of Greek and Roman letters; its modern articulation is at home in the writings of Enlightenment rationalists, nineteenth-century scientific naturalists, and twentieth-century secular moralists. Its practical reach, however, is much wider than its manifestos. It has seeped into the ordinary air of modern Western life so thoroughly that most of those who breathe it cannot name it.

A humanist may be an atheist, an agnostic, or a deist; what unites humanists is the rejection of a personal God who intervenes in human affairs and the confidence that human reason, human empathy, and human science are sufficient to the tasks of ethics, meaning, and the good life. Scripture is not authoritative; tradition is not binding; revelation is not received; the cross is at best a noble symbol. Ethics are to be built from the ground up, on human welfare and human rights. Social justice is pursued — often admirably — as a human project without a transcendent anchor. Meaning is constructed by the individual, who must give his or her own life purpose in the absence of an afterlife or a divine plan.

In North America especially, humanism rarely presents itself by name. It presents itself as "You be you," as "Live your truth," as "Follow your heart," as "I'm spiritual but not religious," as "We don't need God to be good." These mottoes sit on coffee mugs and classroom walls and Instagram captions. They are a catechism.

Answering Humanism

We answer humanism at three points — the question of human dignity, the question of freedom, and the question of hope.

On Human Dignity

Humanists rightly insist that every human being is a subject of worth. They are, however, unable to account for this worth on their own premises. If human beings are only the present output of blind evolutionary processes, if the universe is indifferent to whether we rise or fall, if there is no Creator in whose image we are made, then the insistence on universal human dignity is a sentiment without a foundation. Christianity provides the foundation. "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image,

according to Our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). Our dignity is not a fact we confer upon ourselves; it is a gift conferred upon us by the God who made us and is now working to glorify us: "When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory" (Col. 3:4).

On Freedom

Humanism presents itself as the great liberator, freeing the individual from the constraints of tradition, authority, and divine command. In practice it often produces the opposite — a humanity enslaved to its own appetites, to the marketing that shapes those appetites, to the ideologies that replace the faith it has rejected, to the addictions that are the wages of unbounded desire. The Christian answer is not less freedom but true freedom. "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage" (Gal. 5:1). The servant has learned in the lesson on free will that freedom is not the absence of limits; it is the power to become what we were made to be.

On Hope

Humanism pours all its energy into the pursuit of happiness in this life, because it believes there is no other. The accomplishment is real; the floor is thin. When illness, grief, betrayal, or simply old age arrive, humanism has nothing to offer but stoic acceptance. "I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus" (1 Thess. 4:13-14). Christian hope does not deny the pain of this world; it hands the sufferer a horizon beyond it.

Discerning Truth from Falsehood — A Rule for the Servant

Because Hindu, Buddhist, and humanist ideas usually arrive parishes not as whole systems but as isolated fragments — a yoga class, a meditation app, a college lecture, a self-help book — the servant needs a simple rule of discernment to carry into every conversation. St. Paul gives us the frame: "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" (Gal. 1:8-9). He repeats it at Corinth: "For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted — you may well put up with it!" (2 Cor. 11:3-4).

Four questions form the servant's rule.

- Does the teaching in question honor Jesus Christ as the only-begotten Son of God, true God of true God, incarnate of the Virgin Mary, crucified and risen for our salvation — or does it reduce Him to one of many teachers, one of many avatars, one of many paths?
- Does it receive the Holy Scriptures as the inspired Word of God, not to be added to or taken away from — or does it supplement Scripture with a new revelation treated as superior to it?
- Does it confess that salvation is the gift of God's grace received in the Body of Christ — or does it teach that man can climb by his own effort into divinity?

- Does it honor the Church as the pillar and ground of the truth, bearing the apostolic faith across the centuries — or does it locate authority in a single modern founder, a single modern book, or the lone judgment of the individual conscience?

Where the answer to the first half of each question is yes, the servant is safe to engage freely. Where the answer is to the second half, the servant must be gentle in tone but unbending in substance. "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 14:12).

Approaching Our Neighbors

We do not approach our Hindu neighbor as if his devotion to his tradition were contemptible; we recognize in his prayers, in his fasts, in his reverence for teacher and text, a hunger for the divine that Christ came to satisfy. We do not approach our Buddhist friend as if his search for release from suffering were shameful; we recognize in it a wound the Cross is shaped to heal. We do not approach our humanist colleague as if her concern for justice and human flourishing were a moral failing; we recognize that she is reaching for goods whose fullness is given in Christ. The servant's posture is that of the apostle Paul on the Areopagus: "Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23).

This charity is not a softening of the Gospel. It is the Gospel's native speech. "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1 Pet. 3:15). Meekness and fear — never contempt, never sarcasm, never the cheap triumph of scoring a point.

How to Form the Faithful

The servant who is forming the next generation against these particular currents has three tasks in the parish. The first is to catechize the household in the uniqueness of Christ before the world catechizes it in the interchangeability of saviors. A child who has memorized "I am the way, the truth, and the life" will not be disarmed by a friendly Instagram post about many paths up the mountain.

The second is to teach the difference between the practice and the worldview beneath it. Breathing exercises and stretching are not idolatry; a yoga class whose instructor opens with an invocation to Hindu deities is another matter. Mindful attention to the present moment is not heresy; a meditation app that teaches that the self is an illusion is another matter. The servant must help the faithful to receive the created gifts of the body and the mind — stillness, breath, attention, discipline — as the gifts of the Creator, while refusing the metaphysics that elsewhere comes bundled with them. Where a practice can be extricated from the worldview, it may be received with thanksgiving; where it cannot, it must be set aside.

The third is to cultivate a life of praise within the household, because praise is the deepest Christian answer to every alternative worldview. The humanist cannot praise, because there is no One to receive the praise. The Buddhist cannot praise in the Christian sense, because ultimate reality is impersonal. The Hindu offers devotion to a pantheon that cannot finally love him back. Christian praise knows

itself to be received, heard, and returned in love. A household that sings "Holy, Holy, Holy" with its children has given them a defense the philosophers cannot touch.



Review Questions

1. Where did Hinduism & Buddhism originate? (A: India)
2. What is the goal of Buddhism? (A: To reach Nirvana, a state of nothing)
3. What is the Vedantic motto? (A: You can reach God through all religions/paths)
4. What faith are humanists associated with? (A: atheists)
5. What common Hindu practices do we find in today's society? (A: Yoga, universalism)
6. What common humanist ideas do we find in today's society? (A: We make our own happiness/purpose, we don't need God)
7. Do Buddhists believe in God? (A: God is irrelevant)
8. Who was Jesus to Hindus? (A: An Avatar or a guru.)
9. Who was Jesus to Buddhists? (A: Possibly a Buddha)
10. Why is it important to learn about world religions? (A: Their ideas enter into the society we live in)

Jehovah's Witness

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

The Watchtower Society

Charles Taze Russell, the founder of what would become Jehovah's Witnesses, began his religious journey in a period of significant religious ferment in America. In contrast to the apostolic origins of ancient churches, Russell's movement emerged from personal Bible study groups in Pennsylvania during the 1870s. This presents a stark contrast to the traditional model of apostolic succession that characterizes the Orthodox church, where authority is traced directly to the apostles through an unbroken line of succession.

Russell's background is particular. As a teenager, he struggled with traditional Christian doctrines, particularly eternal torment, leading him to question his Presbyterian upbringing. He briefly joined the Adventist movement, influenced by Nelson Barbour, before starting his own Bible study group. This pattern of individual interpretation and rejection of established church authority marks a fundamental departure from how ancient Christian churches were established through direct apostolic mission and succession.

In 1879, Russell founded Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence (later known as The Watchtower), a publication that would become the cornerstone of his ministry. In 1881, he established the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, a legal entity designed to support the publication and distribution of religious literature. This organization became the administrative backbone of the movement, enabling its rapid expansion across the United States and eventually worldwide. Through this magazine, Russell disseminated his interpretations of biblical prophecy, including:

- Rejection of the Trinity doctrine
- Predictions about Christ's return in 1914
- Denial of eternal punishment
- Rejection of traditional Christian symbols and celebrations
- All who disagree with them will be destroyed during the battle of Armageddon (Revelation 16)

These teachings were largely developed through personal interpretation rather than being grounded in historical Christian tradition or apostolic teaching. His teachings attracted a growing number of followers, who came to be known as "Bible Students."

Time Lines and Conundrums

1874: The Invisible Return of Christ

Charles Taze Russell, influenced by Adventist calculations, initially taught that Christ had returned in 1874. This date was based on a complex interpretation of biblical chronology, particularly the "Gentile Times" mentioned in Luke 21:24 and Daniel 4 (a period of 2,520 years calculated from 607 BCE). With the beginning of Christ's presence in 1874, the start of a 40-year harvest period would lead Russell to predict the end of the world in 1914. This belief was central to his early teachings and was widely promoted in Zion's Watch Tower. When no visible events occurred in 1874, Russell reinterpreted the prediction, claiming that Christ's return was indeed invisible and spiritual. This adjustment allowed him to maintain the significance of the date while avoiding the embarrassment of a failed prophecy. The 1874 prediction became a cornerstone of Russell's theology, setting the stage for later chronological calculations.

1878: The Resurrection of the "Saints"

Building on his earlier calculations, Russell predicted that 1878 would mark the resurrection of the "saints" (the anointed Christians) and the end of God's favor toward nominal Christianity. This prediction was based on his belief that a 1,260-year period of Gentile domination over Jerusalem had ended in 1799, followed by a 79-year period leading to 1878.

When 1878 passed without the expected resurrection, Russell again adjusted his teachings. He claimed that the resurrection was a gradual process rather than a single event and that 1878 marked the beginning of Christ's invisible reign. This reinterpretation allowed him to preserve the importance of the date while explaining away its lack of fulfillment.

1914: The End of the Gentile Times and Armageddon

Russell's most famous prediction was that 1914 would mark the end of the "Gentile Times" and the beginning of Armageddon, the final battle between God and Satan. This prediction was based on his calculation of 2,520 years from 607 BCE, which he believed was the date of Jerusalem's destruction. Russell taught that 1914 would bring the collapse of human governments, the resurrection of the faithful, and the establishment of God's Kingdom on Earth.

When World War I broke out in 1914, Russell and his followers saw it as confirmation of the prophecy. However, the expected apocalyptic events did not occur. After Russell's death in 1916, as the predictions failed to materialize as expected, the movement had to reinterpret these prophecies. His failed predictions about the end of the world, most notably his assertion that Christ would return in 1914, led to criticism and schisms within the movement. The Watchtower reinterpreted the events of that year. They claimed that Christ had indeed begun ruling invisibly in heaven in 1914 and that the "last days" had begun, but the end was still future.

1918: The Resurrection of the "Anointed" and the Fall of Religions

Following the disappointment of 1914, the Watchtower shifted its focus to 1918, predicting that this year would see the resurrection of the "anointed" Christians and the destruction of organized religion. This prediction was based on the idea that a 40-year "harvest period" had begun in 1878 and

would end in 1918.

When 1918 passed without the predicted events, the Watchtower again adjusted its teachings. It claimed that Christ had begun inspecting spiritual temples in 1918, but the resurrection and destruction of religions were postponed. This reinterpretation allowed the organization to maintain the importance of 1918 while explaining its lack of fulfillment.

1925: The Resurrection of Patriarchs and the End of the World

Under the leadership of Joseph F. Rutherford, who was elected president in 1917, the Watchtower predicted that 1925 would see the resurrection of Old Testament patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as the beginning of the Millennium. Rutherford promoted this idea in his book *Millions Now Living Will Never Die* (1920), and the Watchtower even purchased a mansion in San Diego, California (Beth Sarim), to house the resurrected patriarchs.

When 1925 passed without the predicted events, the Watchtower faced significant criticism and a loss of members. The organization later downplayed the significance of 1925 and sold the Beth Sarim property. This failure marked a turning point in the Watchtower's approach to prophecy, as it became more cautious about setting specific dates.

1975: The End of 6,000 Years of Human History

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the Watchtower promoted the idea that 1975 would mark the end of 6,000 years of human history, based on a calculation of biblical chronology starting from Adam's creation. Many Jehovah's Witnesses believed this would coincide with the start of the Millennium and the Battle of Armageddon.

The 1975 prediction was primarily promoted by the Watchtower leadership, particularly under the presidency of Nathan H. Knorr (1942–1977). While the idea was not entirely new—it built on earlier chronological calculations by Charles Taze Russell and Joseph F. Rutherford—it was during Knorr's presidency that the prediction gained widespread attention and became a central theme in Watchtower publications.

