

# WHAT IS THE ORTHODOX CHURCH?

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ORTHODOXY

by Fr. Marc Dunaway

If you are like most Americans, you probably know very little about the Orthodox Church and Orthodox Christianity. Some have even called it "the best-kept secret in America." Many, however, are becoming convinced that this needs to change, and that the Orthodox Church has a vital message for America today. By the time you finish reading this booklet, I hope you will agree.

As a priest in the Orthodox Church, I have been asked many times, "What is Orthodoxy?" A number of years ago, therefore, I and several others developed a "Seminar on Orthodoxy" that would try to provide an introductory answer to this question. Since then I have given this seminar dozens of times in my home parish to hundreds of inquiring people. The material in this booklet comes from that seminar. Certainly very little of it is in any way "original." And, as in all historical summaries, there is also here, no doubt, some oversimplifying.

Nevertheless, I firmly believe the overall perspective is sound, and no one, Christian or non-Christian, can afford to ignore it any longer.

### WHAT IS ORTHODOXY?

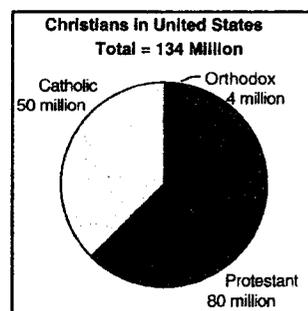
My parents and their parents were born and raised in northern Kentucky. It is mostly farm country, with little towns and communities tied together by a web of narrow, winding roads. It's the kind of place where people sit on porch swings in the afternoon and decorate their yards with concrete animals, birdbaths, and wagon-wheel planters. If you drive through these country hills, about every four or five miles you will see a simple white church building. Occasionally it might have stained glass window and a steeple. Usually it will be either what they call a Christian Church or a Methodist Church. Those are the two predominant denominations in that part of Kentucky.

The people there are certainly aware of other Protestant denominations and of the Roman Catholic who live in the other part of town. For them the Christian world consists of two basic groups: Protestants and Catholics. Therefore, when I visit my grandparents and tell them that I am now an Orthodox Christian, there is no category for me to fit into in their minds.

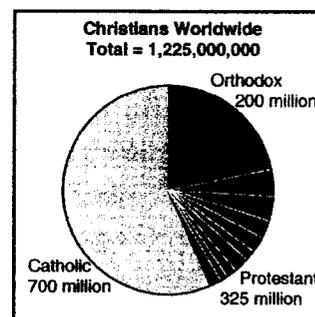
Unless you come from Alaska or from one of the urban areas in the Northeast or Midwest, chances are things are pretty much the same where you grew up. The predominant denominations might be different – maybe Baptist, Lutheran, or Presbyterian. Orthodox Christianity, though, would probably be something

completely foreign. So it may come as news to you that there are three groups of Christians in the world today, not just two. There is Roman Catholicism; there is Protestantism; and there is Orthodoxy.

The reason Orthodox Christianity is relatively unknown in this country is simple. There are approximately 134 million Christians in the United States, and they are subdivided roughly as follows:



In the bigger picture, however, things look much different. If you consider all the Christians in the world, the ratio looks about like this:



In fact, since Protestantism does not really represent one united group of Christians, but hundreds of very different denominations, the second largest unified body of Christians in the world is the Orthodox Church. Worldwide, there are more Orthodox Christians than there are Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Pentecostals, or any other single Protestant denomination.

### WHERE ARE THE ORTHODOX?

Orthodoxy is the second largest Christian group in the world, where in the world are all these Orthodox Christians?

The primary locations of Orthodoxy in the world today are Greece, Russia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. For example, in Greece nearly everyone who professes to be a Christian is Orthodox. In Russia,

also, the vast majority of Christians are Orthodox, and the number of Catholics and Protestants is comparatively small.

Moreover, not all the people who live in Israel, Lebanon, Syria and the other countries of the Middle East are Jews or Moslems. It may surprise you, but many of them are devout Christians, Orthodox Christians, who for generations have lived and practiced their faith in the very land where Christianity began.

