

The Bible and the Apostolic Authority of the Orthodox Church

I. The Evidence of the Holy Scriptures:

Christianity has never been a “free for all.” Our Lord did not just leave us a Holy Book and invite every single person to invent their own brand of Christianity from it. In fact the Bible warns against individualistic, private interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. As St. Peter wrote:

“Knowing this first, that every prophecy of Scripture cometh not out of private explanation, for prophecy was not brought about at any time by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke while borne along by the Holy Spirit.” (2 Pet. 1:20)

Thus the truth of Christianity is not ascertained by searching the Scriptures alone and inventing one’s own religion based on what one thinks they teach. Being Christ is the only-begotten Son and Logos of God the Father from all eternity, He had the foresight to know that such a plan for His Church would lead to utter chaos (as we see today in the thousands of competing variations of Protestant Christianity).

Rather, Christianity is an established faith and has been since the time of the Apostles. Right along with that Holy Book, Christ also left us a Holy Church. He appointed certain men to lead that Church like the 12 Apostles and the 72 disciples, many of whom became bishops. He ordained them for their specific mission. In so doing, Jesus empowered ordinary mortal men, the Apostles and their legitimate successors, to be trustworthy transmitters of God’s eternal salvific truth. He did this by breathing upon them and imparting to them the charism of the Holy Spirit through the Sacramental Mystery of Holy Ordination.

Jesus promised the Twelve that the Holy Spirit would guide them stating, “...but the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My name, that One shall teach you all things, and shall remind you of what I said to you” (Jn 14:26). On another occasion our Lord promised not only that the Holy Spirit would guide them but that He would do so “into all the truth,” stating “Yet I have many things to say to you, but ye are not able to bear them just now. But whenever that One, the Spirit of truth should come, He will guide you into all the truth” (Jn 16:12-13). This is why St. Paul states that the Church is the “pillar and foundation of truth” (1 Tim 3:15).

Christ charged his Apostles to go and authoritatively teach the truth to all the world, stating, "All authority is given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you; and behold, I am with you all the days until the completion of the age" (Mt 28:18-20). Jesus compared the mission He received from His Father to the one He gave to His own Apostles, stating: "...even as the Father hath sent Me forth, I also send you" (Jn 20:21). To reject His Apostles was tantamount to rejecting Christ as He declared to the Seventy Two, "The one that heareth you heareth Me; and the one that rejecteth you rejecteth Me, and the one who rejecteth Me, rejecteth the One Who sent Me forth" (Lk 10:16, cf. Mt 10:14-15).

This authority, which Christ gave to His Apostles, to teach and lead the Church, did not die with them. Such a ridiculous notion would mean that Christ abandoned His Church with no authoritative leadership at the very time they needed it most. This He specifically promised He would not do (Mt. 28:20). Rather, this office or teaching authority was passed on through Apostolic Succession in Holy Ordination by the "laying on of hands" (cf. Acts 1:20; 13:3; 14:23; 1 Tim 1:6; 5:22).

It is significant that Jesus during His life on earth did not write books to impart God's eternal truth. Instead, He chose certain men and established them to lead the Church and teach all nations the message of redemption. Christ entrusted the Gospel message to His Apostles for the salvation of the world. They handed on this message of salvation, known as the "deposit of truth," to their chosen successors, the bishops. We see a clear example of this in the second Epistle of St. Paul to St. Timothy:

"Therefore do thou not become ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor me His prisoner, but suffer hardship with the Gospel, according to God's power, Who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages of time, but now hath been made manifest by the appearance of our Savior Jesus Christ, Who brought death to nought indeed and brought to light life and incorruption through the Gospel, to which I was appointed a herald and apostle and teacher of nations. For which cause I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know Whom I have believed, and have been persuaded that He is able to guard the deposit entrusted to me until that day. Keep on holding fast the pattern of

sound words which thou heardest from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard thou the good deposit entrusted to thee through the Holy Spirit indwelling in us” (2 Tim. 1 8-14)

And again we read, “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to thy care, turning thyself away from the profane and vain utterances and opposition of that falsely-named knowledge, which some professing for themselves missed the mark concerning the faith.” (1 Tim. 6:20).

