



Defending The Faith

Sword of the Spirit
Ephesians 6:17

Statements made in defense of the faith
of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church

Rev. Fr. Vartan Archpriest Kasparian
2014

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generous donation of
St. Leon Armenian Cathedral LADIES GUILD*

*Dedicated to the greater glory of Almighty God
And the further strengthening of our Holy Mother
Armenian Church and to
Yeretzgin Danna and my daughter Katherine
for their patience and understanding.*

*“Blessed are the pure in heart,
For they shall see God”.
Matthew (5:8)*

*What you say concerning the Holy Church
is worthy and true
for She is a pure Mother for us
and from Her we are born
as children of light and truth
and this is our hope of life
and through it we find salvation for our souls
and this is our way of righteousness, and
through it we ascend to
Jesus our heavenly father.*

[from Service of Opening of the Portals]

During the pontificate of
His Holiness Karekin II
Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos
of All Armenians

and

During the primacy of
H. E. Archbishop Hovnan Derderian
Western Diocese
Armenian Church of North America

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PRIMATE'S MESSAGE

Beloved Rev. Fr. Vartan Archpriest Kasparian,

It gives us pleasure to not only commend you but to also publish your latest ecclesiastical-religious literary work titled “Defending the Faith,” wherein you eloquently present the entire doctrine of the Orthodox Faith of the Armenian Apostolic Church and defend her faithful from today’s popular but unorthodox snares of sectarianism. We are confident that this publication will serve as a guide to “...stand firm and be strong in [our] faith.” (1 Peter 5:9).

With your tenured pastoral service, you have admittedly noticed the dire need to educate and enlighten our faithful with the Living Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, according to the sacred teachings and doctrines of our Church Fathers. We wholeheartedly commend your unwavering dedication and resolute spirit.

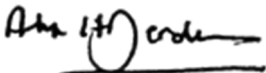
Your publication becomes even more practical as it targets the English-speaking community in efforts to draw their attention to the rich traditions of the Armenian Apostolic Church and to cater to their religious and spiritual needs.

Dear Der Hayr,

We commend your enduring love for the flock of Christ and the Armenian Apostolic Church.

“We beseech you, Lord, through the intercession of Your heavenly host, preserve your Holy Church” (Divine Liturgy).

Prayerfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Hovnan Derderian", written over a horizontal line.

Archbishop Hovnan Derderian
Primate

FOREWORD

The title of this work, DEFENDING THE FAITH, has as its singular purpose just that, defending the faith of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church. In the process of doing this, a number of statements have been made which can, and probably will, be interpreted as attacks on the Roman Catholic Church, the Chalcedonian Orthodox, and the Protestants. Here, it must be stated in the strongest possible terms that these statements are made simply in defense of the faith of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church. They are made for purposes of defense, not attack.

Over the centuries, the Roman Catholic Church, the Chalcedonian Orthodox, and the Protestants, in pursuing their own religious agendas, have in fact made criticisms of the Armenian Church. Indeed, they have attacked the Armenian Church, accusing Her of various supposed errors. As it turns out, these so-called errors are nothing more than a different way of doing things or, in the case of Christological definitions, a simple difference in terminology and semantics, especially as such relate to discussions of the nature of Christ. A prime example of this is in the terminology used to describe His nature. The Armenian Church and Her sister non-Chalcedonian Orthodox have always used the terminology of the 3rd Ecumenical Council, the Council of Ephesus of A.D. 431, which proclaimed ONE INCARNATE NATURE OF GOD THE WORD to describe Jesus Christ as He who is God become man. As a result these churches have never accepted the definitions of the Council of Chalcedon which seem to be a concession to Nestorianism. Because of this, the Armenian Church and Her sister non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches have been wrongly classified as “monophysite” and hence heretical. As will be seen, historical and theological truth do not support such an accusation.

The Roman Catholic Church, the Chalcedonian Orthodox, and the Protestants have couched their criticisms in terms which can easily be reduced to the sentiment that the Armenian Church should be more as they are.

The purpose of this present work is to answer these criticisms head-on. If the result is then viewed as an attack upon these bodies, the reader is to be reassured that such was not the intent. What is being herein presented should be viewed as defense, not as an attack. Further, it must also be noted that in fairly recent times, as a result of what can best be termed the “ecumenical spirit,” much of the previous animosity and exclusivity of the above groups has somewhat dissipated and there is more of a spirit of cooperation. One can only hope and pray that such trends will continue. I can personally attest to the fact that, as a priest of the Armenian Church, I have been extended wonderful courtesies and respect by the local clergy of the Roman Catholic Church and by the Roman Catholic Jesuit clergy at my high school alma mater of Loyola High School in Los Angeles. There is a mutual expression of brotherly love and respect. I hasten to add that I have been shown similar courtesies among the Armenian Protestant churches in the San Joaquin Valley area. This present work, however, is being written simply to include information from the point of view of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, a church which has been in existence since the time of the Apostles St. Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew.

Juxtaposed to this, however, is the reality that since the independence of Armenia in 1991, there have been attempts by some of the above mentioned groups to bring their version of “Christian truth” to Armenia, forgetting that there is a 2000 year old Church there which has functioned continuously, literally, in spite of “dungeon, fire, and sword.” Their approach, for the most part, has not been one of cooperation but one of outright competition.

The purpose of this modest work is to set the record straight and challenge past or present critics of the Armenian Church to take a closer look at their own respective stances. As they do this, it would be well for them to bear in mind our Lord Jesus Christ’s caution: “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” [Matthew 7:3]

It is to be hoped that the ecumenical spirit will prevail and that those who in the past have been so free in their criticism of the Armenian Church will come to the full realization that the Armenian

Church is one which was established directly by two of our Lord's chosen Apostles, St. Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew, and that it has had continued existence since apostolic times. Throughout the centuries it has borne witness to the truth of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and because of its clinging to Orthodox Christianity has been persecuted by a number of both Christian and non-Christian groups. In the past, as we shall see, the criticisms hurled against the Armenian Church have been vicious, whether intended as such or not.

Now that Armenia is enjoying independence, after some 70 years of brutal Communist rule and persecution of the Church, those who are truly interested in helping the people there would do well to stop the attitude of competition with the Armenian Church and approach the Armenian Church in a true spirit of help and cooperation. Regrettably, such is not always the case.

Much of what is going on is proselytizing, plain and simple, denials notwithstanding. Still, it is to be hoped that those who do such will come to the realization that such attempts at proselytizing, and that is what it is, is soundly condemned by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself when He says: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves." [Matthew 23:15]. Trying to win away members of the Armenian Church in the guise of offering "help" and attempting to affiliate them with other bodies which claim to be Christian can hardly be said to be advancing the cause of Jesus Christ.

Regretfully, there are many groups which look upon the Armenian Church not as an apostolic body but simply as a pool for potential converts to their own version of "truth." This is done without ever looking at their own credentials and/or legitimacy.

Again, it must be stressed that this work is intended as a work of defense, not a work of attack. However, just as the criticisms directed toward the Armenian Church have been direct, so must its defense.

To that end, it must be said, “Glory to You, O God, glory to You. In all things, Lord, glory to You.” [from Vespers of the Armenian Church]

Special acknowledgment and thanks to The Rev. Fr. Zaven Archpriest Arzoumanian, Ph.D. and The Rev. Fr. Kevork Archpriest Arakelian who read through the manuscript and made some insightful observations and suggestions.

Rev. Fr. Vartan Archpriest Kasparian

St. Mary Armenian Church
Yettem, California
Lent - 2012

FOR THE DEFENSE

For God is my defense
[Ps. 59:9]

FOR THE DEFENSE

When I was a teenager, I heard an Armenian saying which loosely translated says: “Before the theft has been committed, the thief has already justified his action.” Of course, such a saying is simply the embodiment of a self-evident truth, we all try to justify our actions. We all try to maintain the myth that somehow our own actions are above reproach; what we do is right and justified. A corollary to this is that one aspect of such justification is the criticism of others. This gives birth to the “we” and “they” idea which for untold centuries has simply served to divide mankind into mutually hostile camps. Naturally, we, since our actions are justified, are right, and, by definition, any who oppose or differ are wrong, again by definition. Simply put, we are right and they are wrong. Therefore, our actions, no matter what they may be, are justified because they are right. Such usually results in demonizing one’s “opponents” as a means of justifying one’s own actions. We can see this principle operating in all aspects of life.

Unfortunately, examples of this are not found wanting in the record of human relations and actions. We see students justifying their own cheating with the rationalization that, “I needed the grade. Besides, everyone does it.” Unfaithful spouses attempt to justify their actions with the excuse that, “My husband/wife doesn’t understand me.” One civilization destroys another, proclaiming, “Our actions are right because we are superior and are just trying to bring a higher form of civilization to backward peoples or nations.” In the realm of religion the implied justification is, “We have the truth and you don’t, therefore anything we do to you or say about you is justified, after all we are only trying to lead you from error to truth – at least our version of it.”

It is as though such rationalizations make reprehensible actions good and acceptable. Such an attitude has been a large part of the history and attitude expressed toward the Armenian Church vis-à-vis what are viewed other “Christian churches”. Such examples of this are, regrettably, not in short supply.

For centuries past, the Roman Catholic Church has tried to “convert” the Armenian Church and its faithful into one of its satellites, to bring the Armenian Church into the fold of Roman Catholicism. The rationale here was simple. In the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church it is/was the Mother Church of all Christianity. Not to be affiliated with Rome was by definition to be both schismatic and heretical. Such a view is undaunted by the facts of history and reality. Historically, the Roman Catholic orders of Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits have played important roles in the various attempts at conversion. In this struggle, the Armenian Church was viewed as being one big, potential convert to Roman Catholicism. In return, the Armenian Church and its faithful were expected to be grateful. After all, Rome was simply trying to lead the Armenian Church to truth, a truth defined by Rome and the Pope. The refusal of the Armenian Church and its faithful to go along with such schemes has been characterized as “stubbornness,” rather than what it is, faithfulness to the ancient, apostolic orthodoxy of the Armenian Church.

