

**Holy Scripture
And
The Traditions of
The Eastern Orthodox Church**

“Sanctify them by your truth; Your Word is truth.”

John 17:17

**A Review of the Foundational Teachings of the Eastern Orthodox
Church**

From Biblical and Historical Perspectives

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Prologue: An Excerpt from Dositej Obradovic¹,
Serbian Author, Philosopher, Orthodox Monk, and the First
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“Oh, my dear Serbian people, do not consider me as someone who merely gives you a coarse rebuke out of malice; rather, for the sake of the living God, let us begin to think more freely and reasonably. How long will we persist in condemnation, affectation, and rationalization? No one can persist in hiding the truth and expect to solve any problems or make any improvements. Indeed, a reasonable and moral person begins first with himself. Examine yourself; judge and condemn yourself, do not absolve yourself if something is wrong with you. If you are wrongly blamed and insulted, time will absolve you. My people, nothing on earth can be more merciful or compassionate than to look at each other and speak to another in justice and truth out of love.

Greeks² like other peoples are just as capable of deception as anyone else, and we have adopted the practice of deception from them. Though both the Serbs and Greeks share the same tendency, yet we Serbs judge the Greeks and despise them. In spite of that, we Serbs consider ourselves as shining as brightly as the sun! So when we are apt to condemn and oppose everyone else, is it not fair that we ourselves should also be judged and despised? This is a logical conclusion.

When the Greeks and the Latins received the doctrines of Christian faith from Christ’s apostles, not one single holy tree was in existence. Neither were there any icons, holy bodies, relics, bones, canons, irmos,³ troparion,⁴ nor kontakion.⁵ Of all such things, the blessed and holy apostles never uttered a single word nor thought even the slightest idea! Now some of our Slavic peoples received Christianity from the Greeks, while others received it from the Latins. When did they receive it? 900 years after the apostles. Let me speak forth knowledge: consider what sorts of concoctions men had dreamt up over the course of 900 years?

¹ Translator’s note: Dositej Obradovic (1739-1811) might have been Serbia’s most famous writer and philosopher. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dositej_Obradovi%C4%87

² Translator’s note: Obradovic considers the “Greeks” to have a special status because they were considered the first members of the Eastern Orthodox Church. “Greeks” also refer to the people who originated the doctrine and practice of the contemporary Eastern Orthodox Church. In contrast, “Latins” refer to contemporary Roman Catholics, not the people of the ancient Roman Empire.

³ Translator’s note: “The irmos is the initial verse of each individual ode in a canon, sung by the choir.” See <http://orthodoxwiki.org/Irmos> .

⁴ Translator’s note: The troparion in the religious music of Eastern Orthodoxy is a short hymn of one or more stanzas. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Troparion> .

⁵ Translator’s note: Another type of hymn in Eastern Orthodoxy. See <http://orthodoxwiki.org/Kontakion> .

Don't they realize that the veneration of the multitude of saints in Eastern Orthodoxy has no leg on which to stand? Why don't they admit that such things were invented six and seven hundred years after Christ the Savior and the apostles?

Christ came to save us people in every generation from every kind of idolatry and veneration of materials and things made by human hands. Yet, people turned everything upside down, so that we must bow down before things made by human hands. And what is more pernicious and worse: they depict Saint Christopher⁶ with the head of a dog, which we are told to venerate. The image of the blessed mother of the Savior is depicted with three hands!⁷ This image is the picture of a monster (God forbid!), an icon which we must venerate. Behold, my brothers, the havoc which superstition and blindness overwhelms and wreaks upon people!

So, if someone were a Christian, he would be a Christian in name only. Whatever that person believes and does stems merely from the actual traditions, beliefs, and deeds of men. This nominal believer cares less about the teachings and commands of the crucified Savior who loved men's souls. Instead, this nominal believer follows that which people invented and added several centuries after Christ.

'That is all well and good! But you know your Serbia, who was never taught how to think on her own. She will hear your novelties and curse you as a heretic.'

Let them speak as they please. I trust that time will show that they are wrong. And do not fear everything they say... And it is time to stop lying to people. Knowing the pure truth and not speaking it, how could I approach God with a clear conscience? Who could rightly say that I am a heretic, when they see clearly that I am speaking of nothing else except of Christ's pure gospel and the teaching of the apostles?

I am introducing no novel doctrines. Rather, the only people who will object [to what I say] are those who reject the holy gospel. 'Do not curse, but bless. Do not forsake God's commandments for man's tradition.' The teachings of the meek and blessed Christ the Savior – this is what I have in mind. So why would someone call me a heretic? From my perspective, here is what I would say: 'As someone born a pure Serb, my brothers, you cannot besmirch or condemn me. Consider what I am telling you, I do not speak on behalf of my own interest; I do not ask you to give me any reward, I seek no compensation. I desire and seek your benefit and reformation.'

⁶ Translator's note: St. Christopher was the patron saint of travelers. Dissension exists as to whether he should have been depicted with the head of a dog. Clearly in Obradovic's time, the Serbian Orthodox portrayed this saint with the head of a dog. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Christopher

⁷ Translator's note: "It is the most important icon of the Serbian Orthodox Church." Serbian Orthodox Municipality of Innsbruck. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trojeru%C4%8Dica>

What do you think, why was Christ crucified and murdered? For no other reason other than he wanted to show and reveal to people pure orthodoxy, not superstition.

So have I really betrayed my law and faith? I have not, nor will I do so as long as I live. But I have learned to think and consider my doctrine and faith more reasonably. The books of scholars have given me the ability to discern true orthodoxy from superstition and pure Gospel teaching from various traditions and speculations invented by men...

You ask me: who am I, and who gave me the right to assume upon myself this magisterial power?! In the midst of the multitudes of Serbia, God ordained for me to be born; being a man of letters, I have been gifted by God with natural abilities to think logically, and I have heard good and wise things from others who have taught me... So who gave me this power? God who commands me to fulfill my duty.”

Dositej Obradovic

Introduction

The prologue contains an excerpt from one of the greatest and most important figures in the history of our (Serbian) nation. This prologue is rich with meaning and content. First and foremost, the author bases his doctrine on the Holy Scriptures. Well before the first translations of the Bible in the Serbian language by Duro Danicic and Vuk Karadzic were available, the great Serbian educator Dositej Obradovic had the opportunity to study the Book of Books. In his work *Life and Adventures*, he described his time in the monastery and sincere desire to fulfill the ideal of holiness as modeled in many of the Eastern Orthodox saints. However, Obradovic grew in experience and maturity. He also obtained a greater knowledge of the Gospel. Later in life, Obradovic left the monastery. He wrote of his sincere desire for the Serbian people to attain the true and authentic knowledge of God through the obedience of the original teachings of Christ and the apostles.

The goal of this book is for the Orthodox peoples to discover the spiritual truths written in the Gospel. Unlike the time when Obradovic lived, we live in an age of literacy. The Holy Scriptures have become one of the most accessible books ever. In the past few decades, millions of copies of the Bible in Serbian language have been printed. However, in many ways, modern Serbs at the beginning of the 21st Century have not changed from their ancestors during the time of Obradovic [over 200 years ago]. The evidence is overwhelming that today's Serb knows virtually nothing about the teachings of Christ and His apostles. In this regard, modern Serbs directly resemble the ignorance of their ancestors in the days of Obradovic.

This is the reason that the Holy Scriptures must be the primary resource for our study. The Holy Scriptures contain the most blessed teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles. Only after recognizing the supremacy of God's Word in forming our understanding can we properly examine other sources of information.

We will also examine literature from various domestic and foreign Eastern Orthodox authors in order to familiarize ourselves with the beliefs shared by over 200 million Orthodox believers worldwide.

Finally, we will also consider sources from credible secular and church historians. These sources will be crucial to giving us verifiable, historical data to help us understand the origin and developments of various teachings and liturgical rites of Eastern Orthodoxy. These include some of the doctrines and rites to which Obradovic alluded in the prologue.

The text of this book will introduce a "novel" concept: the term "evangelical ['Gospel believing'] Christians". Most Serbs have no idea what this term means. Who are these people? What do they believe?

Evangelical Christians have existed throughout the history of the Church and up to today. They are believers who submit to Christ's teachings in the Holy Scriptures in their original meaning.

In my personal opinion, Dositej Obradovic might have been the first evangelical Christian in modern Serbian history. Without doubt, he was the most famous person in the realm of modern Serbia. His written works testify to a faith clearly rooted in the Gospel.

May the Lord bless the Serbian people by allowing them to follow in the footsteps of the famous educator and reach the same conclusion – the truth of the Gospel!

For the glory of the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Ivica Stamenkovic

Holy Scripture and the Traditions of the Eastern Orthodox Church

Let us start our analysis with the reaction of the Russian Orthodox priest Kirill Zayets⁸ to the preaching of evangelical Christians. Their preaching made a deep impact in Russia. He describes his efforts to turn his people back to Eastern Orthodoxy.

Namely, this priest issues a challenge to an evangelical preacher present at that moment with the following words:

“Please allow me to ask you several clear questions and be so kind as to reply to them clearly, without any misleading eloquence... Tell me, have you preserved the great spiritual wealth which the Holy Apostles have given to Christ’s Church, or have you never thought of this? In fact, have you ever heard of this wealth?

[The sectarian remained silent.]

Do you have the priesthood? No? But it has been in the Church from Apostolic times. It was passed on by the apostles, and it is clearly spoken of in that very Holy Bible which you are now holding in your hands.

Have you preserved all the Mysteries (sacraments): baptism, chrismation, repentance (i.e., confession), the Holy Eucharist, marriage, holy orders, and unction? These things were already established in the times of the Apostles and they are spoken of in the holy books of the New Testament.

Do you obey the Holy Gospel by honoring the Mother of God?

Do you have prayerful communion with the Heavenly Church, with the Holy Apostles whose writings are in your hands right now, with the [deceased] saints, martyrs, confessors, and all the righteous?

Do you have prayerful communion with angels? Do you pray to your Guardian Angel?

⁸ Translator’s note: Kirill Zayets was not a priest but also a “missionary” for the Russian Orthodox Church. The context of “missionary” differs from the evangelical meaning of one who shares the Gospel with those who do not know it. Russian Orthodox “missionaries” were appointed by the church authorities in cooperation with the government to monitor, oppose, and suppress religious “sectarians” (including official and unofficial means, ranging from debates and lectures to harsher means including arrests and inciting pogroms). See A.T. Bulgakov, *The Holy Inquisition in Russia* (TITLE).

Apparently, Zayets himself later in life had a colorful history. Amongst other things, he was somehow allowed to continue his “ministry” behind German lines in occupied Pskov during the invasion of Russia in the Second World War. (See Wikipedia)

All this was in the Apostolic Church, and all this remains with us in the Orthodox Church.

Do you have prayerful communion with deceased fathers, mothers, grandparents, and all those who have reposed in the faith? Do you pray for the dead, or have you forgotten about them so that death for you has proven to be stronger than the love of Christ?

Don't you know they prayed for the dead in the Apostolic Church?

You do not honor icons nor do you honor the life-giving Cross of the Lord. And do you sign yourself with the Holy Cross? Do you wear the cross on your breast in accordance with the words of the apostle "*bearing the reproach that he bore*" (Hebrews 13:13)? **All this was known in the Apostolic Church.**

My questions are clear and simple. Answer them. Why are you silent? Well, what is there for you to say when you do not maintain any of this? Can't you see that this is a great spiritual wealth?"⁹

This passage will help us to become acquainted with some of the basic teachings of the Orthodox Church. In his discourse before the Russian Orthodox people, the priest asserted a series of claims that he sincerely purported to be accurate. Enjoying the support of the majority of the crowd, the priest rejoiced and gave thanks to God because of the silence of his religious opponent. Zayets considered his theological argumentation to have overcome the evangelical believer. The priest believed that he vanquished the evangelical to silence and humiliation by the wisdom of his eloquence. Apparently, the evangelical believer was alone in his views and recognized his spiritual error.

Our intent is to examine this information and determine whether all of these beliefs that the priest had mentioned truly existed or not in the Apostolic Church. The term "Apostolic Church" defines precisely what the priest had in mind – the church which existed during the time of the Lord's apostles.

It is well known that we have no written records of the Christian faith during the first twenty years of Christ's church. After this initial period, in the second half of the first century, the apostles and their close associates wrote the gospels and epistles addressed to particular churches or individuals. By the end of the life of the last living apostle, John son of Zebedee, who lived to a ripe old age, completed the last book of Scripture.

These facts surrounding Holy Scripture explain why **the apostles recorded everything necessary for proper spiritual living and growth in the books of the New Testament.** On the

⁹ *The Bible without God, Christianity without the Church, Neo-Protestantism Today and Tomorrow*, 45-7. Author's emphasis. [Translator's note: translation is excerpt from "Missionary Conversations with Protestant Sectarrians" by Rev. Kyril Zaits (spelling?) (New Sarov Press Edition, 1993) on http://www.trueorthodoxy.org/heretics_protestants_missionary_conversations.shtml.]

other hand, the **accusation that the apostles would omit (accidentally or deliberately) the most important spiritual truths** on which the eternal destiny of billions of people hang is **utterly inconceivable**.

Most Christians in the early times of the church were familiar with the gospels and the epistles written by the apostles. Small and large assemblies of people recollected the life of Christ, His teachings, and acts. However, the number of believers and churches multiplied throughout the Roman Empire. Thus, it became necessary for the apostles to record in writing all the spiritual truths that believers had been transmitting orally for decades. Thus, the content of the Gospels and Epistles (the New Testament) contained the message that for years was being preached via the spoken word. It addressed its application to certain churches and individuals in accordance with their spiritual needs.

We must reckon with the irrefutable fact that Holy Scripture is the authoritative source of Christian faith. Only after we recognize the authority of Scripture can we then undergo a proper examination of the foundations for belief in the Orthodox Church.

The Priesthood

Let us commence our examination with the very first argument of the Russian High Priest:

“Do you have the priesthood? No? But it has been in the Church from Apostolic times. It was passed on by the apostles, and it is clearly spoken of in that very Holy Bible which you are now holding in your hands.”

Has the Eastern Orthodox priesthood existed since apostolic times? Do the Holy Scriptures truly and clearly speak of this?

Let us first introduce what the Eastern Orthodox Church believes about this topic:

“The priesthood consists of the following: deacons, elders (priests), and bishops. Bishops have the authority to perform all the sacred mysteries, to teach believers, and to govern the diocese entrusted to their authority by the Church; elders (priests) have the right to perform all of the sacred mysteries except the Sacred mystery of ordination. They are to oversee their parishes ordained to them by the bishop, and deacons are not allowed to perform the sacred ministries on their own. The deacons assist (co-minister) the priests and bishops in the performance of the sacred mysteries. **There are three ranks of priesthood: deacon, elder, and bishop... The ministry of the priesthood in Christ’s Church succeeds the ministry of the apostles.** The holy priesthood is the successor of the apostolic ministry and authority. The priesthood acquired this authority from the

Savior. No one else has the right to carry out such ministry either on earth or in heaven on behalf of Christ's Church.”¹⁰

Thus, the Eastern Orthodox Church believes that Christ's apostles established the clerical hierarchy in the Church.

However, a careful reading of the New Testament reveals that the term “priest” (Greek “hiereus”) is never used to describe the ministry of Christian bishops (overseers), elders (officers), and deacons (assistant ministers). The New Testament gospels, Acts, and Hebrews used the term “priest” only to refer to members of the Jewish clergy in the Old Testament - which involved the ministerial offering of blood sacrifices. For example, Christ the Lord sent several lepers he had cured to the Jewish priests because the God's law to Israel prescribed ritual cleansing for lepers:

*“Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off. And they lifted up their voices and said, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’ So when He saw them, He said to them, ‘Go, show yourselves **to the priests.**’ And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed.”*¹¹

Later, we will examine other New Testament texts that use the word “priest”. As we will see, the term “priest” does not refer to ministers in Christian churches. Rather, “priest” in the Bible refers either to officials in the Jewish temple and religious leaders of the nation of Israel, or else the priests of pagan idolaters:

*“Then Jesus answered and said: ‘A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a certain **priest** came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.’”*¹²

*“And every **priest** stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.”*¹³

*“Then the chief **priests**, the scribes, and the elders of the people assembled at the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and plotted to take Jesus by trickery and kill Him.”*¹⁴

¹⁰ *Doctrine in the Home*, 42. Author's emphasis.

