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Back-to-Basics

Lesson 1: All about the Holy Bible

August 24, 2008

Introduction to Back-to-Basics

In our Back-to-Basics series we will be talking about the most fundamental beliefs of our Orthodox Church. In these five lessons, we will learn about the Holy Bible, God and how we related to Him, the meaning of the Church, the practice of repentance and confession, and the goal or point of attending the Divine Liturgy.

Why Back-to-Basics?

Why is it important for us to take a closer look at our faith? There are so many conflicting messages around us. For instance, some people say that Jesus was only a good man or simply a righteous prophet. The church teaches us that Jesus is Lord and God. Some say that Saint Mary gave birth to other children after our Lord Jesus Christ. We say that she remained a virgin her whole life. Finally, some people find certain acts and practices acceptable, but we find the Holy Bible calling these same acts as sin.

So, who's right? Who's wrong? We all cannot be right at the same time about contradicting ideas and messages. There must be one way that is right. This is what we call Truth. For Orthodox Christians, Truth is not just an idea. Truth is a person: Our Lord Jesus Christ. He answers all our questions about God, the meaning of life, the existence of life after death and many other subjects rightly and truthfully.

The Orthodox Church's main concern is that her members walk in the Truth. Saint John the Beloved wrote in his third epistle, "*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth*" (3 John 4).

In order to tell which teachings are false, we have to study the true teachings of our Orthodox Church very, very well.

What is the Holy Bible?

The Orthodox Church regards the Holy Bible very highly. Some people accuse the Orthodox Church of not being a Biblical church, because they get lost in the rites and rituals that are not mentioned explicitly in the Bible. However, they are mistaken. For instance, if we listen to the Divine Liturgy carefully, we will hear that all its words are taken right out of the Holy Bible. Also, the readings from the Holy Bible are an important part of the Divine Liturgy and in the daily life of the Orthodox Church.

Here are a few definitions of the Holy Bible:

1. The Holy Bible is the Word of God; but not in the sense that the Word of God is a book. The Holy Bible answers for us the all-important question: “WHO is the Word of God?” The Word of God is a person: Jesus Christ (see John 1:1-5)!
2. The Holy Bible was written under the inspiration of God (inspired by the Holy Spirit). God used many different people to write the many books of the Bible, such as prophets, fishermen, shepherds, and kings, but all of them wrote through the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, when the Bible speaks about spiritual truths, such as God, His relationship to man, and the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, there are no errors. We say that the Bible is infallible, or without error.
3. In the Holy Bible, God reveals or shows Himself to us. In the Old Testament, God had a direct relationship with His people and with the people of Israel. In the New Testament, God showed Himself to us in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lived on earth, performed miracles, taught us how to live, died, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven for our sake.

Where did the Bible come from?

The Holy Bible was written over a period of about 2000 years. The Holy Bible was written by different people under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in many periods of history, and in many places.

Which came first: the Holy Bible, as we know it today, or the Church? We know that the New Testament Church was formed on the Day of Pentecost just after our Lord's ascension into heaven. This would have been around 33 A.D. The last book of the New Testament that was written (the Book of Revelation) was written around 100 A.D. So, what was the church using as their Holy Bible?

They were using what we know today as the Old Testament, as well as the various letters and gospels that were written. However, there were many strange gospels and letters in the early church, so the Church had a very difficult task of deciding which books and letters were acceptable and which ones were not. Some Fathers gave their opinions which books the church should accept and which ones should not be accepted. However, they did not trust themselves, until the universal voice of the Church spoke and decided this matter. The local Council of Carthage in 397 A.D. wrote out all the books of the New Testament without exception. So by 400 A.D., we had a complete list of all the acceptable books of the Holy Bible, upon which many of the fathers before that time agreed.

This is very important to keep in mind, because many Christian churches say we should only depend on the Holy Bible, and not on Holy Tradition. By Holy Tradition, we mean all Christian teachings not found explicitly in the Holy Bible.

However, it was the Holy Tradition of the Church that determined which books of the Holy Bible were acceptable in the first place. Holy Tradition and the Holy Bible have to work together to make our Orthodox Faith complete, and they do not contradict each other.