From these primary locations Orthodoxy has also spread into many other countries. For example, in the late 1700s, Russian missionaries traveled by ship and then by kayak to bring Orthodox Christianity to the native Aleuts and Eskimos throughout Alaska.

The major reason Orthodoxy Christianity is so little known in most of the United States is that most of the people who originally settled America were from Western Europe, not from Greece, Russia, or the Middle East. It was not until late in the 1800's that immigrants from these countries began to arrive in numbers and to bring with them their Orthodox Faith. Thus the Orthodox churches which have existed in this country up to now have been, for the most part, isolated within certain ethnic communities.

Because Orthodoxy has belonged primarily to these "eastern" countries, it is sometimes referred to as "Eastern Orthodoxy." This is an unfortunate and misleading title. Orthodoxy is not just an ethnic or cultural tradition, nor is it as a Protestant might assume, just an eastern form of Catholicism. It is the oldest Church in Christianity, with its biblical worship, its historic way of life, and a continuity which reaches all the way back to the early Church of the Book of Acts. In fact, Orthodox Christianity is not just a "branch" of the Church, but the very trunk, *the* original Christian Church.

### THE AGE OF THE APOSTLES

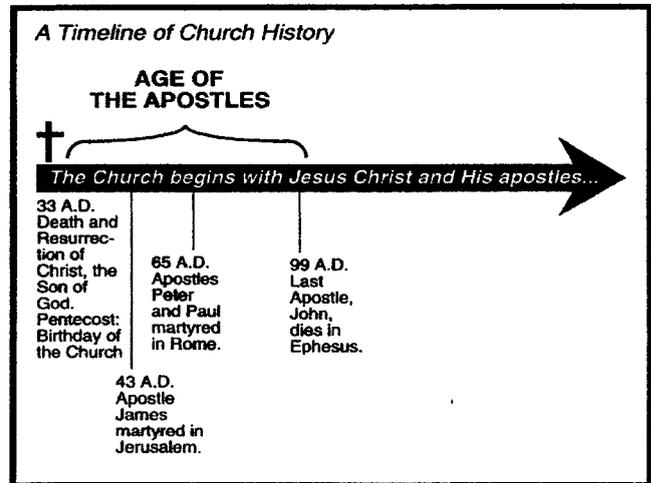
The Christian Church is based in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, who has come into the world as a man. This is the foundational belief of every true Christian.

The Church was planted by the men whom Jesus Christ called to be His Apostles or missionaries into all the world. Christ's last words to these men whom He had chosen were these: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19, 20). The Apostles carried out this "great commission."

Those familiar with the Acts of the Apostles will recall that ten days after Christ's ascension into heaven, on the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came

upon Christ's disciples. Through their preaching and the accompanying miracles, three thousand people in Jerusalem believed in Christ and were baptized. This day has ever since been considered the birthday of the Church. From this remarkable beginning, the Church quickly spread throughout the surrounding area of Judea and Samaria. Then, through the efforts of the Apostle Paul and others, new churches began to spring up in cities throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.

Much of the history of these first years is described in the Book of Acts and the Epistles of Paul. For example, in Acts 12 we read of the martyrdom of James, the first of Christ's original disciples to die, in about AD. 43. Later, in Acts 15, we read about an important council of the Apostles which took place in Jerusalem in about AD. 49. Shortly after this, however, the Bible record of the history of the early Church ends. Was this, then, the end of the Church? Not at all - it was just the beginning.

