

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 2

Source of Orthodox Doctrine

How is Orthodox Doctrine Determined?

The basis of Orthodox teaching: God's revelation to the Church

It starts with the teaching of the Apostles, which, of course, came from Jesus and through the Holy Spirit. It has been expanded, detailed and explained by the collective experience of God by holy men and women of the Church

It is not primarily intellectual—or theoretical—but is based on the common experience, traditions and worship of the Church

Critical doctrines are framed through the councils of the Church using a conciliar process (not a democratic process)

The Orthodox Church accepts only holy persons as theologians. Holy men and women are those who are totally and continuously devoted to God in humble obedience to His commandments, in prayer, fasting and meditation, in acts of love and compassion, in service to the Church and/or in suffering for their faith. To such people, God reveals Himself more completely and exhaustively. More important, the reports from these holy witnesses about what God has revealed to them are amazingly consistent from witness to witness. The same cannot be said for those whose doctrines come only from their own study and intellectual activity.

What about the Bible?

Remember, the Holy Scriptures were not fully determined until late in the fourth century. Not until late second/early third century were initial efforts begun to define what eventually became the canon of the Holy Scriptures.

This Canon of the Scriptures was determined by the Orthodox Church using the same conciliar process followed in framing the doctrines of the Church.

The great councils of the Church

There were seven great councils of the Church during the first eight centuries

A church council was an assembly of bishops and other recognized holy men from all parts of the Christian world called to address a particular issue. There were also regional councils, but these councils did not carry the authority of the whole Church.

Councils typically took several months to reach conclusions and used a conciliar process that required that virtually all participants agree on the conclusions reached and that these conclusions were the result of the Holy Spirit working amongst them.

All but the seventh council had to do with who Jesus Christ is.

The first council (325 AD) was about the divinity of Jesus Christ; and was convened in response to the rapid growth of the Arian heresy that said that

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 2

Source of Orthodox Doctrine

there was a time when the Son of God did not exist but was created by the Father as the first act of creation. The church said, “No,” to Arias and his followers, and established that the Son, the Word of God, is fully God, consubstantial and co-eternal with the Father and Holy Spirit.

The second through sixth councils had to do with the humanity of Jesus Christ. Throughout this period, false teachings arose that Jesus was not fully human. Some held that Jesus’ did not have a true human nature, but only a divine nature; later, others taught that He did have a human soul but only a divine will. There were yet others who taught that the humanity of Jesus Christ was only loosely joined to His divine being and that His divine nature and human nature could be separated when it served the Divine purpose. The church said, “No,” to these positions and established that Jesus was fully human in every sense except for sin, and that the God-man, Jesus Christ, sits at the right hand of the Father now and forever.

The seventh council overturned the iconoclastic heresy and reestablished the validity and value of icons in the Church.

These councils, and their participants, are celebrated by the Church in annual feasts. The doctrines established at these councils are of crucial importance to our salvation. More on this later.

Tradition versus doctrine

Church tradition is the body of beliefs and practices that have been passed down from generation to generation by the church. Many of these traditions were established and accepted by the apostles themselves. They are differentiated from doctrine and scripture in that there was never a formal recognition of their validity by the Church. However, these traditions are a very important part of the teaching of the Church, and the apostles—especially Saint Paul—warn us not abandon them.

Not all traditions are equal in their recognition by the church. Some are so universally accepted that they are virtually as authoritative as doctrine. Others are recognized as being valuable to the Christian life but aren’t regarded as universal or revealed Truth.

There are also traditions that are locally held and others that are newer (only a few hundred years old). You may hear the term, “little ‘t’ tradition,” used to describe these kinds of traditions.

Contrasts to Western Doctrine and Doctrinal Practices

Eastern and Western Christianity split in 1054 on the basis of new teaching in the West that varied from Orthodox teaching as established by the Councils of the Church. As far back as the eighth century, the western church began teaching that the Holy Spirit

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 2

Source of Orthodox Doctrine

proceeds from the Father and the Son—not from the Father alone as established in the Nicene Creed by the first and second church councils.

This variance, along with the insistence by Rome that the Pope of Rome be regarded as having authority over the entire Christian Church, led to the tragic schism between East and West.

After the great schism, other aberrant doctrines evolved in the West including purgatory and the heavy emphasis on satisfying the Justice of God as the reason and purpose behind Jesus' death on the cross. These doctrines are not held by the Orthodox Church.

In the West, theology and doctrine became more speculative and more purely intellectual.

By the 14th century, western theologians generally held that what was arrived at by human thought was of an equal or higher order than revelation. They began to analyze and create doctrines (called speculative theology) on subjects that the Orthodox Church had always treated as mystery.

Mystical knowledge of God was held in low regard and even scorned by many in the West. They held that the only knowledge of God possible in this life was an intellectual knowledge. Experiencing God in this life in any other manner had been ruled out in western theology.

This teaching began to “seep” back into the Orthodox Church, but was rooted out by a 14th century council of the Church based on the dialogue between St. Gregory Palamas and a western-leaning theologian, Barlaam. This council reaffirmed Orthodox mystical theology and practices.

As theology grew increasingly intellectual in the West, western theologians began to develop “systematic theologies” stressing completeness and internal logical consistency. Orthodox theology, because it is based on revelation and experience, makes no claim to being absolutely comprehensive nor does it necessarily restrict doctrine to rules of logical internal consistency. Make no mistake; Orthodox theologians were just as astute in logic and philosophy as were their counterparts in the West. However, they continued to recognize that God is not subject to man's intellectual disciplines and limited understanding. Furthermore, in His revelation to man, God is concerned with restoring mankind to purity, love for God and communion with Him. This means that different doctrines and teaching might appear to conflict with one another, but are actually resolved in the fullness of the Holy Spirit.