Here St. Paul states not only that he was entrusted with the sacred “deposit of truth” but that he passed on this deposit to St. Timothy a bishop of the early Church. This process of “passing on” Orthodox Christian doctrine is historically referred to as “Holy Tradition.” The word “Tradition” means the delivering or handing on of something. “Holy Tradition” entails the handing down of the entire Gospel. And how was the deposit of truth handed on from the Apostles to their successors? Protestants would say by their inspired writings called the New Testament. Ironically, this is not what the New Testament teaches! In fact, the writings we call the New Testament are only one important and essential component of the deposit of truth. The Apostle’s oral instruction imparted a further essential component of the deposit of truth as well. St. Paul explains this in his Epistle to the Church of Thessalonica:

“So then, brethren, be standing firm and holding fast the traditions which ye were taught, whether by word or by our epistle.”
(2 Thess 2:15).

As mentioned above, the Apostles ordained their successors...

“And after they ordained presbyters for them in every church, and prayed with fasting, they committed them to the Lord in Whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23).

...through the laying on of hands (cf. Acts 6:6, 1 Tim 4:14, 5:22, 2 Tim 1:6), and entrusted them with the entire “deposit of truth” (cf. 2 Tim 1:13-14; 2:2, Titus 1:7-9).

The leaders of these above mentioned presbyters, were called bishops, and were given full apostolic authority by Christ through the Apostles. St. Paul exhorted St. Timothy (a bishop of the early Church), in

reference to the deposit of truth: “Keep on commanding these things and teaching” (1 Tim 4:11).

Christians were to be obedient and honor those ordained to lead the Church. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, Christians are instructed to, “Be obedient to those who lead you, and keep on submitting, for they are watchful for your souls...” (13:17). And St. Paul admonished St. Timothy, “Let the presbyters who have presided well be counted worthy of double honor, most of all they who labor in the word and teaching” (1 Tim 5:17).

From the earliest times, bishops were recognized as partaking of the Apostle’s office of shepherding over the Church. As St. Paul, in the Acts of the Apostles, told the bishops of the Church at Ephesus: “Be taking heed therefore to yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit set you for Himself as bishops, to shepherd the Church of the Lord and God which He preserved for Himself through His own blood” (Acts 20:28). Through Holy Orders, full Apostolic authority was given to the bishops. St. Paul witnessed to this, urging St. Titus (another bishop of the apostolic Church): “These things be speaking and exhorting and reprovng with all authority; let no one despise thee” (Titus 2:15).

II. The Evidence of Church History:

This passing of the Apostles’ teaching authority to the Bishops of the Church is known as “Apostolic Succession.” In addition to the above witness of Holy Scripture, there is also abundant evidence for Apostolic Succession from some of the most ancient, historical Christian documents. One manuscript which even pre-dates the last book of the New Testament was written by St. Clement. St. Clement is mentioned by St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians (4:3) and was the third successor to St. Peter as Pope and Bishop of Rome. He held this Episcopal See from A.D. 88 to 97 when he gained the martyr’s crown. In his letter to Corinth, St. Clement wrote,

“The apostles received the gospel for us from Jesus Christ and Jesus the Christ was sent from God. So Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ: thus both came in proper order by the will of God. And so the apostles, after they had received their orders and in full assurance by reason of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, being full of faith in the word of God, went out in the conviction of the Holy Spirit preaching the good news that God's kingdom was

about to come. So as they preached from country to country and from city to city, they appointed their first converts, after testing them by the Spirit, to be the bishops and deacons of the future believers. And our apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife over the title of bishop. So for this reason, because they had been given full foreknowledge, they appointed those mentioned above and afterward added the stipulation that if these should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry” (1 Clem. 42:1-4, 44:1-2).

Another witness from the ancient Church was St. Ignatius of Antioch. After being a disciple of St. John the Apostle, St. Ignatius was appointed bishop of Antioch in A.D. 69. He was a successor there of St. Peter who earlier had gone to Rome (1 Pet 5:13). Attesting to the authority of bishops, St. Ignatius wrote to the church at Philadelphia,

“Surely, all those that belong to God and Jesus Christ are the very ones that side with the bishop; and all that may yet change their mind and return to the unity of the Church, will likewise belong to God, and thus lead a life acceptable to Jesus Christ. Do not be deceived, my brethren: if a man runs after a schismatic, he will not inherit the Kingdom of God; if a man chooses to be a dissenter, he severs all connection with the Passion” (2:2-3).