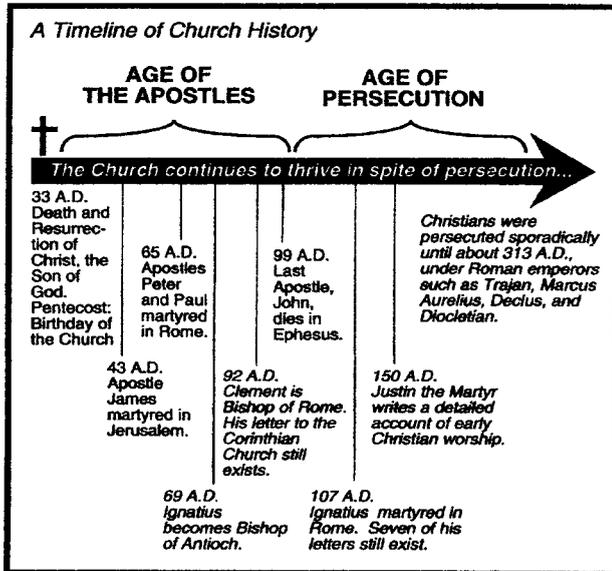


From other early Christian writings we know that the Apostles Peter and Paul were both killed in Rome by Nero in about AD. 65. Peter was crucified upside down, and Paul was beheaded outside the city walls. Likewise, all but one of the original Apostles died in martyrdom because of their uncompromising witness to Christ. Only the Apostle John lived to old age. Having survived several attempts on his life, he was exiled to a remote island, where he penned the last of the books of the Bible to be written: a Gospel, three Epistles, and the Revelation. He finally died a natural death in the city of Ephesus in about A.D. 99. With his death the age of the Apostles came to an end.

### THE AGE OF PERSECUTION

Was the death of the Twelve, then, the end of the New Testament Church? Once again, no. Jesus Christ had given His Apostles the grace of the Holy Spirit, and they did not fail in fulfilling His command. They preached, they baptized, and they established

churches, just as Christ had directed. And they chose other faithful men to be their successors, to start more churches and to lead these communities in the course they, the Apostles, had set. In his letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul wrote: "The things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2).



One of these faithful men was a disciple of the Apostle John named Ignatius. In about A.D. 67 he was made the overseer, or bishop, of the church in Antioch. Some forty years later, in the year 107, Ignatius was arrested by the Emperor Trajan, taken to Rome and thrown to the lions. On the way to Rome he wrote letters to seven of the churches that he passed the churches of Ephesus, Philippi, and Smyrna, among others. These letters still exist today and give a remarkable insight into the early Church after the age of the Apostles.

Another of these early successors of the Apostles is Clement, who became the third bishop of the church in Rome in A.D. 92. He wrote to the church in Corinth, a letter that also exists to this day. Others who carried on the apostolic tradition include Polycarp, bishop of Ephesus; Thekla, who was one of Paul's converts in Iconium (see Acts 14:1 and *The Acts of Thekla*); Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon, France; and Justin Martyr, who, in A.D. 150, wrote a detailed description of early Christian worship.

It is clear, then, that the Christian Church which began with Jesus Christ and was established by the Apostles did not suddenly cease to exist with the death of the Apostles. Nor did it veer away from the course that Christ had set for it to wallow around in some great "Dark Age," only to be rediscovered and resurrected by Martin Luther some fifteen hundred years later. No, the Church kept on going and growing in the course set for

it from the beginning. And it did so in the face of great opposition and persecution from the Roman Empire.

It is important to realize that, at this period of history, there was still only one Church in all the world. There were no such things as denominations. You couldn't walk out of one kind of Christian Church and go down the street and join another kind. For the Church - with its many parishes - was one. Christians everywhere believed the same truths and worshiped in basically the same way, the way handed down to them by the Apostles. Whenever disputes or questions arose, the bishops in a given area would gather in council, just as the Apostles had once done at Jerusalem; and come to agreement on what they had all received from Christ.

### THE AGE OF THE COUNCILS

In the year 313 an event occurred that forever changed the course of history. The Roman Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity.