The Sections and Books of the Holy Bible

In the Holy Bible, we find the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Let us look at the Old Testament first. In the Old Testament, we find God's relationship to all the people who lived before our Lord Jesus Christ was born. The story of the Old Testament is very simple: God created Adam and Eve in Paradise. Adam and Eve sinned, both physical and spiritual death entered the world, and mankind began living a life away from God and the Paradise He created for them. God chose righteous men and women to constantly lead His people back to Him and to the true worship of God. Even though these men and women were righteous, when they died, they were not allowed to enter into Paradise. Therefore, they were in need of a Messiah or a Savior to save them from death and to open up Paradise once again for them. These righteous men and women were prophets, kings, and judges who warned the people about their sins and urged them to return to God.

The New King James Version and many modern Bibles that we see today have 39 books of the Old Testament. These books are based on the Hebrew Bible completed and approved in the first century A.D., called the Masoretic text. However, the Orthodox Church recognizes additional books of the Bible, as well as additional parts of existing books, based on a Greek Translation completed by seventy Jewish and appearing in the third century B.C. This was the universally accepted version of the Old Testament and was used by all the New Testament writers when they quoted the Old Testament. This version of the Bible is called the Septuagint.

The Old Testament is divided into four parts with 49 books of the Bible:

1. The Books of Moses (the Law)
 - a. Genesis
 - b. Exodus
 - c. Leviticus
 - d. Numbers
 - e. Deuteronomy

2. The Historical Books
 - a. Joshua
 - b. Judges

- c. Ruth
- d. 1 – 4 Kingdoms (1 and 2 Samuel; 1 and 2 Kings)
- e. 1 – 2 Chronicles (1 – 2 Paraleipomenon) (includes the Prayer of Manasseh)
- f. 1 Ezra (1 Esdras)
- g. 2 Ezra (Ezra) (2 Esdras)
- h. Nehemiah
- i. Tobit
- j. Judith
- k. Esther
- l. 1 – 3 Maccabees

3. Wisdom Books

- a. Psalms
- b. Job
- c. Proverbs of Solomon
- d. Ecclesiastes
- e. Song of Songs
- f. Wisdom of Solomon
- g. Wisdom of Sirach

4. The Prophets

- a. The Twelve Minor Prophets
 - i. Hosea
 - ii. Amos
 - iii. Micah
 - iv. Joel
 - v. Obadiah
 - vi. Jonah
 - vii. Nahum
 - viii. Habakkuk
 - ix. Zephaniah
 - x. Haggai
 - xi. Zechariah
 - xii. Malachi
- b. The Major Prophets
 - i. Isaiah
 - ii. Jeremiah
 - 1. Baruch
 - 2. Lamentation of Jeremiah

3. Epistle of Jeremiah
- iii. Ezekiel
- iv. Daniel (including the story of Susanna, the Song of the Three Holy Youth, and the story of Bel and the Serpent)

The Books of Law start with the story of creation, the fall of man, and the history of God's people from the time of Abraham through the time of Moses.

In the Books of History, we generally read about the rule of the judges until the time the Jews were captured by the Babylonians, went into exile, and then returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple and its walls. There is also the story of the Maccabees, who later fought the wars of independence against foreign armies occupying their land.

The Books of Wisdom contain advice for how we ought to live and proclaim the blessedness of those who have faith and obey the one true God.

Finally, the Books of Prophecy tell us about the things to come. The prophets often warned the people who went away from God. God spoke through the prophets in order to call them back to Himself. The Books of Prophecy also have many teachings regarding the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the New Testament, we have 27 books of the Bible divided into four categories:

1. The Gospels
 - a. Matthew
 - b. Mark
 - c. Luke
 - d. John
2. History
 - a. The Acts of the Apostles
3. The Epistles
 - a. The Epistles of Saint Paul
 - i. Romans
 - ii. 1 – 2 Corinthians

- iii. Galatians
- iv. Ephesians
- v. Philippians
- vi. Colossians
- vii. 1 – 2 Thessalonians
- viii. 1 – 2 Timothy
- ix. Titus
- x. Philemon
- xi. Hebrews
- b. The *Katholik* Epistles
 - i. James
 - ii. 1 – 2 Peter
 - iii. 1 – 3 John
 - iv. Jude

4. Prophecy

- a. Revelation (Apocalypse)

If we look at the sections of the New Testament, we will find that they are very similar to the Old Testament. We have the four gospels of the New Testament, which corresponds to the Law of the Old Testament. The gospels are the new law. We also have a historical book in the New Testament: the Acts of the Apostles. This book tells us about the life of the early church. The wisdom books of the New Testament are the epistles of Saint Paul and the *Katholik* epistles, which teach us how to live and give us very beneficial spiritual advice about our life with God. Lastly, we have a prophetic book in the New Testament: the Book of Revelation, which tells us about heaven, the end of the world, and the second coming of Christ.

