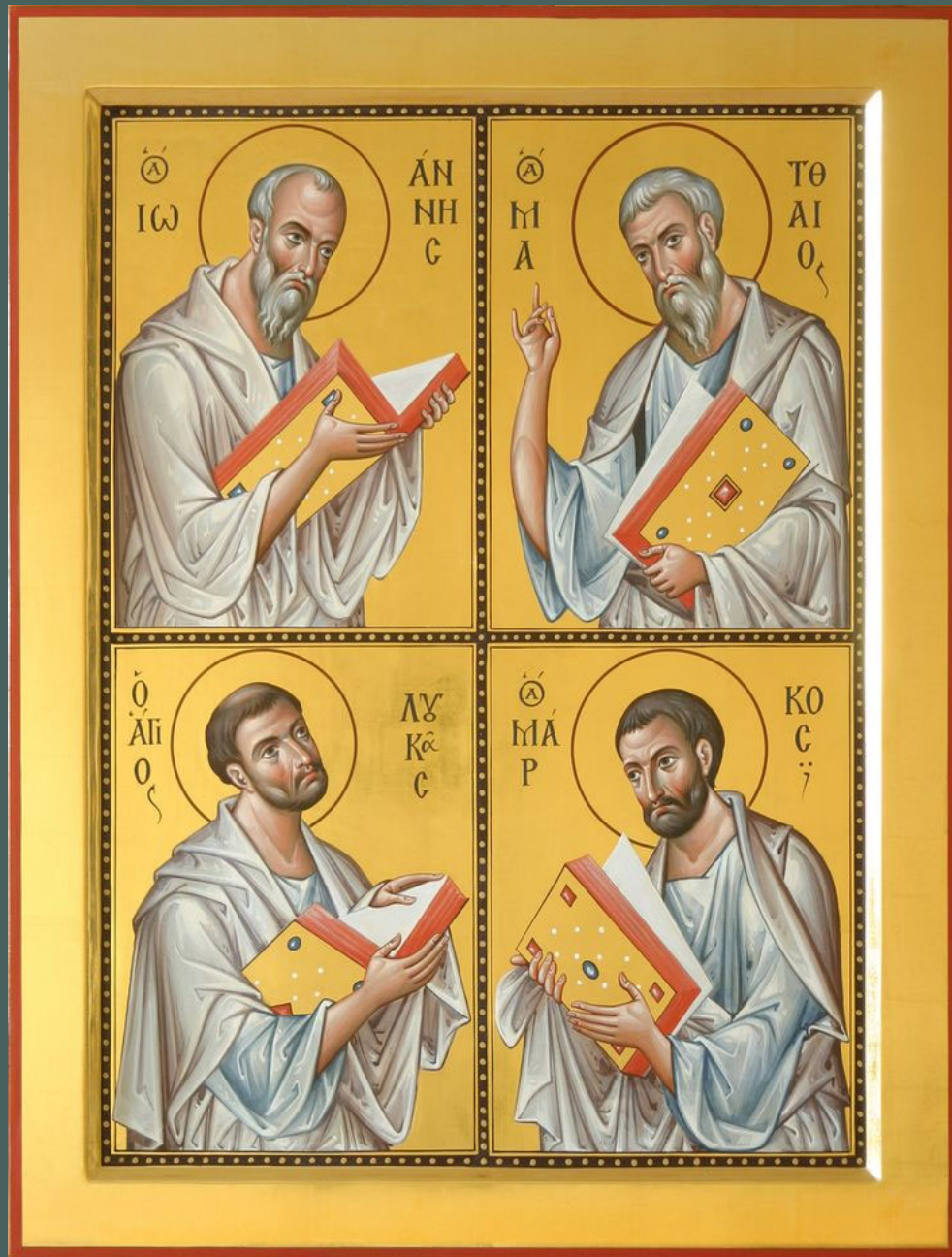


The Bible in the Orthodox Church



*by
Father Steven Tsichlis*

Understanding the Bible in the Orthodox Church

The Relationship between the Bible and the Church

There are many, many strange and even crazy things being said about the Bible these days in movies, novels and the media. All too often, they are little more than sensationalist attempts to make money. But they are simply not true. And we as Orthodox Christians need to know enough about the Bible to recognize this! Let's look at how we as Orthodox Christians understand the Bible and I'd like to begin by offering you two quotes from two well-known Orthodox preachers and teachers about the relationship between the Bible and the Church:

"In the great Tradition of the Orthodox Church, the Bible is *the* central source of truth and the most creative factor behind the worship, doctrine and practice of the Church. The great Fathers and saints of the Church viewed the Bible as an ocean of divine mysteries, having inexhaustible breadth and astonishing depths." – *Father Theodore Stylianopoulos*

"The Bible is *the* book of the Church. It is the main written authority within the Church – not over or apart from it. Everything in the Church *must* be biblical: for the Church, in order to be the Church, must be wholly expressive of the Bible. The Bible *lives* in the Church! Without the Church, there would be no Bible. The Church gives the Bible its life as a book. It makes the book come *alive!*" – *Father Thomas Hopko*

So, Orthodox Christians understand the Bible as central to the life, teaching and worship of the Church; and the Church's life, teaching and worship as wholly expressive of the Bible.

