

THE CHURCH:  
A COMPARISON OF LUTHERAN AND EASTERN ORTHODOX DOCTRINE

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Outline of the State of Controversy

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Bishop Timothy Ware gives this simple summation of the difference between the Eastern Orthodox Church and Protestantism, “Unlike Protestants, the Orthodox insist upon the hierarchical structure of the Church, upon Apostolic Succession, the episcopate, the priesthood; it prays to the saints and intercedes for the departed.” (The Orthodox Church, page 243). However, this summary fails to note that the Eastern Orthodox also differ with Lutherans on (1) the nature of the Church, (2) the infallibility of the Church.

The Eastern Orthodox doctrine of the Church begins in the mystical unity of the Trinity. Christ Jesus is one with the Father and the Spirit. And since the Church is one with Christ (Ware, p. 244-245), therefore the Church is one with the entire Godhead. Therefore, because of this unity with the Trinity, the Eastern Orthodox believe that the Church is: (1) visible, and (2) that it cannot sin or fail with regard to the Truth. That truth is found in both the Bible and also in Tradition (Catechism of the Orthodox Eastern Church, Moscow 1839) The bishops are teachers and guardians of this truth, being in Apostolic succession from the divinely inspired Apostles. The bishops, as a whole, have confessed this truth in the decrees of the Seven Ecumenical Councils.

As the Church is one, being one with Christ and the Godhead, it follows in Eastern Orthodox thought that the entire Church in heaven and on earth is one. The practical outcome of this doctrine is that Eastern Orthodoxy also believes in (1) prayers to the saints and (2) in Purgatory (Ware, pp. 258-259)

The Evangelical Lutheran Church confesses that the Church “is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.” (AC V:1). The essence of the Church is not that of a territorial entity, but of “the assembly of all *believers*.” The Apology further says, “The church is not merely an association of outward ties and rites like other civic governments, however, it is mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men’s hearts. To make it recognizable, this association has outward marks, the pure teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the Gospel of Christ. This church alone is called the body of Christ, which Christ renews, consecrates, and governs by his Spirit.” (Apology VII/VIII:5).

The Nature of the Church

The Catechism of the Orthodox Catholic Eastern Church (Moscow, 1839) says in Article IX: Question 252, “What is the Church? The Church is a divinely instituted community of men,

united by the Orthodox faith, the law of God, the hierarchy and the sacraments.” (P. Schaff, Vol III. Creeds of Christendom, p. 483). Lutherans would agree that the Church is divinely instituted and that it is united by a common faith, but would question what is means by “the law of God,” would disagree about the necessity of the hierarchy, and would disagree about the number of the sacraments.

Bishop Ware points out “There is no ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ Church. The Church in one, in the sense that here on earth there is a single, visible community which alone can claim to be the one true Church.” (p. 249) He emphasizes that the Church is not invisible but must be a “visible community.” The Lutheran Apology emphasizes that the Church “is mainly an association of *faith* and of the Holy Spirit *in men’s hearts*.” (Apol. VII/VIII:5) But, in order to “make it *recognizable*, this association has *outward marks*, the pure teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ.” (Apol. VII/VIII:5).

Eastern Orthodoxy requires that the hierarchy be an integral part of the very nature of the Church, so much so that if there were no bishops and priests, there would effectively be no Church (Catechism of the Orthodox Catholic Eastern Church, Moscow, 1839. Questions 276-277). The Lutheran Church does not see the absolute necessity of bishops, as the Smalcald Articles state, “If the bishops were true bishops and were concerned about the church and the Gospel, they might be permitted (for the sake of love and unity, but *not of necessity*) to ordain and confirm us and our preachers.” (SA X:1)

Salvation, the chief matter of the Christian religion, therefore is not just a matter of faith (Lutheran) but is seen by the Eastern Orthodox as also requiring membership in a visible and physical earthly community (i.e. the Orthodox Church!), which includes submission to the authority of the hierarchy. Therefore any person that is *outside* the Eastern Orthodox Church is outside the Church of Christ and is therefore lost! Yet, Bishop Ware says, “There may be members of the Church who are not visibly such, but whose membership is known to God alone. If anyone is saved, he must be in some sense a member of the Church; in what sense, we cannot always say.” (Ware, p. 249) But by the term “the Church” Bishop Ware means specifically the Eastern Orthodox Church.