The 1975 prediction was based on the Watchtower's interpretation of biblical chronology, particularly the calculation of time from the creation of Adam to the present. The organization taught that:

- Adam was created in 4026 BCE, based on their interpretation of genealogies in Genesis.
- Adding 6,000 years to 4026 BCE brought them to 1975 CE, which they believed would mark the end of 6,000 years of human history.

- They associated this 6,000-year period with the "six days" of creative work in Genesis 1, followed by a "seventh day" of rest (the Millennium). This led to the belief that 1975 could mark the beginning of Christ's Millennial reign.

The Watchtower's emphasis on 1975 led many Jehovah's Witnesses to make significant life changes in anticipation of the end. Some sold their homes, quit their jobs, or delayed education and career plans, believing that the current system would soon be replaced by God's Kingdom. When 1975 passed without the expected events, the Watchtower faced widespread disappointment and a significant drop in membership. In response, the organization took several steps to adjust its teachings, downplay the prediction and maintain its authority.

The Generation of 1914

For decades, the Watchtower taught that the generation alive in 1914 would not pass away before the end of the world. This belief was based on Jesus' words in Matthew 24:34 ("this generation will by no means pass away until all these things occur").

As the generation of 1914 began to die out, the Watchtower faced a theological crisis. In 1995, it reinterpreted the "generation" to refer to a longer, overlapping period of time, effectively extending the timeline indefinitely. This adjustment allowed the organization to maintain its emphasis on the imminence of Armageddon while avoiding the embarrassment of another failed prophecy.

The 144 000

The doctrine of the 144,000 is one of the most distinctive and controversial teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses, rooted in a literal interpretation of Revelation 7 and 14. Introduced by Charles Taze Russell in the late 19th century, the teaching originally held that 144,000 faithful Christians would be resurrected to heaven to rule with Christ. Russell believed this group began to be selected in the first century and would be completed before the end of the world. Under his successor, the doctrine of the 144,000 underwent significant changes. Rutherford introduced the idea of a "great crowd" (based on Revelation 7:9) who would not be part of the 144,000 but would still receive salvation and live on a paradise Earth. This teaching created a two-tiered system of salvation:

- The 144,000 anointed, who would rule with Christ in heaven.
- The great crowd, who would live eternally on Earth.

This division became a defining feature of Jehovah's Witnesses' theology, with the 144,000 portrayed as a limited, elite group nearing completion by the mid-20th century. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that membership in the 144,000 is not something a person can choose or earn through their own efforts. Instead, they teach that it is a heavenly calling bestowed by God. According to their doctrine, individuals who are part of the 144,000 receive a personal, inward conviction from God that they are among the anointed. This conviction is described as a "heavenly hope" that sets them apart from other believers, who are destined to live eternally on Earth. Those who believe they are part of the 144,000 are expected to partake of the bread and wine at the annual Memorial of Christ's death, an act that symbolizes their inclusion in the heavenly covenant.

However, the process is not without its ambiguities. The Watchtower organization does not officially confirm or deny an individual's claim to be part of the 144,000. Instead, it leaves the matter to the individual's conscience, while discouraging public discussion or speculation about who is truly anointed.

For much of the 20th century, the organization taught that the 144,000 was nearly complete, with only a small remnant of anointed individuals remaining. However, in recent decades, the number of partakers at the Memorial has not consistently declined, as one would expect if the number were fixed and nearly fulfilled. In some years, the number of partakers has even increased, leading to questions about the validity of the doctrine. The watchtower shifted its explanation, suggesting that some partakers might be "mentally unbalanced" or mistaken about their heavenly calling.

Jehovah's Witness - in the New Millenium

Despite the repeated failures of their prophecies and the frequent changes in doctrine, the Jehovah's Witnesses experienced significant growth during this period. By 1977, their worldwide membership had reached 2 million, and it continued to climb in the following years, reaching 6 million by the turn of the millennium. This growth can be attributed to their active proselytizing, their appeal to those seeking a sense of community and purpose.

The Jehovah's Witnesses are known for their distinctive practices and beliefs, which often set them apart from mainstream society. They are perhaps most famous for their refusal to participate in activities that they perceive as conflicting with their religious convictions. This includes refusing to serve in the military or participate in warfare, as they believe that Christians should remain neutral in worldly conflicts. They also refuse to salute the flag or participate in nationalistic ceremonies, as they view these as forms of idolatry.

Additionally, Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate Christmas, birthdays, or other holidays that they consider to have pagan origins or to be contrary to biblical teachings. They also have strict rules regarding blood transfusions, which they believe are prohibited by scripture. For many years, they refused to accept blood transfusions, even in life-threatening situations, leading to numerous deaths within their community. However, in recent years, they have softened their stance on this issue and now allow for certain blood fractions and medical procedures that do not involve the direct transfusion of whole blood.

Similarly, they once discouraged vaccination and organ transplantation, but they have since revised their policies to allow for these medical interventions, recognizing the potential benefits and acknowledging the advancements in medical science. These changes reflect the ongoing evolution of the Jehovah's Witnesses' beliefs and practices as they navigate the complexities of the modern world while striving to remain faithful to their interpretation of scripture.

JW Theological Understanding of God

Jehovah's Witnesses emphasize the use of "Jehovah" as God's personal name, derived from the Tetragrammaton YHWH in Hebrew Scripture. This focus on the divine name leads to their

organizational identity, yet their understanding of God's nature presents several theological challenges when compared to traditional Christian doctrine.

Their rejection of the Trinity stems from several arguments:

1. The word "Trinity" doesn't appear in Scripture
2. They view the doctrine as making God into three separate deities
3. They claim it has pagan origins
4. They attribute its development to Satanic influence

Their theological framework establishes a hierarchical view where:

- Jehovah is the Almighty God
- Jesus is a created being, a "mighty god" (with a lowercase "g")
- The Holy Spirit is viewed as God's active force rather than a person

This understanding creates a de facto bitheistic system (belief in two gods of different ranks), though they would reject this characterization. Their translation of John 1:1 reflects this view: "the Word was a god," rather than the traditional "the Word was God."

The biblical testimony presents a more complex picture that affirms both God's unity and the full deity of Christ:

1. The Divine Name and Its Usage:
 - The Tetragrammaton (YHWH) indeed appears in the Hebrew Bible, but the New Testament authors regularly apply Old Testament passages about YHWH to Jesus
 - Philippians 2:9-11 states God gave Jesus "the name above every name," and in context, this refers to the divine name
 - Jesus himself used "I AM" (ego eimi) statements that recall God's self-revelation to Moses
2. Biblical Affirmations of Christ's Deity:
 - John 1:1-3 uses the Greek construction that emphasizes the Word's divine nature.
 - Colossians 1:15-20 presents Christ as creator of all things, not a created being.
 - Hebrews 1:3 describes Jesus as "the exact representation of God's being".
 - John 20:28 records Thomas's confession to Jesus: "My Lord and my God".
 - Titus 2:13 refers to "our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ".
3. Unity and Distinction in the Godhead:
 - Deuteronomy 6:4 affirms God's unity: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one"
 - Genesis 1:26 shows plurality within this unity: "Let us make mankind in our image"
 - Matthew 28:19 presents baptism in the singular "name" (not names) of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
 - 2 Corinthians 13:14 demonstrates the cooperative work of all three persons
4. The Holy Spirit's Personhood:
 - John 14:26 describes the Spirit teaching and reminding, personal actions

- Acts 5:3-4 equates lying to the Holy Spirit with lying to God
- Romans 8:26-27 describes the Spirit's intercession with "groans too deep for words"

Jehovah's Witnesses' belief is similar to the heresy of Arius. This heresy denies the full divinity of Jesus Christ and His pre-existence as God the Son, co-equal with God the Father. Arius proposed that Jesus was a created being, the first and highest of God's creations, but still a creature nonetheless. Similarly, Jehovah's Witnesses teach that Jesus did not exist as God the Son before his earthly birth. They believe that he was created by God as the archangel Michael and was used as an instrument by God to create other spirit beings. The Early Church Fathers have extensively elaborated writings uniformly affirming Christ's deity. In response to Arianism, the fathers are the one who carefully articulated this biblical teaching, not pagan influence.

JW Theological Understanding of Christ

Jehovah's Witnesses present a view of Jesus Christ that differs fundamentally from traditional Christian understanding. They propose that Jesus existed in three distinct and separate phases, rather than acknowledging the continuous nature of His person through the incarnation. Let's examine each proposed phase and the theological challenges this view presents.

Phase 1: The Pre-human Jesus

Jehovah's Witnesses' Position:

- Jesus was Michael the Archangel before coming to earth
- He was the first and greatest of God's creation
- He assisted in creating everything else
- He was a spirit creature, not divine

Theological Response:

The identification of Jesus with Michael the Archangel contradicts several biblical truths:

- Hebrews 1:5-6 explicitly contrasts Jesus with angels: "For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'?"
- Hebrews 1:13-14 shows angels are ministering spirits, while Jesus is the one seated at God's right hand.
- Daniel 10:13 refers to Michael as "one of the chief princes," indicating he is one among many, whereas Christ is unique.
- Colossians 1:15-17 describes Jesus as the creator of all things, including angels, not as a created being himself.

Phase 2: The Human Jesus

Jehovah's Witnesses' Position:

- When Jesus came to earth, Michael ceased to exist
- The human Jesus was purely human, not divine
- God transferred Michael's life force into Mary's womb

- No incarnation occurred; instead, a complete transformation took place

Theological Response:

This understanding contradicts the biblical doctrine of incarnation:

- John 1:14 states "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," indicating addition rather than transformation
- Philippians 2:6-7 describes Christ as not giving up His divine nature but adding human nature: "who, being in very nature God... made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant"
- Luke 1:35 describes the Holy Spirit's role in Jesus' conception, not a transfer of angelic life force
- Hebrews 2:14-17 explains that Jesus had to be made like His brothers in every way while remaining divine

Phase 3: The Resurrected Jesus

Jehovah's Witnesses' Position:

- Jesus was not physically resurrected
- His physical body was disposed of by God
- He was recreated as Michael the Archangel
- He now exists again as a spirit creature
- He returned invisibly in 1914

Theological Response:

This view contradicts clear biblical testimony:

- Luke 24:39 records Jesus saying, "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have"
- John 20:27 shows Jesus inviting Thomas to touch His physical wounds
- Acts 1:11 describes Jesus' ascension and promise of return "in the same way"
- 1 Corinthians 15:14-17 ties the physical resurrection to the validity of Christian faith
- Colossians 2:9 affirms that even after the resurrection, "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form"

JW Understanding of Human Nature and Destiny

The Jehovah's Witnesses' view of human nature and destiny shapes not only their view of salvation but also their conception of human purpose and eternal destiny. They accept the biblical account of Adam's fall but interpret its consequences in a distinctive way. They teach the common narrative that when Adam sinned, he lost perfection and passed this imperfection to all his descendants. Their understanding however significantly differs when comes the subject of the mortality of the soul:

1. Hereditary Sin:

- All humans inherit sin from Adam

- This inheritance includes both sinful nature and death
- No one can achieve perfection in current human existence

2. Mortality of the Soul:

- They reject the concept of an immortal soul
- Humans are viewed as purely physical beings
- Death means complete cessation of existence
- No consciousness continues after death

This understanding differs from traditional Christian teaching in several crucial ways:

- It denies the spiritual dimension of human nature affirmed in Genesis 2:7
- It conflicts with Jesus' teaching about consciousness after death (Luke 16:19-31)
- It contradicts biblical affirmations of the soul's endurance (Matthew 10:28)

Additionally, as previously alluded, one of the most distinctive aspects of Jehovah's Witnesses' theology is their teaching about two different classes of saved people:

Class	The Anointed Class	The Great Crowd	Non-Believers
	The Anointed Class (144,000)		
	• Limited to exactly 144,000 individuals • Will receive immortality in heaven • Will rule with Christ as kings and priests • Called the "little flock" (Luke 12:32) • Selection began at Pentecost and continues until the full number is reached	• Unlimited number of other faithful Witnesses • Will live forever on paradise earth • Will be subjects of the kingdom ruled by the 144,000 • Must maintain faithfulness through Armageddon • Will never receive heavenly life	Complete Annihilation: • Non-believers cease to exist at death • No eternal punishment or separation from God • No consciousness or existence in any form • Second death means permanent extinction No Eternal Hell: • Reject concept of eternal torment • View hell (Sheol/Hades) as common grave • Interpret fire imagery as symbolic of destruction • Consider eternal punishment incompatible with God's love

Issues	• It creates a hierarchy within salvation not found in Scripture • It contradicts the unity of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:4-6) • It misinterprets Revelation's symbolic numbers as literal • It introduces a class system foreign to New Testament teaching	This understanding requires reinterpreting numerous biblical passages: • Jesus' teachings about eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46) • Descriptions of conscious existence after death (Revelation 20:10) • Passages about degrees of punishment (Luke 12:47-48)
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Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a unique view about earth's ultimate destiny:

Earth Destiny	Eternal Earthly Paradise	Armageddon	Millennial Kingdom
Description	- Earth will never be destroyed - Will be transformed into paradise - Most faithful Witnesses will live here eternally - Perfect conditions under Christ's rule	- Will eliminate current world system - Won't destroy earth itself - Will usher in millennial reign - Will remove wicked people	- 1,000-year reign of Christ - 144,000 ruling from heaven - Great crowd living on earth - Progressive restoration to perfection
Implication	- It minimizes the cosmic scope of redemption (Romans 8:19-22) - It conflicts with biblical teachings about new heavens and new earth (2 Peter 3:10-13) - It creates an artificial separation between heavenly and earthly destinies		

Salvation and the Afterlife

Jehovah's Witnesses view salvation primarily as rescue from death and the opportunity for eternal life, either in heaven for the 144,000 or on paradise earth for the "great crowd." This understanding differs markedly from the Orthodox Christian view of salvation. Consequently, to achieve salvation, individuals must fulfill specific requirements: diligently studying the Bible with the guidance of Watchtower publications, adhering to both divine laws and the directives of the Watchtower Society, undergoing baptism within the Watchtower organization, and actively participating in door-to-door proselytization by distributing their magazines.