What is the Bible?



The Bible is not merely a single book, but a whole library of books containing many different kinds of writings: poetry, prayers, hymns, historical narratives, biographies, prophecies, letters, proverbs, love songs and much, much more. So the Bible contains a rich variety of books, authors and contents. Some of the sacred authors remain anonymous. Others, like Moses, David, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are household names. In certain instances, books were produced by a process of compilation, revision and the merging of several oral and written traditions.

But what constitutes the unifying theme of all these different kinds of writings? The Bible – literally, *the* Book - is first and foremost the story of God's love for His creation, His love for the human race, His love for you and me, beginning with the creation of the universe in Genesis, continuing through the formation of the people of Israel and the sending of His prophets in the Old Testament; and, "in these last days" (*Hebrews 1:1*), the sending of His Son, "the Word made flesh" (*John 1:14*) in Jesus Christ, to save and redeem us from sin and death; and ultimately, on the Day of Judgment, the re-creation of the universe as described in the Book of Revelation.

The Bible tells us:

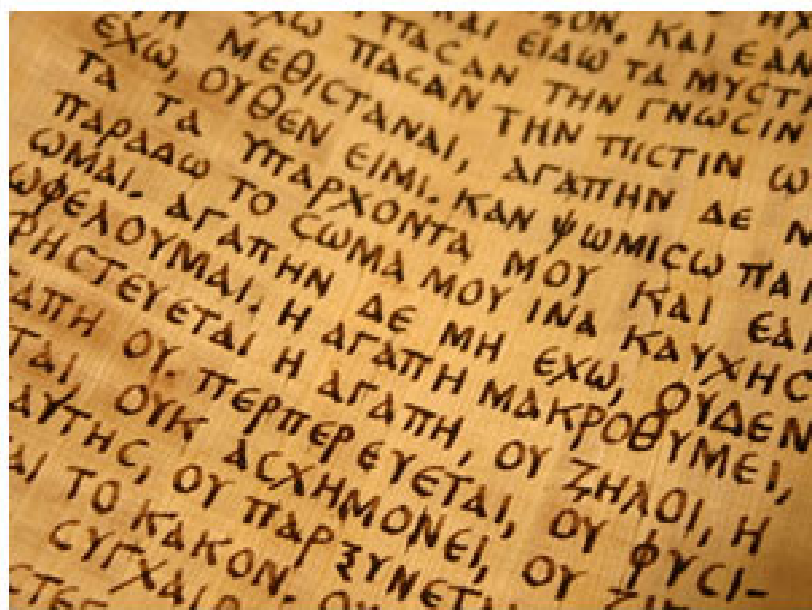
- 1.) who God is and what He has done for us;
- 2.) what it means to truly be a human being and what the purpose of our life is; and
- 3.) how each of us should respond – with our whole life – to what God has done for us in His love.

The Bible contains the answers to the most fundamental questions that we as human beings can ask.

The Canon of the Bible

Many people, including even many Orthodox Christians, do not know that the Orthodox Church has a larger Bible than Protestants and Roman Catholics. In our Bibles, like the recently published **Orthodox Study Bible**, the Old Testament has more books in it than will be found, for example, in Protestant Bibles like the *King James Version* or the much more recent and very popular *New International Version*. The books missing from Protestant Bibles are: 1st Esdras, Tobit, the Wisdom of Solomon, Judith, Baruch, the Wisdom of Sirach, the Letter of Jeremiah, and 1st, 2nd and 3rd

Maccabees. Other books of our Bible are also longer. For example, our Old Testament Book of Daniel includes the Song of the Three Young Men in the Furnace, a beautiful hymn sung by Orthodox Christians at the Liturgy on Holy Saturday morning, but not found in Protestant versions of the Book of Daniel. So, there are 39 books in the Protestant Old Testament; 46 books in the Roman



Greek Manuscript of 1st Corinthians 13

Catholic Old Testament; and by some counts, as many as 49 books in the Orthodox Old Testament.

Why is this so? Did you know that all of the books of the New Testament were originally written in Greek? When St. Paul wrote his letters to the Corinthians, the Galatians, the Thessalonians and the Romans, he wrote them in Greek. When Sts. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote their Gospels, they wrote them in Greek.



THE SEPTUAGINT

Whenever the authors of the books of the New Testament, writing in Greek, cite passages from the Old Testament, they almost always do so from a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures made more than 300 years before Christ in the ancient city of Alexandria in Egypt called the ***Septuagint*** or ***The Translation of the Seventy***. This translation, which was widely used by the Jewish people at the time of Christ, was the version

of the Old Testament preferred by the apostolic writers of the New Testament and has therefore remained the preferred text of the Old Testament in the Orthodox Church to this day. The *Septuagint* contains the books of the Old Testament found in our Bibles that, without going into great detail, were ultimately rejected by Protestant Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin in their debates with the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century.

