

## What About The Non-Orthodox? The Exclusive Claims of the Church

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One of the most difficult things for people to accept about Christianity is the exclusive claim made by Jesus to be God and the only Savior of the world. This claim causes scandal to many, both those (ostensibly) within and those outside the Orthodox Church—a scandal that is simply unavoidable. Outside Christianity, many actively resent any claim that Jesus is God and the only Savior of the world. Yet this is indeed Christ's claim, from which there is no honorable escape. C. S. Lewis and others have rightly noted that there are only three logical options to explain Christ's making this claim: (1) that He was insane; (2) that He was dishonest; or (3) that Jesus is who He says He is. To be sure, one does not have to accept Jesus's claims, but it is simply silly to contend that He did not make them. To be a Christian, however, one must embrace the Lord's exclusive claims about Himself, scandal and all.

Because of the exclusive claims of the Lord, the Orthodox Church confesses, believes, and proclaims that the only Savior of the world, Jesus Christ, has one Body, His Church. We Orthodox believe in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and we believe that the Orthodox Church is it. In pluralistic societies such as those of North America and Western Europe today, the claim of the Orthodox Church to be the one and only Church that Jesus founded certainly is not popular, but ultimately it is a necessary outgrowth of the exclusive claims of Jesus; it is simply a testimony to the fact that God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is One and that salvation is bestowed only by and through Him.

Before we allow ourselves to be embarrassed by the claims of the Church, we must be sure that God Himself is not the cause of our embarrassment. There is no salvation from futility, sin, death, corruption, and estrangement from each other and from God except through Jesus Christ. Salvation is to be united to Him in His Church. Postmodern pluralism cannot be honestly reconciled with Jesus's claims regarding Himself or Orthodoxy's claims regarding herself. There is but one Truth, and He is Jesus.

It must be admitted that the exclusive claims regarding Christ and the Church are insufferable when proclaimed by haughty souls who would not recognize the virtue of humility if they fell over it. No Orthodox Christian is justified in boasting or presuming that his or her visible membership in the Church is a guarantee of a place at the marriage supper of the Lamb. As much damage to sensitive souls is probably done by presumptuous arrogance on the part of Orthodox believers as is done by all the anti-Christian postmodernist academicians combined.

It must be remembered that it is Jesus Christ alone that judges who is or is not saved. The Bible teaches that not all those in the Church will be saved, but some who are never visibly in the Church are nevertheless near and dear to the Lord. (How many times did Samaritan heretics exhibit saving faith in the Gospels?) Jesus is the exclusive Judge of all. On the last and great day, all human beings who have ever lived will be brought before the Lord for the final Judgment. The Creed of Nicea-Constantinople adequately summarizes the entire Tradition when it says of Jesus, He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

### Identifying the Sheep and the Goats

We can say much about those who will be ushered into the marriage supper of the Lamb, but we cannot say everything. Only the Lord has all the facts regarding the saved and the lost. God is Love; He is just and merciful. No one will be unjustly excluded from the Presence of God and the bliss of the day without evening. But there will be many surprises on that day, one of which will be the many excluded from the joy of the Kingdom who considered themselves members in good standing of the Orthodox Church!

From our human vantage point, the one Orthodox Church has both an invisible and a visible character. We can never see or conceive of the Church in its completed fullness. The Church remains the Great Mystery, and she retains a character hidden in the mystery of our Lord's Incarnation. We can say a great deal about the visible character of the Church, but we cannot plumb its depths. We must remember this when we speak of or to people who are not visibly or discernibly members of the Orthodox Church.

All human beings are, by their creation, made in the image and likeness of God. The Cross shows us again that all are loved by the Lord. Many may even bear a hidden, unknown, or imperfect relationship to the Lord and thus to His Church. The job of Orthodox Christians is to find, welcome, and unite such individuals and communities to the Church whenever and wherever possible. The faith is not a talent that should be buried! We know that the Lord wants everyone to be united to Himself.

We know some things about where the Church is and who is part of her. Even now we know the names of many people who will be present at the marriage supper of the Lamb. The Most Holy Theotokos will surely be there. Saint John the Baptist will be there, with the Prophets. The Twelve and the Seventy Apostles will be there, along with the Evangelists, Saint Paul, and his many helpers and companions. The holy martyrs will be there in their millions, led by Saint Stephen, the first of them. Saints Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom, Athanasius, Cyril, Leo, Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Maximos the Confessor, Gregory Palamas, and all the other Fathers will be there. The venerable monastic fathers and mothers of the deserts, deep forests, islands, cities and countrysides of the globe will be there, led by Saints Anthony and Pachomius. Some God-crowned emperors and other rulers will be there, and with them ordinary people with extraordinary faith from all walks of life. We know the names of hundreds of the glorified saints. But we do not know all of them, and it is presumptuous in the extreme to think that we do.

When it comes to who will not be at the marriage supper of the Lamb, we have a much shorter list of specific names. The horror of any creature's ultimate rejection of the mercy of God is almost too much to contemplate. This fact led some of the saints to speculate that every creature, including Satan, would ultimately be reconciled to God. The idea that finally all creatures with free choice (i.e., angels, devils, and men) will share in the grace of salvation is called apocatastasis (or universalism). Origen, Saint Clement of Alexandria, and Saint Gregory of Nyssa held this opinion. Theirs were understandable errors of charity. In 543 the Council of Constantinople condemned universalism. Prior to this, in North Africa, Saint Augustine of Hippo fought mightily against it because he saw the possibility of damnation as the guarantor of our free will. Our choices are real, and the Lord takes them seriously.

