

Finding the New Testament Church

By Fr. Jon E. Braun

Coming off a couple of decades of heightened awareness of our need for a personal knowledge of Christ--notably evidenced through such phenomena as the Jesus Movement and the charismatic renewal--most thinking Christians are realizing something else is needed: the rediscovery of the historic Church. Often, in heated reaction to dated and dead Protestant liberalism, we would hear evangelical preachers in the late sixties and early seventies say, "All you need is Jesus!" Such statements often got rave reviews, but just a little thoughtful reflection quickly showed such a simplistic religion to be shallow and unfulfilling. More and more, that kind of existential reductionism is being tempered with a renewed emphasis on the whole impact of the Incarnation, the coming in the flesh of the Son of God. There must be more to Christianity than a private, internalized individualism. If all we needed was Jesus, why would Jesus have promised, "I will build My church" (Matthew 16:18)? But our need for the Church begs a question, a crucial question. Which Church? The easy answer, of course, and a correct answer, is, "the New Testament Church". But this isn't A.D. 65, and we aren't in old Jerusalem or Colosse. We are in the twentieth century and our challenge is to find the New Testament Church in our day, being sure it is historically identical to the Church of the Apostles--the one Christ Himself established. Starting in the twentieth century with the plethora of choices available to us is difficult. For we have hundreds of denominations and sects claiming to one degree or another to be the New Testament Church. The Roman Catholic Church makes that claim based on its apostolic succession. Baptist churches are unwaveringly confident they hold to the New Testament Faith. Often a Church of Christ will have a sign outside reading, "Founded in Jerusalem, 33 A.D"., thereby staking the claim to be the original Church. And the list goes on. Granted, many groups have maintained, or even rediscovered, important aspects of the New Testament Faith. But who is right? Or is the pluralism crowd correct--that essentially everybody is in and ties for first place?

BACK TO CHURCH ONE

There is a predictably reliable way to tackle the problem of who is right. Rather than trying to decide which of the over 2,500 Christian groups in North America keeps the original Faith best by studying what they are like right now, we can start from the beginning of the Church itself and work our way through history to the present. The birthday of the Church was Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit descended on the Twelve Apostles in the Upper Room. That day some 3,000 souls believed in Christ and were baptized. When the first Christian community began, "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). From Jerusalem, the Faith in Christ spread throughout Judea, to Samaria (Acts 8), to Antioch and the Gentiles (Acts 13), where we find new converts and new churches throughout Asia Minor and the Roman Empire. From the pages of the Gospels and Epistles, we learn that the Church was not simply another organization in Roman society. The Lord Jesus Christ had given the promise of the Holy Spirit to "guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). With the fulfillment of that promise beginning at Pentecost, the Church was founded with a status far above that of a mere institution. Saint Paul was right on target in Ephesians 2:22, where he called the Church the "dwelling place of God in the Spirit". The Church was a living, dynamic organism, the living Body of Jesus Christ. She made an indelible impact in the world, and those who participated in her life in faith were personally transformed. But we also discover in the New Testament itself that the

Church had her share of problems. All was not perfection. Individuals in the Church sought to lead her off the path the Apostles had established, and they had to be dealt with along with the errors they invented. Even whole local communities lapsed on occasion and had to be called to repentance. The Church in Laodicea is a vivid example (Revelation 3). Discipline was administered for the sake of purity in the Church. But there was growth and a maturing even as the Church was attacked from within and without. The same Spirit who gave her birth gave her power for purity and correction, and she stood strong and grew until she eventually invaded the whole of the Roman Empire.

THE SECOND CENTURY AND ON

As the procession of the early Church moves from the pages of the New Testament and on into the succeeding centuries of her history, it is helpful to trace her growth and development in terms of specific categories. Therefore let us look first at a category important for all Christian people: doctrine. Did the Church maintain the truth of God as given by Christ and His Apostles? Second, what about worship? Is there a discernible way in which the people of God have offered a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to Him? Third, we will consider Church government. What sort of polity did the Church practice?