¹¹ Luke 17:12-14. Here is the commandment in the Old Testament: *“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “This shall be the law of the leper for the day of his cleansing: He shall be brought to the priest. And the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall examine him; and indeed, if the leprosy is healed in the leper, ^{then} the priest shall command to take for him who is to be cleansed two living and clean birds, cedar wood, scarlet, and hyssop...”*
Leviticus 14

¹² Luke 10:31.

¹³ Hebrews 10:11.

¹⁴ Matthew 26:3-4.

*“Then the **high priest** tore his clothes, saying, ‘He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy!’”*¹⁵

*“Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, ‘Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.’ And the **high priest** Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.”*¹⁶

*“Then the **priest** of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes.”*¹⁷

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke records that the preaching of the gospel resulted in the conversion of many Jewish priests out of their old religious system into becoming followers of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth:

*“Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great **many of the priests** were obedient to the faith.”*¹⁸

These New Testament verses shed light not only on the use of the word “priest”. Many New Testament texts also reveal the ministry of “bishops” and “overseers” in apostolic times as identical in regard to the level of supervision and care. Scripture teaches that church elders (overseers) minister by watching over the Church’s flock – the same duty as that of overseers or bishops. Luke demonstrates this common ministry in his account of Paul’s meeting with the church leaders (overseers) in Ephesus:

*“From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for **the elders of the church**... Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to shepherd the church of God^l which He purchased with His own blood.”*¹⁹

The original Greek text uses the word “presbuteroi” (overseers) in verse 17. The Serbian language derives the word for presbyter, “overseer”, or “elder”, from the singular case of this Greek word. In verse 28, Paul refers to the same people as “episkopoi” (bishops) as those whom he addressed in verse 17 as “presbuteroi” (overseers). Thus, Paul actually equates the overseers/elders to bishops. Paul’s later epistle to the Philippians sheds further light:

*“Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with **the bishops and deacons**...”*²⁰

In these verses, Paul and Timothy greet all the believers (“*saints*”) in Philippi, including the bishops and deacons (e.g. overseers and ministers).²¹ Surprisingly, Paul omits any mention of

¹⁵ Matthew 26:65.

¹⁶ Acts 23:1-2.

¹⁷ Acts 14:13.

¹⁸ Acts 6:7.

¹⁹ Acts 20:17, 28.

²⁰ Philippians 1:1.

²¹ The ministry of the deacon in the early Church was very different from what the Eastern Orthodox Church defines as deacon ministry. Specifically, the early Church gave deacons the task of “ministry” of distributing humanitarian

“elders” (priests)!²² The modern Eastern Orthodox Church has more “presbyters” or “elders” than did the church in Philippi! Clearly, the reason for omitting “elders” – in fact, other New Testament texts regarding the church also omit this terminology – is that Paul considers their ministries to be identical to that of “overseers”.

It is also significant that Christianity in the first century identified a plurality of bishops/overseers as we see in the two examples of Ephesus and Philippi. Yet in this aspect, the Orthodox Church, which calls itself “Apostolic”, deviates drastically from the early Christian Church. Instead, Eastern Orthodoxy follows the canons of later church councils that expressly forbid the appointment of more than one bishop to a city.²³

Besides the difference with the New Testament structure of leadership in the Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church departs in another way from the teachings of the apostolic church. It is well known that bishops in the Orthodox Church are to be celibate, e.g. they are to be chosen from prominent monks. Contrary to Eastern Orthodoxy, the apostolic church heeded the explicit commandment that church elders (presbyters/bishops) must be married men:

*“A **bishop** then must be blameless, **the husband of one wife**, temperate, sober-minded... one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?)...”*²⁴

In the first century when the apostles were still living, as well as several centuries later, bishops were married. However, after the fourth century, the Biblical rule was replaced with the practice of naming celibate monks as bishops. Eastern Orthodox historian Eusebius Popovic explains:

“The phenomenon of monks acquiring greater control in the church gradually arose as strongly influential monks took over the highest reins of church leadership. Clergy who lived in marriage were gradually **expelled** by celibate monks. As a result, monks eventually not only became elders and deacons... but the monks also took control of the synods. Eventually, all archbishops in the East were monks. **By the fifth century, married bishops were a rarity.** In 410, when Synesius of Cyrene was named Bishop of Ptolemy, he initially hesitated to accept the position because he was married and did not want to part with his wife. But he still wanted to become bishop, even though he did not want to leave his wife. **There are no further records of bishops living in marriage...** With respect to bishops, the **emperor Justinian I (527-565)** issued an **edict that bishops must be celibate.** Indeed, the majority of bishops in the East were monks.”²⁵

aid and a wide range of practical issues that had no direct connection with preaching or missions. Of course, the first deacons also took opportunity to witness about their Lord and even to baptize converts, but that was not their primary ministry. (See Acts 6-8.)

²² The Serbian language also translates the Greek “presbuteros” as “priest” in the context of the Orthodox Church. (Translator’s note)

²³ See the 8th law of the First Ecumenical (Nicene) Council held in 325: “But in one city there should not be two bishops.” See *The Book of Laws, Collection of the Canon of the Orthodox Church*, (Shibenik, 2003) 17.

²⁴ 1 Timothy 3:2-5.

²⁵ Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, vol. 1, 490-1. Author’s emphasis.

In contrast to the clothing of Orthodox clergy, the Bible and historical sources tell us that the apostles and the elders of the first century Church (even Christ Himself) dressed simply like the people of their day. Their clothes differed from that of the priests of the Old Testament. To Serbian people, who are accustomed to seeing their priests dressed in black robes, evangelical Christian preachers who conduct worship services in ordinary civilian clothes (mostly in business attire) appear strange. Yet, the practice of evangelical Christians today is similar to that which Christ and His apostles taught and practiced! Here is the dress code of first century ministers (apostles and other elder-overseers) from the pen of an Eastern Orthodox author:

“The New Testament does not contain, at first glance, any explicit teaching on priestly robes. Let us have no confusion on this matter. **No such regulations exist.** We only find some commands about modesty in dress (Matthew 6:28-30; Luke 12:27-8; Philippians 4:5), while **Christ and the apostles wore clothing typical of their culture.** Moreover, Christ attacks forms of special clothing as hypocrisy (Matthew 23:5)... So, **in the apostolic era, we find no special distinction of clothing for pastors.** (One should realize that the national attire of the time of Christ and the apostles consisted of a lightweight garment that covered the entire body and was well-suited for pastoral purposes.) Afterwards in the late first century, according to apostolic tradition and the church canons, we find traces of its existence. **Only in the second half of the fourth century do we have specific regulations on special priestly attire.**”²⁶

In contrast to Bozhidar Mijac, Orthodox historian Eusebius Popovic mentions nothing about special priestly attire at the end of the first century. Instead, Popovic claims that the first mention of such attire came no earlier than “the end of the first period”, that is, sometime between the end of the third and fourth centuries. He points out that the ministers of that time wore religious clothing that was white or some other bright color. Only during the second period (312-622) did formal priestly attire arise, which today is still adorned by clergy of the Eastern Orthodox and Western (Roman Catholic) Churches. Popovic notes that some items of clothing were introduced much later in history.²⁷

So we see from this analysis that the Bible and historical sources clearly demonstrate that the Eastern Orthodox belief regarding the establishment of a special priestly hierarchy within the Church goes against the teachings of the Apostles. Orthodoxy’s beliefs on this issue stem from the teachings of men centuries after the death of the Apostles. The current phenomenon of the Orthodox priesthood with all its characteristics and duties is foreign to the Holy Scriptures, New Testament Christianity, and the spirit prevailing in the Church of the first century.

²⁶ Bozhidar Mijac, *Questions and Answers*, 194. Author’s emphasis.

²⁷ “Only in the second period do we find about more about this area. The teachings of the second period principally were based on attire of the first period, which has carried on to be used in the church today, though there were some later innovations. **And so, this system of liturgical garments came little by little, not all at once.**” E. Popovic, *General Church History*, vol. 1, 677.

Sacraments

Let us move onto the next challenge of Russian Orthodox priest Kirill Zayets:

“Have you preserved all the Mysteries (sacraments): baptism, chrismation, repentance (i.e., confession), the Holy Eucharist, marriage, holy orders, and unction? These things were already established in the times of the Apostles and they are spoken of in the holy books of the New Testament.”

So our question is: What is the origin of sacraments? Do they really come from the apostolic age? Do the New Testament Scriptures speak of sacraments?

The Eastern Orthodox Church teaches that the Lord has designed man’s salvation to be achieved on the basis of people performing a certain number of sacraments. People should participate and abide by the sacraments. Only through the sacraments can a person attain salvation and eternal life. Here is one citation from Eastern Orthodox literature:

“‘The whole world lies in the power of the evil one,’ writes the old apostle loved by Christ, St. John (1 Jn. 5:19). In this world dominated by evil, man is found at the bottom of a well crying out for salvation. He himself is unable by his own strength to save himself, but someone at the top of the well can extend him **a rope, a lifeline** to which he will eagerly take hold... **The sacraments of the [Eastern Orthodox] Church of Christ are the ‘rope’ that the Lord Jesus Christ extends from His heavenly heights.** Out of the motivation of pure and infinite love, [Christ] reaches down to man deep in our valley of tears so that we, sinful men, might grab onto the sacraments and partake of their powers, by the grace of God, and acquire the Light of God that is without darkness.”²⁸

The main sacraments in Orthodoxy consist of seven “mysteries”: Baptism, Chrismation, Holy Communion (the Eucharist), Repentance (i.e., Confession), Holy Orders (i.e., Clergy), Marriage, and Anointing of the Sick (Unction).

The diligent student of Scripture will notice at least two “sacraments” never mentioned in the New Testament: chrismation (performed after baptism) and anointing of the sick (e.g. sanctification through oil on behalf of a sick person). The apostolic practices of the New Testament provide not one shred of evidence for either of these practices. The first century Christians neither performed chrismation (rubbed oil) on a believer after baptism nor did they rub patients with oil to sanctify them “in the name of the Lord”. Although the New Testament mentions baptism many times and refers to praying for the healing of sick people, the Orthodox sacraments of chrismation and unction are completely absent.

²⁸ *Religion in the Home*, 4th Edition, (Religious Charity Foundation: Belgrade, 1991), 25. Author’s emphasis.

All objective students of Eastern Orthodoxy admit that different teachers believed other sacraments existed in addition to the seven that are now officially recognized. Such is the example of monastic tonsures (cutting the hair of initiates into life in the monasteries). However, under the influence of Roman Catholic theology, the Orthodox Church adopted the number of seven Holy Sacraments:

“Orthodoxy characteristically does not strictly adhere solely to seven as the number of the Sacraments in the Church. **However, the theology of the Orthodox Church later came under the influence of the Roman Catholic Church and adopted the definition of Seven Sacraments identical to those of Rome.** However, Orthodoxy does not recognize the principle of a strict distinction between the Sacraments and sacramentals, in other words, devotional acts of the church that are not sacraments in the true sense.”²⁹

The historian Ernst Benz affirms the fact that the doctrine of the Sacraments developed gradually over many centuries. He also attests to the diversity of opinions about their number as held by church authorities. The doctrine of the “Sacraments” found in Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism appeared over 1200 years after Christ's ascension into heaven:

“In a certain way, the Church in its entire sphere of 'mysteries' pouring forth from its charismatic fullness could always devise a new mystery. While the old church resolved its acceptance of the books of the New Testament canon in the Fourth Century, its establishment of church dogmas in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries, and the simplification of the church liturgy in the Seventh Century, **the number of Sacraments had not yet been defined until the end of the first millennium. This was typical of its creative liveliness in this sphere.**

One of the renowned teachers of the Orthodox Church, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (6th Century) listed six sacraments in his work *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*: baptism, Eucharist, confirmation, priesthood, the consecration of monks, and rites for the dead. Another teacher revered by Orthodoxy, John of Damascus, two centuries later mentions only two sacraments: Baptism together with the corresponding chrismation and the Eucharist (Communion). **Only during the Council of Lyons in 1274 did Greek theologians, who discussed the possibility of uniting with Rome, accepted the number of Sacraments to be seven,** which is slightly before the West accepted scholastic theology: Baptism, Confirmation (Confirmation), Eucharist, Penance, Priesthood, Marriage, and Anointing of the Sick. Even today there are many Orthodox theologians who do not hold strictly to the scheme of the seven ‘Sacraments’ established by the Roman Catholic Church. They hold to a much wider range of Orthodox mysteries.”³⁰

St. John of Damascus was one of the most respected theologians in Orthodox history, particularly for his views on icon veneration. Yet, it is remarkable that even his view of the sacraments bears strong parallels to that of the Protestants. Like the Protestants, St. John only recognized two sacraments: baptism and the Eucharist (the Lord’s Supper). Yet the list of

²⁹ *The Spirit and Life of the Eastern Churches*, 32. Author’s emphasis.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 33. Author’s emphasis.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite two centuries earlier contains some sacraments that are accepted today and others that are omitted, a total of six sacraments.

These historical facts cited in the quote above are sufficient to demonstrate that the number of “Holy Sacraments” finds no support from the teachings of Christ and His apostles. Rather, the seven Sacraments are based on the opinions of Church Fathers and the decisions of later ecumenical councils. By the time the Orthodox Churches settled on “Seven Sacraments,” they had chosen that number based on an effort of reconciliation with the anathematized “brethren” of the Western Roman Catholic Church!

Based upon the compelling evidence of these weighty historical arguments, one might question the accuracy of other claims about the doctrine of sacraments. The earlier passage from *Religion in the Home* tries to convince the reader that the number of seven sacraments was instituted by Christ who from the heavens extends us a “lifeline”. We realize this “lifeline” or “rope” was actually woven by the church fathers through the centuries. One end of the rope is held by the Western (Roman Catholic Church), while the other end is held by the Eastern Orthodox Church.

So What Exactly Does the Bible Teach about Sacraments (Mysteries)?³¹

The Holy Scriptures elevate the word “mystery” to the highest place. The fulfillment and the contexts of references to “mystery” vary. There are human and divine mysteries. For example, Old Testament passages such as in Judges 3:19 and Proverbs 25:9 use the word “mystery” in reference only to ordinary human secrets, i.e., confidential information that one would not want to disclose to many other people. However, the following verses clearly show that certain facts or events were to be kept secret only to a certain group of people for a particular generation. There are also mysteries of God which people have never fully comprehended, such as the mystery of God and the miracle of His eternal existence, His unlimited power, and many other magnificent attributes:

“Are you the first man ever born? Were you brought forth before the hills? Do you listen in on God’s council [mystery]? Do you limit wisdom to yourself?”³²

*“When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, **The secret [mystery] of the kingdom of God** has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables... ”³³*

*“I do not want you to be ignorant of **this mystery**, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will*

³¹ Translator’s note: the Serbian (and Russian) word translated “sacrament” in English also can be translated as “mystery” or “secret”. The author is using a play on words in this section.

³² Job 15:7-8. Serbian Synodal translation. Author’s emphasis.

³³ Mk. 4:10-11. Author’s emphasis.

be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.'"³⁴

*"Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to **the revelation of the mystery** hidden for long ages past,²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him..."*³⁵

*"My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know **the mystery of God, namely, Christ**, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."*³⁶

*"Listen, I tell you **a mystery**: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed..."*³⁷

*"In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into **the mystery of Christ**, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets."*³⁸

*"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is **a profound mystery**—but I am talking about Christ and the church."*³⁹

*"The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. This title was written on her forehead: **MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH**. I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus."*⁴⁰

As the above verses demonstrate, the Biblical writers use the word "mystery" in reference to the teachings about the Kingdom of Heaven, the Church of Christ, and the resurrection of the dead. "Mystery" also alludes to the future salvation of Israel.

"Mystery" depicts the rise of Babylon, which according to many evangelical interpreters is materially rich yet spiritually bankrupt. Babylon symbolizes religion that is far from God and derives from tradition based not on the Bible but from rules dictated by men. Through the centuries, Babylon in the name of protecting "orthodoxy" has persecuted true followers of Jesus and brutally murdered them.⁴¹

³⁴ Rom. 11:25-6. Author's emphasis.

³⁵ Rom. 16:25-6. Author's emphasis.

³⁶ Col. 2:2-3. Author's emphasis.

³⁷ 1 Cor. 15:51. Author's emphasis.

³⁸ Eph. 3:4-5. Author's emphasis.

³⁹ Eph. 5:31-2. Author's emphasis.

⁴⁰ Rev. 17:4-6. Author's emphasis.

⁴¹ See the chapter "The Church that Persecutes" in my book *Eastern Orthodoxy Illuminated by the Gospel* [Translator's note: available on orthodoxy-illuminated.weebly.com].