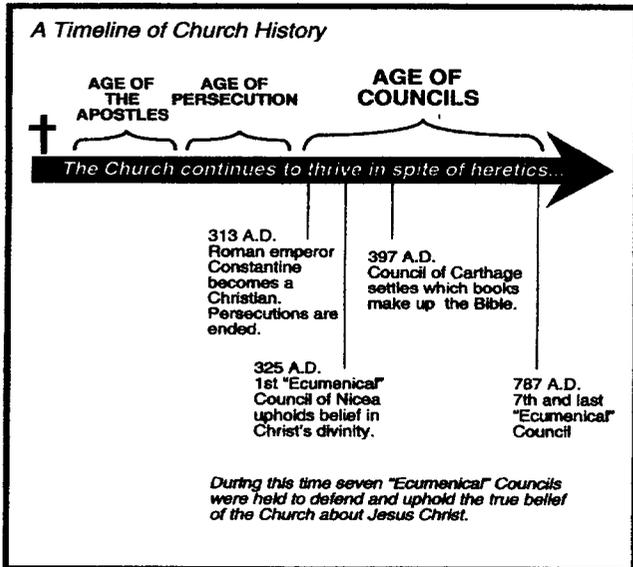
For the Church, this meant that the first age of persecution was over and that Christians now had freedom to gather, to travel, and to confer with one another on a worldwide scale. It began what some have called the Golden Age of the Church, a time of great advancement and great saints.

Yet at almost the very same time, a new threat arose to challenge the Church. This time it was not a threat from outside; it was a threat from within. It did not take the form of arenas filled with lions or of cruel executioners. Rather, it was the insidious and destructive force of heresy, perpetrated by men such as Arius, Eutyches, and Nestorius. These men were priests and bishops in the Church who began to challenge the most essential beliefs of the Christian Faith, including the belief that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God.

Arius began to teach in Egypt: "There once was a time when the Son of God did not exist!" Ultimately this would mean that Christ was not eternally begotten of the Father. Eutyches taught nearly the opposite - that the humanity of Christ is an insignificant drop of water swallowed up in the ocean of His divinity. Nestorius tried to straddle these two views by splitting Christ, making Him into two persons, one divine and one human, passing through life like two dancers joined hand in hand.

Each time these and other heresies arose, however, they were opposed by great men in the Church, men like Athanasius, Basil, Hilary, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Leo of Rome, and hundreds of others. And during the course of the next five hundred years, from 325 to 787, the leaders of the Church from all over the Empire and beyond gathered on seven different occasions to combat these false teachings and to put forth the true belief of the Church. These seven gatherings later came to be called the Seven Ecumenical Councils. The use of the word

"ecumenical," from the Greek word for "all the inhabited earth," implies that these councils represented and defined the Christian Faith as it was held throughout the entire world.



The first of these councils was held in the year 325 in the small town of Nicea. There a statement of faith was drawn up to set forth in a concise manner the essential belief of the Church about Jesus Christ. It was an attempt not to invent new doctrines, but simply to preserve what was taught in the Bible and to witness to the truth that had always been held by the Church. This statement of faith is known today as the Nicene Creed, and it still remains the basic creed of the Orthodox Church.

Another very important Church council was held in North Africa in 397. This council at Carthage confirmed once and for all which books would make up the Bible. The Bible did not just magically float down from heaven at the end of the first century, leather-bound and gilt-edged. For the first three centuries of the Church, the books of the Bible we take so much for granted were written and known, but they were still in the process of being compiled. In some places a few books were disputed and left out; in other places a few books were added. The Church, then, made the final determination of the New Testament canon in a council held early three hundred years after the last book had been written, and Christians have abided by this canon ever since.

The point to be stressed, however, is that during the age of these Seven Ecumenical Councils the belief of the Church, even though subjected to the attack of heresy from within, remained the same as it "had been in New Testament times, in the age of the Apostles and during the age of persecution. Even after one thousand years there were still no such things as

denominations. There was still only one, unified Church throughout all the world.

### THE GREAT SCHISM

Now we come to a critical moment in Church history. Near the end of the first thousand years of its existence, the Church began to be pulled in two directions, along the lines of East and West. (At this time "East" meant Greece, Asia, and the Middle East, while "West" referred to Europe.) The causes of this pulling apart were many and complex. The language of the West was Latin; the language of the East was Greek. The western portion of the old Roman Empire eventually crumbled beneath the attack of hordes of invading tribes and then began a slow process of rebuilding; the eastern portion survived these invasions and eventually became the Byzantine Empire. The churches of the West revolved around Rome; the churches of the East were led by the great city of Constantinople.

