

Report of the Committee Appointed by URCNA Classis SWUS to Study Eastern Orthodoxy

In recent years, several URCNA churches in Classis SWUS have reported that members have left the Reformed tradition in order to join Eastern Orthodox (hereafter EO) churches.¹ Our committee was given a two-part mandate:

1. To identify prominent Eastern Orthodox voices, what they are advocating, and media they are using; and
2. To provide a Reformed apologetic response to members attracted to Eastern Orthodoxy as pastoral advice.

The following report is the fruit of our committee's labors.

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¹ Throughout this report, EO will stand for either the adjective "Eastern Orthodox" or the noun "Eastern Orthodoxy."

Introduction

What is an Eastern Orthodox church?

EO churches are often recognized by national names (e.g., Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, the Syriac Church, etc.) and are associated by most people with ornate buildings and worship spaces decorated with gold, clergy with long beards and black robes, prominent use of icons (paintings of Jesus and the saints done in a distinctive “iconographic” style), liturgical worship services filled with ritual actions (kneeling, crossings, kissing and incensing icons, etc.), and a *capella* chanting and singing.

To many people EO seems Roman Catholic (hereafter RCC),² and there are many places of agreement between the two over and against Protestantism. Both hold to a succession of apostolic office residing in the Bishops. Both reject the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. Both believe that the elements in communion are transubstantiated into the physical body and blood of Christ. Both practice prayer using visual imagery (whether RC statuary or EO iconography). Both insist on seven sacraments: Baptism, Chrismation/Confirmation, Eucharist, Confession, Holy Orders, Marriage, and the Anointing of the sick.³ Both deny the sufficiency of Scripture and though they articulate the relationship between Scripture and Tradition differently, both reject the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*. For the reason of commonality between EO and RC, some familiar lines of Reformed apologetic response to RC will prove applicable to EO and helpful.

However, there are some key differences between the EO churches and the RCC. EO does not claim an infallible Pope as does the RCC. EO does not utilize Aristotelian categories for explaining transubstantiation as does the RCC and is in general much more mystical and contemplative than the analytical character of the RCC. In fact EO sees the RCC (and also Protestantism) as in schism from the true Church due to the inclusion of the *filioque* clause in western versions of the Nicene Creed. Because of the differences between EO and RC, and because Protestants are birthed more directly out of RC, EO has seemed to present new or less familiar questions and challenges, to which we should formulate more targeted apologetic response.

We here have sketched out only some very basics of EO. Ministers and elders will benefit from further study of EO history and doctrines which can be found in bibliographical resources listed at the end of this report.

Why are people leaving Reformed churches for EO churches?

While there have always been some who have left Protestant churches to be received (chrismated) into EO, significant cultural differences seem generally to have prevented EO from being as much of a draw to Protestant “searchers.” With the advent of a distinctly American

² Throughout this report, RCC will stand for “Roman Catholic Church” and RC will stand for either the adjective “Roman Catholic” or the noun “Roman Catholicism”.

³ Note that the seventh sacrament is different in EO; the RCC includes “last rights” as their seventh sacrament.

flavor of EO found in the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America and the Orthodox Church in America, in addition to the influence of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York, many are being drawn to EO who evidently had a limited familiarity and access before.

In the 1960's and 70's, a large number of evangelicals left Campus Crusade for Christ and founded a movement called the New Covenant Apostolic Order. Those who belonged to this movement had spent significant time reading the early church fathers in an effort to discover the New Testament church. They came to the conclusion that EO was that church and in coming years, large numbers of pastors and lay people were received into EO. Peter Gillquist spearheaded a publishing effort to teach Protestants about EO and these efforts paid dividends, producing a steady stream of converts who now saw EO as a way to participate in an ancient faith without the trappings of the RCC.⁴

Our committee has discussed all the recent known cases of URCNA members leaving churches in Classis SWUS for EO. There were a number of reasons, somewhat varied, that people said they left--such as, among others, the desire to worship in the church with the longest organizational history, or the desire to worship in a church that is not inundated with worldly fads and customs, or the desire to be free from pressure to formulate and swear by answers to every theological question, or the desire for worship more focused on aesthetics and a tangible sense of awe, or the desire to have faith and everyday life more meaningfully integrated.

We identified a set of (somewhat overlapping) categories that classify the different reasons former members gave for their departure and labeled them as follows:

1. Mystery
2. History
3. Beauty
4. Experience

In the following pages, this report will assist the classis churches by explaining the draws of EO within each category. Each of the four sections are self-contained, and will consider the kinds of desires people have and how EO is perceived to satisfy those desires. They will reflect on the ways in which Reformed Christianity actually best fulfills people's legitimate spiritual and religious desires, while offering a corrective to misguided or overvalued desires.

Interspersed throughout the four sections, but particularly in a separate short section at the end, we will suggest ways to provide pastoral care and shepherding for members considering EO, including specific counsel for consistories with regard to administering the membership of those who leave a URCNA congregation and are chrismated in an EO church.

There is an appendix, followed by a bibliography/resource list. The appendix is from Dr. W. Robert Godfrey, President and Professor of Church History at Westminster Seminary California,

⁴ Peter Gillquist writes of his conversion in *Becoming Orthodox: A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith* (rev. ed.; n.l.; Conciliar Press, 2010), and shares the conversion stories of eighteen Protestant pastors in *Coming Home: Why Protestant Clergy are Becoming Orthodox* (2d ed.; Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1995).

who has graciously granted the inclusion of this his unpublished draft of an essay on the RCC's conception of authority. We are indebted to Dr. Godfrey and commend the essay for its direct relevance to EO's view of tradition, apostolic succession, the office of bishop, and iconography.

One final note: this report could obviously be strengthened by including an evaluation of the history and theology of the *filioque* controversy. It must however suffice for us to commend the words of Francis Turretin on the matter, as he makes what could seem (to the committee chairman, at least) to serve as a representative Reformed summary judgment:

Although the Greeks ought not to have been charged with heresy on account of their opinion, nor ought it to have been the occasion of a schism arising or continuing, still the opinion of the Latins may be properly retained as more agreeable to the words of Scripture and the truer.⁵

The First Category: Mystery

Attracted to Mystery

EO worship is described as participation in and expression of fundamental unknowable realities: Trinity, Incarnation, Creation, Sacraments, and the Church. Andrew Louth says: "We start by standing before a mystery that is, and will remain, beyond our understanding . . . our worship is a response to an unfathomable mystery."⁶ For many converts to EO a main draw is the idea that EO worship and even theological formulations supremely reflect these mysteries, especially in contrast to Western Protestantism.

The West is seen as rationalistic, the Reformed are seen as failing to express nuance or to recognize that there are far more unknowns than knowns in life or even to acknowledge that what is known is only partially known. It is said that the West tries too hard to definitively, formulaically answer and defend answers to every conceivable spiritual and religious question instead of simply and gracefully living with mystery and paradox.

EO theology and life does not feel to many like seeking the right answers for an exam, but rather like an artful and earthy journey to heaven in company of its God. EO has appeal to those yearning to be lost in something bigger than themselves, to those who say they are not so much seeking answers as they are meaning, purpose, experience, community, and connection. Many are longing for the mystical and often describe their settling into EO as a homecoming, for the first time feeling "found-ness," belonging, being known and loved.

Many who have left for EO would say the West is more focused on talking about God rather than actually experiencing, loving, and serving Him. They perceive a conflict between an attempt to define, explain and codify God and to revel mystically in the unknown. Many EO convert stories

⁵ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* [ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; trans. George Musgrave Giger; Phillipsburgh, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1992], 3.31.5). See also: <http://heidelberg.net/2014/03/muller-on-reformed-orthodoxy-on-double-procession-and-the-filioque/>, accessed on September 12, 2016.

⁶ Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 1.

highlight being carried away in some aspect of beauty, mystery, or experience, rather than having a question answered; they may speak less of finding some elusive answer in EO theology, and more of being soothed out of existential angst by the EO experience. The liturgy, images, icons and community of the EO church are central and comforting to them. They speak of being alive to possibility, of being lost in spectacle and grandeur as they see, hear, and touch, in contrast to a stagnancy they felt in a bland or shallow Western religious program. Many who journey to EO speak of finding the West's dogmatic assertions unsatisfying and lacking, the product of callously spouted answers and touted systems that swallow up purity, piety, and humility.

Implications of Mystery in EO for Epistemology and Theology

For EO, mystical experience is an ascent towards God, an experience that surpasses all human understanding, an existential attitude which involves the whole being. One implication of this is that knowing starts in prayer, in liturgy, in sacraments, as opposed to starting with, as is said to characterize the Reformed and Western church, a preoccupation with mere rationalistic constructs.

Thus, in EO the beginning place of knowing is ironically in unknowing. Central to EO is the idea of *apophaticism*. Apophaticism is a way of knowing in which one knows God primarily through mystical contemplation, rather than through positive propositions or intellectual activities. It is an emptying of the mind of logic and engaging in prayer in one's ignorance. The goal is not knowledge but union with the Triune God, what EO calls *deification*. This negative way of apophaticism is the only way to open the door to a legitimate positive way of *cataphaticism* (a way of saying something positive about God). Denials, or negations, are the beginning point of EO theology- and everything else is God (as displayed by the negations of the central Athanasian Creed, and by descriptors of God like ineffable, incomprehensible, invisible, inconceivable).

Protestants are said to give lip service to God's incomprehensibility, but then via their theological systems, confessions, and philosophies, to compromise it by explaining that which was just confessed as incomprehensible. Vladimir Lossky says: "... we must live the dogma expressing a revealed truth, which appears to us as an unfathomable mystery, in such a fashion that instead of assimilating the mystery to our mode of understanding, we should, on the contrary, look for a profound change, and inner transformation of spirit, enabling us to experience it mystically. Far from being mutually opposed, theology and mysticism support and complete each other ... there is, therefore, no Christian mysticism without theology; but, above all, there is no theology without mysticism ... Mysticism is ... the perfecting and crown of all theology: as theology *par excellence*."⁷

Lossky writes elsewhere: "God speaks to us through His Son, the Incarnation accomplished revelation: it reveals and it constitutes revelation itself. To think theologically is not to think of this revelation, but to think by means of it ... God is not an object of investigation – God is not someone or something that we grasp or seize by way of investigation; rather we are seized by

⁷ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 8-9.

God as one seizes a person.”⁸ Thus, the Trinity and Incarnation are not puzzles to be solved or realities needing explanation. Rather, they are mysteries to be entered through life and liturgy. This is why philosophical speculation, proofs for the existence of God, natural theology, classical apologetics, and the like, are all problematic and of deep concern to the EO since they are all attempts to play the philosopher’s game.

In EO, a second implication of the mystery of God, related to the first, is a fundamental theological distinction between God’s unknowable *essence* and God’s self-revealing *energies*. For EO one cannot say anything positive about God’s essence (only the apophatic way of negation can be stated), but with respect to God’s self-revealing energies (what we may typically think of as God’s attributes) there is much to be said. EO rejects the West’s doctrine of simplicity because they believe simplicity (which again they call a mere philosophical concept) obliterates this essence/energies distinction.

Some Reformed Thoughts on Mystery

In general since in EO the mystery of God is expressed in sensuous liturgy and other mystical experience we must acknowledge that many may be attracted to EO because they bear emotional wounds and scars, and not because they are compelled by the abstract idea that mystery necessitates certain mystical experience in life and worship. Thus rather than first answer unasked analytical questions about the proper outworkings and expressions of mystery in Christianity, we could supplant the bad salve of EO with our own kindly restorative affection in tangible, concrete, and consistent ways. As human beings created in the image of God we are more than thinking beings.⁹ It would not surprise us that many of our friends attracted to EO will need more deliberate, patient, personal, holistic (body and soul) care. This is the care, after all, that the Father gives us. We can model and teach holistic piety in the way we interact in church and in the world.¹⁰

To provide this care would first be to ensure that our own local churches’ love and communion extends beyond the walls of the church on the Lord’s Day. Thoughtful, intentional, and sacrificial seeking to love and serve one another daily is our calling. The phrase “they will know we are Christians by our love” is not just a platitude, but a calling, a privilege, a responsibility, a participation in the life of God and His People. If we wish to minister most effectively to those believing that EO is a more desirable place to experience the mysteries of the Christians life, let us spend time with one another, weeping with those who weep, rejoicing with those who rejoice,

⁸ Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (trans. Ian and Ihita Kesarcodi-Watson; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), 18, 27.

⁹ For a useful discussion the breadth of the human person, a breadth that goes beyond “cognitivist approaches” that reduce man to merely a thinking being, see James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009). In places, Smith sounds as if he is minimizing the importance of knowledge and cognition, but this is not his intent.

¹⁰ Those who believe the Reformation to be exclusively cerebral seem to have paid insufficient attention to the Puritans whose writings evidence a thorough and careful theology wedded to a deep and passionate piety and experience of faith. For a useful introduction to Puritan writers see Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans: With a Guide to Modern Reprints* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006). Another source of note is Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012).

chasing after the wandering, binding up the wounded, bearing with one another, and by the Spirit serving and loving one another as God the Father loves and serves us in Christ.¹¹ It behooves us to examine ourselves in light of God's Word to see if we are sounding like the noisy gongs and clanging cymbals that lack love.¹²

But alongside living in caring community and ministering to the whole person the whole week, it will likely be helpful readily to review and affirm any number of our thoughts on the broad concept of "mystery," including:

- that we cannot know truth or Truth Himself, let alone love, see, hear, or serve Him without being known; we know *as we are known*, dependent on the Triune God— particularly the person and work of the life-giving Holy Spirit, who is subjectively experienced (1 John 2:20-27; Jer. 31:33-34; 1 Cor. 2:1-16; John 10; and John 17);

- that we confess the Holy Mystery of God in many places with identical language to that of EO, having inherited this good theology from the Lord with them through the early fathers: *Belgic Confession* Article 1 (note the negations!), "We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth. . . [the] spiritual Being which we call God; and that He is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite. . .";

- that we in fact take pains to express the preponderance of mystery, as evidenced by the over 20 times we refer to it in the *Belgic Confession*, especially with regard to the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Church, the Lord's Supper, God's Will, Election, and Regeneration;¹³

- that the Holy Spirit shapes faith by institution and ritual as well as by intellectual explanation and assent. The Church is important for faith, life, practice, and piety; indeed outside of her there is no salvation. The sacraments (at least the two instituted by Christ) are far more than bare signs, but effectual means of grace. Extraordinary things are happening through ordinary means;

- that the ecumenical creeds and confessions of the church are not merely lists of things to which we subscribe, but lively words forming our liturgical lives in union with our Triune God and his People. We stand before God in awe, and he dwells within us. We are not just talking about God but we are talking to him and with him and because of him, given that in him we live and move and have our being, and the Spirit of Christ dwells within us;

- that mystery does not necessitate specific forms of mystical experience (though admittedly it does not, on its own, forbid them). For example, the awe-striking mystery of the Holy

¹¹ Daily household devotional reading and prayer, the regular exercise of hospitality, and the development of local/regional household prayer and fellowship gatherings would be ways to serve these purposes.

¹² Wilhelmus à Brakel's words on humility, meekness, and peaceableness are commendable as we seek to avoid the pride and arrogance that is often more true of us than we wish to admit. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* (ed. Joel R. Beeke; trans. Bartel Elshout; Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1995), 4:67-101.

¹³ And there is particular (and catholic) reflection on our experience of that mystery, as represented by John Owen's *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* (Works 2:1-274), applied in Sinclair B. Ferguson's *The Trinitarian Devotion of John Owen* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2014).

Spirit intensifying the faithful's physical and spiritual union to the Second Adam in the Lord's Supper is no less mysterious because it should not (and does not in Reformed churches) take place in an elaborate setting with a dizzying array of ritual action and with a contrived (if even well-intended) transubstantiation understanding. Really, the Supper's mystery is better expressed by the contrast between its utter outward simplicity joined to the Spirit's universe-altering power at work there. We have Christ, and in Him all things! He is sufficient, we do not need the trappings;¹⁴

- that though there is much to be recognized as mystery, there is much that the Lord has revealed; certainly there are things beyond our comprehension as finite creatures, but that does not undermine the fact that there are things which we know and can know as God has revealed himself in nature, in His Word, and in His Son. Scripture itself makes this distinction, between the revealed and hidden things (Deut. 29:29). The Incarnation, the reality of which is inaccessible to us in a great and many ways, is that the Eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We only know in part, yes, but we do know! And while knowledge for knowledge sake may be problematic, and speculation is idolatrous, the Lord never prizes ignorance. To say that we cannot know something fully is not to say that we do not know it meaningfully or sufficiently.¹⁵ What God has said to us, we must learn.

A robust and consistent Reformed piety is saturated by delight in the mysteries of God, and will be expressed in prayer, song, preaching and teaching, in living life with a sense of wonder and passion before the face of God, in hearty partnership with fellow image-bearers. This piety certainly draws on (though not uncritically), yes in some ways relies on, the riches of expression in life and religion of the early church fathers and those who also have followed their example in other parts of Christendom throughout history and today. The Reformed would, should not only use (say) John's Prologue as a treasure of proof texts for certain dogmas, but as an invitation to believers to contemplate the unfathomable richness of the Trinity, the Incarnation, our union with the Father, in the Son, through the Holy Spirit, our indebtedness given we do not know these things by unaided reason, but by revelation and redemption. Where the Reformed have fallen short of this high calling, they are no more an indictment on the Reformed faith itself, than would some EO adherents thoughtlessly going through liturgical motions be itself an indictment on the EO system.

¹⁴ And consider what John Calvin himself said of participating in Christ in the [plainly celebrated] Eucharist: "Now, if anyone should ask me how this takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it" (*Institutes*, 4.17.32).

¹⁵ See Esther Lightcap Meek, *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003). And as this unknowable/knowable discussion applies to the essence/energies distinction, consider Michael Horton's adaptations in *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology For Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 129-131, 159-160, 612-613 and critical interactions with them, for example, Dr. Ryan M. McGraw, "Shifting Paradigms in Reformed Systematic Theology A Review Article of Michael Horton's *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*." *Puritan Reformed Journal* 5:2 (July 2013): 250-254.

The Second Category: History

Another major contributing factor in Protestant conversion to EO is the allure of antiquity. EO claims to be the original Christian church founded by Jesus, with liturgy, doctrine, and government that has remained unchanged since the days of the apostles. This claim can be very appealing to those in search of historic Christianity. Many Protestants and evangelicals attest to feeling disconnected with the ancient church, and desire greater certainty that the church they attend has not been drastically changed by the world over the passing centuries.

These are legitimate concerns that we should take seriously. How can we as leaders in Reformed churches listen to these concerns with pastoral sensitivity? What is our response to EO's claim to antiquity? What does Reformed Christianity have to offer the person in search of the historic Christian church?

The Quest for the Ancient Church

Any survey of testimonies from Protestant and evangelical converts to EO will inevitably reveal a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the modern evangelical church. As they retell their stories in books, blogs, and YouTube videos, people who have made this journey describe how they found their evangelical or, in some cases, Reformed church to be shallow and unfulfilling, partially because of its apparent severance from the ancient church.