Doctrine: Not only did the Church begin under the teaching of the Apostles, but she was also instructed to "stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). The Apostle Paul insisted that those matters delivered by him and his fellow Apostles, both in person and in the writings that would come to be called the New Testament, be adhered to carefully. Thus followed such appropriate warnings as "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us" (2 Thessalonians 3:6). The doctrines taught by Christ and His disciples are to be safeguarded by "the church . . . the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15) and are not open for renegotiation. Midway through the first century, a dispute over adherence to Old Testament laws arose in Antioch. The matter could not be settled there, and outside help was needed. The leaders of the Antiochian church, the community which had earlier dispatched Paul and Barnabas as missionaries, brought the matter to Jerusalem for consideration by the Apostles and elders there. The matter was discussed, debated, and a written decision was forthcoming. It was James, the "brother" of the Lord and the first bishop of Jerusalem, who gave the solution to the problem. This settlement, agreed to by all concerned at what is known as the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), set the pattern for the use of Church councils in the centuries ahead to settle doctrinal and moral issues that arose. Thus, in the history of the Church we find scores of such councils, and on various levels, to settle matters of dispute, and to deal with those who do not adhere to the Apostolic Faith. In addition to this well-known controversy, the first three hundred years of Christian history were also marked by the appearance of certain heresies or false teachings, such as super-secret philosophic schemes for "insiders" only (Gnosticism), wild prophetic programs (Montanism), and grave errors regarding the three Persons of the Trinity (Sabellianism). Then, in the early fourth century, a heresy with potential for Church-wide disruption appeared and was propagated by one Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, Egypt. He denied the eternality of the Son of God, claiming, contrary to the Apostles' doctrine, that the Son was a created being who came into existence at a point in time and thus was not truly God. This serious error crept through the Church like a cancer. Turmoil spread almost everywhere. To solve the problem the first Church-wide, or ecumenical, council met in Nicea in A.D. 325 to consider this doctrine. Some 318 bishops, along with many priests and deacons, rejected the new teaching of Arius and his associates and upheld the Apostles' doctrine of Christ, confirming "there never was a time when the Son of God was not", and issued a definition of the

apostolic teaching concerning Christ in what we today call the Nicene Creed. Between the years 325 and 787, seven such Churchwide conclaves were held, all dealing first and foremost with some specific challenge to the apostolic teaching about Jesus Christ. These are known as the Seven Ecumenical Councils, meeting in the cities of Nicea, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and Constantinople. For the first thousand years of Christian history, the entire Church, save for the heretics, embraced and defended the New Testament Apostolic Faith. There was no division. And this one Faith, preserved through all these trials, attacks, and tests, this one Apostolic Faith, was called the Orthodox Faith.

Worship: Doctrinal purity was tenaciously maintained. But true Christianity is far more than adherence to a set of correct beliefs alone. The life of the Church is centrally expressed in her worship or adoration of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It was Jesus Himself who told the woman at the well, "the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (John 4:23). At the Last Supper, Jesus instituted the Eucharist, the Communion service, when He took bread and wine, blessed them, and said to His disciples, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me", and, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:19, 20). From New Testament books such as Acts and Hebrews we know that the Church participated in Communion at least each Lord's Day (Acts 20:7,11). And also from such first- and second-century sources as the Didache and Saint Justin Martyr, we learn the Eucharist was kept at the very center of Christian worship after the death of the Apostles. And just as the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets were read in the temple worship and the synagogue in Israel, so the Church also immediately gave high priority to the public reading of Scripture and to preaching in her worship, along with the eucharistic meal. Even before the middle of the first century, Christian worship was known by the term "liturgy", which means literally "the common work" or "the work of the people". The early liturgy of the Church's worship was composed of two essential parts: (1) the Liturgy of the Word, including hymns, Scripture reading, and preaching; and (2) the Liturgy of the Faithful, composed of intercessory prayers, the kiss of peace, and the Eucharist. Virtually from the beginning, it had a definable shape or form which continues to this day. Modern Christians advocating freedom from liturgy in worship are usually shocked to learn that such spontaneity was never the practice in the ancient Church! A basic pattern or shape of Christian worship was observed from the start. And as the Church grew and matured, that structure matured as well. Hymns, Scripture readings, and prayers were intertwined in the basic foundation. A clear, purposeful procession through the year, honoring in word, song, and praise the Birth, ministry, death, Resurrection, and Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, and marking crucial issues in Christian life and experience, was forthcoming. The Christian life was lived in reality in the worship of the Church. Far from being routine, the worship of the historic Church participated in the unfolding drama of the richness and mystery of the Gospel itself! Further, specific landmarks in our salvation and walk with Christ were observed. Baptism and the anointing with oil, or chrismation, were there from Day One of the Church. Marriage, healing, confession of sin, and ordination to the ministry of the gospel were early recognized and practiced. On each of these occasions, Christians understood, in a great mystery, grace and power from God were being given to people according to the individual need of each person. The Church saw these events as holy moments in her life and called them her mysteries or sacraments.