These verses show that the apostles emphasized that mysteries **had been secret or hidden to people in the past**, but **now they are no longer secret** since the recording of the Gospel of Christ.

To reiterate, the New Testament does not use the term “mystery” for such things as baptism, communion, marriage and other “spiritual institutions”, even if Orthodoxy calls them “Sacraments” or “Mysteries”. Holy Scripture never uses the word “sacrament” nor does it teach people to perform those rites performed by the traditional churches of the East and the West.

Mary

Let us move onto the next contention by Russian Orthodox priest Kirill Zayets:

“Do you obey the Holy Gospel by honoring the Mother of God?”

What does Holy Scripture say about honoring (or venerating) “the Mother of God”? Does Eastern Orthodoxy obey Christ’s Gospel in this area?

Russian Orthodox priest Kirill Zayets asks the gospel preacher: “Do you obey the Holy Gospel by honoring (venerating) the Mother of God?” Zayets clearly implies that the Orthodox doctrine of the veneration of Mary is based on the Scriptures, as we see in this citation:

“The Orthodox Church reveres the Virgin Mary as ‘more honorable than the cherubim and incomparably more renowned than the seraphim’, the One who surpasses all creatures. The Church views her as the Mother of God and the Intercessor before the Son for the entire human race and Who prays for all people without mediation. **Love and veneration for the Virgin is the soul of Orthodox piety**, it warms the heart and revives the entire body... **Whoever does not venerate Mary does not know Jesus** nor have faith in Christ. Whatever religion itself does not include reverence for the Virgin is a different faith, an apostasy to Christianity apart from the teaching of the Church.”⁴²

As we set out to review the teachings of Scripture and examine history on this subject, we encounter one of the most important people in the Scriptures – Mary, the mother of the God-man and Savior Jesus Christ. The passage above considers the veneration of Mary as the heart and soul of Orthodox piety, which makes it unique. Moreover, according to the Eastern Orthodox confession, whoever does not show veneration to the Virgin Mary neither knows Jesus nor can be considered a Christian.

⁴² Sergey Bulgakov, *Orthodoxy* (1991), 183. Author’s emphasis.

We will learn more about the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox Church on Mary later. Let us commence our study of Mary from the most important source of knowledge in the world, the Bible.

Russian Orthodox First Presbyter Alexander Schmemmann says this about the biblical revelation of the mother of our Lord:

“The New Testament says quite little about the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus Christ. Of the four evangelists, only two, Matthew and Luke, speak of the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem, which means that they remembered His Mother, referring to the environment in which His birth took place. **Mark the Evangelist says nothing about the Virgin Mary.** In John, she appears only twice: at the very beginning at the wedding in Cana, where she told her son to help the wedding host to replenish the wine. The second time, at the very end of John, she stood beneath the cross on which her Son was crucified. The book of Acts mentions the Virgin Mary only once, when the disciples of Christ gathered together in prayer with the women and Mary, the Mother of Jesus. **Nothing else about the Virgin Mary is recorded in all the other books of the New Testament, including the epistles of St. Paul and the other apostles.”**⁴³

The Lord's Mother in the Gospels

According to the New Testament, Mary was a modest and virtuous girl who lived in the house of her parents. Although already betrothed by the custom of that time, she was allowed to spend one more year at home with her parents until the wedding. After the wedding, she was supposed to move into the house of her husband.⁴⁴

Just at that time, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and announced to her the good news about the miraculous conception and birth of the Son of God. Having heard the angelic message about the conception of the child, Mary was shocked and frightened by his visit.

Although He had made His choice to give birth through Mary, even after the betrothal, the news of her pregnancy frightened her, since she knew that she had never had sex with any man up to that time. *"How will this be since I am still a virgin?"* (Luke 1:34). The angel's response was that this child will be the Son of God, and will be conceived of a virgin by the power of the Most High, without the participation of men (Luke 1:35). Mary, the virtuous girl, calmly replied: *"I am the Lord's servant. May it be as you have said."* (v. 38).

The evangelists write that she was betrothed to be married to Joseph:

⁴³ Alexander Schmemmann, *Celebration of Faith*, chapter on "Why Do We Believe in the Holy Mother of God?" Author's emphasis.

⁴⁴ See the commentary by Dimitriye Stepanovic on Matthew (1923), 6.

“...to a virgin **pledged to be married** to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.”⁴⁵

“But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, **do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife**, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit’ ... Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and **took to him his wife** ...”⁴⁶

“...to be registered with Mary, **his betrothed wife**, who was with child.”⁴⁷

“Then Joseph **her husband**, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.”⁴⁸

Also, it is critical to emphasize that Joseph and Mary had more children after the birth of Jesus, the firstborn and eldest of several siblings to follow. Joseph abstained from sexual relations with her only during her first pregnancy (Matthew 1:25). The Commission of the Holy Synod of the Archbishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church in its translation of the New Testament renders the verse like this:

“And he did not know her **until the birth of the firstborn son**, and they called Him Jesus.”⁴⁹

The Gospels tell us that the Lord Jesus Christ had several half-brothers and sisters who were the children of Joseph and Mary. The residents of Nazareth once asked:

“Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?”⁵⁰

We will examine other Bible verses about Mary later.

⁴⁵ Luke 1:27.

⁴⁶ Matthew 1:20, 24.

⁴⁷ Luke 2:5.

⁴⁸ Matthew 1:19.

⁴⁹ Mt. 1:25. *New Testament, Translation Commissioned by Serbian Orthodox Church*, 4th Ed. (1998). Author's emphasis.

⁵⁰ Mark 6:3.

The Lord's Mother in the Confession of the Eastern Orthodox Church

Just as we have read some verses on the Lord's Mother from the New Testament, now let us examine some written sources from which the Eastern Orthodox Church bases its beliefs on Mary.

The first and foremost lesson we learn is that the beliefs of the Eastern Orthodox Church about Mary are based not on Scripture, but rather on sources written long after the death of the apostles:

“The mother of Jesus was a pure godly young woman named Mary. **According to tradition along with the best and oldest apocryphal, that is unauthentic** or [non]apostolic, gospels, she was a God-fearing daughter of pious parents, Joachim and Anna, who descended from the tribe of David and resided in Nazareth in Galilee.”⁵¹

“The canonical gospels (Scriptures) otherwise give little information about Mary, the Mother of Jesus, so that a more complete picture of her mythical-divine personality can be obtained only if one relies upon **the vast hagiographical and apocryphal literature, folk legends and medieval iconography**. Here, above all, should be singled out the apocryphal ‘**Book of the Birth of Mary**’ (later named the “**Protoevangelium of James**”) from the second century, ‘**The Book of the Passing of the Blessed Virgin Mary**’ in the third century, or ‘**The Arabic Infancy Gospel of the Savior**’ in the sixth century. Some of these **legends** were compiled during the Middle Ages as an entire compendium of many events in Mary's life. **These non-canonical accounts** claim that Mary was brought up in the Jerusalem Temple starting at age three. She worked with her hands and received food from the hand of an angel. At twelve years of age, she pledged herself to eternal virginity.”⁵²

Contrary to what the apostles record in Holy Scripture, Eastern Orthodoxy alleges that the Virgin Mary never consummated sexual relations with her fiancé Joseph. Instead, she was entrusted to Joseph, an elderly man of eighty years old and uncle to James and John (the sons of Zebedee), for the purpose of preserving her virginity:

“When the All-Holy Virgin completed the fourteenth year after her birth and was entering her fifteenth year, after having lived and served eleven years in the Temple of Jerusalem, the priests informed her that, according to the Law, she could not remain in the Temple but was required to be betrothed and enter into marriage. How amazed were the priests by the answer of the All-Holy Virgin that she had dedicated her life to God and that she desired to remain a Virgin until death, not wanting to enter into marriage with anyone! Then, according to Divine Providence, Zacharias, the high priest and father of the Forerunner, under the inspiration of God, and in agreement with the other priests, gathered twelve unwed men from the Tribe of David to betroth the Virgin Mary

⁵¹ Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 110. Author's emphasis.

⁵² Milan Vukomanovic, *Early Christian Myths*, (1997) 58. Author's emphasis.

to one of them to preserve her virginity and to care for her. **She was betrothed to Joseph of Nazareth, who was her kinsman.**"⁵³

"Joseph lived as a chaste and devoted widower. The high priest Zacharias and the other priests chose Joseph, **who was eighty years old**, to be the guardian of the Most Holy Virgin Mary, who was fourteen years old. He died at the age of 110."⁵⁴

However, in contradiction to the claims of Eastern Orthodoxy that Mary was a perpetual virgin and her marriage with the eighty year old Joseph was never consummated, the Gospels reveal that Mary with her young husband, after the birth of the Son of God, gave birth to several sons and daughters. Even Orthodox writers confirm this fact and admit the historicity of the Scriptures over the fallacy of legends invented centuries later.

Serbian Orthodox theologian Doctor Lazar Milin in his book *A Scientific Defense of Religion* even admits that Holy Scripture teaches that Joseph planned to enter into marriage with Mary:

"And Joseph? According to the words of the Bible, Joseph had a **truly serious intention to take Mary as his wife**... So it is no wonder that **he truly wanted to take** Mary as his wife, and thus the gospel and even the angel of the Lord called her his wife."⁵⁵

Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic says this about James, the brother of the Lord:

"**James is called the Lord's brother** because he was the son of the righteous Joseph, the betrothed of the Most-holy Theotokos... **According to tradition, he traveled to Egypt with the Most-holy Virgin and Joseph**, when Herod sought to slay the newborn King... The Lord numbered him among His Seventy Apostles... He was Bishop of Jerusalem for thirty years and zealously governed the Church of God... **James was sixty-three years old when he was martyred for Christ.**"⁵⁶

Bishop Nikolai presents data on the martyrdom of James, by which we can approximate the exact year of his birth.

Since we know the fact that Christ the Lord was born in 4 or 5 B.C.,⁵⁷ we can infer that His public ministry began around 27 A.D. when He was 30 years old. We know that the Lord preached for about three and a half years, which implies a date of 31 A.D. for His death and

⁵³ Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic, *Prologue from Okhrid*, March 25. Author's emphasis.

⁵⁴ *Light of the World*, (Third Edition: Belgrade 2001) 61. Author's emphasis.

⁵⁵ See also Lazar Milin, *Church and Sects*, 201. Clearly, Mr. Milin believes "sacred tradition" that claims an eighty year old man could marry a teenager who could easily have been his great granddaughter and that (when he learned Mary was pregnant) very naturally thought that he had cheated on his betrothed girl.

⁵⁶ Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic, *Prologue of Okhrid*, October 23. [Translator's note: other translations claim James died when he was 66 years old. See <http://www.westsrbdio.org/prolog/prolog.cgi>]

⁵⁷ Jesus Christ was not born in 1 AD. That date was miscalculated by a Roman monk named Dionysius Exiguus in 525. His calculation was inaccurate by 4-5 years. Recent historical calculations reveal that Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. Jesus was born a short time before Herod's death; hence, the beginning of the new era should have started a few years earlier. See Pavel Borovic, *Biblical Handbook*, 597.

resurrection. That same year, the church in Jerusalem was established where, according to Bishop Nikolai and historical data, the first elder was James, the Lord's brother. Nikolai tells us that James was **63 years old** when he became a martyr.⁵⁸ According to the historians Flavius Josephus and Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea (fourth century AD)⁵⁹, this elder of the Jerusalem church was martyred in 62 AD, which is consistent with the statement that James was involved in spiritual ministry for thirty years.

If we accept the accuracy of these dates (which we should), simple math would lead us to the conclusion that **James, the Lord's brother, was born in 1 BC, roughly 3 years after the birth of Christ**. This calculation is fully consistent with the Bible, which teaches that Jesus was the **firstborn** Son of Mary and that she later gave birth to other sons and daughters.

We arrive at the same conclusion even if we were to accept the claim that Jacob was 66 years old at the time of suffering martyrdom (as alleged by Archimandrite Justin Popovic in his *Lives of the Saints*), not 63 as mentioned by Bishop Nikolai.⁶⁰ Even in that case, James still would have to be born around the same year as the Lord Jesus.

Yet, according to Eastern Orthodox narratives, James was born to Joseph's first wife Salome. But that would also mean that Joseph had two pregnant women living in his house and giving birth at the same time?? Such a scenario seems absurd.

Regardless, historical data and simple arithmetic refute the Eastern Orthodox allegation of an elderly Joseph married to his long deceased wife Salome and their son James, purportedly born decades before Jesus...

Obviously, the Gospels are a much more reliable source of information! Jesus was born first, then James was born shortly afterward (a few years), and both from the same mother Mary.

In addition to the Bible, here is a text from an Eastern Orthodox journal. It informs us that the belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary derives from apocryphal texts not inspired by God:

“The Canonical books of the New Testament books, **and even more so the apocryphal gospels**, support the dogma of the perpetual virginity of the Most Holy Mother of God.”⁶¹

From studying the actual Bible verses earlier, we learned that the New Testament in fact does not support the Orthodox dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity! Obviously then, this dogma derives only from apocryphal books. Furthermore, names such as “Virgin” or “Mother of God” are not found in the Bible. Such names were introduced into the church centuries after Mary's death.⁶²

⁵⁸ See translator's note under previous footnote 52.

⁵⁹ See *The New Testament Commentary: Acts*, (Novi Sad, Serbia) 176.

⁶⁰ See translator's note under previous footnote 52.

⁶¹ *Holy Prince Lazar*, No. 1 (5), Prizren, 1994, 60. Author's emphasis.

⁶² Although Serbian Orthodox seminary professor Jevrem A. Ilic in his book *The Feasts of the Orthodox Church* (Belgrade, 1886: Publishing of the Kingdom of Serbia) argues that from the moment of Mary's resurrection, the

Serbian Orthodox author and high priest Radomir Popovic writes that St. Athanasius the Great at the start of the fourth century was one of the first church authorities to use the term “Mother of God”. In his “Letter to the Monks”, he exhorts his (indirect) successor Cyril during his conflict with Nestorius.⁶³ Athanasius had a clear motive for using this term. He was confronting the Arians’ denial of Christ’s divinity. Cyril was later forced to use the same term to oppose the teaching of the Bishop of Constantinople.

However, Russian Orthodox author Alexander Schmemmann shows that the term “Mother of God” was used not to venerate and exalt Mary, but rather to defend the doctrine of the Incarnation:

“However, in even using the expression ‘Mother of God’ before any theological refinements, **the Church was expressing its faith in the absolute unity of God and man in Christ** (so that everything that was said about Christ’s humanity also applied to His divinity and vice versa), its faith in the absolute sense of the Gospel’s claim – ‘And the Word became flesh.’”⁶⁴

A similar argument applies to the Eastern Orthodox belief that Mary resurrected 3 days after her death. The apostles in their epistles and gospels (written shortly after Mary’s death) make no mention of such a resurrection. Neither did the first century Christians in their personal or corporate prayer address the mother of Jesus as an intercessor. This teaching of Orthodoxy emerged well after the death of the apostles, not with those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the Word.⁶⁵

Let us turn our attention to some other information from which we can draw some conclusions. The Eastern Orthodox Church adapted some of its beliefs from pagan cultures and religions several centuries after the death of the apostles of Christ. Here is what we learn from some of these accessible historical sources:

“It is instructive that the cult of the Mother of God gained strong momentum at a time when Constantine gave official state recognition to the Christian church by making it the official religion of the Empire and when the pagan masses of the Roman Empire began to have access to the church. The peoples of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, whose piety and religious awareness over thousands of years created **a large cult of the mother-goddess and**

church “celebrated the Most Holy Virgin Mary in all places where they praise the name of Jesus Christ”, no such information exists neither in the apostolic writings nor in historical documents. In fact, this veneration of Mary comes from the sacred traditions and teachings of the Church Fathers, who possessed a strong bias to attach their beliefs to the first century Church. The text quoted from Dr. Ilic also admits that Mary was not called “Mother of God” in the first century, but that “...our Church called her Theotokos, the Mother of God. And for this reason, we remember her death in the holiday of ‘Our Great Lady’... The celebration of ‘Our Great Lady’ brings our praise to the Mother of God in heaven and reminds us that we must pray to the Mother of God as our intercessor before God.”

⁶³ See Radomir Popovic, *Ecumenical Councils*, 75. See also chapter on “Seven Pillars of Wisdom” in author’s book *Eastern Orthodoxy Illuminated by Holy Scripture*, which demonstrates that the term “Mother of God” does not appear before the third and fourth centuries. It came into use from Origen, the Alexandrian bishops Athanasius and Alexander, St. Basil the Great, Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, and Gregory the Theologian. See page 33.