#### Infallibility of the Church

The Synod of Jerusalem and the Confession of Dositheus (1672) states, “We believe the Catholic Church to be taught by the Holy Spirit and therefore we both believe and profess to be true and undoubtedly certain that it is impossible for the Catholic Church to err, or to be at all deceived, or ever to choose falsehood instead of truth.” (Schaff, p. 252) The 1954 Declaration on Faith and Order, Evanston, Illinois, states, “We must not say that because Christians on earth sin and are imperfect, therefore the Church sins and is imperfect; for the Church even on earth, is a thing of heaven and cannot sin.” (Ware, p. 248). Bishop Ware himself further states, “Christ and the Holy Spirit cannot err, and since the Church is Christ’s Body, since it is a continued Pentecost, it is therefore infallible.” (Ware, p. 252). For Rome this infallibility resides in the office of the Pope; for Eastern Orthodoxy it resides in the living presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the college of orthodox bishops and in their pronouncements, the Seven Ecumenical Creeds. This means that for the Orthodox, the “true Church” is *only* the Orthodox Church.

The Lutheran Reformation specifically declared that the medieval church (both Rome and Constantinople!) *had, in fact, erred!* (cf. Luther’s Works, vol. 41, page 91). The supposed safeguards of the truth (i.e. Apostolic Succession and the corrective counsel of brother bishops) had failed. A dictatorship of bishops proved unable to correct itself on the basis of the Scriptures.

For Eastern Orthodoxy (according to the 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council), the Truth of the Christian faith is found in the Scriptures (including the Apocrypha) and in the unwritten, verbal Tradition of the Church. Tradition, of course, always “trumps” Scripture, for Tradition is the correct interpretation of the Word of God. Bishop Ware writes, “Scripture is not the fundamental principle of truth – God Himself is, and He lives mysteriously in the life of His Church.” (Ware, p. 258). The Catechism of the Orthodox Catholic Eastern Church, Moscow, 1839, says, “It teaches us to hold fast to the Apostolic doctrine and tradition, and eschew such doctrine and such teachers as are not warranted by the doctrine of the Apostles.” (Question 275).

Lutheranism rejects mere human tradition and recognizes only the authority of the divine Word of God. The Smalcald Articles proclaim, “It will not do to make articles of faith out of the holy Fathers’ words or works. Otherwise what they ate, how they dressed, and what kind of houses they lived in would have to become articles of faith – as has happened in the case of relics. This means that the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel.” (SA II:II:15). The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord (1580) states, “Here he [Luther] expressly asserts by way of distinction that the Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine, and that no human being’s writings dare be put on a par with it, but that everything must be subject to it.” (FC-SD: Rule & Norm: 9). Article XV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession goes into great detail about the unreliability of human traditions and the spiritual damage they have caused, specifically in leading people away from the Gospel.

If the Church were, in fact, infallible and totally incapable of any error of doctrine or faith, then how is it possible for Adam and Eve (who were *perfectly* united to the Godhead) to have fallen into error by believing Satan’s Word rather than God’s? If Adam and Eve were fallible and were led away into damning error, then cannot the Church? All the apostolic warnings against false doctrine presuppose that the Church can, in fact, be led astray. In order to remain in the saving truth of Christ, the Church must remain in His Word! (John 8:31-32).

Philip Melanchthon’s Commentary on Romans (CPH, 1992. Fred Kremer, transl.) notes, “Nevertheless, we must know that this true church is not always flourishing equally, but often is only small, and is to be divinely restored later when true teachers are sent, as in Noah’s time the church was oppressed and an assembly of only a few persons.” Melanchthon then goes through the hard times of the true Church, tracing church history, speaking of Melchizedek, Abraham, the time of Ahaz, Elijah and Elisha. “At the time of the prophets the true church was small. Isaiah 1:9: ‘If the lord had not left to us a seed, we should have become like Sodom and Gomorrah.’” Then Melanchthon further says, “When Christ was about to be born there was in Judah only a small church: Mary, Joseph, the family of Zachariah, Simon, Anna, the shepherds, and a few others. Meanwhile the church government was with the Pharisees and Sadducees who were openly ungodly.” Further, Master Philip quotes Matthew 24, “that after the Apostles there will be disaster for the church.” And after further quotes and comments on Matthew 24:24 and 2 Thessalonians 2:3 and Luke 18:8, Master Philip concludes, “These sayings testify that although the church must be preserved, it will, especially in the last time, be only small and an assembly of few persons who are spurned and rejected in this life.” (Commentary on Romans, pp. 240-252).

The church, as an *outward structure* (whether of bishops, consistories, or synods), is far from infallible, but can become rife with error and heresy. It has been that way throughout the Old and New Testaments. The true Church, the assembly of true believers, therefore has an endless work of proclaiming the Biblical truth of the Gospel and fighting against false teachers and leaders.