3. Government: No one seriously questions whether the Apostles of Christ led the Church at her beginning. They had been given the commission to preach the gospel (Matthew 28:19, 20) and the authority to forgive or retain sins (John 20:23). Theirs was by no means a preaching-only mission! They built the Church itself under Christ's headship. To govern it, three definite and permanent offices, as taught in the New Testament, were in evidence.

The office of bishop. The Apostles themselves were the first bishops in the Church. Even before Pentecost, after Judas had turned traitor, Peter declared in applying Psalm 109:8, "his bishopric let another take" (Acts 1:20, KJV). The word "bishopric" refers to the office of a bishop and its use obviously indicates the "job description" of the Apostles as being bishops. Some have mistakenly argued that the office of bishop was a later "human" invention. Quite to the contrary, the Apostles were the New Testament bishops, and they appointed bishops to succeed them to oversee the Church in each locality. Occasionally, the objection is still heard that the offices of bishop and presbyter were originally identical. It is true the terms are sometimes used interchangeably in the New Testament while the Apostles were present, but it was the understanding of the entire early Church that, with the death of the Apostles, the offices of bishop and presbyter were distinct. Ignatius of Antioch, consecrated bishop by A.D. 70 in the church from which Paul and Barnabas had been sent out, writes just after the turn of the century that bishops appointed by the Apostles, surrounded by their presbyters, were everywhere in the Church.

The office of presbyter. Elders or presbyters are mentioned very early in the life of the Church in the Book of Acts and the Epistles. It is evident that in each place a Christian community developed, elders were appointed by the Apostles to pastor the people. As time passed, presbyters were referred to in the short form of the word as "prests", then as "priests", in full view of the fact that the Old Covenant priesthood had been fulfilled in Christ and that the Church is corporately a priesthood of believers. The priest was not understood as an intermediary between God and the people, nor as a dispenser of grace. It was the role of the priest to be the presence of Christ in the Christian community. And in the very capacity of being the presence of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ, the priest was to shepherd the flock of God.

The office of deacon. The third order or office in the government of the New Testament Church was that of deacon. At first the Apostles fulfilled this office themselves. But with the rapid growth of the Church, seven initial deacons were selected, as reported in Acts 6, to help carry the responsibility of service to those in need. It was one of these deacons, Saint Stephen, who became the first martyr of the Church. Through the centuries, the deacons have not only served the material needs of the Church, but have held a key role in the liturgical life of the Church as well. Often called "the eyes and ears of the bishop", many deacons have become priests and ultimately entered the episcopal office. The authority of the bishop, presbyter, and deacon was not anciently understood as being apart from the people, but always from among the people. But the people of God were called to submit to those who ruled over them (Hebrews 13:17), and they were also called to give their agreement to the direction of the leaders for the Church. On a number of occasions in history, that "Amen" was not forthcoming, and the bishops of the Church took note and changed course. Later in history, many Church leaders departed from the ancient model and usurped authority for themselves. In the minds of some this brought the ancient model into question. But the problem was not in the model but in the deviation from it. It should also be mentioned that it was out of the ministry and life of the Apostles that the people of God, the laity, were established in the Church. Far from being a herd of observers, the laity are vital in the effectiveness of the Church. They are the recipients and active users of the gifts and grace of the Spirit. Each one of the laity has a role in the life and function of the Church. Each one is to supply something to the whole (1 Corinthians 12:7). And it is the responsibility of the bishops, the priests, and the deacons to be sure that this is a reality for the laity. The worship of the Church at the close of its first thousand years had substantially the same shape from place to place. The doctrine was the same. The whole Church confessed one creed, the same in every place, and had weathered many attacks. The government of the Church was recognizably one everywhere. And this One Church was the Orthodox Church.

