

Eastern Orthodoxy

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The position of the Pristine Faith Restoration Society should not be confused with the views of the Eastern Orthodox Church. No doubt we have some things in common. For example, we both appeal frequently to the early Church Fathers to demonstrate that our views are ancient. There are also some specific doctrines that we hold in common, including “futurism” and “posttribulationism.” But the similarities are far outweighed by fundamental differences.

Like the Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox believe in *Apostolic Succession*. But, unlike the Romanists, the Orthodox do not see Apostolic authority resting in one local Church (Rome), nor in a single Bishop (the Bishop of Rome). Rather, the Orthodox Church views the collective decisions of the bishops through ecumenical councils, such as the Council of Nicea (AD325), as the vehicle for divine decrees. Therefore, when matters of importance deserve the attention of the Church, councils are called and the bishops from local provinces discuss the issue and vote. The decree of the Church council is considered inspired, and virtually on a par with Scripture. This thinking stems from five fundamental errors.

In the following table, we have contrasted the PFRS and the Eastern Orthodox positions, quoting from their own material.

I. Eastern Orthodox

The Eastern Orthodox Church teaches that the “universal Church” is a visible organization on earth, with certain offices held by men. “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.”¹

PFRS

PFRS believes that the “universal Church” is not an organization, but merely the sum total of all believers from all local churches. A local church, according to the New Testament, consists of *all baptized believers within a local community*. A local church is led by a group of ordained elders (bishops). *Elders* and *deacons* are the **only** biblical offices of the local church community. The job of the *elders* is to faithfully preserve and teach what has been handed down by Apostolic authority in their particular city. Deacons were charged with looking

after the temporal needs and concerns of the flock. The “universal Church” has no offices because it is not an organization.

The Apostles themselves certainly exercised a kind of universal authority over all the local churches they founded. But, their “Apostolic ministry” was not an “office” in which others succeeded them. The Apostles were **Christ's hand picked ambassadors sent by Him personally** to lay the foundation of the Church through the establishment of many local churches. The network of many independent local churches, all teaching the same pristine Faith and all in fellowship with one another, is the “universal Church.” Neither individual local churches, nor the combined network of local churches, have any independent authority to speak for God beyond what the Apostles handed down. That right was granted to the Apostles alone.

II. Eastern Orthodox

The Eastern Orthodox Church teaches that the Universal Church is Christ's mystical body on earth, and that each believer becomes “christ” through the sacrament of Chrismation (confirmation) conferred immediately after baptism. *“The Greek word for Confirmation is ‘chrisma,’ which means anointing. The one anointed with ‘chrisma’ becomes ‘christos,’ that is the anointed one, which is the meaning of the name Christ. Thus, by this sacrament we are made Christians or other Christs.”*² Consequently, the collective of “christs” comprises the mystical Jesus Christ on earth.

PFRS

PFRS does not agree that individual Christians become “christs.” Nor do we believe that the universal Church is Christ's mystical body on earth. Despite the fact that this is taught by Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestants, it is not biblical. In every passage where Paul likened the church to the “body of Christ,” he was speaking metaphorically not mystically. That is, he was using the human body to illustrate a spiritual truth, i.e., that each member is necessary to the whole, and that all members should care for one another (as with the human body). We are “members of Christ” in the same sense that human limbs are “members” of a human person. Our inclusion “in Christ” is a metaphor, not a literal reality.

III. Eastern Orthodox

The Eastern Orthodox Church teaches that official decrees and creeds of the Church are inspired, because they come from the consensus of representative bishops from the whole Church. When the universal Church (being the mystical Christ) speaks, it is Christ Himself who speaks. *“The creed is merely a divinely*

inspired human statement to help us in our understanding of God.”³ “The highest authority of the Eastern Church is the Ecumenical Council, involving the whole Church. When the bishops of the Church define a matter of faith in an Ecumenical Council, a requisite for its recognition is the acceptance and consent of the whole Church. Only then can it be considered infallible or inspired of the Holy Spirit, who resides in the whole Church, consisting of clergy and laity, to guide it to all truth.”⁴

PFRS

PFRS does not agree that anyone, after the Apostles and before the coming of the two witnesses of Revelation, speaks directly for Christ, either individually or collectively. Hebrews opens by saying that *“in these last days”* God has *“spoken unto us by His Son.”* He also chose and personally sent Apostles to whom He promised that the Spirit would teach them what Jesus did not complete in the three years He lived with them. The Apostles were the foundation of the Church, with Jesus Christ Himself being the *“chief corner stone.”* The job of the churches is not to formulate doctrine, but to teach, preserve, and defend *“the Faith once for all delivered to the saints”* in its pristine condition. It may certainly summarize the fundamentals of Christianity in its creeds or confessions. But these are not infallible, merely the opinions of those who formulated them based on their fallible understanding.

