

The One, Holy, Catholic And Apostolic Church

What do we mean when we use the word "church"? Look at the tremendous variety of groups that call themselves "churches". In fact, anyone can establish a "church" for himself. There are many cults and other groups today that use the name "Jesus" and "church" very freely. You'll hear them calling themselves "Jesus People" or "Jesus Church," etc. But are they truly churches? Were they founded by Jesus and the Apostles? What kind of historical connection do they have with the apostles and the early church? If the Devil appears as an angel and quotes Scripture, then he can use even "churches" to lead people away from the one true God and His plan of salvation.

We need to define our terms carefully. Exactly what do we mean when we say "church"? We Orthodox Christians mean by Church the Body through which Jesus is present and active in the world today. It was founded by Christ through the apostles and has maintained a living, historical connection with the apostles through the ordination of its clergy. The fact that the bishop who ordains an Orthodox priest today can trace his ordination historically all the way back to the apostles and through them to Christ is a guarantee that the Orthodox Church was not founded by someone called Joe Smith a few centuries ago but by Christ Himself and traces its existence historically back to Jesus. We call this "apostolic succession" It means that our Church is the authentic and genuine Church or Body of Christ in the world today. It continues to teach not one man's interpretation of the faith but the complete deposit of faith as it was handed down to the Apostles by Jesus.

So there are some very important questions to ask when one hears the word "church". Was this "church" founded by God or by man? Does it have an unbroken historical connection with the early apostolic church? How else can we be certain that what it teaches is truly apostolic, truly Christian, truly the word of God and not one man's interpretation, or misinterpretation of that faith?

A group of evangelicals banded together recently to seek to find what they feel is lacking in their tradition: a living connection with the early church. They call themselves "The Orthodox Evangelicals" and they are now members of our Holy Orthodox Church within our Antiochian Archdiocese in North America.. Let me share with you what they said, "We were, for the most part, a people without roots. Some of us can only trace the beginnings of our denomination or church to some time in this century - arising over a split in this or that doctrine, or maybe even a personality clash between two strong leaders. Most of us had no sense of the past, no understanding of where we came from . . ."1 They found their roots in the early apostolic Church of which the Orthodox Church is an historical continuation.

AN UNBROKEN HISTORICAL CONNECTION

In order to be used as evidence in court, the bullet used in the attempted assassination of President Reagan some time ago had to have an unbroken connection with the bullet that was removed from the president's body. Accordingly, a secret service agent was present during surgery. He witnessed the removal of the bullet. The surgeon signed a statement upon giving the bullet to the agent. The agent signed another statement when he delivered the bullet to the laboratory, etc. Such evidence of an unbroken connection between a bullet and a body is required in a court of law. Equal evidence is required to show that a church is indeed the genuine church founded by Jesus: the evidence of an unbroken historical connection with the apostolic church.

A church is the true Church of Christ if it can show historically that it was rounded by Christ and has maintained a living connection over the centuries with that early Church. We need this historical connection in order to be assured that the deposit of the faith has not been tampered with but has been handed down to us in its entirety.

A professor of Theology in Boston said:

". . . the Orthodox Church is the true Church of God on earth and maintains the fullness of Christ's truth in continuity with the Church of the apostles. This awesome claim does not necessarily mean that Orthodox Christians have achieved perfection: for we have many personal shortcomings. Nor does it necessarily mean that the other Christian Churches do not serve God's purposes positively: for it is not up to us to judge others but to live and proclaim the fullness of the truth. But it does mean that if a person carefully examines the history of Christianity he or she will soon discover that the Orthodox Church alone is in complete sacramental, doctrinal and canonical continuity with the ancient undivided Church as it authoritatively expressed itself through the great Ecumenical Councils." 2