AFTER A THOUSAND YEARS--A PARTING OF THE WAYS

Tensions began to mount as the first millennium was drawing to a close. They were reaching the breaking point as the second thousand years began. While numerous doctrinal, political, economic, and cultural factors began to work to separate the Church in a division that would be the East and the West, two giant issues ultimately emerged above others: (1) should one man, the pope of Rome, be considered the universal bishop of the Church? and (2) should a novel clause be added to one of the Church's ecumenical creeds?

The Papacy: Among the Twelve, Saint Peter was early acknowledged as the leader. He was spokesman for the Twelve before and after Pentecost. He was the first bishop of Antioch and later bishop of Rome. No one challenged his role. After the death of the Apostles, as leadership in the Church developed, the bishop of Rome came to be recognized as first in honor, even though all bishops were equals. But after nearly 300 years, the bishop of Rome slowly began to assume to himself a role of superiority over the others, ultimately claiming to be the only true successor to Saint Peter. The vast majority of the other bishops of the Church never questioned Rome's primacy of honor, but they patently rejected its claim to be the universal head of the Church on earth. This claim became one of the major factors leading to the tragic split between the Western and Eastern Church which we will soon be considering.

The Addition to the Creed: A disagreement about the Holy Spirit also began to develop in the Church. Does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father? Or does He proceed from the Father and the Son? In John 15:26, our Lord Jesus Christ asserts, "But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me" (*italics mine*). This is the basic statement in all of the New Testament about the Holy Spirit "proceeding", and it is clear: He "proceeds from the Father". Thus when the ancient council at Constantinople in A.D. 381, during the course of its conclave, reaffirmed the Creed of Nicea (A.D. 325), it expanded that Creed to proclaim these familiar words: "And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-Giver, who proceeds from the Father, who is worshiped and glorified together with the Father and the Son . . ." But two hundred years later, at a local council in Toledo; Spain (A.D. 589), King Reccared declared that "the Holy Spirit also should be confessed by us and taught to proceed from the Father and the Son". The King may have meant well, but he was contradicting the apostolic teaching about the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately the local Spanish council agreed with his error. Because of the teaching of the Holy Scriptures as confessed by the entire Church at Nicea and at Constantinople and for centuries beyond, there is no reason to believe anything other than that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. Period! But centuries later, in what was looked upon by many as a largely political move, the pope of Rome unilaterally changed the wording of the universal creed of the Church. Such an independent action was bound to evoke a strong response from the Eastern bishops. They saw it as a flagrant violation of the long established practice that no universal creed could be altered or changed apart from the corporate action of an ecumenical council. Though this change was initially rejected in both East and West, even by some of Rome's closest neighboring bishops, the pope eventually convinced the Western bishops to capitulate to it. Although this change may appear small, the consequences have proven disastrous-both from a theological and an historical perspective. This issue represented a major departure from the Orthodox doctrine of the Church. It became another instrumental cause leading to the separation of the Roman Catholic Church from the Eastern Orthodox Church.

