

Scripture & Tradition

(By Father Deacon Michael Hyatt)

Part 1

Any discussion of what Orthodox Christians believe has to begin with a discussion of authority: how do we know what we believe? What is the foundation? And so, I want to be able to talk about Orthodox tradition, as well as Scripture, and for us as Orthodox Christians, those are part of a seamless whole. And so I want to spend here a couple of weeks talking about the relationship between Scripture and Tradition. We've done this in the past, but I think it's critically important as we think - because we live and operate in a context where, at least among Evangelical Christians, the Scripture is the final authority, and if you can't prove it from the Bible, then you're a little bit on your heels, and have difficulty communicating.

But it's because we have different assumptions about the Scripture. It's not that Orthodox don't revere the Scripture; we indeed *do* revere the Scripture, greatly. It's highly esteemed in our church, but it is esteemed precisely because it is at the core and at the focal point of apostolic tradition. And that's what gives it its authority.

So with that, what I'd like to do is talk about a doctrine that is very prevalent, that you need to understand if you're going to dialogue with Evangelicals, is the doctrine of Sola Scriptura. How many of you know what that means? It's a pretty common term that's used in Evangelical or Protestant theology; in fact, it's the bedrock of that theology. But here's the meaning of it: it comes from the Latin, and it means, simply, "by Scripture alone." In other words, by yourself, with the Bible, you ought to be able to figure most of it out. The doctrine of Sola Scriptura.

Wikipedia, which has supplanted, I guess, Britannica and every other encyclopedia out there - in fact, I talked to a printer this week who said that sales of encyclopedias have completely vanished, that Wikipedia basically has made that part of the publishing business, sadly, go away. But Wikipedia says, "Sola Scriptura is the assertion that the Bible is God's written word, is self-authenticating, clear, or perspicuous, to the rational reader, its own interpreter," - Scripture interprets Scripture, you may have heard that - "and sufficient of itself to be the only source of Christian doctrine. The Scriptures - the Old and New Testament - were given by inspiration of God, and are the only sufficient, certain, and authoritative rule of saving knowledge, faith, and

obedience.” So says the Abstract of Principles of the Southern and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminaries. So if you came out of that background, that’s kind of the common view, and I’ll let that stand as a proxy for the view of Sola Scriptura.

You don’t have to talk, though, to too many Evangelicals or Protestants to realize that the doctrine of Sola Scriptura has a lot of different meanings, depending upon who you talk to. So you need to think of that doctrine as a continuum. On the one end are the reformers, such as Luther and Calvin. They taught that the Scriptures are the sufficient source of saving knowledge, the Bible does not contain everything we would like to know or could know, but everything we need to know. The position leaves a certain amount of room for maneuvering.

So if you are a Presbyterian, like I used to be before I became Orthodox, in the Westminster Confession of Faith, it says this, and listen carefully to the room it gives you for maneuvering, quote: “Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word, and that there are some circumstances, concerning the worship of God, the government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.”

So the Bible doesn’t talk about everything, and there are some things that we can just use common sense to figure out. So says the Westminster Confession of Faith. In other words, the Bible’s not a how-to book. It’s not going to cover every possible subject. And, in fact, in the Presbyterian Church, they have the Book of Church Order, and there are many other such manuals in other denominations.

That’s one end of the spectrum, sort of the Reformed end of the continuum. On the other continuum are the radical reformers, or the Anabaptists. They basically taught that the Scriptures are not only the sufficient source of saving knowledge, but also the exclusive guide to worship and community life. The most vocal and consistent adherents of this view are the conservative descendents of Alexander Campbell and the Restoration movement, typically known as the Church of Christ.

But regardless, both ends of the continuum, and everything in between, agree that tradition has no binding authority. No real place for it. The Scriptures may not speak of everything, we might be able to use

our common sense on a few things, but the Scriptures play the sole role of authority in the church, at least in the Evangelical church.

In the final analysis, Sola Scriptura is not so much an affirmation about the Bible as it is a denial of tradition. And that indeed was why it was framed - was a reaction, in the reformation - to the Roman Catholic doctrine of tradition, which in the view of the reformers, had corrupted the church, and introduced things that were not only extra-Biblical, but contrary to Biblical teaching. More about that in a little bit.

I think we have to acknowledge, though, that the reformers were attempting to get back to the golden age of Christianity. There was an intention, a motivation on their parts, that was good and appropriate, because what they were seeing didn't square with the gospel. And in fact, I think we would even argue that in many ways, it didn't square with apostolic tradition. There were many things that had been added, through the Middle Ages, to the faith once for all delivered for the saints, that even as Orthodox Christians, we could not embrace today. But by returning to the Bible, they sought to divest Christianity of all the accretions, the additions, and return it to the pristine state of the early church. And if you were in my classes on the seven ecumenical councils, one of the things that was clear and apparent was that there was no golden age in the history of the church - it's really a myth - that there were heresies from the very beginning pages of the New Testament that had to be routed out, and challenged, and debated, and fought over. And it took centuries for that to happen.

The irony is, that the principle by which the reformers sought to turn to the purity of the early church, that is, Sola Scriptura, was itself unknown in the early church. And I'll tell you here in a moment why it would have been impossible to have that doctrine in the early church. The idea of Sola Scriptura was an invention of the 16th century. No father or council of the early church ever asserted that the Scriptures, in and of themselves, without any reference to the church, are the all-sufficient rule of faith.

The doctrine of Sola Scriptura was very much a product of its age, and it was predicated upon several assumptions relative to that age, and it's important that we understand these assumptions, and that's what I want to go through, is 4 assumptions that undergird the doctrine of Sola Scriptura. And I think it will be helpful to us as we have dialogue with Evangelicals, to understand where they're coming from, and what's not stated in the arguments. You know, when we're having this debate,

there's a lot of unstated assumptions, and these are 4 of them.