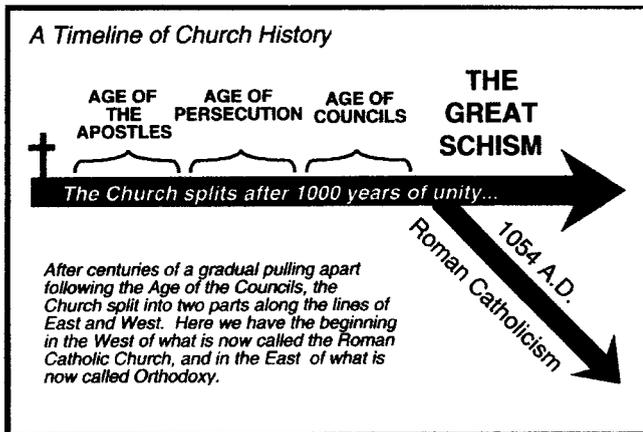
The result of this pulling apart was that the oneness of mind and the desire and ability to come together in council, which had been so vital to the Church during the age of the Ecumenical Councils, gradually began to be lost. This was particularly true in the West, where the bishop of Rome, the pope, began to assume a new and greater authority. Finally he declared that he alone was the universal head of the Church. But in the East the original spirit of "conciliarity" was maintained, because the patriarch of the capital city of Constantinople shared equal ranking with the patriarchs of three other ancient cities of the Church: Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria.

Once Rome drifted out of this vital communication with her sister churches, doctrinal change began to creep into the Western Church, bringing division in its wake. One such change was the addition of a phrase to the Nicene Creed. Whereas the Eastern Church continued to confess that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father alone, the Western Church now claimed that He proceeded from the Father *and the Son* (in Latin, *filioque*).

Many other significant differences began to develop as well differences in worship, theology, and Church government - all because of innovations in the West which represented a confusing deviation from what had been held before. The result of this gradual pulling apart was that, over a period of centuries - from the ninth to the thirteenth - the churches of the West and the churches of the East officially broke communion with each other.

This parting of the ways is known in Church history as the "Great Schism." This was the beginning in the West of what is now called Roman Catholicism, and in the East of what is called Orthodox Christianity. No doubt, both sectors suffered a great loss. The Church, which was, in the language of the Bible, the "Body of

Christ," had lost a limb. While each group naturally claimed to be the True Church, it was actually in the West that the change and deviation from the early Church had taken place. One convincing proof of this is the next major event of Western Church history - the Protestant Reformation.



### THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

About four hundred years after the Great Schism, many Christians in the West began to oppose the distortion of the Christian Faith which had continued to take place in Rome. This distortion was manifest in everything from the buying and selling of clerical offices, to what seemed like the buying and selling of salvation. The opposing movement was at first a "protest" and then a call for "reformation" - hence the term, "Protestant Reformation." It was an attempt to rediscover and regain something which had been lost in the West. But the pope, instead of seriously examining the need for reform, simply excommunicated these "protesters." Among the many break-off groups which then arose, little agreement could be found as to what direction reform should take. So instead of reform, there occurred only massive and drastic division.

The first of these movements of reform was led by Martin Luther, who in 1517 nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of his church in Wittenberg, Germany. He did not originally intend to break from Roman Catholicism, but that was the ultimate result. From this fracture has come the Lutheran Church.