All Christians, however, agree on the 27 books contained in the New Testament that were first listed by St. Athanasios, the bishop of Alexandria, in an encyclical (or circular letter) written in 367AD to the churches under his pastoral supervision in Egypt. St. Athanasios is in fact a pivotal figure in the development of what we today call the canon of the New Testament and we celebrate his feast day in our Church each year on January 18th!

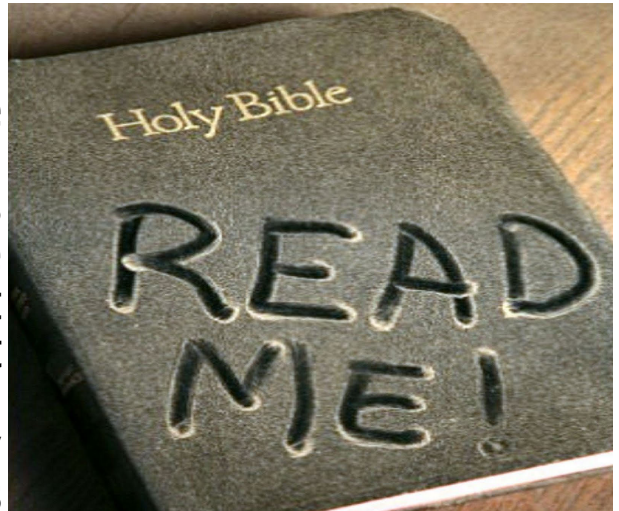
To Know the Bible and the God of the Bible, we have to actually read it!

It is an unfortunate fact that we Orthodox Christians often do not read the Bible as we should. We *revere* the Bible, but we don't actually *read* it. This is a terrible weakness in our spiritual lives at a personal level and is one of the reasons why our Churches, as communities, are often so spiritually weak.

Several generations ago many people, like my grandparents, could neither read nor write. The Bible had to be read to them. It was not

something they could pick up and read for themselves. But this is no longer true of most Orthodox Christians living in the U.S. today. An Orthodox Christian who *can* read but *doesn't* read the Bible on a daily basis is a contradiction in terms.

Writing more than 1600 years ago, a great saint like John Chrysostom (354-407AD) could say: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is a great cliff and a deep abyss. Not knowing the Scriptures is the cause of all evils. Reading the Scriptures is like possessing a great treasure. A Christian cannot help but read the Scriptures. To be a Christian is to rejoice in the power of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit speaks to us through the Scriptures." Or, as St. Jerome (347-420AD) said even more bluntly: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ."

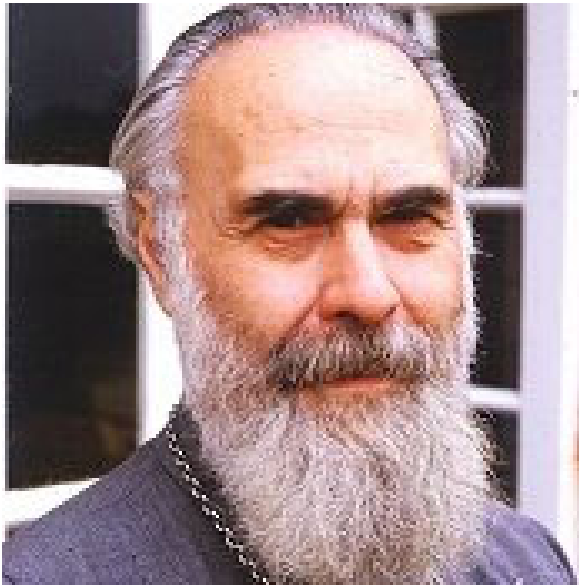


Someone once said: "Most books **inform**, a few **reform**, but only the Bible **transforms**." In fact, the Bible does all three! The Bible *informs* us about the history of God's dealings with the human race and most specifically about His love for us as expressed in the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible provides the basis for *reforming* us, for in its pages we find the ideals and standards by which we are to live. And the Bible *transforms* us because in it we come face to face with the grace and power of Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. In this sense, the Bible is *sacramental* because it conveys the *presence* of Christ in the Holy Spirit. "Whenever you read the Gospel," writes St. Tikhon of Zadonsk (1724-1783), "Christ Himself is speaking to you. And while you read, you are praying and talking with Him."

For us, therefore, it is not Word and Sacrament, as some Protestant folks say; rather, the Word itself is a Sacrament!

St. Augustine (354-430AD), the bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa, writing in Latin in the late 4th century, speaks of the *sacramentum Scripturae*, the "sacrament of the Scriptures." To

pick up the Bible and read it can never be a neutral act: we must say either Yes or No to the God whose message is contained within its pages.