First of all, Sola Scriptura presupposes a closed and universally recognized canon of Scripture. In other words, you have to have something from which to draw this sufficient knowledge of the faith. And as hard as it is for some people to believe, the Scriptures didn't always exist, in bound form, in one commonly accepted book, or books. It just didn't. Not even in the 16th century did it exist in that form.

But this assumption completely ignores the fact that the process of defining the canon of the New Testament took centuries. Here's a couple of examples: the church of the first three centuries - the age frequently regarded as the golden age, before Constantine legalized Christianity and there corrupted it - had no single, defined New Testament canon. This was the first three centuries of the church. There was no book of letters, universally agreed upon, circulated to every church. The Scriptures were a series of letters; different churches had different collections of these letters.

Not all the letters circulating would end up making it into the canon. Some are regarded [as] Scripture by some and others are rejected by others. Heretics rejected many of these letters. The Gnostics, for example, rejected the letters of Paul, because he takes them on pretty ferociously in his letters, and they circulated their own. For example, the Gospel of Thomas, the so-called "lost gospel" that was popular and sold well a couple of years ago.

This led the church to make decisions about which books were or were not to be considered Scripture. It was a process that took time. It wasn't until the 2nd and 3rd century that Saint Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen of Alexandria explicitly state that there are four, and only four, gospels. That wasn't until the 2nd and 3rd century.

The Muratorian Canon, dating from the end of the 2nd century, lists the books of the New Testament, but omits James, Hebrews, 3 John, and 1 and 2 Peter, and in addition to the Revelation of John, it includes the Apocalypse of Peter. Certain books remained problematic for centuries. Hebrews remained controversial in the West until the end of the 4th century. Revelation remained controversial for centuries. In fact, it's the only New Testament book that's not read liturgically in the Orthodox Church. The first extant list of New Testament books that exactly matches our canon is found in the Paschal letter of Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, in 367 AD. That's a long time after the supposed golden age - you know, the first few centuries.

In the West, the canon wasn't settled until the Council of Carthage in 397 AD. So really, until we get to the 4th century, it would not even have been possible to make an argument - Sola Scriptura - because there wasn't an agreed-upon canon of Scripture that could be used in the argument. And the Old Testament is even more problematic.

This assumption, Sola Scriptura, which presupposes a closed and universally recognized canon of Scripture, also ignores the fact that even the Old Testament canon was not settled for centuries. Even among the Jews of Jesus' day, there were variations in usage. There doesn't appear to be any attempt to settle the question of the Old Testament canon until after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

There were different scrolls that were rolled up in the synagogue, and you might grab the scroll of Isaiah and read from it, but there was not an agreed upon canon, even of the Old Testament. The first time this was even attempted was at the Council of Jamnia in 90 AD. However, even after this council, Christians continued to use books from the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, and in fact, that's what's in the Orthodox Study Bible. The Old Testament was translated from the Septuagint version of the Scriptures, which would have been the canon that was known in the Old Testament, to the apostles.

This assumption also ignores the fact that even the reformers struggled to define the canon. Oops. This is a dirty little secret. Even the reformers, who claimed Sola Scriptura, evidently using some other criteria, because they couldn't agree on what the canon was, argued about some of the books, whether they should be part of that canon. Now think about that: if the final authority is Sola Scriptura, then by what criterion do you exclude certain books from the canon? For example, Luther rejected James. He didn't much like Hebrews either. And there were other books that were in dispute.

So that's the first assumption. And again, just to repeat it, Sola Scriptura presupposes a closed and universally recognized canon of Scripture. Second assumption is that Sola Scriptura presupposes that the Scriptures are self-interpreting. This is an interesting one. And you have to ask the question, if it's true, why are there more than 25,000 Protestant denominations? If the Scriptures are so clear, so that anyone, unaided by anything except the prompting or the inner illumination of the Holy Spirit, reading the Scriptures, would come to the same conclusion, why do we have over 25,000 different denominations? It presupposes a notion of absolute objectivity. That somehow, I can come

to the Scriptures, open the Bible, and, unprejudiced by my current cultural context, my own upbringing, my own time, my own psychological weirdness, that somehow I can read the Scriptures and understand it, by myself. It presupposes that.

But I don't even think most Protestants believe this. Otherwise, they wouldn't have penned documents like the Westminster or the Augsburg Confessions. There is something that's supplemental, that helps come to consensus about what the Scriptures teach. Or, just take a trip to your local Christian bookstore. If the Scriptures are self-interpreting, why do we need commentaries? Even Protestants can't escape tradition. Lutherans write commentaries from within the tradition of Luther, Milanchthon, and the Augsburg Confession. Presbyterians write commentaries from within the tradition of Calvin, and Beza, and Knox, and the Westminster Confession. In fact, every commentary is written from within some tradition.

If you've got your Bible this morning, look at Acts, chapter 8, verse 26. In the Orthodox Study Bible, it's page 1483. This is the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. And Saint Luke writes, Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Arise and go toward the south, along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is desert. So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go near and overtake this chariot." So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

And so then Philip proceeds to explain to him how the prophet Isaiah speaks of Christ, and the Ethiopian eunuch is converted, and later baptized. So the **second presupposition** is that Sola Scriptura presupposes that the Scriptures are self-interpreting. And I think, by their actions at least, most Christians understand that that's not the case.