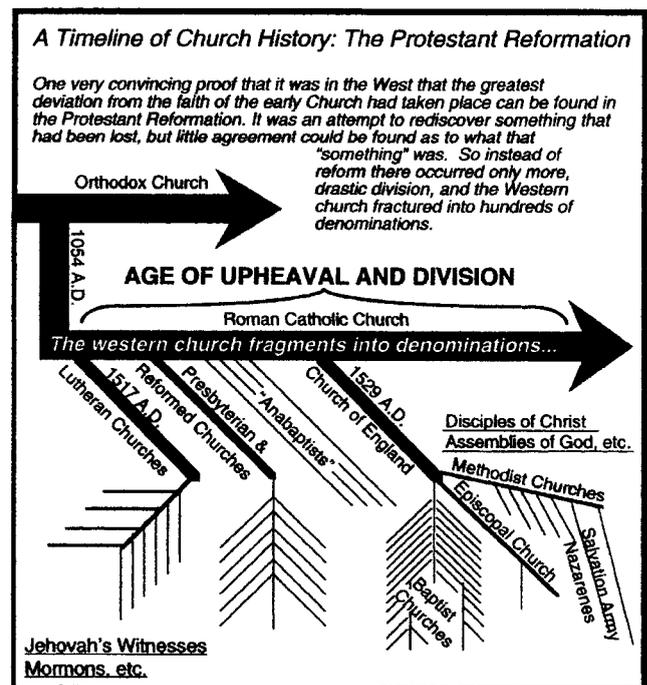
In France the reform movement was led by John Calvin. He could not agree with Luther on several important points, so another schism occurred. From this division developed another branch of Protestantism, the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. During this time the rest of Europe was in great religious, social, and political turmoil, and dozens of smaller independent groups began to splinter away from the Roman Catholic domain as well. These groups, commonly referred to as the Anabaptists, are represented today by the Amish, the Mennonites, and the Quakers.

Across the English Channel another major split was brewing. King Henry VIII was unhappy that the pope would not approve his divorce from one wife so that he might marry another. Therefore, in 1529, with the (in some cases coerced) support of his fellow churchmen, he officially severed ties with Rome and made himself the head of the new Church of England, or Anglicanism.

These initial schisms from Rome were, however, only the beginning of a tremendous splintering that was still to come in the West. Without agreement as to what was the full and original Faith of the Church, unity of belief and practice was never again realized. Instead, even greater division occurred.

From the original schism of Luther eventually came four separate Lutheran groups called "synods," and half-a-dozen smaller groups as well. From the followers of John Calvin came more than twelve different denominations of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. From the Church of England later came the Puritans, the Baptists, and the Methodists. The Baptists, in turn, eventually fragmented into over twenty-five different denominations. The Methodists broke into five major groups, from which later came the Nazarenes and the Salvation Army.

In the midst of all this fracturing and disagreement, hundreds of independent groups and denominations began to spring up on their own, and they have continued to do so even to the present day. These groups include everything from the Disciples of Christ and the Assemblies of God to other groups which call themselves Christians, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons.



After four hundred years, this fragmentation has continued to the point that it's clear we in the West have little idea of what the Church is really supposed to be about. Rather, we assume that the existence of hundreds of separate denominations is perfectly acceptable, and that in the end every Christian is really on his own anyway, alone with God and the Bible. The tragic conclusion of all this is that vast numbers of Western Christians today - Protestant and Roman Catholic alike - simply no longer "believe in the Church." Ask them! "Church" is a word without real substance, an institution, no longer essentially connected to the gospel, but simply a fellowship, a fraternity, a Christian resource center, a club.

Christian history can thus be broken down into the "Age of the Apostles," the "Age of Persecution," the "Age of the Councils," the "Great Schism," and then, in the West, an age of great upheaval and division.