Much of this Roman Catholic attitude and subsequent actions can be traced to the Roman Catholic exegesis of Matthew 16:13-18. The complete section reads as follows: *Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do men say that the Son of man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.” And Jesus answered, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.”*

The Roman Catholic explanation of this scriptural passage asserts that the rock upon which Jesus will establish His Church is Peter. This assertion is explained by saying in the Koine Greek text that the root word for rock [petra] and the proper name Peter [Petros] both refer to the Apostle Peter. Further, that it was our Lord’s intention to designate the Apostle Peter as the rock upon which His Church was to be established.

In further stating the Roman Catholic claim, it is also asserted that the Apostle Peter was the first Bishop of Rome and, therefore, the current Pope, as the successor of the Apostle Peter as Bishop of Rome, takes precedence over all the other bishops of Christ's Church.

However, even a cursory look at these claims serves to show that they are essentially baseless. First of all, if one looks at the above scriptural passage in the original Greek, one realizes that the proper name Petros is a masculine form. If the word *petra*=rock also referred to the Apostle Peter, it, too, would be masculine in form. It is not. Rather it is a feminine form. The conclusion, then, is that Petros and *petra*, even though they come from the same root word, do not refer to the same thing. Petros is one thing, a proper name. *Petra*, referring to a rock, is quite another. Petros is the proper name of a living person while *petra* is an inanimate object.

Further, even as we look at the scriptural selection in translation, we see that the conversation is being conducted in the 2nd person, direct address. Let's look more closely. Our Lord is saying" "Blessed are *you* Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to *you*... and I tell *you*, *you* are Peter..." Then all of sudden, our Lord's words change from the 2nd person, direct address, to the 3rd person: "...upon this rock."

The Roman Catholic explanation does not tell us how or why our Lord and the scriptural text could so abruptly change from the 2nd person, direct address to the 3rd person, if, in fact, the entire section referred to the Apostle Peter. Would it not be more reasonable, if indeed, our Lord intended to make Peter the rock, to have said something akin to, "You are Peter and on you[as rock] I will build my Church." However, in fact, that is not what Jesus said.

The Orthodox explanation of this passage is quite simple. "This rock," refers to the Apostle Peter's confession and assertion that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God." That, not the Apostle Peter, is the foundation of the Christian Church. In other words, Jesus Christ, as the son of God and Messiah, not the Apostle Peter, is the foundation of the Christian Church.

Such a view is supported by St. Augustine, a stalwart of the Western Church. He comments: “For on this very account the Lord said, ‘On this rock I will build my Church,’ because Peter had said, ‘Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God.’ On this rock, therefore, He said which thou hast confessed, I will build my Church. For the Rock [petra] was Christ; and on this foundation was Peter himself also built.” (Tractate CXXIV, On the Gospel of John, The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. VII, pg. 450)

Elsewhere, St. Augustine says: “Thou art therefore, said He, Peter, and upon this rock which thou hast confessed, upon this rock, which thou hast acknowledged, saying, ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,’ I will build my Church. Upon Me I will build thee, not Me upon thee.”

Regarding the Apostle Peter having been the Bishop of Rome, it must be remembered that before he was the Bishop of Rome, Peter was the first Bishop of the Church at Antioch. It was from there that he went to Rome and became Bishop there. Properly speaking, then, if there is a precedence of St. Peter’s successor, based upon being St. Peter’s successor as Bishop in a Church, that honor should properly belong to the present incumbent of the See of Antioch, not to the Bishop of Rome. After all, St. Peter was the Bishop of Antioch before he was the Bishop of Rome. And the second incumbent in the office of Bishop in the Church of Antioch would be the most immediate and senior successor to St. Peter in that office.

Aside from this, it is a historically verifiable fact that the Fathers of the Church did not accept such claims on the part of Rome. Rather, they accepted the fact that the above scriptural passage referred quite simply to Jesus Christ as the “rock” upon which the Church was to be built, not the foundation of a single Apostle. This point is made most eloquently and repeatedly in the book *POPES AND PATRIARCHS* by Michael Welton, It is well worth reading.

Here it would be helpful to read the following Scriptural passages: Matthew 18:18; John 20:23; and Acts 15. We here see St. Peter presented, not as chief over the other Apostles, but simply as one of them. If you will, a kind of first among equals. Since Vatican

II in the 1960's relations here have been growing more and more cordial.

Ever since the 5th century, the churches collectively known as the Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches, that is those who accept the definitions and decrees of the 451 A.D. Council of Chalcedon, have viewed the Armenian Church as "heretical." Why? Because the Armenian Church, along with the Coptic, Assyrian, Ethiopian, and Indian Church of Malabar refused to accept the definitions and decrees of the Council of Chalcedon. The Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches regard the Council of Chalcedon as the 4th Ecumenical Council.

The issue arose out of a controversy known to history as Nestorianism. Nestorius, its chief propagator, was a Patriarch of Constantinople. He maintained that it was inappropriate to refer to St. Mary, the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, as the Mother-of-God [Armenian = Asdvadzadzin, literally Birthgiver of God; Greek = Theotokos.] He claimed that she should be referred to as Christotokos [Birthgiver of Christ] because she gave birth to Christ the man. This gave rise to the question, who was Jesus Christ. Was He man; was He God? Was He some kind of a hybrid? Which functions could be properly assigned to which nature. Eventually, Nestorianism was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431. The champion of this all-church council/ecumenical council was St. Cyril of Alexandria. His slogan became the decision of the Council of Ephesus. Speaking of Jesus Christ, the Council proclaimed: ONE INCARNATE NATURE OF GOD THE WORD. By this, it was understood that Jesus Christ was at one and the same time completely and perfectly God and completely and perfectly man. He was God who became man, completely and perfectly. As far as the universal Church was concerned, the issue was settled.

However, this controversy over the nature of Jesus Christ continued. The result was the calling of what some view as the Fourth Ecumenical Council, the Council of Chalcedon which was held in 451 A.D. The Armenian Church did not take part in this Council for two major reasons: 1.) As far as the Armenian Church was concerned, the issue had been settled at the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431 and 2.)

The Armenian Church and nation was, at the time, engaged in a life and death struggle with the Persian Empire which was trying to force the Armenian people to renounce Christianity and embrace Zoroastrianism. Incidentally, this was the first time in history that any nation actually went to war in defense of Christianity. The Armenian Church, therefore, saw neither the need nor the opportunity to revisit a question which, from its point of view, had long since been settled.

The deliberations and decisions of this Council of Chalcedon were strongly influenced by Pope Leo of Rome and the Byzantine emperor. This Council decided that Jesus Christ was one person **IN** two natures – divine and human. To the Armenian Church, as well as to the Coptic (Egyptian), Ethiopian, Assyrian, and Indian Church of Malabar, this decision seemed like a return to Nestorianism and, as such, a denial of the decision of the 3rd Ecumenical Council, that of Ephesus. To them, the decisions of Chalcedon seemed to split Christ into two, just as Nestorianism had done. Accordingly, these Churches rejected the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon. Hence, they are known as non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches. For the Armenian Church, this official rejection of the Council of Chalcedon came at the Armenian Church's Council of Dvin in the year A.D. 506.

An important vindication of the position of the Armenian Church and Her sister non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches regarding this issue is to be found in the fact that in A.D. 553 a fifth “ecumenical council” was convened, the Second Council of Constantinople. One of the interesting points to come out of this Council was a statement disavowing the use of the Chalcedonian decision in a Nestorian way. One need only look at the Capitula of the Council [II Constantinople, sections VII and VIII] to see this effort to clarify the decisions of Chalcedon. The very fact that there was a need for such a disclaimer and clarifications certainly seem to vindicate the position of the Armenian Church. This means that the Nestorians took refuge in the earlier decisions of Chalcedon and used them to argue for their own position. This was a fact which the Armenian Church and Her sister non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches found unacceptable.

As a result, the non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches reaffirmed the teachings of the earlier Council of Ephesus and the proclamation

of St. Cyril of Alexandria: ONE INCARNATE NATURE OF GOD THE WORD. For this, the non-Chalcedonian Churches were branded as monophysite – one nature. Of course, the point that the Chalcedonians chose to ignore was that the non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches never spoke of only one numerical nature to the elimination of the other. Rather, they spoke of ONE UNITED NATURE, meaning, as presented above, that Jesus Christ is God become man; completely and perfectly God and completely and perfectly man. We speak of Him as being **OF** two natures; not **IN** two natures as the Chalcedonians do.

Nowhere is the teaching of the Armenian Church regarding the nature of Jesus Christ more clearly stated than in the Creed of the Orthodox Faith which is the work of St. Gregory of Datev A.D. 1346 to 1409. The statement from the Creed is: - *“...We believe one of the three persons, God the Word, begotten of the Father before all ages, in time descended into the God-bearer, the Virgin Mary, taking from her blood and uniting it to His divinity, waiting patiently in the womb of the pure Virgin for nine months, and was perfect God and perfect man, in spirit, in mind, and in body; one person, one countenance, and one united nature. God become man without change and without any alteration, without semen and purely born; so that there was no beginning to His divinity and no end to His manhood; for Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and for all ages...”*

To this day, the Armenian Church has affirmed the teachings of the Third Ecumenical Council that Jesus Christ is at one and the same time completely and perfectly God and completely and perfectly man – one incarnate nature of God the Word. For this stance, the Armenian Church in the past has most wrongly been branded as “heretical” by some branches of Christianity.

I here relate some hurtful instances which I believe expose the absurdity and the arrogance which the Chalcedonian Orthodox have shown toward the Armenian Church, justifying their actions on the basis of the Council of Chalcedon and the Armenian Church’s reaction to it.

The first of these involved an Armenian family member who, in the 1800's, married a Greek Orthodox man in the old country, Smyrna to be exact. Prior to her being married in the Greek Orthodox Church, she was re-baptized because, as the explanation was related within the family, her baptism in the Armenian Church was a "heretical" baptism and therefore invalid. Many years later, when she died, her funeral was from the local Greek Orthodox parish in Fresno. The Armenian side of the family had asked if I would attend and offer a prayer of the Armenian Church for this original daughter of the Armenian Church. The response of the local Greek Orthodox priest at that time was that I could attend and offer a prayer when the Greek Orthodox portion of the service was over. However, aside from that, I could not participate in any aspect of the service. Reference was made to the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon.

