

## The Basics of Orthodoxy Class 101

*St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church, Kingston, Ontario, Canada*

### Topic 14: Our Union with Christ - Part One

*(The Life, Chp.6)*

#### Review:

The Son of God became man, uniting Himself with our humanity, dying and rising again to destroy death and overthrow the Devil, so that He might open for all humanity a way “to **attain the purpose for which he [man] was created: participation in the unending life of God Himself.**” (*The Life*, p. 70)

Christ has *already saved* mankind, in the **objective** reality. All men and women will rise from the dead by His power on the Day of Resurrection. However, for some it will be a **resurrection to eternal life and joy** and bliss in the Presence of God, while for others it will be a **resurrection of condemnation**, of weeping and gnashing of teeth (because they will **not** be able to participate in and enjoy the Presence of Christ before Whom they stand).

Christ has saved humanity—yet it is up to each person, **each subject**, to **decide** for himself or herself, through a life of faith and action, whether this **salvation** will be a **benefit** or a **harm** -- eternally.

**What must we do to attain to this salvation that Christ has readied for us?**

#### 1) FAITH is first of all required.

John 3:16 “God so loved the world, that He gave His Only-Begotten Son, that whosoever **believeth in Him** should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Hebrews 11:6 “**Without faith it is impossible to please God**, for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.”

What is FAITH? “Now **faith** is the substance of **things hoped for**, the **evidence of things not seen.**” (Heb. 11:1)

Man has an inner eye—the “nous”—**the eye of the soul**, our inner ability to perceive spiritual reality. The Fall of mankind darkened and closed this spiritual “eye”. Our sins

and passions continue to keep this “eye” **closed**. People today cannot easily perceive the spiritual reality around them. Many find it hard to believe and trust in God. Such a person is **proud**—spiritually blind, and lacks faith. God is still around that person—like the sun that is shining on a blind man—only that man’s eye is closed to reality and he cannot see the sun, nor “see” God by faith.

So too, **many humans suffer from the passion of pride**, the eye of their spiritual perception is blinded, and they find it hard to “see” God. Such persons could be shown all the testimonies of miracles and evidences from creation which indicate a Creator, and they ***still will not believe***. Such persons could even meet a man who rose from the dead, and still—due to their closed inner “eye”, they will not be convinced, and will not believe. Many Pharisees in the time of Christ saw Jesus perform miracles *right in front of their eyes*, and still they refused to believe.

When the “eye” of the soul is opened—even a little bit—we say that such a person is becoming **humble**. He is beginning to **perceive spiritual reality as it really is**. His eye of faith is opening and he can “see” and believe and trust in absolute Truth—which is Christ. Such a person uses his “nous”—the “eye of the soul”—and combines it with the proofs and testimonies he is given, which strengthen and confirm his faith. (John 19:35 and John 20:31)

So, for Orthodox Christians, faith is “not a blind leap into irrationality”. (*The Life*, p. 74) We are not post-modern men. For us, faith **synergizes with** (cooperates with) the testimonies and the miracles, and is willing to believe them. On the other hand, it is **unbelief** which is a form of **blindness**—a blindness that **will not** recognize a miracle even when it is performed openly for all to witness.

**Secondly, TRUTH is required.** Our *faith* must be grounded in *truth*. There is no use believing something that is not true. Don’t waste your time on lies.

For us, Christ Jesus is the Truth—the Person known as the “Word of God.” Faith is trusting in Him, in a Divine **Person** Whom we get to know and love and experience.

Knowing Christ is not the same as knowing a lot of facts about Him and His Church. Knowing Him is like knowing another person—it is **experiential, real, and personal**.

The **true theologian** is not necessarily the seminary professor. Rather, the true theologian is the one who truly prays—the one who is God’s intimate friend. We Orthodox are taught that we “do” theology, not in the classroom, but **in the church**, during our **worship, where we meet the Living Christ and fall down in adoration before Him**.

**However, to safeguard and to guide us to a correct and authentic Christian knowledge of God**, the Church offers its direction. The Scriptures, together with the creeds of the Church, the decisions of Holy Councils, and the witnesses of Church Fathers and the Saints combine to be “**plumb-line” of truth**”, leading us away from error and towards Christ. We do not want to stray off the true narrow path into a broad heretical ditch. But **true faith** in God will *always* lead to the Truth, *Who is a Person—Jesus Christ*.