For many of these people, this frustration involves more than feelings of nostalgia. Some express a genuine desire to know what happened in Christian history before their particular tradition emerged, and how their tradition connects to that history. Some complain that the Protestant narrative of church history makes an illegitimate jump from the era of the apostles to the Reformation, as if the Christian church barely existed during the centuries in between. As one convert explains, "I grew up in a fundamentalist 'Bible church' that loved God and had a clear desire to serve him, but I questioned why my church was so isolated from other Christians. By the time I graduated from high school I found something in the more historical faith of Reformed Presbyterianism but still wondered what exactly transpired between the first century A.D. and 1517."¹⁶

Three areas where many people long for this sense of connectivity to the historic church are worship, doctrine, and church government. Concerning the first of these three (worship), many converts to EO explain how they desired to worship God in the way of the early church, and that modern Protestant worship did not satisfy those desires. Burned out with worship services that reflect far more of popular culture than the liturgical practices of the historic church, many find the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church attractive. Even some who have attended Reformed churches see its appeal:

During my first year of college, I attended a Reformed Church on Sunday mornings and a Roman Catholic Church on Sunday evenings. My theology was still Reformed, but I longed for rich, liturgical worship saturated in Scripture. I encountered Eastern

¹⁶ Allison Bennett, "Reformed Calvinist Converts to Orthodoxy," *Journey to Orthodoxy* (blog), May 7, 2012. Accessed March 10, 2016. <http://journeytoorthodoxy.com/2012/05/07/reformed-calvinist-converts-to-orthodoxy/>

Orthodoxy and knew immediately that this was where I belonged. General dissatisfaction with evangelicalism led me to search for the historic church of liturgy and sacraments. And while Reformed Christianity sometimes has these elements, I found the fullness of them only within the Orthodox Church.¹⁷

A second area where many Christians complain of feeling an historic void in their faith is doctrine. Just as they want to be confident that they are worshiping God the same way the apostles and early church did, they also want to be sure that the teachings and beliefs of the church they attend conform to that history as well. Many former Protestants describe how their church seemed to have little to no continuity with the beliefs of the past, at least not further back than the Protestant Reformation: “Evangelicals essentially told me that the Christian church fell into heresy right away and did not recover until years later when Martin Luther rescued the faith from the hands of Roman Catholicism. Reformed thinking is more generous to the early church, but still takes significant pause at what transpired between Jerusalem and Geneva.”¹⁸

A third area of disconnection to the ancient church is ecclesiastical government. Given the plethora of different practices of worship and standards of beliefs among the thousands of different Christian churches and denominations today, some wonder how biblical worship and doctrine can be preserved in every generation apart from some form of apostolic succession in its ecclesiastical government. Many turn to EO for this very reason.

The Church Unchanged: Eastern Orthodoxy’s Claims

Concerning these three areas of disconnection from the ancient church (worship, doctrine, and government), EO makes claims which many troubled souls find comforting.

In the first place, EO contends that its worship has not changed since the days of the apostles. They claim that the Divine Liturgy “was in practice right after the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Disciples of Christ on the 50th day after His Resurrection.”¹⁹ While they admit that the Divine Liturgy saw subsequent development and did not take its final form until the fourth century, they maintain that the basic structure of their worship has not changed since the early church. As one Orthodox monk put it, “You have to understand, the words we are saying in today’s liturgy are the same words that Christ was saying, the same words that saints from the first century, the second century, the third century, the fourth century [were saying].”²⁰ Unlike American evangelicalism that undergoes constant updates and changes in its musical and liturgical styles, the Divine Liturgy appears to remain untouched by the passing fads and whims of popular culture.

¹⁷ Bennett, “Reformed Calvinist Converts.”

¹⁸ Bennett, “Reformed Calvinist Converts.”

¹⁹ This is according to the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. See George Mastrantonis, “Introduction to the Divine Liturgy,” Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, accessed March 10, 2016, <http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith7117>

²⁰ Harry Radcliffe and Michael Karzis, “Mt. Athos: A Visit to the Holy Mountain” 60 Minutes, May 22, 2011, accessed March 10, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/mt-athos-a-visit-to-the-holy-mountain/>

The two essential components of the Divine Liturgy are the Liturgy of the Catechumens (or Word) and the Liturgy of the Faithful. The Liturgy of the Word consists of Scripture readings, preaching, and a series of chanted litanies, prayers, and verses from Psalms and hymns. The Liturgy of the Faithful is another series of litanies, prayers (including the Lord's Prayer), and songs, but instead of Scripture reading and the homily, includes the recitation of the Nicene Creed and the celebration of Holy Communion. EO's representatives are apt to point out that it was the practice of the early church to receive the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day, often citing New Testament passages such as Acts 2:42 and 20:7, as well as first- and second-century sources as the *Didache* and Justin Martyr.

Incorporated into EO's worship is the veneration of icons (images depicting Christ, Mary, saints and angels) and the observance of twelve special feast days that honor key events in the life of our Lord and his mother Mary. These practices have a long pedigree and play a prominent role in the life of the Orthodox Church.

Secondly, while EO describes itself more as a way of life than a system of belief, it nevertheless claims to represent the unbroken succession of apostolic Christianity in its doctrine, which is summarized in the seven Ecumenical Councils (Nicea [325], Constantinople [381], Ephesus [431], Chalcedon [451], Constantinople [553], Constantinople II [681], and Nicea II [787]) and their respective creeds and canons.²¹ For the Orthodox Church, these Ecumenical Councils constitute its confession:

The Orthodox Church of Christ is the Body of Christ, a spiritual *organism* whose Head is Christ. It has a single spirit, a single common faith, a single common and catholic *consciousness*, guided by the Holy Spirit; and its reasonings are based on the concrete, definite foundations of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Apostolic Tradition. This catholic consciousness is always with the Church, but, in a more definite fashion, this consciousness is expressed in the Ecumenical Councils of the Church... Such *Ecumenical* Councils the Church recognizes as seven in number. The Ecumenical Councils formulated precisely and confirmed a number of the fundamental truths of the Orthodox Christian Faith, defending the ancient teaching of the Church against the distortions of heretics. The Ecumenical Councils likewise formulated numerous laws and rules governing public and private Christian church life, which are called Church canons, and required the universal and uniform observance of them. Finally, the Ecumenical Councils confirmed the dogmatic decrees of a number of *local* councils, and also the dogmatic statements composed by certain Fathers of the Church... In this way, the decrees of the councils concerning faith express *the harmony of Sacred Scripture and the catholic Tradition of the Church*. For this reason *these decrees became themselves, in their turn, an authentic, inviolable, authoritative, Ecumenical*

²¹ "Many misunderstandings and prejudices concerning the Orthodox Church thus go back to a wrong approach as students try to form, merely with the help of sources and scholarship, a picture of Orthodoxy, which is not really doctrine but a way of life, with its own system-related criteria and thought forms." Anastasios Kallis, 'Orthodox Church,' in *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 3:866-8.

*and Sacred Tradition of the Church, founded upon the facts of Sacred Scripture and Apostolic Tradition.*²²

In addition to the seven Ecumenical Councils, EO recognizes as authoritative the writings of the early church fathers. This is “for guidance in questions of faith, for the correct understanding of Sacred Scripture, and in order to distinguish the authentic Tradition of the Church from false teachings.”²³

EO claims that, unlike western Christianity, it has experienced doctrinal unity and harmony over the past two millennia. According to one of EO’s bishops and leading theologians, Kallistos (Timothy) Ware, Orthodox Christians “have known no Middle Ages (in the western sense) and have undergone no Reformations or Counter-Reformations; they have only been affected in an oblique way by the cultural and religious upheaval which transformed western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”²⁴ Through the eyes of Orthodox Christians, the Protestant Reformation was merely a schism within the Roman Catholic Church, which itself departed from the historic church (the Orthodox Church) by exalting their bishop (the pope) over all other bishops, and unilaterally altering the words of the Nicene Creed by adding the *Filioque* clause. These acts led to the Great Schism of 1054.

Finally, EO offers connectivity to the ancient church in its government through its claim of an unbroken succession from the apostles to the current bishops of the Orthodox Church. EO has three tiers of church hierarchy in its government: bishops, presbyters, and deacons. These offices, EO claims, have direct lineage to the apostles, that is, the men who serve in these offices today were ordained by men who were ordained by men (and so on) all the way back to the apostles. Without this apostolic succession, says Orthodoxy, a church is not a true church: “The succession from the Apostles and the uninterruptedness of the episcopacy comprise one of the essential sides of the Church. And, on the contrary: the absence of the succession of the episcopacy in one or another Christian denomination deprives it of an attribute of the true Church, even if in it there is present an undistorted dogmatic teaching.”²⁵ In defense of this claim, they appeal to several ancient sources, namely, Irenaeus (c.130 – 202), and Tertullian (c.155 – c.240), and Eusebius of Caesarea (c.260 – c.340).²⁶

²² Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1983, 2009), 40-42. In his survey of EO, Robert Letham concurs: “Insofar as the Orthodox Church has a doctrinal standard, these councils provide it” (Robert Letham, *Through Western Eyes: Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective* [Ross-shire, England: Christian Focus Publications, 2007], 23). See also Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London, England: Penguin Books, 1969), 25-8.

²³ Pomazansky, *Dogmatic Theology*, 43. See also Ware who states that the Orthodox Church possesses a “Patristic mind” that considers “the Fathers...as living witnesses and contemporaries” (Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 22).

²⁴ Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 9.

²⁵ Pomazansky, *Dogmatic Theology*, 257-8. Pomazansky adds, “The Apostles established in the Church the Grace-given *succession of the episcopate*, and through it the succession of the whole Grace-given ministry of the Church hierarchy, which is called to be *stewards of the Mysteries of God*, in accordance with 1 Corinthians 4:1” (Pomazansky, *Dogmatic Theology*, 247).

²⁶ Pomazansky writes, “From the Church History of Eusebius of Caesarea we know that all the local ancient Christian Churches preserved lists of their bishops in their uninterrupted succession. [Moreover,] St. Irenaeus of Lyons writes; ‘We can enumerate those who were appointed as bishops in the Churches by the Apostles, and their successors, even to our own time.’ And, in fact, he enumerates in order the succession of the bishops of the Roman Church almost to the end of the 2nd century (*Against Heresies* 3.3). The same view of the importance of the

A Critique of Orthodoxy's Historical Claims

Is it true that EO represents the unbroken chain of apostolic Christianity in its worship, doctrine, and government? How should we as Reformed Christians respond to these claims?

With regard to worship, it is true that the Divine Liturgy of EO enjoys a rich and impressively lengthy pedigree. Millions of people today worship according to the traditions that can be traced back to the liturgical practices of the Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire (330-1453). However, regarding EO's claim to unbroken succession in its worship, we make two observations. First, the notion that the Divine Liturgy has been in place since the days of the apostles is misleading and grossly oversimplified. While it is true that certain components of the Divine Liturgy were present in the liturgies of the ancient church (i.e. Scripture reading, weekly communion, the recitation of the Lord's Prayer and creeds, etc.), there is no evidence that the basic form of the Divine Liturgy was used by the apostles or universally practiced by churches in the first few centuries. The nearest example in the New Testament of an apostolic liturgy is found in Acts 2.42: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." But this, of course, is not a liturgy; rather, it describes the four main elements present in the weekly worship of the apostolic church: Word, fellowship, sacraments, and the prayers (which includes the singing of Psalms and hymns).

Likewise, the most reliable documents from the post-apostolic early church, such as the *Didache* (c. 2nd century) and Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (c.155-157), provide us with evidence that worship in the ancient church consisted of Scripture reading, preaching, singing, the Lord's Prayer, and weekly communion. These, however, show no signs of looking identical to the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church. In fact, the oldest surviving liturgy in use by EO today is the "Liturgy of St. James," which dates no earlier than the 4th century. EO's claim that its liturgy has remained unchanged since the days of the apostles is unsubstantiated and overstated.

Our second observation regarding EO's claim to historic continuity in worship concerns their use of icons. Like the Divine Liturgy, the icons of the Orthodox Church boast an impressive historicity, dating back to at least the 4th century. There is ample evidence, however, that images of Christ were not tolerated in the early church and viewed as a form of idolatry. For example, Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon in the 2nd century, spoke against making images of Christ and honoring them "after the same manner of the Gentiles."²⁷ From the 4th century, we have the Thirty-Sixth Canon of the Synod of Elvira (c.305-306), which says in part, "There should be no

succession is expressed by Tertullian. He wrote concerning the heretics of his time: 'Let them show the beginnings of their churches, and reveal the series of their bishops who might continue in succession so that their first bishop might have as his cause or predecessor one of the Apostles or an Apostolic Father who was for a long time with the Apostles. For the Apostolic Churches keep the lists (of bishops) precisely in this way. The Church of Smyrna, for example, presents Polycarp, who was appointed by John; the Roman Church presents Clement, who was ordained by Peter; and likewise the other Churches also point to those men whom, as being raised to the episcopacy by the Apostles themselves, they had as their own sprouts from the Apostolic seed.' (Tertullian, "Concerning the Prescriptions" against the heretics)" (Pomazansky, *Dogmatic Theology*, 247; see also 301-2).

²⁷Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.26.6, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (1885; repr., Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), 1:351.

pictures in church, lest what is revered and adored be painted on walls.”²⁸ Also from the 4th century (394) is the letter from Epiphanius, the bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, to John, the bishop of Jerusalem, in which he tells his colleague about his shock in finding a curtain with a painted image of Christ hanging in a church. Epiphanius tore it down and rebuked the elders of that church, explaining that such images are contrary to Christianity and “shall not be hung up in any church of Christ.”²⁹

The Reformed interpretation of the Second Commandment – both in its regulatory principle of worship and its prohibition of manmade images of our Lord – is not an idiosyncratic view unique to the Calvinistic tradition of the Reformation. The historical evidence shows that EO’s Divine Liturgy and the use of icons were not used in the worship of the early Christian church, at least not before the 4th century. Throughout the Middle Ages, icons (as well as crucifixes and statues in the west) became fashionable. In fact, one is hard pressed to find any sort of image of Jesus – for use in worship or otherwise – before the time of Constantine.³⁰

Turning to EO’s claim to represent the unbroken chain of apostolic doctrine, we again make two brief observations. First, EO’s claim only works if one accepts the Orthodox notion of the church’s infallibility, and, specifically, that the canons and decrees of the Ecumenical Councils are infallible.³¹ If the canons and decrees of the Ecumenical Councils are infallible, as EO claims, then they possess the same weight and authority as Scripture. On the other hand, if the church and its various councils are fallible, then it is possible that the church has erred in its rulings from time to time since the days of the apostles. We believe, as the Westminster Confession of Faith states, that “all synods or councils, since the Apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice; but to be used as a help in both.”³²

Second, we point out that essential Christian doctrine is not limited to the seven Ecumenical Councils of the ancient church. While we agree that there exists a “catholic consciousness” in the ancient creeds, confirming “a number of the fundamental truths” of Christianity, we also recognize that the history of the Christian church continued after the 8th century, giving rise to crucial questions and debates that required more clarity than the canons and decrees of the Ecumenical Councils provide.

²⁸ As found in Robert Grigg, “Aniconic Worship and the Apologetic Tradition: A Note on Canon 36 of the Council of Elvira,” *Church History* 45, no. 4 (December 1972): 428-433. Grigg provides some helpful commentary on the Synod’s ruling: “What they seemed to have feared, by their own testimony, was the act of painting that which is revered and adored upon walls. They did not simply fear that images of God or Christ might be worshiped, as if one could distinguish between a proper and improper use of such images. Their fear was evidently based upon a more fundamental consideration. The very act of circumscribing divinity by painting it on walls was a self-evident sacrilege. It was an insult to God, who had no need of such images” (Grigg, “Aniconic Worship,” 429).

²⁹ The letter was translated by Jerome and is found in *Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, 14 vols. (1893; repr., Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), 1:351.

³⁰ Consider relevant theological arguments here: David Van Drunen’s “Pictures of Jesus” in *The Confessional Presbyterian* 5, 2009 and Daniel R. Hyde’s *In Living Color: Images of Christ and the Means of Grace* (Granville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2009).

³¹ For more on EO’s claim that the canons and decrees of the Ecumenical Councils are infallible see Pomazansky, *Dogmatic Theology*, 29-49, and *The Patriarchal Encyclical of 1895*.

³² Westminster Confession of Faith, 31.4.

The 16th century disputes over matters of authority and justification are good examples. These became matters of essential Christian doctrine as evidenced in the confessions of the Reformed churches as well as Rome's canons and decrees of the Council of Trent. What a Christian believes about the authority of Scripture and how a sinner is made right with God matters. Yet, Orthodox theologians typically dismiss these discussions as idiosyncratic to the western Church, a church they see as schismatic from the true historic church. As Timothy Ware notes, "Christians in the west, both Roman and Reformed, generally start by asking the same questions, although they may disagree about the answers. In Orthodoxy, however, it is not merely the answers that are different – the questions themselves are not the same as in the west."³³ However, the debates surrounding the doctrines of authority and justification are hardly western in their origin. These in fact were the debates "at the heart of Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees, of Paul's controversy with the Galatians, and of the writer of the book of Hebrews' controversy with the Judaizers who wanted to return to the shadows of Jewish temple ritual."³⁴ Thus, we find EO's claim to uninterrupted continuity in its doctrine to be superficial as they possess no unifying confession on matters of essential Christian doctrine beyond the seven Ecumenical Councils. It is unsatisfactory and unfair to ignore debates on important biblical teaching simply because those debates arose in the west after the 8th century.

Finally, we respond briefly to EO's claim to apostolic succession in its government, that is, that their current bishops have a direct lineage to the apostles. While such a claim is in itself dubious, even if it could be proven it is no ground for the believer's confidence that EO has preserved the truth over the past two millennia.³⁵ As Michael Horton has stated, "Orthodoxy's appeal to a direct line to the apostles is surely no greater ground for confidence than that which the Galatian churches could have claimed. Yet they were wrong. It is on the basis of the apostle's own rebukes that we know they were wrong, and that their lofty place in the history of the church could not save them from the apostle's anathema."³⁶

In other words, if the apostolic church itself was fraught with problems and sometimes deviated from the truth, how does EO's claim to apostolic succession of its bishops give us confidence that the truth has been preserved pristinely over the centuries? The true apostolic succession is not one of men, but of apostolic *ministry* – ministry of the Word of God, which alone is the final authority for the Christian's faith and life. "The treasure that the church carries in earthen vessels

³³ Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 9.

³⁴ Michael Horton, "Are Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism Compatible? No: An Evangelical Perspective," in *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism* (ed. John Stamoolis; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 134.

³⁵ The claim itself is dubious, given both the history of Orthodoxy and its ecclesiastical structure. As Robert Letham has observed, "The Eastern church in the Byzantine Empire had no systematic ecclesiology. Unlike the West, there was no coherent body of canon law, due to the fact that the Byzantines never considered the church in a juridical manner" (Letham, *Through Western Eyes*, 121). Throughout much of the Byzantine Empire (c.330 – 1453), the Orthodox Church was not held together by a magisterium and final authority as was the Western Church with its College of Cardinals and Papacy in Rome. Not only did its center shift from Constantinople, which fell to the Turks in 1453, to Moscow, but under the pressure and persecution of Islam since the 7th century, the Orthodox Church gradually dispersed into a monastic movement of ascetics, mystics, hermits, and recluses. While this does not disprove EO's claim to apostolic succession, it does seem to make the claim more difficult to prove than the similar claim of Rome, which has, for the most part, remained seated in one place for 2000 years, and developed a highly structured ecclesiology.

³⁶ Horton, "Are Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism Compatible?," 142.

is the gospel – the announcement that God has done for us in Christ that which we could never do for ourselves, even with his help. This is all we have at the end of the day, and without it our ancient pedigree and customs, liturgies and rites, ecclesiastical offices and powers, are worthless.”³⁷ It is not upon an apostolic succession of men that Christ has built his church, but upon the gospel that the apostles proclaimed.