THE SCHISM

Conflict between the Roman pope and the East mounted--especially in the West's dealings with the Eastern bishop, or patriarch, of Constantinople. It was even asserted that the pope had the authority to decide who should be the bishop of Constantinople--something which violated historical precedent, and which no Orthodox bishop could endure. The net result of this assertion was that the Eastern Church, and in fact the entire Christian Church, was seen by the West to be under the domination of the pope. A series of intrigues followed one upon the other as the Roman papacy began asserting an increasing degree of unilateral and often authoritarian control over the rest of the Church. Perhaps the most invidious of these political, religious, and even military intrigues, as far as the East was concerned, occurred in the year 1054. A cardinal, sent by the pope, slapped a document on the altar of the Church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople during the Sunday worship, excommunicating the patriarch of Constantinople from the Church! Rome, of course, was flagrantly overstepping its bounds by this action. Some very sordid chapters of Church history were written during the next decades. Ultimately, the final consequence of these tragic events was a massive split which occurred between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. While some disagree that the West departed from the New Testament Church at this point, the reality remains that the schism was never healed. As the centuries passed, conflict continued. Attempts at union failed and the split widened. Orthodox Christians agree that in departing from the tradition of the Church the West had deviated from historic Christianity, and in so doing, set the stage for countless other divisions which were soon to follow.

THE WEST: REFORMATION AND COUNTER-REFORMATION

During the succeeding centuries after A.D. 1054, the growing distinction between East and West was indelibly marked in history. The East maintained the full stream of New Testament Faith, worship, and practice. The Western or Roman Catholic Church, after its schism from the Orthodox Church, bogged down in many complex problems. Then, centuries after Rome committed itself to its unilateral spirit of doctrine and practice, another upheaval was festering--this time not next door to the East, but inside the Western gates themselves. Though many in the West had spoken out against Roman domination and practice in earlier years, now a little-known German monk named Martin Luther launched an attack against certain Roman Catholic practices that ended up affecting world history. His famous Ninety-Five Theses were nailed to the church door at Wittenburg in 1517. In a short time those theses were signaling the start of what came to be called in the West the Protestant Reformation. Luther sought an audience with the pope but was denied, and in 1521 he was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. He had intended no break with Rome. Unresponsive to Luther's many legitimate objections concerning the novel practices of the now-separated Western Church, Rome refused to budge or bend. The door to future unity in the West slammed shut with a resounding crash. The protests of Luther were not unnoticed. The reforms he sought in Germany were soon accompanied by the demands of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, John Calvin in Geneva, and hundreds of others all over Western Europe. Fueled by complex political, social, and economic factors, in addition to religious problems, the Reformation spread like a raging fire into virtually every nook and cranny of the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Church's Western ecclesiastical monopoly was greatly diminished and massive division replaced its artificial unity. The ripple effect of that division continues even to our day. If trouble on the continent were not enough, the Church of England was in the process of going its own way as well. Henry VIII, amidst his marital problems, placed himself as head of the Church of England instead of the pope of

Rome. For only a few short years would the pope ever again have ascendancy in England. And the English Church itself would be shattered by great division. As decade followed decade in the West, the many branches of Protestantism took various forms. There were even divisions that insisted they were neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic. All seemed to share a mutual dislike for the bishop of Rome and the practice of his church, and most wanted far less centralized forms of leadership. While some, such as the Lutherans and Anglicans, held on to a basic form of liturgy and sacrament, others, such as the Reformed Churches and the even more radical Anabaptists and their descendants, questioned and rejected many biblical ideas of hierarchy, sacrament, historic tradition, and other elements of historic Christian practice, no matter when and where they appeared in history, thinking they were freeing themselves of Roman Catholicism. To this day, many sincere, modern, professing Christians will reject even the biblical data which speak of historic Christian practice, simply because they think such historic practices are "Roman Catholic". To use the old adage, they "threw the baby out with the bathwater", without even being aware of it. Thus, while retaining in varying degrees portions of foundational Christianity, neither Protestantism nor Roman Catholicism can lay historic claim to being the true New Testament Church. In dividing from the Orthodox Church, Rome forfeited its place in the Church of the New Testament. In the divisions of the Reformation, the Protestants-as well-meaning as they might have been-failed to return to the New Testament Church.