## Necessity of Bishops [The Hierarchy]

The Synod of Jerusalem and the Confession of Dositheus (1672) states, “The dignity of the bishop is so necessary in the Church that without him, neither the Church nor the name Christian could exist or be spoken of at all. He is a living image of God upon the earth and a fountain of all sacraments of the Catholic Church, through which we obtain salvation.” (Schaff, p. 252-253). Bishops are the teachers of the truth and the guardians of it. Bishop Ware says, “No one bishop can claim absolute power,” but the collective wisdom and correction of all the Eastern Orthodox bishops is claimed to be the guarantee that no error will occur in the Church (Ware, pp. 244-245). Part of this process of safeguarding the truth is found in the doctrine of Apostolic Succession, which Eastern Orthodoxy requires (Ware, p. 243).

The Lutheran Church does not recognize that the office of bishop (episcopos) is over and above lesser clergy (i.e. presbyters, pastors, etc.) by divine right. The Smalcald Articles state, “By the confession of all, even our adversaries, it is evident that this power belongs by divine right to all who preside over the churches, whether they are called pastors, presbyters, or bishops. Accordingly Jerome teaches clearly that in the apostolic letters all who preside over the churches are both bishops and presbyters. He quotes from Titus, ‘This is why I left you in Crete, that you might appoint *presbyters* in every town,’ and points out that these words are followed by, ‘A *bishop* must be married only once’ (Titus 1:5-7). Again, Peter and John call themselves presbyters” (SA: Power and Jurisdiction of Bishops: 62). Martin Chemnitz, in his Examination of the Council of Trent, goes into great detail on the usage of the Greek term “episcopos” and shows that bishops and presbyters are two terms for the same office (Examination of Canon VIII:1-9. Kremer edition, Vol 2, pp. 700-705).

The Lutheran Church is not against the office of bishop, but says, “On this matter we have given frequent testimony in the assembly to our deep desire to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, although they were *created by human authority*” (Apology XIV:1b). The Lutherans were forced to disregard the authority of the bishops because the “bishops either force our priests to forsake and condemn the sort of doctrine we have confessed, or else, in their unheard of cruelty, they kill the unfortunate and innocent men. This keeps our priests from acknowledging such bishops. Thus the cruelty of the bishops is the reason for the abolition of canonical government in some places, despite our earnest desire to keep it.” (Apology XIV:2)

The episcopal system was not overthrown completely in Lutheranism. In Scandinavia the ancient system of bishops was retained, as the bishops all embraced the evangelical doctrine of the Lutheran Church. There the bishops were corrected and cleansed of error by the truth of the Word.

In Lutheranism there is no one (or infallible) system of ecclesiastical government. Bishops, consistories, synods, and ministeriums have all been used. The most basic and Biblical form of the Church is the local congregation. To be a true part of the Church a local congregation does not need to be under a larger, territorial authority. Scripture is replete with references to individual “churches” (i.e. Acts 14:23, 15:41, 16:5, Rom. 16:4, 16:16, 1 Cor. 4:17, 7:17, 11:16, 2 Cor 8:1, 8:18, Gal. 1:2, 1 Thess. 2:14, Rev. 1:4, 22:16 to name a few) as well as to the one Church. The ordinary Christians at the congregation at Berea even did not merely accept the Apostolic authority of St. Paul, but “examined the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul said was true.” (Acts 17:11) The Truth of salvation is not guaranteed by bishops but by the Scriptures alone!

### Necessity of Ecumenical Councils

The Catechism of the Orthodox Catholic Eastern Church, Moscow, 1839, states, “What hierarchical authority is there which can extend its sphere of action over the whole catholic church? An Ecumenical Council.” (Schaff, p. 278). The Eastern Orthodox Church recognizes only the first Seven Ecumenical Councils. Bishop Ware asks what gives these councils such universal authority, and then answers, “The whole Church accepts them, not in a juridical sense, but because the whole Church *lives* them.” (Ware, pp. 256-257). It is the living witness of the church that makes these seven councils authoritative.

The Lutheran Church confesses in the Introduction to the Book of Concord that it accepts the three ancient Creeds as authoritative. The Nicene Creed of 325 A.D. is accepted, but nothing is said of the canons of Nicea as being in any way binding. But Lutheranism is not against the notion of a council, as the Introduction to the Augsburg Confession says, “If the outcome should be such as we mentioned above, we offer in full obedience, even beyond what is required, to participate in such a general, free, and Christian council as the electors, princes, and estates have with the highest and best motives requested in all the diet of the empire which have been held during Your Imperial Majesty’s reign.” (AC Intro:21).