“I Will Build My Church”: The Catholicity of Reformed Christianity

What does Reformed Christianity have to offer the person in search of the historic Christian church? How should we respond to the weary pilgrim who desires continuity with ancient Christianity in areas of worship, doctrine, and church government?

Concerning worship, we believe it is commendable for modern day Christians to desire worship services that conform to the practices of the apostolic and early church. We sympathize with believers who find themselves dissatisfied with the trends of contemporary worship, which are often shallow, worldly, and irreverent. In view of this, we can understand why some have found the rich history of the Divine Liturgy attractive. We believe, however, that Reformed worship offers an alternative that is not only more biblical than EO, but also maintains great continuity with the worship of the early Christian church. In fact, maintaining such continuity was a great concern of Calvin and other early Reformers, such as Bucer, Knox, Oecolampadius, Capito, Le Fevre, and Musculus. They had no desire to be innovative in worship by starting new traditions or practices, but sought to recover the simplicity of Word and sacrament that was central in the early church. As they made reforms to the worship of the western medieval church in the 16th century, they drew upon their knowledge of the early Father and their liturgies.³⁸

It is for this reason that Calvin wrote into the title of the Genevan Psalter of 1542 that the Reformed liturgy was “according to the custom of the ancient church,” and produced a simple liturgy of Word, sacrament, and prayers, which ran as follows:

Call to Worship
Invocation
Confession of Sins
Prayer for Pardon
Absolution
Singing of First Table of Ten Commandments
Prayer of Commitment
Singing of Second Table of Ten Commandments
Prayer for Illumination
Scripture Lesson
Sermon
Prayer of Intercession (concluding with the Lord’s Prayer)
Singing of the Apostles’ Creed

³⁷ Horton, “Are Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism Compatible?,” 142-43.

³⁸ For an excellent analysis of the Reformers’ knowledge and application of the ancient Father and liturgies, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Zurich, Switzerland: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 1975).

Lord's Supper
Singing of a Psalm
Benediction

Calvin's liturgy bears striking similarities to some of earliest liturgies of the ancient church, as evidenced by documents such as the *Didache* (1st century) and Justin Martyr's *Apology* (2nd century).³⁹ Psalmody, Scripture lessons, preaching, the Lord's Prayer, and weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper were regular elements in the liturgies of the first five centuries, both in the east and west.⁴⁰

Thus, when Reformed churches maintain these historic practices in their liturgies, they are preserving a connection to the worship of the ancient Christian church. Just as it is important that Reformed churches do not deviate from these rich historic practices in order to be more appealing to the modern culture, it is also important that we do not think of Reformed worship as a new tradition that began in the 16th century. Rather, we must have the same concern of the early Reformers themselves and seek to uphold continuity with the ancient church. By retaining ordinary practices such as the Lord's Prayer, Psalmody, and weekly communion, we can be confident that we are worshipping God in the same way as the ancient church, and have not merely followed a new tradition.

Turning to doctrine, we believe it is also commendable for modern day Christians to desire a church whose teachings and beliefs have not radically departed from those of the ancient church. This too was a great concern of the early Reformers. As they defended their views on doctrines such as Scriptural authority, justification by faith alone, and the sacraments, they drew heavily upon the ancient Fathers in order to show that they were not departing from the historic Christian church (a claim made by Roman Catholic apologists in the 16th century). For example, one cannot read Calvin's *Institutes* without noticing his frequent citations of early and medieval writers, including eastern theologians such as the archbishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom (c.349 – 407) and the Cappadocian Fathers.

Moreover, as evidenced in Belgic Confession Article 9, the Reformed churches have always confessed the great creeds of the ancient church, namely, the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian. The Heidelberg Catechism includes an exposition of the Apostles' Creed. The Reformers were careful to maintain their confession and adherence to the historic and orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ.

³⁹ See Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996).

⁴⁰ Like the early church, Calvin saw the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a means of grace and integral to the ordinary ministry of the Word, firmly believing that it should be served to the congregation at least weekly: "That such was the practice of the Apostolic Church we are informed by Luke in Acts, when he says, that 'they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread and the prayers' (Acts 2:42). Thus we ought always to provide that no meeting of the Church is held without word, prayer, the dispensation of the Supper, and alms" (John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* [ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960], 4.17.44). For more on Calvin's view of the Lord's Supper and how he believed weekly observance conformed to Scripture and the practices of the early Church, see Michael Horton, "At Least Weekly: The Reformed Doctrine of the Lord's Supper and of Its Frequent Celebration," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 11 (2000), 147-169, and Keith Mathison, *Given For You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002).

We admit, however, that we could do a better job today of showing Reformed theology's continuity with ancient and medieval theology. While it is indeed important to highlight the discontinuity of Roman Catholic and Reformed theology, we must avoid giving the impression that we read the narrative of church history as beginning with the Reformation, or jumping from the early church to the Reformation as if the medieval church (both western and eastern) had nothing to contribute. We encourage Reformed pastors to become better versed in the ancient Fathers, and, when possible, to highlight the continuity of Reformed doctrine to that of the early and medieval church. This is in keeping with the spirit of the Reformers themselves, and equips us to dialog pastorally and intelligently with the troubled soul who is looking for historic Christianity in EO.

Finally, we understand why some have found EO's claim to apostolic succession to be attractive. Such a claim seems to offer stability to the believer in a tempestuous sea of churches, denominations, and sects declaring themselves to be Christ's purest church. We believe, though, that Reformed ecclesiology offers far more stability and safeguards to the believer than EO. It is important that we educate our members on how the apostolic succession of gospel ministry is preserved through our ecclesiastical assemblies, church orders, and confessional subscription.

In conclusion, we, as Reformed leaders need to take seriously the desire of those who are looking for continuity to the ancient church. We need to instruct the members of our congregations on how they can be confident that they belong to the historic Christian church. And we need to help everyone see how Christ has been faithful to his promise to build his church, and why we believe Reformed Christianity is a full and robust expression of that building.

The Third Category: Beauty

Converts Seeking Beauty

Though the draw of mystery and experience are considered elsewhere in this report, "beauty" is another category – closely related, to be sure – that has been a factor in people's embrace of EO. Perhaps we might say that the rejection of "cognitive" approaches to the faith, as seen in the draw to mystery, and the rejection of stale, emotionless worship and life, as seen in the draw to experience, leads one to seek out and contemplate beauty like never before. We believe that the Reformation possesses rich theology of beauty and thus believe that Christians should not despise the enjoyment of beauty as such. Nevertheless, when the objective criteria and cognitive elements that ordinarily govern the Christian life are downplayed, the quest for beauty can take on a life all its own.

Some converts to EO have become frustrated with the lack of beauty in many Protestant worship services. For example, note the following:

One time I was visiting a friend's church, and the pastor was pounding the pulpit, "Don't you dare imagine anything when you're praying! That's idolatry!" I never really bought that line. I never understood why Old Testament worship utilized all the senses, and then suddenly we get a new and better covenant (Heb. 8:6) and switch to plain white walls

free of any symbolism. Orthodox people taste, touch, see, hear, and smell virtually everything!

Orthodoxy is exceedingly beautiful. The Psalmist exults, “O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; let the whole earth stand in awe of him” (96:9). Worship is beautiful in Orthodoxy, as it should be. And every detail of worship is carefully designed for the honor and glory of God – from the way we sing to the images that adorn our walls to the vestments of the clergy.⁴¹

Since a hallmark of Reformed churches since the Reformation has been simplicity of worship and since Reformed church décor is often designed to minimize distraction from the preached word, converts like the one just cited describe their transition as one from worship that is ugly and bland to worship that is beautiful and vibrant.

Even when some Reformed churches have stained glass windows and visually pleasant interiors, these churches nevertheless have a simple, “white wall” feel when compared with the ornamentation and style of Roman Catholic or EO buildings. EO converts have felt dissonance when worshipping in Reformed churches, reasoning: “If we live in a beautiful world, one that is beautiful because it bears the imprint of God’s own beauty, why should worship of that beautiful God be so bland?”

How EO is Perceived to Provide Beauty

Our committee reflected on the departure of a particular URCNA member to EO whose dissatisfaction with the Reformation centered on experiential and non-cognitive desires and feelings. This individual was drawn to the visual arts, although mostly art in a modern style. Since he felt that traditional art forms were still constrained and burdened by rationalistic categories, the uniqueness of modern sculpture contained for him an “aesthetic richness.” There is a sense in which EO churches contain a similar kind of aesthetic character as modern art. The style is different and not overly controlled by either the realism of photography or by consumer trends and preferences. The gold furniture and implements, the myriads of stylized painted icons, the sweet smell of incense, the ritualized actions and gestures, and the lofty sounds of *a capella* singing (often led by a well rehearsed choir⁴²), come together to create a unique and sensory experience of worship. One convert explains: “Orthodox worship engages all the senses, taking worship out of a theoretical place, and grounding it here, in something tangible.... our whole person is engaged in worship, as it should be because, after all, when God created us He said, ‘It is good.’ Our senses being engaged in worship speaks to our view of humankind....”⁴³ To experience worship in this way is the only way to worship humanly, according to this convert.

⁴¹ Jamey Bennett, “Liturgy, Sacraments, and all that Jazz: Ten Reasons I Joined the Orthodox Church” *Journey to Orthodoxy* (blog), September 30, 2013. Accessed February 9, 2016. <http://journeytoorthodoxy.com/2013/09/liturgy-sacraments-all-that-jazz-ten-reasons-i-joined-the-orthodox-church/>

⁴² For a taste of choral music in the Russian Orthodox tradition, Sergei Rachmaninoff’s “All-Night Vigil” (aka “Vespers”), widely recorded and distributed by major classical record producers, is truly stunning with its deep, rich harmonies and haunting melodies.

⁴³ Thom Crowe, “12 Things I Love about Orthodoxy,” *Journey to Orthodoxy* (blog), August 17, 2015. Accessed February 12, 2016. <http://journeytoorthodoxy.com/2015/08/12-things-i-love-about-orthodoxy/>

One reason EO has such a sensory approach to worship is because EO emphasizes both ontology and eschatology when describing beauty. First of all, ontology (i.e., being, existence) comes in to play in the belief that the cosmos is designed to reflect God's own beauty. EO theologian, Andrew Louth, explains: "[W]e look at the world of creation. There we see a created order of beings both visible and invisible, a creation which, because created out of nothing, manifests nothing but God himself, for the whole created order is to be seen as a theophany, a manifestation of God, indeed a manifestation of God's beauty."⁴⁴ Beauty is therefore pursued not simply for subjective experiences of delight, but because to gaze upon beauty is to gaze upon God's own beauty revealed in creation. Indeed, the very layout of EO worship spaces is intended to be a model or reflection of the entire cosmos.⁴⁵

Second, eschatology comes into play as the beauty of worship especially reflects God's revelation of beauty as it exists in the eschaton. The idea of the age to come breaking in to the present age is not a category wholly foreign to Reformed theology. After all, we regularly speak of the "already/not-yet" and recognize the in-breaking of the kingdom of God in Jesus miracles.⁴⁶ Orthodoxy, however, tends toward an over-realized eschatology, attempting to pull more and more of the age to come into the present in worship. Furthermore, this eschatological distinction is even conceived in terms of an ontological or metaphysical movement toward "being."⁴⁷ For example, Leonid Ouspensky, a famous Russian Orthodox iconographer, speaks of those in glory (the saints) as *more fully human* than sinners because they have "put on the incorruptible beauty of the kingdom of God." He continues:

For this reason beauty, as it is understood by the Orthodox Church, is not the characteristic beauty of a creature. It is a part of the life to come, when God will be all in all.... For the church ... the value and beauty of the visible world lie not in the temporary splendor of its present state, but in its potential transformation, realized by humans. In other words, true beauty is the radiance of the Holy Spirit, the holiness of and participation in the life of the world to come.⁴⁸

Again, there is validity in speaking of the glory of the age to come breaking in to the present, but glorification is not the same as Plato's pure being. The beauty of the age to come is consummate beauty, to be sure, but EO's handling of this beauty using the language of being and ontology ups the ante, as it were, concerning what is happening in worship. If in worship the worshipper experiences nothing less than the age to come manifesting a beauty that is more real than the present, then it is no wonder that worship is so geared toward sensory experience.

⁴⁴ Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 66.

⁴⁵ Louth, *Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 133-34.

⁴⁶ See Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (ed. Raymond O. Zorn; trans. H. de Jongste; Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962), 65-70; Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (1948; repr., Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 386.

⁴⁷ These are metaphysical matters which can get complicated, but for a description of the details, see Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 20-45. This is a chapter entitled "Eschatology After Nietzsche."

⁴⁸ Leonid Ouspensky, "The Meaning and Content of the Icon," in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader* (ed. Daniel Clendenin; 2d ed; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 42.

Beauty in Scripture and the Reformation

Scripture speaks regularly of beauty, although it does not do so in a philosophical and analytic direction. “Instead the biblical writers are content with beauty as a general artistic quality denoting the positive response of a person to nature, a person or an artifact.”⁴⁹ It is true that God’s creation is beautiful; the fruit of the tree was “a delight to the eyes” (Gen 3:6) and the various results of God’s creative acts were declared “good” or “very good.” And the beauty of this world does seem to direct our attention to a “beauty that is more permanent and transcendent than anything this life can give....”⁵⁰ Yet beauty in Scripture is not only an aesthetic quality, but also a spiritual response to the beauty of God.

It is also true that Scripture does describe God himself as beautiful. David desires to enter God’s presence to “behold the beauty of the Lord” (Ps. 27:4). The Psalmist notes that God made the heavens, and that “splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary” (Ps. 96:6). But it is noteworthy that in the Old Testament, beauty is frequently used as a synonym for glory, majesty, splendor, and pleasantness.⁵¹ Yahweh in his glory, and Jesus in his transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-8; Mark. 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36; cf. 2 Pet. 1:16-17) and his appearance among the seven lamp stands (Rev. 1:12-16) equally depict the beauty of God’s holy array.⁵² Thus while beauty is predicated of God and while there is an appropriateness to speaking of his beauty in aesthetic terms, the ontological and eschatological language used in EO descriptions of beauty seems to go beyond Scripture’s intent, reflecting ideas more Platonic than biblical. Nevertheless, the Bible assumes that beauty is praiseworthy and good, that beauty found in this world is a reflection of God’s perfect beauty, and the artisanship found throughout Scripture’s pages is even attributed to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (e.g., Exod. 31:1-11). The pursuit of and delight in beauty by humans should be seen as a natural outworking of this very truth.

Though the Reformation strongly affirms the regulative principle of worship and strongly opposed the use of images in worship per the 2nd commandment, this has not led to a degradation of beauty among the Reformed. True, Reformed worship is simple, but simple worship is not opposed to beautiful worship. The very modern art that delighted the URCNA member who converted to EO mentioned above should have cued him into this very truth: simplicity *is* beautiful. And it is also true that some Reformed churches worship in a sloppy and lazy manner, paying insufficient attention to skillfulness in song (Ps. 33:3) and failing to ask whether their worship space “provides the appropriate environment for following the lines and the plot” (i.e., the content and doxological goal of the liturgy).⁵³ But this is not due to an intentional denial of beauty, but to a temptation that we all face. Indeed, EO churches themselves struggle with this same problem.⁵⁴ No, the Reformation is a place where the affirmation and pursuit of beauty and

⁴⁹ “Beauty” in Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 82.

⁵⁰ “Beauty,” 85.

⁵¹ See Edmund Clowney, “Living Art: Christian Experience and the Arts,” in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F.H. Henry* (eds. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 240.

⁵² Clowney, “Living Art,” 246.

⁵³ Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 172.

⁵⁴ For some noteworthy examples admitted by EO converts themselves, see Peter E. Gillquist, ed., *Coming Home: Why Protestant Clergy Are Becoming Orthodox* (2d ed.; Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1995), 123-23, 147-48.

the arts is robustly affirmed and encouraged. Space does not allow for a full description of this reality, but works by Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Edmund Clowney, and William Edgar, to name only a few, should be read closely before one converts to EO due to concerns for beauty.⁵⁵

A Note on Icons in EO

The use of icons is a hallmark feature of EO. Though EO condemns the Roman Catholic use of statues, it nonetheless insists on the use of icons in keeping with the pronouncements of the 7th ecumenical council wherein the iconodules (literally, icon-lovers) triumphed over the iconoclasts (literally, icon breakers).⁵⁶ The historical section of this report deals with the claims of EO that icon use dates back to the time of the apostles. It should also be noted that historians have observed a number of non-theological factors that dramatically shaped the controversy so that historical-theological claims by EO advocates should be sifted carefully.⁵⁷ And while it is worth mentioning icons here due to their visual nature, it should be noted that the use of icons in EO goes well beyond the category of beauty and aesthetics.

While the neophyte to EO tends to be enamored by the otherness of iconographic styles, icons tend to play more of a Christological and ecclesiastical role in EO.⁵⁸ Christologically speaking, EO treats icons as nothing less than an extension of the incarnation of Christ. The claim is that one who *truly* affirms the incarnation will affirm the use of icons.⁵⁹ Ecclesiologically speaking, EO uses icons in prayer, believing that the saints represented in the icons will – like live saints sitting next to one in a pew – join in praying to God for the needs of the worshipper. Thus EO should be distinguished from Roman Catholicism (EO lacks the belief that the saints somehow possess an abundance of merit due to works of supererogation), and yet should still be criticized for assuming that there is propriety in asking *dead* saints to pray for us.⁶⁰ What is more, the belief that icons somehow possess more beauty than the preaching of the word seems to be

⁵⁵ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1931); Herman Bavinck, “Of Beauty and Aesthetics” in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society* (ed. John Bolt; trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 245-60; Edmund Clowney, “Living Art: Christian Experience and the Arts,” in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F.H. Henry* (eds. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 235-53; William Edgar, “The Arts and the Reformed Tradition,” in *Calvin and Culture: Exploring a Worldview* (eds. David W. Hall and Marvin Padgett; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 40-68).

⁵⁶ For details on this controversy, see Everett Ferguson, *Church History, Volume One: From Christ to Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 336-42. Robert Letham devotes a chapter to the issue of icons and while helpful, his critique of icons has been deemed lacking by many eminent Reformed writers. Nevertheless, his critique is worth reading even if it needs supplementing and strengthening. See Robert Letham, *Through Western Eyes: Eastern Orthodoxy: A Reformed Perspective* (Ross-shire, England: Christian Focus Publications, Ltd., 2007), 143-171,

⁵⁷ See, for example, Peter Brown, “A Dark-Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy,” *The English Historical Review*, vol. 88, no. 346 (January 1973): 1-34.

⁵⁸ Although, it should be noted that icons are woven throughout EO theology, not just these two loci. Eugen Pentiuic, for example, uses iconography as an organizing principle in a respected academic treatise on EO use of the Old Testament. See Eugen J. Pentiuic, *The Old Testament in Eastern Orthodox Tradition* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3-10, 263-320.

⁵⁹ Michael Horton critiques this briefly in “A Response to Edward Rommen,” in *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism* (ed., James Stamooolis; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 256.

⁶⁰ See Letham, *Through Western Eyes*, 168.

another example of what we note below concerning the difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world. Though preaching is deemed foolish and ugly to some, it possesses a stunning beauty to one who has ears to hear (1 Cor. 1:21).