⁶⁴ Schmemmann, *The Historical Road of Orthodoxy*, 158-9. Author’s emphasis.

⁶⁵ See Luke 1:1-4 and 1 John 1:1-4.

divine virgins – which developed from the ancient folk religions of Babylon in the mystery cult of Ashtarte during the Hellenistic periods and resulted in devotion to the cult of the goddess as a voluntary, uniting factor for all peoples and nations - **could not accept exclusively the rule of God the Father** and the strict patriarchal structure of the Jewish concept of God **as captured in early Christian teaching**. By the thousands, they requested **deity worship through the cult of devotion to the Great Virgin and Mother** to be established in the Christian Church as well. **Despite resistance, a new opportunity for such expression was found in devotion to the Virgin Mother of God**, which produced the mysterious union of the divine Logos with human nature. The spontaneous impulse of folk piety spurred in this direction major advances into the practice and doctrine of the Church.”⁶⁶

“The emergence of the titles “Mother of God”, Theotokos, and ‘Blessed Virgin’ along with the evolution of its respective dogmas comprise one of the most astonishing events in the history of the ancient church. The New Testament provides no reasons to support such a development. In fact, proofs for the creation of a special title for Mary are absent. In contrast to Jesus Christ, who is in the center and foreground of all four gospels, Mary is left completely in the background.

The gospels clearly show that Jesus' emergence as a preacher of the kingdom of God occurred amidst very fierce opposition from His family. According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus' blood relatives were so skeptical of his mission that they thought He had gone insane (Mk. 3:21). Consistently, all the Gospels imply that Jesus lived in separation from His earthly family. Even His disciples recognized the significance of that separation.

John's gospel also describes an element of very tense relations between Jesus and His mother. **Additionally, Mary appears twice in John without being called “the mother of Jesus”. In fact, Jesus Himself does not call Mary by this name. Instead, Jesus refers to her as 'woman', which, according to Jewish custom, was unusually offensive. Jesus addresses her harshly: 'Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me?' (Jn. 2:4) This is the most powerful expression of Jesus making a conscious effort to distance Himself from Mary.”⁶⁷**

Which Source Are We to Believe: Holy Scripture or Dubious Sources of Tradition?

The Scriptures considers Mary's status in a quite humble light in contrast with the exalted nearly divine status ascribed to her by the traditional Eastern and Western Churches believe.

The Lord Jesus Christ Himself repeatedly in His teaching put His mother in her place within God's plan of salvation, equating Mary's position with His other disciples who were obeying God's will:

⁶⁶ Ernst Benz, *The Spirit and Life of the Eastern Church*, 56. Author's emphasis.

⁶⁷ Ernst Benz, *The Spirit and Life of the Eastern Church*, (Svetlost Press: Sarajevo, 1991), 55-6. Author's emphasis.

*“While He was still talking to the multitudes, behold, **His mother** and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with Him. Then one said to Him, ‘Look, **Your mother** and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You.’ But He answered and said to the one who told Him, ‘Who is **My mother** and who are My brothers?’ And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, ‘Here are **My mother** and My brothers! **For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven** is My brother and sister and **mother**.’”*⁶⁸

Luke makes limited reference to the mother in Jesus. His references are most relevant to Eastern Orthodox believers. He describes the meeting of two pregnant women: Elizabeth, the wife of Zacharias and Mary, the betrothed of Joseph. The aged Elizabeth certainly considered it a great blessing to be the mother of the herald of the coming Messiah (the prophet to announce Christ’s coming). Yet, without a doubt, it was a greater honor for Mary to bear in her womb the divine Logos. As a woman about to give birth and become a mother, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke some very significant and powerful words. At that moment, Elizabeth never could have imagined how her words would be so misunderstood by millions of people for many centuries to come:

*“Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a city of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; **and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit**. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, ‘**Blessed are you among women**, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 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. **Blessed is she who believed**, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord.’”*⁶⁹

Mary replied to Elizabeth:

*“And Mary said: ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; **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. And His mercy is on those who fear Him From generation to generation.’”*⁷⁰

Elizabeth’s intent was meant only to acknowledge the merciful gift of God to bear the divine Logos in her womb – which only one woman among millions in the world could do. To carry in her womb the future Savior of the world was indeed a great blessing. Mary rightly is considered to have been “**blessed among women**”. Many women throughout history have become mothers of God’s great servants and prophets, including in the Old and New Testament periods. Yet, only one woman could become the mother of the Son of God.

However, the term “**blessed among women**” was a common phrase among the people of Israel in biblical times. This title which expressed a unique type of ministry belonged to various women.

⁶⁸ Matthew 12:46-50. See also Mark 3:31-5 and Luke 8:19-21.

⁶⁹ Luke 1:39-45.

⁷⁰ Luke 1:46-50.

Among them we find a lady who lived during the time of “the Judges” (roughly 1300 years before Christ). She was of excellent character and a very unusual woman who justly received such praise. Let us examine the biblical text that describes the events spoken in narrative and then in a hymn to the Lord penned by this judge and leader of the Jewish people, the prophetess Deborah:

*“Then Deborah said to Barak, ‘Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has delivered Sisera into your hand. Has not the LORD gone out before you?’ So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot. But Barak pursued the chariots and the army as far as Harosheth Hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left. However, **Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite**; for there was peace between Jabin king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. **And Jael went out to meet Sisera, and said to him, ‘Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; do not fear.’** And when he had turned aside with her into the tent, she covered him with a blanket. Then he said to her, ‘Please give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty.’ So she opened a jug of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him. And he said to her, ‘Stand at the door of the tent, and if any man comes and inquires of you, and says, ‘Is there any man here?’ you shall say, ‘No.’” Then **Jael, Heber’s wife, took a tent peg and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, and it went down into the ground; for he was fast asleep and weary. So he died.** And then, as Barak pursued Sisera, Jael came out to meet him, and said to him, ‘Come, I will show you the man whom you seek.’ And when he went into her tent, there lay Sisera, dead with the peg in his temple. And the hand of the children of Israel grew stronger and stronger against Jabin king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Jabin king of Canaan... Then Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying: ‘When leaders lead in Israel, When the people willingly offer themselves, Bless the LORD... **Most blessed among women is Jael, The wife of Heber the Kenite; Blessed is she among women in tents.** He asked for water, she gave milk; She brought out cream in a lordly bowl. She stretched her hand to the tent peg, Her right hand to the workmen’s hammer; She pounded Sisera, she pierced his head, She split and struck through his temple. At her feet he sank, he fell, he lay still; At her feet he sank, he fell; Where he sank, there he fell dead.”⁷¹*

Another example of one who was "blessed among women" included Leah, a wife of Jacob. After her maid Zilpah gave birth to a son, Leah said joyously:

*“Then Leah said, ‘I am happy, **for the daughters will call me blessed.**’ So she called his name Asher.”⁷²*

King Solomon also in his Song of Songs describes the blessed state of a girl whom was chosen in her youth out of many by her lover:

⁷¹ Judges 4:14-23; 5:1-2, 24-27. Author’s emphasis.

⁷² Genesis 30:13. Author’s emphasis.

*“There are sixty queens And eighty concubines, And virgins without number. My dove, my perfect one, Is the only one, The only one of her mother, The favorite of the one who bore her. The daughters saw her And called her blessed, The queens and the concubines, And they praised her.”*⁷³

Obviously, the term "***blessed among women***" was a common expression used to describe the special joy experienced by certain women in Israel. Thus, we see that Elizabeth's words to Mary were in no way meant to be some special exaltation of Mary to a heavenly status (as the Orthodox believe). Otherwise, using this flawed logic, the Orthodox would also have to exalt Jael – whom was celebrated for her murder of Sisera, the enemy of Israel – and Leah – whose maid gave birth to another son.

After all, Christ the Lord Himself used the phrase "***blessed among women***" with wide application to the question of who truly enjoys blessings from the God of heaven. Specifically, Luke 11:27-28 describes Christ's encounter with a Jewish woman. She was inspired after hearing the Lord's teaching to utter, "*Blessed among women is Mary, the mother of Jesus,*" only she used slightly different words:

*“And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!’”*⁷⁴

However, though Jesus might have agreed that Mary was truly blessed by God for having Him in her womb, He was more interested in the woman's proper response to His teaching:

*“But He said, ‘More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’”*⁷⁵

This verse about Mary's position in comparison with the people of God (the New Testament Church) contradicts the teachings of the Orthodox Church. Indeed, it is the Lord Himself who pronounces these words. Consequently, the faithful Christian must accept Jesus's word unconditionally. Jesus clearly indicates that those who honor God and obey His will are far more blessed than His mother (in the sense of Jesus's humanity). Today's Eastern Orthodox followers would do well to listen to what Jesus says.

Evangelical Christians hold great respect for Mary and considered her as a prominent example of faith and humility to be followed. We consider Mary as blessed, just as she called herself blessed. However, Mary's state of “blessing” stems from her being an undeserving recipient of many blessings on the basis of God's unmerited favor. Mary's state of being “blessed” does not exalt her to the heavenly throne nor does it give her glory and honor that do not belong to her. After all, the Lord Jesus considered as “blessed” all believers who are poor in spirit, in mourning, meek, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted for righteousness, and so forth. Indeed, such “blessed people” who throughout

⁷³ Song of Solomon 6:8-9.

⁷⁴ Luke 11:27. Author's emphasis.

⁷⁵ Luke 11:28. Author's emphasis.

history have been saved as believers in Christ number in the hundreds of millions. Moreover, the Scriptures ascribe greater blessing to people other than the apostles themselves (who, despite the news of Jesus' resurrection, still remained in unbelief). People who are blessed more in the sight of God are those who believe in the risen Christ and believe in Him. Such blessed status comes even though they never saw Him physically. The Gospel of John reveals the Lord's statement made after His reappearance before the apostles:

*“Then He said to Thomas, ‘Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.’ And Thomas answered and said to Him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. **Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.**”*⁷⁶

A few decades after the event, the apostle Peter praises the faith of those who are blessed even though they have never physically seen the Lord, but who firmly believe in Him and love Him:

*“...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, **whom having not seen you love.** Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory...”*⁷⁷

Both the Bible and secular sources on Mary reveal that most points of the Orthodox confession concerning Jesus's mother are not based on the Gospels. Evangelical Christians, who only base their belief on truths from God's inspired Scriptures, consider Mary to have been favored and blessed (Luke 1:48). In contrast, Orthodox believers who venerate Mary in reality are worshipping goddesses of ancient pagan religions.⁷⁸

Let us recall the words of Russian Orthodox theologian Sergey Bulgakov at the start of this study. He said this with regard to the Orthodox veneration of Mary:

“Love and veneration for the Virgin is the soul of Orthodox piety, it warms the heart and revives the entire body.”

⁷⁶ John 20:27-30.

⁷⁷ 1 Peter 1:7-8.

⁷⁸ “The early Christian Virgin Mary inherited the functions of Aphrodite as ‘**the Queen of Heaven**’ (**regina caeli**), Ruler of the Sea (**Venus Marina**), and the protector of sailors. Even today, many rural churches on the Aphroditic island nation of Cyprus **under the nomenclature of Theotokos pray to the Panagia Aphroditissa** (‘**most holy Aphrodite**’).” Miroslav Markovic, *Study of Classical Religion*, (2001) 16.

History testifies that during the “Christianization of paganism”, Egyptian church bishops issued a special decree to rename the statues of Isis and Horus as Mary and Jesus without any break in continuity. Thus, the pagan idolaters continued to worship the same images, only under different names. See Ralph Woodrow, *Babylon Mystery Religion*, 16.

Pay close attention to these words: “the spirit of piety that warms the heart and revives the entire body!” The identity of Mary is a very important issue.

However, this analysis exposes this “spirit of piety” that has inspired ecumenical Eastern Orthodoxy through the centuries as poisoned with unbiblical false teachings lacking any foundation in the Bible, the holy book of Christianity. The heart which circulates this spiritual energy to each bodily organ of the Orthodox body for centuries has contaminated the body with a stream of pagan heresies regarding the divine Mother and her divine child.

In conclusion, let us allow Mary to speak for herself. Here is a quote uttered by the mother of our Lord more than thirty years after her Magnificat in which she sang about her happiness to give birth to the Savior. We could even call this statement “the Gospel of Mary”. Pointing to her divine Son Jesus, Mary addressed the crowd:

*“Whatever He says to you, do it.”*⁷⁹

Just like her ancient contemporaries, so Mary urges us to obey God by doing what He requires. We would do well to listen!

So let us return to the question of Russian Orthodox priest Kirill Zayets: “Do you obey the Holy Gospel by honoring the Mother of God?” Evangelical believers would be able to answer with an unequivocal “Yes”! It is Eastern Orthodox believers who venerate the mother of the Lord Jesus in ways foreign to what the gospel teaches!

Veneration of Saints and Angels

“Do you have prayerful fellowship with the Church in Heaven, the Holy Apostles, whose writings are in your hands, along with the saints, martyrs, and all the righteous ones?

Do you have prayerful fellowship with the angels?

Do you pray to your guardian angel?

All this was in the Apostolic Church, and all this remains with us in the Orthodox Church.”

Do the teachings of Holy Scripture support the Orthodox practice of praying to dead saints and other saints of the past? Does the Bible teach us to pray to guardian angels?

⁷⁹ John 2:5.

The stance of Russian Orthodox priest Kirill Zayets poses is unequivocal. He states: “All this was in the Apostolic Church, and all this remains with us in the Orthodox Church.” Zayets and other Orthodox teachers claim that the practice of praying to saints and angels developed during the lives of the apostles in the first century. The translators of this text from the Russian language into the Serbian language also support this claim. Additionally, the venerable Serbian Orthodox bishop who gave his blessing to publish the work also stands behind this claim of Zayets. In other words, the Eastern Orthodox Church advocates that such ancient and modern practices date from the time of Christ and His apostles!

We will examine this Orthodox belief in light of objective evidence from the very books of the New Testament. If the claims of this Orthodox authority were correct, we should easily find support for them from the teachings of the apostles as well as the practice of first century Christians. The Orthodox Church claims that prayers to saints and angels are of utmost importance to the believer. Thus, this should also have been the case for believers from the very beginning of the Christian era.

However, unsurprisingly, we do not find one iota of support for these practices among the New Testament writings of the Apostles. We find no basis for praying to deceased saints (who ascended to be with God in Heaven). Neither do we find a shred of evidence for praying to angelic beings.

On the contrary, we find the apostles and other disciples devoutly prayed to God the Father through the intercession of the Holy Spirit. Holy Scripture makes no mention connecting saints and angels as intercessors for prayer or objects of prayer. As is the case with Orthodox teachings on the cult of Mary based on apocryphal writings, the Eastern Orthodox teaching on prayer to deceased saints is also based on sources outside of the Bible. Orthodoxy derives these teachings from apocryphal books written around the times of the Old Testament.

Here is how one Orthodox priest attempted to explain the divine origin of intercession by the saints. Archpriest Paul O’Callaghan in his book *An Eastern Orthodox Response to Evangelical Claims* says this:

“Scripture clearly testifies that certain people were very powerful intercessors before God (Job 42:8; James 5:16-18). Such power is not limited to this life. **The apocryphal Second Book of Maccabees, which Protestants exclude from the canon of the Bible, gives the example of the deceased prophet Jeremiah who continually prays for the people of Israel (2 Maccabees 15:14).**”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Paul O’Callaghan, *An Eastern Orthodox Response to Evangelical Claims*, (Bookstore “Your First”: Pancevo, Serbia, 1997) 14.

The fact of the matter is that neither the Old Testament Jews nor Christ and His apostles accepted these apocryphal books as divine works inspired by God. Thus they excluded them as legitimate books in the canon of His Word.

Yet again, the Orthodox cannot cite a single example from either the Old or New Testament.

This second example comes from the apocryphal Second Book of Maccabees, chapter 15. This passage describes the conflicts between the armed forces of Nicanor, the governor of Judea, and the rebel forces of Judas Maccabees. Judas tried to encourage his troops and prepare them for battle by recounting **a recent dream** of his. The Orthodox interpret this text to mean that “the Bible” teaches that the prophet Jeremiah, even though he had died centuries before, still interceded before God for the people of Israel:

“He armed each of them not so much with confidence in shields and spears as with the inspiration of brave words, **and he cheered them** all by relating **a dream, a sort of vision**, which was worthy of belief. What he saw was this: Onias, who had been high priest, a noble and good man, of modest bearing and gentle manner, one who spoke fittingly and had been trained from childhood in all that belongs to excellence, was praying with outstretched hands for the whole body of the Jews. Then likewise **a man appeared**, distinguished by his gray hair and dignity, and of marvelous majesty and authority. And Onias spoke, saying, ‘This is a man who loves the brethren and prays much for the people and the holy city, Jeremiah, the prophet of God.’ Jeremiah stretched out his right hand and gave to Judas a golden sword...”⁸¹

Lacking any proof from the Holy Scriptures, the Orthodox are forced to rationalize their unbiblical practice of praying to dead saints by resorting to apocryphal sources, including dreams of soldiers.

