

This is a chapter from *The Non-Orthodox: The Orthodox Teaching on Christians Outside of the Church*. This book was originally published in 1999 by Regina Orthodox Press in Salisbury, MA (Frank Schaeffer's publishing house). For the complete book, as well as reviews and related articles, go to <http://orthodoxinfo.com/inquirers/status.aspx>. (© Patrick Barnes, 1999, 2004)

I. A Burning Question

In the latest edition of *The Orthodox Church*, Bishop Kallistos (Ware) raises the question, "If Orthodox claim to constitute the one true Church, what then do they consider to be the status of those Christians who do not belong to their communion?"¹ For many Christians today—both Orthodox and heterodox who are seriously contemplating a conversion to Orthodoxy—, this is a burning question.

It is typically Protestants, more than other Christians, who wrestle with this issue. The exclusivity of the Orthodox Church—namely, Her claim to be the one and only True Ark of Salvation (cf. 1 Peter 3:20ff) established by the Lord Jesus Christ, preserving unadulterated the very criterion of Christianity—runs counter to everything they have been taught about the nature of the Church. A marketing manager of a major Orthodox publishing house specializing in "evangelistic" literature was once heard to remark that the number of phone calls and faxes her company receives on the question of the ecclesial and eternal status of heterodox Christians is consistently high. Many Orthodox are interested in this issue, and this book is in part an attempt to provide a cogent answer.

The problem with this and other questions relating to the boundaries of the Church is that there currently exists a variety of contradictory answers. Those who have a reasonable knowledge of the state of Orthodoxy today know that certain aspects of ecclesiology are hotly debated. This is especially true with regard to the status of those not in visible communion with the Church. Several decades ago, the Orthodox theologian and ecumenical activist Nicolas Zernov made the following comment upon this sad state of affairs:

One of the Anglican delegates [at an ecumenical gathering in Oxford in 1973], Canon Allchin, asked the Orthodox, "Are we, according to your opinion, inside or outside of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church?" A lively discussion followed but no answer was given, and one of the leading Orthodox theologians frankly confessed his ignorance. He said, "I don't know". Such a lack of knowledge among theologians who claim to speak in the name of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church can easily perplex those who are not familiar with the sharp disagreements among Eastern Christians in regard to the status of other Christian confessions.²

¹ Timothy [now Bishop Kallistos] Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1993 [1963]), pp. 307-308.

² "The One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church and the Anglicans," *Sobornost*, 6:8 (1973), p. 529.

There are many reasons for this confusion today, all of which have served to make questions involving the boundaries of the Church increasingly relevant, and often emotionally charged:

Orthodox participation in the Ecumenical Movement. The movement for unity among Christians was begun by Protestants in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Most Orthodox Churches fully entered into it only fifty years ago, if that. Orthodox involvement in this movement has yielded precious little good fruit. In fact, a compelling case can be made that our involvement has resulted in the infection of many Orthodox participants with the *bacterium* of heretical belief.

A very important fact to be noted . . . is that exposure again and again through dialogues to this *minimalistic, relativistic mentality* [of typical modern dialogue] has a *blunting* effect on the Orthodox *phronema* or mindset. One becomes *infected* by the *virus*—or *venom* (*ios*) as the Orthodox Church Fathers call it—of heresy. . . .

The reason why St. Paul and the other holy men . . . advise avoiding repeated religious dialogues with the heterodox is clearly *the danger of being infected spiritually* by heretical ideas—it is *not* to teach *hatred* towards the heterodox. Such ideas are compared to poison, the venom of snakes, causing spiritual death.³

Another negative result of the ecumenical movement has been the drafting of “official” documents that are not faithful to traditional Orthodox ecclesiology, the most notorious example being the “Balamand Agreement” issued by Orthodox and Roman Catholics.⁴ Though initially girded with sound ecclesiological principles which countered the Protestant claims that the aim of the ecumenical movement, and specifically of the World Council of Churches, was the unity *of*, or unity *within*, the Church,⁵ many Orthodox participants—even entire local Orthodox Churches—have, to

³ Dr. Constantine Cavarnos, *Ecumenism Examined* (Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1996), pp. 46-47, 52, emphases his.

⁴ For more on this lamentable document see “The Balamand Agreement” page on the Orthodox Christian Information Center Web site (hereafter “OCIC”) at OrthodoxInfo.com/ecumenism.

⁵ As opposed to *among Christians*, or *within Christendom*. See, for example, “Christian Unity as Viewed by the Eastern Orthodox Church: Statement of the Representatives of the Greek Orthodox Church in the USA at the North American Faith and Order Study Conference, Oberlin, Ohio, September 3-10, 1957”:

We admit, of course, that the Unity of Christendom has been disrupted, that the unity of faith and the integrity of order have been sorely broken. But we do not admit that the Unity of the Church, and precisely of the “visible” and historical Church, has ever been broken or lost, so as to now be a problem of search and discovery. The problem of Unity is for us, therefore, the problem of the return to the fullness of Faith and Order, in full faithfulness to the message of Scripture and Tradition and in the obedience to the will of God: “that all may be one”. . . .