Third presupposition: Sola Scriptura presupposes that the Scriptures were intended to be an all-sufficient guide for Christians. In other words, everything God could possibly say, or wanted to say, is here. Let's look at a few verses, even in the Bible, where the Bible doesn't claim this for itself. Look back just a few pages to John chapter

21, the very last verse of that gospel. [John 21:25](#). Page 1467. Saint John says, “and there were also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen.” Whole lot of stuff that wasn’t recorded in the Bible that Jesus did and said, and even more if you contemplate the apostles and all that they taught. And as we’ll see in the weeks to come, Saint Paul makes it clear that there’s not only a written tradition, as we have here in the form of the Holy Scripture, but also an oral tradition that was passed on from one generation to another.

Look at [Acts 20](#) and verse 7. And this is on page 1505. And it’s talking about a 1st century worship service, and it says, “now, on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread.” Not a lot of detail about the worship. How did they administer it? Was it out of a common cup? I don’t think they had little plastic glasses in that day. How was it administered? Was there praying beforehand or after hand? If you look back at Acts chapter 2 and verse 42, where it talks about the early church subsequent to Peter’s sermon - this is page 1473, [Acts 2:42](#) - “and they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship and the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” All those elements are certainly part of Orthodox worship, but in what order? How is it administered? Do you sit? Do you stand? Do you wear vestments? Can you use incense? Not use incense? Have pictures? Not pictures? There’s a lot that’s not covered there.

The Torah gives specific directions about worship under the Old Covenant. All you have to do is look at the book of Leviticus, and it’s mapped out in painstaking detail. But nothing resembling this is outlined in the New Testament. Which has caused a lot of the more radical reformers and Protestants to argue that there is no structure, there should be no structure. And what I would just say, is that structure is inescapable wherever life is found. Even if it has the appearance of non-structure, that’s even a structure.

Fourth assumption: Sola Scriptura presupposes that Christianity is essentially an ideology rather than a living faith based on a relationship. This is probably the most important thing I could say, and I think one of the things that differentiates Orthodoxy and makes it really attractive to me is that we’re not just talking about a moral philosophy, about an ancient book, that if somehow we memorize and know, that that knowledge will somehow save us. But in this view of Sola Scriptura,

I think, the Bible is seen as a book that contains teachings and a complete system of doctrine. That's why you can have systematic theologies, and if you really want to understand what the Scripture teaches, then just read this systematic theology, which attempts to take what the Bible teaches on various topics, put them all together, and teach that. The problem is, which systematic theology? Do you want to look at Calvin's *Institutes*? Or more modern systematic theologies? Or better yet, roll your own. Come up with your own systematic theology, which is almost what is taught in many places today.

Thus anyone can pick the Bible up, and because it's self-interpreting, glean from it everything he needs to believe and do in order to be a Christian. Therefore Christianity, I believe, in this view, is reduced to a set of doctrines to be believed and a set of rules to follow. But for Orthodox Christians, Christianity is essentially a life to be lived. It is, first and foremost, a relationship, a dynamic relationship that we're invited into in the Holy Trinity. We're invited to participate in that divine life and to be restored to that position which was taken, and actually be elevated from that position.

But it's not just any life that we're called to. It's not just, again, a set of moral principles. And even among Orthodox, we can degenerate our faith into being a series of Dos and Don'ts. What are the fasting rules? And we start looking at the back of cans to see what the ingredients are, and it can quickly be devoid of life. But it's primarily a relationship.

But it's not just any life; it's life in Christ, not a mere ethical imitation of him, but an organic union *with* him, in his body, the church. And it's inside of this life in Christ that we have the ability to understand the Scriptures. And apart from that organic union with Christ, and with his body, the church, the Scriptures, no matter what else we may declare, continue to be a mystery for us.

Part 2

We're trying to differentiate between the Protestant doctrine of Sola Scriptura and what we believe as Orthodox. Not because we're trying to stand and point the finger at Protestants in saying "you're wrong", but sometimes, for most of us particularly who come from a Protestant background, it's helpful to understand and differentiate between the two. But I think it's helpful to understand because this is the dominant kind of view of Scripture that permeates Christian culture in the West today.

Now I want to look at some of the proof-texts that are often used to “prove” Sola Scriptura. This whole dichotomy or distinction between Scripture and Tradition is a false dichotomy. And what we’ll see is that these two things hold together beautifully in the Orthodox Faith. But let’s look at the texts that are often used to “prove” the doctrine of Sola Scriptura. First of all, [II Timothy 3:16-17](#), and if you’re following along in your Orthodox Study Bible, it’s page 1643. And here’s what it says, and this is a verse that’s precious to all of us. And here St. Paul writes: All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

I was converted when I was 18 years old, and the pastor that helped in my conversion and followed up with me after my conversion, this was one of the first Scriptures that he brought me to. And he said to me, and rightfully so, he said it’s critically important that you know the Scriptures, that you learn about the Scriptures. And so, he helped me embark upon a Bible reading plan, a Scripture memory program, and it was hugely helpful to my faith. But as a proof-text for that, he used this passage. The problem is that this does *not* prove the doctrine of Sola Scriptura, and let me show you how. First of all, if you read just a few verses above this, St. Paul says in verse 14 to St. Timothy:

But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures. ([2 Timothy 3:15](#))

So, St. Timothy had known these Scriptures from his youth. The only problem was that the New Testament had not been written at that point. So whatever the Scriptures were that St. Timothy had known from his youth, they, by necessity, excluded the New Testament because even as St. Paul is writing this, the New Testament is being written and not all of it had been written at this point. In fact, I would say that all references in the New Testament to “the Scriptures” refer to the Old Testament, with one exception. And that one exception is found in [II Peter 3:16](#). And St. Peter says — actually I want to back up to verse 14 to give you the context because St. Peter mentions St. Paul when he says: Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation, as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also

in all his epistles, speaking to them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. So, St. Peter here seems to have an awareness that what St. Paul is writing is at the level of Scripture and will, prophetically, one day become part of the canon, part of the New Testament canon, but that's the only verse that I can find in the entire New Testament where a reference to the Scriptures is speaking about something, possibly that's not the Old Testament. No Orthodox Christian would deny that St. Paul's affirmation of the Scriptures as inspired by the Holy Spirit does apply to the New Testament by extension, but I'm simply trying to make the point that this book did not fall out of heaven in the first century, complete. And so that there were Bible studies as we know them today that were happening in the first century, and that people were running their churches based on what they cobbled together from the New Testament and the Old Testament because the New Testament did not exist. In fact, as I pointed, for almost three centuries after this, there would not be a New Testament canon. Certain churches would have certain letters, but no Church possessed *all* the letters and we certainly didn't have the wonder of the printing press to print them and distribute them like we know today. So it's easy to read back into that something that was unknown to them.