Orthodox teachers employ another tactic to defend this practice: distortion of Scripture. Orthodox apologist Dr. Lazar Milin takes a prominent passage in the New Testament epistle and completely misinterprets its meaning. Here is an excerpt:

“**We have testimony that souls who died a physical death still remember us.** The Apostle Peter in his Holy Epistle writes to Christian believers: *‘Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease.’* (2 Peter 1:15)

According to the Epistle, Peter wrote these words before his death. But when he knew his death was approaching, Peter promised to ‘ensure’ that the believers would remember the teaching he gave them after his death. How could Peter make such a promise if he were nowhere to be found after his death?”⁸²

As we have seen, Milin twists the biblical texts with deception in order to defend his claims. Let us examine the entire context of 2 Peter 1:12-15:

⁸¹ *The Bible: The Christian Gift*, (Zagreb, 1983). 2 Maccabees 15:11-15.

⁸² Milin, *Church and Sects*, 212. Author’s emphasis.

*“For this reason I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth. Yes, I think it is right, **as long as I am in this tent**, to stir you up by reminding you, knowing that shortly I must put off my tent⁸³, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease.”⁸⁴*

As is evident from the text, the apostle Peter states that he can benefit Christians by encouraging and instructing them in the faith so long as he remains alive (hence “as long as I am in this tent”). Peter’s words written at the end of this section emphasize that he will make every effort to remind the believers of the spiritual lessons he had taught them, even to the extent that they would remember them after his death. In contrast, Milin in his apologetics implies that Peter actually said he would do this only after his death, perhaps by praying for them, personally doing wonders, visiting and teaching them in dreams and visions in their monastic dwellings in later centuries. But any competent expert on Serbian language and grammar would admit that Peter’s words bear no connection whatsoever to Milin’s conclusion.

Anyone who reads the New Testament knows that the Lord Jesus Christ taught believers to pray only to God the Father and the Son with the mediation of the Holy Spirit. Here are some verses from the Gospels that speak specifically about this subject. Jesus Christ Himself said:

“And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.”⁸⁵

“And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full... In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God.”⁸⁶

The apostle Paul taught:

*“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.**”⁸⁷*

Holy Scripture also emphasizes the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ is our only mediator before God in any sense, and that He intercedes on our behalf:

⁸³ Tent or “tabernacle” (made of perishable materials, wood, and wicker) is a type of temporary residence, like a mortal human body. Speaking of “*the tent of his body*” and “*putting it off*”, the apostle refers to his impending physical death.

⁸⁴ 2 Peter 1:12-15. Author’s emphasis.

⁸⁵ John 14:13-14.

⁸⁶ John 16:23-24, 26-27.

⁸⁷ Romans 8:26-7. Author’s emphasis.

*“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.”*⁸⁸

*“Who is he who condemns? It is **Christ** who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, **who also makes intercession for us.**”*⁸⁹

*“Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God **through Him**, since He always lives **to make intercession for them.**”*⁹⁰

God’s Word shows no support for the practice of showing veneration and seeking intercession of the apostles and angelic beings as depicted by the icons of the saints in Orthodox churches and homes. The apostles who never allowed people to bow before them while they were alive certainly would not have allowed it after their deaths.

The New Testament speaks of mutual respect of the saints. The apostles stated that all Christians comprise the invisible spiritual body of Christ, whose head is the Lord, and whose members are

⁸⁸ 1 Timothy 2:5.

⁸⁹ Romans 8:34. Author’s emphasis.

⁹⁰ Hebrews 7:25. Author’s emphasis. Here is a response to this argument from Lazar Milin, who once again mixes up unbiblical concepts of the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of intercession of deceased saints in prayer with the Biblical command for believers to pray to God for each other on the basis of Christ’s atoning death:

“In an attempt to prove that our prayers addressed to the Mother of God and the saints violate the Scriptures, sectarians often quote the words of the Apostle Paul: ‘*For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.*’ (1 Timothy 2:5) Also refer to the words of St. John the Theologian: ‘*My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*’ (1 John 2:1) We add the words from the Epistle to the Romans (8:34): ‘*Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us*’”

Thus, according to the sectarians, the clear words of Scripture make any prayer addressing Mary and the saints to be entirely irrelevant. They have no right to serve as intermediaries between us and God. There is only one mediator, Jesus Christ, Who prays for us. Such sectarian reasoning is wrong and defies logic and the biblical point of view. From the logical point of view, it is a typical example of erroneous evidence that proves more than it should prove. **If we were to agree with the sectarians that the intercession of Christ renders prayers to the saints null and void, then such logic also would render null and void the prayers of people for their children, parents, and friends.** Yet, sectarians pray for other people. From the biblical point of view, the sectarian conclusion is also wrong because it overlooks the fact that Christ’s intercession with the Heavenly Father for us is something completely different than praying to the saints. Let the sectarians properly examine these quotations in context and see the truth we are teaching. ‘*Who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.*’ (1 Timothy 2:6) ‘*And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.*’ (1 John 2:2)” Milin, *Church and Sects*, 211-2. Author’s emphasis.

Contrary to Milin’s accusation of “sectarian” heresy, the Bible clearly exposes as falsehood the Orthodox tradition of prayer through dead saints as mediators. Specifically, Milin’s allegation that Christ’s mediation before God is distinct from the prayer intercession of dead saints (which sectarians cannot possibly understand) because Christ’s mediation is valid only in terms of his vicarious death is simply false. Scripture teaches that Christ is the sole mediator between God and believers in every sense (including both salvation and intercessory prayer, as demonstrated in texts such as 2 Corinthians 5:21, Galatians 3:13, Revelation 5:9-10, and others). In contrast, Holy Scripture makes absolutely no mention that would command believers to practice intercession by dead saints. (Unless, of course, one adopts the “Eastern Orthodox way” of interpreting Scripture by distorting verses out of context. Such wooden “exegesis” would lead one to make absurd conclusions about what the Bible teaches, even to the extreme that “God does not exist.” See Psalm 14:1, 53:1).

Christian believers. Indeed, Paul stresses that the Church should show greater respect for believers involved in less visible ministry in the congregation (so-called “ordinary” believers) compared to those who are involved in more visible ministry (such as elders or pastors), for they already receive respect for their prominent spiritual “position”. Here is the reason:

*“No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unrepresentable parts have greater modesty, but our representable parts have no need. **But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another.**”⁹¹*

The apostles always stressed the fact that people with the gifts of administration and teaching others received such abilities only by the grace of God. Indeed, the apostles refused to accept any excessive honor and warned believers not to show it:

*“As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him **and fell down at his feet and worshiped him.** But Peter lifted him up, saying, ‘**Stand up; I myself am also a man.**’”⁹²*

*“But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out and saying, ‘Men, why are you doing these things? **We also are men with the same nature as you,** and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God...’”⁹³*

The Bible teaches the same message to believers today regarding the heavenly angels. On two occasions in Revelation, the apostle John fell to his knees and bowed down before the angel who had given him the revelation:

*“**And I fell at his feet to worship him.** But he said to me, ‘See that you do not do that! I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. **Worship God!**’”⁹⁴*

*“Now I, John, saw and heard these things. And when I heard and saw, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel who showed me these things. Then he said to me, ‘**See that you do not do that.** For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book. **Worship God.**’”⁹⁵*

Even the angels themselves admit that they are sent to serve and help the Christians on the earth, not to receive ministry and worship from God’s servants:

*“Are they not all ministering spirits **sent forth to minister** for those who will inherit salvation?”⁹⁶*

⁹¹ 1 Corinthians 12:22-25. Author’s emphasis.

⁹² Acts 10:25-6. Author’s emphasis.

⁹³ Acts 14:14-5. Author’s emphasis.

⁹⁴ Revelation 19:10. Author’s emphasis.

⁹⁵ Revelation 22:8-9. Author’s emphasis.

⁹⁶ Hebrews 1:14. Author’s emphasis.

After all, the apostle Paul warned that the worship and ministry to angels would lead to false, unchristian religion:

*“Let no one cheat you of your reward, **taking delight in false humility and worship of angels**, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.”⁹⁷*

Evangelical Christians, in accordance with biblical revelation, show respect to all the apostles and other men and women of God throughout history. Such people are respected for their lessons in piety based on their various experiences in living with the Lord. Yet, Christians reject what Scriptures forbid: to pray for their intercession before God and prayerful mediation of long deceased saints on behalf of the living based on the Orthodox Church calendar.

Prayers for the Dead

“Do you have prayerful communion with deceased fathers, mothers, grandparents, and all those who have reposed in the faith? Do you pray for the dead, or have you forgotten about them so that death for you has proven to be stronger than the love of Christ?”

Don’t you know that they prayed for the dead in the Apostolic Church?”

Is communication in prayer with deceased ancestors taught by Holy Scripture? Does God command us to make prayers on behalf of the dead?

Russian Orthodox priest Zayets would answer in the affirmative to both questions. He makes the allegation that “the Apostolic Church” (during the life of the Apostles) prayed for the dead. Firstly, he assumes they held communication in prayer with the dead. Secondly, he assumes early believers sought the intercession of deceased souls in prayer. This practice would have involved a two-way relationship: first, the intercession in prayer of the dead on the behalf of the living (that is, deceased souls in Heaven would pray for those living people on earth), and second, the intercession of living people on behalf of deceased souls (that is, people alive on the earth would pray for the deceased souls to gain easy entry into Heaven).

If Zayets were correct, then we would expect to find an abundance of texts and examples of this practice in the apostolic teachings. The books of the New Testament would teem with a multitude of such examples of “saving” activity by first century believers.

⁹⁷ Colossians 2:18-9. Author’s emphasis.

However, neither Jesus Christ nor the Apostles make the slightest mention of this practice nor teach it.

Specifically, the reason is that the divine doctrine of salvation leaves nothing undefined regarding the believer's relationship to God after his death. (Hence, there is no need for believers still alive to help that deceased person get to Heaven through their intercession to God.) Furthermore, neither Christ nor the Apostles say anything about the capacity of deceased souls to intercede on behalf of the living. The New Testament is absolutely silent on either of these issues.

But still, how is it that so many Orthodox believers go astray as to the doctrine and practice of the first century Church? What is the origin of this errant practice, which they allege is in accordance with the gospel?

To begin this examination of the belief of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the need for prayers for the dead, let me quote from a Russian Orthodox apologist.

Russian theologian Ivan Nikolin writes in *Orthodox Apologetics* with regard to the origin of the practices of veneration and prayer to the saints. He admits that such practices have no foundation in Holy Scripture and that they derive from a later tradition (formed by the teachings of the Church Fathers):

“If Holy Tradition had needed the support of Holy Scripture, then many issues of religion (**veneration of the saints**, icons, prayer for the dead) **would be judged with an unfavorable verdict.**”⁹⁸

It is necessary to take this claim of the Russian Orthodox seminarian seriously before going further. This is certainly the reason that some of his Orthodox colleagues try to stretch numerous verses from the Scriptures in an effort to somehow rationalize that prayers for the dead are still based on the doctrine of Christ and the apostles (e.g., the New Testament texts). What will become clear is that these verses in their proper context show something completely different and certainly do not prove the doctrine of prayer for the dead.

Here is how Lazar Milin attempts to justify his belief:

“Since a person's definitive fate is determined by God at the general judgment after the resurrection, which lasts for all eternity, so the sentence of the special judgment is not complete and definitive, but it stands from the time of death until the final judgment. With the exception of those who have committed mortal sins, one's judgment can be alleviated through the prayers of the Church.

The basis for this kind of prayer is found in Holy Scripture. Holy Scripture teaches us that we should pray for one another (James 5:16) and to pray for all people (1 Timothy 2:1). As the

⁹⁸ Ivan Nikolin, *Orthodox Apologetics*, 160. Author's emphasis.

Scriptures have no spatial or temporal limits as related for which people we should pray, as “*all live to God*” (Luke 20:38), and since we always belong to the Lord, whether we are alive or dead (Romans 14:8), then these words of Holy Scripture require that we pray for one another, not only for our relations on earth, but also for our brothers who have passed on from the earthly to the spiritual world.

The Savior said, ‘*Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven of men, neither in this world nor in the one to come.*’ (Matthew 12:32) This means there are sins which can be forgiven in the future age. These sins include ones that do not involve blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31-2)... But since the deceased person himself can no longer do anything to improve his condition after death, but in principle his condition can still be improved since some sins can be forgiven ‘*in the age to come*’, so they can receive the forgiveness of God only through the prayers of the Church of those who are still alive.

The Savior gave us a very comforting promise: ‘*Whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. Whatever you ask in My name, that I will do.*’ (John 14:13-4) And since the Savior is the only mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5), and He reconciled mankind with God by offering Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world by pouring out His own blood (Matthew 26:26-8; Luke 22:19-20), then our prayer is not only for those who are still alive but also for the dead. **Such prayer pleases God and extends charity for the dead** when prayer is merged with the bloodless offering of the sacrifice, i.e., the liturgy.

This is the teaching, based apparently upon Holy Scripture, that the Church inherited by Holy Tradition from the apostles. **Thus, in the earliest days, there was prayer not only for the living but also for the dead...** As we have seen, [the Church] in its prayer for the dead and all its liturgical rites, including the liturgy for the dead, funerals, and memorial services, **is founded strictly on Holy Scripture.**”⁹⁹

In this lengthy passage, Milin attempts to disprove the belief of evangelical Christians through using verses found in the Bible. Milin would have us believe that Scripture affirms Orthodox belief and practice.

However, if we were to assume that Ivan Nikolin, also an Eastern Orthodox theologian, had as much theological education as Dr. Milin, then how is it that these two men were able to arrive at two diametrically opposing conclusions?

It is evident that Nikolin’s attitude was sincere when he admits that neither the Old nor the New Testament give any support for prayers for the dead (lest one were to misquote verses completely out of their context, as Dr. Milin does). Indeed, it is easy to demonstrate the correctness of Nikolin’s position. I wish to comment on the verses which Dr. Milin cites. (Indeed, Dr. Milin gives allusion to these Bible verses, but our goal is to show them in their original context.) I ask the reader to read their Bibles to verify my next statement.

⁹⁹ Milin, *Church and Sects*, 251-2.

The truth is that God's Word does command us to pray for one another (James 5:16) and for all men (1 Timothy 2:1). However, the apostles do not command believers to pray for the souls of the dead. James 5:16, the first verse Milin uses, refers to prayer for the healing of sick people. The second verse in 1 Timothy 2:1 commands prayer for the conversion of unbelievers to find a saving faith in Christ, as well as to live a quiet life (without persecution) through the godly living of believers.

Further, we read Milin's assertion that Holy Scripture commands us to pray for all people – without any limit of time – both for the living and for the dead. He rationalizes his assertion on Luke 20:38 in saying that "*He is the God of the living*". This text cannot be used to justify prayers for the dead. Rather, the entire context of Luke 20:27-40 is merely Christ's response to the Sadducees' doubt in the resurrection of the dead. He says nothing at all about prayer for the dead.

The next verse mentioned by Dr. Milin is Romans 14:8. Here is the context of that verse:

*"For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living."*¹⁰⁰

What Paul says in this section and previous verses (1-6) is that the Christian believer should live life in total submission to the will of the Lord and serving his neighbor. This section also discusses the security of salvation for the believer (through faith in the Savior) "*for if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.*"

Christ Himself said:

*"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live."*¹⁰¹

Since it is obvious that these verses have nothing to do with prayers for the dead, it is not at all clear why Eastern Orthodox teachers attempt to use them to rationalize their beliefs. Indeed, these verses prove the contrary. A true Christian belongs to the Lord both during his lifetime and after death. (It is also true that the Word holds condemnation for someone who persists in unbelief – both in this life and the life to come – as shown in John 3:18, 36.)

Neither does Holy Scripture support Milin's later arguments for prayer for the dead. Matthew 12 speaks of "*blasphemy against the Holy Spirit*" as the unforgiveable sin, which "*will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.*"

Eastern Orthodox logic assumes that sins except for "*blasphemy against the Holy Spirit*" can be forgiven in the future world. This comes in spite of the fact that the Lord did not give even the

¹⁰⁰ Romans 14:7-9.