### THE ORTHODOX EAST

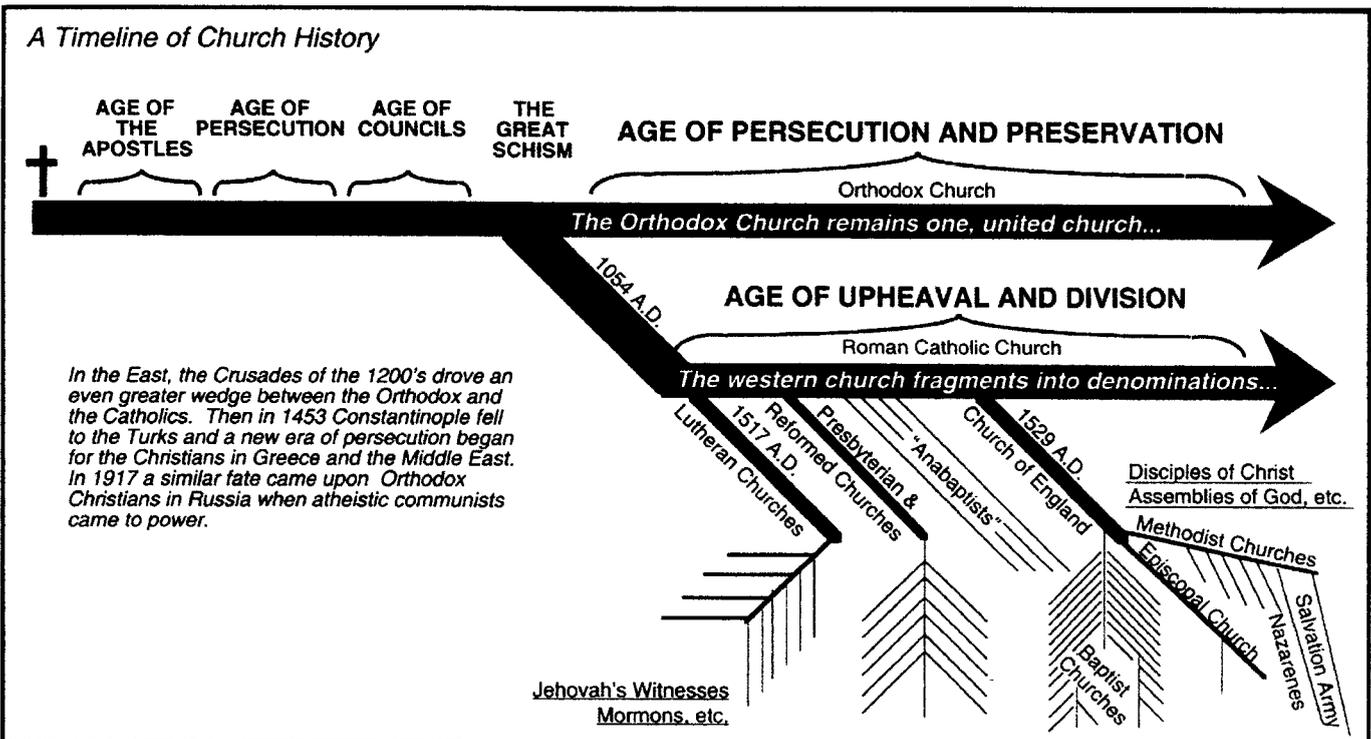
While the West was in turmoil, what was happening in the East? The centuries following the Great Schism brought a few attempts at reconciliation with the West, but none succeeded. Instead the Crusades of the 1200s drove an even greater wedge between the two. Roman Catholic soldiers, supposedly on their way to free the Holy Land from "infidels," attacked instead the cities of the Orthodox East, including even the great capital, Constantinople. There they killed their Christian brothers.

Meanwhile, however, Orthodox Christianity had spread into Russia, where it soon began to flourish.

This was providential, for in 1453 the city of Constantinople was overrun by Turkish Moslems, and the Byzantine Empire came to an end. As a result, Christians in Greece and the Middle East entered a new age of persecution. Then, in 1917, a similar fate came upon the Church in Russia, as communist revolutionaries overthrew the Tsar and established the atheistic state of the Soviet Union. Under Lenin and Stalin, more than twenty million Orthodox Christians in Russia were killed for their belief in Jesus Christ.

Through all of this time, however, it can be said the Orthodox Church did two things. First, it remained one united Church. There has never been a Protestant Reformation in the East; there has never been a fracturing into hundreds of different denominations. The national jurisdictions which exist in the Orthodox Church, such as Russian, Greek, and Antiochian, do not represent differences in belief, worship, or structure. They are simply the different geographic and cultural expressions of the same faith. All the national Orthodox jurisdictions hold to exactly the same doctrine, worship in much the same way, recognize one another's members and leaders, and are in full communion with one another.