In this light, we know that Lucifer will not be at the marriage supper of the Lamb. Neither will Arius or the unrepentant heresiarchs. In addition, Saint John Chrysostom tells us that the roads of hell are paved with the skulls of erring priests, and those of erring bishops are the lampposts! Jesus warns us that there will be miracle-workers and prophets among those excluded (see Matthew 7:21&ndash;23). Saint Paul gives us lists of those who will not inherit eternal life (see 1 Corinthians 6:9&ndash;11).

Judas Iscariot was one of the Twelve. Was the Lord's call a charade? Arius was a duly ordained senior priest of the Church of Alexandria. Was his ordination flawed? Absolutely not! Judas's call was genuine and pure; Judas himself was not. Arius's ordination was faithful and authentic; Arius was not. From the time of Judas to today, mere visible membership in the Church is no guarantee of salvation. It can, however, guarantee a stricter standard of judgment by the Lord, especially for the ordained. The Lord judges the reality, not merely the appearance, of our faith and obedience. He will separate the saved from the lost on the Last Day.

### Speaking in Humility and Love

When speaking of a person's or a community's relationship to the Lord, and thus their ultimate fate, we in the visible communion of the Orthodox Church must be very careful. It is simply not for us to speculate about how any individual or group we encounter today will fare on Judgment Day. Orthodox Christians who have forgotten this have caused terrible damage to many. We must surely provoke God's wrath and place our souls in peril when we thus usurp the prerogatives of the Righteous Judge of the Universe.

We can say that this or that person is not in visible communion with the Orthodox Church. But what we say and how we say it must proceed out of utmost humility. Our own sins, and our gratitude that (most undeservedly) Jesus loves us despite everything, must forever remain in the forefront of our thinking when we are discussing such issues with those outside the Orthodox Church. Depravity among those outside the Church is understandable; our own sinfulness despite being in the Church is not. This conviction must permeate our being before we discuss the Church with those outside. Quite often we must simply remain silent. But our reticence in such cases is not due to a lack of belief in one God or in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

We are simply not given all the facts regarding the mystery of even our own salvation, much less anyone else's. On one level, we are only given those facts that we need to know in order to be saved. And, yes, we are only saved in the Church. Saint Paul teaches, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Ephesians 4:4&ndash;6). This can never be an excuse for arrogance or presumption on the part of Orthodox Christians. It is better to hymn the mystery of the Church in awed silence rather than to say too much, or to behave as though one's membership in the Church is due to some excellence on one's own part.

Ignorance is an aspect of being human, both within and outside the Church. Our ignorance must call us to humility. Here and now we see through a glass darkly. But even in the consummated fullness of the Kingdom of heaven, we will never know God in His essence. We will never know what it is to be uncreated. We will always be creatures, even as we go from glory to glory in eternal life. We must remain humble in the face of the fact of our ignorance. Even our Lord Jesus Christ partakes of ignorance when He tells His disciples that He does not know when the world will end: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matthew 24:36, RSV).

We confess our ignorance when we say, "We know where the Church is; we do not know where it is not." This hyperbolic saying is a way of embracing humility and eschewing vainglory regarding the uniqueness of the Orthodox Church and the unspeakable mercy of God for allowing us in despite our sins.

Saint Paul exhorts us, "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things" (Philippians 4:8). Saint Paul also tells us that "no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3). If this is the Tradition, i.e. what we have learned and received and seen and heard from the Holy Apostle Paul—and it is—then this outlook must inform our dealings with the non-Orthodox, especially our neighbors.

We Orthodox have nothing to fear and much to rejoice about when a person or group tells and believes the truth. We Orthodox worship the Truth—His name is Jesus. We have the unique vocation to tell the truth. We are called and sent to be prophets by our baptismal faith, but if we prophesy without love we will go to hell. (See Matthew 7:21–23 and 1 Corinthians 13:1–7 again.) Magisterial pronouncements and anathemas of the town clergy association by the new Orthodox mission priest or the self-appointed "Committee for a Truer Orthodoxy" are harmful and deplorable. (Of course, this does not mean Orthodox Christians should compromise every aspect of the Tradition to be "in" with the "in crowd" of a city, neighborhood, or political party!)

We Orthodox are called to quietly, courageously, consistently, and constantly live the True Faith. People should be able to intuit a great deal about the Lord and His Church by watching us. Our seeking what may be true in others does not diminish or compromise the Lord or the Church. Likewise, our seeking what is good and true in others will not soften or dull our duty to stand up against evil and even die for what is true at the hands of a society that wants to live a lie.

We must walk the narrow way of loving obedience to Jesus and maintain vigilance against the pitfalls of arrogance and presumption on the one hand, and sentimental universalism on the other. There are laudatory things and people both within and outside Christendom. Does that mean that the Gospel is irrelevant and that these people and things are not in need of the Savior? Certainly not! We must never oversimplify a complex problem. The Apostles themselves were vexed by the problem of how to view those outside their fellowship who followed Jesus one way or another. What we should not do is to create schisms or toss about anathemas while these things are discussed and worked out.

The Church has never faced such a large number and such a loud cacophony of non-Orthodox groups identifying themselves as Christians. The denominational situation, especially as it exists in the English-speaking world today, is relatively new. The Holy Scriptures and the Holy Canons give us clues as to the right shape for Orthodox strategy in this new milieu, but a universal response by the entire Church in this era has not been made. An individual's best response is to leave the issue to his own bishop and avoid attempting to speak for the entire Church. Eventually the Orthodox Church will speak with one voice.