How Do I Read the Bible?

We should read the Holy Bible daily. The Holy Bible gives us commandments and teachings on how to live. This is God's way of speaking to us. If we want to be like our Lord Jesus Christ and to imitate Him, then it makes sense for us to spend time with Him through reading the Holy Bible. If we take good and holy things in, our lives will be good and holy. We cannot just hear the Word of God; we also have to take action.

Also, reading the Holy Bible and learning passages and verses will help us in our struggle against sin and temptation. Our Lord Jesus Christ was able to overcome the temptations of Satan by using the Holy Scriptures.

Therefore, we need to choose a time in the day when we can focus on reading the Holy Bible. The quantity of what we read may not be as important as the quality. If we read and think deeply about just a few verses each day, it will probably be more effective than reading a whole chapter without any concentration.

We should be talking regularly with our confession fathers about what we should be reading and how much we should be reading each day.

Here are five ways that we should approach the Holy Bible:

1. The Holy Bible must be read in the spirit of prayer

Communication goes both ways. If God is speaking to us through the Holy Scriptures, then we also have to speak to Him through prayer. As we said before, the Divine Liturgy is filled with the words of the Holy Bible, so every time we attend the Divine Liturgy, we are praying the Holy Bible. By praying with the Holy Bible and applying its words to our lives, we will begin living the Holy Scriptures.

2. The Holy Bible must be read with obedience

We should read the Holy Bible in a spirit of obedience. For certain books, it is important to question their information and to wonder if what these books say is right or wrong. The Holy Bible is not one of these books. God is speaking to us. He is the all-knowing and the all-wise God, who knows much, much more than we do. He always wants what is best for us. Therefore, we should open our hearts and minds to the

message of the Holy Bible and obey all His commandments, because they will lead us to joy, peace, and heaven itself.

3. The Holy Bible must be read through the interpretation and teaching of the Orthodox Church

There are many difficult passages in the Holy Bible. Just because we do not understand them does not mean that we should either ignore them or that we should try to come up with our own explanations about them. Rather, we have to try and understand how the church interprets their meaning. If the Church determined which books should go in the Holy Bible in the first place, shouldn't we trust how the Church explains the teachings in these same books as well?

Saint Peter wrote in his second epistle, “...*knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit*” (2 Peter 1:20:21).

Whenever we are faced with a difficult passage, we can ask our fathers the bishops, the priests, and also the spiritual servants of the Church, or to read Orthodox commentary on these passages.

4. The Holy Bible must be read as a personal message

The Holy Bible is God's personal letter to each of us. Even if we are not supposed to explain the Holy Bible according to our own personal interpretations, we should still ask ourselves, “How do I apply what the Holy Bible is telling me to my own life? What is God's personal message to me?” If we do this, we can read the same passages in the Bible at different times in our lives and benefit from them in many ways.

An example of someone who received the Holy Bible as a personal message was Saint Antony the Great. We know that the passage about selling everything and following our Lord Jesus Christ inspired him to live a life as a monk in the desert. There is also another story:

When Saint Antony's fame had reached Emperor Constantine, he wrote to him as ‘our father’ and asked to receive letters from him. But the letters did not trouble Antony and he did not rejoice over the emperors’

letters but remained just as he was before the emperor wrote to him. When he received the letters, he summoned the monks and said to them, ‘Why are you so amazed that the emperor has written us? He too is a person. Instead, be more amazed that God has written his Law for us, and has spoken to us through his Son.’

5. The Holy Bible must be read knowing that our Lord Jesus Christ holds the whole Holy Scriptures together.

Finally, we must understand that the whole Bible is about our Lord Jesus Christ. As Christians, we find Christ everywhere and rejoice in Him. The prophecies of the Old Testament all point to the New Testament. The New Testament fulfills and completes the message of the Old Testament.

We pray that God will open our hearts and minds to read the Holy Bible daily, so that we can live a life that is pleasing to Him. As we say in the Divine Liturgy we pray that we may be made worthy not only to hear, but also to act according to the Holy Gospel.

Glory is due to God forever. Amen.