One of the clearest examples of the Biblical text fully conveying the *presence* of Christ in the Holy Spirit is the story told by the late **Metropolitan Anthony Bloom** (1914-2003), one of the great Russian Orthodox spiritual writers of the 20th century, of the first time he ever picked up a Bible as a teenager and the impact it had on him:

"I met Christ as a Person at a moment when I needed him in order to live, and at a moment when I was not in search of him. I was found; I did not find him. I was a teenager then. Life had been difficult in the early years and now it had of a sudden become easier. All the years when life had been hard I had found it natural, if not easy, to fight; but when life became easy and happy I was faced quite unexpectedly with a problem: I could not accept aimless happiness. Hardships and suffering had to be overcome, there was something beyond them. Happiness seemed to be stale if it had no further meaning. As it often happens when you are young and when you act with passion, bent to possess either everything or nothing, I decided that I would give myself a year to see whether life had a meaning, and if I discovered it had none I would not live beyond the year.

One day, it was during Lent, and I was a member of one of the Russian youth organizations in Paris, one of our leaders came to me and said, 'We have invited a priest to talk to you, come.' I answered with violent indignation that I would not. I had no use for the Church. I did not believe in God. I did not want to waste any of my time. Then my leader explained to me that everyone who belonged to my group had reacted in exactly the same way, and if no one came we would all be put to shame because the

priest had come and we would be disgraced if no one attended his talk. My leader was a wise man. 'Don't listen,' he said. 'I don't care, but sit and be a physical presence'. That much loyalty I was prepared to give to my youth organization and that much indifference I was prepared to offer to God and his minister. So I sat through the lecture, but it was with increasing indignation and distaste. When the lecture was over I hurried home in order to check the truth of what he had been saying. I asked my mother whether she had a book of the Gospels. I expected nothing good from my reading, so I counted the chapters of the four Gospels to be sure that I read the shortest, not to waste time unnecessarily. And thus it was the Gospel according to St. Mark which I began to read.

I do not know how to tell you of what happened. I will put it quite simply and those of you who have gone through a similar experience will know what came to pass. While I was reading the beginning of St Mark's Gospel, before I reached the third chapter, I became aware of a Presence. I saw nothing. I heard nothing. It was no hallucination. It was a simple certainty that the Lord was standing there and that I was in the Presence of Him whose life I had begun to read with such revulsion and such ill-will. And the certainty was so strong that it was Christ standing there that it has never left me. This was my basic and essential meeting with the Lord. From then I knew that Christ did exist. I knew that he was *thou*, in other words that he was the Risen Christ. I met with the core of the Christian message! This was the real turning point in my life."

Metropolitan Anthony, who was later to study at the Sorbonne, become a medical doctor, work with the French Resistance during WW II, become a monk, priest and ultimately a bishop in the Russian Orthodox Church in England, was brought to Christ by the sacramental power of the Biblical text!

How to Read the Bible



But one of the things people often say to me is that they don't know how to go about beginning to read the Bible. And when they try to read it, they often don't understand what they're reading!

It is a simple fact that people who are picking up the Bible and reading it for the first time will often find it difficult to

understand – especially at first. But when you are reading the Bible, emphasize what you *do* understand, not what you *don't* understand, and put what you do understand into practice in your life.

For example, much of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans discusses the sorry state of the human race, the nature of sin, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, the Law of the Old Testament, Abraham and faith, redemption and the coming of Christ. The first 11 chapters of Romans, the longest and in some ways most theological of St. Paul's letters, are a compendium of what Christians believe about all these topics and more, and parts of it may be difficult for us to comprehend. But at the beginning of chapter 12, St. Paul switches gears and in

The Bible will always be full of things you cannot understand, as long as you will not live according to those you can understand.

essence says, if this is what we believe we must therefore live in this way: "Love others without hypocrisy. Be eager to show respect for one another. Work hard and do not be lazy. Do not be arrogant. Do not think of yourselves as wise. If someone has done you wrong, do not repay him with evil. Never take revenge. Try to do what everyone considers to be good. Do everything possible on your part to live at peace with everyone. Conquer evil by doing

good." These admonitions are simple, clear and straightforward – easy to understand, but much more difficult to put into practice. What we will discover is that as we begin to live what the Scriptures teach by putting into practice what we do understand, the rest of the Bible will often slowly begin to open up to us.

But you might ask: what concrete, practical steps can we take to begin reading the Bible as a spiritual discipline, always seeking Christ with an open mind and heart? Here are seven suggestions on how to begin reading the Bible:

COLOSSIANS 3:16

"Let the word of Christ dwell within you abundantly, in all wisdom: teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual canticles, singing in grace in your hearts to God."

