

INTRODUCING THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

by Fr. Victor Novak

Serious Christians want to belong to the New Testament Church. But with some 30,000 competing denominations how does a serious Christian find the original New Testament Church - the Church founded by our Lord Jesus Christ himself? Common sense tells us that the New Testament Church must have an unbroken history dating back almost 2,000 years to New Testament times. If a denomination does not have a verifiable history going back to New Testament times it simply cannot be the New Testament Church.

Faced with this fact of history, some denominations seek to justify their existence with the claim that the original Church founded by Jesus Christ quickly fell into apostasy after the death of the last apostle, or after the conversion of Constantine, or during the "dark ages," and that a new Church had to be started by some "Reformer," "Theologian" or "Prophet;" but such claims contradict the very words of Christ himself. Jesus not only said, "I will build my Church" (Matt. 16:18), but he also promised "and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

So how can we find the original New Testament Church that was founded by Jesus Christ himself and that received the promise of Christ that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18)? The answer to this question is simple: You will find the New Testament Church in the pages of the New Testament!

Open your Bible and look at the churches in the New Testament. What Church are the New Testament churches part of today? Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Vineyard, Roman Catholic? Some other denomination? The indigenous Christians in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, the Mother Church of all Christians, are Orthodox. The indigenous Christians in Antioch "where they were first called Christians" (Acts 11:26) are Orthodox. The Christians of Cyprus and Crete where the Apostle Paul took early missionary journeys are Orthodox. The Christians of Asia Minor where the seven churches of the Book of Revelation are found are Orthodox. The Christians of Corinth, Athens and other Greek cities where the Apostle Paul planted churches and to whom he preached or wrote epistles are all Orthodox. The Christians of Galatia where St. Paul wrote his important Epistle to the Galatians are Orthodox.

All of these New Testament churches are, and always have been, part of the Orthodox Church. They all have an unbroken history dating back to New Testament times and there never was a moment in history when they were not Orthodox churches. The only church spoken of in the entire New Testament that is not Orthodox today is Rome, and Rome was fully Orthodox for a thousand years before falling away into schism in AD 1054. Rome was Orthodox for longer than she has been separated from Orthodoxy. The Church of Rome was an Orthodox Church for longer than she has been known as the Roman Catholic Church, and Orthodox Christians pray for Rome's return to the fullness of Christian Orthodoxy and to unity with the Orthodox Church.

For the first thousand years of Christianity there was essentially one Church - the Orthodox Church. Then, having changed the Nicene Creed without Catholic consent, the Church of Rome fell away into schism in AD 1054, eventually becoming known as the Roman Catholic Church. Having separated from the Orthodox Church, Rome continued to change the Faith introducing novel doctrines such as purgatory and indulgences, leading to the Protestant Reformation in AD 1517. The Protestant Reformation was really a revolution rather than a reformation because rather than reforming the Roman Church they created new Churches. The Protestant Reformers eliminated one pope, but through their novel doctrines of sola scriptura and private interpretation of the Scriptures they essentially abolished all authority and made every individual protestant his or her own pope.

Beginning with the Protestant Reformation in 1517, Christianity in the West began to splinter until today there are an estimated 30,000 separate and competing denominations with five new denominations being organized every week. In addition, there are uncountable numbers of independent, non-denominational and interdenominational churches. Our Lord Jesus Christ established one Church and promised that the gates of hell would never prevail against it. All of the others are man-made denominations that arose in the last five hundred years, or in the case of Rome, separated in a tragic schism. A human foundation means a human organization, and a human organization means a human and therefore a changing Faith.

Beside this chaos in Western Christendom there remains the 300 million-member Orthodox Church. The word Orthodox means both "correct doctrine" and "correct worship," and both the New Testament and history demonstrate that the Orthodox Church with its unbroken history dating back to New Testament times is the New Testament Church founded by Jesus Christ himself.

The Orthodox Church has never experienced a Reformation or Counter Reformation and has not splintered, but has remained united and unchanged in Faith and morals for nearly 2,000 years. Our Lord Jesus Christ promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against his Church and that promise has been kept.

Many Western Christians sadly know little about the Orthodox Church, but what they do know is that it is an "Eastern" Church and that it refuses to change with the times. Eastern? Of course it is Eastern. Christianity originated in the Holy Land and the Middle East. Christianity has its roots firmly planted in the East, not in Western Europe and certainly not in the United States! The Orthodox Church is an *Eastern* Church because Christianity is Eastern, and it simply does not change in matters of Faith and morals because it has an unchanging message for an ever changing world. Rather than conforming itself to the world, the Orthodox Church seeks to transform the world by the Light of Christ. As St. Athanasius the Great said, "Know that we must serve, not the times, but God."