Upon attaining salvation, a select group of 144,000 individuals, referred to as the "little flock," are destined to ascend to heaven and share divine status with Jehovah. The remaining believers, constituting the "great crowd," will enjoy eternal life on Earth in the presence of Jesus. Those who fall outside these categories face annihilation, as Jehovah's Witnesses reject the concept of hell as a fabrication of the devil, whom they perceive as a deceptive entity.

General Morals and Worship

Jehovah's Witnesses adhere to a strict interpretation of the Bible, which leads to specific practices and prohibitions. Blood transfusions are strictly forbidden, even in life-threatening situations, as they believe the Bible forbids the consumption of blood. Celebrations such as birthdays and holidays like Christmas and Easter are also shunned. They view these as having pagan origins and therefore incompatible with their faith. Additionally, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and other similar celebrations are not observed as they are not explicitly mentioned in the Bible.

Jehovah's Witnesses are also politically neutral. They do not participate in the armed forces, vote, or salute the flag. These actions are seen as demonstrating allegiance to human governments rather than to Jehovah.

A key distinction between Jehovah's Witnesses and many other Christian denominations is their structure. They do not have a clergy class; all baptized members are considered ordained ministers. This reflects their belief in the priesthood of all believers. Religious symbols, such as the cross, are also rejected as they are viewed as having pagan roots. They believe that Jesus was crucified on a stake, not a cross, although this view is not supported by historical evidence.

Unlike some other Christian denominations, Jehovah's Witnesses do not observe the Sabbath. They believe that the commandment to keep the Sabbath was fulfilled with the coming of Christ.

Comparative Summary

Elements of Faith	Historic Christianity	Jehovah's Witnesses
Supreme Being	We believe in one personal/supreme God who is Creator and Lord of everything that exists. He eternally exists as Triune God: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. (Gen. 1; Deut. 6:4; Matt. 28:19.)	They believe in one God, properly called Jehovah. His Holy Spirit is an impersonal force. Reject the doctrine of Trinity.
Key Figures in	We believe in Jesus, the Christ,	Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916)

History	eternally one with the Father and incarnated supernaturally through the Virgin Mary. (John 1:1-12; Matt 1:18-25)	
Person of Jesus	The Lord, Jesus Christ, is perfect in His divinity and perfect in His humanity, yet His divinity parted not from His humanity for a single moment, nor a twinkle of an eye. A supreme example of God's character and His love for humanity. Full and final revelation of God and His love. (John 1:1-13.)	They believe he created being with stages of existence: 1. Archangel Michael or the Word. 2. Jesus, the perfect man, became Messiah at his baptism. 3. After His spiritual resurrection, became Michael again but retained the name Jesus.
Work of Jesus Christ	Jesus was born, lived, and died in a given time and place as a unique historical event. He lived a sinless life, and willingly died on the cross as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity. He is the Messiah, (Christ,) Lord, and Savior. (John 1:14-18; 3:16)	Christ's ransom sacrifice on a "stake" made salvation possible for each and every one of us.
Sources of Authority	We believe in the Holy Bible, (Old and New Testaments,) and Tradition. Unique, revealed, factual, accurate, and the inspired Word of God. (2 Tim. 3:16-17.)	They believe in the Bible, (the New World Translation of Holy Scriptures,) as interpreted by Watchtower Bible, and Tract Society.
Doctrine of Humanity	Humanity is part of creation, but distinct from the rest of creation & from God. Human beings are created in God's image. Every person is a unique, precious being of dignity & worth. (Gen. 1:26-28.)	Created in Jehovah's image; a soul, not immortal; capable of responding to Jehovah.
The Basic Human Problem	By their free will, human beings have chosen to sin against God, rejecting His nature, & pursuing a course of life that is opposed to His essential character & revealed law. (Gen.3; Rom. 3:23.)	Sin is viewed as a willful rebellion against Jehovah.
Solution to the Basic Human Problem	Salvation: restoring man back in communion with God. It is considered a process rather than an event. Freedom from the guilt &	Their solution is allegiance to Jehovah and the works, (baptism, faithfulness in Kingdom Hall work; those ignorant of Jehovah given a

	power of sin is God's gift of grace, as well as new nature received through baptism. (Eph. 2:8-9.)	chance to believe during the millennium.)
Ethics, (Value System)	Ultimate values for humanity are based on God's character and His Ten Commandments. Human beings are potentially good, but not inevitably good. They always need God's grace to renew their characters.	Those not loyal to Jehovah are unrighteous; all earthly organizations are controlled by Satan; Jehovah's Witnesses are required to obey Jehovah's laws as explained by the Watchtower Bible, and Tract Society.
Life After Death	Eternal communion with God, (heaven,) or eternal separation from God, (hell.) (Heb. 9:27; Rev. 20-22.)	144,000 "select" to reign with Christ in the Kingdom of God, (heaven.) Other Jehovah's Witnesses live on glorified paradise earth. Annihilation for all who reject Jehovah.



Review Questions

1. Are Jehovah's Witnesses Christians? (A: No)
2. How many 'gods' do they believe in? (A: Two)
3. How many people do they believe will get into paradise? (A: 144,000 followers.)
4. What is their scripture called? (A: The Watchtower Bible)
5. How many stages did they believe 'Jesus' went through? (A: Three.)
6. List three things forbidden for Jehovah's Witnesses. (A: Saluting the flag, blood transfusions, and birthdays/ holidays.)
7. What do they call their God? (A: Jehovah.)
8. How do they believe the events of the resurrection transpired? (A: They believe, in his resurrection as a "spirit person," "Jesus" became Michael the Archangel again, newly created or restored.)
9. How do they believe the events of the crucifixion transpired? (A: They claim Christ "was crucified on a stake, not a cross.")
10. What do they believe about Jesus? (A: He is seen as "the equal of the perfect man Adam.")



[The Heresy of Jehovah's Witnesses](#)

Unit 3

Chapter

3.1 Angels & Saints

The Angels

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Ministers of God and Companions of the Church

The Pre-Servant must think rightly about the angels for three reasons.

First, Scripture assumes that we know them. The Bible opens with the cherub at Eden's gate and closes with the angel of Revelation, and across the sixty-six books in between the ministry of angels is woven as a steady thread. A servant who cannot speak of angels is a servant who cannot teach the whole counsel of God.

Second, the life of the Church cannot be understood apart from them. The Divine Liturgy names them by rank; our hymns address them by name; the feasts of Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Suriel, and the Four Incorporeal Creatures are woven into the Coptic calendar; every sanctuary is furnished with the Cherubim above the ark of the altar. A pre-servant who does not know this will not be able to explain the church to the children who sit in her pews.

Third, the world is suffering a strange re-paganization in which angels are turned into sentimental mascots or occult intermediaries. The Church's sober and scriptural teaching is the medicine for this fever.

The aim of this lesson is not merely informational. As the Church prays in the Liturgy of St. Gregory, "Those who are in this place, conform them to Your angels" — that is, make us like them. To study the angels rightly is to be shown, in a living icon, what obedience, praise, service, and courage look like when they are perfected. We study them so that we may imitate them.

What the Scriptures Say About the Angels

The foundation of our teaching is not popular imagination but the written Word. The Scriptures speak of the angels plainly, often, and without embarrassment. They are creatures — not eternal, not divine, not to be worshipped — and yet they are mighty, bright, holy, and close to God.

"Who makes His angels spirits, His ministers a flame of fire." Psalm 104:4

The word itself — ἄγγελος in Greek, malak in Hebrew — means simply "messenger." The name describes an office rather than a nature; it tells us not what they are in themselves but what they are in relation to us and to God. St. Augustine observes this clearly: angel, he says, is the name of the ministry, not of the essence. Their essence is spirit; their office is messenger.

"Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?" Hebrews 1:14

Every word in that verse deserves attention. They are ministering — they serve. They are spirits — bodiless. They are sent — they do not come on their own errands. And the ones to whom they are sent are precisely those who will inherit salvation. The angel is therefore the Church's friend by divine appointment.

The Nature of the Angels

The angels are created beings. They are not co-eternal with God. St. Gregory Nazianzen, preaching on the Nativity, teaches that God “first conceived the Heavenly and Angelic Powers. And this conception was a work fulfilled by His Word, and perfected by His Spirit” (Oration 38, “On the Theophany,” IX). Gathering what Scripture and the Fathers say of their nature, the Church has always confessed the angels to be intelligent spirits: rational minds who know and love God, not impersonal forces; possessed of free will, as their own history proves, since it was by this freedom that Satan and his host fell; incorporeal, having no bodies as we do, though they can, by divine power, take visible form to appear to men; and immortal, not because deathlessness belongs to their nature as it belongs to God's, but because it is a gift of His grace. Each of these truths repays meditation.

Intelligent: the angels know; they are rational minds, not impersonal forces.

Endued with free will: they have chosen; and it was by this choice that the fall of Satan and his host became possible.

Incorporeal: they have no bodies in the sense that we do; they are pure spirits, though they can, by divine power, take form to appear to men.

Serving God: their life is leitourgia, the liturgy of adoration and obedience.

Immortal by grace: they cannot die, yet their deathlessness is a gift, not a property of their essence.

Because they have no bodies, the angels do not occupy space and are not bound by it as we are. They are not limited by distance, roads, buildings, or time the way physical creatures are; their movement is better compared to the movement of a thought than to travel through space. In this same immediate way, the angels carry out the will of God: the moment He commands, they are there; the moment He asks, they respond.

On the question of whether the good angels can still sin, St. Augustine's own judgment, given in his commentary on Genesis, is the Church's anchor: “there is in the holy angels that nature which cannot sin” (De Genesi ad Litteram, Book XI). Because they chose God with the whole depth of a free and rational nature, and because they now behold Him without any veil between, the angels who remained faithful rest in Him without wavering; their freedom was not destroyed by this, but perfected, in the same way that a will fixed wholly on the good is more free, not less.

Instant and unquestioning obedience

This immediacy of the angels is not simply a curiosity of their nature; it is a moral example. Scripture repeatedly shows the angels obeying God's word the instant it is given, without hesitation, without

complaint, and without demanding an explanation of commands that might, in human terms, seem difficult or severe.

When Sodom and Gomorrah had given themselves over entirely to sin, Abraham interceded before God, questioning whether the city might be spared. God, who does not err, sent two angels to Sodom — one work to rescue Lot, another to execute judgment on the city (Genesis 19). In the days of Hezekiah, “the angel of the LORD went out, and killed in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred and eighty-five thousand” in a single night, delivering God’s people (2 Kings 19:35). An angel struck down the firstborn of Egypt in a night, in the great deliverance of Exodus. And when Herod accepted the praise of the crowd as though he were a god, “immediately an angel of the LORD struck him, because he did not give glory to God” (Acts 12:23).

These same angels also deliver mercy with the same instancy. The angel who announced to Zacharias that his son would prepare the way of the Lord acted immediately and joyfully — but when Zacharias doubted, the angel just as immediately sealed his mouth in silence until the child was born (Luke 1:11-20).

The lesson for the servant is not that God delights in severity, but that the angels model a total, unhesitating yielding to the will of God, whether that will is experienced as comfort or as correction. When we pray “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” we are asking to do the will of God the way it is done in heaven — immediately, without grumbling, without doubt. In this the angels are given to us as an example to imitate.