1.) ***We must read the Bible prayerfully.*** Always pray before you read the Bible that God will help you understand what you are reading in order to put His Word into practice in your daily life. One possible prayer to use is from the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom:

The Prayer before the Reading of the Gospel

Loving Master, shine the pure light of Your divine knowledge in our hearts. Open the eyes of our minds that we may understand the message of Your Gospel. Instill in us reverence for Your blessed commandments, that having conquered our sinful desires, we may pursue a spiritual life, thinking and doing all those things that are pleasing to You. For You, O Christ our God, are the light of our souls and bodies and to You do we offer glory, together with Your Father who is without beginning and Your all-holy, good and life-giving Spirit now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

2.) *Set aside a few minutes every day just for Bible reading* – in the morning, afternoon, or before you go to bed—whenever is best for you. Don't say you don't have the time. You can make the time. No excuses! Everybody, no matter how busy, can set aside 5 or 10 minutes each day in order to read the Scriptures.

3.) *Begin reading the Bible by reading those books that are easiest to understand.* This means: in the New Testament, begin with the Gospel of Matthew and Luke, focusing on Christ, and then perhaps the First Letter of John and the Letter of James. In the Old Testament, begin with the Book of Proverbs and then the Psalms. For first time readers it is generally *not* advisable to attempt to read the Bible straight through, starting at Genesis and ending with Revelation. Very few people who begin this way get much past the first half of Genesis.

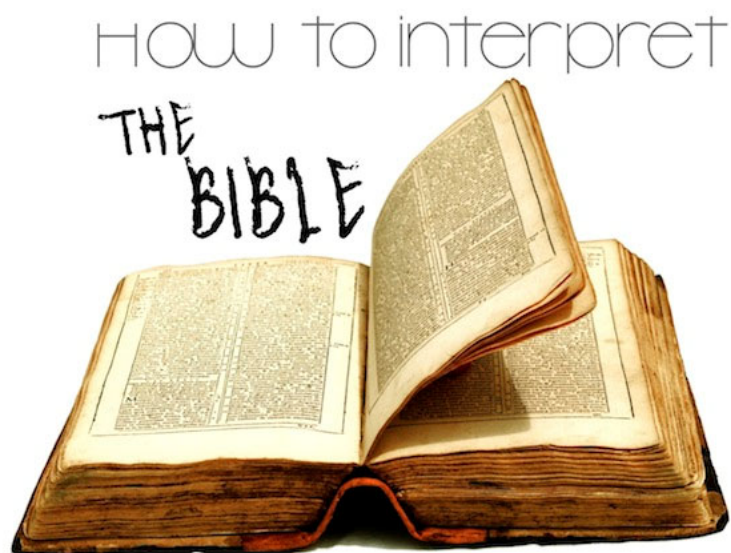
4.) *Don't read too much at one time.* Concentrating on a few verses and what they mean is far better than skimming through a whole chapter superficially. But if the Bible is totally new to you, you might want to read through a whole book quickly just to get a sense of the whole and then go back and focus on smaller passages.

5.) *As you read the Bible, try to focus on what this passage means for us today and how we can actively apply the Bible's teachings to our lives today.* The Bible is not just a history book – it is the record of God's Word addressed to each of us and our guide for Christian living! As ***St. Hesychios of Jerusalem wrote in the 4th century, "The words of the Scriptures are written for us not simply to understand them but also to do them."***

6.) *Don't worry about passages that seem strange to you or that you don't understand. Ask God to help you to understand them in time.* Every Scripture verse has to be understood in terms of its immediate context and in context of the

entire Bible and the life of the Church as a whole. ***Always beware of people who quote a Bible verse in isolation and draw strange conclusions from it.***

7.) ***The Bible is the Book of the Church.*** It is the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit that provides the proper context for interpreting the Scriptures, not any one individual (including ourselves). ***Therefore, in any question of Biblical interpretation, we must seek to learn what the Church teaches about it by consulting the lives and writings of the saints, the texts of our liturgical services, the icons, etc.*** You may also ask your priest for guidance. "First of all, you must understand this: no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20).



Interpreting the Bible

These last two points are particularly important. We must not only read the Scriptures, but also interpret them correctly. For this, we need guidance. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware writes:

"Coming upon the Ethiopian as he read the Book of Isaiah in the Old Testament in his chariot, Philip the Apostle asked him, *"Do you understand what you are reading?"* And the Ethiopian answered, *"How can I, unless someone guides me?"* (Acts 8:30-31). We are all in the position of the Ethiopian. The words of Scripture are not always self-explanatory. God speaks directly to the heart of each one of us as we read our Bible. Scripture reading is a personal dialogue between each one of us and Christ - but we also need **guidance**. We read the Bible personally, but not as isolated individuals. We read as the members of a family, the family of the Orthodox Catholic Church. When reading Scripture, we say not "I" but **"We."**

We read in communion with all the other members of the Body of Christ, in all parts of the world and in all generations of time. The decisive test and criterion for our understanding of what the Scripture means is the **mind of the Church** for the **Bible is the book of the Church.**"

And here it is important to remember that *not all Christians interpret the Bible in the same way*. There can be, for example, a Protestant interpretation of a passage from the Bible that is completely at odds with how we, as Orthodox Christians, would understand the same passage.

