

# WHY SHOULD ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS GO TO CHURCH?

Can an Orthodox Christian survive apart from a church? Some Christians have no choice. They are trapped in a hospital bed, or working in an isolated area where no church exists. And God is certainly sufficient to care for their needs.

But even though it's technically possible to live the Christian life in isolation, it's certainly not the norm.

When you become an Orthodox Christian, you are called into a relationship with God (1 Corinthians 1:9). But 1 John 1:3 makes it clear that we enter a fellowship that goes two ways: with God and with other Christians.

The New Testament never divides Christians into the church members and the non-church members. All the way through, it assumes that everybody participates in their local assembly. It gives no samples of Christians who belong to the «universal church» but have no link with a local church. One scholar has said that «any idea...of enjoying salvation or being a Christian in isolation is foreign to the New Testament writings». Wherever Christians are within range of each other in the New Testament, they meet. Every time the apostle Paul comes to a town in the book of Acts where there are no Christians, he wins a few converts and immediately organizes them into a small group — a little church.

Acts 20:7 reveals the practice of the early church: «And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached



to them.» For Christians in every location, regular gathering was a part of life.

It's illogical to say that you are merely part of the worldwide, universal church, yet refuse to gather with the segment of that universal church that exists in your geographical area.

The church must be together to carry out many of its purposes.

Here are some irreplaceable pieces of the Christian that cannot happen when you live in isolation from the church:

1 Corinthians 12 makes it clear that God has given spiritual gifts to every Christian. And verse 7 states unmistakably that these abilities are not provided to make you feel good; they are abilities to minister that should be used for the common good! 1 Peter 4:10 commands us to use spiritual gifts to help each other. Church provides us with holy Sacraments like Confession, Holy Communion.

The church is pictured as a body in 1 Corinthians 12, and Paul explains that each part of the body exists to meet the needs of other body parts. In the same way, God intends each of us to meet the needs of other believers, using our strengths to help in their areas of weakness. 1 Corinthians 12:21 expresses it this way: «The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you.» Neither can a Christian claim to be self-sufficient today.

The New Testament is full of «one another» commands. We are to comfort one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18), build up one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11), confess our sins to one another (James 5:16), pray for one another (James 5:16), and many more. How can we obey these directives if we stay away from the gathering of believers?

Christ promised us, that For where two or three are gathered together in His name, there Christ is in their midst. (Matthew 18:20)

## CHRIST IS RISEN!

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Yet even during this most joyous of all Orthodox feasts the cross of Christ is not forgotten. In one of the hymns of the Resurrection (sung also every Saturday evening), the cross and the resurrection are combined:

Having beheld the Resurrection of Christ, let us worship the holy Lord Jesus, the only Sinless One. We venerate thy cross, O Christ, and thy holy Resurrection we praise and glorify; for thou art our God, and we know no other than thee; we call on thy name. Come, all you faithful, let us venerate Christ's holy Resurrection. By enduring the cross for cross joy has come into all the world. Ever blessing the Lord, let us praise His resurrection. By enduring the cross for us, He destroyed death by death.

The veneration of the cross is prominent in Orthodox worship and spirituality. By the cross, as St. John of Damascus summarizes the teachings of the Fathers, all things are set aright. Sin is destroyed, death is overcome, and resurrection is bestowed. The cross, as the services exclaim, is the «life-bearing cross,» «the banner of joy,» «the divine glory of Christ,» «the power which raises us from corruption.» There is no resurrection without the cross. The cross and the resurrection are one whole. One of the Church's hymns expresses this unity as follows:

Before Thy Cross, we bow down in worship, O Master, and

Thy holy Resurrection, we glorify.

Among the twelve great feasts of the calendar year, one is the Exaltation of the Precious and Life-giving Cross (Sept. 14). At the midpoint of Great Lent, we are reminded that it is by way of the cross and death that Christ moves toward the Resurrection. He is never pictured on the cross as the victim but as the victor.

The exalted cross calls all of creation to praise the pure passion, the passion of Christ, who was exalted on it.

On the cross, He killed the one who had killed us...

On Great Friday Vespers, the worshippers hear in the church that «all creation was changed by fear of seeing Thee upon the cross, O Christ. The sun was darkened and the foundations of the earth were shaken. All creatures suffered with their Creator.» «Today, the Master of creation stands before Pilate. Today the Creator of all is condemned to die on the cross. Of His own will, He is led as a lamb to slaughter...»

On Great Saturday, Christ experiences an «active» rest. He descends to Hades and extends salvation to the whole of fallen humanity, including those in Sheol. The icon of Christ's descent into Hades is both the icon of Holy Saturday and of Easter. There is a transition, a gradual passing from «a day of reverent silence» (Friday) to a day of joy,

the joy of the resurrection. This middle day is that «blessed Sabbath»:

In the flesh Thou wast willingly enclosed in the tomb, Thou who art boundless and infinite in Thy divinity.

Thou didst close the chambers of death, O Christ.

Thou hast emptied all the palaces of hell. Thou has honored this Sabbath with Thy blessing, glory and splendor:

With His resurrection, in the words of the liturgical texts, Christ has transformed the corruptible to incorruption and revealed a fountain of incorruptible life. He has crashed the bars of Hades, driven away its darkness, released Adam and brought joy to the world.

When Thou, the Redeemer of all wast placed in a tomb, all Hell's powers quaked in fear. Its bars were broken, its gates were smashed! Its mighty reign was brought to an end, for the dead came forth alive from their tombs, casting off the bonds of their captivity. Adam was filled with joy! He gratefully cried out to Thee, O Christ: Glory to Thy condescension, O Lover of man!

The cross and the resurrection — their power and joy are the foundation of our faith and the source of our life. Because of them we can proclaim on the day of the Resurrection: «This is the Day which the Lord has made; Let us rejoice and be glad in it!»

## FROM THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

*The same was in the beginning with God.*

*All things were made through him. Without him was not anything made that has been made.*

*In him was life, and the life was the light of men.*

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness hasn't overcome it.*

*There came a man, sent from God, whose name was John.*

*The same came as a witness, that he might testify about the light,*

*that all might believe through him.*

*He was not the light, but was sent that he might testify about the light.*

*The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world.*

*He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world didn't recognize him.*

*He came to his own, and those who were his own didn't receive him.*

*But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become God's children, to those who believe in his name:*

*who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*

*The Word became flesh, and lived among us. We saw his glory, such glory as of the one and only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.*

*John testified about him. He cried out, saying, «This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me, for he was before me.'»*

*From his fullness we all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

*No one has seen God at any time. The one and only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him.*