How EO Fails to Provide True Beauty

In responding to those drawn to EO for reasons of beauty and aesthetics, it is important to stress the fact that what is at stake is *not* whether the Reformation values beauty in general or even beauty in worship. What *is* at stake is whether cognitive concerns can be bracketed out from aesthetic concerns when determining what is glorifying to God, and whether conversion to EO is really an exchange of plainness (or ugliness) for beauty. Those drawn to the beauty of EO have demonstrated an emotional/existential angst on account of which they flee to the refuge of EO worship. When surrounded by the gold and the icons, and when engulfed with the sweet smells of incense, converts have felt better about the struggles of life. The sensory atmosphere enables them to forget the troubles of the pilgrim life, if only for a moment, as they get caught up in the cosmic and eschatological beauty that they feel is breaking into their worship.

It should be noted that popular EO approaches to beauty actually are quite truncated in their approach to beauty. There is certainly an “otherness” to the worship spaces and iconography of EO, and one is hard pressed to argue that the lush harmonies of EO choral music and the designs of the priestly vestments do not represent something beautiful. Yet all of this represents a *particular version* of artistic expression: that of the Byzantine Empire. Does Byzantine art most accurately reflect the beauty of the cosmos? Does Byzantine art most faithfully depict a truly universal aesthetic? For all the assertions that EO presents a more beautiful approach to life and worship, it actually seems to present a very narrow and politicized approach to beauty. Abraham Kuyper, for example, had this to say:

[W]ith respect to the Roman art-style I answer, first, that a style which borrowed almost all its motives from Greek art can scarcely boast of an independent character; and secondly, that, in Rome, the State-idea had become so identified with the Religious idea that when, in the period of the emperors, art reached its height of prosperity while sacrifices were burned to Divus Augustus, it is unhistorical to consider state and Religion any long as being at that time separate spheres.⁶¹

This is why Kuyper notes that “the dome in Roman and Byzantine art is not an expression of a religious thought but of political energy.”⁶² One on a quest to enjoy the beauty of God’s creation should find it ironic to reject a host of different expressions of true beauty in favor of one particular expression of beauty with roots in Byzantine political realities.

In light of this, we must ask a further question: is the character of EO worship truly beautiful vis-à-vis Protestant worship? Answer: No. The only way converts can downplay the beauty of Protestant worship is by judging Protestant worship by one’s tastes for Byzantine artistic culture. Though some claim that the simplicity of Protestant worship is “boring” (i.e., lacking beauty/aesthetics/etc.), Darryl Hart and John Muether offer an important response: “The real question ... is ... how did Reformed and Presbyterian churches come to a point where members

⁶¹ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 150.

⁶² Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 150.

sometimes perceive preaching, the sacraments, prayer, song, Bible reading, and benedictions as boring?”⁶³ Indeed – how did they? We would suggest that the problem is not with Protestant worship, but with the overly narrow tastes that have been cultivated by converts to EO. A scenario, offered by John Witvliet, is illustrative:

On a Sunday in Advent, the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* are sung by a choir of developmentally and physically disabled children. The Old Testament lectionary reading is from Isaiah 35. Their singing, by any standard measure, lacks aesthetic integrity – it is unrhythmic and out of tune. Yet here a powerful symbiosis of social factors (personal knowledge of individual choristers) and theological factors (the vivid and hope-filled eschatological theme of Isaiah 35) transform the aesthetic dimension of the choir’s contribution into a rich, kingdom-oriented liturgical experience.⁶⁴

Here is a lovely example of how aesthetics and taste are not the ultimate marks of the truly beautiful. Herman Bavinck relates this approach to aesthetics and beauty to the cross: “The cross of Christ teaches us before and above all that truth and goodness are not always one in a formal sense. The eye of faith may see glory in this, but the Greek mocks this foolishness and it is an offense to the Jew. Whoever sees Christ only with the physical eye sees in him no form, beauty, or appearance that would make us desire him.”⁶⁵ As Isaiah predicted, the man of sorrows “had no beauty that we should desire him” (Isa. 53:2). As noted above, there are indeed times when Protestant worship is done sloppily and lazily. But it is crucial to remember that the broken and contrite heart renders something to God in worship more beautiful than any external adornments that meet any number of cultural aesthetic norms. This is the wisdom of God vs. the (so-called) “wisdom” of the world. Would that converts might consider the breadth of true beauty before embracing the EO system.

Concluding Thoughts on Beauty

In conclusion of this section, three things stand out for our churches to consider when approaching those tempted to convert to EO for purposes of beauty.

First, let us remember that even good things can become idolatrous. As the saying goes, “Good goods make bad gods.” When one’s quest for beauty (something good) leads one to minimize the importance of *thinking* rightly of the worship of Christ, then it has become something bad.⁶⁶ To worship God in any way not commanded in his word is to violate the 2nd commandment (cf.

⁶³ D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 115.

⁶⁴ John D. Witvliet, “Toward a Liturgical Aesthetic: An Interdisciplinary Review of Aesthetic Theory,” *Liturgy Digest* 3, no. 1 (1996): 76.

⁶⁵ Bavinck, “Of Beauty and Aesthetics,” 256.

⁶⁶ Even EO writers note that EO worship can tempt people towards an externalism that is detrimental to the faith: “However, to say that anyone becomes an Orthodox Christian simply because of the aesthetic experience of the liturgies is missing something integral to Christianity. This idea that ‘it’s because of the beauty’ shows a rather depressing externalism, that is, a reliance upon the aesthetic experience of external actions.” Ryan Adams, “4 Things That Are Not Reasons I Became an Orthodox Christian,” *Journey to Orthodoxy* (blog), November 26, 2014. Accessed February 9, 2016. <http://journeytoorthodoxy.com/2014/11/4-things-that-are-not-reasons-i-became-an-orthodox-christian/>

Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 96). Thus when a church member begins to pursue beauty at the expense of biblical thinking about beauty (especially beauty in worship), let us seek to draw them back to the sufficiency and satisfaction of worshipping Christ according to his word, simple as that may be.

Second, let us strive towards excellence in our own worship so as to not place a stumbling block before those who are being tempted toward EO for reasons of beauty. This does not mean that a would-be convert's craving for beauty should go unchallenged, nor that we should focus on externals at the expense of the gospel message itself. Nevertheless, we must also remember that a desire for excellence in worship is a fitting response of gratitude for those redeemed from their sin and invited into the presence of the Triune God. Michael Horton explains: "It is often difficult to distinguish exactly where theological values end and taste begins, and yet we must, it seems to me, steer a course between stylistic absolutism ("Only the Gothic style really captures transcendence!") and a general disregard for the set in which this divine drama is staged in its local weekly performance."⁶⁷

Third, let us seek to grow in our appreciation of beauty and work to inculcate this same appreciation among the flock under our care. Herman Bavinck explains: "[M]any attempts are made to educate our people aesthetically.... This latter education especially deserves our support."⁶⁸ Though Bavinck was speaking more generally of vocational training, his words certainly hold true for religious education as well. While this may mean offering instruction about a Christian approach to art and beauty, it also means cultivating a sense of delight and awe in simplicity itself. Let us not take for granted that people are thinking correctly about the simplicity of our worship.

The Fourth Category: Experience

We have fourthly and finally grouped some allures of Orthodoxy in the category we have labeled "Experience." This category significantly overlaps with "mystery," and is also in some sense a catch-all. Different kinds of experience are in view, whether components of a satisfying life EO converts say they enjoy as a result of a comprehensive piety alternative to that of Evangelical Protestantism, or positive experiences incidental to EO, enjoyed by converts whether for the first time, or in a deeper way than before their conversion.

Concerning the former kind of experience, numerous converts to Orthodoxy wax poetic about participation in Orthodox liturgy:

It was fantastic. I remember our first divine liturgy. . . and so I watched this whole thing. I was enamored by it, and bewildered, and confused, all at the same time. I didn't know what all exactly was going on, but I liked what I saw.... And I said, "That looked to me like worship in the book of Revelation." And that's still what I tell people today. . . I think that when you go into an Orthodox Church, and you open your eyes to see the robes, to hear the chanting, the Psalms, the incense, the prayers, the presence of God

⁶⁷ Horton, *A Better Way*, 174.

⁶⁸ Bavinck, "Of Beauty and Aesthetics," 260.

there in the midst of his people, it's like you're reading the book of Revelation and you're seeing how worship happens in heaven.⁶⁹

And again:

[W]e had an opportunity to visit our friends' local Orthodox parish (our pastor was out of town, so we figured, "Why not?"). One visit was enough for me to know that our lives were about to radically change. It was one thing to read books and study about the history of the Church, and yet another to experience the Divine Liturgy and see where all of the ideas, stories, histories, and theories I had been contemplating for many months (and even years) intersect. I know for many other people, one visit is far from enough. But for me, it really was. I don't know, it's difficult to explain.⁷⁰

We find no need in this section to repeat and counter basic arguments in favor of Orthodox worship and piety previously mentioned (e.g., the use of icons, the interaction with rich ornamentation in temple art and architecture and priestly dress, prayer to saints, etc.). But for what we do say here, we recognize that in one sense it is perilous to try and respond critically to anything which people authenticate, validate by personal (and even corporate) experience. This is not to assume that Orthodoxy validates its piety in only this way, nor is it to say that experience is an unimportant consideration in discourse about Christian theology and piety. However, at the end of the day, satisfying and/or ecstatic religious experience cannot justify itself. This is proven by the many sincere, vibrant, and content people whom both Orthodox and Reformed would identify as gross idolaters (e.g., Muslims). Happy experience can tell the truth, or it can deceive.

A Kinder, Gentler Gospel?

Orthodox converts regularly speak of a fuller, broader understanding of the gospel in Orthodoxy than is typically believed and taught in Protestant churches. Protestants are accused of "gospel reductionism":

In the Holy Scripture and in the Holy Fathers salvation is a grand accomplishment with innumerable facets, a great and expansive deliverance of humanity from all of its enemies: sin, condemnation, the wrath of God, the devil and his demons, the world, and ultimately death. In Protestant teaching and practice, salvation is essentially a deliverance from the wrath of God.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Joseph Gleason, interview by Mark Bradshaw, transcript, "A Calvinist Converts to Orthodoxy," *Journey to Orthodoxy* (blog), October 24, 2013. Accessed March 10, 2016. <http://journeytoorthodoxy.com/2013/10/24/a-calvinist-anglican-converts-to-orthodoxy/>

⁷⁰ Gabe Martini, interview by Brian Davidson, transcript, "From Baptist to Orthodox: An Interview with Gabe Martini," *Journey to Orthodoxy* (blog), December 7, 2014. Accessed March 10, 2016. <http://journeytoorthodoxy.com/2014/12/07/from-baptist-to-orthodox-an-interview-with-gabe-martini/>

⁷¹ Josiah Trenham, *Rock and Sand: An Orthodox Appraisal of the Protestant Reformers and Their Teachings* (Columbia, MO: New Rome Press, 2015), 288. As an aside, Father Trenham is a convert from the Reformation to EO; he is himself a former PCA minister and alumnus of Westminster Seminary California.

Some Orthodox converts say that as a result of this broader understanding, they experience an increased joy in their salvation, draw greater encouragement from it, and find more gospel power for holy living. This better experience is a result, they may argue, of Orthodoxy subjugating the primary, dominant salvific image in Protestantism (i.e., the Divine Judge acquitting criminals in the courtroom) to the image of the divine doctor healing the sick in the hospital. This offers some degree of relief from the angst of what they would probably characterize as an errant or imbalanced understanding of God's wrath.

We readily admit that the proclamation of these broader elements of redemption may be inappropriately neglected, not only in churches which indeed have a narrow view of gospel blessings, but even in churches that explicitly confess a rich and broad understanding of the gospel. Preaching and liturgy *absent of communicating the Lord's victory through Christ over all of humanity's enemies* is surely deficient, and we do well to be self-critical if we have lapsed into such an imbalance. Rounded preaching and worship includes the gospel themes of restoration from ruin, repair of brokenness, victory over Satan, the glorification, and the like. And certainly there can be too much law and not enough gospel in our liturgy and preaching, distorting our people's understanding of God's character.

It seems to us, however, that the substantive disagreement here is not over how broad a range of gospel blessings are believed and taught, but over the doctrine of justification itself, and most of all whether that doctrine's basic "courtroom model" elements should have a primary role in the communication of the broad gospel blessings. We are compelled to answer this question by asking: In what framework and model, and in what balance or emphasis, do the Scriptures communicate the fullness of gospel blessings? Not without other frameworks, yes, but the Scriptures in fact weigh heavily toward the image of the Divine Judge acquitting criminals in the courtroom. This is the image that permeates Scripture: sin as the cause of the wrathful curse, and of Christ who comes to die to atone for the debt of that sin. The Lord levies the horrific curse in the garden in direct response to man's idolatry, and straightaway announces the bruising of the Seed for the crushing of the Serpent; His Law at Sinai even anticipates Israel's unthinkable gross apostasy for which He will drive them into onerous exile, and institutes the sacrificial system where only smelly, bloody slaughter brings forgiveness; His prophets explain at great length the gross sin of the people as the cause of His severe judgments, and that their only hope for reconciliation will come through the unjust spurning, crushing of an obedient Son; Jesus Himself speaks forcefully of the wrath to come, and in the gospels increasingly reveals the driving purpose of His death, to pay the ransom debt; and of course Paul directly systematizes the longstanding justification theme.

So if what attracts someone to Orthodoxy is that the chief biblical structure of the gospel's communication are relegated to the backburner, such that the discomforts inevitably caused by the chief structure get muted, the existential relief may be delightful, but it is, to use the metaphor from C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Turkish delight.⁷² Christians can and should learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable: "It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him; let him put his mouth in the dust.... For the Lord will not

⁷² C.S. Lewis used the confection, Turkish Delight, as a metaphor for sin and temptation in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. See C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008).

cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men” (Lam. 3:26-33). As we ought regularly to struggle with and feel some angst about our violations of God’s law (“a sense of this corruption should make believers often to sigh, desiring to be delivered from this body of death”⁷³), we flee to the atoning suffering and death of Christ. This is a salve that is, let us admit, unsettling, but also beautiful.

Practically, we are concerned that when professing Christians flee to EO for a kinder, gentler gospel, some are taking that path to evade accepting and confronting the horrific nature and extent of their sin, and cultivating a godly sorrow for it that leads to repentance. This path was opened to them and such a journey was encouraged in the Protestant churches they have left. They may try to quiet the law working on their conscience with EO religious exercises and a gospel easier on the ears. Ironically, then, this Orthodox critique of Protestantism’s supposed gospel reductionism is akin to the modern evangelical church’s pragmatism or its penchant to adapt theology and practice primarily for its value to fulfill people’s emotional, social or other perceived needs.

It is also worth offering some counsel to those who (probably, rooted intellectually in the problem of evil and/or emotionally in personal experience of abuse at the hands of sinful authority) are anxious about the biblical God of wrath. Let us remember that the Lord, given all we know about Him, is worthy of our confidence in His justice. He gave us His own Son, and so though we may have some questions about Him, we may at times be intimidated by Him, we have beheld enough of His love, peace, and glory, to worship Him, sense His love, and one day to enjoy the full, soulful, peaceful resonance with Him.

The Force of Family

Incidental to Orthodoxy has to be, in so many Orthodox churches, a stable, genuine, deeply emotional and mutually-supportive connection among its members. We cannot doubt that to some extent this bond of love develops from common faith, however it seems obvious that one reason for the connection is cultural and historical. There is indeed overlap between the religious and the cultural/ historical and so it does not surprise us to learn of the old Russian proverb, “To be Russian is to be Orthodox,”⁷⁴ nor to imagine its variations, “To be Greek is to be Orthodox,” or “To be Armenian is to be (Armenian) Orthodox.” Simply put however, as it happens, constituents of particular Orthodox churches are made up of similar people from similar ethnic backgrounds. This is not a bad thing; in fact it can be a blessing, with the accompanying obvious temptations, like unwarranted suspicion of outsiders.

Think of how powerfully this deep, interpersonal love and support plays in our not only multi-ethnic community, but one also full of broken homes and disjointed families. People do not always draw from their immediate family and broader blood family basic emotional and financial support, so when there is a community that demonstrates such love and support—even if the reason for the love and support is at least only in part incidental to its faith—the faith of

⁷³ Belgic Confession of Faith, art. 15 (regarding original sin).

⁷⁴ Cited in Daniel B. Clendenin *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: A Western Perspective* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 11.

that community becomes magnetic. We are concerned that people may so desperately want to be part of a good church family—that when they find good family in Orthodoxy—they buy its religion to just to get in. Sometimes that move even reconnects people to their own cultures and families, from ancient times.

Our experience, in our little corner of the Reformed churches, tells us that as communities change and our churches become less proportionally Dutch (or if we are churches that were more recently planted, made up of diverse people from the get-go), that we are challenged to maintain and grow the unity and love among our diverse selves. The New Testament church went through the same challenge: Jews and Gentiles had to get used to living together in Christ, as in Acts 6:1.

It goes without saying that we need to be on guard, that we need to buckle down in the work of love and unity, so that we do our part to model the love to which Christ called us. If our love is not evident to others, not magnetic, we are the problem.

But it must also be said that for those who sense that Christian love and connection is lacking in their local Reformed church, two things are required: one, our expectations of what that love and connectedness should look like must be realigned with what the Scripture teaches; and two, we must with longsuffering deny ourselves, give selflessly, to live out and model that love, filling any actual void. You know, as opposed to bailing out for seemingly greener pastures where there is dung hidden among that green grass.

Just Passing Through

It turns out that not everyone who leaves broader evangelicalism (or Roman Catholicism or secular naturalism) for Reformed Christianity makes that move on their spiritual journey for the reasons we hoped they did. Or no matter what the reasons are for which they came here, they may never have grown to make this their home for the right reason. We have to accept that some people who leave Reformed Christianity did not come to Reformed Christianity in the first place to honor Christ and His Word, seeking here the best (though imperfect) expression of doctrine and life. Nor did they develop that conviction later as the reason for sticking around as long as they did.

Certainly many came for other reasons. Perhaps because Reformed Christianity represented something older than the Christianity they experienced before, perhaps because confessional churches gave an appearance of doctrinal certainty that was lost in the confusion of their churches before, perhaps because they found our doctrine intellectually stimulating, perhaps because they were fleeing evangelical consumerism, perhaps because they were messed up and they found a strong sense of community in a local Reformed church, perhaps because they are divisive personalities (Titus 3:10) and they liked how Calvinism stirred so many pots, and/or perhaps because they were born in these churches and came back to get in touch with their roots.

And these same sometimes leave and go to Orthodoxy to scratch these same itches. In some cases they stayed with the Reformation for bad reasons (e.g., they liked stirring the pot of their EO family; i.e., elitism). In some cases they overvalued good reasons that brought them here (e.g., antiquity). Some people come to our churches without due, responsible consideration, but

in light of that they may leave for EO the same way, passing in the wind. And for all we know the move to EO will be just another restless shift on an endless series of stops.

This does not describe everyone, of course. Some people who made Reformed churches their home, expressing the right reason at the time, have now thoughtfully replaced Reformed Christianity with EO. To them, EO is a more faithful expression of biblical doctrine and life. We can only examine those claims on their own merits, as we are doing throughout this report. Still, we must be sensitive to reasons and motivations that may lie below the surface.

Let us make an analogy. In his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, Zacharias Ursinus writes of Q&A 21 about those with “temporary faith”:

Hypocrites rejoice in hearing the gospel, either because it is new to them, or because it seems to calm their minds, whilst it delivers them from the burdens which men, by their traditions, have imposed upon them, as does the doctrine of Christian liberty, justification, etc.; or, because they seek, under its profession, a cloak for their sins, and hope to reap rewards and advantages, both public and private, such as riches, honors, glory, etc., which shows itself when they are called to bear the cross; for then, because they have no root in themselves, they fall away.⁷⁵

While hypocrites rejoice in Christ temporarily, though not *truly* for Christ, some people (not only those who leave for Orthodoxy) rejoice in Reformed Christianity temporarily, but not for obedience to Christ and the Scriptures. When they move on from us, we are saddened, but are frankly unsurprised.