The Multitude of the Heavenly Host

Scripture does not number the angels; it overwhelms us with their multitude. Daniel sees before the Ancient of Days a scene that staggers the imagination.

“A thousand thousands ministered to Him; Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him.” Daniel 7:10

The Epistle to the Hebrews takes up the same image and lays it upon every Christian assembly — we have come, the Apostle writes, “to an innumerable company of angels” (Hebrews 12:22). The liturgical tradition of the Church inherits this vision directly. In the anaphora attributed to St. Gregory the Theologian the priest lifts his voice and prays: “Thousands of thousands stand before You, and ten thousand times ten thousand offer You service.” What Daniel saw in **prophecy**, the Church sees in every Liturgy; what the seer of Revelation heard on Patmos, the deacon chants at the altar.

King David gives us their character as well as their number:

“Bless the LORD, you His angels, who excel in strength, who do His word, heeding the voice of His word.” — Psalm 103:20

We are not taught how many they are; we are taught that they are many, and that our reckoning fails before their number. The practical effect of this doctrine is humility. The servant who remembers the

innumerable host will not be tempted to overrate his own presence in the church hall; he will know that the work of salvation is being carried by a company far greater than the roster of his own teachers.

Praise: The Highest Form of Prayer

The angels are not only obedient and numerous; they are, above all, worshippers. Their example is worth pausing over, because it teaches the servant something about the nature of prayer itself.

The Christian tradition recognizes several distinct kinds of prayer. There is supplication, in which we bring our requests before God. There is thanksgiving, in which we give thanks for what we have received. There is simple conversation with God, a two-way exchange in which we remain present as ourselves. There is intercession, in which our attention moves further from ourselves toward the needs of others. And there is praise, in which the one praying is no longer occupied with self or need at all, but only with the greatness and beauty of God Himself.

St. Paul commends the first two when he writes, “in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6) — these are good, necessary, and the most common forms of prayer among believers. But praise, in which nothing is asked and nothing is sought except to behold God as He is, holds a place of special honor, because it asks for nothing but is content simply to know Him and declare what it sees.

This is the work of the angels above all others, and it finds its fullest expression in the Cherubim. In the anaphora of the Liturgy of St. Basil the Church prays: “You are He around whom stand the Cherubim full of eyes, and the Seraphim with six wings, praising continuously.” To be full of eyes is not merely to see everything; it is to have one's whole attention fixed, undistracted, on God alone. Ezekiel's vision of the Cherubim (Ezekiel 1, 10) presents them as wholly given over to beholding the divine glory, missing nothing. Because they know Him so fully, they can do nothing else but declare, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts. Heaven and earth are full of Your glory” (Isaiah 6:3). Knowledge of God, carried to its fullness, issues necessarily in praise — one cannot be amazed by what one has not first come to know.

The Angelic Hierarchy

The Church has received, chiefly from St. Dionysius the Areopagite and after him from St. Gregory the Theologian, a teaching that the heavenly host is arranged in nine orders, gathered in three triads. This is not a human speculation imposed upon the Scriptures; it is a reading drawn from them. Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1 and 10, Colossians 1:16, Ephesians 1:21, Romans 8:38, and 1 Thessalonians 4:16 together name each of the nine ranks, and the Liturgy gathers them together in a single confession: “Before whom stand the angels, the archangels, the principalities, the authorities, the thrones, the dominions, and the powers.”

Triad	Orders	Office
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Highest — nearest to God	Seraphim, Thrones	Cherubim,	The orders of immediate adoration — the ceaseless Sanctus, the fiery love, the knowledge of the divine mysteries.
Middle — governors of the created order	Dominions, Powers	Virtues,	The orders that administer the providence of God over creation and restrain the rebellious spirits.
Nearest to man	Principalities, Angels	Archangels,	The orders that watch over nations, deliver the messages of God to men, and are assigned as guardians to the faithful.

The pattern is instructive: the higher the order, the closer to God; the lower the order, the closer to us. This means that the angels who are our familiar companions are not lesser in dignity, but nearer in office — they are the ones sent forth, carrying our prayers up and bringing the Lord's messages down.

Each order has its particular character:

The Seraphim, whose name means “the burning ones,” are wholly consumed with the love of God; Isaiah sees them with six wings and hears them cry, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” The Cherubim, full of eyes, behold the glory of God without ceasing, missing no part of it. The Thrones bear the majesty of God as a living seat of His glory. Scripture describes this highest order as fire-like: “For our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29); “His throne was a flame of fire” (Daniel 7:9); “Who makes His angels spirits, His ministers a flaming fire” (Psalm 104:4). To be nearest to God is to be, in a sense, set ablaze by His presence.

The Dominions direct the good order of the other angels, granting prudent governance and wise management to the ranks below them. The Virtues (also called Authorities) work miracles and impart the grace of miracle-working to those found worthy. The Powers hold authority over the demonic realm, restraining evil spirits and repelling the temptations they bring, and they help the faithful who struggle with sin to cast out evil thoughts.

The Principalities direct the lower angels and are entrusted with the oversight of nations, kingdoms, and peoples. The Archangels are the heralds of good news; they receive the prophecies and understanding of God's will from the higher orders and announce them to the lowest order. The Angels, nearest of all to man, announce the lesser mysteries and intentions of God, teach the faithful to live righteously, and are appointed as guardians over each of us who believe.

The Ministry of the Angels: Messengers of God

If the name of the angels is messenger, then their chief office is to carry the Word of God. The pages of Scripture are full of their errands. An angel closes the gate of Eden. Three angels dine with Abraham at the oaks of Mamre and announce the birth of Isaac. An angel stays Abraham's hand on Mount Moriah. An angel goes before the camp of Israel in the wilderness. An angel feeds and strengthens Elijah under

the juniper tree when he is in despair after Jezebel's threats (1 Kings 19:5-7). Gabriel stands by Daniel to explain the vision. Gabriel comes to Zacharias in the temple to announce the birth of John the Forerunner, and comes again to the Virgin at Nazareth, to Elizabeth, to Joseph the Righteous, and to Tobias — bringing, in each case, good news that prepares the way of salvation. An angel speaks to the shepherds at Bethlehem and lets loose the multitude of the heavenly host in the Gloria. Angels minister to our Lord after the temptation. An angel strengthens Him in Gethsemane. An angel rolls away the stone. Angels speak to the myrrh-bearers. Two men in white stand by the disciples at the Ascension. An angel opens the prison doors for the Apostles. An angel directs Philip toward the Ethiopian eunuch. An angel appears to Cornelius. An angel stands by Paul in the storm. Angels open and close the whole of the Apocalypse.

This is not a scattered collection of ornamental incidents; it is a consistent testimony that God speaks to man by the mediation of His servants, and that every epoch of salvation history has its angelic attendants. It also teaches that the angel is the minister of the Word, never a rival to it — every angelic message points to Christ, never to itself.

“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.” — Galatians 1:8

The Church therefore receives no new revelation on the word of an angel. The canon is closed, and the true angels of God are content to point always to the Son. This same ministry of the word extends into the life of the Church: in the Book of Revelation, God sends messages through angels to seven churches, each carrying a word of correction, rebuke, or encouragement, aimed always at the growth of the people's faith. This is the pattern of angelic ministry in every age — to protect and strengthen the faith of God's people through the Word rightly delivered.

The Ministry of the Angels: Guardians of the Faithful

A second great office of the angels is guardianship. The Lord Himself, when warning His disciples against despising the little ones, spoke a sentence that the Church has treasured above every private revelation:

“Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.” — Matthew 18:10

From this word, and from the testimony of Acts 12 — where the disciples, hearing that Peter is at the gate, say “It is his angel” — the Church has confessed that every soul has a guardian angel from birth, even though this has never been settled by dogmatic definition; it is, rather, the constant mind of the Church. St. Jerome expresses this common conviction memorably: “How great the dignity of the soul, since each one has from his birth an angel commissioned to guard it” (Commentary on Matthew, Book II, on 18:10). Not every Father framed the teaching the same way: St. Basil, in his Homily on Psalm 43, held the narrower view that this privilege belongs especially to Christians rather than to every soul without exception — a reminder that this particular point, while widely held, was not stated with

perfect uniformity across the Fathers. This guardianship falls, fittingly, to the order nearest to man in the ninefold hierarchy already described — the order called simply “Angels” — so that the rank nearest to us in the heavenly host is also nearest to us in office.

“The Angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them.” — Psalm 34:7

“For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.” — Psalm 91:11-12

Scripture and the life of the saints supply this teaching with vivid illustration. At the pool of Bethesda, the sick waited every year for an angel to stir the water, trusting in the healing power God worked through it (John 5:1-4). Lot is drawn out of Sodom by the hand of angels. Daniel is preserved in the lions' den because his angel shuts their mouths. When Elisha's servant Gehazi saw the city of Dothan surrounded by an enemy army and was afraid, Elisha told him, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them,” and prayed that the servant's eyes be opened — and Gehazi saw the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire around Elisha (2 Kings 6:15-17). The Patriarch Jacob, blessing the sons of Joseph, speaks of “the Angel who has redeemed me from all evil” (Genesis 48:16) — a fitting testimony from a man whose life had been marked by betrayal, slavery, imprisonment, and long years of being forgotten before he rose to stand at Pharaoh's right hand. Joseph could look back over that entire history and recognize the constant, quiet protection of an angel at his side.

The guardianship of angels is both protective and formative — they do not merely shield the faithful from harm but form them toward virtue, precisely as a guardian is charged with the whole well-being of the one entrusted to their care. This is why the Church, in her daily prayers, concludes by asking: “Surround us by Your holy angels, that, by their camp, we may be guarded and guided.” And because we who study the angels are called also to resemble them, this same work of guarding becomes our own responsibility toward those weaker than ourselves — most immediately, our own children. In the commandment given to parents at baptism, the Church charges them to guard their children from unsuitable places and influences. To guard the young in this way is itself an angelic work, and it belongs to every servant.

Angels as Warriors

The angels are also warriors, and this office belongs particularly to Michael, the archangel who leads the armies of heaven against the dragon and his angels (Revelation 12:7). The traditional icon of Michael standing over the defeated devil expresses this truth, but Scripture and tradition also show him and the angelic host contending against armies and nations, not merely against the devil alone. It is for this reason that the Church commemorates the Archangel Michael on the twelfth day of every Coptic month.

This same warrior ministry protects what is holy. In the Liturgy, an angel of the sacrifice attends the altar from the moment of the offering, guarding the sanctity of what is being consecrated until it is presented before God.

The account of Elisha and Gehazi, already mentioned above, belongs equally to this theme: the servant saw only the visible army surrounding them, but Elisha, aware of the greater and unseen reality, could say with confidence, “those who are with us are more than those who are with them” (2 Kings 6:16). The Book of Judith gives the same confidence: “As the Lord lives, His angel has been my keeper” (Judith 13:20).

For the servant, the lesson is one of steadiness rather than fear. Every believer has a guardian angel who stands ready to contend on their behalf, particularly in the moment of temptation. The Christian who is tempted toward sin, or afraid before it, is not fighting alone; the same host that fought for Elisha and for Judith surrounds every soul that fears the Lord.

The Angels in the Divine Liturgy

The sharpest lesson in angelology is not found in a book but in the Liturgy. When the veil of the sanctuary is drawn and the deacon cries “Stand in awe,” the Church is reminded that she does not stand alone before the altar. The anaphora lifts the congregation to the scene of Isaiah's vision; the Sanctus is the Cherubic and Seraphic hymn, and the congregation is invited to join its voice to theirs — “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts.” The censer is offered for the living and the departed, and in the fraction of the Liturgy of St. Basil the priest prays that the sacrifice may ascend “upon Your rational altar in heaven” by the hand of the angel of the sacrifice.

Every part of the Eucharistic building witnesses to this. The Cherubim are carved above the ark of the altar; the curtain of the sanctuary recalls the cherubic embroidery on the tabernacle curtain (Exodus 26:31); the icon of the Archangel Michael stands in every Coptic church because Michael is the prince of the heavenly host and the guardian of the Church. On the twelfth day of every Coptic month the Church commemorates the Archangel Michael, and on the twenty-second day the Archangel Gabriel; the Feast of the Four Incorporeal Creatures is kept on Hatour 8, and the whole host is named together in the Doxology of the Angels sung at the Midnight Praise.

A servant who prepares children for their first confession and communion, or who stands at the pulpit to preach, does well to remember this architecture. The church building is a theology in stone and wood; it teaches the faithful that the Liturgy on earth is the Liturgy in heaven, and that they have come up, in Christ, to an innumerable company of angels.