At one point in the mid-1980's, I was invited by the Armenian Church parish in Phoenix, Arizona to conduct two baptisms and a wedding. Because the parish had no facilities of its own at that time, the baptisms and wedding were to be held at the local Greek Orthodox Church. Making the arrangements took a number of phone calls. Finally, all was set. At the beginning of the week when I was to travel to Phoenix, I received a phone call from the parish priest at the Greek Orthodox Church in Phoenix. He informed me that I would have to bring my own myron [chrism] for the baptisms since, as non-Chalcedonians, it would be impossible for me to use their myron. Of course, I had no intention of using their myron. In fact, at the time of the call, I had already packed our myron along with my vestments to be used for the services. Again, reference was made to Chalcedon. Ironically, when I arrived at the Greek Orthodox parish in Phoenix, I was approached by the assistant to the pastor, a young priest of obvious Irish background. He was profuse in his apologies about the incident and concluded his comments by saying, "It's all politics!"

In 1990-1991, when I was serving in the Southern California area, I was invited to attend a pan-Orthodox observance of the Sunday of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, the first Sunday of Lent. I was, however, advised that I could not participate in the service because, as a priest of the Armenian Church, I was viewed as being "heretical." Besides, my presence and active participation might be offensive to some of the participating Chalcedonian Orthodox clergy.

Yet another instance occurred in the same 1990-1991 time frame, when I was serving in the Los Angeles area. At the time, I looked into the possibility of enrolling my daughter in a school affiliated with the local Greek Orthodox parish in the San Fernando Valley. I was told that, if she was accepted, when the student body received Holy Communion, my daughter would be excluded because she wasn't "Orthodox."

Still there was another occurrence in 1991. I was traveling north on Balboa Boulevard in the San Fernando Valley and I drove past the local Greek Orthodox Church. It happened to be the day of the Greek Orthodox Good Friday. That meant that the Service of the Entombment [Lamentations] was being conducted. Predictably, there was a large crowd at the service. In fact, the crowd spilled out on to the street. That particular Holy Week service is one of my favorites. So, I stopped, parked the car, put on my cassock and pectoral cross and entered the church. What was interesting was that I looked the part of an Orthodox priest, which I am, albeit Armenian. In spite of the fact that there were easily more than a thousand people there, to say nothing of several priests, no one, not one single person, not even one of the priests, said a simple, "Hello."

Further, the year 2005 marked the 90th anniversary of the murder of almost two million Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman Turkish government beginning in 1915 in what was the first genocide of the 20th century. Solemn observances were held throughout the world. Yet, as rumored, in Georgia, a part of the former Soviet Union, the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church was hesitant to participate, claiming that it was inappropriate for him to pray with "heretics." Such an action is not only contemptible in and of itself, it is profoundly anti-Christian and a demonstration, not of devotion, but of outright arrogance and bigotry.

Unfortunately, what seems to be motivating the Chalcedonians is not truth but simple agreement with the Byzantines who view themselves as the only true guardians of "Orthodoxy." In other words, in this particular controversy, agreement with the Byzantines and their fellow ideologues is what is important, not the truth of adhering

completely to the findings of the Third Ecumenical Council and the teaching of St. Cyril of Alexandria. One can even find elements of this attitude in the relationships among some of the Chalcedonian Orthodox themselves. For example, several years ago when a group known as the Evangelical Orthodox Church, under the leadership of Peter Gillquist, came into the Orthodox Church via acceptance and subsequent ordination by Metropolitan Phillip of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, the then Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America, His Eminence Archbishop Iakovos, objected to the ordinations on claims of “irregularity.” Earlier, the Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch had even refused to meet with this group which was seeking admission to Orthodoxy. Again what seemed to be the real issue was not the ordinations but who was in control of them. Although the Antiochian Orthodox Church is in the Byzantine camp, it is, for the most part, non-Greek. Among the Greeks some seem to view only themselves as the guardians of Orthodoxy. Such an attitude puts a strain on fostering closer relations..

What is ironic about this is that both Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian theologians, after decades, indeed centuries, of discussion, have concluded that the difference between the two positions relating to the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon is one of terminology, not of substance. In spite of that, non-Chalcedonians are still treated as second class citizens by the Chalcedonians. Again, the justification made by the Chalcedonians is quite simple: “We are right and the Armenian Church and Her sister non-Chalcedonian churches are wrong, therefore Chalcedonian actions, whatever they might be, are justified.” For them, the only solution is for everyone to totally agree with the Chalcedonians in every detail. Such a stance ignores what is the obvious substance of the faith of the Armenian Church. Such a stance also seems to belie the oft repeated slogan of Eastern Orthodoxy – *unity in essentials; liberty in non-essentials; and charity in all things.*

In fact, one of our priests recounts the following story. He was a student at St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Seminary in New York. In one of his classes, the professor made a statement to the effect that the Armenian Church was 99% Orthodox and only 1% heretical. The

Armenian priest then asked the professor to identify the area of supposed heresy on the part of the Armenian Church. The Armenian priest never did get an answer. And so it goes!

I here hasten to add that for the past decade or so relations here have also been growing more cordial.

The third group to launch attacks against the Armenian Church is the Protestants, both Armenian and non-Armenian. Perhaps nowhere is this attack more vitriolic than in a book entitled THE ARMENIAN EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT by the late Hagop Apraham Chakmakjian, Th.D. What follows is a relatively mild example of one of his diatribes:

The Armenian Church was vulnerable to test of the Scriptures because it had strayed from the "truth" revealed "in Jesus," namely that the kingdom of God did not depend on saints and extraneous observances but on the inner faith of the believers, the grace of Christ, and the obedience of the faithful. When this "truth in Jesus" was obscured by a thick crust of superstitious beliefs and ceremonies, and traditions, then the plain proclamation of the "truth in Jesus" becomes, as it did, a disturbing force, be it in the Palestine of A.D. 30, Constantinople of A.D. 1830-1840, or the world of A.D. 1980's. Such being the case, a devoted messenger of biblical truth would be considered an abomination whatever his motives might be. Whether their attitude claimed the finality of the message they preached, or not, the conflict was between those for whom the Bible was the ultimate rule and those to whom

the Church's clerics, Councils, and traditions were the last word. Therefore, it would be more correct to say that the hierarchy of the Armenian Church were not willing to allow their authority to be undermined by the authority of the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, they interpreted and represented the "reform" movement as an importation and imposition of the views of foreign missionaries, whereas, these "reformists" were striving to be faithful to the Bible as their final and supreme authority for faith and conduct. Hence, the Armenian Church's leadership was determined to repudiate the missionary's attitude of the finality of the truth they preached. [pg. 43]

Here, the detractors of the Armenian Church cast themselves in the role of being defenders of the Holy Bible. Of course, its corollary follows that any who disagree with them are anti-Bible. However, from both a historic and theological point of view, the exact opposite is the case.

All of this translates to the comment which has been expressed before. In this case, "We – the Evangelicals/Protestants – possess Truth; the Armenian Church doesn't." Naturally, its corollary applies – "Therefore, anything we do is justified." What Chakmakjian fails to realize is that from the view of the Armenian Church, indeed of all the Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, what the so-called Evangelicals were proposing and preaching was in fact rank heresy and a denial of biblical truth as seen and practiced by those Churches for almost 2000 years prior to the evangelicals' own movement.

Of course, in terms of Armenian Church history, Protestantism is a relatively new phenomena, dating back to the 1830's and 1840's.

However, such criticism of the Armenian Church is simply in keeping with the attitudes of the early so-called “missionaries” toward the Armenians and the Armenian Church. For example, James L. Barton Secretary of the American Board (of Missions) comments:

In order that misunderstanding may be cleared up, it should be stated here that missionaries to the Armenians and Greeks were not sent to divide the Churches or to separate out those who should accept education and read the Bible in the vernacular. Their one supreme endeavor was to help the Armenians and Greeks workout a quiet but genuine reform in their respective churches. The missionaries made no attacks upon churches, their customs, or beliefs, but strove by positive, quiet effort to show the necessary changes . . . There was no desire for forming among the Armenians an evangelical or Protestant Church. There was no purpose to form any organization among them, but to introduce the New Testament in the spoken tongue of the people and to assist them in working out reforms in their old Church and under their own leaders. – [Chopourian, THE ARMENIAN EVANGELICAL REFORMATION, CAUSES AND EFFECTS, pg. 1-2]

It is here claimed that the Protestant missionaries had no intention of establishing a new church. Rather, it was their intention to be the catalysts for enabling the reformation of the Armenian Church. Given the historical realities of the 19th century and the concept of “manifest destiny” which, among other things, promoted the superiority of the west, particularly the United States, and when one considers that these missionaries came from the United States, perhaps we should not be surprised at their attitude. If we look at their argument from a slightly

different point of view, we are able to see the rank arrogance and inappropriateness of their stance. Imagine what the reaction would have been in the 1800's, or even now in the 21st century, if the Armenian Church were to establish a Board or Commission to work among the Protestants to bring them to the truth of Christian Orthodoxy! On second thought, maybe we should!

Further, although the Protestants then and now claim that they accept the truth of the Holy Bible over that of Holy Tradition, in point of fact, however, one of the pillars of Protestantism, based upon the views of Martin Luther, the "Father of Protestantism," is the personal interpretation of the Scriptures. What this means in terms of actual practice is that "biblical truth" becomes little more than this or that person's interpretation or view of what the Scripture says. In a real sense, with all due respect, the Protestant view makes Christianity into a kind of "do it yourself" religion. The Scriptures say what you believe they say. One can see the practical results of this in the multitude of Protestant denominations which are spread throughout society, all claiming to be "the Church" or at least part of "the Church." In fact, one can reasonably argue that the advent of such esoteric forms of Christianity as Mormonism and the Jehovah's Witnesses, as full of error as they are, are the natural outgrowth of this Protestant stance.