Longing for Certainty

It is troubling that deep doctrinal and ethical divisions exist among the groups that profess Christ. That there even are a wide variety of groups in the first place: the Orthodox churches, Roman Catholicism, confessional Protestant churches, mainline churches that departed from their historic doctrine and life, churches in some sense born out of the Reformation but difficult to categorize, etc. This is bad.

What is worse (and sadly most familiar to us), within the latter three groups, there is the widespread scandal of denominationalism.⁷⁶ It would be well nigh impossible to count the “evangelical Protestant” denominations, especially because we would have to include in that count so many so-called “independent” churches (i.e., churches that are, in actuality, each separate denominations made up of one single local church!). Are we not obviously exposed as somewhat narrow, uncharitable, bickering, and proud? Does there not always lurk among these groups one controversy which is the new test of orthodoxy, or one new way to parse an old issue

⁷⁵ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (trans. G.W. Williard; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1985), 109.

⁷⁶ John Frame defines “denominationalism” as “sometimes (1) the very fact that the Christian church is split into many denominations, and sometimes (2) the sinful attitudes and mentalities that lead to such splits and perpetuate them” (John M. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the Body of Christ* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991]; note that this quote has been taken from the edition now available online: <http://frame-poythress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/FrameJohnEvangelicalReunion1991.pdf>

that becomes grounds for creating a new denomination? And sure, if we accept that for the sake of conscience separations on secondary issues are sometimes (unfortunately) inevitable in this age, how well have we kept up on our expressions of Christian unity with those brothers we leave behind?

Add to the irritation and anxiety of schism the frustration stemming from a seeming lack of consensus on what core articles of doctrine and life legitimize a church's claim to exercise organized religion. Who is a church and who is only playing church? And even when the "marks of a true church" are agreed upon by likeminded churches⁷⁷, in practice there is widespread disagreement on how these marks are meaningfully to be applied.

Against this messy backdrop emerges the simple claim of "The Holy Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Eastern Church," which is claimed to be measured by her unbroken hierarchical succession from the apostles, and by her strict adherence to the infallible seven Ecumenical Councils. She alone is said to be Christ's visible (institutional) bride. Affirm this claim, and – poof! – with one fell swoop so much of the schismatic mess and confusion is clarified. Many breathes a sigh of relief, a newfound confidence in their union with Christ's Church throughout time and the world. Theological and moral debate is taken out of a divisive, rationalistic, chaotic arena and placed inside a tent that has (even with all its latitude) clear boundaries.

However, as alluded to in our earlier section on "history," justification for the claims of Orthodoxy from which this relief comes is simplistic and romantic. For one thing, the EO churches ground their confidence in the infallibility of the Seven Ecumenical Councils in major part by the proximity of those who produced and confirmed the council declarations to the apostles themselves. There are, however, other ancient churches with identical proximity to the apostles who disagree with them about which Councils are infallible and/or which Councils are even basically correct (e.g., the Oriental Orthodox churches, and even groups like the Arian Catholics and Nasoreans).⁷⁸ This is not to say that the Protestant identification of infallible authority in the Scripture alone does not leave us in a fallen world and church with some messy problems and uncertainties, but only to say that the Orthodox alternative is not as different, nor as neat and tidy, as is often claimed.⁷⁹

What the Reformed churches can (and should) do, given the fragmented and fractious nature of the visible church, is, insofar as possible, work toward consensus both on our understanding of the core articles of doctrine and life that legitimize the exercise of organized religion, and on the meaningful application of these marks where "secondary" disagreements in this age persist. One result of progress here would be a more unified, visible, organizational front of the Church. This would perhaps give us more credibility and not leave our people as vulnerable to simplistic and romantic claims of the different orthodox communions claiming to be the One, True Church.

⁷⁷ I.e., in those churches which confess article 29 of the Belgic Confession of Faith.

⁷⁸ For background, see Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 2013), xiii-xx.

⁷⁹ Keith Mathison makes a unique contribution in book on *Sola Scriptura*, noting that EO does not escape some of the same problems that accompany Roman Catholicism in their claims about the need for an "infallible tradition." See Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), 225-25.

Conclusions and Guidelines for Ministering to Members Considering EO

As we conclude this report, we offer four points; suggestions for churches as they seek to minister to those who are being enticed by EO, whether for reasons explained in the four categories we have discussed already or for other reasons.

First, of paramount importance, while communicating with those in our care who are anywhere along a road considering EO, let us maintain intellectual honesty and humility. We should feel free to admit the foreignness of Orthodoxy to many of us rather than presuming (under pressure) to speak hastily to it. Those promoting Orthodoxy pounce on obvious mischaracterizations of their faith made by their critics (e.g., when we conflate Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism), and we easily lose credibility if we also become guilty of mischaracterization. We expect that in the long term, as important as the substance of our answers to EO claims may very well be the patient care that we take in responding to them. Try to slow everyone down. One man in our churches who left for EO was introduced to it, then “studied the matter on the internet for three months,” and then left his Reformed church of over ten years (without any discussion or indication of such a move to any pastor or elder). Not only should this man be told that he moved hastily, but we ourselves should model for him and others a slow, careful, and thoughtful approach.

Second, let us be sensitive to the difficult life situations of those who are considering EO. It is quite possible that in someone’s home life or in their church life they have become restless for reasons technically unrelated to the differences between EO and confessional Protestantism. One man’s brash and offensive character traced to his tremendously traumatic life seems to have made him a religious vagabond (EO may prove only to be a comfortable stop along the road). In other cases, however, peoples’ troubles rub up against the edges of Reformed doctrine. There was a man in one of our churches who was tormented by the Reformed conception of God’s sovereignty because of the suffering of a family member. Somehow he found relief in on this point in EO. In either situation, our normal work of loving counseling and discipline, rebuking and comforting must be renewed so that, as much as depends on us, the sheep do not compound their sins with false religion or wander elsewhere for false comforts.

Third, perhaps with this report as a resource, put together a short list of talking points or questions about the core differences between the Reformed Faith and EO which can structure otherwise open conversations with our members about Orthodoxy. It is more important to discuss *sola scriptura* vs. conciliar infallibility, or iconoclasm vs. the mandatory use of icons, than it is to get lost in discussions about every jot and tittle of EO tradition. And through these discussions, we do well to be patient and understanding (though also firm) as opposed to being primarily adversarial.

Finally, there is the question of how to administer our membership lists with regard to those leaving our churches for EO. While the person remains a member of one of our local churches, if they are exploring EO, reading, even attending an occasional service, patience on our part is an excellent virtue to exercise. As long as a person is not given over to promoting beliefs and practices inconsistent with their Reformed profession, let us seek to extend as much latitude as possible. There is a difference between someone who is genuinely curious and needs to think

through new challenges to their profession without us standing over them and inquiring at every turn, and someone who is spreading newfound Orthodox convictions on their Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram page. In the latter case, admonition and discipline must be considered.

Realistically, however, in that latter case, this person is well on their way to undergoing EO's initiation rites, in which case procedures consistent with how local elders handle departures other than transfers to fellow NAPARC churches (e.g., acquiescence to resignations, dismissal, lapsing, excommunication, erasure, etc.) must be enacted. Our classis has been giving more consistent advice lately on how to handle membership resignations, and Synod Wyoming 2016 did send pastoral advice to the churches on how to handle membership departures; please review these actions as they may be of great help to our elders in this context.

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Lord Jesus, build your Church; have mercy on us and help us.

In service of Christ and his Church,
Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Adam Kaloostian (chairman)
Rev. Andrew Compton (secretary)
Rev. Mike Brown
Rev. Stephen Donovan
Rev. Chuck Tedrick

The Roman Catholic Church and History

W. Robert Godfrey

For vast numbers of people Roman Catholicism is the religion of choice. Rome can be attractive for a wide variety of reasons. The most significant is familial, people born into and persevering in the Roman church. But other attractions of various sorts can be readily found: theological, philosophical, liturgical, moral, psychological, and historical.

Defenders of Protestantism over the centuries have entered the lists confronting at great length all of Rome's reasons. Often the discussions, understandably, have focused particularly on biblical and theological arguments. But historical arguments are of great importance as well. Rome often claims that it represents two thousand years of unbroken apostolic succession and practice. The implication is that no fundamental changes have taken place in the church, but only a legitimate development of principles found at the beginning. I believe that this historical claim is profoundly false and that in the interests of truth and biblical religion it must be challenged.

The Roman Catholic Church today is at least the fourth iteration of that organization, each in basic ways different from the others. There is the ancient form, the medieval form, the Tridentine form, and the post-Tridentine form. In its ancient form Rome was in fellowship with the other Christian churches as an important and leading church, but its authority was appellate (not original over other bishops) and was recognized only in parts of the western church. In its medieval form it separated from other Christian churches insisting on absolute Roman supremacy over all churches. It called its own councils which defined certain doctrines such as transubstantiation, but leaving many other doctrines (such as Scripture and tradition, justification, and predestination) open to discussion. In its Tridentine form (after the Council of Trent which adjourned in 1563) it defined many more doctrines rendering itself more closed on a number of issues than it had been in the Middle Ages. In its post-Tridentine form (increasingly strong in the twentieth century) it theoretically upholds the decisions of Trent, but in practice moves beyond and contrary to Trent. As the Tridentine church claimed to supplement the Bible with tradition, but in fact used its traditions to contradict the Bible, so the post-Tridentine church has claimed to supplement Trent with other teachings, but in fact has used those other teachings to contradict Trent.

The extensive contentions of the previous paragraph cannot be elaborated or substantiated in the space of this brief article. My purpose is simply to review some of the claims of the Roman Catholic Church particularly with reference to its use of the idea of tradition as the authority for many of its beliefs and practices. As Rome makes strong historical claims for its positions, it is proper to evaluate them historically. I will cite Rome's councils at some length to show both the context and the amazingly confident character of its historical claims.

I. Scripture and Tradition

One of the greatest controversies of the sixteenth century that led to the division of the western church was over the source of truth in the life of the church. In the face of serious disagreements over doctrine and practice different theologians looked in different directions for answers. The Protestant Reformers taught that the Bible alone was the church's ultimate authority. The Roman Catholics responded that tradition along with the Scriptures were the authority for the church.

The role given to tradition as an authority by the Roman Catholic Church is very great indeed. Before we evaluate the claims for tradition we need to look at the various ways in which that word is used and the ways in which its use has changed over time. We will see that the role of tradition grew dramatically from the way in which the early church fathers used it.

A. *Types of Tradition*

How has tradition been handed down and to what end? These questions ask about the types of tradition in the history of the church as to their authority and function. The church historian Heiko Oberman in his article "*Quo Vadis, Petre? Tradition from Irenaeus to Humani Generis*" has helpfully distinguished three distinct ways in which the word tradition has been used in the history of the church to describe authoritative teachings handed down to us in the church. These three types of authoritative tradition, he has summed up in these words: "Whereas in Tradition I truth is grasped and held through reflection on Holy Scripture and in Tradition II through reflection on Scripture and Tradition, in this last stage, the stage of Tradition III, truth is grasped and held by introspection and self-analysis on the part of the Church focused in the Teaching Office."¹

1. Tradition I

For Oberman, then, the first type of authoritative tradition is a school of interpretation of the Bible. The authority is the Bible itself as understood according to a distinctive reading of the biblical text. This Tradition I is familiar to us in the phrase "the Reformed tradition." This use of tradition implies no authority *per se* to such tradition, but is rather descriptive of a body of thought about what the Bible teaches. This Tradition I is the historic Protestant approach to tradition.

At the time of the Reformation the Reformers came to recognize that the question of what it meant to be an "apostolic" church needed to be clarified. Rome insisted that it was apostolic because of its unbroken descent through many generations of bishops from the days of the apostles (apostolic succession). The Reformers by contrast insisted that the real test of apostolicity was upholding the teaching of the apostles, teaching that could only be found reliably in the Scriptures.

2. Tradition II

¹ Heiko Oberman, *Quo Vadis, Petre? Tradition from Irenaeus to Humani Generis*, in *The Dawn of the Reformation*, Edinburgh (T&T Clark), 1992, pp. 294f.

The second type of authoritative tradition, often identified with the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, is one that claims that the apostles left to the church not only the written tradition of the Scriptures but also unwritten oral traditions to guide the church. The claim for this Tradition II is that it contains nothing “new” after the age of the apostles, but is itself genuinely apostolic. Here appeal is often made to 2 Thessalonians 2:15: “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.” (But a careful look at Paul’s letters shows that he regularly notes in his letters that he is reiterating what he had preached to them.)

In the ancient church discussions of unwritten tradition and a possible Tradition II began in relation to the worship of the church. We can see that, for example, in Tertullian in the early third century. R.P.C. Hanson noted that Tertullian’s appeal to tradition is cautious and hesitant: “Generally, he likes to find biblical authority in order to decide questions of practice or custom if he possibly can....Generally his rule is the essentially Puritan one, ‘what Scripture does not commend it in effect disapproves of.’”² Still Hanson recognized in Tertullian a cautious use of tradition as a guide to worship. But he concluded: “But it would be wholly misleading to conclude... that tradition was in any serious sense regarded as a second source of Christian truth beside Scripture; tradition of this sort was clearly regarded as a matter of secondary importance in which divergence and diversity between different Christian churches could easily be tolerated. This tradition did not cover doctrine; it did not even interpret Scripture; far less was Scripture ‘subordinated’ to it. It supplements Scripture only in as far as in certain practical matters Scripture is silent, and here tradition presumed to emanate from the apostles is allowed to speak.”³

Basil of Caesarea (c. 330-379), about 150 years after Tertullian makes a much stronger and clearer claim for Tradition II. Basil argued that all the worship practices of his day were of apostolic origin. By his day the formal liturgy of the church had become central and quite elaborated. He wished to defend the church’s practice against pagan, Jewish, and heretical critics. For pagans and Jews the details of ritual were very important to worship and Basil may have unwittingly adopted that attitude. In any case one careful scholar of Basil has concluded: “The idea that the Fathers have preserved in silence, from the very beginning of the Church, out of the reach of curious meddling and inquisitive investigation, the ‘unwritten’ liturgical customs and the doctrines, implied in these rites, which both come from an unpublished and secret teaching, is very dear indeed to Basil.”⁴ Both Hanson and Oberman⁵ see Basil as a key turning point in the church’s claims for and confidence in unwritten tradition. Yet even here the appeal to tradition is for practice, not for doctrine.

Tradition II became the general position of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches from the late ancient period through the middle ages and well into the modern period. Only with the Council of Trent, however, did it receive detailed definition. The Council of Trent defined this Roman position in these terms: “seeing clearly that this truth and discipline are contained in

²R.P.C Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church*, London (SCM Press), 1962, p. 131.

³ Hanson, p. 137.

⁴ Emmanuel Amand de Mendieta, *The “Unwritten” and “Secret” Apostolic Traditions in the Theological Thought of St. Basil of Caesarea*, Edinburgh (Oliver and Boyd), 1965, p. 40.

⁵ Oberman, “*Quo Vadis, Petre?*,” p. 277 and Hanson, p. 184.

the written books, and the unwritten traditions which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down even unto us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand....”⁶

This position continued to characterize the Tridentine church as it was reiterated in very similar language by the First Vatican Council (1870): “this supernatural revelation, according to the universal belief of the Church, declared by the sacred Synod of Trent, is contained in the written books and unwritten traditions which have come down to us, having been received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself; or from the Apostles themselves, by the dictation of the Holy Spirit, have been transmitted, as it were, from hand to hand.”⁷

In the decrees of these two councils we read nothing of evolving or developing traditions. The claim made is a historical one, namely that the authoritative traditions of the Roman church were taught by the apostles in the first century. The apostles, taught directly by Christ or by the Holy Spirit, established the authoritative traditions of the Roman church.

Such a claim is entirely untenable as any informed Roman Catholic must acknowledge today. Many Roman apologists have sought to show how current Roman teachings and practices, supposedly based on tradition, have grown from a kernel of truth found in the time of the apostles, and so justify the doctrine or practice. The problem with such an apologetic – which Oberman defined as Tradition III below - is that it contradicts the clear commitment to Tradition II officially declared by the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council.

The problems with Tradition II as a workable position have been raised by many critics. John Owen, a great Puritan theologian and careful student of the ancient fathers, sensed something of the problem in the disagreements he found among the Fathers. He wrote: “The *joint consent of the fathers* or ancient doctors of the church is also pretended as a rule of Scripture interpretation. But those who make this *plea* are apparently influenced by their supposed interest to do so. No man of ingenuity who hath ever read or considered them, or any of them, with attention and judgment, can abide by this pretense; for it is utterly impossible they should be an *authentic rule* unto others who so disagree among themselves, as they will be found to do, not, it may be, so much in *articles of faith*, as in their *exposition of Scripture*, which is the matter under consideration.”⁸

Modern historical scholarship has really shown Tradition II to be an indefensible concept. Much of what Rome teaches and practices cannot possibly be attributed to the apostles. Oberman commented: “Especially due to the mariological dogmas of 1854 and 1950, theologians have concluded once again, that not only Scripture, but now also Scripture and tradition taken together are materially insufficient to support by simple explication these authoritative definitions.”⁹ Hanson is more general and more definitive: If some scholars argue “that there is reliable evidence for the existence in the early Church of a tradition of doctrine or of important

⁶ Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 2, p. 80.

⁷ Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 2, p. 241.

⁸ John Owen, “Pneumatologia or, A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit,” *Works*, Edinburgh (Banner of Truth Trust), 1967, vol. 4, p. 227.

⁹ Oberman, p. 294.

information about Jesus Christ, independent of the Bible and consciously recognized by all as authentic and original, and capable of being preserved in the Church intact for an indefinite period right up to our own day, then we must give an absolute negative to this theory. Careful, historical investigation of the relevant facts leaves no room for doubt here. By the year 250 such a tradition certainly was not known to exist in the Church, and therefore certainly did not exist. No words of Basil, a hundred years later, nor of the Quinsext Council four hundred and fifty years later, nor of any individual or authority a millennium or more later, could possibly conjure it into existence. Either we must believe that the laws of history have miraculously been suspended and that historical evidence is irrelevant for deciding matters of history, or we must accept this absolute No.”¹⁰

3. Tradition III

According to Oberman Tradition III is an inevitable development out of Tradition II for those who would maintain an authoritative tradition beyond Tradition I. Tradition III sees tradition as an evolving and developing authority in the church with no tie to the explicit teaching in the Bible or the ancient church. A clear early apologist for Tradition III was John Henry Newman in his famous work, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845). He argued that the church evaluates traditions which have developed in the history of the church to see if they have developed faithfully out of seed ideas in the Bible and the ancient church. These traditions may not have been known to the apostles, but reflect a proper unfolding of apostolic ideas.¹¹

Tradition III was given powerful practical expression in the pontificate of Pius IX (1792-1878, pope from 1846). Pius defined as authoritative tradition the doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary in 1854, and through the first Vatican Council, 1869-1870, defined the doctrine of papal infallibility. Pius IX gave classic – and remarkably arrogant – expression to the idea of Tradition III. When asked about tradition, he replied: “Tradition? I am tradition.”¹² Ironically Pius IX’s council teaches Tradition II while he seems personally to embrace Tradition III.