In considering firstly “the nature of the unity we seek,” we wish to begin by making clear that our approach is at variance with that usually advocated and ordinarily expected by participating representatives. The Orthodox Church teaches that the unity of the Church has not been lost, because she is the Body of Christ, and, as such, can never be divided. It is Christ as her head and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that secure the unity of the Church throughout the ages.

varying degrees over the years, lost touch with a proper understanding of Orthodox ecclesiology, often becoming increasingly estranged from the life-giving spiritual heritage of Holy Tradition. Serious compromises in the Faith have resulted, creating confusion and internal division⁶ among the Faithful.

For those alarmed by these facts, it is worth pointing out that doctrinal controversies in the Church are nothing new. Anyone can discover this by reading Church history. In our day, ecumenism—an ecclesiological heresy—has ravaged the Church and at times appears to have the characteristics of a “protracted naval battle,” to use a metaphor from Saint Basil the Great (*On the Holy Spirit*, Chapter 30).⁷ One must keep in mind that there has never been a “Golden Age” in the Orthodox Church. She has always been beset by arguments and strife. This is in accordance with Holy Scripture: “For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you” (I Cor. 11:19). With all due sympathy to those trying to sort out the nuances of Orthodox ecclesiology, a consistent Orthodox position is definitely discernible, if only one resorts to a careful examination of Holy Tradition, and specifically, Sacred Scripture, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the Sacred Canons.

Observation of Pious Heterodox Believers. In our modern, pluralistic society, Orthodox Christians have a great deal of personal contact with non-Orthodox Christians, many of whom exhibit a sincere faith in Christ, living good and honorable lives that even outshine those of their Orthodox neighbors. Combine this with the fact that heterodox Christians hold to varying degrees of Orthodox truth, and one has a recipe for confusion in those who are ignorant of Orthodox teachings. Two false conclusions are typically drawn: 1) The heterodox are Christians in the same sense that the Orthodox are; and 2) the “church” to which they belong is somehow a part or “branch” of the one true Church of God.

*Ignorance of Orthodoxy, specifically the Patristic Mindset.*⁸ “The . . . insufficient grounding [of a large number of Orthodox] in the consensual body of Patristic doctrine has led many to imagine that the Fathers disagree on the issue of Mysteries [Sacraments] outside the Orthodox Church. Separating canons from theology and theological speculation from spiritual life sets Fathers at artificial odds with one another, when in

⁶ See Bishop Photios of Triaditza, “Orthodox Unity Today,” *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. X, No. 4, pp. 4-10.

⁷ Patrick Barker [now Hieromonk Patapios] continues:

In the twentieth century, the Orthodox Church has been thrown into tremendous confusion. It could be said that the crisis through which we are now passing is no less severe than those crises faced by the Church during the period of the Seven Œcumenical Synods, and in particular the crisis provoked by the Iconoclast heresy in the eighth and early ninth centuries. (*A Study of the Ecclesiology of Resistance* [Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1994], p. 10)

⁸ The concept of a Patristic mindset (*i.e.*, the *phronema ton pateron*, *consensus patrum*, or “ecclesial consciousness”) will be discussed in greater detail in Appendix I.

fact our own misreading and lack of intellectual acumen, not the Fathers, are at fault.”⁹ This is related to a misinterpretation of the Church’s historically divergent policies regarding the reception of non-Orthodox: that the reception of converts by means other than Holy Baptism, or the declaration that a heterodox sacrament is “valid,” is a tacit recognition of heterodox sacraments *per se*—*i.e.*, in and of themselves, apart from the Church.

Perhaps the reader wonders why it should take so long to answer such a simple question as the one posed by Bishop Kallistos. Many undoubtedly would like an accurate and succinct answer not involving extensive theological discussion. To satisfy these readers, it is worthwhile at the outset briefly to state the Orthodox position vis-à-vis the heterodox.

The status of the heterodox is properly seen in two ways. When speaking of their *ecclesial* status—*i.e.*, their relation to the Orthodox Church—we would say that the heterodox cannot be seen as Her members, because they have not been grafted into the one true Body of Christ through Holy Baptism. On the other hand, when speaking of their *eternal* status—*i.e.*, the implications of this ecclesial separation—, we leave them to the mercy of God and do not judge them. Affirmation of their separation does not require belief in their damnation.

In what follows, we will first lay some of the theological groundwork that is requisite for a full treatment of our question. In so doing, we will address many of the issues relating to this question. A critique of various well-known answers to this question, including that of Bishop Kallistos—one that, although often cited, raises numerous problems—will bring our study to a close.

⁹ Bishop [now Archbishop] Chrysostomos of Oreoi [now of Etna], “BEM and Orthodox Spirituality,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Vol. 32, No.1 (1987), p. 61. BEM stands for “Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry,” Paper No. 111 of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches conference in Lima, Peru in 1983. This article by Archbishop Chrysostomos contains Patristic insights of a valuable kind. See related comments by His Eminence and Bishop Auxentios of Photiki in *Scripture and Tradition* (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1994 [1984], 50-52): “The diversity of positions we encounter in contemporary Orthodox theological thought is engendered by the importation, into Orthodoxy, of Western influence.” Also see Christos Yannaras, “Theology in Present Day Greece,” *St. Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly*, Vol. XVI, No. 4 (1972). For a survey of this problem from a Russian Orthodox perspective, consult *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Co., 1979), Vol. I, “St. Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers,” 105-120; Vol. IV, “Patristic Theology and the Ethos of the Orthodox Church,” and “Western Influences in Russian Theology”; Vol. V, *Ways of Russian Theology, Part One*; Vol. VI, *Ways of Russian Theology, Part Two*.