In A.D. 107, en route to Rome to receive a martyrdom of being torn apart by wild animals, St. Ignatius penned several other letters including one to the church at Smyrna in which he wrote,

“You must all follow the lead of the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed that of the Father; follow the presbytery as you would the Apostles; reverence the deacons as you would God's commandment. Let no one do anything touching the Church, apart from the bishop. Let that celebration of the Eucharist be considered valid which is held under the bishop or anyone to whom he has committed it. Where the bishop appears, there let the people be, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not permitted without authorization from the bishop either to baptize or to hold an agape; but whatever he approves is also pleasing to God” (Chp.8).

Finally, there is the witness of St. Irenaeus the second bishop of Lyons in Gaul (France), who held that bishopric from A.D. 177 to 202. In his letter *Against Heresies*, St. Irenaeus gave a striking witness to Apostolic Succession. He states,

“But since it would be too long to enumerate in such a volume as this the successions of all the churches, we shall confound all those who, in whatever manner, whether through self-satisfaction or vainglory, or through blindness and wicked opinion, assemble other than where it is proper, by pointing out here the successions of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient Church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul, that Church which has the tradition and the faith which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the Apostles...”

St. Irenaeus continued, “The blessed Apostles [Peter and Paul], having founded and built up the Church [of Rome], they handed over the office of the episcopate to Linus. Paul makes mention of this Linus in the Epistle to Timothy [2 Tim 4:21]. To him succeeded Anencletus; and after him, in the third place from the Apostles, Clement was chosen for the episcopate. He had seen the blessed Apostles and was acquainted with them. It might be said that He still heard the echoes of the preaching of the Apostles, and had their traditions before his eyes. And not only he, for there were many still remaining who had been instructed by the Apostles. ...To this Clement, Evaristus succeeded; and Alexander succeeded Evaristus. Then, sixth after the Apostles, Sixtus was appointed; after him, Telesphorus, who also was gloriously martyred. Then Hyginus; after him, Pius; and after him, Anicetus. Soter succeeded Anicetus, and now, in the twelfth place after the Apostles, the lot of the episcopate has fallen to Eleutherus. In this order, and by the teaching of the Apostles handed down in the Church, the preaching of the truth has come down to us” (p. 90 pars. 210-211).

These are but a few of the numerous proofs for Apostolic Succession coming from the historical documents of the early Church.

These bishops, ordained by the apostles, were entrusted with the duty to ordain other bishops (Gk. *episkopos*, cf. 1 Tim 3:1), priests (Gk.

presbuteros, cf. 1 Tim 5:17), and deacons (Gr. *diakonos*, cf. 1 Tim 3:8). As St. Paul directed St. Timothy,

“Thou therefore, my child, be empowered in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; and the things which thou heardest from me in the midst of many witnesses, commit thou these things to faithful men who shall be competent also to teach others” (2 Tim 2:2).

He informed St. Titus,

“For this cause I left thee behind in Crete, in order that thou shouldst set right the things wanting, and ordain presbyters in every city, as I ordered thee” (Titus 1:5).

The same process of Apostolic Succession has been maintained to this day through the laying on of hands in the Holy Mystery (Sacrament) of Holy Orders by the bishops of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches.

Our Lord did not just leave us a Holy Book. Rather, He established a living entity, the Church, to maintain His eternal truth. To the shepherds of the Church alone did Christ give pastoral teaching authority and the promise of divine assistance to protect Christ's faithful flock from being led into error. This is done primarily through Church councils as it was done in the Apostolic era (see Acts 15) and all throughout ecclesiastical history. As our Lord Jesus Christ promised, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.” And He said this in the context of Church authority (Mt. 18:15-20). Again, Scripture attests that it is the Church of the living God which is the pillar and foundation of truth.

All this can be substantiated historically by the consistency of two thousand years of continuity going all the way back to the Apostles and first bishops. To reject belief in Apostolic Succession is to reject history and the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. To reject the Church's authority, is to reject the historic Orthodox faith.

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On the Feast of St. Cyril of Jerusalem
During the Great Fast, 2006

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