The Archangels Named in Scripture and Tradition

Scripture names two archangels directly. Michael is named in the Book of Daniel as the great prince who stands for the people of God (Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1), in the Epistle of Jude as the one who disputed with the devil about the body of Moses (Jude 9), and in the Apocalypse as the leader of the

angelic army that casts down the dragon (Revelation 12:7). His name means “Who is like God?” — a cry of warfare against every idolatry.

Gabriel is named as the angel of the Annunciation — to Daniel (Daniel 8:16; 9:21), to Zacharias (Luke 1:19), and to the Theotokos (Luke 1:26). His name means “God is my strength.” The Church sings of him as the minister of the Incarnation, for it was by his voice that the consent of Mary sounded in the world.

The Book of Tobit names Raphael, “the medicine of God,” who walks with Tobias and heals the eyes of Tobit (Tobit 12:15). The Coptic tradition, reading the vision of the seven angels who stand before the throne (Revelation 8:2) together with Tobit 12:15, also names Suriel, Sedakiel, Sarathiel, and Ananiel; and the Four Incorporeal Creatures who surround the throne in Ezekiel and the Apocalypse — the Living Creatures with the faces of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle — are commemorated together as the chief witnesses of the Lamb.

The Fallen Angels

The Church confesses with equal firmness that there are fallen angels. They are not eternal enemies of God — for there is no dualism in Christian theology — but creatures who, having been made good, abused the freedom given them and fell irretrievably from grace. Our Lord speaks of them plainly:

“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” — Luke 10:18

St. Peter writes of “the angels who sinned,” whom God “cast down to hell and delivered into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment” (2 Peter 2:4), and St. Jude speaks of “the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode” (Jude 6). The Apocalypse names “the great dragon, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan,” and his angels (Revelation 12:9).

Three truths safeguard the believer here. First, the devil is a creature — mighty, but made; fearful, but defeated. Second, his fall is final — unlike man, the fallen angel is not offered a path of repentance, for he sinned with the whole depth of his nature and without the mitigation of ignorance or weakness. Third, his power is permitted, not sovereign; he can tempt but cannot compel, he can accuse but cannot condemn, he can rage but cannot win. In the Liturgy, the priest breathes upon the water at Baptism and prays, “Every adverse power, every assault of the devil, be trampled under the feet of Your servant,” and the child comes up out of the font clothed with Christ. This is the father’s weapon and the servant’s confidence.

How the Servant Teaches the Angels to the Faithful

Knowing these things, the servant has a simple and sober catechesis to give.

We teach children that they are not alone — that a good angel walks with them by the gift of God, and that they may speak to God with the confidence of a child whose hand is held.

We teach that angels are creatures, not gods; we venerate them as we venerate the saints, but we worship God alone. We do not make angels into deities, and we do not make them into mascots.

We teach that angels are messengers of God — therefore we listen for their message in the Word of God read and preached, and we do not chase after private visions or sensational encounters. The true angel preaches Christ.

We teach that every Divine Liturgy is a meeting with the angels — and we prepare the children to sing the Thrice-Holy with reverence, knowing whose song they are joining.

We teach that the devil is real but defeated — we do not minimize him, lest we be caught off guard, and we do not magnify him, lest we forget the victory of the Cross.

We teach the names of the Archangels and the feasts of the Church — so that the catechumen grows up feeling at home in the household of heaven.

The true mark of the spiritual child is that he feels comfortable in the company of the saints and the angels — they are his family. This is the sort of formation the servant is called to give.



Review Questions

1. Angels are messengers of God, True or False? (A: True)
2. Which angels are the closest to God? (A: The Thrones, Cherubim and seraphim, these are the ones that are closest to God. They stand in closest proximity to God.)
3. What do the Dominions dominate over? (A: The Dominions dominate the rest of the angels. They send down power for prudent governing and wise management to authorities.)
4. What do the Principalities do? (A: The Principalities direct the lower angels. They are entrusted with the management of the universe and the keeping of all the kingdoms and principedoms, of lands and all peoples, races and nations.)
5. What are the roles of the Archangels? (A: The Archangels are the heralds of good news, they reveal prophecies, knowledge, and understanding of God's will which they receive from the higher orders of angels and announce to the lower order.)
6. What do the rest of the Angels do? (The Angels are the lowest of all the orders and the closest to man. They announce the lesser mysteries and intentions of God and teach people to live virtuously and righteous before God.)
7. Why is The Cherubim full of eyes? (A: Their eyes are focused, not on us, but on God. Full of eyes, looking at God! They are soaking in everything! Looking at Him, not missing a single detail.)

The Intercession of the Saints

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Having confessed the angels, we now turn to our elder brethren in the faith — the saints who, having completed the course and finished the race, now stand before the throne and pray for us who are still on the way. The doctrine of the intercession of the saints is one of the most beloved convictions of the Orthodox Church and one of the most misunderstood by those outside the communion. The servant who has grasped this lesson will have a new confidence in his own prayer, a new affection for his spiritual fathers, a new reverence in the house of God, and a ready answer for the Protestant brother who asks, in all sincerity, why we "pray to the saints." Our purpose in this lesson is not polemic but confession. We are not defending ourselves; we are opening a door into a room that is full of light.

Growing up in a Church where many hymns, icons, church names, and censers invoke the saints; we live in a culture in which the saints have been stripped from the imagination of Western Christianity. Meeting Protestant friends at university, Evangelical co-workers in the office, and perhaps even Coptic brethren who have absorbed the assumptions of a foreign theology, is inevitable.

We are not here to spend pages refuting objections — those will be answered, but briefly and toward the end. We are here first to see, to rejoice, to confess. The communion of saints is an article of the Creed; let us teach it with the joy that an article of the Creed deserves.

The Scriptural Foundation — One Household, Living and Departed

The first word must be Scripture's. The God of the Bible is not the God of abstractions; He is a God with a family. And that family, the Apostle teaches, is not broken by death.

"For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named." Ephesians 3:14-15

Heaven and earth. One family. Named from one Father. The Apostle does not say "the family in heaven" and "the family on earth" as though there were two companies; he says "the whole family," passing through heaven and earth as a single, continuous household. This is the grammar of the communion of saints.

"But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant." Hebrews 12:22-24

The Apostle writes in the perfect tense — you have come. It is not something reserved for the hour of death; it is the present condition of every baptized Christian. At this moment, as the Pre-Servant reads

this lesson, he has already come to the spirits of just men made perfect. The question is not whether we have access to the saints but whether we will exercise the access that baptism has already opened.

What the Saints Do — Three Kinds of Intercession

The Coptic tradition, following the Fathers and summarized with characteristic clarity by H.H. Pope Shenouda III, distinguishes three kinds of intercession:

- Propitiatory intercession: The intercession that reconciles God and man by the offering of a sufficient ransom. This is proper to the Lord Jesus Christ alone, and no saint can share in it.
- Entreating intercession: The intercession of prayer, the asking of favor on behalf of another. This belongs to every Christian, angel, and saint, and is commanded as an act of love.
- Intercession of the poor: The intercession of those whom we serve, whose gratitude calls down the mercy of God upon the one who has shown them mercy.

When we deny to the saints the first kind of intercession we refuse to insult the Cross. When we confess in them the second and third kinds we receive what Scripture plainly teaches. Every objection falls once the distinction is held clearly in mind.

Propitiatory Intercession: Christ Alone

The Apostle writes without qualification:

“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all.” 1 Timothy 2:5-6

This verse is often raised as an objection to our teaching. In fact it is its foundation. The Apostle is not speaking of prayer in general — he has just, in verse 1, commanded "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men" — he is speaking of the ransom. There is one Mediator because there is one Ransom. No saint paid the price; therefore no saint mediates in this sense. The blood of Christ is unique, sufficient, and unshareable.

The same Apostle John who calls Christ "the propitiation for our sins" in 1 John 2:2 also calls Him in the preceding verse "our Advocate with the Father" — paraclete — and St. John the Baptist calls Him "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The saints in the Apocalypse are those who have "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 7:14) — not in their own blood. The Coptic liturgy sings this night and day: every absolution, every exhortation, every prayer is offered "through Jesus Christ our Lord." No saint, no angel, no Mother of God ever displaces the Mediator. Their intercession is not a rival to His; it is the echo of His.

“If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.” 1 John 2:1-2

Entreating Intercession: The Common Inheritance of the Faithful

When a Christian asks his brother to pray for him, he is not rivaling the one Mediator; he is obeying the New Testament. The Apostle Paul asks again and again that prayer be made for him.

“Brethren, pray for us.” 1 Thessalonians 5:25

“Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men” 1 Timothy 2:1

“Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me.” Romans 15:30

If it is licit — indeed commanded — to ask for the prayers of a brother standing beside me on earth, how much more licit is it to ask for the prayers of a brother who stands before the throne? The saint is not less a brother because he has passed into the nearer presence of God; he is more a brother, because death, as St. Cyprian teaches, does not dissolve the bonds of the Body of Christ — it strengthens them.

Scripture itself shows us the saints interceding. In the Old Covenant Abraham pleads with God for Sodom (Genesis 18:22-33) and the Lord answers him. Moses stands in the breach for Israel after the golden calf and the Lord relents (Exodus 32:11-14). Job is told to pray for his three friends, “for I will accept him” (Job 42:7-8). Samuel says, “Far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you” (1 Samuel 12:23). Elisha prays and the dead child is raised (2 Kings 4:32-35). In the New Covenant the Apostles command intercession, the Church prays for Peter in prison (Acts 12:5), the elders are summoned to anoint and pray for the sick (James 5:14-16). “The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much,” writes James — and the most righteous man who prayed, he continues, was Elijah (James 5:17). If the righteous on earth may pray for us with great effect, the righteous who are perfected cannot pray with less.

Do the Departed Saints Know Us? Do They Hear Our Prayers?

This is the point at which the Protestant objection gathers. It is raised as though the Bible knew nothing of it. In fact the Bible is full of it.

*“There is joy **in the presence of the angels of God** over one sinner who repents.”* Luke 15:10

The angels, then, know when a sinner on earth repents. If knowledge reaches the angelic host, it reaches the saints also, for the Lord says of the resurrection that “they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven” (Matthew 22:30). What the angels know, the perfected know — this is the consistent reading of the Fathers.

“They cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Revelation 6:10

The souls under the altar know what is happening on earth — they know that their blood has not yet been avenged, they know that persecutions continue, and they bring their knowledge to God as prayer. They are not asleep; they are alert, they are conscious, they are praying.

“Now the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand.” Revelation 8:4

The prayers of the saints are offered in heaven. They are held in golden bowls — the vials of Revelation 5:8 — and they ascend with the smoke of the incense. The whole of the heavenly Liturgy is a great intercession offered on our behalf.

St. Paul writes, “Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Our knowledge grows when we pass into the immediate presence of God; it does not shrink. And in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) Abraham is shown to remember the earthly condition of both men. The departed saints know, and they remember, and they pray.

God Honors Those Who Honor Him

The doctrine of the intercession of the saints rests, at its deepest, on a principle repeated everywhere in Scripture: God honors those who honor Him. “Those who honor Me I will honor,” the Lord says to Eli (1 Samuel 2:30). And this honor does not cease at death; it flowers at death.

Consider the case of the Prophet Elisha. He was a man mighty in God — he did not die a mighty death, he died in his bed — and yet the Scripture records:

“So it was, as they were burying a man, that suddenly they spied a band of raiders; and they put the man in the tomb of Elisha; and when the man was let down and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet.” 2 Kings 13:21

A dead man, on touching the bones of a dead prophet, was restored to life. The bones of the saint were holy after the saint had passed, and the power of God flowed through them. The Church did not invent the veneration of relics; the Holy Spirit wrote it into the book of Kings. The same pattern returns in the New Covenant — at Ephesus “handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his [Paul's] body to the sick, and the diseases left them” (Acts 19:12); at Jerusalem “they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them” (Acts 5:15). The shadow of the saint was medicinal; the very cloth of the saint was healing. God honors those who honor Him, and the honor extends to the saint's body, to the saint's belongings, to the saint's shadow — how much more to the saint's prayer.

“If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor.” John 12:26

The Witness of the Church — Liturgy, Fathers, and Icons

The Church has never separated the doctrine of the intercession of the saints from her worship. In the anaphora of St. Basil, after the consecration of the Holy Mysteries, the priest prays: "Most of all, the pure, full of glory, ever-Virgin Saint Mary,... Saint John the Forerunner, Saint Stephen the Protomartyr, our father St. Mark the Evangelist, ... and all the choirs of the Saints." The Church names them; she calls them by name, one by one, because they are a family, and the faithful are drawn into their company. The Coptic hymns "Ari Epresvevin" — "Intercede on our behalf" — addressed to the Theotokos, and "Tobh Emepchoice" — "Ask the Lord on our behalf" — addressed to the saints, are the daily speech of the faithful.