The second thing the Orthodox Church has done is to preserve unchanged the original Faith of the Church, the Faith of the Apostles, of the martyrs, and of the Seven Ecumenical Councils. Sometimes it seems to us in the West as though somewhere along the way, near the end of the first thousand years after Christ, the Orthodox Church entered a long, dark tunnel, as it were, removed from the rest of history and the developments of the western world. Only in this



century, it seems, is Orthodoxy suddenly ready to reemerge. But, in fact, throughout this period of politically imposed isolation from the West, Orthodoxy continued to preserve the original treasure of the Christian Faith, safe and unchanged. This same unaltered Faith is still in the Orthodox Church today. It is alive, and as powerful and life-changing as it was when Peter and Paul and the other Apostles gave their lives for Christ in the first century.

So while the West underwent an age of upheaval and division, centered in the Protestant Reformation, the East underwent an age of persecution but still preserved the Faith.

The original Faith of the Church did not disappear with the Apostles. It did not disappear with the end of persecution. It did not disappear with the onslaught of heresies. It did not disappear when the West became isolated and began to innovate and deviate from the original Faith of the early Church. And it did not disappear in the fracturing of Western Christianity into a thousand different denominations.

There is another voice and another choice in the Christian world besides Catholicism and Protestantism. That choice is Orthodox Christianity, the precious treasure of the early Church, alive and well in our day.

#### MY OWN DISCOVERY OF ORTHODOXY

In 1975 a group of Protestant evangelical leaders from varied backgrounds banded together and made a commitment that together they would try to discover the historic Church and seek God's will for themselves and their communities. Each of these leaders was the pastor of a church or Christian fellowship group that was independent of any existing denomination. They felt there was more to Church life than they had experienced so far, but they also believed that they would not find it in the places they had already been. Like most Americans, they knew next to nothing about Orthodoxy; some did not even know of its existence. They turned to the study of Church history for the answer to a question that burned in their hearts: Whatever became of the New Testament Church - where did it go in history?

So began the journey of those who would come to be called the "Evangelical Orthodox" - a pilgrimage that would take them, literally, halfway around the world, and would turn upside down many of the doctrinal preconceptions they had held all their lives.

As these Christian leaders studied Church history and gradually discovered historic, orthodox Christianity, they began to put into practice in their communities, as best they could, the things they were learning about doctrine, worship, and Church government. Then, in 1987, after more than a decade of learning, growing, and changing, these churches-whole Christian congregations from Atlanta to Anchorage, with their existing membership and leadership intact-were officially received back into the fold of the Orthodox Church as parishes under the ancient Church of Antioch.

As a participant in that journey, I still look back with fondness on the excitement of those times. Virtually none of us had ever before had any ties to the Orthodox Church. We had all formerly been such things as Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Catholics, or simply new converts to the Christian Faith. But following God, we discovered historic Christianity and we became Orthodox. And now, years later, I can say that in Orthodox Christianity we have found a faith which really satisfies the longings of our hearts. We no longer feel we have to look for the newest, hottest Christian book or keep up with the latest, most popular Christian speaker in order to stay spiritually alive. Rather, we have found an unchanging place that we call home, a place to grow, to be fed, and to worship God with a fulfillment we had never before dreamed was possible.

Many other individuals and groups have made similar journeys to Orthodoxy in recent years. I personally believe it is time for America to hear more about the Orthodox Faith. If you are interested in the things you have read, if you are looking for something deeper and fuller than you've experienced so far in your Christian life, or if you have just given up altogether on Christianity and the beliefs you were raised with, then I challenge you to investigate the Orthodox Church. Many fine books are available from a variety of publishers. (Write for a catalog from Conciliar Press of basic books on Orthodoxy.)

Let me also urge you to find an Orthodox Church in your area and attend a worship service. (Be patient with us - a number of American parishes still use a foreign language in portions of the services.) Then ask the priest and the people there to talk to you about their faith and their life as Orthodox Christians.

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