¹⁰¹ John 11:25.

slightest hint of such a wild presumption in His teaching. When a reader honestly examines the context of this passage, it is apparent that such a presumption does not fit the context. Jesus's statement that "*every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but [not] blasphemy against the Holy Spirit*" is a response to the accusation by the Pharisees that Jesus heals by the power of Beelzebub, Satan, the ruler of the demonic world (23-4). Let us examine the Lord's response more:

"But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you." ¹⁰²

So Jesus cast out demons by the Spirit of God, not by the power of the devil. Because the traditionalist Pharisees compare the Holy Spirit of God with the unclean spirit of Beelzebub (Satan) causes Jesus to describe their statement as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the sin that could never be forgiven. Nicodemus admits that the Pharisees were conscious of the fact that Jesus performed miracles by divine power:

"There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, 'Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.'" ¹⁰³

Despite recognizing that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God, the religious Pharisees nonetheless opposed the Lord's will out of fear of losing their prestige and status before people who accorded them all kinds of honors (see Mark 15:9-10; John 11:47-8, 12:10). Jesus was accused of various charges. The accusation that Jesus was a servant of Satan was one of the most serious.

The context leads us to the conclusion that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (the unforgiveable sin) is actually a conscious and premeditated rejection of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior. It has nothing to do with the forgiveness of other sins after a person dies. On the contrary! When stating that all kinds of sin can be forgiven of men, Jesus prefaced it with the condition that a person must repent of his or her sin when they did not believe in the Lord previously. The Savior teaches that the Holy Spirit convicts the world of the great sinfulness of not believing in the Son:

"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." ¹⁰⁴

*"And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: **of sin, because they do not believe in Me...**"* ¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Matthew 12:28.

¹⁰³ John 3:1-2.

¹⁰⁴ John 16:13.

¹⁰⁵ John 16:8-9.

The only way a person can be saved and his sins forgiven (thus ensuring that he not only did not blaspheme the Holy Spirit, but that he also listened to His voice) is a commitment of life and faith to Christ the Savior. The Word of God testifies that a person who does not believe and dies will surely be condemned. For such an unbelieving person, there is no more opportunity for mercy or forgiveness:

*“He who believes in Him is not condemned; **but he who does not believe is condemned already**, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God... 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.**”*¹⁰⁶

Thus, the expression “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” unable to be forgiven neither in this life nor in the life to come does not mean that other sins not forgiven in this earthly life can be forgiven in the afterlife. Rather, “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” refers to the gravity of sin when a person refuses to heed the voice of the Holy Spirit which testifies to the Savior. (See John 15:26.)

Knowledge of the fundamental truths of Scripture leaves it practically unnecessary to refute the use of other uses by Eastern Orthodox teachers to rationalize their belief in prayers for the dead. Thus, the promise of Jesus recorded in John 14:13-4 that He listens to all the prayers that His disciples would make (which, of course, conform with His will) undoubtedly does not refer to praying for the souls of the dead. Holy Scripture shows not one shred of evidence that the apostles practiced prayer for the dead. Neither did Christ and the apostles teach others to do so.

After all, such prayers would be redundant and unnecessary in the first place. Christians who die belong to the Lord, since they had already experienced God’s grace of the forgiveness of sin and new spiritual rebirth. Romans 14:7-8, verses that Dr. Milin earlier cited, reveal this truth. On the other hand, a person who never believed in Christ stands already condemned because of his unbelief. Such a person has the opportunity to repent only until the end of that person’s earthly existence, else that person faces eternal condemnation.

So we must conclude based on these passages that Holy Scripture does not support the Orthodox teaching of prayer for the dead. Indeed, the Orthodox teaching of prayer for the dead contradicts the clear Gospel of belief and repentance in this life that Jesus Christ Himself taught.

The quotation from Russian Orthodox teacher Ivan Nikolin that prayer for the dead is based solely on Orthodox tradition and not Holy Scripture is completely accurate.

Apocryphal Literature on Prayer for the Dead

¹⁰⁶ John 3:18, 36.

So if neither the Old nor the New Testament supports the Eastern Orthodox teaching of prayer for the dead, then where else can Orthodox teachers go to find support? Dr. Milin appeals to apocryphal literature not inspired by God. Specifically, he appeals to Holy Tradition based on the two apocryphal books of Sirach and 2 Maccabees. Let us take a look at Milin's argument:

“Finally, it is not without significance that prayer for the dead was practiced by the Old Testament Jews. When Judas Maccabeus discovered precious items from pagan temples in the robes of **slain Jewish soldiers, all the Jews turned to God in prayer to forgive the dead soldiers of this sin. Judas sent burnt offerings on behalf of the dead soldiers to Jerusalem in order to atone for their sins and for prayers to be offered on their behalf.** (See 2 Maccabees 39-42 and 43-6.) So prayer for the dead is not merely a pagan tradition allegedly copied by the Church, **but it is a universal rite introduced into the Church on the basis of Scripture and Holy Tradition.**”¹⁰⁷

What Dr. Milin the Orthodox theologian neglected to tell us is that these “Old Testament Jews” lived in the time after the writing of the Old Testament was completed. These Jews lived in the second century B.C. This was a time of great influence of pagan Hellenistic (Greek) culture and beliefs on the Jewish religion. These Jews certainly were unable to find the practice of prayers for the dead in the Old Testament books written by God's prophets. The Old Testament does not teach prayer for the dead. In contrast, Greek religion believed in the perpetual existence of the soul after death and prescribed people still alive on the earth to perform certain rituals for the welfare of deceased souls in the afterlife. The reason that these books are called apocryphal is that these apocryphal books deviate from divine truth as revealed in the canon of the Old and New Testament Scriptures.

The book that Dr. Milin mentions first, the 2nd Book of Maccabees, also justifies suicide as “an honorable thing” (2 Maccabees 14:41-6). This utterly opposes the Word of God in the Old Testament, which teaches that the days of our lives are in the hands of the Lord, not our own. (See Psalm 31:15-6.) After all, Dr. Milin admits that the practice of prayer for the dead is a “universal” (e.g. pagan) rite, yet he also claims that the Church introduced this rite on the basis of “**Scripture**”. “**Scripture**” in Eastern Orthodoxy includes the apocrypha, also called “deuterocanonical”, that is “second canon”. The Eastern Orthodox Church uses the texts of the apocrypha and **Holy Tradition** (religious ideas introduced later into the Church by converts to Christianity called the Church Fathers).

Parastosi (Memorials for the Dead)

Regarding the cult of the dead, the Eastern Orthodox Church established memorials for the dead – an official memorial service known as the “parastosi”¹⁰⁸. These memorial services for the

¹⁰⁷ Milin, 253.

¹⁰⁸ Translator's note: also known as “panikhida” in some Orthodox churches, such as the Russian.

dead, as one can expect, also have no basis in Holy Scripture. Rather, they are entirely based on tradition – which in this case “happens” to find its origin from the cult of the dead in Greek pagan religion. One Eastern Orthodox teacher speaks of the importance of memorial services for the dead:

“Secondly, focused exclusively on prayer for the rest of the departed souls of Christians, is the memorial service for the dead. Typically, such services occur **on the third, ninth, and fortieth days after the person’s death**... People who attend memorial services know it as the ‘wake’. The service is scheduled at a specific time on a specific day without fail. Forty days after death is a special time. **The tradition of our Holy Church** teaches us that this is the day when the Kingdom of God holds a special tribunal for departed souls. The soul will receive either temporal reward or punishment consistent with that person’s faith and deeds as well as the prayers of our Holy Church for that person’s salvation from eternal damnation. Those prayers come from our people who are still living. In this manner, the memorials are performed forty days after the person’s death, or at the latest one day afterward.”¹⁰⁹

So, according to the teachings of Eastern Church, the third, ninth and fortieth days after death are very important for the departed souls of Christians! For further information on Eastern Orthodox teaching on life after death, let us read a lengthy excerpt from the writings of St. Macarius of Alexandria, who lived in the fourth century after Christ. The excerpt is an answer received by St. Macarius allegedly from an angel of God regarding the importance of holding memorials for the dead on the third, ninth, and fortieth days after a person’s death. This excerpt also clearly demonstrates the importance of the patristic tradition to Eastern Orthodoxy:

“One time, St. Macarius of Alexandria asked a question of the Angel who escorted him in the desert: ‘Why did the Holy Fathers pass on to the Church the teaching that she should conduct a memorial service for the dead on the third, ninth, and fortieth day? How does it benefit the soul of the deceased?’ The Angel replied: ‘God never passed on to the Church anything that was unnecessary and useless. When the Church offers a memorial service on the third day, then the soul of the deceased receives from the angel miraculous comfort from the sorrow of separation from the body. The soul receives comfort because he sees that the separation is done for the glory of God and the Church, and in this he receives hope. For two days, the soul hovers around the earth. Naturally, the soul loves the body (where the soul dwelled in earthly life). Sometimes, the soul wanders around the house where he had dwelled in earthly life, sometimes the soul roams around the grave where the body is buried. The soul spends these two days like a bird building its nest. The soul that performed good works visits places where truth was formed within him. On the third day, He who had resurrected from the dead commanded that every Christian soul, modeled after His resurrection, should ascend into Heaven and worship God in everything. **Thus, the Church performs a good ritual in giving sacrifice and prayer for the soul on the third day.**

After worshiping God, God orders the angels to show the soul the variety and beauty of the Saints and the holy beauty of Heaven. This six day tour leads the soul to worship and praise God, the

¹⁰⁹ *Catechism in the Home*, (Belgrade, 1991) 98-99. Author’s emphasis.

Creator of everything. After observing all this, the soul forgets its grief of separation from the body. But if the soul is guilty of sin as the soul witnesses the blessings of the Saints, the soul breaks down in tears, saying: 'Woe is me! How much time I wasted in the world! Having pursued the lusts of the flesh, instead I could have spent much of my life with peace of mind to serve God properly. Then I would have been worthy of grace and glory. Woe is me... And after viewing the six days of joy the Righteous Angels again extol the worship of God. **Yet again, the Church does the right thing in observing the ninth day of ministry and commemoration of the dead.** After the second session of worship, the Ruler (Lord) of all commands the angels to take the soul to Hell and reveal all the local places of torture, its various departments, and various unclean torments that cause the souls of sinners there to constantly wail and gnash their teeth. The soul trembles and endures these various places of torment over thirty days, even though the soul itself is not sentenced to imprisonment in them. On the fortieth day, the soul once again ascends to worship God, and the Judge has already determined where the soul will stay according to the deeds of that person. **Thus, the Church does well to observe the fortieth day of commemoration for the deceased.**'"¹¹⁰

Not only does the above text oppose the Bible's teaching on life after death, but it also apparently contradicts the Orthodox teaching on spiritual tollhouses cited earlier. According to an earlier revelation to Theodora, the baptized soul after death travels to Heaven over several weeks along a spiritual road to demonic customs houses. Her vision does not mention any incident of worship before God's throne on the third or ninth day after death.

The second revelation given by the "angel" to St. Macarius reveals that for two days, souls can freely wander the earth, after which with the angels they spend six days in Heaven, and finally they spend thirty days in Hell. Nevertheless, this revelation makes no mention of the tollhouses!

It is critical for us to know that the revelation to St. Macarius dates from the fourth century, while the revelation of tollhouses dates from the tenth century after Christ. Thus, St. Macarius was unable to write about tollhouses of which he was unaware, because this doctrine was introduced into Orthodox teaching six hundred years after his death. St. Macarius is solely interested in the reason for observing memorials for the dead. We have already read the angel's answer. However, putting aside such a statement from a "higher power", let us look for a more realistic answer from earthly historical sources. We arrive at a completely different explanation.

First, let us recall the statement of Russian Orthodox priest and theologian Alexander Schmemmann about the celebration of Christmas.

¹¹⁰ *After Death*. Author's emphasis. [Translator's note: see Russian translation from Greek in <http://www.zaistinu.ru/articles/?aid=316> .]

“The main method which the church used to attract pagans to Christianity was a method of sublimation and **transformation of the pagan beliefs themselves; the Church adapted some pagan customs and invested them with Christian meaning and content.”** ¹¹¹

Now let us read about some pagan rites that were transformed and invested with Christian meaning. Let us read an excerpt from the Orthodox historian Eusebius Popovic:

“Specific to this rite, they conducted religious services for the peace of deceased souls (‘All Souls Day’) with the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice, if possible, next to the grave. This rite had the symbolism of showing love to the souls of the deceased (‘agape’ for the soul as a free gift) and was usually held **on the third, seventh or ninth, thirtieth or fortieth day**, and also on the one year anniversary of the death or funeral. The numbers seven and thirty as well as the one year anniversary were chosen as specific final conditions of weeks, months, and years after the death or burial of the deceased.

Now they might have chosen to associate the third, ninth, and fortieth days with Christ: the third day related to His resurrection on the third day, the fortieth day in relation to His ascension to Heaven, and the ninth day related as the product of three in order to emphasize His resurrection on the third day three times.

But such is not the case. **The pagan Greeks offered sacrifices to their dead on the third, ninth, and thirtieth days** as well as on the anniversary of a person’s death.” ¹¹²

Besides that mentioned above, A.G. Hamman in his book *Rome and the First Christians* describes traditions held by Christians that bore a remarkable resemblance to those followed by pagans:

“Similar to their fellow countrymen, the believers in Greece observed memorials on the third, ninth, and fortieth day after the death of a person. In Rome, the ritual was observed on the ninth day after burial – after which they held a meal in which relatives and friends gathered... **Like the pagans, Christians organized holidays in honor of the deceased called ‘refrigeria’** (refreshment).” ¹¹³

So we learn that the pagan Greeks observed the practice of memorial services for the souls of the dead on the third, ninth, and fortieth days after death. It becomes very clear that the “Church” invested some Christian meaning to this custom. Indeed, this is a much more robust explanation than believing some alleged revelation to St. Macarius by some angel! Such a conclusion is even more obvious when we consider that the Bible contains not a single trace of such teaching!

It also is apparent that tradition has given special meaning to the fortieth day after the death of a deceased soul throughout the centuries (including the “Christianization” of pagan faiths). This

¹¹¹ Text from the special supplement “Christmas” on the page of *Today* (excerpt from the book *The Sacrament of Holidays* by Alexander Schmemmann), 2002, 6. Author’s emphasis.

¹¹² *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 437. Author’s emphasis.

¹¹³ A.G. Hamman, *Rome and the First Christians* (Belgrade, 1998) 178. Author’s emphasis.

tradition existed in the Church during the Middle Ages, a time when St. Basil the New and his disciples lived. This is why the soul of the venerable Theodora, after she passed by the tollhouses and then was led through Hell, could tell Gregory in a dream that she was resting in Heaven on the fortieth day after her death – the very time when St. Basil was conducting a memorial service on Earth on her behalf.¹¹⁴

However, the assimilation of pagan practices by some Christian churches and movements and dressing them in Christian attire (for the sake of "converting" pagans) was not only an ancient custom, but it still occurs today. Let us examine evidence presented by Greek Catholic Priest Roman Miz:

“The population of the whole series of countries in Central Africa, which at the beginning of the twentieth century was overwhelmingly polytheistic, now professes Christianity or subscribes to the so-called ‘new African movements’ – **syncretistic concoctions that successfully combine elements of Christianity with those of traditional tribal religions.** In China, even very superficial and inadequate statistics testify to the presence of tens of millions of Christians. Rising interest in Christianity continues in Northeast Asia. In contrast, the ‘Christian bastions’ of Europe at the end of the century do not look invincible at all... The “de-Europeanization” of Christianity is not only a process confined to geography but also extends to sociology and culture, perhaps to an even greater degree... Differences pertain not only to specifics of rituals, religious architecture, or devotional differences, **but also the doctrinal issues that concern the very essence of the doctrine of the Christian religion. For example, in Japan, the Catholic Mass conducts memorials for the dead on the first, third, seventh, thirteenth, and thirtieth anniversary after the death of a person – identical to Buddhism.**”¹¹⁵

The analysis of this section based on the Bible and historical facts related to the Eastern Orthodox teaching on the afterlife and prayers for the dead leads the logical reader to only one conclusion. None of the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox Church regarding prayer for the dead honors God and His Word. Neither Christ nor the first century apostles practiced nor taught others to perform prayers for the dead which are practiced by today’s traditional Eastern Orthodoxy.