Although the Orthodox Church has its roots firmly planted in the East, the Orthodox Church is the "One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" founded by Jesus Christ. The

word *Catholic* means both “Universal” and “Whole and Complete,” and the Orthodox Church is the One Church for all people of all races and nations, proclaiming an unchanging Faith for all time. Within the Orthodox Church there are believers from every race on earth. The Orthodox Church is made up of people of many nations and cultures who worship God in many languages and according to various liturgical rites. Although the Eastern Rite predominates, especially since the Great Schism (the falling away of Rome into schism) in 1054, there are also many Orthodox Christians in the West who worship according to the Western Rite in a completely Western cultural setting - an Eastern Faith lived and shared in a Western cultural context. There are Western Rite churches and monasteries in North America, the United Kingdom, on the continent of Europe, and in Australia and New Zealand, and their numbers are growing. All Orthodox Christians of whatever nation, culture or rite, share the same unchanging and unchangeable Orthodox Christian Faith “which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3).

The Orthodox Church is a Communion of autocephalous and autonomous Orthodox Churches spread throughout the world with some 300 million members, the largest of which is the Russian Orthodox Church. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (modern Istanbul in Turkey) is the *primus inter paras* (first among equals) among the world’s Orthodox bishops. There is tremendous Orthodox Christian missionary activity going on in Africa, Asia, South America, Europe and North America, with very active missionary organizations.

The first group of Orthodox colonists arrived in what would become the United States of America in 1768. They were Greeks and they landed at St. Augustine, Florida. There were even Colonial American converts to the Orthodox Church. Organized Orthodox Christian missionary work in North America began in 1794, when a small group of Russian Orthodox missionaries arrived in Alaska to minister to Russian workers there and to take the Gospel to the Native Alaskans. Alaska remains very much an Orthodox society today with 92 parishes, 2 monastic communities and a seminary in that vast but sparsely populated state. The Alaskan missionary effort quickly spread into California and then throughout North America.

According to the 2010 Census of Orthodox Christians in the United States, coordinated by Alexei Krindatch for the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of North and Central America, there were then 2,380 local Orthodox parishes in the United States, and 78 monastic communities (41 male and 37 female). Orthodox Christians live and have churches in all fifty States. The five States with the largest number of parishes are California (254) Pennsylvania (249), New York (240), Florida (136) and New Jersey (128).

In Mid-America there are 12 parishes in Nebraska, 16 parishes in Kansas, 18 parishes in Missouri with 2 monastic communities, 12 parishes in Iowa, 26 parishes in Colorado with 2 monastic communities, 5 parishes in the sparsely populated Dakotas, 11 parishes in Oklahoma, and 68 parishes and 3 monastic communities in Texas. Orthodox parishes and monasteries of whatever origin - Greek, Russian, Serbian,

Romanian, Syrian, Lebanese, African, convert (and there are many parishes founded by converts), etc., all belong to one and the same Orthodox Church and are in full communion with one another. Today, all canonical Orthodox bishops in America are members of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of North and Central America, the successor body to the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA).

The Orthodox Church in the United States is no longer a Church of immigrants or an ethnic Church. Orthodoxy in the United States is increasingly an American Church. The vast majority of Orthodox Christians in the United States are native born. A full third of the Orthodox clergy in America are converts. One third of the membership of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, America's largest Orthodox jurisdiction with 525 parishes, 20 monastic communities and about a half a million faithful, are converts. Many members of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia in the United States are converts, including clergy, whole congregations and at least three bishops. The same can be said of the other jurisdictions. Three out of four Orthodox parishes in the United States use English as the language of the Liturgy, and 81% use English as the language for sermons.

Converts to the Orthodox Church come from every Christian tradition and from none. Two decades ago Anglicans made up the second largest group of converts to the Orthodox Church. Today they may well make up the largest group. There are large numbers of former Anglican clergy now serving as Orthodox clergy. There are opportunities in both the Eastern and Western Rites of the Orthodox Church, and converting clergy, laity and congregations have entered both. I have interacted with four Russian Orthodox bishops in the past two years and three of the four have been converts: two from Anglicanism and one from Roman Catholicism.

While the Orthodox Faith remains the same everywhere and is not subject to compromise or change, there is plenty of room for different cultures and different rites. St. John the Wonderworker of San Francisco (d. 1966), a strong supporter of the revival of Western Orthodoxy, said: "Never, never, never let anyone tell you that in order to be Orthodox, you must be Eastern. The West was fully Orthodox for a thousand years..."

Insist on the original and accept no substitutes. The doors to the New Testament Church are wide open and the welcome mat is out. There is nothing to be afraid of. Why not visit this Sunday? You'll be glad you did. The Orthodox Church welcomes you!

Fr. Victor Novak is the rector of Holy Cross Orthodox Church, 7545 Main Street, Ralston, Nebraska 68127. Holy Cross is a Western Rite parish of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. Holy Cross Orthodox Church was received into the Orthodox Church in June of 2013, from the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA). For more information please visit the Holy Cross website at: www.holycrossomaha.net ; e-mail Fr. Victor at venovak@hughes.net ; or call the church office at (402) 573-6558.