The fact is St. Paul is not asserting the sole sufficiency of Scripture is also confirmed by [II Timothy 3](#) in verse 8. [II Timothy 3:8](#), St. Paul says this, "Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth." What's he talking about? Who are these men to whom he refers? These are actually magicians from the book of Exodus, but you would not know it from the passage in Exodus. But this was part of common Jewish tradition, that these were the names of the two chief magicians in the book of Exodus when Moses confronts Pharaoh. And so, here St. Paul is making an extra-biblical reference, which would not be necessary, I suppose, if the Scripture were all-sufficient, if the New Testament was all-sufficient.

What then is St. Paul teaching? Well he's teaching that the Scriptures of the Old Testament were profitable for doctrine, and he's really fighting the Gnostic heresy, which look in I Timothy, just turn back a few pages to [I Timothy 6:20](#). He says "O Timothy!" By the way, this is the very last thing that he says to Timothy. "O Timothy. Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle

babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge.” The Greek word *gnosis* from which we got the heresy of Gnosticism. And St. Paul is making the case — let me back up. The Gnostics made the case that the Old Testament Scriptures were irrelevant, that you didn’t need them. And St. Paul is making the case that no, what God has gone in history and in Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of what was written in the Old Testament and prophesied by the prophets of old. It’s a continuation of, a fulfillment of, it exists in continuity with what God has done in history. It is the apex of his work. It’s not discontinuous from that work. It’s continuous with that work. So St. Paul is here affirming the authority and usefulness of the Old Testament.

So, whatever our view of Scripture, and it’s certainly true in the Orthodox Church that we don’t just esteem the New Testament alone but also the Old Testament. It’s highly regarded as well. If you attend Vespers, probably 70 percent of that service is pulled straight out of the Old Testament, primarily the Psalms, but also the book of Genesis and other places. We are, as Orthodox Christians, a biblical Church. We’re steeped with the Scriptures, it’s in all of our services. It’s in our worldview, but we don’t believe it’s an all-sufficient guide.

OK, so that’s [II Timothy 3:16](#) and 17, the Scriptures are profitable for teaching for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, particularly the Old Testament Scriptures, but they were not intended to be all-sufficient, otherwise, the Old Testament — it actually proves too much, the Old Testament would be sufficient in and of itself without reference to the New Testament canon. Another passage I want us to look at is [I Corinthians 4:6](#), and I’m only going to look at four of these, but this is the second one. [I Corinthians 4:6](#), and this is page 1555. [I Cor. 4:6](#), St. Paul says:

“Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us to not think beyond what is *written*, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.”

And this is often used as a proof-text to prove that we shouldn’t go beyond what is written. Only what the Bible says: that far and no further. But again, the same thing applies. That when St. Paul is referring to “that which has been written” he is talking about the Old Testament. If you look back a few pages at [I Corinthians 1:19](#), and St. Paul says, again arguing from the Old Testament, I’ll start in verse 18. “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us

who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written.” For **it is written**. Now where is this coming from? It’s coming from the Old Testament “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.” It’s a direct quote from [Isaiah 29:14](#).

So what is written, for St. Paul, is what **had been** written prior to his writing which we call the Old Testament. You look at chapter 1 in verse 31 in the same epistle. And St. Paul says “that, as it is written, “He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.” And that’s a quote from [Jeremiah 9:24](#). So again, “it is written”, and all through the book of I Corinthians, we can see that and indeed the entire New Testament. So what was written was the Old Testament. It is profitable. It is useful. I’m simply arguing that it is not “sufficient” in and of itself.

[Acts 17:10](#). So, turn backward in your Bible, and this is on page 1500. [Acts 17:10](#), another passage that is often used as a proof-text for the doctrine of Sola Scriptura, and this is talking about the Church in Berea, and it says, “Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded...” or I think the New American Standard says noble-minded, “than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.” Now among many evangelicals, they point to this and say this is the posture that all of us should have, and I would say, indeed it is, but we ought to test the things that we hear against the Scriptures. And so that if something can’t be found in the Bible, the argument goes, then it should be rejected. Again, if that’s what this proves, it proves too much because it could only possibly refer to the Old Testament because the New Testament was in the process of being written.

They did, though receive — the Bereans did receive the gospel with eagerness. They tested all things by Scriptures, and this is a good and important principle which we can also apply to the New Testament by extension. We can test all things by the Scriptures, and I think our position as Orthodox Christians is that this is the normative record. It’s called the canon for a reason. A canon is a rule. It’s something by which you measure everything else, but that’s not all there is. It exists in the context of Holy Tradition, but it’s God’s self-revelation to man, and nothing may contradict the Scriptures. And I would argue as an Orthodox Christian of some 24 years or so that I’ve not found anything in the Orthodox faith that contradicts the Scriptures. There may have

been things that have occasionally raised an eyebrow on my part or caused me to wonder, but ultimately it's part of the same Holy Tradition. It's all part of the same Holy Tradition, apostolic Tradition, and in the end, as Orthodox Christians, that's what authoritative in the Church.