The Fathers speak with one voice. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, explaining the Liturgy to the newly baptized, says that we commemorate the Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, and Martyrs, "that God, at their prayers and intercessions, would receive our petition." St. John Chrysostom calls the saints "our unfailing advocates." St. Augustine, writing in the West, says that the martyrs do intercede, but that they intercede through Christ and in Christ. St. Gregory of Nyssa, preaching on St. Theodore the Tyro, says that at the grave of the saint "those who come approach as to the living, alive, and this is no invention of the imagination." The doctrine is catholic — common to all the ancient Churches of both East and West — and it is as old as the second century, when the Acts of the Martyrs began to record the prayers of the persecuted Church at the tombs of her confessors.

The icons of the saints are the visible face of this doctrine. An icon is not an imagination; it is a window. The icon of the saint in the church is the Church's confession that this brother is alive, that he is present, that his face may be turned toward us even now. The kiss given to the icon, the candle lit before it, the prayer offered in its presence — none of these is worship; all of them are the family's greeting of an elder brother who stands in the next room.

The Intercession of the Poor

Pope Shenouda III, following the Fathers, reminds us of the third kind of intercession, often forgotten: the intercession of the poor. When the Christian feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, visits the sick, and welcomes the stranger, the gratitude of those he has served rises to the throne of God as a prayer, and the mercy of God descends upon his head.

"Then the King will say to those on His right hand, Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." Matthew 25:34,40

This is an intercession that any Christian may ask for now. The poor whom we serve become, in the economy of grace, our intercessors. St. John Chrysostom, in his preaching at Antioch and Constantinople, makes this point with startling insistence: if you wish to have powerful advocates on the day of judgment, clothe the poor, for the garments you give them will plead for you. The pastoral application for the Sunday school is immediate. Teach the children that the child they help, the elderly neighbor they visit, the orphan they remember in their prayers, is already gathering for them a company of advocates before God.

Why Churches Are Named After Saints

The Orthodox faithful often give the names of saints to their churches, their monasteries, their schools, even their children. This practice has been misunderstood as an importation from paganism; it is in fact a direct inheritance from the Bible itself.

The Temple of Solomon was called "the house which I have built for My name" (1 Kings 8:44) — and yet it was called "the house of Solomon" as well (2 Chronicles 7:11). The Torah is called "the Law of the LORD" and also "the Law of Moses" (Joshua 8:31). The prophetic books are called the word of the Lord and also "the words of Jeremiah" (Jeremiah 1:1). The Holy City is called "the City of God" and also "the City of David." There is no rivalry in this; there is a simple logic. The instrument of the Holy One is honored with the name of the Holy One, and the name of the Holy One is attached to His instrument. So too the Apocalypse: "Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Revelation 21:14). The New Jerusalem itself bears the names of the saints.

When a Coptic village calls its church "the Church of St. Mina" or "the Church of St. Mark," it is doing nothing more than writing into the name of its temple the names that the Holy Spirit wrote into the foundations of the heavenly city.

A Pastoral Answer to the Brother Who Objects

Let the Pre-Servant learn a short and charitable answer to give to the Protestant brother who asks, in good faith, why we "pray to the saints." Three sentences, in a kind voice, will almost always suffice.

- We do not pray TO the saints as we pray to God — we ask them to pray WITH us, as you would ask your friend or your grandmother to pray for you.
- The Bible says that Christians have already come to the spirits of just men made perfect (Hebrews 12:22-24), that the prayers of the saints rise as incense before God (Revelation 5:8; 8:3-4), and that the souls under the altar pray for justice on the earth (Revelation 6:10) — so our practice is a reading of Scripture, not an addition to it.
- There is one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5) — and for that very reason we can boldly ask the whole family in heaven and earth to pray with us through Him, because it is His one Mediation that binds the whole family into one prayer.

The servant must speak these sentences without heat. The brother asking is not an enemy; he is often a sincere Christian who has inherited a defective catechesis. The best apologetic in such a conversation is not an argument but an invitation — come, visit a Coptic Divine Liturgy, hear the names read, see the icons venerated, watch the censer pass, and ask yourself whether the Christianity of the first four centuries looks more like this or more like a bare auditorium with a single teacher at the front.

How to Teach the Intercession of the Saints

The catechesis for children is simple, joyful, and structured.

- Teach them the names of the saints of our Church — St. Mark, St. Athanasius, St. Antony, St. Pachomius, St. Macarius, St. Mina, St. George, St. Demiana, St. Rebecca, St. Moses the Black — and tell their stories with the zest of family history.
- Teach them the hymns — "Ari Epresvevin" to the Theotokos and "Tobh Emepchoice" to the saints — and explain, line by line, what the words mean.
- Teach them to ask for a saint's prayers in a direct, childlike voice, and to feel no embarrassment in doing so.
- Teach them to venerate the icons without fearing that they are committing idolatry — show them the distinction between proskynesis and latreia in words a child can hold.
- Teach them to serve the poor, and explain that by doing so they are building for themselves a company of intercessors who will pray for them for the rest of their lives and into eternity.
- Teach them, above all, that they belong to a family larger than the one that lives in their neighborhood — a family that is partly visible and partly invisible, partly pilgrim and partly perfected, but wholly one in Christ.

The Warmth of the One Household

The doctrine of the intercession of the saints is not an appendix to the Christian faith; it is the warmth of the house. There is one God; there is one Mediator between God and men; there is one Church; and within that one Church, at any given moment of the Liturgy, the living are joined to the perfected in a single communion of praise and of prayer. The saints are not dead; they are most alive. They are not distant; they have been made near. They do not compete with Christ; they stand only because He stands for them. They pray for us with an undistracted attention that our earthly intercessors cannot yet attain, and their prayer is effective because it is offered in Him who is the effectiveness of every prayer.

The servant of the Pre-Servants class should leave this lesson with a settled warmth in his heart. He has a family. That family is larger than his parish, larger than his diocese, larger than his generation. It is the whole household in heaven and on earth, named from one Father. And when he kneels tonight to pray, he is not alone; his voice is added to a chorus that has been singing since the Apostle Stephen first saw the heavens opened. Let him teach his children this joy, and let him teach it with confidence.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." Hebrews 12:1



Review Questions

1. Which saint(s) do you intercede in? (A: N/A)
2. True or false. The churches named after saints are dedicated to them. (A: False)
3. What are instances of God honoring his saints by giving them gifts, etc? (A: The dead bones of Elisha the Prophet raised the dead, the handkerchiefs of St. Paul healed the sick and cast out demons, and the shadow of St. Peter healed the sick.)
4. Name a biblical example of intercession. (Sample A: Moses interceding for his people to the Lord.)
5. What do the relics represent? (A: They are not a form of idolatry, but rather a temple for the Holy Spirit.)

Mariology

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Mariology is the branch of dogmatic theology that studies St. Mary — who she is, what the Church confesses about her, and why. Before we go further, it's worth asking yourself a plain question: what do you actually believe about the Virgin Mary, and where did that belief come from? Most servants have absorbed a mix of things — some from the Liturgy, some from Sunday School, some from conversations with friends of other traditions — without ever sorting out which parts belong to the faith once delivered to the saints and which parts are misunderstanding on one side or another. That is the work of this lesson. We will look at Mariology across the whole spectrum of Christian teaching, so that you can explain clearly what the Coptic Orthodox Church believes about St. Mary, why she believes it, and how that differs from what other Christians believe.

What Dogma and Dogmatic Theology Mean

Two words need defining before we can go anywhere: dogma and dogmatic theology. A dogma is a solemn, formal definition of one of the Church's doctrines — a boundary line the Church draws to protect the truth against a specific error. Dogma exists to guard orthodoxy against pagan or heretical teaching, and once the Church has defined a dogma, it does not develop or change; it is settled, black and white. Dogmatic theology, in turn, is the ordered study of God's revelation of Himself to man. St. Augustine described it simply as "rational discussion respecting the deity." Break the word theology itself into its two Greek roots and you get exactly that: *theos*, God, and *logos*, word or reasoned account — the reasoned account of God.

Mariology takes its place inside this family of studies. The table below lays these branches out side by side. Each of these disciplines exists to reveal more of Christ through an independent angle of study, and Mariology is no exception. Its purpose is to connect Scripture, Tradition, and the teaching of the Church concerning St. Mary.

Type	Definition
Christology	The Person of Christ
Pneumatology	The Person of the Holy Spirit
Soteriology	The study of salvation
Ecclesiology	The nature of the Church
Eschatology	The end of times
Trinitarianism (Theology Proper)	God's attributes
Mariology	St. Mary

Angelology	The nature of angels and demons
Anthropology	The purpose and nature of humanity
Hamartiology	The nature, origin, and effect of sin
Bibliology	The nature, canon, and purpose of Scripture

Mariology is not an independent dogma floating above Christology. Rightly understood, it is Christology seen from below — the Incarnation traced through the door by which it entered the world. Every title given to the Virgin is a title given to protect the truth about her Son. Every feast of the Theotokos is, beneath the surface, a feast of the Lord. The Church has never venerated the Virgin as a goddess, has never prayed to her as to the Father, and has never made her a substitute for Christ. What she has done, continually and without embarrassment, is call her by the name the Holy Spirit gave her through the mouth of Elizabeth — "the mother of my Lord" (Luke 1:43) — and from that one sentence all the rest follows.

A Timeline of the Councils: Why History Matters Here

You will hear Mariology more clearly if you hold in mind the map of church history through which the doctrine passed. The Church did not invent the teaching about St. Mary; she defended it, when it came under attack, with the same resolve she used to defend the Trinity and the Incarnation. The table below traces the line from Pentecost through the councils to the divisions of later centuries, and shows what each moment meant for the Church's confession about St. Mary.

Year	Event	Mariological Significance
AD 33	Pentecost	The Theotokos stands in the upper room with the Apostles (Acts 1:14); the Church's life begins with her at its center.
AD 325	First Council of Nicea	The Son is confessed homoousios with the Father; the ground is laid for the right confession of His mother as Theotokos.
AD 381	First Council of Constantinople	The divinity of the Holy Spirit and the full doctrine of the Trinity are confirmed; the Creed as we pray it is completed.
AD 431	Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus	Against Nestorius, the Church under St. Cyril of Alexandria confesses the Blessed Virgin as Theotokos — Mother of God.
AD 451	Council of Chalcedon	The Oriental Orthodox Churches did not receive the Chalcedonian formula; we continue to confess the one incarnate nature of the Word of God after the mind of St. Cyril.

AD 1054	The Great Schism	The separation of the Roman and the Eastern Orthodox; Coptic Orthodoxy is already nearly 600 years outside the Chalcedonian communion but preserves an ancient and unbroken Mariology.
AD 1517	The Reformation	Mariology becomes, in parts of Western Christianity, a casualty of reaction against late-medieval accretions; the Coptic Church, untouched by this history, keeps the Mariology of Ephesus intact.

As the table shows, the Coptic Church's confession of the Theotokos is not a late or provincial opinion. It was settled in 431, nearly six centuries before the schism that separated Rome from Constantinople, and more than a thousand years before any Reformer picked up a pen. When we confess the Theotokos, we are confessing a doctrine of the undivided Church — older than the papal claims that later divided East from West, and older still than the disputes that later divided West from West.

The Council of Ephesus and the Title Theotokos

The heart of Mariology was forged in the controversy of the fifth century. Nestorius, Archbishop of Constantinople, taught that the Virgin should be called Christotokos — Christ-bearer — but not Theotokos, God-bearer. Nestorius did not deny that Jesus was divine outright; his argument was subtler. He held that God the Son existed eternally before Mary, that Jesus took his divinity from the Father and his humanity from his mother, and that calling her "Mother of God" confused the two and implied that the divine nature itself had a beginning in her womb. Nestorius believed no real union of the human and divine was possible in one Person: if it occurred, he reasoned, Christ would have to grow, mature, suffer, and die in ways he thought God could not do. So he preferred Christotokos, insisting he was defending sound Christology, not degrading the Virgin.

St. Cyril of Alexandria answered him, and his answer is the key that unlocks the whole doctrine. The question, St. Cyril said, is not whether the divine nature had a beginning from Mary — it did not. The question is who was born of Mary. A mother does not give birth to a nature; she gives birth to a person. If the one born of the Virgin is a divine Person — the eternal Word — then the one who bore Him is the mother of that Person, and that Person is God. Therefore she is rightly called Theotokos.