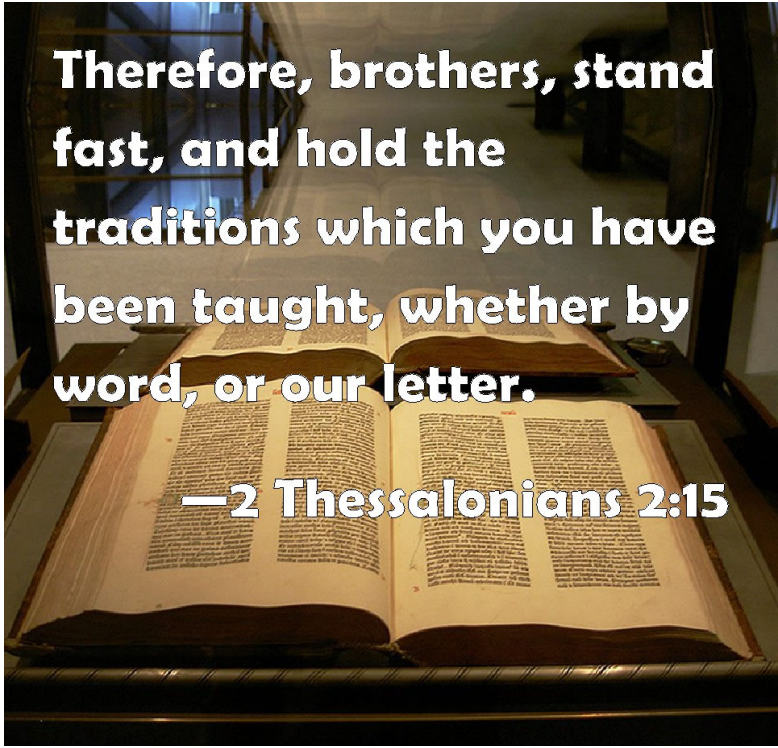
To give a concrete example: I was once discussing, with a parishioner, the "non-denominational" Bible study she was attending at a neighbor's home. She explained to me that when the group met they were not allowed to discuss the church they attended but were to focus instead solely on reading the Bible. When I expressed my concern that there is no such thing as a "non-denominational" approach to the Bible and that the phrase "non-denominational" – for an Orthodox Christian – simply means that you are evangelical Protestant but don't want to admit it, she informed me that they were studying the Gospel of John and that she had, so far, no difficulty with what had been taught. I asked her, "Have you studied the sixth chapter of John yet?" When she informed me that they hadn't gotten that far into the Gospel, I asked her to look in the workbook she had been given in class and see how the following verses that the Lord Jesus had taught in the synagogue at Capernaum were interpreted: "I am the Bread of Life. Amen, Amen, I say to you: if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is truly food and my blood is truly drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in



him" (*John 6:53-56*). She opened up the notebook and, somewhat surprised, said to me, "In here, those passages are interpreted to mean that we should read our Bibles more often." I asked her: "As an Orthodox Christian, is that what you think those passages refer to?" "No," she replied. "Don't those verses refer to receiving communion?"

And, of course, that is precisely what they refer to! But most churches claiming to be "non-denominational" do not have the same understanding of these verses because they no longer emphasize the importance of the Eucharist in their worship. Not celebrating the Liturgy, they no longer have the proper context within their faith communities to understand these verses. They no longer stand within the 2,000 year old Tradition of the Church in the same way that we do.

The Bible and its relationship to Tradition



Therefore, brothers, stand fast, and hold the traditions which you have been taught, whether by word, or our letter.

—2 Thessalonians 2:15

Orthodox Christians always interpret the Bible in the context of the Church and the Tradition of the Church. Not that the Bible and the Tradition of the Church are to be juxtaposed to one another: Scripture vs. Tradition, as in the evangelical Protestant scheme of things; or even Scripture *and* Tradition, as in Roman Catholicism. For us, Scripture and Tradition are *not* two different things. Rather, the Bible exists *within* the Tradition of the Church and is

the heart and core of the Church's *written* Tradition.

Orthodox Christians are always speaking about Tradition – more so than do other Christians. What do we mean by that?

First, when we speak of the Tradition of the Church, we are *not*

talking about “the traditions of men” (*Colossians 2:8*) condemned by the Apostle Paul. Rather, we are talking about apostolic tradition, the kind of tradition that St. Paul speaks of when he writes to the Thessalonians, “Stand firm and hold fast to the traditions which you were taught, whether by our preaching or by letter from us” (*2 Thessalonians 2:15*). We need to draw a clear distinction between the tradition of men and the Tradition of the Apostles, between Tradition with a capital “T” and traditions with a small “t”, between the Tradition of the Church and the many pious customs that emerge over time in the many cultures which the Good News of Christ has helped to shape.