But, therein lies the attraction of Protestantism. That is its very principles allow the individual to define for him/herself what the faith is. There is no need to adhere to a pre-existing creed or faith tradition in order to be defined as a Christian. In effect, each individual establishes his/her own faith tradition based upon his/her interpretation of the Scriptures. Further, it ignores the historical and scriptural reality that Jesus Christ established A Church, not denominations, and that the Church He established functioned remarkably well for over 1500 years before the advent of Protestantism. In Protestantism, functionally, every individual becomes the "ultimate authority" on what the Holy Scriptures teach and say. Witness the numbers and types of "mission statements" among Protestant circles, especially those among the "mega-churches." Such a practice is not in keeping with the practice and usage of the early Church. That is, rather than committing to a creed established by the historical, apostolic Church,

they have chosen to give “mission” statements which may or may not reflect the historic Christian faith as seen and proclaimed by the early fathers of the Church established by our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Within Protestantism, individuals are free to go and “establish” a “church” which fits and reflects their own views, whether it is the prohibition of the use of musical instruments in worship, the unbridled “speaking in tongues,” or, more correctly, babbling, the denial of the reality of the material world, a denial of the real presence in Holy Communion, the handling of poisonous snakes, the denial of Sunday as the Lord’s Day, replacing the Eucharist [Holy Communion] with a sermon, and so forth. Such actions are unthinkable from an Orthodox point of view. From that point of view, one is free to accept or reject the Church which our Lord Himself founded and established. One is not, however, free to go out and establish his or her own “church” or version of Christianity.

Further, in rejecting the Tradition of the Church, Protestantism is, though possibly unwittingly, also rejecting the Holy Bible itself. After all, as we know, the Holy Bible as we now have it did not exist until the 5th century. That means that for the first 400 years the Church existed but the Holy Bible didn’t. The Holy Bible existed as a part of the Tradition of the Church. The Holy Bible was in fact given to the world by the Church. In the case of the Armenian Church, the Holy Bible (Asdvadzashoonch = Breath of God) was translated into Armenian and given to the world in A.D. 433-434 as a result of the efforts of the monk St. Mesrob.

In fact, at the time the canon of the Holy Bible was defined, there were a number of books which laid claim to being Christian scripture. For example, the writings of Clement were frequently read in the churches and bear a striking resemblance to the canonical writings of St. Paul. There were also a number of writings claiming to be gospels. There was also a supposed narrative of Jesus’s childhood. None of these was deemed worthy of inclusion in the official scriptural canon. One of the main reasons for the rejection of these writings was the view that they did not have apostolic origin. That is, their authorship could not be traced to any one of our Lord’s Apostles. There were,

thus, a number of books which laid claim to being Christian scripture. However, it was the Church which was the determiner of which books would be included and excluded from the official biblical canon of the Church. So, when anyone casts a disparaging remark against the Tradition of the Church, he/she is, in fact, also casting those same disparaging remarks against the Holy Bible itself which came out of the Tradition of the Church, which they, by their own admission, reject. More about this later on.

This brings to mind another inconsistency with the Protestant stance. It is one which is manifestly untenable in dealing with the relationship between the Holy Bible and the Church. They extol the Holy Bible as the Word of God and surely it is. Yet, they reject the Church which defined the contents, that is the books, which make up the Holy Bible as we have it. This is comparable to saying that one accepts the laws of the United States Congress as binding, but rejects the authority of the Congress to make such laws.

The simple fact is that the Church is the agency through which the Holy Bible as we now have it was given to the world. How can one accept the one, while, in effect, rejecting the other?

Again, I feel obligated to stress the fact that this work is not intended as an attack on anyone. Rather, all the comments should be viewed as simply a defense of the Armenian Church. Her critics have been direct; Her defenders must also be direct and specific..

In fact, in his book *THE ARMENIAN EVANGELICAL REFORMATION, CAUSES AND EFFECTS*, G.H. Chopourian, on pages 142-143, presents the respective stances of the Armenian Church and the then new Protestant movement. What is interesting about the presentation is the titles under which they are presented. For example, the Protestant views are presented under the heading *The Evangelistic View*. At the same time, the Orthodox views of the Armenian Church are presented under the heading *The New Creed*. The natural and intended and predictable conclusion from such a presentation is that the Protestant/Evangelistic point of view is the long-standing “traditional” view and the views of the Armenian Church are something “new.” Of course, the exact opposite is the

truth. Regardless of the headings under which the views of the Armenian Church are being presented, its views are the traditional, Orthodox views. They are simply being re-presented to counteract the various heretical claims of the Protestants/Evangelicals. It is the views of the latter that are the innovations, not the Orthodox views of the Armenian Church.

Having defined themselves as “biblical,” the detractors of the Armenian Church, in order to justify their stance, must necessarily posit the Armenian Church as being “unbiblical.” Otherwise, they have no basis or justification for their own institutional existence!

It must be noted that in recent years, much of the mutual animosity of previous years has mellowed and relations appear to be better than in the past.

WHO IS BIBLICAL?

Your word is a lamp unto my feet.
[Ps. 59:105]

WHO IS BIBLICAL?

In September of 1973, September 9 to be exact, I was ordained as a priest of the Armenian Church at St. Mary Armenian Apostolic [Orthodox] Church in the small Tulare County village of Yettem. Incidentally, this is the only community in the United States which bears an Armenian name. Yettem means Eden. One of the closest towns, small by most standards, is Dinuba. In the mid-1970's Dinuba had a population of about 10,000. Many of the parishioners of St. Mary Armenian Church of Yettem lived in Dinuba. Since most of these were up in years, it was only natural that in the course of time they would be entering their eternal rest. When this happened, the funeral arrangements were made through the town's one and only funeral home – Dopkins Chapel.

At one point in the mid-1970's, there were several deaths within a relatively short period of time. Of course, these arrangements were all made through Dopkins Chapel and the services were conducted in St. Mary Church in Yettem. It was and still is my custom to accompany the casket from the church to the cemetery, riding in the hearse. During those trips which would take anywhere from 20 to 30 minutes, depending upon whether the burial was to be in Visalia or Dinuba, I would frequently strike up a conversation with the driver. We would usually discuss current events, the economy, the weather, the life of the deceased or a host of other topics. During one of those trips from the church to the cemetery, the driver, a most amicable young man who had driven the hearse for the previous two funerals, commented, "You know, Father, this is the third time I have been to a funeral in your church. You know what, you do things just like Christians!"

Needless to say, I was taken back by this comment. After all, for all of his sincerity, the young man made this comment to a priest of a Church which has been in continuous existence since apostolic times, having been initially established by two of Christ's Apostles, St. Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew. This is a Christian Church and faith which became the state religion of Armenia in A.D. 301. This Church compiled an alphabet for the Armenian language specifically so that the

Holy Bible could be translated into Armenian, centuries before the earliest English language translations of the Scriptures. Here is a Church whose sons and daughters had undergone centuries of persecution because of their Christianity. In fact, a goodly number of those funerals out of Dopkins Chapel in Dinuba were for people who had managed to escape from the Genocide of 1915 which was perpetrated by the Turkish Ottoman government against its Christian Armenian population. Any of these could have escaped by the simple expedient of converting to Islam. They chose to remain Christian.

Bearing all of this in mind, the young man's comment, though sincere and intended as a compliment, revealed a bias. Yettem is in Tulare County in California in the San Joaquin Valley, an area which is considered to be the "Bible Belt" of California. The dominant vocal force is Protestant. One's faithfulness to Christianity is judged in Protestant terms. It betrays the Protestant bias which, among other things, holds to the idea that from the very earliest days Christianity fell into error and was waiting the advent of the Protestant reformers to "purify" it and "free" it from centuries of "errors." Such a stance, viewed in historical and theological terms, is nothing more than absolute nonsense. Nonetheless, it is a view that is not uncommon.

In line with this view the following article is quoted from the June 17, 1988 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY. The article which appears on page 29, makes mention of the fact that the Coptic Orthodox Church, a sister of the Armenian Church, has accepted the Protestant Arabic Bible and has started its own Sunday School movement. The article concludes that this makes the Coptic Orthodox Church more "biblical" than the other branches of Orthodoxy. In other words, the Coptic Orthodox Church, one of the most ancient of Christian Churches, one which was established through the efforts of St. Mark, and one which has and continues to be persecuted in an Islamic country, Egypt, somehow wasn't "biblical" until it began to use a "Protestant" Bible. Of course, the corollary is that those Orthodox Churches which do not follow suit are somehow either less "biblical" or "unbiblical."

As mentioned earlier, in this same vein Hagop A. Chakmakjian in his THE ARMENIAN EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT (pg. 43) makes the following comment:

. . .the conflict was between those for whom the Bible was the ultimate rule and those to whom the Church's clerics, Councils, and traditions were the last word. Therefore, it would be more correct to say that the hierarchy of the Armenian Church were not willing to allow their authority to be undermined by the authority of the Holy Scriptures.

Of course, as was earlier pointed out, ultimately the “authority of the Holy Scriptures” for the current detractors is dependent upon individual opinion/interpretation of the Scriptures. In the final analysis, for them, the Bible means what I think/believe it to mean.

The impact and intention of the above statements is, nonetheless, quite clear. They convey, and are intended to convey, the idea that Orthodoxy, the Armenian Church included, is non or anti-biblical; that Orthodoxy works in opposition to the Holy Bible; and that if Orthodoxy, the Armenian Church included, wishes to be considered “biblical,” it must become like its detractors, because they are really “biblical.”

Such a stance gives rise to two vitally important questions: 1.) What does it mean to be “biblical?” and 2.) Who designates who is and who isn't “biblical?” In moving to answer these questions, we must look at the Holy Bible itself, to the statement made by St. Paul himself in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 – “*So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or letter.*” For an Orthodox Christian, this simply means that the Christian faith has two crucial parts, the written, that is the Scriptures and, the non-written, that is Holy Tradition. Both of these convey the Christian faith. And, further, we are cautioned to hold fast

to both of these. That caution comes to us from the Holy Scriptures themselves.

In answering the above questions about what constitutes being “biblical,” I have found the following article by Valerie Geokjian Zahirsky to be most helpful. It is here presented in its entirety:

Perhaps it was the daughter’s vehemence in defending her beliefs, beliefs that are misdirected and so strongly held that I felt compelled to challenge them. Perhaps it was just that she and her mother had come on a lovely day, and I was glad for an excuse to sit on the porch awhile.