The Book of [Acts 2:42](#) says that they continued in the apostles' teaching, or the apostles' doctrine. That's how the New Testament Church, if you want to get back to the "golden age" of the Church, the New Testament Church that's how the New Testament Church ordered itself, was based on what the apostles taught. And that apostolic Tradition was preserved and passed along. In fact, that's what the word in the Greek for tradition means: "to pass along." That's exactly what happened to that apostolic teaching. It was passed along from one generation to the next, geographically from one Church to another Church. And so, that St. Paul often appeals to the things that he teaches everywhere in the Scripture. We'll look more at that next week. One final passage I'd like us to look at is [Revelation 22:18-19](#). It's page 1748 in the Orthodox Study Bible. [Revelation 22:18-19](#). And this is the very end of the New Testament canon, or close to the end. And St. John writes:

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

That is a very sobering statement, especially to come at the end of the New Testament canon. This is a very common thing that occurs in ancient literature, even within the Bible. If you look at [Deuteronomy 4:2](#), page 215, to make it easy, in the Orthodox Study Bible. [Deut. 4:2](#), it says "You shall not add to the word I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God all that I command you today." So there in the book of Deuteronomy, in the first five books of Moses, we have the same exhortation: don't add to the commandments I've given to you. And if you do, big trouble ahead. [Proverbs 30:5-6](#), and this is page 867, but another similar exhortation. [Proverbs 30: 5 and 6](#). And here the writer says "All the words of God are tried in fire and He defends those who fear Him. Do not add to His words that He might not reprove you and you become a liar."

So this was common in ancient literature, and it's true also in the book of Revelation. It's a solemn warning not to change the text of what? This book. What does that possibly refer to? Could it be this entire book? The Bible as we know it? No. It had not been collected in this form, and there would be dispute for centuries to come as to which books would be included in *this* book. And what we now refer to as a "book" was a technological innovation that came about as a result of Guttenberg. A book in that day would've been a scroll or a reference to the book of Revelation. It's an exhortation not to add or take away from the **book of Revelation**. That's the book that St. John's referring to in the book of Revelation. Nothing in the context would suggest that this applies to the Scriptures as a whole. Even if we did extend this to cover the entire canon of Scripture, what conclusion could we draw? That the canon of Scripture is given by God and is not to be altered? That is different from saying the text is sufficient in and of itself.

And I would just say that if Protestants who believe in the doctrine of Sola Scriptura applied that, then by what authority did the Reformers themselves, and those following them, removed what's commonly called the Deutero-Canonical books, which were commonly used up through the Middle Ages, and even into the Protestant era. By what authority did they remove those? Or is that simply an economical decision on the part of printers? What was that? On what basis does Martin Luther struggle with and consider not including the epistle of James? There's some other tradition that's operating in all of this.

Well, what do Orthodox Christians believe about Scripture? Well, as I said, all Scripture is indeed inspired by God, and the word in the Greek literally means "God-breathed", that these Scripture are the breath of God as he breathed out his life into the world. He inspired the prophets of old. And they wrote it down, they passed it along, and that became part of our Tradition. We are steadfastly, as Orthodox Christians, committed to the authority of Scriptures as the normative record of God's self-revelation to mankind, but we're equally committed to the principle that the text of Scripture is not to be altered either by addition or subtraction.

However, the Scriptures are still a book. It does not claim to be all-sufficient. The Scriptures, both testaments, were produced within the context of God dealing with his people with a living relationship. This context, this living relationship, is nothing less than Holy Tradition. And apart from that Tradition, the Scripture loses its necessary reference.

You can't understand it. If it's just you and the bare text of Holy Scripture, who knows what you're going to come up with, and you don't have to look very far to see what kinds of things people come up with when they are left with their own devices. No Scripture is given by private interpretations, St. Peter says, but it's given with the context of a community, within the context of a living relationship with Christ.

The Protestants' insistence on Sola Scriptura is not so much erroneous from our viewpoint as much as it is impossible. It's just not possible. And I would say, fully understanding all the things that the Reformers are reacting to, and it wasn't just the Scriptures that they said Sola Scriptura, because they wanted to have faith alone with no consideration for works, and grace alone for no consideration for works. Who says it has to be either/or? Oftentimes, in reacting to one error, and we would acknowledge also that Rome was in error at that point and there needed to be a reaction, but it was an overreaction. And we can see how it happens because we've done it ourselves. In reacting to one error, you go from one ditch to the next.

About seven years ago, I guess, we were driving to Church, I came to Church one Sunday morning and my wife Gail and the girls were driving to Church, and I was already at the altar and Deacon Richard came and got me and said your family's been in a car accident and you need to leave immediately. Never news you want to hear. And so, I got in the car and drove up on Peystonville Rd, right as you get off the exit and make that first turn, and I couldn't hardly get to it. I was about a mile and a half away from it, and the traffic was backed up. So, I parked my car on the shoulder, I got out of my car and started running towards the accident. And of course, my mind is filled with all these things, and I'm seeing flashing lights. And then I see our Suburban which was upside down, crushed, and thinking the worst, and looked over and saw my family sitting on a hill with a couple of policemen and as I got closer, I could see that they were all OK, thank God. But when I inquired what had happened, Megan, my oldest daughter who was driving at the time and was doing what some do which was putting on her makeup as she was driving, ran off — you know there's not any shoulder there — and so her wheel just fell off into the ditch on the right side and went off the road for just a second. She overcorrected, pulled the steering wheel hard to the left, went across the road and flipped the car into a telephone pole.

It was an overcorrection, and you can look through the history of the Church and see that happening, where people in trying to avoid one error fall into another. And that's why it's important that we think about our theology and think about our faith in the context of what God is doing in the midst of his people and not just in any particular time, but **over** time. We'll have to give our ancestors a vote too, and that's really what Tradition is all about.