Icons

¹¹⁴ This is the whole passage: “Then they brought me out from there [from Hell], and they brought me to the dwelling of our Venerable Father Basil, you see, and they comforted me by telling me: ‘Now the Venerable Basil is commemorating you.’ And it was clear to me that I was in this place forty days after the separation of my soul from my body...’ **According to the teaching of the Church,** the fortieth day after the separation of the soul from the body marks the completion of the passage through the tollhouses, there will be a particular judgment of the soul that will render a provisional sentence: either the soul stays either in the place of joy or else in the place of torment, where the soul remains until the second coming of the Lord to the earth and God’s Last Judgment over people.” *The Way of the Soul after Death: about Tollhouses*, (1995: Chelije Monastery). Author’s emphasis.

¹¹⁵ Roman Miz, *Christianity on the Edge of the Third Millenium*, (Novi Sad, 2000) 17-8. Author’s emphasis.

Russian Orthodox priest Kirill Zayets asks:

“You do not honor icons nor do you honor the life-giving Cross of the Lord? And do you sign yourself with the Holy Cross? Do you wear the cross on your breast in accordance with the words of the apostle *“bearing the reproach that he bore”* (Hebrews 13:13)? All this was known in the Apostolic Church.”

Do the veneration of icons and the cross, along with making the sign of the cross, comprise practices that originate from the time of Christ’s apostles?

The answer of this Russian Orthodox priest is unequivocal: these religious traditions date from the time of the apostles! In other words, Zayets alleges that Christ’s disciples directly taught others to venerate holy icons and relics as spiritual practice in the first century. He would have us believe that the first century disciples made and venerated icons, made the sign of the cross, and wore crosses on their chest just like today’s Eastern Orthodox believers.

Such an explanation appears quite reasonable. But is it really correct?

Well, as the case with other Eastern Orthodox rites and traditions, we need to examine this claim in the light of objective Biblical and historical data.

Let us first examine a detailed excerpt from Orthodox literature that describes the origin and practice of icon veneration:

“The Church teaches that iconography, icon imagery, has existed since the beginning of Christianity, for, as to be shown later, it represents the direct expression of the Incarnation. Iconography, in this sense, corresponds not only to the revelation itself of the Word of God, but also the Image of God (Colossians 2:6-7, Galatians 3:24-5; 4:3). The Old Testament prohibition of “formal” imagery indicates that the gap would be filled with the holy figures of the New Testament. This, as confirmation and illustration, has been well served by the liturgical church tradition of the ‘icons not made by human hands,’ e.g., icons made by themselves or else by the people whom they depict. Such is the image of Christ, which Christ Himself gave to the Emperor Abgar in the form of His image miraculously portrayed on a cloth. These icons emphasize the parallel existence of the church and iconography – **the Church has never existed without icons**. As soon as the Church began to preach, she also began to paint. **According to tradition, the holy Apostle Luke was a painter and painted images of Christ and the Virgin.”**¹¹⁶

According to Serbian Orthodox author Mijac, the first century Church from the time of the apostles practiced iconography and icon veneration! Some of the apostles themselves were iconographers, following the example of their Lord and Teacher Christ, who personally made

¹¹⁶ Bozhidar Mijac, *Icons Holy Images*, 18-9.

His own icons and gave them to His worshipers on several occasions. That is what church tradition tells us.

However, historical facts about the first century Apostolic Church reveal no such practice of icon veneration. People knew nothing about the legends of the icons of Christ or the Virgin not made by human hands. Reliable historical sources tell a completely different account than the fable of traditional stories. Russian Orthodox author Sergius Bulgakov explains:

“The Christian Church from Judaism – as something that it decided itself to enforce with the rule of law – inherited **the prohibition of religious art** and in a sense **was defined even more so as iconoclasts.**”¹¹⁷

If we accept as true this statement of the renowned Russian Orthodox theologian, then it raises a major question. How could it be possible that the first century Church opposed iconography if everyone knew that Christ blessed His image on cloths and towels which people venerated? How could it be possible that Luke painted many icons at the time when the Church possessed a spirit of iconoclasm? The answers to these questions are obvious.

In contrast, here is a more extensive description of the early church period that confirms Bulgakov’s statement. The author is a Serbian Orthodox author and expert historian:

“As the church entered the end of the first period¹¹⁸, the church first began to use pictures symbolically, and only images that portrayed people or events. However these were used **very rarely and with great reluctance**, for many of the first Christians came out of Judaism, which we know that in later times all the way up to the fifth century A.D. obeyed the Old Testament commandment in this regard.

The Synod of Elvira at Iliberus in Spain (306) **banned images painted on walls of church buildings.**

The church historian **Eusebius** (died 340), who was Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, was a contemporary of the above-mentioned Synod. He was a devout man who deemed religious images as **mimicking pagan customs**. (As a footnote, Constantina, the sister of Constantine the Great, asked Eusebius for a picture of Jesus. Eusebius responds that religious images are **pagan customs**. In his ecclesiastical history which he wrote, Eusebius speaks of a statue of Christ in Caesarea Philippi, which a woman erected there in his hometown. She claimed to have been cured by Christ of hemophilia, but he says this story was only transmitted second-hand.¹¹⁹ Even if this story were true, Eusebius considered this woman to definitely have been a pagan.)

¹¹⁷ Sergey Bulgakov, *Icons and Iconography*, 10.

¹¹⁸ Translator’s note: the name “first period” refers to the period of church history from the Ascension of Christ in the Book of Acts until the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. when the Roman Emperor Constantine granted toleration to the Christian Church. “The first period of Christian history, extending from the day of Pentecost to the conversion of Constantine, has a special relevance for contemporary Orthodoxy.” Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/history_timothy_ware_1.htm .

¹¹⁹ Author’s note: that is, it was a legend, not verifiable history

But as we mentioned earlier, the custom began and gained momentum later on. By the end of the fourth century, icons became quite widespread, although it remained the case that **church leaders did not encourage their use. Either they totally condemned the use of religious images and icons, or else they considered religious images to be a dangerous habit.**

Among the most determined opponents of religious images and icons was the early church father **Epiphanius** (died 403) at the end of the fourth century. He was from Palestine and a descendant of the tribe of Judah. He died as a church metropolitan in either Salamis or Constantia in Cyprus. His antipathy toward icons went to such an extreme that one time, when he found **an icon painted on the canvas near a church door**, Epiphanius **tore it down, ripped it into pieces**, and gave it to a church minister to **bury the destroyed icon with a dead body**.

But conditions changed in the fifth and sixth centuries. The use of icons found more and more allies and became common in churches, except in the Nestorian church, which wanted to retain the ancient customs and raised opposition in this matter vs. the other churches. Moreover, in the East at the end of the second period, icon veneration had also spread as people venerated icons through sacrifices, kisses, incense, burning candles, etc... **And in the East, the icons first served merely as religious monuments and teaching aids. Only over time did the Eastern Church's use of icons evolve into veneration of the icons**, the person whom the icon represents.”¹²⁰

Let us summarize a few main points from this passage:

1. In the early church started by the apostles and their successors in the first century A.D. and afterward during the first period, the Church did not use any religious images.
2. The first religious images, which only had symbolic and illustrative significance, began to be introduced at the end of the “first period”, i.e., probably in the third century A.D.¹²¹ Such art was used only for religious instruction (such as frescoes and contemporary works of art, illustrated editions of Scripture, and pictures with the biblical themes).
3. The introduction of other images (iconography of “saints” and others) initially encountered fierce opposition from many church leaders.
4. Some of the major opponents of iconography and icon veneration included Eusebius, the famous historian of the early Church, the bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, and the Metropolitan Epiphanius.
5. Even one local church council (in Elvira/Elbirus in 306 A.D. during Diocletian’s persecution of Christians) decided to ban interior painting in church buildings.¹²²

¹²⁰ Eusebius Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 652-3. Author’s emphasis.

¹²¹ Regarding images, Bulgakov writes: “The history of icon veneration say this gives the artwork. The earliest paintings (from Roman catacombs) are timid and primitive allegorical-symbolic characters (goats, lambs, doves, fish, and grapes). Later, they are joined by some typical images that echo the themes of the Old and New Testament (Noah’s ark, Daniel, Jonah, Moses, who strikes the rock to find water, the Good Shepherd carrying a lamb, wise and foolish virgins, etc.). Bulgakov, 11.

¹²² Today’s defenders of icon veneration who subscribe to the so-called “decree” of the Seventh Ecumenical Council claim that the ban on painting icons by the Synod of Elvira was not binding on the church in general but rather only had local authority (Mijac, *Icons Pictures of the World*, 26). The fact remains that at the time when the Synod of Elvira convened (more than three centuries before the Seventh Ecumenical Council), its findings were a true reflection of the attitude of the church at large toward icons (according to many experts, including Eusebius

6. In the fifth and sixth century A.D., iconography began to grow in popularity. By the end of the “Second Period”, i.e., the end of the sixth and early seventh centuries, icon veneration (which includes veneration of icons in the form of teaching people to kiss, burn incense, and light candles to icons) emerged.
7. Icon veneration such as practiced today in Eastern Orthodoxy developed gradually over several centuries from the creation of the original art form of depicting symbolic images, including the representation of vineyards, fish, doves, etc. By no means was icon veneration part of the religious practices of believers in the first centuries of Christianity.

It is interesting to note that iconography and icon veneration have roots in Greek religious and philosophical thought. Russian Orthodox author Sergius Bulgakov explains:

“In the history of icon veneration, we admit above all to the basic fact that icons originated in paganism. **The entire pagan world was full of icons and icon veneration.**”¹²³

“Along with its highest achievements, Greek philosophy **appeared in Christianity before the time of Christ**. On that basis, Greek philosophy became the natural language for Christian revelation and theology, as well as the revelation of ancient art in iconography with some, although limited, meaning in **Christianity before the time of Christ**. Without a doubt, Greek philosophy spawned a prototype of Christian icons... **and as one would logically expect, the Christian church changed the content of iconic depictions, although it still adopted the principles of icons**. This became the bridge between pagan iconography and Christian art... Coincidentally, the ideal forms to paint were pure humans, which were needed in Christian iconography and were found even in pagan art. This does not mean, of course, that Christian iconography simply copied pagan icons. Rather, Christian iconography imprinted its own stamp. **However, this does not diminish the fact that pagan iconography**, as it were, was **as natural in the Old Testament before Christianity** in the same way as pagan philosophy appears in the Old Testament before Christian theology.”¹²⁴

We have already determined that iconography and icon veneration are based on Greek religious and philosophical thought. Eusebius Popovic adds further confirmation to this fact as he narrates about the external and internal appearance of liturgical (i.e., worship) places:

“At first, there were no icons¹²⁵, for the Jews prohibited religious images. **However, little by little**, gospel freedom allowed **in some places** the first use of symbolic imagery... Finally, the pagan trend toward images prevailed over the Jewish banning of images, such as those images depicting historical imagery; such included icons of Jesus as a babe in the arms of His

Popovic). Thus, its decisions could be considered binding on the church at large, including the ecumenical church (prior to the schism of East and West), in the early fourth century.

¹²³ Bulgakov, 6.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8. Author’s emphasis.

¹²⁵ Compare the historical facts with the previously mentioned claim by Mijac that “the (Orthodox) Church teaches that iconography existed from the very beginning of Christianity.”

mother¹²⁶... **But the majority of church teachers did not approve of religious images (icons)** during the end of this (first) period: the Synod of Elvira (Iberis) in Spain in 306 banned such pictures on the walls of churches. Some religious teachers, including the church historian Eusebius (died circa 340), a younger contemporary of the said Synod, **called icons direct imports from pagan customs**, with which Christians have no business to be involved.”¹²⁷

This information from early church history leaves us with the inescapable conclusion that the sources of sacred tradition provide unreliable and inaccurate information about the origin of the first icons. Eusebius Popovic, the respected Serbian Orthodox historian, in his *General Church History* rejects the plausibility of icons of Christ not made by human hands nor icons painted by Luke the Evangelist as fallacious. He acknowledges such icons could not have existed simply because they would contradict the clear historical evidence of the attitude of the first century church toward icons. The early church opposed the making and usage of religious images.

¹²⁶ The phenomenon of icons of the Virgin Mary with little Jesus in her arms arose only in the early fourth century under the influence of the cult of the Mother Goddess (Ishtar-Astarte) and her divine child, both taken from pagan cults. These portraits are identical to those of the Queen of Heaven with her divine child as seen in many, previously listed, old religions and cults. (If you were to visit the home of followers of Hare Krishna, you would most likely see, among other images, one of the virgin Devaki with her son, which is similar to the Orthodox icons of Mary and Jesus.) On one icon called “Holy Virgin Giving Breast Feeding”, Mary is shown to breastfeed the baby Jesus. Professor Markovic says a few words:

“Lastly, my argument concerns the motifs, ‘**Mother and Child**’, Aphrodite and Eros... We are here restricted to the so-called type “**curotrofni**” representation of the goddess, that is, Aphrodite with the baby Eros on her breasts, which was on the side... The goddess of love and her babies have become a popular theme in Greek art... Painted vases from the Lipari Islands (330 B.C.; LIMC 1238) shows **a happy mother breastfeeding her baby**, Venus lactans. Similar terracotta from the British Museum shows the same position Isis lactans (first century B.C.), with the great Egyptian goddess Isis breastfeeding the baby Harpocrates (in Egypt, "the baby Horus"). **Our next step is to compare Isis lactans from Karanisa in Egypt** (around 300 A.D.) **with Maria lactans** (Virgin Mary breastfeeding Christ), with bas-reliefs from Medinet Madi (about 500 A.D., now in Berlin): **they are identical**, the only important difference is that the artist drew two crosses for Mary.

The conclusion is clear: the type of archaeological Venus lactans influenced the type of Isis lactans, and this influence is reflected again in the early Christian icons as Maria lactans (i.e. the Orthodox icon of “Holy Virgin Giving Breast Feeding”)... To take a step further - kampanaska oinochoe (around 350 BC, now in Paris, LIMC 1241) shows how Aphrodite adores her son Eros, just as Mary adores her baby Jesus in the most famous Russian icon, the Virgin of Vladimir, which was painted by a Byzantine artist about 1125 (now in the church in the Kremlin). **In short, religious traditions have long histories, and many versions of Aphrodite were transferred to the Virgin Mary.**” M. Markovic, 25-6.

The Orthodox priest Bozidar Mijac admits in his own words that although visual representations of the pagan deities Apollo and Artemis are not easily comparable to the icons of Christ and the Virgin, “but also one image borrows from the other certain elements of the corresponding image, thus a painter’s technique could use the same expression to reflect the character of the other.” See: *The World of Icon Painting*, (Parthenon: Belgrade, 1997), 30.

¹²⁷ Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol.1, 423. Author’s emphasis.

Origin of the Sign of the Cross and Veneration of the Holy Cross

Eastern Orthodoxy alleges that the practice of making the sign of the cross dates from the very start of the Christian church. Such a claim echoes Orthodoxy's claims about icons studied earlier.

Serbian Orthodox historian Eusebius Popovic confirmed that many of today's religious practices in the Eastern Orthodox Church originated several centuries after the death of the apostles. Some of these practices were adopted from paganism for the purpose of helping unconverted pagans to learn religious habits of liturgical practice, that is, until some other action (such as "making the sign of the cross" or receiving a blessing from the priest) emerged and developed, so to speak "on its own":

"The development of forms of worship in the second period (e.g., from 312 to 622) stemmed from developments outside the church and church hierarchy. Since the church in the Roman Empire from persecution became a state church, which received material and moral aid from the state, consequently the church acquired wealth. Naturally, the church's form of worship also was enriched in its development, and increasingly so as more pagans entered into Christianity. Logically, such developments required that the church should compensate for the pomp and wealth of symbols in pagan religion.

Some Christian symbolic rites appeared, or at least became popular, as the symbolic use of lighting and incense for worship, including oil, lamps, and candles. **While some of these forms existed in the first period, now they appeared in a more developed form. Making the sign of the cross, a practice long performed so far as we know in the African churches, involved drawing the sign of the cross on one's forehead with one finger.** However, it progressed to its complete form of crossing from one's forehead to chest and shoulders – going from the left to the right side with the whole hand in the Western Church, while going from right to left with only the first three fingers to symbolize the Holy Trinity in the Eastern Church.