Whatever it was, my most recent encounter with Jehovah’s Witnesses was different from past ones. Before, I usually mumbled to the visitors that we had our own church and my husband was a priest and I really didn’t have time today, while gently but firmly closing the door. This time, I sat with the mother and daughter team for quite a while, listening and talking.

Again and again, as I questioned their teachings and practices, the daughter fiercely insisted that, “We only teach what is in the Bible.” Finally, I confronted the statement and said to her, “No you don’t teach what is in the Bible. You teach what is in Charles Taze Russell’s personal translation of the Bible – a translation that distorts the Bible’s meaning terribly. And that distortion is what the Jehovah’s Witnesses is founded on.” I tried to explain that in the Christian Church, nothing can be based on one person’s interpretation, and together we read from 2 Peter 1:20-21 – “First of all, you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

The encounter made me think how often this kind of thing happens. The Mormons, like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, a non-Christian group, base their whole

system of belief on the interpretations and “visions” of one man, Joseph Smith. Innumerable tiny denominations exist around us, all espousing their own interpretations of the Bible. They feel no obligation to apologize for or even recognize their fragmented, individualized distortions of divine revelation.

Yet, they all claim to be “biblical” churches, and many of them question our biblical basis. We are asked to “explain” our Church’s practices and even to somehow demonstrate that they are in accordance with Scripture. So let’s answer the question directly. Are we a biblical church? No; WE ARE THE BIBLICAL CHURCH. We are part of the Orthodox body of churches which has preserved the teachings and worship of the Apostles since the beginning. We, the members of this body, are united in doctrine and teaching [though some of our practices and traditions differ] and we are not fragmented into hundreds of denominations. We do not allow one person’s individual beliefs to determine what we espouse. The Church is a body and that body must come together and agree on something for it to be recognized as a teaching of the Church.

This month is an appropriate time to think about all of this. One of the events the Church remembers this month [as a feast day on Her calendar] is the Council of Constantinople, an ecumenical council in which 150 bishops met together, representing all the Christian churches throughout the world. Together they worked to discern God’s will, together they prayed for God’s guidance, together they formulated the teaching that the Holy Spirit is the divine Third Person of the Holy Trinity. That meeting of the whole Church took place in 381, and we have taught the same thing about the Holy Spirit ever since. Russell, the Jehovah’s Witnesses founder, abandoned these teachings of the one universal Church and substituted his own.

The Church remembers Councils, both to remind us of what our basic teachings are, and to remind us of this all-important dimension of coming together in the Church's life. Yes, we are the biblical Church because we interpret the Bible together, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as a united body. We don't think up our own interpretations. We know that the Bible is the description of a way of life. We come together to experience that life as a Church, worshipping and praying and striving to do God's will together. That shared experience enables us to fill our whole life with Christ's teaching. The Church encourages us to read the Bible on our own. Daily readings, or lections, are given to us by the Church and are printed each year in the Diocesan calendar.

But, the Church also knows that Christ and the Scriptures call us to experience the godly life as a community, and to live in accordance with what He revealed to the Apostles and to His Church. We do not follow some individual "interpreter" who made up his own idea about what Scripture means. We follow the One who created Scripture and everything else. It's our privilege and responsibility to be truly the Church of the Bible.

As a further illustration of some of the points made by Valerie Zahirsky above, we now turn to a consideration of comments made by the Armenian Protestant author, Carnegie Calian in his book *ICON AND PULPIT*. Here he is addressing the issue of the relationship between liturgy and Scripture. These comments are found on page 123 and following.

It is only a superficial survey which leads a Protestant to think that the Liturgy and Scripture are widely separated. Liturgy and the Bible are fused into one for the Orthodox. One Orthodox theological student indicated, "We have more of the Bible read in our services that you have in yours." His statement at first is surprising, but it is true. The use of Scripture in

the Orthodox liturgy reproduces the Bible for the present as living tradition. The liturgy actually united the written Word with the unwritten life of the Christian Church. Furthermore, the unity of liturgy and Scripture chanted by the Orthodox priest helps the believers to see Christ as the High Priest who intercedes in their behalf.

In a research study on the Byzantine liturgies of St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil, and the Pre-sanctified (the liturgies best known in the West) as well as the sacramental services of Baptism, Chrismation, Holy Unction, and Matrimony, a clear relationship was found between these services of worship and their dependence on Scripture. Approximately 25 per cent of these services consist of almost direct Biblical material. The content of the liturgy that alludes to Scripture is even greater. The study also revealed that the liturgical authors used both Testaments but slightly favored the Old over the New. The Hebrew influence inherent in Orthodox worship would be a fruitful avenue for further investigation, especially in the light of the increasing Christian-Jewish dialogue. The use of the Book of Psalms in the liturgies exceeds by far the other books of the Bible. This fact is not only revealing for purposes of ecumenical exchange, but even more indicates that a theological and liturgical study of the soteriological nature of the Psalms is needed in our rapidly developing ecumenical climate.

The Gospel according to Matthew comes second, and the book of Genesis is third in number of appearances in the three basic Byzantine liturgies. In the Old Testament, Genesis is followed by Isaiah, Exodus, and the deuterocanonical books [Apocrypha] – the Wisdom of Solomon, and Judith. In the New Testament, Matthew is followed by the Gospel of Luke, 1 Corinthians, Romans, and the Gospel of John, in that order. The letter to the Hebrews also enjoys wide representation in the liturgies, indicating that the

liturgical authors had considerable knowledge of the recognized Scriptures of that day.

What both Zahirsky's and Calian's comments lead us to conclude is simply that the accusations that Orthodoxy, the Armenian Church included, is somehow un- or anti-biblical are simply without foundation. At a most personal level, I am always amused by comments of the detractors that the Armenian Church is somehow not biblical while their own version of Christianity is. During my life as a priest, out of ecumenical concerns and/or consideration for parishioners, some of whose families include non-Orthodox members, I have attended a number of weddings and funerals which have been conducted in various Protestant churches. One of the things which has struck me about each of these experiences is that while the service itself was moderately sprinkled with various biblical references, normally there was no formal reading of any scriptural passage. As an Armenian Orthodox priest whose Church is accused of being non-biblical, I have found this omission to be strange indeed. Contrast this to the usage of the Armenian Church whose services feature regular scripture readings, normally from both the Old Testament and the New Testament as an integral part of the service. In fact, there are assigned scripture readings for almost each and every day of the year. One would assume, correctly I believe, that the services of those who claim to be "biblical" would feature more in terms of scripture reading than I have personally witnessed.

What really seems to be the issue is not being "biblical" or "unbiblical." Although, as demonstrated above and in the coming pages, the Armenian Church and Her sister Orthodox Churches, both Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian, along with Roman Catholic Church [and I must add the Anglican/Episcopalian Church] are considered to be the historical biblical Church and are known as THE "biblical" Church. The central issue has been and is the unwillingness of the Orthodox to blindly follow the proddings of the so-called reformers. For example, who says that Luther, Zwigli, Calvin, Knox et al are correct? Ultimately, their systems are based upon their own opinions and teachings about what the Holy Bible says or what they think it should say. Their views have demonstrably not been subjected to the kind of scrutiny which has been applied to Orthodoxy. Within

the Protestant system, there is no corrective for this or that interpretation. While, within Orthodoxy, although much maligned, there is the ever-present corrective of Holy Tradition. Given the antagonism of the detractors to the concept of Tradition, that is the handing down of the faith from generation to generation, if this non-Orthodox attitude were applied to the law, it would mean that legal precedent would have no place in legal or court proceedings. Precedent would be completely disregarded.

As mentioned earlier, given the Protestant stance of “sola scriptura = the Scriptures alone” and private interpretation, what we have is a situation in which my own opinion becomes synonymous with the “Word of God.” Instead of an infallible Church, the Protestant position makes every believer “infallible.” Perhaps the ultimate proof of this is the plethora of Protestant denominations, each of which claims to be “founded” on the Holy Bible but whose teachings are in fact antithetical to apostolic Christianity as portrayed in the Holy Bible itself and frequently to each other. A commonly observed example of this phenomena is the attitude toward abortion which seems to differ from denomination to denomination, some placing the idea of “choice” above the value of human life. Hopefully, such a tendency will become more and more obvious in the coming pages.

In closing this section, we must bear the following caveat in mind. The so-called “reformers” were writing in opposition to what they viewed as excesses in the Roman Catholic Church. Their modern apologists frequently make the mistake of assuming that Orthodoxy is simply an eastern version of Roman Catholicism. With all due respect to the great Church of Rome, such a view is inaccurate from both a historical and a theological point of view.

SALVATION

He who believes and is baptized will be saved.
[Mark 16:16]

SALVATION

Salvation is by faith alone, justified by the righteousness of Christ, and not by meritorious works such as prayer, fasting or penance.
[Chopourian pg. 142]

Such a statement means that faith is equated with salvation. To believe is to be saved. Beyond this, there is nothing to be done, no further requirements. Such practices as prayer, fasting, or penance are neither necessary nor are they helpful. The message is simple – only believe and you are saved!

This stance, leads to a kind of show-biz like atmosphere in which people are urged to make a declaration of faith and be instantly saved. We need only look at television and the various popular media to see the appeal of such an apparently simple message. It is certainly the central thrust of the many so-called revival crusades that we regularly see. “Come; believe; and be saved,” is the call.

I am here reminded of an incident which occurred in the 1980’s. One of our local high schools here in Visalia, Mt. Whitney to be exact, had a World Religions class which was taught by a most dedicated and informed teacher. Twice each year, once in the fall semester and once in the spring semester, he would have an open panel of the various pastors from in and around the Visalia area to deal with the students’ questions. The students would direct questions to the clergyman of their choice, who was then free to answer according to his own faith background. These panels usually featured a Roman Catholic priest, an Orthodox priest [me], several Protestant ministers, and, as available, representatives from non-Christian religions. Because of the demographics of Visalia, most of the questioners were from one or another Christian background and the questions were more Christianity centered. During one of these sessions, a young lady very proudly announced that she had been “born again” and, accordingly, was saved. Therefore, she did not attend church services of any kind, did not pray, did not read the Bible, in fact, did nothing more than relate her “born again” experience to all listeners. She noted that since she had been “born again” and “saved” there was no

need for any of these other activities! Of course, if this young lady had been raised in a Roman Catholic or Christian Orthodox atmosphere, she would have realized that her being “born again” was just the beginning, not the end of the journey. She was deliberately avoiding those practices which have always been associated with Christianity. Admittedly, none of these will WIN us salvation. Nonetheless, they are truly inseparable from the Christian life which she felt no obligation to live, relying on having been “born again.”