We confess that the only-begotten Word of God, begotten of the same substance of the Father, the true God from true God, the light from the light, through whom all things were made in heaven and earth, for our salvation came down and emptied Himself, was incarnate and was made man; that is to say, He took flesh from the holy Virgin, and made it His own from the womb, and subjected Himself as we to birth, and came forth a man from a woman. — St. Cyril of Alexandria, Second Letter to Nestorius

The First Council of Ephesus in 431 received St. Cyril's letters, condemned the teaching of Nestorius, and confessed the Blessed Virgin Theotokos. When the news reached the streets of Ephesus, the people of the city — who had prayed and fasted all day for the safe outcome of the council — carried the bishops on their shoulders through the city by torchlight, crying "Theotokos! Theotokos!" It

remains one of the great moments in Christian history, and the Coptic Church was at its center: St. Cyril, our twenty-fourth Patriarch of Alexandria, is remembered as the Seal of the Fathers, and his Christology is our Christology.

Ask yourself what is actually at stake in Christotokos versus Theotokos. It sounds, at first hearing, like a technical dispute over a compound noun. It is not. If the Church allows that Mary bore only a man later joined to God, then the union of God and man in Christ becomes something added on rather than something real from the first moment of the Incarnation — and if that union is not real and total, our salvation is not real and total either. Nestorius's error mattered because Christology and soteriology stand or fall together. This is also why the Council of Ephesus approved, in the same period, the creation of icons bearing the images of the Virgin and Child; devotion to Mary was already widespread, visible in the fresco depictions of mother and child in the Roman catacombs, but Ephesus gave it a settled theological foundation. The early Fathers saw Mary as the new Eve who said "yes" to God as the first Eve had said no, and understood her as a compassionate intercessor standing between suffering humanity and her Son, who is King and Judge. Every time the Coptic Church prays the Creed and confesses that the Lord "came down from the heavens and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man," she is reciting the fruit of Ephesus.

The Scriptural Witness to the Theotokos

The title Theotokos is not a late accretion onto a simpler biblical religion. It is a single-word summary of what the Bible itself says about the Virgin Mary.

Then Mary said, Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her. Luke 1:38

The Incarnation begins with her consent. The eternal Son, who could have come in any way and at any moment, waited for the "yes" of one of His creatures — because He was establishing a new covenant, and a covenant requires a free partner.

But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Luke 1:43-44

Elizabeth's word, spoken under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41), is the patristic definition of Theotokos in miniature. "The mother of my Lord" — Kyrios — is Elizabeth's translation of the divine Name. The Church did not invent the title; she preserved it.

For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. Luke 1:48-49

All generations. The Coptic Church's veneration of the Virgin is a fulfillment of her own Spirit-inspired prophecy, not an innovation upon it. A Christianity that does not call her blessed in every generation has, at that point, stepped outside the song of the Magnificat. The rest of the Gospel continues the witness. At Cana, she says to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it" (John 2:5) — her whole

counsel in the Christian life, and the Church has not forgotten it. At the Cross, the Lord gives her to the Beloved Disciple, and in him to the whole Church: "Behold your mother!" (John 19:27). In the Upper Room she is named among the hundred and twenty who await the descent of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). In the Apocalypse the woman clothed with the sun brings forth the Man-Child who is to rule the nations (Revelation 12:1-5). Scripture gives us her portrait from Annunciation to Apocalypse.

The Ever-Virginity of the Mother of God

The Coptic Church confesses, with all the ancient Churches, that St. Mary was a virgin before birth, in birth, and after birth — *semper virgo*, ever-virgin. This is not a devotional flourish; the Scriptures teach it, and the Fathers received it as a matter of course.

Before birth

"How can this be, since I do not know a man?" (Luke 1:34). Her question to Gabriel is hard to explain unless she was already, in her own soul, vowed to virginity. She was betrothed to Joseph but kept the integrity of a consecrated life; this is the sober reading of her question.

In birth

The Fathers read Ezekiel 44:2 — "This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter by it, because the Lord God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut" — as a prophecy of the inviolate womb of the Theotokos, fulfilled in the mystery of Christmas.

After birth

"Woman, behold your son!" — the Lord, from the Cross, entrusts His mother to the Beloved Disciple (John 19:26-27). A Jewish son would not have given his mother to a disciple if she had other sons to care for her. The other "brothers of the Lord" named in the Gospels (Matthew 13:55) are, according to the ancient tradition, either sons of Joseph from a prior marriage or close kinsmen, since in Semitic usage the word for brother covers both cases.

This is not a peripheral devotion. St. Athanasius called her the Ever-Virgin. St. Ambrose called her the New Eve. St. Jerome wrote his treatise *Against Helvidius* in defense of her perpetual virginity — and in another letter left the Church one of its most quoted lines on the subject, that death came through Eve and life through Mary. Even the Reformers Luther and Calvin confessed her perpetual virginity in the sixteenth century. It is only in the last two centuries that large parts of Protestantism have drifted from a teaching held by the undivided Church for over a thousand years.

The New Eve: A Typology Older Than the Creeds

The Fathers read the Bible as a single book whose two Testaments mirror each other. At the center of the first stands the first Eve, whose disobedience helped unmake the world. At the center of the second stands the Second Eve, whose obedience helped remake it. The comparison is not a medieval flourish; it goes back to the middle of the second century, to St. Justin Martyr, who was the first to set Eve and Mary side by side in his *Dialogue with Trypho* around the year 155. St. Irenaeus of Lyons then developed the typology at length a generation later, and St. Jerome carried it forward still further.

And thus also it was that the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith. — St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies III.22.4

Notice what St. Irenaeus does. He takes the Annunciation (Luke 1) and sets it beside the Fall (Genesis 3), and shows that the reversal happened by the obedience of a woman. The first Eve stood at the side of the first Adam; the Second Eve stands at the side of the Second Adam. The first ate from a tree and opened death; the Second Adam hung upon a tree and opened life, and the Second Eve stood beneath that tree (John 19:25). The parallels are deliberate and exact. If you have wondered why the church never tires of praising the Theotokos, this typology is the reason.

The Titles of the Theotokos

The Church has given the Virgin many titles across her hymnology. Each one is a small stanza in the song of her Son.

- Theotokos — Mother of God, the title of Ephesus, our defense against Nestorius.
- Ever-Virgin — semper virgo, her integrity before, in, and after the Incarnation.
- Our Lady — Kyria, the feminine of Kyrios; the mother of the King is the Queen Mother, honored as such in Scripture (1 Kings 2:19; Psalm 45:9).
- The Second Eve — the mother of all the living by grace, as Eve was by nature (Genesis 3:20).
- The Burning Bush — the mother who bore the divine fire without being consumed (Exodus 3:2-4; read by the Fathers as a Marian type).
- The Ark of the Covenant — the vessel in which the Word and the Bread from heaven were carried (Exodus 25; Hebrews 9:4; Revelation 11:19–12:1).
- The Eastern Gate — the gate by which the Lord alone entered (Ezekiel 44:1-3).
- The Ladder of Jacob — the bridge between heaven and earth (Genesis 28:12), sung in the Coptic Theotokia of Monday.
- The Vine — for the true Vine Himself passed through her, and through her the Fruit of Life was given to the world (John 15:1-5).

The Saturday Theotokia and the weekly Psalmody of the Coptic Church preserve an extraordinary treasury of these titles. Every day of the week has its own Theotokia, and together they form a cycle of Marian contemplation stretched across the whole life of the Church — which is worth knowing the next time you hear a title for the Virgin that sounds unfamiliar. It is almost certainly older than you think.

Sharing Christ's Titles Without Sharing His Nature

One question that comes up honestly among both Coptic and non-Coptic Christians is why the Church gives the Virgin titles that Christ also uses of Himself — the vine, the shepherd, the light — without this implying that she competes with Him or shares His divine nature. The Church's own hymns raise the question directly: why do we call the Virgin "the true vine" in the Prayer of the Third Hour — "O Mother of God, you are the true vine bearing the Fruit of Life" — when the Lord Jesus says of Himself, "I am the true Vine and My Father is the vinedresser. I am the vine, you are the branches" (John 15:1,5)?

Giving the title "the true vine" to the Virgin does not contradict the Lord's own title. The Lord is the Vine in one sense, and the Virgin is the vine in another. The Lord is the Vine as the One from whom all of us, the branches, originate; He is the Head and we are members of His Body. The Virgin, according to the Church's hymns, is the vine who bore the Fruit of Life, the Son of God — she is the one through whom that Vine entered the world, and she is the vine that neither grew old nor was cut down by anyone.

This is, in fact, a pattern the Lord Himself established. He says, "I am the good Shepherd" (John 10:11,14), a title David had already given God in the Psalms ("The Lord is my Shepherd," Psalm 23:1) and Ezekiel had likewise used of Him (Ezekiel 34:11-16). Yet the Lord still appoints His children to be shepherds after Him: He tells Peter, "Feed My lambs. Tend My sheep" (John 21:15-16), just as the Lord had said in Jeremiah, "I will give you shepherds according to My heart" (Jeremiah 3:15). The title "shepherd" then became the title of the Apostles' successors, the bishops who "shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28), and St. Peter tells the elders to "shepherd the flock of God which is among you" (1 Peter 5:2). In the same way, the Lord calls Himself "the Light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5), yet tells His disciples, "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14) and "Let your light so shine before men" (Matthew 5:16). The Lord is the absolute Light; His disciples are light only because they derive their light from Him. So it is with the Virgin: she is called Queen and the daughter of the King, not because she rivals Him, but because she is the one who bore Him — which is why the Coptic Church, in her icons of the Virgin, portrays her as a crowned queen at the right hand of the Lord Jesus Christ, glory be to Him.

Veneration, Not Worship

Every servant should be ready to answer a set of honest questions that Sunday School children and inquiring adults alike will eventually ask. Consider a few of the verses that, taken alone, can sound like an exaggeration:

- "At Your right hand stands the Queen" (Psalm 45:9);
- "The royal daughter is all glorious within" (Psalm 45:13);
- "Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all" (Proverbs 31:29).

Is this exaggeration? It is not, once you remember that Scripture elsewhere commands that God Himself "be glorified in His saints" in that Day (2 Thessalonians 1:10) and that glory belongs "to Him... in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations" (Ephesians 3:21). Glory given to a saint, rightly understood, returns to God; it does not compete with Him. This is exactly the pattern of Elizabeth's own greeting to Mary: "But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy" (Luke 1:43-44) — a greeting inspired by the Holy Spirit, honoring Mary precisely because of who she carries.

You should also be ready to sort out a short list of true-or-false questions that surface again and again in catechesis:

- St. Mary is the Mother of Christ (true, and more precisely the Mother of God, as Ephesus confessed);
- the Coptic Orthodox Church worships St. Mary (false — the Church distinguishes worship from honor with real theological precision, discussed below);
- St. Mary was sinless at the birth of Christ in the specific sense claimed by the Immaculate Conception (false, as the next section explains);
- Jesus had brothers and sisters in the sense of other children born to Mary (false, per the Ever-Virginity discussed above); and
- St. Mary can forgive our sins (false — she intercedes and asks on our behalf, but forgiveness belongs to Christ alone).

The precision the Coptic Church actually uses here matters, and it is not a modern invention. Worship — the absolute adoration owed to the Creator by the creature — belongs to the Holy Trinity and to the Holy Trinity alone; the Church has never offered it to Mary, to any saint, or to any angel. What the Church offers the saints and angels is honor and love, the respect due to those in whom God has dwelt and worked. What the Church offers the Theotokos goes further than the honor given to any other saint, precisely because no other saint carries the title "Mother of God" — but it is still honor, not worship, and it still flows toward God rather than competing with Him. The Church refuses to call the Virgin a goddess, just as she refuses to place her above the Son. But she also refuses to call her a mere saint among saints, for she is not: she is the one creature whom the Creator called "Mother," and no other creature, in time or in eternity, bears that title.

A Queen stands at Your right hand in gold from Ophir... The royal daughter is all glorious within the palace; her clothing is woven with gold. Psalm 45:9,13

The Coptic Church has always read the King's daughter of Psalm 45 as a prophecy of the Theotokos: she is the Queen at the right hand of the King, and her glory is the reflection of His.

On Jesus having brothers and sisters

The Fathers of the Church found evidence for Mary's perpetual virginity in the New Testament itself, as already discussed above. Her reply to the angel — "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" (Luke 1:34) — suggests a resolve to remain a virgin even within her betrothal. And when the Lord, from the Cross, entrusts the care of His mother to the beloved disciple (John 19:26-27), the act implies that Mary had no other children to whom she could have been entrusted instead.