Jesus said: “**I am the way**, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” (John 14:6)

Orthodoxy means “right belief”. It is important what we believe correctly. “Right belief is necessary for salvation because **what we believe about God will determine how we relate to Him**.” (*The Life*, p. 75) **False conceptions may lead us away from truth, and therefore, away from God**. We may be *handicapped by our wrong ideas* and unable to relate to Christ—the Truth—in the correct manner. And, if we are hindered in relating to Christ correctly, we stand the chance of missing the goal of the whole salvation process: which is to attain for ourselves the gift of perfect God-likeness through union with God.

**Wrong theology may have huge consequences:**

For example: a huge problem would be to have faith yet not have works. (James 2:17)  
This is demonic. (James 2:19) This is a dead faith—merely cerebral. (James 2:17,20,26)  
There is no salvation in such faith.  
What is needed is a living faith—a **faith that is alive** and **working by love**. (Galatians 5:6)

“Faith that remains in the head is not saving faith.”

“Faith must move the heart and the hands and the feet.”

Faith is the spiritual force by which the Christian moves. (See Gal. 2:20) (*The Life*, p. 76)

Another example: If a person's particular theology (i.e. words, thoughts, and concepts about God) is not grounded in the truth as taught by the historic Church, the resulting distorted theology may actually lead a person in the wrong direction, away from union with God.

If a person's particular private theology teaches that one does not need to participate in the saving Grace of God through the Church's Sacraments, then this **mistaken** (i.e. wrong, bad) **theology** is actually going to keep that person from going to the Sacraments of Holy Confession, Holy Baptism, Holy Chrismation, and Holy Communion. This is sad. The wrong theology is setting up barriers to the Grace of God. Instead of getting in line (in the Confession line, in the Communion line) to receive the Grace of God which will help unite his soul with Christ (and make him godly), that person, because of his wrong theology, is mistakenly running in the opposite direction, as far as he can from the Sacraments and from union with Christ through those Sacraments. Sadly, such a person may even try to convince others that the Sacraments of the Church are evil, unnecessary, and empty. This deceptive, wrong, and heretical theology certainly must have a demonic inspiration, and it certainly limits the manner in which God can connect with that soul.

**We need a correct (i.e. an “Orthodox”) theology that leads us to a correct encounter and union with God.** Truth is required, in addition to faith.

### **Thirdly, REPENTANCE is needed.**

Faith, if it is real, brings one to repentance—which means to “turn around” and to have a “change of mind, heart, and direction in life.” Feeling “sorry” is only a part of repentance. True repentance is to **change**. (*The Life*, p. 77,78)

This change is **a life-long process**, not limited to one moment, though it may at times in some persons' lives have a particularly strong beginning. Ever since the Fall, man has been pulling away from God, so our repentance is a daily struggle to constantly be re-orienting our entire life back to God. “Deny yourself, take up your cross **daily**, and follow Christ.” However, true change (true repentance) is only possible by the Grace of God.

St. Peter of Damaskos (11<sup>th</sup> Century) wrote: “If **we so wish**, however, God's **second gift of grace—repentance**—can lead us **back** to our former beauty. But if we **fail to repent**, inevitably we will depart with the unrepentant

demons into age long **punishment**, more by our own free choice than against our will. Yet God did not create us for wrath but for salvation, so that we might enjoy His blessings; and we should therefore be thankful and grateful towards our Benefactor.”

The Grace of God—His Gift of His Divine Energies that **enables and assists us to change**—is **accessible in the Body of Christ, the Church**.

“The Son of God assumed human nature so that we might **be able to share in** His divine life [and therefore change for the better]. ***Only by being united to Christ and by participating in His life will we be able to live life as God intended:*** as a person living in an eternal communion of love with God, with one another, and with all of creation.” (*The Life*, p.78)

Through a **repentant** life of **true faith**, we unite with Christ in His Holy Church, and through this holy union our **salvation**—in the fullest understanding of the term—**is made possible**.

To attain salvation, we need **FAITH, TRUTH, and REPENTANCE**.