Part 3

This is Part Three in kind of a miniseries as we've set up this course on what Orthodox Christians believe. And we've been looking at Scripture and Tradition, and before I go any further, I want to say how heavily indebted I've been to Clark Carlton's book "The Way" which has got a whole section on Scripture and Tradition, and it's fantastic. And then Gail bought for me, last night, at the bookstore a book called "Sola Scriptura" by Father John Whiteford which is also excellent and surprisingly parallels much of what we've talked about. But I read it last night. It's very short, and you can read it almost in one sitting.

Let me just go back. The first class we looked at the presuppositions behind Scripture and Tradition and particularly the doctrine of Sola Scriptura, and just by way of reminder, if this is the first time you're in this class, Sola Scriptura means "scripture alone." And the Reformers, from which this phrase came, were big on trying to distinguish those things that they felt were of the essence of the faith, and they felt that the Roman Catholics had muddied the waters, so to speak, by bringing in all these traditions that obscured the pure knowledge of the gospel. And so, they wanted to remove that and get back to Scripture alone. They felt this way about many things, including the doctrine of faith and works, that if you could just clear away the works and get back to pure faith, that that was really the task before the Church of that day.

Unfortunately, as I said last week, in trying to avoid one danger, they fell into another. Instead of running off side of the road, they overcorrected and ran off another side of the road. So, we looked at the presuppositions in the first week, and then last week, we looked at some the proof-texts that are typically used in proving the doctrine of Sola Scriptura, including [II Timothy 3:16-17](#), and just let me give you a quick two-minute review. That's the passage that says "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction,

for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” The problem with that verse is that it indeed proves anything, it proves the sufficiency of the Old Testament because that would’ve been the only Scriptures that St. Timothy would’ve had access to from his childhood which is what St. Paul refers to in the verses immediately preceding this.

So, it really kind of over-proves the point, and indeed all through the New Testament, when the Scripture refers to “the” Scriptures, it’s referring first and foremost to the Old Testament Scripture. It would be at least three centuries before the New Testament canon would be collected and widely distributed and agreed upon. So, we sometimes, I think, as moderns think that everything that we have today somehow they had back then, and so that the early Church gathered together for Bible study, and they just didn’t. There weren’t Bibles to study in those days. There were scrolls, there were Scriptures that were being circulated, and there certainly were the Old Testament texts which they could study, and in them, they found them speaking of Christ, but there wasn’t a New Testament as we know it today. So, we looked at a lot of those Scriptures last week, and this week what I’d like to look at is turn really from our consideration of Scripture to a consideration of Tradition. And that’s really the topic for today.

In defending Sola Scriptura, Protestant apologists invariably use Roman Catholic theology as a foil. Now, you have to understand and have a little bit of sympathy for the Reformers. They didn’t have access, like we do, to the writings of the Eastern fathers. Many of those were unknown to them. The writings, for example, of St. Ignatius of Antioch were unknown to the Reformers, which clearly lays out the kind of Church government that the Church really practiced throughout Church history until the Protestant Reformation. But they didn’t have access to that, and they often used Roman Catholic theology as a foil. They assert that Roman Catholics accept two sources of authority, Scripture and Tradition, and that Tradition is given equal weight with Scripture. And according to the Protestant apologists, Roman Catholic reliance on Tradition has resulted in the modern doctrines of the Immaculate Conception, purgatory, papal infallibility, etc. And they believe that Sola Scriptura is really the only safeguard against said aberrant doctrinal developments.

Well, how do we respond as Orthodox Christians? Well, the doctrinal aberrations of the Roman Catholic Church, in our view, are

manifestly **not** part of the universal Tradition of the Church. So, in that sense, we would stand in agreement with the Protestant Reformation in that these things that they were reacting to, many of these things, we would also regard as aberrant. In particular, we oppose the Roman doctrines of universal papal jurisdiction, papal infallibility, the filioque, purgatory, the Immaculate Conception, precisely because, from our perspective, they're untraditional. They are not part of the universal Tradition of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. The Orthodox Churches never accepted the Roman Catholic assertion that there are two sources of authority within the Church. This is really important to understand because if we're not careful, as we talk to Evangelicals and as we try to understand their world view, we can fall kind of into the assumption or the presupposition that there are, in fact, two sources of authority within the Church. Our position as Orthodox Christians would be no, there's only one source of authority within the Church, and that's Apostolic Tradition, and it is manifest in two forms: the written form and the oral form, but it all flows from the same fountainhead. So, from our perspective, Scripture and Tradition cannot be pitted against one another. It's a false dichotomy. Tradition is one. However, it does come, and we acknowledge, in two forms.

Now, let's just admit from the get-go here, that if you look at the New Testament, Jesus does seem to rail often against tradition. And these texts, in fact which we're going to look at in just a moment, become the source of often throwing the baby out with the bathwater, of completely nullifying the importance of Tradition at all. So, for example, let's look at [Matthew 15:2](#). [Matthew 15:2](#), and if you're following along in the Orthodox Study Bible, I'm going to give you the page numbers here, but it's page 1296. [Matthew 15:2](#), Jesus says — actually it's the Pharisees saying to Jesus: Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread. Now, the word tradition comes from the Greek word *paradosis*, which just means "to hand over, to deliver." It's really just the same idea as running a relay race where one runner hands a baton to the next runner. It's the passing along of what one has been taught to subsequent generations. And so, the Pharisees accuse Jesus and his disciples of transgressing the tradition of the elders. And it seems fairly trivial. They're not washing their hands. That's a big deal in the Jewish tradition. And in verse 3, "He answered and said to them, "Why do you

also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?" So even Jesus here seems to pit tradition and the commandments of God against one another, but as I'll show in a moment, he's really not doing that. He says:

For God commanded, saying, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God" then he need not honor his father and mother. Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you...