Second, the Tradition of the Church is not merely an historical or archaeological exercise, a compilation of dusty religious artifacts from antiquity, and it is never merely an attempt to restore the past for the sake of it being the past. As Metropolitan Kallistos Ware writes, “Tradition is not only kept in the Church – it lives in the Church, it is the life of the Holy Spirit within the Church. The Orthodox conception of Tradition is not static but dynamic, not merely a dead acceptance of the past but a living experience of the Holy Spirit in the present. Loyalty to Tradition means not primarily the acceptance of formulae or customs from past generations but rather the ever-new, personal and direct experience of the Holy Spirit in the present, here and now!”



The life of the Holy Spirit in the Church – this is the Orthodox understanding of Tradition! And the Holy Spirit has, over the centuries, given the Church the Scriptures, the dogmatic decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, the liturgical and sacramental life, the threefold pattern of ministry, canon law, iconography and the lives and witness of the saints beginning with the Apostles themselves and continuing through the centuries to the present day.

But not all of these aspects of the Tradition are of equal importance: a unique pre-eminence belongs to the Bible, the Creed and the dogmatic decrees of the 7 Ecumenical Councils, confirming the New

Testament teaching about Christ and outlining Christian belief in the one God as Trinity – these things Orthodox Christians accept as absolute and unchanging. Other aspects of the Tradition do not bear the same weight. For example, the writings of a St. Symeon the New Theologian writing in 11th century Constantinople do not carry the same importance as the Gospel of John. Indeed, the saints are unanimous in considering the Scriptures foundational to the life of the Church and the heart and core of her Tradition.



The Bible in Orthodox Worship

Orthodox Christians are not merely to read the Bible, we are also to *pray* the Bible. This takes place most clearly and completely in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom on a Sunday to Sunday basis. Yes, there are two readings from the New Testament during the Liturgy – an Epistle reading from one of the Letters of the apostles Paul, Peter, James and John or other apostolic writings; and a Gospel reading from one of the four evangelists – but we pray the Lord's Prayer (*Matthew 6:9-13*) and also sing verses from the Book of Psalms. In the priest's blessing, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all," we hear St. Paul's final farewell to the Church in Corinth (*2 Corinthians 13:13*); and in the choir's singing of "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of *Sabaoth*, Heaven and Earth are full of Your glory," we hear the song of the angelic Cherubim first heard by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah in the Temple in Jerusalem (*Isaiah 6:1-5*). The prayers of the Liturgy are shot through with hundreds of Biblical quotes. In fact, the late French Orthodox theologian, Paul Evdokimov (1902-1970), once calculated that there are 98 quotations from the Old Testament and 114 quotations from the New Testament woven into the prayers of the

Liturgy. To come to Liturgy attentively is to learn to pray the Bible!

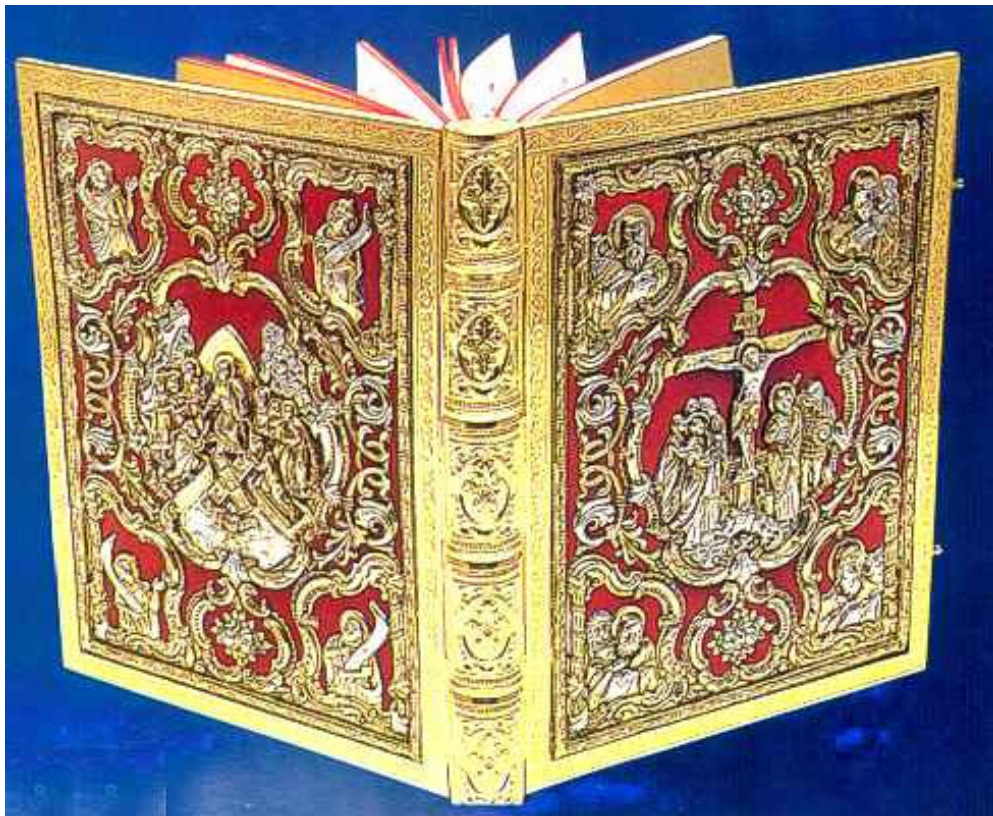
In closing, let me remind you of what St. Paul says about the Scriptures:

Everything written in the Scriptures was written to teach us in order that we might have hope through the patience and encouragement that the Scriptures give us.