Let’s look at such claims more closely, more biblically. We begin by looking at Matthew 7:21-23: *Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me you evil-doers.'* ”

The conclusion here is inescapable. Belief of and by itself is not sufficient. Even acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of and by itself is not sufficient. Along with such an affirmation there must be the doing of God’s will. They go hand in hand and are not mutually exclusive.

Let’s now look at the epistle of James which Martin Luther characterized as the “straw epistle” because he didn’t like its stress on works. Here in James 1:22-25, we read the following: *“But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing.”*

Elsewhere in the same epistle, James 2:14-17, we read: *"What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead.*

But some will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you shallow man, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works."

Here the point made in relation to the selection from the Gospel according to Matthew is reiterated – belief of and by itself guarantees nothing, after all, even the demons believe. What sets the Christian apart is the faith commitment to Jesus Christ AND the actual doing of God's will. Our professed faith is to be shown by doing/living God's will in our personal lives. Again, the biblical injunction is for faith AND works which are reflective of that faith.

Let's now look at John 5:25-26. This is part of a scriptural selection which is read at the grave site for every funeral in the Armenian Church. The selection reads as follows: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and has given him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life; and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment."*

Elsewhere, in Luke 8:21, we read the following clear comment of our Lord saying: *"My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."*

Here again, the point is stressed that what we do is as important as what we believe. This, of course, does not mean that we can earn our way into heaven as though we are earning points for scouting badges. In a sense, such points have already been earned by and through Jesus Christ. It remains for us to accept this and to live our

lives in accord with His dictates. If we truly love Him and believe in Him and accept Him, there is no other recourse.

What here appears to be most shocking are the negative comments made in regard to prayer, fasting, and penance. It is as though none of these is important. To be sure, of and by themselves, none of these will “win” us salvation. What is undeniable, however, is that all of them, individually or together, can and do open the way for us to get closer to our Lord Jesus Christ. As such, they are valuable exercises. This negative stand toward prayer, fasting, and penance on the part of the detractors of the Armenian Church show just how far they have wandered from historic Christianity. All of these practices have been and are part of the Orthodoxy of the Armenian Church.

Aside from the above comments, the negative comments regarding the efficacy of prayer, fasting, and penance are outright anti-biblical, a truly strange stance for a group which claims to be based on the Bible. Let’s take a few moments and look at what the Holy Bible actually has to say about these practices.

Regarding prayer, the following scriptural comments are most relevant. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 we read, “*Pray constantly.*” Also, we find this statement in James 5:16: “*The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effect.*” And, most tellingly, we find the following statement regarding prayer in Mark 14:32: “*And they went to a place which was called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here, while I pray.’*”

From the above, we are drawn to the inescapable conclusion that prayer is necessary, effective, and that our Lord Himself prayed. If one takes the comments of the detractors seriously at face value, then one is left to conclude exactly the opposite: prayer is not necessary; prayer is ineffectual; and Jesus, our Lord, was wasting His time in praying. I know of no one who is a believing Christian who would subscribe to such a nonsensical, blatantly anti-biblical stance. Yet, if one takes the detractors of the Armenian Church seriously, that is precisely the conclusion with which one is left.

Regarding fasting, which is the limiting of the total intake of food, the Scriptures give us the following examples. In Luke 5:35, we read: *“The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.”* Also, this statement from Matthew 6:16 carries the point even further: *“And when you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

From the above, it can be clearly seen that both the Holy Bible and our Lord Himself assume the practice of fasting. Our Lord Himself never questions the practice of fasting. In fact, He takes care to point out the attitude and proper deportment for one who is fasting. He never says, “IF you fast. . .” Rather, He says, “WHEN you fast. . .” Given such clear statements coming from the mouth of our Savior Himself and found in the Holy Bible, how can one who professes to be a Bible-believer discount a practice which Jesus is advocating for His followers?

Let’s now look at biblical comments regarding penance, another practice which the detractors of the Armenian Church slough-off as being ineffectual and unnecessary. We begin by looking at 1 John 1:9: *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

We then read the very words of our Lord Himself regarding penance, which the Armenian Church, along with Her sister Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church regard as a sacrament: *“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”* [John 20:22-23] In the Gospel according to Matthew we read: *“Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”* [Matt. 16:19]

Could any statements regarding the sacrament of penance and the requisite authority surrounding it be more clear? Again, in all sincerity, one must inquire how anyone who claims to be a Bible-

believing Christian can ignore such clear statements of our Lord, statements which are clearly included in the text of the Holy Bible itself.

In considering the questions of salvation, several conclusions seem inescapable, based upon the Holy Bible itself:

- 1.) Believing/faith of and by itself is not sufficient.
- 2.) There is nothing we can do to “earn” salvation.
- 3.) We must cooperate with and live in accordance with the will of God.
- 4.) Our salvation is not final until our Lord Himself has judged us. Read Matthew 25:31-46 and John 5:28-30 in this regard.
- 5.) It is possible for us to lose our salvation as a result of our own actions. Read 1 Corinthians 10:12.
- 6.) In the final analysis we are all completely and absolutely dependent upon the grace/mercy of God. Witness the frequent response of “Lord, have mercy,” which one finds in the Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church. Such a response merely underscores the fact of our dependence.

The detractors of the Armenian Church would have us believe that all that is necessary for salvation is to make an emotional affirmation of faith and then go about our business. There is no need to pray, to fast, to penance, to do deeds of compassion and virtue, and ultimately there is no need to even worship. Just go around announcing to all the day and time when “I was saved.”

Here again, we find that it is the stance of the detractors of the Armenian Church which is non-biblical, not the stance of the Armenian Church in regard to the questions discussed. The Holy Bible itself, the Breath of God, contradicts the detractors’ own statements. One would think that, given their claims to be “Bible-based,” they would rush to embrace the Bible-based Orthodoxy of the Armenian Church, rather than concocting baseless arguments, claiming that the Armenian Church is somehow un-biblical or even anti-biblical.

THE CHURCH

Upon this rock I will build my church.
[Matt. 16:18]

THE CHURCH

Any organized group of true Christians is a church of Jesus Christ. [Chopourian – pg. 142]

The true Church of Christ is the invisible Church; the visible Church can and does err. [Chopourian – pg. 142]

As we consider the first statement, we are led step by step to the following inescapable conclusions:

- 1.) The Church comes into being when WE get together and get organized.
- 2.) In effect, WE create the Church.
- 3.) WE then become the founders/establishers of the Church

While this seems to suit the inclinations of the detractors of the Armenian Church, such a statement appears to ignore the essential role of our Lord Jesus Christ as both THE founder and THE foundation of the Church. It is a paradigm which fits quite well into what amounts to a “church-less” Christianity. It also helps to explain why there are so many varying denominations in the Protestant camp. If each denomination or church is just a different version of what Jesus Christ did in establishing His Church, then such a definition might make sense. If, however, our Lord established *A Church* for all time, then such a concept makes no sense whatever.

Let’s now take a look at the Scriptures to see whether or not the above statement of the detractors is in line with or in contradiction to the comments of the Holy Bible which they claim as their base. We will start with Matthew 16:18-20: “*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.*” In this brief selection, we are shown that the Church was established by

Jesus Christ Himself. He established A Church, NOT "churches" or denominations!

Our next Scriptural reference is Matthew 18:18-20. Here we read: *"Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything, it will be done by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them."*

Once again, the conclusions seem all too evident, First, the Church which Jesus Christ established functions with His authority. Secondly, Jesus is wherever the Church which He established is. These conclusions are simply based upon the words of the Holy Bible itself.

Our third scriptural reference is from Luke 10:16. Let's read: *"He who hears you, hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me."*

Once again, the conclusions seem inescapable. First, the Church speaks with the authority of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ and the Church are not mutually exclusive or antagonistic entities. Undoubtedly, there may have been abuses from time to time. Nonetheless, the principle still remains that when the Church speaks on matters relating to the Christian faith, it speaks with the authority of Jesus Christ Himself. Secondly, the mission of the Church is the same as the mission of Jesus Christ. They do not automatically stand in opposition to each other as is apparently proposed by the detractors of the Armenian Church.

We now move on to a fourth scriptural reference, John 15:16. Here the Breath of God tells us, quoting our Lord: *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide."*

Here we see that the Apostles were initially the ones who were authorized to carry Jesus Christ's message and Church into the world. Starting from the Apostles, each generation of those who were called

passed this authority on to the next generation by means of ordination i.e. laying on of hands – in Armenian *tzernatrootyoon*. This was done on the basis of what is known as apostolic succession, thereby assuring that the commission originally given by our Lord to His own chosen Apostles would continue unchanged until the very last days. The mission was to continue unchanged, not end with the Apostles. We see this concept even in the Book of Acts in the case of St. Paul at the Council of Jerusalem where he was given authorization by the Apostles to continue his missionary work.

This concept of continuing the faith unchanged is described in the following words of no less a personage than St. Paul himself who says: “*For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you...*” [1 Cor. 11:23] and “*For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received...*” [1 Cor. 15:3] This concept of handing on to others what was received is central to an Orthodox understanding of the faith. The selected apostolic method for doing this was the laying on of hands, what we call ordination.

Let’s now look at John 20:21-23. In these verses we find the following: “*Jesus said to them, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’*”

Here we are clearly shown that the work of the Church is to be the same as the work of Jesus Christ, that is the forgiveness of sin and the salvation of souls. Such is based upon the authority of Jesus Christ Himself as He authorized His Church.

As we consider the above scriptural citations, we are drawn to several conclusions. These show that the detractors of the Armenian Church, though they speak in terms of the Holy Bible, offer propositions which certainly appear to have no biblical basis. Let’s now look at these conclusions:

- 1.) Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of mankind, established His Church in time and place.