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH TODAY

But that first Church, the Church of Peter and Paul and the Apostles, the Orthodox Church-despite persecution, political oppression, and desertion on certain of its flanks-miraculously carries on today the same Faith and life of the Church of the New Testament. Admittedly the style of Orthodoxy looks complicated to the modern Protestant eye, and understandably so. But given the historical understanding of how the Church has progressed, the simple Christ-centered Faith of the Apostles is clearly preserved in its practices, services, and even its architecture. In Orthodoxy today, as in years gone by, the basics of Christian doctrine, worship, and government are never up for renegotiation. One cannot be an Orthodox priest, for example, and reject the divinity of Christ, His Virgin Birth, Resurrection, Ascension into heaven, and Second Coming. The Church simply has not left its course in nearly 2,000 years. It is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. It is the New Testament Church. The gates of hell have not prevailed against it. But Orthodoxy is also, in the words of one of her bishops, "the best-kept secret in America". Though there are more than 225 million Orthodox Christians in the world today, many Americans are not familiar with the Church. In North America, the Orthodox Church until recently has been largely limited to ethnic boundaries, not spreading much beyond the parishes of the committed immigrants that brought the Church to the shores of this continent. But the Holy Spirit has continued His work, causing new people to discover this Church of the New Testament. People have begun to find Orthodox Christianity both through the writings of the early Church Fathers, and through the humble witness of Orthodox Christians. On a personal note, I am a part of a group of nearly 2,000 ex-Protestant evangelicals who were received into the Antiochian Archdiocese of the Orthodox Church in the spring of 1987 as the Evangelical Orthodox Mission. Orthodox student groups are springing up on a number of American campuses. The word is getting out. What does this identity of the Orthodox Church with the New Testament Church mean as far as the other churches in Christendom are concerned? Many have retained much of the truth of Orthodox Christianity. Some pretend to be the New Testament Church but are seriously off-base, leading people far astray from Christ and the Church. Other modern churches have preserved truth in greater or lesser degree. But groups which possess

some or much of the truth are one thing; the New Testament Church is another. What is it that's missing in the non-Orthodox churches-even the best of them? Fullness. The fullness of the New Testament Faith is to be found only in the New Testament Church. Being in the New Testament Church doesn't guarantee all those in it will necessarily take advantage of the fullness of the Faith. But it does guarantee the fullness is there for those who do. For those who seriously desire the fullness of the New Testament Faith, action must be taken. There must be for these a return to the New Testament Church. Being aware of this ancient Church is not enough. In America, people have had ample opportunity to investigate and decide about the Roman Catholic faith, the Baptist, the Lutheran, and so on. Not so regarding the Orthodox Church. Let me make two specific suggestions that will provide you with a tangible means to look into Orthodox Christianity and to decide for yourself if it is not the Church for which you have searched.

Visit: Look up "Orthodox" or "Eastern Orthodox" in the "Church" section of your Yellow Pages. Ask for the whereabouts of the nearest Orthodox parish. Pay a visit-several visits. Meet the priest, and ask him to help you study and learn. And be prepared to be patient. Sometimes a portion of the Liturgy is not in English! But the service books will help out here.

Read: There are a number of books and periodicals immensely helpful to people seeking to learn about the Orthodox Church. Let me mention a few: *The Orthodox Church*, by Timothy (Bishop Kallistos) Ware (Penguin); *The Orthodox Faith*, by Father Thomas Hopko (4-volume set, Orthodox Christian Publications Center); the writings of the Apostolic Fathers (several editions available); *Feed My Sheep*, by Metropolitan PHILIP Saliba (Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press); *AGAIN Magazine* (Conciliar Press). In a day when Christians are realizing anew the centrality and importance of the Church as the Body of Christ, the doors of Orthodoxy are open wide and the invitation is extended to come and see. Examine her Faith, her worship, her history, her commitment to Christ, her love for God the Father, her communion with the Holy Spirit. The Orthodox Church has kept the Faith delivered once for all to the saints for nearly two thousand years. In her walls is the fullness of the salvation which was realized when "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).