Herman Bavinck, the Dutch Reformed theologian, has accurately summarized this movement and change in Rome’s view of tradition: “For Rome, when the pope proclaims a dogma, it is by that very fact apostolic tradition. The criterion of tradition has therefore been successively found in apostolicity, in episcopal succession, and in papal decision. With that the process has reached its conclusion. The infallible pope is the formal principle of Romanism.”¹³

The effect of Rome’s position is to make the reform of tradition impossible in any other way than by papal decree. Scripture is marginalized and negated in a way absolutely unknown to the ancient fathers of the church. Scripture for all practical purposes is irrelevant. Again Bavinck summarized this Roman position eloquently: “The church existed before the Scripture, and the church contains the full truth and not just a part, while Scripture contains only a part of the

¹⁰ Hanson, pp. 238f.

¹¹ For a discussion of this development see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine*, New Haven (Yale University Press), 1969, p. 19.

¹² Cited in J.R. Geiselman, *The Meaning of Tradition*, Montreal (Palm), 1966, p. 16, note cited on pp. 113f.

¹³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan), ed. John Bolt, vol. 1, p. 485.

doctrine. Whereas Scripture needs tradition, the confirmation of the pope, tradition does not need the Scripture. The tradition is not a supplement to Scripture; Scripture is a supplement to tradition. While Scripture alone is not sufficient, tradition alone is. While Scripture is based on the church, the church is based on itself.”¹⁴ This attitude of Rome toward tradition is unknown in the Bible or in the ancient and medieval church.

Surely we must ask: on any understanding of tradition, is it at all credible that so much crucial Roman Catholic doctrine – for example, about the priesthood, the sacrifice of the Mass, the role of Mary, the authority of the pope, and images – is not to be found in the apostolic writings? Would the apostles have written so much about Jesus and the foundations of his church and not have written at least a little about these “traditions”?

B. The Foundational Tradition: the Role of the Bishop of Rome

While bound together as Roman Catholics by common beliefs, venerable traditions, a shared liturgy and priesthood, their name offers their essential definition: the Roman Catholic Church is the universal church of Jesus Christ with the Bishop of Rome as its head. A foundational focus of this study is the question of how the Bishop of Rome came to the primacy in this church. Christianity, after all, begins with Jesus in what was the ancient land of Israel. Jesus never left that region of the world and certainly never visited Rome. Many Christians – most notably the Orthodox and Protestants – do not acknowledge the Bishop of Rome as the head of the church. So what is the origin and development the claims of Roman Catholicism about its head, known today as the Pope?¹⁵

1. The First Vatican Council

Perhaps the place to begin is with the end, namely the culmination of Roman Catholic claims for its pope. In 1870 Pope Pius IX called an ecumenical council¹⁶ to meet in the Vatican, known now as the first Vatican council. It was the first ecumenical council to meet since the Council of Trent¹⁷ more than three hundred years earlier and its great task was to articulate and clarify the church’s doctrine of the papacy. As the council stated: “we, therefore, for the preservation, safe-keeping, and increase of the Catholic flock, with the approval of the sacred Council, do judge it to be necessary to propose to the belief and acceptance of all the faithful, in accordance with the ancient and constant faith of the universal Church, the doctrine touching the institution, perpetuity, and nature of the Apostolic Primacy....”¹⁸ The claim here is clear: the council is not teaching anything new, but simply stating what the whole church has always believed.

¹⁴ Bavinck, p. 487.

¹⁵ The title “pope” is derived from the Latin for father and was not unique to the Bishop of Rome, but historically was born by other bishops. In the western church over time it came to refer to the Bishop of Rome alone.

¹⁶ The first ecumenical council met at Nicea in 325 at the call of the Emperor Constantine. It was intended to represent the entire church. Since the formal (and to this point final) separation of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches in 1054, no council truly representing all the churches has been held. Rome continues to reckon several subsequent councils called by the pope as ecumenical, because she sees herself as the true church.

¹⁷ The Council of Trent met in three phases between 1545 and 1564 to respond to the Reformation and to renew the Roman Catholic Church in a variety of ways.

¹⁸ Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 2, pp. 257f.

So what is the Apostolic Primacy? The council declared: “all the faithful of Christ must believe that the holy Apostolic See¹⁹ and the Roman Pontiff²⁰ possesses the primacy over the whole world, and that the Roman Pontiff is the successor of blessed Peter, Prince of the Apostles, and is the true vicar of Christ, and head of the whole church, and father and teacher of all Christians....Hence we teach and declare that by the appointment of our Lord the Roman Church possesses a superiority of ordinary power over all other churches, and that this power of jurisdiction of the Roman Pontiff, which is truly Episcopal, is immediate...so that the Church of Christ may be one flock under one supreme pastor through the preservation of unity both of communion and of profession of the same faith with the Roman Pontiff. This is the teaching of Catholic truth, from which no one can deviate without the loss of faith and of salvation.”²¹

Several crucial claims are made here: 1) the authority of the pope is related to his being the successor of Peter; 2) the authority of the pope is universal over all churches; 3) the authority of the pope over all churches is immediate, that is, no intermediate authorities limit his jurisdiction over the whole church; 4) the authority of the pope determines the true faith of the church; and 5) acceptance of this authority of the pope is necessary for salvation.

Further the council declared: “And the Roman Pontiffs...defined as to be held those things which with the help of God they had recognized as conformable with the sacred Scriptures and Apostolic traditions. For the Holy Spirit was not promised to the successors of Peter, that by his revelation they might make known new doctrine; but that by his assistance they might inviolably keep and faithfully expound the revelation or deposit of faith delivered through the Apostles. And, indeed, all the venerable Fathers have embraced, and the holy orthodox doctors have venerated and followed, their Apostolic doctrine; knowing most fully that this See of holy Peter remains ever free from all blemish of error according to the divine promise of the Lord our Saviour made to the Prince of his disciples: ‘I have prayed for thee that thy faith not, and, when thou art converted, confirm thy brethren.’”²²

Here again the council made several crucial claims. The first is that the papacy is not guided by the Holy Spirit to new doctrine or revelations, but rather preserves the doctrine given by the Apostles themselves during their lifetimes. The council explained this point when it declared: “this supernatural revelation, according to the universal belief of the Church, declared by the sacred Synod of Trent, is contained in the written books and unwritten traditions which have come down to us, having been received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself; or from the Apostles themselves, by the dictation of the Holy Spirit, having been transmitted, as it were, from hand to hand.”²³ Such statements rule out any evolving or expanding tradition as well as any new revelation.

¹⁹ The English word “see” is derived from the Latin “sedis,” meaning seat, as in the seat of episcopal authority.

²⁰ One of the titles held by the Bishop of Rome is that of Pontifex Maximus, or Supreme Pontiff. This title was originally the title of the leading pagan priest in Rome before the coming of Christianity.

²¹ Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 2, pp. 262f.

²² Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 2, pp. 268f.

²³ Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol.2, p. 241. This statement is almost a quotation from the decree of the Council of Trent: see Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 2, p. 80.

The second claim is in teaching this Apostolic doctrine the pope “remains ever free from all blemish of error....” This claim seems even stronger than the definition of papal infallibility²⁴ which comes later in the decisions of Vatican I and certainly suggests that the efforts of some Roman Catholic theologians to limit the infallible teachings of the papacy to a very small number is contrary to the teaching of the council.

The teachings about the papacy of the First Vatican Council are both theological and historical. When the Council states that what it teaches about the authority of the papacy has always been taught and believed in the church, it is making a claim that is open to historical analysis. Have these doctrines in fact always been taught and believed in the church? The purpose of this article is to examine those historical claims to see if they are defensible.

2. Peter and the Bible

The first historical documents available on this subject are the books of the New Testament themselves. Matthew in his Gospel introduces Peter in Jesus’ call to him to become disciple: “he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.’” (Mt. 4:18f) John’s Gospel provides greater detail, showing that Andrew first responded to Jesus and then told Peter about Jesus (John 1:40ff), but Matthew’s account points to the priority of leadership that Peter had among the disciples. Peter’s leadership is further suggested by his being named first in the list of apostles (Mt. 10:2, Mk. 3:16, and Lk. 6:14). Peter is also one of the three disciples (along with James and John) whom Jesus made his inner circles (e.g., Mt. 17:1). These three continued to be leaders – Paul called them pillars - in the church after the death and resurrection of Jesus (Gal. 2:9).

The leadership which Peter exercised, as presented throughout the New Testament, was not monarchical rule or authority over the church, but leadership as spokesman for and representative of the disciples. He led the disciples in the process of the selection of a replacement apostle (Acts 1:15), spoke for the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2:14), and was one of the leading participants in the discussion of the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:7).

Peter was also a representative disciple, both in his strengths and his weaknesses. In the strength of his faith, he confesses that Jesus is the Christ, and is given the new name of Peter (Mt. 16:15-19). In the weakness of his understanding of Jesus, he insists that Jesus must not die and is severely rebuked by Jesus, even called Satan (Mt. 16:21-23). It is intriguing that Peter’s confession of Jesus and Peter’s severe criticism from Jesus follow the one right after the other. The case of Peter shows that real disciples and apostles can be very weak.

²⁴ The statement on infallibility follows that of inerrancy and may fairly be seen as explaining it: “Therefore faithfully adhering to the tradition received from the beginning of the Christian religion, and the salvation of Christian people, the sacred Council approving, we teach and define that it is a dogma divinely revealed: that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when in the discharge of the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the universal church, by the divine assistance promised him in blessed Peter, is possessed of that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer will that his Church should be endowed for defining doctrine regarding faith or morals; and that therefore such definitions of the Roman Pontiffs are irreformable of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church.” Cited from Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 2, pp. 270f.

Much has been made of Simon Peter's confession and Jesus' response giving him a new name, the keys of the kingdom, and the authority to bind and loose sins (Mt. 16:17-19). Do these gifts which Jesus gave to Peter establish him as the rock on which the church is built and the only one who holds the keys of the kingdom? We will return to the question of "this rock" on which Jesus would build his church, but on the keys of the kingdom as the authority to loose or bind sins, this authority is clearly not given uniquely to Peter. Rather this authority is given to the church of which Peter is representative as is clear from Mt. 18:18-19.

The last explicit reference to Peter in Matthew's Gospel is the story of his denying Jesus three times (Mt. 26:69-75). Again, John seems intentionally to provide greater detail, making explicit the restoration of Peter. As Peter had denied Jesus three times, Jesus restores him by having him three times pledge his love (John 21:15-17).

Does Jesus make Peter in this restoration the sole shepherd of all the sheep? Clearly not. Others have responsibility for the sheep over which they are placed (e.g., Acts 20:28). More particularly Peter himself teaches that he shares in shepherding the flock with others in I Peter 5:1-3: "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you; not for shameful gain but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock."

The weaknesses and failings of Peter continue in his apostolic ministry. Paul has no hesitation to state that Peter was so wrong in Antioch that "I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned...not in step with the truth of the gospel..." (Gal. 2:11, 14). Here Peter was condemned as seriously wrong in doctrine and in life.

While Peter had a priority as an apostle, he had no ultimate or independent authority. We see that very clearly in the discussions at the Jerusalem council described in Acts 15. Peter makes an important contribution to that discussion, but his is not the final word and authority seems to be vested in the apostles and elders together (Acts 15:6, 22). Indeed, Acts 15 records the last words of Peter in that book, the expansion of the church taking place without any further reference to Peter. Still we should never neglect the last words of Peter in Acts: "But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (Acts 15:11).

The New Testament contains two letters by Peter himself which provide the witness of Peter about a number of issues. First, we can see how Peter identifies himself. He says he is an apostle (I Pet. 1:1 and II Pet. 1:1), making no claim to any unique, authoritative apostolic authority over other apostles. He also calls himself a servant (II Pet. 1:1) and a fellow elder with other elders (I Pet. 5:1). He specifically warns against domineering as a shepherd (I Pet. 5:3), the very sin so often found in Rome.

As to his teaching on authority, he argues for the superiority of the Scriptures to his own eyewitness experience: "we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain [the Transfiguration]. And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark

place...” (II Pet. 1:18f). Peter himself directs our attention away from himself and to the Scriptures as our sure authority.

One key passage in the New Testament to which the Roman Catholic Church particularly appeals is Matthew 16:15-18. Jesus asks his disciples who they say that he is. Peter responds: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus then said to Peter: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Rome insists that Peter (in Greek *Petros*) is the rock (in Greek *petra*) on which the church is built.

Even if Peter personally and individually is the rock on which the church is built, this text does not establish any of Rome’s claims for the pope. This text says nothing about Peter as the bishop of Rome or about Peter’s foundational role passing from him to anyone else.

Rome’s understanding of this text has not been universally accepted, however. Many Christians have agreed with the interpretation of the great ancient preacher and Patriarch of Constantinople, John Chrysostom (ca. 345-407). In Homily 54 on Matthew he stated, “Upon this rock, that is, upon the faith of your confession.”²⁵ Chrysostom teaches that the confession that Jesus is the Christ is the rock of the church.

Peter himself makes a clear statement about the rock on which the church is built. Peter writes to all Christians: “As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’ So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,’ and ‘A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense’” (I Peter 2:4-8). Peter nowhere claims that he is the rock, but rather teaches that Jesus is the rock of the church.

Peter’s last words in his second letter are needed by the church in every era: “...take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen” (II Pet. 3:17f). Peter glorifies God, not himself.

Interestingly, the New Testament knows nothing of the kind of claims that the bishops of Rome will later make for themselves. Nowhere in the New Testament is there any association of Peter with the city of Rome. He is not mentioned in Paul’s letter to the Romans (written about 57 A.D.) or in any of Paul’s later letters. Certainly a well established church existed in Rome when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. If episcopal government was established by the apostles as Rome claims, would there not have been a bishop there already when Paul wrote? How could Peter be the first bishop?²⁶

²⁵ Cited in Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey), vol. 3, p. 164.

²⁶ Peter Heather in his remarkable book, *The Restoration of Rome, Barbarian Popes and Imperial Pretenders*, Oxford (Oxford University Press), 2013, records a great deal about the developing power of the papacy in late

Luke in his Acts of the Apostles (written around 63 A.D.) records Paul's presence in Rome, but makes no mention of Peter being there. Paul wrote his last letter, II Timothy, from prison in Rome, (conservative scholars believe probably between 64 and 68 A.D.) and makes no mention of Peter being in Rome. Since tradition teaches that Peter died in Rome in 68 A.D., only a few years are available for Peter to become bishop there, if that actually happened. Certainly it is strange that the whole New Testament knows nothing of Peter as Prince of the Apostles or monarch of the whole church. Rather the New Testament sees the apostles corporately as foundational to the church: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone..."(Ephesians 2:19,20).

Perhaps the Apostle Paul should be allowed the last New Testament comment on Peter. Paul warned against a factionalism in the church which would identify with one leader or another dividing the church. He rejected the idea that anyone should say, "I follow Cephas" (I Cor. 1:12). This warning seems precisely directed against the subsequent claims of the Roman Catholic Church.

3. Peter and the First Letter of Clement

The earliest Christian document outside the New Testament related to this question, dated about 97 A.D, is the First Letter of Clement. Tradition holds that Clement was the bishop of Rome either immediately or shortly after Peter. This letter is interesting in that it breathes precisely the spirit of Peter that we find in his letters. Clement writes a letter of advice on the troubles in the church in Corinth. He does not identify himself either by name or by office. He does not claim any authority of the Roman church over the Corinthian church in offering advice. More than half of the letter is simply quoting the Scriptures, clearly showing that the Scriptures are the authority for him. As Clement wrote: "Ye are fond of contention, brethren, and full of zeal about things that do not pertain to salvation. Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit. Observe that nothing of an unjust or counterfeit character is written in them."²⁷

Clement certainly had the opportunity to claim authority for his office, because one of the subjects he addresses is the subject of office. He teaches just what we find in the New Testament. He sees two offices in the church, bishops and deacons (ch. 42, p. 16) and sees presbyter as an alternative title for the office of bishop (ch. 44, p. 16, cf. ch. 1, p. 5). He seems to see a plurality of bishops or presbyters in each congregation. In this matter Clement follows the teaching of Paul in his letter to Titus 1:5-7.

Like Peter, Clement commends humility to the leaders of the churches: "For Christ is of those who are humble-minded, and not of those who exalt themselves over His flock. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Sceptre of the majesty of God, did not come in the pomp of pride or arrogance, although He might have done so, but in a lowly condition, as the Holy Spirit had declared

antiquity and the medieval periods. He notes that the claim that Peter's grave was to be found on the Vatican hill in Rome was identified "by late Roman and early medieval Roman Christians", p. 299.

²⁷*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI, 1967): "The First Epistle of Clement," ch. 45, p. 17.

regarding Him....Ye see, beloved, what is the example which has been given us; for if the Lord thus humbled Himself, what shall we do who have through Him come under the yoke of His grace?" (ch. 16, p. 9)

The nature of salvation should encourage humility: "And we, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." (ch. 32, p. 13)

4. Peter and Pope Stephen I

If neither the New Testament nor the Letter of Clement know anything of Peter's authority over the whole church or of Peter's connection to the Roman church, from where do such notions come? The first record of such a claim comes from Pope Stephen I, bishop of Rome from 254 to 257. As J.N.D. Kelly says of Stephen, "He was in fact the first pope, so far as is known, to find a formal basis for the Roman primacy in the Lord's charge to the Apostle Peter cited in Matt. 16:18."²⁸ Mid-third century is, of course, a very long time ago, but it is more than two hundred years after the death of Jesus. Such a claim does not seem apostolic or even very primitive.

5. Peter and the Ecumenical Councils

We must also remember that a claim is one thing, wide acceptance of a claim is quite another. It is surely striking that the first seven ecumenical councils of the church (meeting from 325 to 787) know nothing either of a Roman primacy or of a connection of the bishop of Rome with Peter.

a. The Role of Rome

The first ecumenical council of Nicea (325) adopted two canons of particular relevance to the question of Rome's authority. Canon 6 states, "The ancient customs of Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis shall be maintained, according to which the bishop of Alexandria has authority over all these places, since a similar custom exists with reference to the bishop of Rome. Similarly in Antioch and the other provinces the prerogatives of the churches are to be preserved."²⁹ This canon clearly sees the authority of the bishop of Rome as being regional, not universal, just as the authority of the bishops of Alexandria and Antioch is regional.

The second ecumenical council at Constantinople (381) declared in Canon 3, "Because it is the new Rome, the bishop of Constantinople is to enjoy the privileges of honour after the bishop of Rome."³⁰ Here Rome is indeed given a leading honor, but no authority over other churches. The reason given for the honor given to Rome has nothing to do with Peter, but is because it was the original capital of the empire.

²⁸ J.N.D. Kelly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes*, (Oxford, 1986), p. 21.

²⁹ *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1, ed. by N.P. Tanner, S.J., (London, 1990), pp. 8f.

³⁰ *Decrees*, vol. 1, p. 32.

The fourth ecumenical council at Chalcedon (451) makes the same point in its Canon 28, “Following in every way the decrees of the holy fathers and recognizing the canon which has recently been read out – the canon of the 150 most devout bishops who assembled in the time of the great Theodosius of pious memory, then emperor, in imperial Constantinople, new Rome – we issue the same decree and resolution concerning the prerogatives of the most holy church of the same Constantinople, new Rome. The fathers rightly accorded prerogatives to the see of older Rome, since that is an imperial city; and moved by the same purpose the 150 most devout bishops apportioned equal prerogatives to the most holy see of new Rome, reasonably judging that the city which is honoured by the imperial power and senate and enjoying privileges equalling older imperial Rome, should also be elevated to her level in ecclesiastical affairs and take second place after her....”³¹

The papal legates at the council protested against the acceptance of this canon, but the council passed it anyway. Clearly the great ecumenical council did not acknowledge the right of the pope to determine its actions. Additionally, and very importantly, for the council the discussion of the honor accorded to the bishop of Rome was purely a matter of its relation to the imperial system. Again no mention is made of Christ or Peter in this matter.