- 2.) Over the centuries that Church has grown and been taken to the far corners of the world.
- 3.) That Church was brought to Armenia by two of Jesus Christ's chosen Apostles, St. Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew. Other Apostles took it to different parts of the world.
- 4.) That Church has been in continuous existence for approximately 2000 years.
- 5.) One can become a member, a part, of the Christian Church established by Jesus Christ.
- 6.) The Church does not simply come into existence by a group of people coming together and "establishing" a "church."
- 7.) One becomes a part of the Christian Church by joining the very Church which our Lord Jesus Christ Himself established with a commitment to Jesus Christ and baptism and chrismation. Acts 8:26-38 is illustrative of this point.
- 8.) It is this Church which has maintained the Christian faith for approximately 2000 years.
- 9.) The concept of the Church as proposed by the detractors of the Armenian Church has no biblical basis whatever.

The second quote at the beginning of this section is yet another example of a baseless accusation being made against the Armenian Church as a justification for the actions of the detractors. It is interesting to note that this statement posits the fiction that there are two Christian "Churches." One is the visible Church which is known to history. The other is the "invisible Church." Here again, the detractors offer no biblical basis for their statement.

Our Lord, in His famous conversation with St. Peter – Matthew 16:18 – says: *"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it."* It is quite clear from the foregoing that our Lord established one Church, a visible Church, a Church which was established in time and space. There is no mention of an "invisible Church." Further, if we take a look at the letters of St. Paul, indeed of any of the epistles in

the New Testament, we see that they are all addressed to real, functioning Christian Church communities at Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, Colossus, and so forth. None of these letters was addressed to this imaginary “invisible Church.” It seems that the reason for the creation of this “invisible Church” is but another attempt on the part of the detractors to justify their own position by denying the legitimacy of the real, visible Church and claiming a loyalty to the “invisible Church.” While this group attributes an arrogance to the Armenian Church, it seems that the real arrogance is exhibited by them. The baseless comment regarding the real, visible Church is but an obvious device for saying that they are better than the regular Christians, that is Orthodox Christians, because they, the detractors, belong to the superior “invisible Church.”

In their rush to justify themselves by criticizing the Armenian Church, the detractors never seem to bother to tell us when this “invisible Church” was established; who established it; and where in the Holy Bible we can read about its establishment. They do all this, or rather fail to do this, all the while claiming that their views are biblically based and that anyone who disagrees with them, especially the Armenian Church, is not only un-biblical but is operating in an anti-biblical mode.

The comment about “the Visible Church can and does err,” is also most amusing. Elsewhere, there have been a sufficient number of scriptural citations indicating that the Church which was founded by our Lord Jesus Christ was endowed by Her Founder with the necessary authority to do that for which it was commissioned. We were shown that this commission started with our Lord Himself and was intended by Him to continue to the end of time. Bearing this in mind, it should be obvious that the claim of the Church to infallibility is biblically based and extends only to matters relating to the faith itself. In the Eastern understanding, infallibility doesn’t mean that the pronouncements of this or that member of the hierarchy are true and without error because they have pronounced them. Rather, it means that such pronouncements are made for the simple reason that they are true. Such is not a minor difference. An important part of this process is acceptance by the people of God. In other words, the views about infallibility differ from East to West. In the West it rests in the

office of the Pope. In the East, it rests within the totality of the Church. To follow on the attempted point by the detractors, if the Church makes errors here, why should one listen to the Church? Of course, a part of their entire system is to reduce or eliminate the role of the institutional Church and make Christianity simply a kind of individual or personal endeavor. Such a situation has been described as “Jesus, me, and the Bible,” nothing else is necessary. If one grants validity to these statements of the detractors, one is left with the conclusion that our Lord is a liar. After all, did He not promise that “the gates of death [error] shall not prevail against it [the Church].”? Again, such pronouncements have only to do with the faith.

However, if the Church were to come out with a pronouncement that the earth is flat, such a statement would be blatantly in error, simply on the face of the matter. Such a statement would be beyond the competency of the Church and would be dealing with a matter of science, not the Christian faith.

It is a simple fact that the Church has not been authorized to make pronouncements on economic theory, biology, science, geography, and so forth. It has been authorized, in terms of the witness of the Holy Bible, to make pronouncements in terms of the Christian faith.

What is strikingly inconsistent in this argument of the detractors is the fact that while denying infallibility to the Church, they seem willing to grant infallibility to the individual in his/her own personal interpretation of the Bible. Using their own logic, we ask, if the Church in its collectivity errs, what is to prevent the individual from erring in his/her interpretation. And, most importantly who or what decides? From the Orthodox point of view the answer is easy and has been given.

Further, their stance ignores the fact that Jesus Christ established His Church, a very visible Church, in space and in time. That Church has maintained its continuous existence for approximately 2000 years. From century to century, generation to generation, people became members of this Church through a commitment to Christ and baptism. Given this reality, what need is there for other “churches?” The next question is most intimidating. What validity is there in

“churches” or “denominations which have broken away from the Church established by our Lord, rejecting some of the basic tenants of that Church and establishing differing “versions” of the Church established by Him?

How, for example, can they claim to be part of the Church of Jesus Christ, when they have severed membership in that Church and set-up their own rival institutions? The reality is that one either belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ or one doesn't. Having left the Church established by our Lord, how is it possible to maintain or claim to still be a part of Jesus Christ's Church?

Here, perhaps, emotional arguments might be involved. However, historical fact and solid theology, to say nothing of the witness of the Holy Bible, show such attempts to be without any scriptural basis. In fact, the biblical witness stands in direct opposition to such attempts.

St. Cyprian, a second century Church father, writing against the Novatians, who set up rival bishoprics and a rival “church” to the Church established by our Lord Jesus Christ, put the situation into the clearest possible focus when he said: *“No one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as Mother.”* [St. Cyprian – *De Unite Ecclesiae* = On the Unity of the Church]. His meaning could not be clearer. If you are not loyal to the Church [of Christ] then you cannot claim to have God as your Father.

In order to discount St. Cyprian's comment, one would have to revert to the baseless claim that early on the Church of Christ almost immediately fell into error and was simply awaiting the arrival of the “reformers” to again put it on the right track. As pointed out earlier, such a stance runs counter to historical, theological, and scriptural reality.

THE SACRAMENTS

And lo, I am with you always.
[Matt.28:20]

THE SACRAMENTS

There are but two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper and a Christian duly ordained by a gathered Church may administer them. [Chopourian – pg. 142]

It seems that a logical place to begin the discussion in this section is by first defining what is meant by the term “sacrament.” Three related definitions will here be given. The first is the classical Roman Catholic definition; the second a standard Orthodox definition; and the third a definition of the Armenian Church.

Our Roman Catholic definition is: *A Sacrament is an outward or sensible sign instituted by Christ through which inward grace is imparted to the soul.* [A Course in Religion for Catholic High Schools and Academies – Rev. John Laux, M.A. – pg.1]

Moving on, the following Orthodox definition is for a sacrament: *... an outward visible sign and inward spiritual grace.* [The Orthodox Church – Timothy Ware – pg. 283] And, according to Metropolitan Filaret of Moscow, *a holy act by which grace, or what is the same thing, the redeeming power of God, operates upon man in a mysterious fashion.* [The Eastern Orthodox Church – Ernst Benz – pg. 32]

The Armenian Church's definition of a sacrament is as follows: *The Sacraments or the Mysteries of the Church are those holy rites which are instituted by Christ, and in which, through outward and visible signs, are given to those who worthily receive them, the power and grace of the Holy Spirit for their sanctification.* [A Catechism of Christian Instruction according to the Doctrine of the Armenian Church – Archbishop Khoren Narbey – pg.180]

As we consider the above definitions, several common factors are seen to emerge. A Sacrament involves:

- 1.) institution by Jesus Christ
- 2.) outward signs
- 3.) reception of an inward grace

Further, when we consider the words of our Lord in the closing lines of Matthew 28:20: *“Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age,”* we realize that the Sacraments of the Church are a very real way of concretizing that promise and showing that, indeed, the Lord is always with us, at every juncture of life. Perhaps, this fact will become more obvious in what follows.

While the detractors maintain that there are only two Sacraments and the Roman Catholic Church maintains there are seven. Orthodoxy, the Armenian Church included, does not insist on a fixed number. Considering the fact that all of the Sacraments proclaim the lordship of Jesus Christ in one way or another, it does not seem reasonable to say that there is a fixed and limited number of ways of doing this. For Orthodoxy, the number of Sacraments is irrelevant. What is important is the essence of each. However, the usually agreed upon number is seven Sacraments. For the Armenian Church, as part of Orthodoxy, the number could as easily be eight or nine or ten. Again, number is not as important as essence.

When we look at the generally accepted seven Sacraments, we see that there is a correspondence to our various stages of life, thereby underscoring the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ is with us always, not just in a kind of ethereal sense, but in a real, concrete way. The Sacraments as usually presented are:

- 1.) Baptism = birth
- 2.) Chrismation = growth
- 3.) Holy Communion = sustenance
- 4.) Penance = falling and rising again
- 5.) Matrimony = living life; life's vocation
- 6.) Holy Orders [Ordination] = living life;
serving God; life's vocation
- 7.) Prayers for the Sick = illness and healing

All of the above have their Scriptural origins, as we shall see. When we consider baptism, we first turn to our Lord's baptism at the hands of John the Baptist. We can read about this event in Matthew 3:1-17. The focus point for our purposes here is to be found in verses 13 through 15. Here we read: *“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John tried to prevent Him,*

saying, *‘I have need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?’ But Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he allowed him.”*

In the above selection, when John hesitates to baptize Jesus, our Lord’s comment is most revealing. He says: *“. . .thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”* In other words, it is appropriate for me to fulfill all requirements. Of course, our Lord had no need of baptism. Nonetheless, He underwent baptism as an example of what we should do.

Elsewhere, in the Gospel according to St. John, in what is a clear reference to baptism, our Lord says: *“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.”* For the early Church, being born again and baptism were one and the same. Unfortunately, the theology of the detractors of the Armenian Church has taken this reference and turned it into a kind of private emotional experience, that of “being born again.” The earliest understanding of this text was precisely that it referred to baptism. In fact, it is one of the Gospel selections which is read at every baptism in the Armenian Church.