Thus arose the symbolic meaning of blessing, which was performed by making the sign of the cross over another person or a crowd of people or things or even in their general direction."¹²⁸

Eastern Orthodox Church historian Eusebius Popovic informs us of the origin and veneration of one of the most important relics - the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified:

"The first reason for the cross on which Christ suffered was the general opinion that it was located in Jerusalem. Since the middle of the fourth century, we have accounts of the location of the Cross. Primarily, in 348, Cyril of Jerusalem testifies in his catechism that the Cross is located in Jerusalem, **but that some small pieces have been scattered throughout the world.** In his letter to the Emperor Constantine in 351, Cyril vouches for the authenticity of the Cross, even though some doubted its existence, and that it was found during the time of Constantine. In 395, Ambrose, and many others after him, cited the year 326 when Helena, the mother of Constantine

¹²⁸ E. Popovic, 638-9.

the Great, chartered an excavation at Calvary in order to find the Cross of Christ, and on that occasion they found three crosses. They were able to tell the difference between the Cross of the Savior, which wrought miracles, from the other two crosses. Helen divided the Cross into two parts, one that she stored in the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem, while her son kept the other part in his statue in Constantinople. **The part of the Cross kept in Jerusalem became the object of universal veneration, and many devout Christian visitors to Jerusalem broke off pieces of it, hence Cyril's testimony that many pieces of the cross of Christ were spread throughout the Christian world.** Pious searching, storing, and veneration of the Cross in Jerusalem aroused others to seek the Lord's clothes, the clothes of His Mother, the apostles, and martyrs, and objects of martyrs and other Christians. They also searched for the bones and objects of the apostles, martyrs and saints, which people kept as relics in their churches and private homes. However, **fraud often occurred**, and the heads of the church condemned forgery, and laws of church and state were enacted. The same situation happened with the miracles and other relics of the saints as with the Cross. **Yet in the second period there is no further mention of the miraculous power of relics, unlike, for example, the case in the Eastern Orthodox Churches which makes no mention the flow of fragrant myrrh from the holy remains...** of the Martyr Demetrius, son of the proconsul of Thessalonica, during the time of Diocletian. We have in the Roman Catholic Church, the blood of the persecuted Januarius, the martyr and bishop of southern Italy. After his death, they stored his blood in two glass vials.¹²⁹ When they waved the blood in front of the saint's head, it immediately turned from solid to liquid. Such a miracle occurs only later in Roman Catholic history."¹³⁰

Let us reflect on this very important account of events of ancient history. The Gospels give not even the slightest reason to believe that any of the apostles stole the cross after Christ's death. In fact, little attention was paid to this device of torture and execution. Nor do the apostles even tell us the location of where all the crosses were buried. They certainly do not state that the cross was buried at Calvary. Nonetheless, a wide variety of beliefs about the cross has spread throughout history.

Specifically, historians including Eusebius and other anonymous sources dispute the authenticity of cross relics. Some later historians doubt that the Empress Helena found the cross on which Christ was crucified along with the two other crosses that belonged to two robbers. According to data presented by J.G.R. Forlong, the date of 326 for Helena's visit to Jerusalem is probably historically accurate. However, the news of her finding the crosses did not occur until the year 440, that is, 114 years later.¹³¹ *Fausset's Bible Encyclopedia* says that the Jewish laws in force at the time of Jesus Christ mandated that all crosses used for crucifixion were to be destroyed by

¹²⁹ Translator's note: also St. Gennaro. 'This year the miracle took on special importance because it marked 1,700 years from **the martyrdom of San Gennaro (St. Januarius) in 305 AD... The first historical reference to the liquefaction of the martyr's blood is dated 1389.**' See <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1487257/posts> .

¹³⁰ Popovic, *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 654-5. Author's emphasis.

¹³¹J.G.R. Forlong, *Encyclopedia of Religions*, Vol. 1 (University Press: New Hyde Park, NY, 1964), 494, cited in <http://www.scribd.com/doc/29617415/Babylon-Mystery-Religion-by-Ralph-Woodrow-1981> Ralph Woodrow, *Babylon Mystery Religion* (1981), 59.

incineration.¹³² If this information is accurate, then it is certainly not true that these crosses could have been found three hundred years after Jesus' crucifixion. Simply put, the crosses would have been burned up into ashes long before Helena's visit.

Notwithstanding this issue, there is another problem with the theory that Helena actually found the crosses of Christ and the robbers. The probability of finding the exact cross that belonged to Christ and not to someone else would have been extremely low. This is because the crucifixion of political opponents of Rome and various bandits at that time in Judea was a common, almost daily occurrence. It is certain that the hill Golgotha was the place where the crucifixion had occurred. During and after the time of Christ, crosses of different shapes and dimensions were used to execute hundreds of people. In particular, there was a mass crucifixion, not only at Golgotha, but also throughout Jerusalem. Thousands were executed forty years after Jesus' crucifixion in the history of the famous "Judean War" and the siege of Jerusalem by the Roman army. The famous Jewish historian Flavius Josephus describes the plight of a multitude of starving victims being crucified:

“And when they were going to be taken, they were forced to defend themselves for fear of being punished; as after they had fought, they thought it too late to make any supplications for mercy; so they were first whipped, and then tormented with all sorts of tortures, before they died, and were then **crucified before the wall of the city**. This miserable procedure made Titus greatly to pity them, while they caught every day five hundred Jews; nay, some days they caught more: yet it did not appear to be safe for him to let those that were taken by force go their way, and to set a guard over so many he saw would be to make such as great deal them useless to him. The main reason why he did not forbid that **cruelty** was this: he hoped the Jews might perhaps yield at that sight, out of fear lest they themselves might afterwards be liable to the same cruel treatment. **So the soldiers, out of the wrath and hatred they bore the Jews, nailed those they caught, one after one way, and another after another, to the crosses, by way of jest, when their multitude was so great, that room was wanting for the crosses, and crosses wanting for the bodies.**”¹³³

Thus, we see that in Jerusalem during and after the time of Christ, numerous crucifixions occurred, particularly around 70 A.D. When one considers that virtually any available wood had to be used for making crosses, plus the fact that the plethora of these crosses around Jerusalem would have been like a forest, then it seems quite implausible that Helena would have been able to sift through hundreds of these crosses to find the exact one on which Jesus was crucified.

Additionally, the legends of the discovery of the cross of Christ describe the nails which pierced Christ's hands. These stories allege the nails were sent to the Emperor Constantine, who took

¹³² A.R. Fausset, *Bible Cyclopedia, Critical and Expository*, (Scranton Co.: Hartford, CT, 1902), 145, cited in <http://www.scribd.com/doc/29617415/Babylon-Mystery-Religion-by-Ralph-Woodrow-1981> Ralph Woodrow, *Babylon Mystery Religion* (1981), 59.

¹³³ Translator's note: Translated by William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus*, (Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody, MA, 1987), 720 cited on <http://religiousstudies.unc.edu/people/jtabor/cruc-josephus.html> . Author's emphasis.

one and fastened it as a wedge to his helmet and another for the reins of his horse. This was done, as alleged by many "holy fathers" and transmitted in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, so that the Scripture might be fulfilled as foretold in the book of Zechariah 14:20:

*"In that day "HOLINESS TO THE LORD" shall be engraved on the bells of the horses."*¹³⁴

As for the medieval practice, according to Eusebius Popovic, of transporting pieces of the cross of Christ throughout the world to garner respect and veneration for them by the faithful, let us say a few words. Specifically, there proliferated numerous large and small fragments of the "authentic cross of Jesus" throughout the world during the Middle Ages. So much so that the French reformer John Calvin once said that if they were all gathered in one place, they could form a good shipload! He implied that most of these pieces of wood were falsely and erroneously regarded as pieces of the cross of Christ! To explain the existence of large amounts of woody material ripped from the "true cross", St. Paulinus originated the theory of "the reintegration of the cross." In other words, no matter how many pieces of the cross had broken off, the original cross of Christ never diminished in their size.¹³⁵

What does the Bible say about such veneration for pieces of wood allegedly from the cross on which Christ was crucified? (In reality, historians doubt the veracity of the "discovery" of the Cross as a legend.) Would the Lord truly be pleased if his faithful were bowing down to the "Cross" and kissing it with their lips, if it actually existed? God's Word gives us more than a clear answer to this question.

The wooden cross on which Christ was crucified (we have no idea of its exact form) has already served its purpose on the day of the Lord's death on Calvary. After this grand event of the redemption of the sins of mankind before God the Father, the rough wooden device that served this purpose was to be forgotten. Although the apostles in their epistles mentioned in several places the cross of Christ¹³⁶, not once did they ever consider the physical cross as an object that demanded veneration. The cross of Christ in the New Testament epistles is a symbolic metaphor, a picture of the exceedingly painful, shameful, and humiliating death that the Lord suffered in order to save sinners. Regarding worship, the thoughts and teachings of the apostles addressed to believers were always directed solely and only to Jesus Christ the Savior, not to a piece of wood. The apostles betrayed no reverence for the physical cross on which Christ was crucified. The evidence is that the apostles never instructed Christ's disciples to worship the physical cross. Sometimes in sermons, they simply said that Jesus was crucified "on a tree":

¹³⁴ "Cross", *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, 523, cited in Woodrow, 59. The context of Zechariah 14:20 clearly shows that it has nothing to do with the nails on Christ's hands.

¹³⁵ Translator's note: Arthur Noble, *The Relics of Romanism*, cited on http://www.theonemediator.com/Catholicism/Doctrines%20and%20Decrees/relics_of_romanism.htm .

¹³⁶ See 1 Corinthians 1:17-8; Galatians 5:11, 6:12, 14; Ephesians 2:16; Philippians 2:8, 3:18; Colossians 1:20, 2:14; Hebrews 12:2; 1 Peter 2:24.

*“Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, **they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb.**”*¹³⁷

*“He who Himself bore our sins in His own body **on the tree**, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.”*¹³⁸

The Old Testament paints a beautiful picture of Christ's cross as the place from which Jesus saves anyone who believes in Him as Savior through faith. Here is what the Lord Jesus Christ Himself said about this image of the cross:

*“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”*¹³⁹

So, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so Jesus would be lifted up, so that anyone who believes in Him shall gain forgiveness of sins and eternal life. How exactly did the lifting up of the serpent exactly work? Here is the background of this event as recorded in the Old Testament:

*“And the people spoke against God and against Moses: ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.’ So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; **and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.**’ So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, **if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.**”*¹⁴⁰

This Old Testament event is a beautiful picture of salvation from eternal death. It symbolizes the forgiveness of sins available to anyone who trusts solely in the redemptive work of Christ crucified at Calvary and not upon that person's own merits or good works.

The bronze serpent set upon the pole in the time of Moses had played such an important role in the past toward pointing people to salvation and rescue from certain death. Indeed, this was a symbol which God had explicitly commanded to be built. However, in later times, this symbol lost its significance. Moreover, people suffered adverse consequences from preserving the bronze serpent, as they began to venerate it as a kind of “holy relic” which violated the will of God. Thus, God had the rod and bronze serpent destroyed. (See 2 Kings 18:4.)

A similar situation has occurred with the wooden cross on which the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified. The cross fully served the purpose for which it was intended. He Himself died on

¹³⁷ Acts 13:29. Author's emphasis.

¹³⁸ 1 Peter 2:24. Author's emphasis.

¹³⁹ 1 John 3:14-5

¹⁴⁰ Numbers 21:5-9. Author's emphasis.

behalf of all the sins of the world. To this day, anyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

The texts above, as well as the behavior of the apostles and other disciples in the New Testament, demonstrate that early Christians attached no importance to the physical wooden cross from which Jesus' body was long removed. No one gave any veneration to the cross on which our Lord was crucified even if it ever were to have been found. Veneration of Christ's cross would have been akin to veneration of the bronze serpent of Moses. God is not pleased with veneration of any object. For this reason, the apostles along with thousands of believers in the first century neither practiced nor preached such clearly errant religious practices.

Conclusion: The True Apostolic Tradition

“My questions are clear and simple. Answer them. Why are you silent? Well, what is there for you to say when you do not maintain any of this? Can't you see that this is great spiritual wealth?”

We have arrived at the end of our examination of the basic tenets of Eastern Orthodoxy. Now we will answer the question posed by the Russian Orthodox priest Kirill Zayets at the beginning and end of his speech.

We have seen that the Russian Orthodox priest's claim that the doctrines of Eastern Orthodoxy are based on the Bible is wrong. Previous sections showed the fact that the “great spiritual wealth” present in ecumenical Eastern Orthodoxy does not have its origin in the apostolic era.

Theologians of the traditional churches of the East believe that Eastern Orthodoxy represents the apostolic Church. Yet, these theologians dismiss evangelical Christians as people who have nothing to offer. However, the reality is that evangelical Christianity does not adorn itself with silken and velvet vestments of centuries of human tradition and the glittering stones of manmade customs and rituals. For this reason, Eastern Orthodox believers who practice mystical religious ritual are unable to understand how ordinary people can practice their faith based solely on the Bible. Indeed, those who follow God's Word diligently instead of traditions invented by men in reality practice a much deeper faith.

Moreover, many Eastern Orthodox believers consider faith defined solely by Holy Scripture to be heresy! Eastern Orthodoxy rejects the divine authority of God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son as the sole authorities in matters of faith. Instead, Eastern Orthodoxy forces the inclusion of other manmade sources as authority for its doctrines and practices.

The majority of theologians in the Serbian Orthodox Church often label the beliefs of evangelical Christians as “Protestantism”. They consider Christian beliefs merely as a succession of religious teachings dictated by the German church reformer Martin Luther.

In his time, Dositej Obradovic also ran into such objections. His “preaching” of the Gospel was in accord with the Holy Scriptures and clashed with the teachings of Eastern Orthodoxy. His teaching was condemned as “Lutheranism” by his enemies. Obradovic answered such complaints in a clever manner. His response was that if the words recorded in Scripture were confessed by the Lutheran denomination, then by that logic, Christ and the Apostles must have been Lutherans!

“But who accepts the testimony of the apostle Paul or Christ Himself? Suddenly you hear the same thing five or nine times: Lutheran! Oh, Serafim, these are the men who can help us! Then Christ the Most Blessed Savior and the apostle Paul themselves are Lutherans!”¹⁴¹

Although Biblical Christianity does not practice rituals steeped in manmade tradition, it does obey the fundamental doctrines as taught in the Word of God. Biblical Christianity follows the teachings left by Christ and His apostles to His followers. These teachings are found in Holy Scripture and consist of the Gospel and sincere Christian fellowship.

Biblical Christians possess priceless treasures, in the words of the apostle Peter who wrote:

*“To those **who have obtained like precious faith** with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ...”*¹⁴²

*“...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.**”*¹⁴³

Biblical Christians base their faith solely and exclusively on Holy Scripture. Unlike them, the Eastern Orthodox have set the foundations of their beliefs on the sinking sand of various traditions and cultures.

A large number of Orthodox teachings consist of pagan customs and ideas assimilated into Christianity, as well as distortions of Biblical texts. This study has introduced the reader to a few of some of the false teachings of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Naturally, Orthodox doctrines are much more extensive than what this short booklet can address. There are many more Orthodox beliefs that we have not examined. Many of them are based on erroneous interpretations of the Bible as well as the tangible influence of pagan traditions. If the reader is genuinely

¹⁴¹ Dositej Obradovic, *Collected Works*, 270. Calling Gospel-believing people “Lutherans” or “Lutorans” during the time of Obradovic and afterward was considered a great insult. The famous historian Vladimir Chorovic explains: “The Protestant movement did not have great influence among Serbs living in denser population areas, although some did become members. But the people stuck the name “lutor” as a label for a godless oaf.” *History of the Serbs*, 438.

Traditionalist Orthodox believers consider Lutheranism as atheism because it denied everything that an ordinary religious man would have considered to be faith. It is obvious that Obradovic himself was looked upon as a “godless idiot” by some, for he denied the Biblical foundation of many customs and beliefs of Eastern Orthodox which were introduced centuries after the end of the apostolic age.

¹⁴² 2 Peter 1:1.

¹⁴³ 1 Peter 1:7.

interested in preserving the purity of the apostolic faith and basing his or her beliefs on the apostles, the reader is encouraged to read further on this topic.

Further elaboration on these topics can be found in the book *Orthodoxy Illuminated by the Gospel*. This book contains 840 pages (in the Cyrillic version)¹⁴⁴ that explain in depth the origin of a host of Eastern Orthodox doctrines, customs, and rituals. Reading this book could be of great blessing to the reader, as it has been to many people, who in fact have discovered the truth of the true Gospel. This includes both Biblical and Eastern Orthodox believers.

“Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.” (2 John 1:9)

¹⁴⁴ Translator’s note: available also in English on the website orthodoxy-illuminated.weebly.com .

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