IV. Eastern Orthodox

The Eastern Orthodox Church teaches that it alone has preserved the true Christian Faith in a continuous stream from the mouths of Jesus and the Apostles. *“Thus, the Orthodox Church is the legitimate and historical continuation of the early Church. She has the same faith, the same spirit, the same ethnos.”⁵*

PFRS

PFRS does not agree that the Orthodox Church, nor any other human organization, has successfully accomplished this task. God has preserved His truth through a number of means and through a plethora of various groups, none of which are infallible. Sometimes this was accomplished through reformation, other times through separation. While the Eastern Orthodox Church claims to preserve the pristine Faith, it is easy to demonstrate historically that they have not. Their theology is largely Augustinian, not Apostolic. For example, the Eastern Orthodox Church teaches Augustine's *amillennialism*. Yet, the Church of the first and second centuries was virtually unanimous in proclaiming *“Chiliasm”* (premillennialism). The problem with both the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic systems is that their claim to doctrinal continuity is simply not true. The earliest bishops and Christian apologists who lived contiguous to the

time of the Apostles substantially disagree with the more modern Augustinian theology.

V. Eastern Orthodox

The Eastern Orthodox Church teaches that merely continuity with the early Church means they are the true Church. This is the same position held by Roman Catholics. "A church is the true Church of Christ if it can show historically that it was founded by Christ and has maintained a living connection over the centuries with that early Church."⁶

PFRS

PFRS acknowledges historical continuity in the history of the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches, linking both to the early Church. But historical continuity means nothing if the Church has fallen into apostasy and largely departed from the teachings of the Apostles. It means nothing unless *Apostolic Succession* is a biblical concept. Even Protestants can claim historical linkage, since Protestantism was merely a reform movement from the Roman Catholic Church, and Roman Catholicism is a split from the Eastern Orthodox. The true test is not whether we can trace an unbroken chain of ordinations leading all the way back to the Apostles. Such genealogical trees spread out in many directions. The fruit of *Apostolic succession* is a far cry from the fruit of the Apostles. Jesus did not say we can recognize the true from the counterfeit by tracing an unbroken genealogy of ordained bishops! If that was the case, the scribes and Pharisees should have been followed, not Jesus. Rather, it is by the fruit produced.

That mere continuity and succession cannot be the true test of the "true Church" can be inferred from Jesus' seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor. He threatened them that unless they repent, He would remove their lampstand, and would spew them out of His mouth, (Rev. 2:5 & 3:16). Historical continuity means nothing when this happens.

There was clearly an evolution of theology in the earliest period of Church history prior to the council of Nicea (AD325). It began with two lines of heretical teachings coming together in Augustine. The first was the introduction of *mysticism* into Christianity with the writings of men like *Origen*. The second was a kind of *universal church* mentality evident in the writings of *Cyprian*. Originally, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and other early apologists emphasized the *uniformity of doctrines* in all the **independent** local churches founded by the Apostles as evidence that their teachings were apostolic. That is, the agreement of many independent witnesses to what the Apostles themselves taught proves a common uncorrupted source. But, this thinking mutated between the second

and fourth centuries into “*One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church,*” as stated in the Nicene Creed. Irenaeus and Tertullian appealed to *many parallel independent witnesses* (local apostolic churches) to the same Apostolic Faith. It was their **independence** that proved the authenticity of the common message. At the Nicene Council, convened by the Roman Emperor Constantine, the emerging “*universal Church*” first exercised a new kind of power, as though it had the authority of the Apostles. This power evolved into that claimed by both the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches — that of Christ Himself! The **real power and authority** of this emerging universal Church came not from genuine Apostolic succession, but from **the Roman Emperor**. The universalization of the local churches was influenced by the writings of men like Cyprian. The circumstances under which the Council of Nicea was convened, under the direct control of the Roman emperor Constantine, solidified this trend. Both of these streams of thought (mysticism and universalism) merged in Augustine, who developed a kind of pseudo-Christianity which became the foundation of both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

Notes:

1. Coniaris, Anthony, Introducing the Orthodox Church Its Faith and Life, Light and Life Publishing, Minneapolis, 1982, p. 1
2. *ibid.* p. 132
3. *ibid.* p. 14
4. *ibid.* p. 4
5. *ibid.* p. 3
6. *ibid.* p. 2