Then he goes on to talk about what Isaiah said about these people who honor God with their lips but not with their hearts, and so he, again, seems to pit Tradition and Scripture against one another. There are actually thirteen verses in the New Testament that use the word "tradition." Ten of these verses are used in a negative sense. Three of these verses are used in a positive sense, and I want us to look at those first because all the other ones that I could list — and let me just give you some other ones if you want to look them up later. [Mark 7:3,5,8,9](#), and 13. You can look at [Galatians 1:14](#) or [Colossians 2:8](#), but these are the ones that use tradition in the negative sense. But in three of these verses, tradition is used in a positive sense. The first one is [I Corinthians 11:2](#), and that's on page 1563. And again, St. Paul says,

Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you.

So here's something that St. Paul had that he very carefully and methodically delivered to the Corinthians, and he's now exhorting them that they keep these traditions. So on the one hand, Jesus seems to condemn it: traditions, and here St. Paul says it's a positive thing, it should be passed along and believers, in fact, ought to adhere to it. OK, another passage. [II Thessalonians 2:15](#), and I've got that on page 1631. This is a really important verse. You know, if you're going to underline a verse about this doctrine, this would be one to underline. "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or by our epistle." So, St. Paul here to the Thessalonians says, stand fast, hold steady, don't give it up. Resist, hold fast, he says, and how do you do that? And "hold the traditions" which you've been given.

Now, the interesting thing here is that he delineates these two forms because he says "whether by word or by our epistle." So at that

time, there are some epistles circulating, and St. Paul is saying we need to adhere to those, those are authoritative in the Church, but also our word, what we're orally communicating is also authoritative in the Church. One source, Apostolic Tradition, two forms: oral and written. And both of them have equal authority in the Church. [II Thessalonians 3:6](#), this is on page 1631. St Paul says, "But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us." So somebody not walking according to the tradition which had been received from St. Paul is enough for St. Paul to exhort the Thessalonians to withdraw themselves from such a person. So, it was authoritative. It is interesting by the way, I just have to note this as a Bible publisher, that the New International Version of the Bible always translates *paradosis* as "tradition" when it's used in the negative sense, and the same Greek word, they translate "teachings" when it's used in a positive context. But it's the same exact Greek word. You think there might be some pre-suppositional commitment there before they translate? I think so.

Well, clearly there are two kinds of tradition we have to acknowledge. There is tradition that Jesus himself condemns, and there is tradition that the apostles esteem. How do we reconcile these two things? Well it's actually simpler than you think. It has to do with the source of the tradition because in the case of the Pharisees' tradition, Jesus refers to it again and again as the "traditions of men." That's what's condemned. And particularly when the tradition of men, which is also inevitable, it happens in every Church, every parish, but when those are elevated, the traditions of men, above the word of God, even above Apostolic Tradition, then they get in the way of what God is trying to accomplish through his word and through Tradition.

On the other hand, the source of the Tradition that St. Paul esteems is none other than God himself and through Christ to the apostles. This is the gospel that's passed along from one generation to the other in two forms: both written and oral. So it's the source, and I think we still have to ask ourselves that question today. There are many things that even in the Orthodox Church that are fine traditions, but they aren't "the" Tradition of God. Capital T. And the way I had it explained to me, and I think it's a good way to think of it is there's Tradition, capital T, the Holy Tradition, Tradition which is binding upon us as Christians, and traditions, small t, which is sometimes not only not a good thing,

sometimes it actually opposes the gospel and opposes Tradition. So, we have to distinguish those two things, but let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Tradition is inescapable. If it's not going to be Apostolic Tradition, it's not like this book just sits up, this Bible, and speaks to us about what it means. And as I pointed out last week, if it was so clear that anyone unaided by anything except human reason could understand it, then everybody would agree what it said. But the fact of the matter is, that there are thousands, probably hundreds of thousands of commentaries and Christian books written to try to explain what it means. And there's thousands upon thousands of Protestant denominations who agree on really nothing other than the fact that the Scripture can stand on its own, and we see where that leads us: to all these disparate opinions, all these different viewpoints, all these denominations. So in a way, Tradition is kind of a fence. It's a context. It's a place where we stand as we read the Scripture so we can understand the sense of what is meant there.

Adherence to Sola Scriptura sometimes acknowledges that initially there was valid oral tradition, however when the last of the Scriptures were completed, there was no longer any need for oral tradition. What they forget, though, is that the canonization process, the process of the letters then in circulation, became Scripture, or at least were acknowledged as Scripture, it took centuries. It wasn't until the fourth century that we have a list of the 27 books of the New Testament. Now, certain books were distributed and were beyond dispute, but there were many books that were being distributed that didn't make it, ultimately, because they were regarded as spurious or false. Nowhere does St. Paul or any other apostle instruct his readers to forego oral tradition once they have received written instructions, in fact the contrary point is made in II Thessalonians. He acknowledges that there was a written tradition, but there's also an oral tradition, and not everything is committed to writing.

I was talking to one of my daughters this morning about this, and I said it's almost like in a family. You know, if you got my will, and you've got certain letters I've written to Gail, and you've gotten some other documents that we have as a family, insurance documents, you could piece together part of our lives. But you would miss the essence of it because there's a lot of things that we do in our family that aren't documented. I mean, we have a tradition in our family that when we get

together and eat a meal, one of the first things that Gail asks, and she's trained me to ask, is what was the best thing that happened to you today? Nowhere do we have that documented. This is the liturgy of our table that we practice every time we eat a meal together, but there are thousands of things just like that that occur in our family that if you just took the written documents and tried to distill the essence of our family, you would miss it entirely.