Yet, an ecumenical council is not required or necessary, as Luther confesses in his Smalcald Articles, “I should be very happy to see a true council assemble in order that many things and many people might derive benefit from it. Not that we ourselves need such a council, for by God’s grace our churches have now been so enlightened and supplied with the pure word and the right use of the Sacraments, with an understanding of the various callings of life, and with true works, that we do not ask for a council for our own sake, and we have no reason to hope or expect that a council would improve our conditions. But in the dioceses of the papists we see so many vacant and desolate parishes everywhere that our hearts would break with grief. Yet, neither the bishops nor the canons care how the poor people live or die, although Christ died for them too. Those people cannot hear Christ speak to them as the true shepherd speaking to his sheep” (SA Preface:10).

### Unity of the Saints with in the Church

Bishop Ware notes, “Since there is no division between the living and the departed, and just as Orthodox Christians here on earth pray for one another and ask for one another’s prayers, so they pray also for the faithful departed and ask the faithful departed to pray for them.” (Ware, p. 258).

While the Lutheran Church would agree with the unity of the true Church in heaven and on earth, yet there *is* a division between the living and the departed – death! The saints might well be praying for us who are still on the earth, but only according to their understanding of how things used to be.

### Prayers to the Saints

The Catechism of the Orthodox, Catholic, Eastern Church, Moscow, 1839, notes in Question 264 that the supposed Scriptural basis for invoking the saints in prayer is “when the Prophet David cried out in prayer, ‘O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, our fathers’ (1 Chron. 29:18), he makes mention of saints in aid of his prayer.” (Schaff. Vol. III. P. 485). Question 265 in the same catechism quotes Revelation 8:3-4 as proof of the mediatory prayer of the saints in heaven (though the rather poor translation reads, “...that he [an angel] should offer

it, **by** the prayers of all saints, upon the golden altar...and the smoke of the incense ascended up **by** the prayers of the saints...).

Saints, however, cannot hear us or respond to us (Isaiah 63:16). The Apology of the Augsburg Confession says, “Even if the saints do pray fervently for the church, it does not follow that they should be invoked. But our confession affirms only this much, that Scripture does not teach us to invoke the saints or to ask their help. Neither a command nor a promise nor an example can be shown from Scripture for the invocation of the saints” (Apol. XXI:10).

The Augsburg Confession states, “It cannot be proved from the Scriptures that we are to invoke saints or seek help from them. ‘For there is one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus.’ (1 Tim. 2:5), who is the only Savior, the only high priest, advocate, and intercessor before God (Rom. 8:34). He alone has promised to hear our prayers” (AC XXI:2).

In the Old Testament every sort of contact with the spirits of the dead was condemned by the Law of Moses. No one was to go to anyone who claimed to be any sort of intermediary with the dead (Deuteronomy 18:10-12, Leviticus 19:31). In the New Testament our Lord’s parable about the rich man and Lazarus indicates that no saint will be sent to make contact with the rich man’s brothers, and that the rich man himself will not be able to warn them. Only Jesus Christ (the One who, in fact, “rises from the dead”) is able to warn those wayward brothers.

### Purgatory

The 17<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox theologians, Peter of Moghila in his Confession of 1643 and Dositheus (whose confession is appended to the Confession of the Synod of Jerusalem of 1672) both uphold the Roman doctrine of Purgatory, that is, a spiritual realm where the faithful pay the penalty for their earthly sins (Ware, p. 259). However, Bishop Ware notes that more modern Orthodox theologians say either: (a) the faithful departed suffer no more, “for when a man dies in the grace of God, then God freely forgives him all his sins and demands no expiatory penalties” or (b) that “they perhaps suffer.” A third group of Orthodox theologians “leave the whole question entirely open” (Ware, p. 259).

Lutheranism rejects the doctrine of Purgatory, not only because it has no Scriptural warrant, but because it runs contrary to the Gospel, as the Smalcald Articles say, “For Purgatory, too, is contrary to the fundamental article that Christ alone, and not the work of man, can help souls. Besides, nothing has been commanded or enjoined upon us with reference to the dead. All this may consequently be discarded, apart entirely from the fact that it is error and idolatry” (SA II:II:12).

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession notes, “They bring up the case of Adam, and of David who was punished for his adultery. From these instances they construct the universal rule that for the forgiveness of sins there must be temporal punishments corresponding to particular sins. We have said before that the saints suffer penalties which are the work of God, like contrition or terrors of conscience, as well as other common troubles. Some of them suffer from the particular penalties which God imposes only on them, for the sake of example... From the particular penalty imposed on David it does not follow as a universal rule that over and above our common troubles there is a special penalty in purgatory, where the particular punishment fits the particular crime. Where does Scripture teach that we can be freed from eternal death only by the payment of certain penalties over and above our common troubles? On the contrary, it constantly teaches that we obtain the forgiveness of sins freely because of Christ, who is the victor over sin and death” (Apology XII:156-157).

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