The Coptic Church and the Theotokos

The Coptic tradition is, by any honest measure, one of the most Marian of any Christian tradition — and with good reason. The Holy Family spent years of their flight on Egyptian soil, and every step they took from Gaza to Assiut and back again has left behind a shrine and a story that Coptic piety still remembers.

- The month of Kiahk is the great Marian month, when the Church sings the Theotokias of the seven days of the week in cycles through every Saturday evening — the Kiahk Psalmody.

- The Feast of the Annunciation (29 Baramhat) and the Feast of the Nativity (29 Kiahk) form the two poles of our liturgical year.
- The Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos (21 Tobah) — the commemoration of her falling asleep — is kept with abundant Mariology in our hymnology.
- The sixteen feasts of the Virgin in the Coptic calendar mark the stations of her life and her miracles.
- The apparitions of the Theotokos over the Church of Zeitoun in Cairo (beginning April 2, 1968, and continuing over subsequent nights) are received in our Church as a sign of her continued maternal care.
- The Shrine of the Virgin at Mostorod, the Tree of the Virgin at Matariya, Gebel al-Tair, and the Church of the Virgin at Assiut are stations of the Holy Family's flight, and they belong to our catechetical inheritance.

If you grew up in a Coptic Orthodox Sunday School, you inherited a piety in which the Theotokos is felt to be the mother of the house. Teach it without embarrassment, and with the confidence that you are handing on exactly what the Fathers handed to you.

Different Teachings About St. Mary Across the Spectrum

With the Coptic Church's own confession established, we can now set it beside what other Christian traditions teach, so that you can speak to a friend of another tradition with both charity and precision. Five teachings are worth walking through in turn: Theotokos, Perpetual Virginity, the Immaculate Conception, the Intercession of St. Mary, and the Assumption of St. Mary.

Theotokos

As already discussed, Elizabeth calls Mary "the Mother of the Lord" — a phrase that holds together both His divinity and His humanity. When the Lord addresses her as "woman" at the wedding at Cana and again from the Cross, He is not distancing Himself from her; He is speaking with the formal address appropriate to the new relationship being established between the Theotokos and the whole Church. Her motherhood is not limited to the years of His earthly life on earth; she remains, to this day, the one who bore the Son of God, which cannot be undone because it is a fact of history, not merely a title of devotion.

Perpetual Virginity

As set out above, the Coptic Church confesses that St. Mary was a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Christ, till her death. St. Gregory of Nyssa read her question to Gabriel — "How will this be, since I do not know a man?" — as evidence of a vow of virginity already made. The Lord's word from the Cross, "Woman, behold your son!", implies she had no other children to whom He could instead have entrusted her care; had she had other sons, entrusting her to a disciple instead would have been a slight against His own family. There is also a suggestive prophecy in the Old Testament: "This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter by it, because the Lord God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut" (Ezekiel 44:2). This perpetual virginity is exactly what allows the Church to call her the Second Eve — Christ being the Second Adam, Mary the Second Eve — a title

first introduced, as noted earlier, by St. Justin Martyr around the year 155, discussed at length by St. Irenaeus, and carried forward by St. Jerome.

Immaculate Conception — a Catholic-only doctrine

The Immaculate Conception holds that St. Mary herself was conceived free from original sin. This is the one teaching on this list that belongs to the Roman Catholic Church alone; no Orthodox Church, Coptic or otherwise, has ever held it, and it was itself a matter of live debate inside the Catholic Church until the nineteenth century. In 1854, Pope Pius IX proclaimed it *ex cathedra* — that is, with the full weight of papal infallibility as defined in Roman Catholic doctrine — in the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, declaring that Mary, "at the first instant of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin," and that she "was redeemed in a more sublime manner" than the rest of humanity.

The Coptic Church does not follow this teaching, and the reasons are worth understanding rather than merely repeating.

First, Scripture does not support it: Romans 3:23 states plainly that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," and St. Mary herself, far from claiming exemption from this, says in the Magnificat, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47) — the word Savior only makes sense on the lips of someone who needed saving.

Second, even within the Catholic Church, the doctrine has generated its own difficulties: if St. Mary needed to be sinless in order for Christ to be born without sin, one could ask whether her mother must then also have been sinless in order to bear a sinless daughter, and so on backward without end.

Third, the Coptic Church answers the underlying question — how could the Lord be born without original sin from a mother who, like all of us, was under it — directly from the angel's own words to her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). It was the Holy Spirit's overshadowing at the Incarnation itself, not a prior exemption of Mary from original sin, that accounts for the sinlessness of the Child. According to the Scriptures, our Church believes St. Mary was highly favored by God — "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" (Luke 1:28) — and that she, by the power of the Holy Spirit, kept herself pure and holy; that is a real and great grace, but it is not the same claim as freedom from original sin at conception.

To say that St. Mary is the Immaculate Conception, in the end, makes the Cross less necessary for her than for the rest of us, and to that degree it diminishes the very Cross the Magnificat itself glories in.

Intercession of St. Mary

The Coptic Church does not pray to St. Mary as one prays to God; the Church addresses her, and asks for her prayers, in the same way Scripture itself addresses many things that are not God:

- angels ("Bless the Lord, you His angels, who excel in strength, who do His word" — Psalm 103:20-21),

- the created order ("Praise Him, sun and moon... mountains and all hills; fruitful trees and all cedars" — Psalm 148:1-9), and even,
- in the imperative mood of the Psalms, evil spirits commanded to depart (Psalm 6:8-10).

Asking for the prayers of one who is alive in Christ, and whom the whole of Scripture calls blessed, is not foreign to the pattern of biblical address; it carries no implication that she, rather than Christ, saves us. Nothing about her intercession is necessary for salvation in the way faith in Christ is necessary. But in finding glory in the saints, and above all in the greatest of the saints, the Church glorifies God and opens her own eyes to Him through one more window He Himself provided.

Assumption of St. Mary: a shared belief with a distinctly Catholic dogma

Here the picture is more nuanced than it might first appear, and it is worth being precise rather than simply repeating a slogan. The belief that St. Mary's body, and not only her soul, was taken up into heaven at the end of her earthly life is not a Catholic invention; it is an ancient conviction shared across Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Oriental Orthodox Christianity alike, the Coptic Church fully included. The Coptic Synaxarium itself preserves a detailed account, kept every year on 16 Mesore, of St. Mary's falling asleep, her burial at Gethsemane, and the discovery — when the Apostle Thomas asked to see her body — that the tomb was empty, her body already assumed body and soul into heaven, where the Apostles then beheld her "sitting on the right hand of her Son and her Lord, surrounded by the angelic Host," in fulfillment of David's word, "At your right hand stands the queen" (Psalm 45:9). This feast stands alongside the Feast of her Dormition on 21 Tobah, which commemorates her falling asleep itself. In other words: the Coptic Church already believes, and has always believed, that St. Mary's body was taken up to heaven.

What is distinctly Catholic is not the underlying belief but its formal definition as a binding, ex-cathedra dogma. In 1950, Pope Pius XII — a different pope and a different document from the Immaculate Conception of a century earlier — proclaimed the Assumption in the apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*, drawing on 1 Corinthians 15, where St. Paul alludes to Genesis 3:15's prophecy that the seed of the woman will crush Satan's head, reasoning that since Christ rose to fulfill this, the woman who shared His enmity with Satan should share a like end; on Psalm 132, a psalm of the return of the Ark of God to Jerusalem, read as prefiguring Mary as the New Ark taken body and soul into the true Jerusalem; and on Revelation 12:1-2, "that woman clothed with the sun" that St. John the Apostle saw on Patmos.

The Coptic Church has never needed, and has never made, an equivalent juridical proclamation, because the belief was never contested within her the way it eventually was contested in the West; it has simply always been part of her living Synaxarium and her liturgical calendar rather than a matter requiring a formal dogmatic ruling. The difference, then, is not that Copts reject the Assumption while Catholics affirm it; it is that Rome eventually felt the need to legislate what the Coptic Church has always simply sung and kept.

Comparing the Teachings Across Traditions

The table below gives a working summary of where the major Christian traditions stand on these five teachings. Real variation exists within each tradition, especially among Anglicans and within different strands of the Reformation, so treat this as an honest starting map rather than the final word on any individual's belief.

	Perpetual Virginity	Immaculate Conception	Theotokos	Intercession	Assumption
Coptic / Oriental & Eastern Orthodoxy	Yes, dogmatic	No	Yes, dogmatic (Ephesus, 431)	Yes	Yes — Dormition & assumption (feast, not juridical dogma)
Roman Catholicism	Yes, dogmatic	Yes, dogmatic (1854)	Yes, dogmatic	Yes	Yes, dogmatic (1950)
Lutheranism	Luther affirmed it; not binding	No	Yes, per Luther	No	Not dogmatic; varies
Calvinism / Reformed	Calvin affirmed it; not confessional	No	Accepted as a safeguard	No	No
Anglicanism	Historically affirmed; varies today	No	Retained in some liturgy	Varies by wing	Some keep a Dormition feast
Methodism	Wesley affirmed it; not official	No	Affirmed by Wesley	No	No

Answering the Protestant Objection

The sincere Protestant brother often finds Coptic Mariology to be the greatest single obstacle to his understanding of our Church. He has been told that we have "invented" doctrines about her, that we "worship" her, that we put her in the place of Christ. None of this is true, and you should be able to answer him with charity and with precision.

First, on the title Theotokos: we did not invent it. The Holy Spirit, through Elizabeth, said "the mother of my Lord" in the first chapter of Luke. Theotokos is the single Greek word that says what Elizabeth said in three. If your Bible says that Jesus is the Lord God, and that Mary is the mother of Jesus, then the word Theotokos is an inevitable consequence of your own confession.

Second, on the veneration of the Virgin: we do not worship her. Worship belongs to God alone; the honor we give St. Mary, as already discussed, is a different thing entirely, however much higher it stands than the honor we give any other saint. And we invite our brother to consider what he himself would think of a man who loved his father but refused to honor his father's mother. The Christian who despises St. Mary insults Christ, not by theological intent but by the plain logic of the Fifth Commandment.

Third, on asking for her prayers: "All generations will call me blessed." Every generation that fails to do so has, at that moment, stepped outside the Magnificat.

Fourth, on the perpetual virginity: the Reformers held it. The early Church held it. The teaching is older than Protestantism by fifteen hundred years, and those who teach it today are in the company of Luther, Calvin, and every Father of the first ten centuries.

The pastoral posture toward this conversation should be firm but kind. We do not boast; we invite. "Come and see" (John 1:46) was good enough for the Apostles, and it remains the Church's best invitation still.

The Crown of the Book

St. Cyril, our Father among the saints, the Seal of the Fathers, the Pillar of the Faith, closes his Third Letter to Nestorius with a doxology that we make our own. What God has joined in the one Person of the Son, let no man put asunder. What the Spirit revealed to Elizabeth, let the Church confess unto the ages. And what the Magnificat commands, let every servant carry into every class he will ever teach: to call her blessed, and to teach the children of this Church, generation after generation, to do the same.

Hail to you, O Mary, the pure dove, who has borne unto us God the Word. You are the ark, overlaid round about with gold; you are she in whom was contained the Manna, the Bread which came down from heaven. Intercede on our behalf before Christ our God, that He may forgive us our sins. — from the Coptic Hymn of the Theotokos (Kiahk Psalmodia)



Review Questions

1. Nestorianism is one denomination that exists today, what is their belief? (A: It emphasizes the distinction between Christ's human and divine natures, and argued that Mary should be called Christotokos but not Theotokos.)
2. Nestorius' heresy led to conflict with which church father? (A: St. Cyril: the Patriarch of Alexandria)
3. What is one difference between the terms Christokos and Theotokos? (A: Their meanings: the "Mother of Jesus," (Christokos,) and not the "Mother of God," (Theotokos.))
4. True or false? St. Mary is the Mother of Christ. (A: True)
5. True or false? The Coptic orthodox Church worships St. Mary. (A: False)
6. True or false? St. Mary was sinless at the birth of Christ. (A: False)
7. True or false? Jesus had brothers and sisters. (A: True)

8. True or false? St. Mary can forgive our sins. (A: False)
9. How can we be sure of St Mary's virginity? (A: "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" (Lk 1:34))
10. True or false? Calling St Mary the Vine contradicts our Lord's title. (A: False)

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Acknowledgements

The Diocese would like to thank all those who helped in this curriculum. There were collaborators and volunteers from across the globe throughout the US, Canada, and Egypt. May God bless and reward all to those who have labored and prayed for this curriculum.

Providing Feedback

Feedback, suggestions and material may be submitted at suscurriculum@gmail.com.

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