- *Romans 15:4*

The Holy Scriptures are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation. All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults and giving instruction for living rightly.

- *2 Timothy 3:15-16*



The Saints on Reading the Bible

The best way to find what is fitting for one's life
is to meditate upon the divinely inspired Scriptures.

- *St. Basil the Great (329-379AD)*

Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.

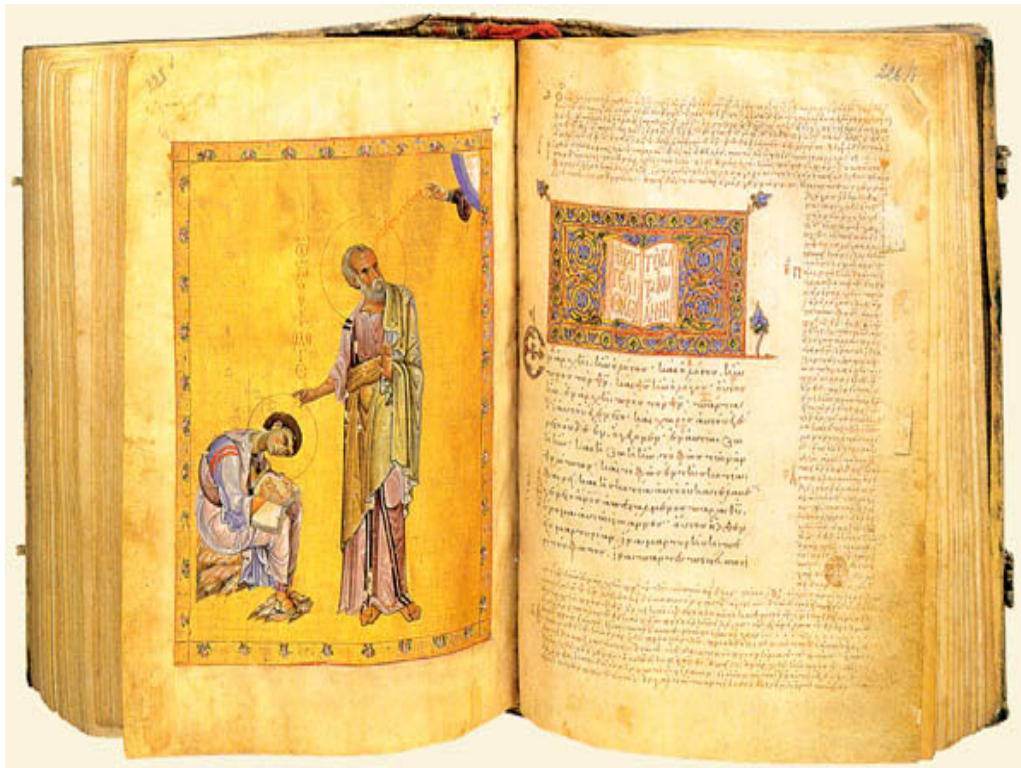
- *St. Jerome (347-420AD)*

The holy occupation of the reading of the Scriptures
is a light to the mind,
a guide on the path and an inspiration during prayer.

- *St. Isaac the Syrian (7th century AD)*

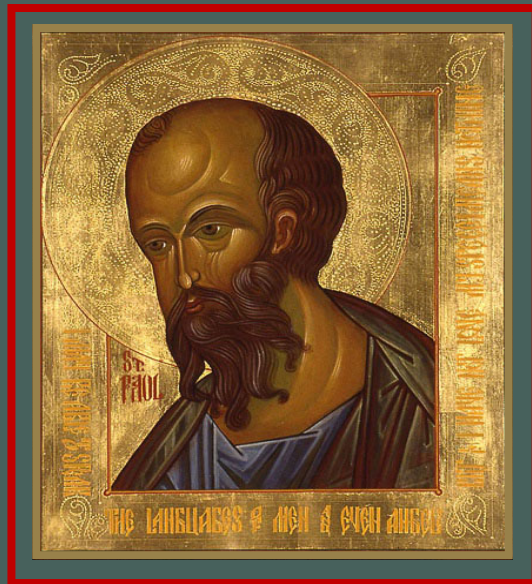
In order to fulfill the commandments of Christ,
you must know them! Read the Holy Gospel,
penetrate its spirit and make it the rule of your life.

- *St. Nikon of Optina (1888-1931)*



*Everything written in the Scriptures
was written to teach us
in order that we might have hope
through the patience and encouragement
that the Scriptures give us.
- Romans 15:4*

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