Consider also this statement of the fifth ecumenical council in Constantinople (553), in the midst of its discussion of whether it is proper to condemn dead heretics, “Moreover, several letters of Augustine of sacred memory, who was particularly outstanding among the African bishops, were read in which he indicates that it is correct to condemn heretics even after their death. Other most reverend bishops of Africa have also observed this church custom; moreover the holy church of Rome has issued anathemas against certain bishops even after they were dead, although they had not been accused on matters of faith while they were alive....”³² Here Rome’s actions are treated as one witness to the proper policy of the church, but not at all as the universal authority over the whole church.

b. The Council of Nicea, Canon 15

One of the disciplinary canons adopted by the Council of Nicea (325) was Canon 15: “On account of the great disturbance and the factions which are caused, it is decreed that the custom, if it is found to exist in some parts contrary to the canon, shall be totally suppressed, so that neither bishops nor presbyters nor deacons shall transfer from city to city. If after this decision of this holy and great synod anyone shall attempt such a thing, or shall lend himself to such a proceeding, the arrangement shall be totally annulled, and he shall be restored to the church of which he was ordained bishop or presbyter or deacon.”³³ This canon teaches clearly that a bishop may not move from one see to another.

This regulation was reiterated by the fourth ecumenical council at Chalcedon (451). Canon 1 stated: “We have deemed it right that the canons hitherto issued by the saintly fathers at each and every synod should remain in force”³⁴ and Canon 5 specifically declared: “In the matter of

³¹ *Decrees*, vol. 1, pp. 99f.

³² *Decrees*, vol. 1, pp. 110f.

³³ *Decrees*, vol. 1, p. 13.

³⁴ *Decrees*, vol. 1, p. 87.

bishops or clerics who move from city to city, it has been decided that the canons issued by the holy fathers concerning them should retain their proper force.”³⁵

The bishop of Rome still regarded Canon 15 of Nicea as authoritative in the ninth century. In 897 Pope Stephen VII placed his predecessor, Pope Formosus (891-896), on trial, exhuming the corpse and keeping it in to room where the trial took place. Heather rightly calls this event “the most bizarre incident in the entirety of papal history.”³⁶ One charge, among others, was that Formosus had violated Canon 15 of the Council of Nicea because he had been bishop of Portus before he became bishop of Rome. He was convicted and deposed. This bishop of Rome clearly thought that that canon was binding on bishops of Rome. Yet for many centuries bishops of Rome have served as bishops elsewhere before being elected bishop of Rome.

In the twelfth century the great jurist Gratian in his *Decretum* sought to harmonize and explain all canon law. There he wrote: “The holy Roman Church imparts right and authority to the sacred canons, but is not bound by them. For it has the right of establishing canons, since it is the head and hinge of all churches, from whose ruling no one may dissent.”³⁷ This is Rome’s theological justification for violating the canon of an ecumenical council, but certainly this claim has no historical support, even in the practice of the bishops of Rome as late as the ninth century. Those who accept the authority of the Council of Nicea must conclude that the bishops of Rome have not been legitimate for centuries.

6. The Pope and Power

According to Peter Heather one of the effects of the Council of Nicea was that now officially “all bishops were no longer considered equal. Certain sees acquired metropolitan rank (effectively becoming archbishops, although that term was not yet in general use) with established rights to interfere in certain ways in the running of the subordinate sees of their province....Within this extraordinary shake-up, the see of Rome acquired metropolitan rights over a substantial area around the city.”³⁸ Rome’s role as a court of appeal did grow in the west over Italy, Spain, Gaul, and North Africa,³⁹ but was never universal.

Ironically, at the very time when the council of Chalcedon was most clearly declaring the equality of the bishops of Rome and Constantinople, the bishop of Rome was most vocally insisting on his authority over the whole church. Pope Leo I (440-461) faced the serious decline of the Roman empire in Italy (The tradition date for the end of the western Roman empire is 476.)

Leo was motivated in his claims, not just by his fears of Rome’s declining power and importance, but also by no doubt sincere trust in a forged document known to history as the Clementine Recognitions. This forgery, written around 400, claims to be a letter from Clement, the bishop of Rome in the late first century, to James the brother of Jesus. The letter states that

³⁵ *Decrees*, vol. 1, p. 90.

³⁶ Heather, p. 362.

³⁷ Cited in Heather, p. 401.

³⁸ Heather, pp. 304-305.

³⁹ Heather, p. 305.

Peter had appointed Clement as his successor and given to the Roman church authority to appoint continuing successors of Peter there.⁴⁰ Leo and others no doubt sincerely believed that this forgery was genuine, but it encouraged claims for the papacy that had no genuine historical foundations in the church.

Interestingly Pope Gregory I (590-604) who actually had more power over the western church than Leo had did not make the exalted claims for himself. He seemed more content to be, as the ecumenical councils had seen the bishop of Rome, as one of five patriarchs.

Heather's conclusion on the historical evidence is most apt: "As late as the year 1000, the evidence suggests that Bishops of Rome were broadly content to enjoy pre-eminent prestige rather to exercise any kind of overarching control....the main focus of the papal job description remained – religiously – to ensure that the city's shrines remained in excellent working order so that the pilgrims might keep flooding in, and – politically – to utilize the see's wealth effectively in orchestrating the play of ambitions among the landed aristocracy of central Italy. The whole idea that the papacy might be mobilized to function as the head of Latin Christianity was first conceived of in theoretical terms in the old barbarian north in the ninth century...."⁴¹

C. Other Traditions

In addition to Rome's claims about the tradition of papal authority, other claims of historical evidence for various traditions of doctrine and practice are made by the Council of Trent. As we examine the decisions of Trent carefully, we find various places in which it claims the authority of tradition as the foundation of its teaching.

1. The Eucharist

a. Transubstantiation

For example, Trent teaches that its doctrine of transubstantiation is a perpetual and passionate commitment of the entire church in ancient times: "And because that Christ, our Redeemer, declared that which he offered under the species of bread to be truly his own body, therefore, has it ever been a firm belief in the Church of God, and this holy Synod doth now declare it anew, that, by the consecration of the bread and of the wine, a conversion is made of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood...."⁴²

b. Worship

Trent also teaches that worshipping the consecrated bread and wine of the Lord's Supper is an apostolic tradition: "Wherefore, there is no room left for doubt, that all the faithful of Christ

⁴⁰ Heather, p. 307. For the important role of other forgeries in the growth of papal claims (the pseudo-Isidorian decretals and the Donation of Constantine), see Heather, pp. 359, 383-384, 390, 407.

⁴¹ Heather, pp. 406-407.

⁴² Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 2, p. 130.

may, according to the custom ever received in the Catholic Church, render in veneration the worship of latria, which is due to the true God, to this most holy sacrament.”⁴³

c. Administration of the elements by priests

Trent declared that the laity must receive communion from the priests as was ancient tradition: “Now as to the reception of the sacrament, it was always the custom in the Church of God that laymen should receive the communion from priests; but that priests when celebrating should communicate themselves; which custom, as coming down from an apostolic tradition, ought with justice and reason to be retained.”⁴⁴

d. Sacrifice

Trent also taught that the apostolic tradition held that the mass was an unbloody, propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of the living and the dead: “And forasmuch as, in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the mass, that same Christ is contained and immolated in an unbloody manner who once offered himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross; the holy Synod teaches, that this sacrifice is truly propitiatory, and that by means thereof this is effected, that we obtain mercy, and find grace *in seasonable aid*, if we draw nigh unto God, contrite and penitent, with a sincere heart and upright faith, with fear and reverence. For the Lord, appeased by the oblation thereof, and granting the grace and gift of penitence, forgives even heinous crimes and sins. For the victim is one and the same, the same now offering by the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the cross, the manner alone of offering being different. The fruits indeed of which oblation, of that bloody one to wit, are received most plentifully through this unbloody one....Wherefore, not only for the sins, punishments, satisfactions, and other necessities of the faithful who are living, but also for those who are departed in Christ, and who are not as yet fully purified, is it rightly offered, agreeably to a tradition of the apostles.”⁴⁵

2. Purgatory

Trent declared the antiquity of its doctrine of Purgatory: “Whereas the Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Ghost, has, from the Sacred Writings and the ancient tradition of the Fathers, taught, in sacred Councils, and very recently in this oecumenical Synod, that there is a Purgatory....”⁴⁶

3. Images

Trent grounded the veneration of images in apostolic practice: “...agreeably to the usage of the Catholic and Apostolic Church, received from primitive times of the Christian religion, and agreeably to the consent of the holy Fathers, and to the decrees of sacred Councils, they

⁴³ Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 2, p. 131.

⁴⁴ Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 2, pp. 134f.

⁴⁵ Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 2, pp. 179f.

⁴⁶ Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 2, p. 198.

especially instruct the faithful diligently concerning the intercession and invocation of saints; the honor [paid] to relics; and the legitimate use of images....”⁴⁷

4. Indulgences

Trent also declared the antiquity of indulgences: “...the power of conferring Indulgences was granted by Christ to the Church, and she has, even in the most ancient times, used the said power delivered unto her of God....”⁴⁸

5. Response

The Council of Trent declares that each of these traditions are from the ancient apostolic church, that is, teaches that they are part of Tradition II. Yet no reputable church historian would confirm any of these historical claims of the Council of Trent. Even if some ancient support for some of these teachings were found, it would not substantiate Trent’s claims of clear and broad acceptance of them in the early period of the ancient church, which would be true if genuinely apostolic.

In the post-Tridentine church Roman scholars have tried to obviate the traditional understanding of tradition as supplementing Scripture. In a very important article, “Roman Catholic Theology Today,” Protestant theologian Robert B. Strimple has shown the great influence on the interpretation of the Council of Trent’s statement on the relationship of Scripture and tradition in Roman Catholic circles by Josef Rupert Geiselmann. Geiselmann concluded that “nothing, absolutely nothing, was decided at the Council of Trent concerning the relation of Scripture and Tradition.”⁴⁹ Even if Geiselmann is correct, which seems implausible in light of the words and intention of Trent, his conclusion does not change Trent’s definition of tradition. Authoritative tradition is to be found in the teaching of the apostles, not in later traditions.

II. Scripture and its Text

Trent not only made a declaration on Scripture and tradition. It also made an official pronouncement on the text of the Bible which the church should use. It insisted that the church use the traditional translation of Jerome (ca. 342-420) in use in the western church, namely the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible: “the said old and vulgate [Latin] edition, which, by the lengthened usage of so many ages, has been approved of in the Church, be, in public lectures, disputations, sermons, and expositions, held as authentic; and that no one is to dare, or presume to reject it under any pretext whatever.”⁵⁰

Again the First Vatican Council states something similar: “And these books of the Old and New Testament are to be received as sacred and canonical, in their integrity, with all their parts, as

⁴⁷ Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 2, p. 200. See the Appendix on Images at the end of this study for an historical examination of the developing tradition of the use of images in the churches.

⁴⁸ Schaff, vol. 2, p.205

⁴⁹ Robert B. Strimple, “Roman Catholic Theology Today,” in *Roman Catholicism*, ed. John Armstrong, Chicago (Moody), 1994, p. 102.

⁵⁰ Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 2, p. 82.

they are enumerated in the decree of the said Council, and are contained in the ancient Latin edition of the Vulgate.”⁵¹

Calvin, as a hard-working Renaissance scholar, was particularly outraged by Trent’s approval of the Latin Vulgate translation as “authentic” (*authentica*). The Latin word *authentica* in addition to meaning authentic also means original or genuine. The intent of the decree was clearly to teach that the Latin Vulgate was as true and reliable as the Greek and Hebrew originals to which not only the Reformers but great Roman Catholic Renaissance scholars such as Valla, Faber Stapulensis, and Erasmus appealed.⁵² Calvin as a linguist and historian as well as a biblical scholar and reformer utterly rejected such confidence in the Vulgate as indefensible.

He is incredulous that the church should not make use of the texts of the Bible available in its original languages: “In condemning all translations except the Vulgate, as the error is more gross, so the edict is more barbarous. The sacred oracles of God were delivered by Moses and the Prophets in Hebrew, and by the Apostles in Greek. That no corner of the world might be left destitute of so great a treasure, the gift of interpretation was added....this [Vulgate] version teems with innumerable errors....There is no man of ordinary talent who, on comparing the Vulgate version with some others, does not easily see that many things which were improperly rendered by it are in these happily restored....It were tedious beyond measure to mark the passages erroneously and absurdly rendered. So far is there from being an entire page, that there are scarcely three continuous verses without some noted blunder.”⁵³

For centuries after Trent the practice of the Roman Catholic Church showed clearly what the Council of Trent intended by its teaching on the Vulgate. Roman Catholic scholars did not make much use of Greek or Hebrew texts relying on the Vulgate as authoritative and reliable for all their needs.

The Roman Catholic Church devoted great efforts to establishing a completely reliable text of the Vulgate, but contemporary Roman scholars have concluded that the efforts were not entirely successful: “The Council of Trent called for an officially sponsored critical edition of the Vg...: but despite serious work toward that goal over a period of some 30 years in the late 16th cent., neither the Sixtine edition of 1590 nor the (Sixto-) Clementine texts of 1592-98 can be considered as truly successful fulfillments of the council’s directive.”⁵⁴

In the late nineteenth century Pope Leo XIII gave some very cautious permission to use Greek and Hebrew texts. Roman Catholic scholars Thomas Collins and Raymond Brown noted that the pope’s 1893 encyclical “*Providentissimus Deus*,” encouraged renewed biblical studies in the Roman Catholic Church. They wrote: “The ‘authentic’ Vg version is to be the biblical text used, though other versions, as well as the more ancient mss. should not be neglected....”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 2, p. 241.

⁵² John Calvin, “Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, with the Antidote,” *Selected Works*, Grand Rapids, Michigan (Baker), 1983, p. 74.

⁵³ Calvin, “Antidote,” pp. 71f. Calvin offers numerous examples of errors, pp. 72, 75.

⁵⁴ *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. by Raymond Brown et al., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey (Prentice-Hall), 1968, p. 579.

⁵⁵ *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 627.

Fifty years later Pope Pius XII finally liberated Roman Catholic biblical scholarship from dependence on the Vulgate. Of his 1943 encyclical “*Divino Afflante Spiritu*,” further encouraging biblical studies, Collins and Brown wrote that this encyclical “orders them [scholars] to explain the original texts from which new translations should be made....As for the true meaning of the Tridentine decree regarding the Vg, the authenticity of the Vg is not specified primarily as critical, but rather as juridical...; this means that no claim is made that the Vg is always an accurate translation, but that it is free from any error in faith and morals.”⁵⁶

The interpretation of Trent’s decree on the Vulgate offered by Collins and Brown is not historically accurate or credible, nor does it explain the historical practice of Roman Catholic scholars for almost four hundred years. How can such a new interpretation be explained?

Strimple in his article, “Roman Catholic Theology Today,” shows some of the ways in which the post-Tridentine church circumvents the decisions of Trent. He cites the same distinguished Roman Catholic biblical scholar Raymond Brown, quoted above, who wrote, “the Roman Catholic church does not change her official stance in a blunt way. Past statements are not rejected but are requoted with praise and then reinterpreted at the same time.”⁵⁷ Strimple shows a similar pattern of circumvention in the work of Karl Rahner.⁵⁸ Is this a faithful submission by the church and her scholars to the irreformable decisions of an ecumenical council?

III. Scripture and Its Interpretation

In addition to its decisions on tradition and the text of Scripture, Trent further decreed that only the church could properly interpret the meaning of the Bible: “Furthermore, in order to restrain petulant spirits, it decrees, that no one, relying on his own skill, shall, - in matters of faith, and of morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, - wresting the sacred Scripture to his own senses, presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church, - whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures, - hath held and doth hold; or even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers....”⁵⁹

The position articulated by Trent against *sola Scripture* has rightly sometimes been called *sola ecclesia* (by the church alone). It is not so much the Bible and tradition that determine the truth as the decisions of the church as to the meaning of the Bible and tradition.

John Calvin gives strong expression to the Protestant objection to Rome, that Rome did not in fact give any real authority to the Bible, but made the Bible into a wax nose which would mean whatever Rome wanted it to mean: “Now, if credit is given them, the right of authorized interpretation will remove every doubt. For what passage can be objected to them so clear and strong that they shall not evade it? Any kind of quibble will at once relieve them from difficulty. Against opposing arguments they will set up this brazen wall – Who are you to question the

⁵⁶ *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 628.

⁵⁷ Robert B. Strimple, “Roman Catholic Theology Today,” in *Roman Catholicism*, ed. John Armstrong, Chicago (Moody), 1994, p. 98.

⁵⁸ Strimple, p. 94.

⁵⁹ Schaff, *Creeeds*, vol. 2, p. 83.

interpretation of the Church? This, no doubt, is what they mean by a saying common among them, in that Scripture is a nose of wax, because it can be formed into all shapes.”⁶⁰

Calvin indeed recognized an important role for the church in interpreting the Bible, but has a very different notion of what the church is. For Rome the church is the authoritative hierarchy that by its power decides the meaning of the Bible. For Calvin the interpretation of the Bible in difficult matters should be given to learned members of the church to study the meaning of the Bible humbly and submissively. “I come to the right of interpreting, which they arrogate to themselves whenever the meaning is doubtful. It is theirs, they say, to give the meaning of Scripture, and we must acquiesce. For everything which they bestow upon the Church they bestow in themselves. I acknowledge, indeed, that as Scripture came not by the private will of man (2 Pet. i. 21,) it is unbecoming to wrest it to the private sense of any man. Nay, in the case of an obscure passage, when it is doubtful what sense ought to be adopted, there is no better way of arriving at the true meaning than for pious doctors to make common inquiry, by engaging in religious discussion. But that is not now the question. They wish, by their tyrannical edict, to deprive the Church of all liberty, and arrogate to themselves a boundless license; for, be the meaning which they affix to Scripture what it may, it must be immediately embraced. Except themselves, moreover, no man will be permitted to prove anything out of Scripture.”⁶¹

The question remains, of course, as to the means for Roman Catholics by which the church reaches its decisions. Who speaks for the church? Some argued for the authority of church councils. Others looked to the great theological faculties in the universities. (For example, in presenting a judgment on the Leipzig Disputation in which Martin Luther participated, the theological faculty of the University of Paris declared that it had the responsibility to determine the meaning the Scriptures.⁶²) Many, of course, believed that only the Pope could speak for the whole church. Still today, while Rome is theoretically united around the Pope’s authority to declare the teaching of the church, Roman Catholicism in fact has vast differences theologically inside itself and many debates continue as to what popes have meant in what they say.

Calvin recognized that many well-meaning people in his day simply accepted the arguments of the Roman church: “Meanwhile many unskilful, though otherwise honest persons would be imposed upon, by the plausible axiom that the decision of the Church must be acquiesced in.”⁶³ Calvin wrote to try to help those honest persons to understand the Bible and the history of the church more truly than Trent was presenting them.