And the same thing, yeah, there are written documents—many of the New Testament epistles were written to correct problems, but you don't find a comprehensive pattern of worship in the New Testament. You don't find a communion service. So, in the absence of that, guess what happens? It's not like anybody just takes what's written in the Scripture and they do that and nothing more. No, instead they concoct another tradition. The Reformed tradition has a certain way of doing it, the Lutherans have a certain way of doing it, the Baptists have another way of it, and there becomes a tradition that builds up, but it's the traditions of men. It's not Apostolic Tradition. It's not that which was passed along. Contrary to this, consider the words of St. John Chrysostom commenting on [II Thessalonians 2:15](#). Again that's the one about the written and the oral traditions. This is what St. John Chrysostom says, and he quotes the verse first. He says: "Therefore brethren stand fast and hold the traditions you have been taught whether by word or by letter." From this it is clear that they did not hand over everything by letter, but there was much also that was not written. Like that which was written, the unwritten too is worthy of belief. Let us regard the Tradition of the Church also as worthy of belief. Is it Tradition? Seek no further.

And he writes that in the homilies — his homilies on the second epistle to the Thessalonians, his chapter 4 and verse 2. The problem is that many Protestants use the Bible to create a system of doctrine as opposed to connecting them to the source of life. And that's what the Scriptures were intended to be all along: a signpost that points us to Christ in whom is our life. That's what the sacraments are for. Everything in the Church exists to "effect" our union with Christ. That's what baptism is about, that's what chrismation is about, that's what every sacrament in the Church is about: connecting us to Christ. And so it's not just that we learn *about* Christ in reading the Scriptures, but we are joined **with** him as we read the Scriptures and as we interpret within the context of Holy Tradition. St. Basil makes it clear that Holy

Tradition is more than a set of ideas. It just isn't an idea sourcebook for preachers to come up with some message on a Sunday morning. It's more than that. St. Basil says, Concerning the teachings of the Church, whether publicly proclaimed, the kerygma, or reserved to members of the household of faith, dogmata, we have received some from written sources while others have been given to us secretly through Apostolic Tradition. Both sources have equal force in true religion. No one would deny either source, no one at any rate who is even slightly familiar with the ordinances of the Church. If we attacked unwritten customs claiming them to be of little importance, we would fatally mutilate the gospel, no matter what our intentions or rather we would reduce the gospel teaching to bare words. And that's from his book on the Holy Spirit, paragraph 66. Boy, it's almost like he foresaw what was going to happen in the 16th century and warned against it, that you can't just get back to the bare words and somehow create Church out of that. St. Basil goes on in the same book to explain why not everything was written down.

Are not all these things found in unpublished and unwritten teachings which our fathers guarded in silence, safe from meddling and petty curiosity? They had learned their lesson well, reverence for the mysteries is best encouraged by silence. The uninitiated were not even allowed to be present at the mysteries.

By the way, in the liturgy, when the deacon says "the doors, the doors", that's a remnant to remind us that those who had not been baptized and chrismated were not permitted in the service to observe the mysteries beyond that point. In the early Church, those that were baptized had never seen baptism. Those that communed were, for the first time, present in the liturgy. It was not something that was open to the public. St. Basil goes on — let me back up to get the context again. "The uninitiated were not even allowed to be present at the mysteries. How could you expect these teachings to be paraded about in public documents?"

We're used to the services being opened to everyone, and as I said, it wasn't so in the early Church, but it was precisely because the uninitiated wouldn't understand them. You know, you sometimes wonder, why is it so hard to follow? Well it is sometimes hard to follow to the uninitiated and even to those of who have been again and again, there's something to learn isn't there? St. Cyril of Jerusalem also explains why these traditions existed and why they weren't made

public.

I long ago desired trueborn and dearly beloved of the Church to discourse to you these spiritual and heavenly mysterious, but knowing well that seeing is far more persuasive than hearing, I waited until this season that finding you more open to the influence of my words from your experience, I might take and lead you to the brighter and more fragrant meadow of the present paradise, especially as you have been made fit to receive the more sacred mysteries having been counted worthy of divine and life-giving baptism.

In other words, I could've explained this to you all beforehand, but it would've fallen on deaf ears because until you see it, you're not going to understand it. He goes on:

In remaining therefore to dress for you a boarded more perfect instruction, let us now teach you exactly about these things that you may know the deep meaning toward you of what was done on that event of your baptism.

So, he's going to teach them after they've experienced the sacrament.

This is a key distinction between western and eastern learning because in the West, so often the assumption is, if you can explain it to me and I can buy off it, on my reason, then I'll embrace it. And in the Psalms, the Psalmist says, "A good understanding have all those who do thy commandments." In other words, **doing precedes knowing**. We often dismiss this in the West, but there are some things you won't understand until you actually do them. And there were a lot of things that I accepted by faith when I became Orthodox that I didn't fully understand and wasn't entirely comfortable with, but the scales began to fall off my eyes, and I began to understand them as I began to participate in the services. And I think that's true for all of us. I think we can enter in and embrace it, and as we do, we begin to understand it. Note here the emphasis on experience. Converts were not taught about the mysteries of the Church until they had been initiated into the sacramental life of the Church through baptism and Holy Chrismation. And that's why I encourage people who are not Orthodox but who are interested, if you confine yourself to simply reading Orthodox books, I fear you will probably never really get it. You can get to a point, yes, but I want to say "come and see." Come and experience. And don't just come once because you'll probably be confused the first time, but I encourage people who come for the first time to the Orthodox Church, make a commitment to come at least three times, at least. Then you'll begin to

see that there is an order to it, you begin to see what it's about, but until that, you're not going to understand it. I don't care how many books you read.