

Scripture and Tradition:

The Differences between Eastern Orthodox and Evangelical Lutheran Doctrine

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Eastern Orthodox Teaching

Official Doctrinal Statements

“To make our confession short, we keep unchanged all the ecclesiastical traditions handed down to us, whether in writing or verbally.” (2nd Council of Nicaea, 787, called the “7th Ecumenical Council.” NPNF² 14:550).

“We, therefore, following the royal pathway and the divinely inspired authority of our Holy Fathers and the traditions of the Catholic Church (for, as we all know, the Holy Spirit indwells her), define...” (2nd Council of Nicaea, 787, called the “7th Ecumenical Council.” NPNF² 14:550).

“Wherefore, the witness also of the Catholic Church is, we believe, not inferior to that of the Divine Scriptures. For one and the same Holy Spirit being the author of both, it is quite the same to be taught by the Scriptures and by the Catholic Church.” (*Confession of Dositheus*, 1672, decree 2).

“[B]ut the Catholic Church, as never having spoken, or speaking from herself, but from the Spirit of God—who being her teacher, she is ever unfailingly rich—it is impossible for her to in any wise err, or to at all deceive, or be deceived; but like the Divine Scriptures, is infallible, and hath perpetual authority.” (*Confession of Dositheus*, 1672, decree 2).

Note: The authority of the *Confession of Dositheus* is disputed by some within the E. Orthodox churches. More generally it is seen as a correct statement of Eastern Orthodox faith.

Evangelical Lutheran Teaching

Official Doctrinal Statements

“This is about the Sum of our Doctrine, in which, as can be seen, there is nothing that varies from the Scriptures, or from the Church Catholic, or from the Church of Rome as known from its writers.” (*Augsburg Confession*, end of doctrinal articles, para. 1).

Note: Though Lutheran doctrine is drawn from Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*), the Lutheran Church confesses itself to be in unity with those who have taught rightly through the ages, including writers of the Church of Rome, such as St. Augustine.

“For it will not do to frame articles of faith from the works or words of the holy Fathers; otherwise their kind of fare, of garments, of house, etc., would have to become an article of faith, as was done with relics. The rule is: The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel (cf. Gal. 1:8).” (*Martin Luther, Smalcald Articles II/II:15*).

“First, then, we receive and embrace with our whole heart the Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged.” (*Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm*, para. 3).

“Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, which are to show in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this pure doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.” (*Formula of Concord, Epitome, Rule and Norm*, para. 2).

“Of the beliefs and practices whether generally accepted or publicly enjoined which are preserved in the Church some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have delivered to us ‘in a mystery’ by the tradition of the apostles; *and both of these in relation to true religion have the same force.*” (Basil of Caesarea, 4th cent. *On the Holy Spirit*, NPNF² 8:41, emphasis added).

“Q. What is Holy Tradition, and is it absolutely essential to faith?

A. Holy Tradition consists of those things which Christ delivered to his Apostles and which they transmitted to their successors orally. It is absolutely essential to faith, because it is the source of the Holy Scripture and we cannot understand all of the Holy Scripture correctly without the help of Holy Tradition. Since the Protestant Churches reject Holy Tradition, they have no authoritative judge for the explanation of Holy Scripture. Each has his own opinion, and on this account they differ among themselves, although they have the same name, Protestant. And they will continue to be subdivided in the future as long as they do not restore Holy Tradition to its proper place in the Church.” (C. Demetry, *Catechism of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/CDHN/catechis.html>).

“[Tradition] means the books of the Bible; it means the Creed; it means the decrees of the Ecumenical Councils and the writings of the Fathers; it means the Canons [church laws], the Service Books, the Holy Icons—in fact, the whole system of doctrine, Church government, worship, spirituality and art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages.” (Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 196).

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me. Amen.” (Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms in 1521, *Amer. Ed.* 32:112-113)

“The church is reborn where God restores the doctrine, and gives his Holy Spirit. Paul testifies in Eph. 4[:11] that the church is ruled and preserved in this manner, not by orderly succession: ‘He gave gifts to men, apostles, prophets. . . .’ He teaches that the true church is where Christ is at work and where he bestows true teachers. . . . Let us not permit ourselves to be scared away from the Word of God by the false protection of the name church. . . . Therefore, the authority of the crowd must not be appealed to against the Word of God, but it is necessary that one return to the rule: ‘If anyone shall preach another Gospel, let him be anathema’ [1 Cor. 16:22; Gal. 1:8]. Let the highest authority be that of the Word which was divinely taught. Thereafter that church which agrees with that Word is to be considered authoritative as Christ says [John 10:27]: ‘My sheep hear my voice.’ As Augustine said: ‘The question is: “Where is the church?”’ What, therefore, shall we do? Shall we seek it in our words, or in the words of the church’s head, our Lord Jesus Christ? I think that we should seek it in the words of the One who is the truth, and best knows his own body.” (Philipp Melanchthon, *Romans*, 16th cent., pp. 239-284).

“I said that the writers are to be heard, as we say also that preachers are to be heard, because some remain in the church who hold fast to the truth, some more purely, others less purely. But one must add that the hearers should judge according to the Word of God which always remains the rule for doctrine.” (*Ibid.*)

“It is absolutely essential to question the past. In Byzantine and post-Byzantine times, Orthodox have often been far too uncritical in their attitude to the past, and the result has been stagnation. Today this uncritical attitude can no longer be maintained.” (Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 197).

Note: Here Ware shows that there is a range of opinion within Eastern Orthodoxy on the question of the extent to which tradition is normative.

“‘Blessed will be those who love the church’ [cf. Ps. 122:6]. He promises defense, successes, and perpetual salvation to those who love the true church. With these words the godly should arouse their minds to care for the service of the church, and should not only strengthen themselves against the threats of tyrants, but should also fortify themselves against the sophistry of those who falsely cite testimonies of antiquity and the church for the defense of their ungodly dogmas.” (*Ibid.*)

Many more quotes could be added, but these are sufficient to show the difference between the two kinds of teaching. The difference between the two is not that Eastern Christendom values tradition and Evangelical Lutheran Christendom does not. No indeed! True Evangelical Lutherans learn from and value tradition. But Evangelical Lutheran doctrine has also learned from Holy Scripture that no external institution or church body is infallible and no human teacher’s writings can be put on the same level as the writings of the inspired prophets and apostles. We must test all things and hold fast what is good (1 Thess. 5:21). All Scripture (that is, the writings of the prophets and apostles, Eph. 2:20; 3:5) has been given to us so that we can “test all things” (2 Tim. 3:16). The traditions of men cannot be put on the same level as the writings of the prophets and apostles (Matt. 15:9; Gal. 1:14). The traditions which *must* be held are the teachings of the apostles and prophets (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15), and these have been recorded for us in Scripture, the Word of God. Scripture itself teaches us to honor our fathers in the faith and our mother, the Church, and to learn from them (Exod. 20:12; Prov. 1:8; cf. 1 Cor. 4:15; Gal. 4:26), and this we do gladly. Yet Scripture alone remains the standard of truth.