Since Calvin’s time Rome has continued its defense of itself through complicated arguments full of distinctions made after the fact. I have quoted at great length from many historical documents to show how great is the distance between what the documents say and how Rome treats them today. Rome’s historical arguments are simply not credible and most Roman Catholics do not know them and do not think about them. Most of those who do know them do not believe them. Those who do believe them in the end follow the founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius Loyola who wrote: “If we wish to proceed securely in all things, we must hold fast to the following principle:

⁶⁰ Calvin, “Antidote,” p. 69.

⁶¹ Calvin, “Antidote,” pp. 74f.

⁶² E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, St. Louis (Concordia), 1950, p. 436.

⁶³ Calvin, “Antidote,” p. 37.

What seems to me white, I will believe black if the hierarchical Church so defines.”⁶⁴ Such a position is not worthy of a Christian or of biblical religion.

Appendix on Images

(The following study was prepared as a Reformed reflection on the development of the tradition of icons in Eastern Orthodoxy and the problem posed by the use of icons for the Reformed. The history of this tradition is relevant to the historical claims of the Council of Trent about images.)

One point at which Orthodoxy is crystal clear, and which must be a major concern to Reformed Christians, is the matter of icons. For the Orthodox icons are not just a matter of church decoration, but are a meeting place of man and God and the veneration of icons is a central part of Orthodox worship. In addition the Orthodox have officially anathematized those who reject the use and veneration of icons. That means that Reformed Christianity officially stands under the anathemas of Orthodoxy, anathemas that are reiterated and celebrated every year.⁶⁵

For Reformed Christians the Orthodox use of icons is idolatrous as a violation of the Second Commandment. The Second Commandment prohibits false worship of the true God. Most focally the commandment forbids the making of images of God to be used in his worship. Understandably the Orthodox do not regard their practice as idolatrous, just as Rome insists that its veneration of statues and worship of consecrated bread is not idolatrous. But Reformed Christians have insisted, on their side, that just saying a practice is not idolatrous is not adequate. So let us explore in some detail the historical and theological developments in the Orthodox churches on the matter of icons.

The great controversy over icons in the Orthodox churches occurred between 726 and 843, often referred to as the iconoclastic controversy. The iconoclasts (icon destroyers) wanted to remove the icons from the churches and from veneration, while the iconophiles (icon lovers) or iconodules (icon servers) wanted to protect and venerate the icons.

⁶⁴ Cited in Lewis W. Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation, 1517-1559*, New York (Harper and Row), 1985 p. 306.

⁶⁵ According to Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol, 4, Grand Rapids, Michigan (Eerdmans), 1910, p. 465, the Eastern Orthodox churches annually celebrate the “Sunday of Orthodoxy” (on the first Sunday in Lent). In this celebration, “The old oecumenical Councils are dramatically represented, and a threefold anathema is pronounced upon all sorts of heretics such as atheists, antitrinitarians, upon those who deny the virginity of Mary before or after the birth of Christ, the inspiration of the Scriptures, or the immortality of the soul, who reject the mysteries (sacraments), the traditions and councils, who deny that orthodox princes rule by divine appointment and receive at their unction the Holy Ghost, and upon all iconoclasts.”

The full character of the theological debate and the controversy is difficult to reconstruct because the ultimate victory of the iconophiles led to the destruction of much of the writing of the iconoclasts. Nevertheless certain elements of the struggle and what preceded it remain clear. That history is usefully summarized by Kallistos Ware, a Greek Orthodox theologian, historian, and apologist. First he recognizes the absence of icons in early Christian history: “Early Christian art – as found, for example, in the Roman catacombs – showed a certain reluctance to portray Christ directly, and He was most often represented in symbolical form....With the conversion of Constantine and the progressive disappearance of paganism, the Church grew less hesitant in its employment of art, and by A.D. 400 it had become an accepted practice to represent our Lord not just through symbols but directly. At this date, however, there is as yet no evidence to suggest that the pictures in church were venerated or honoured with any outward expressions of devotion. They were not at this period objects of cult, but their purpose was decorative and instructional. Even in this restricted form, however, the use of icons aroused protests on the part of certain fourth-century writers....”⁶⁶

Another distinguished historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, who was a Lutheran, but later became Eastern Orthodox, wrote even more strongly about the teaching of the early ancient church. Pelikan insisted that the written witness of the ancient fathers of the church was unanimous through the fourth century against the use of images of God or Christ.⁶⁷ This means that there was no written, theological defense of images for four centuries, indeed quite the opposite.

Second, Ware acknowledges the rather late development of iconodule practice: “Not until the period following Justinian – during the years 550-650 – did the veneration of icons in churches and private homes become widely accepted in the devotional life of eastern Christians. By the years 650-700 the first attempts were made by Christian writers to provide a doctrinal basis for this growing cult of icons and to formulate a Christian theology of art....The veneration of icons was not accepted everywhere without opposition....The ensuing controversy falls into two main periods: the first phase, 726-780; and the revival of iconoclasm, 815-42.”⁶⁸ Ware seems clearly to recognize that the veneration of icons was neither apostolic nor very ancient.

Third, he notes that iconodule practice was far from universal on the eve of the controversy: “...the cult of icons which grew up from the middle of the sixth century onwards was by no means universal throughout the Byzantine world at the start of the eighth. If the icons were highly popular in certain circles – at Constantinople, above all among the lower classes, and also in Greece and in most monasteries – they were viewed with far greater reserve by many Christians in Asia Minor.”⁶⁹

The basic elements of the history of the controversy between the iconoclasts and the iconodules are simple. The Emperor Leo III (717-741) responded to the spread of popular devotion to the icons and their use in church by issuing an edict in 726 ordering destruction of images. This policy was continued by Emperor Constantine V (741-775) who in support of iconoclasm called

⁶⁶ Kallistos Ware, “Christian Theology in the East 600-1453,” in *A History of Christian Doctrine*, ed. by H. Cunliffe-Jones, Philadelphia (Fortress Press), 1978, p. 191.

⁶⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Imago Dei*, Princeton, New Jersey (Princeton University Press), 1990, pp. 57, 61.

⁶⁸ Ware, p. 192.

⁶⁹ Ware, p. 193.

a large council. About this council Ware wrote: “In 754 Constantine [the Fifth] summoned a synod at Hieria, an imperial palace close to Chalcedon; this assembly was attended by 338 bishops, and was regarded by its own members, though not by subsequent centuries, as the seventh Ecumenical Council. The bishops at Hieria renewed the condemnation of icons....”⁷⁰

Under the Emperor Leo IV (775-80) the iconoclast policy was maintained, but on his death his young son Constantine VI succeeded him for whom his mother, the Empress Irene, was regent. Irene supported the restoration of the icons and had the iconodule Tarasius made patriarch of Constantinople in 784, after deposing the previous patriarch who was an iconoclast. In 787 the Second Council of Nicea was called which supported the iconodule position. This council is reckoned both by the Orthodox and by the Roman Catholics as the seventh ecumenical council.

The Second Council of Nicea did not in fact settle the iconoclastic issue for the churches. A second phase in the iconoclast controversy began when the Emperor Leo V (813-820) started again removing the images from churches. Although he was assassinated in 820, his iconoclastic policies were continued by his successors Michael II (820-829) and Theophilus (829-842). Of this phase Ware wrote: “But the campaign against icons in this second period (815-42) proved less fierce than under Leo III and Constantine V. While *proskynesis* of icons was prohibited, pictures of Christ and the saints on the upper walls of churches were often left undisturbed. It was the cult of the icons, rather than their mere presence, which was attacked....”⁷¹

When Theophilus died, the Empress Theodora became regent for his young son Michael III and restored the icons in 843. The Fourth Council of Constantinople (869-870) reiterated the orthodoxy of the icons as well as addressing other issues. (This council is recognized as an ecumenical council by the Roman Catholic Church, but not by the Eastern Orthodox Churches.)

While Theodora managed the ultimate restoration of the icons, it was the Second Council of Nicea, 787, arranged by Irene, which had provided the official defense of the icons. When the Second Council of Nicea met, the eastern empire and churches had faced some fifty years of controversy over the imperial policy of banning images used for worship. The iconoclast emperors had received support from some clerics, theologians, and people, but had also faced opposition, often led by monks.

The Empress Irene as regent for her young son, the Emperor Constantine VI, supported the iconodule element in the church and supported the meeting of the Second Council of Nicea. The meeting place for the council was clearly intended to link the orthodoxy and importance of its decisions to the great first Council of Nicea (325) which condemned Arianism.

The decisions of the Second Council of Nicea are very interesting in a variety of ways. First, aside from adopting 22 disciplinary canons, the doctrinal definitions of the council are rather brief. Second, the tone of the doctrinal definitions is relatively mild in light of the serious controversy and persecution that had occurred in the fifty years before the council. There seems, especially compared with the language of the Fourth Council of Constantinople, an almost nervous desire not to offend unnecessarily.

⁷⁰ Ware, p. 193.

⁷¹ Ware, p. 194.

Third, the council acknowledges that one of the great things Christ had done for his church was to rescue her “from the darkness of idolatrous insanity....”⁷² At the outset the council wanted to make clear that it rejected the charge of idolatry brought by the iconoclasts against the images.

Fourth, the council noted the danger of following false priests, “hoodwinked by the treacherous foe they abandoned the true line of reasoning, and setting themselves against the tradition of the catholic church they faltered in their grasp of the truth....Indeed they had the effrontery to criticise the beauty pleasing to God established in the holy monuments....”⁷³ These false teachers were guilty of “asserting that the icons of our Lord and of his saints were no different from the wooden images of satanic idols.” (This declaration, of course, implicitly acknowledges that many priests, bishops, and theologians had been iconoclasts.)

Fifth, the claim of tradition is very important to the council: “...setting for our aim the truth, we neither diminish nor augment, but simply guard intact all that pertains to the catholic church.”⁷⁴ Further the council stated: “To summarize, we declare that we defend free from any innovations all the written and unwritten ecclesiastical traditions that have been entrusted to us. One of these is the production of representational art; this is quite in harmony with the history of the spread of the gospel, as it provides confirmation that the becoming man of the Word of God was real and not just imaginary, and as it brings us a similar benefit. For, things that mutually illustrate one another undoubtedly possess one another’s message.”⁷⁵

Sixth, the council appeals not just generally to tradition, but also to the specific practice of venerating the cross as a symbol. “...following as we are the God-spoken teaching of our holy fathers and the tradition of the catholic church – for we recognize that this tradition comes from the holy Spirit who dwells in her – we decree with full precision and care that, like the figure of the honoured and life-giving cross, the revered and holy images, whether painted or made of mosaic or of other suitable material, are to be exposed in the holy churches of God....”⁷⁶

The council was specific about the images commended: “...these are the images of our Lord, God and savior, Jesus Christ, and of our Lady without blemish, the holy God-bearer, and of the revered angels and of any of the saintly holy men. The more frequently they are seen in representational art, the more are those who see them drawn to remember and long for those who serve as models, and to pay these images the tribute of salutation and respectful veneration. Certainly this is not the full adoration in accordance with our faith, which is properly paid only to the divine nature, but it resembles that given to the figure of the honoured and life-giving cross, and also to the holy books of the gospels and to other sacred cult objects. Further, people are drawn to honour these images with the offering of incense and lights, as was piously established by ancient custom. Indeed, the honour paid to an image transverses it, reaching the model; and he who venerates the image, venerates the person represented in that image.”⁷⁷

⁷² *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. N.P. Tanner, London (Sheed and Ward), 1990, vol. 1, p. 133.

⁷³ *Decrees*, p. 133.

⁷⁴ *Decrees*, p. 134.

⁷⁵ *Decrees*, p. 135.

⁷⁶ *Decrees*, pp. 135f.

⁷⁷ *Decrees*, p. 136. The footnote in this edition notes that the last sentence in this section is a quotation from Basil of Caesarea.

The council insisted that it was not introducing innovations into the life of the church, but continuing and protecting apostolic practice: “So it is that the teaching of our holy fathers is strengthened, namely, the tradition of the catholic church which has received the gospel from one end of the earth to the other. So it is that we really follow Paul, who spoke in Christ, and the entire divine apostolic group and the holiness of the fathers, clinging fast to the traditions which we have received.”⁷⁸

The council finished its doctrinal teaching on the icons with four anathemas:

- “1. If anyone does not confess that Christ our God can be represented in his humanity, let him be anathema.
2. If anyone does not accept representation in at of evangelical scenes, let him be anathema.
3. If anyone does not salute [greet] such representations as standing for the Lord and his saints, let him be anathema.
4. If anyone rejects any written or unwritten tradition of the church, let him be anathema.”⁷⁹

The definitions and anathemas of the council lack specific appeals to the Scripture or tradition to validate its teaching. (Some other councils had also not presented specific supports for their teaching.) The appeal was to tradition in a rather general way. Jaroslav Pelikan has summarized the reasons that the iconodules believed that they could appeal to holy tradition in defense of their position in these terms: 1) casting doubt on the genuineness of some of the patristic writings against images, 2) appealing to unwritten tradition, 3) suggesting the ambiguity in the meaning of the Bible, 4) seeing an analogy between images and the reverence shown the cross, and 5) appealing to natural reason.⁸⁰

Certainly the council’s appeal to apostolic tradition is not very convincing in light of the history presented by Ware and Pelikan. Even its appeal to later tradition is problematic. For example, the council’s allusion to the words of St. Basil of Caesarea (ca.330-379) was a misuse of him. Ware noted: “In St. Basil the Great’s words, often repeated during the course of the controversy, ‘The honour shown to the icon is ascribed to the prototype.’”⁸¹ But these words of the great theologian were wrenched from their context and misused by the iconodules. Basil was not writing about icons of God or Christ, but of images of kings. He was not discussing images in worship, but trying to illustrate how the Son and the Spirit in the Trinity can be one nature and two persons at the same time. He wrote in “The Treatise on the Holy Spirit”: “For the Son is in the Father and the Father in the Son; since such is the former, such is the latter; and herein is the Unity. So that according to the distinction of Persons, both are one and one, and according to the community of Nature, one. How, then, if one and one, are there not two Gods? Because we speak of a king, and of the king’s image, and not of two kings. The majesty is not cloven in two, nor the glory divided. The sovereignty and authority over us is not plural but one; because the honour paid to the image passes on to the prototype. Now what in the one case the image is by imitation, that in the other case the Son is by nature; and as in works of art the likeness is

⁷⁸ *Decrees*, p. 136. The footnote in this edition notes that the last phrase in this section is a quotation from Paul, 2 Thessalonians 2:15.

⁷⁹ *Decrees*, pp. 137-138.

⁸⁰ Pelikan, pp. 60ff.

⁸¹ Ware, p. 196.

dependent on the form, so in the case of the divine and uncompounded nature the union consists in the communion of the Godhead.”⁸²

The appeal to unwritten tradition was used by iconodules and certainly artistic representations of Christ appeared before there were written theological defenses of the practices. But ancient iconodules also appealed to legends which today have been historically discredited. Some appealed to the Mandylion of Edessa, which supposedly was the imprint of the face of Christ on a cloth made by Christ himself for Abgar, king of Edessa. (A similar legend developed in the west about Veronica’s veil. The story goes that when Christ fell under the weight of his cross on the way to Calvary, Veronica wiped his face and the image remained on her veil. This story developed most likely in the fourth century and the veil has been kept in Rome since the eighth century.) Another important legend was that the Apostle Luke had painted the icon of the Virgin Hodegetria. This icon was one of the greatest treasures of the church in Constantinople and disappeared in 1453 when the city fell to the Turks.

Pelikan suggests that the iconodules appealed to natural reason to defend their position. Such an appeal can perhaps be seen in several ways. One would be to the need of the illiterate for instruction: “‘What the Scripture is to those who can read,’ wrote John of Damascus, ‘the icon is to the illiterate.’”⁸³ Another would be a proper appreciation of the material creation: “Whereas the Council of Hieria saw in the cult of the icons nothing but the ‘grovelling and materialistic worship of created things’, John for his part insists on the reverence which should rightly be shown toward the material order.”⁸⁴ Still another might be in the relationship between an icon and the sacraments: “St. Theodore of Studios went so far as to state, ‘It would not be wrong to say that the Godhead is present in an icon...not in virtue of a natural union (for the icon is not deified flesh), but in virtue of a relative participation: for the icon shares in the grace and honour that belong to God’....The icon of Christ the God-Man is not merely a reminder, bringing the absent Saviour into our thoughts: it is an actual point of meeting between ourselves and Him, filled with supernatural grace and making the power of god truly present among us....While clearly on a different level from the consecrated elements at the eucharist, the icon is none the less sacramental: it is a visible sign conveying invisible grace.”⁸⁵

The heart of the theological argument offered by the iconodules is that the incarnation of Jesus has so joined heaven and earth and so redeemed the eyes of Christians that icons of Jesus do not foster idolatry, but rather devotion and spiritual growth. The Old Testament prohibitions of images do not apply after the incarnation of Jesus.

Such theological reasoning, however compelling it may seem in terms of internal argument, is valueless without biblical support or the evidence of early tradition. Orthodoxy does not embrace a doctrine of evolving tradition, but rather upholds only unwritten apostolic tradition. For example, Dositheos, Patriarch of Jerusalem, wrote in his influential *Confession* (1672): “For

⁸² Basil of Caesarea, “The Treatise on the Holy Spirit,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1895, vol. 8, second series, (chapter 18, section 45), p. 28.

⁸³ Ware, p. 197.

⁸⁴ Ware, p. 199.

⁸⁵ Ware, p. 200.

so both the custom obtaining in the Church from Apostolic times of adoring the holy Eikons relatively is maintained, and the worship of latria reserved for God alone....”⁸⁶

The historical evidence for such apostolic practice and tradition is entirely lacking. As Ware wrote: “They [the iconoclasts] were archaists and reactionaries rather than innovators; their aim was to preserve, or rather to revive, an older tradition of Christian art which relied upon symbolic *motifs* and did not portray our Lord directly.”⁸⁷ Does not Ware, as an Orthodox historian and theologian really concede that the use of icons was not in fact apostolic or part of the earliest centuries of Christian teaching and practice?

Ironically, it would seem that even by Orthodoxy’s own standards the legitimacy of the Second Council of Nicea as an ecumenical council is in doubt. Since Orthodoxy does not recognize any council as ecumenical after Second Nicea, how can we be sure that a future ecumenical council will not declare that Hieria, not Second Nicea, is the true ecumenical council of the eighth century? Is it not much safer to maintain the teaching of the Bible and early Christian practice in prohibiting the use of images?

⁸⁶ Cited in Josiah Trenham, *Rock and Sand, An Orthodox Appraisal of the Protestant Reformers and Their Teaching*, Columbia, Missouri (Newrome Press), 2015, p. 352.

⁸⁷ Ware, p. 193.

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- Here are some of the blog and other web resources influencing journeys East:

- Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy - <http://blogs.ancientfaith.com/orthodoxyandheterodoxy/>
- The Ancient Faiths - <http://blogs.ancientfaith.com/>
- The Life of Faith - <http://blogs.ancientfaith.com/thelifeoffaith/>
- A Lamp For Today - <http://blogs.ancientfaith.com/alampfortoday/>
- Departing Horeb - <http://blogs.ancientfaith.com/departinghoreb/>
- No Other Foundation - <http://blogs.ancientfaith.com/notherfoundation/>
- Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America- <http://goarch.org>
- Journey to Orthodoxy - <http://journeytoorthodoxy.com>

And for commentary on various relevant EO issues from a Reformed perspective, consult the blog of Westminster Seminary California professor Dr. R. Scott Clark – <http://heidelblog.net>