As we go further, in Titus 3:4-7, we read the following: *“But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”* What St. Paul is here telling us is that baptism, the “washing of regeneration,” is given to us out of God’s mercy, through Jesus Christ. It is this act which makes us heirs in the hope for eternal life because we have been justified by His grace. In other words, God is operating in and through baptism.

Let’s now take a look at Romans 6:5 – “For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.” Here we see that baptism not only marks

our entrance into the Church, the Body of Christ, it also has ramifications beyond the grave - the resurrection.

The next sacrament, that which we call chrismation and in the West is referred to as confirmation, also has a biblical basis and is seen by all Orthodox as the completion of baptism. Baptism is the “new birth.” What then happens when this new spiritual life is born through baptism? It is given, dedicated/sealed, to God. This is signified by the anointing. In fact, in the Armenian Church, anything that is to be used in God’s service is anointed/sealed. Any picture that is to be used in the church is anointed. When a church is consecrated as a house of worship, it is anointed. When a priest is ordained, his forehead and hands are anointed. When someone is baptized, that person’s forehead, eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, hands, heart, back, and feet, are anointed. In each case, the meaning is the same: this object or person is being dedicated or sealed to God to be used in His service. It is not an “add on.” Rather it is the essence of who we are to be as Christians.

Immediately following the baptism, the initiate is anointed: forehead; eyes; ears; nostrils; mouth; hands; heart; back; and feet. In Orthodox belief, this is an extension or continuing of the act of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles. In the case of the sacrament, the Holy Spirit descends upon the newly baptized. This new Christian is now fully and completely a member of the Body of Christ, the Church. He/she becomes part of the priesthood of believers and is thereby called upon to bear continual witness to Jesus Christ. In Armenian this is referred to as *guhnoonk*=sealing. Witness the scripture which says “...*having believed you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.*” [Eph. 1:13]

This sealing marks the initiate as a full Christian, one belonging to Christ, one whose relationship to our Lord and Savior is sealed and assured by the Holy Spirit. To see the total Christ-centeredness of this sacrament, one only need look at the prayers which are said with the anointing.

Forehead – This sweet oil, which is poured upon you in the name of Jesus Christ, be a seal of incorruptible heavenly gifts.

Eyes – May this seal in the name of Jesus Christ enlighten your eyes, so that you may never sleep unto death.

Ears – May this holy anointing be to you for the hearing of the divine commandments.

Nostrils – May this seal in the name of Jesus Christ be a sweet smell to you for life unto life.

Mouth – May this seal in the name of Jesus Christ be a guard for your mouth and a strong door for your lips.

Hands – May this seal in the name of Jesus Christ be a cause for good works and for all virtuous deeds and conduct.

Heart – May this divine seal cleanse your heart and establish an upright spirit within you.

Back May this seal in the name of Jesus Christ be for you a shield of strength so that you may quench all the fiery darts of the evil one.

Feet –May this divine seal direct your steps toward eternal life so that you may not be shaken

When the anointing is finished, the priest adds: “*Peace to you, O saved of God. Peace to you, O anointed of God.*” It is this sealing or signing of the Holy Spirit that is important. In effect, each chrismation is like the candidate’s own private Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is imparted to the candidate. This marks the candidate as belonging to God in a special way. This concept is so important in the Armenian Church that anything which is being given to God’s service is chrismated or anointed. The church building is anointed signifying that this is not like any other building, it is being used in the service of God. Pictures which are used in the church are anointed for the same reason. And when a priest is ordained, the anointing tells all that the candidate is being set aside for special service to Almighty God. That is why his forehead and hands are anointed.

The third of the sacraments to be considered is Holy Communion, or as it is also known, Holy Eucharist. This sacrament, in combination with baptism and chrismation, are known as the sacraments of initiation. In other words, they are the sacraments through which one

who is not a member of the Church, the Body of Christ, becomes incorporated into that Body, Christ's Church. With the reception of these sacraments, one becomes completely and fully a member of the Body of Christ. The scriptural comments about Holy Communion are plentiful. We start with the comments found in Matthew 26:26-28: *"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all you, for this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.'"*

Similar comments are found in Mark 14:22-24 and Luke 22:17-20. When one looks at these scriptural comments and views them in the light of the frequent comments in the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John about "eating My body and drinking My blood," and juxtaposes them with the narrative on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:30-31, we see the centrality of this sacrament in the Christian experience.

A point which I personally find most difficult to understand about the position of the detractors' is that they view both Baptism and Holy Communion as simply being *symbols* or *representations*, having no efficacy in and of themselves. Given that stance, what difference does it make if there are 2 or 7 or 10 or any number of sacraments or if there are any sacraments. As Orthodox Christians, we take our Lord at His word. He has told us that the bread and wine are His body and blood. We believe His words and believe that in some way, beyond human understanding, He is truly present in what appear to our senses to be simple bread and wine. He does not use the terms "symbol" or "represents" in describing Holy Communion.

Speaking to this point, St. Basil, a church father of the 4th century from Cappadocia, in his **ADDRESS OF ST. BASIL**, makes the following observation: *"...And now do you, my brethren, with great fear and reverence, impress upon your hearts not to contemplate only this visible bread and wine but contemplate the great Mystery which is hidden from our bodily sight, and which may be seen only with the eyes of the soul by those who in holiness seek this, by which the spirit is nourished, and is gladdened with divine joy. For God has the power*

of converting it to flesh and blood, as has happened to one of the saints. But because our senses cannot tolerate actual flesh and blood, there has God manifested It to us under the semblance of bread and wine. But do not you look on it as bread, and do not you contemplate it as wine, for this is the Body and Blood of Christ. . .”

It is worth noting that the *Address of St. Basil* is read during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy on Great [Holy] Thursday morning just before the singing of the Lord’s Prayer [Hayr Mer]. This is done to commemorate the fact that it was on that day when the Last Supper was held and the sacrament of Holy Communion was established by our Lord. Given both the scriptural witness and that of the early Church fathers, it seems that one would be hard put to deny the efficacy of Holy Communion.

We will now consider the sacrament of Penance or, as it is more commonly known, Confession. Here, a common criticism is that, “I don’t have to tell my sins to a priest. I tell them directly to God. After all, the priest is just a man and cannot forgive sin.” At a most basic level, such a statement is self-deceptive. The reality is that God not only already knows our sins, He knows our hearts, as well. Why would we confess our sins to God, He already knows them! We have to admit them to ourselves! It is also true that the priest, as a human being, cannot and does not forgive sin. However, within the context of the sacrament, He is functioning as a representative of the Church, the Body of Christ, which, as we shall see, has been authorized by our Lord and Savior to do just that, forgive sin.

The first of our scriptural considerations for this sacrament comes from Luke 5:18-26. *“Then, behold, men brought on a bed a man who was paralyzed, whom they sought to bring in and lay before Him. And when they could not find how they might bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the housetop and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. When He saw their faith, He said to him, ‘Man, your sins are forgiven you.’ And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason, saying, ‘Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ But Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered and said to them, ‘Why are you reasoning in your hearts? Which is easier to say, ‘Your sins are*

forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise up and walk? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins,’ He said to the man who was paralyzed, ‘I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.’ Immediately he rose up before them, took up what he had been lying on and departed to his own house, glorifying God.”

In this scriptural passage we are shown quite clearly, that our Lord, as God become man, had the authority both to cure and to grant the forgiveness of sins. The scribes and Pharisees unwittingly established our Lord’s claims in their own comment, “Who can forgive sins, but God alone?” A true statement. And that is precisely why our Lord could and did forgive sin.

As we look further at Scripture, we find the following clear references to the Sacrament of Penance [Confession]. For example, in John 20:21-23, we find the following comment of our Lord: “*So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’*” Such a statement certainly seems clear enough. This was the authority given by Christ Himself to the Apostles and they, in their turn transmitted this authority via ordination i.e. the laying on of hands. This was to continue in the Church, not end with the Apostles.

Elsewhere, in speaking to the Apostles, our Lord clearly says: “*Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*” [Mathew 18:18] Once again, the statement of our Lord seems to be quite clear and unequivocal. As we will see later, these are the exact words uttered by the priest for absolution in the Sacrament of Penance [Confession]

Let’s take a look at this Prayer of Absolution. Its statements are quite clear and easily understood. At the conclusion of the confession, the priest says:

Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

May God who loves mankind have mercy on you and forgive all of your sins, both those which you have confessed, as well as those which you have forgotten.

Therefore, with the priestly authority committed to me and by the Lord's command that "Whatsoever you forgive on earth shall be forgiven in heaven," by His very word, I absolve you of all participation in sin, in thought, in word, and in deed, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And I reinstate you in the sacraments of the Holy Church, that whatever good you may do may be accounted to you for good and for the glory of the life to come. Amen. [trans. by Findikian]

As we look carefully at this prayer, we see the following sequence:

- 1.) The priest prays for God's mercy and forgiveness for the penitent.
- 2.) The priest acknowledges that it is God who grants mercy and forgiveness.
- 3.) Because God has granted forgiveness, the priest, as the agent of the Church, reinstates the penitent into the full life of the Church.
- 4.) The priest prays that whatever good the penitent may do will be accounted for good, both in this life and the life to come.

It should be noted that all of what the priest says is dependent upon the fact of God's mercy and forgiveness. At no point does the priest view himself as the source of the forgiveness and mercy. This is quite clearly in God's hands. Assuming this mercy to have been granted, the priest, acting with the authority of his God-given office, then reinstates the penitent into the full life of the Church.

The next of the sacraments to be considered is that of matrimony/marriage. In the Gospel of John we find the following clear reference to matrimony. This is the scene in John 2:1-11. Here we have the famous incident of our Lord and His disciples having been invited to a wedding in Cana of Galilee. During the wedding, the host runs out of wine. At that point Jesus's mother, Mary, informs Him of this fact saying simply, "They have no wine." Of course, the full implication

of this statement is obvious. Mary was alerting Jesus to this fact with the expectation that He would do something about the situation. Our Lord's response to this comment was immediate: "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." In other words, our Lord was responding to His mother that it was really none of her business. Besides, His hour for glorification had not yet arrived.

In what can be viewed as a typical motherly response, Mary tells the servants, "Do whatever He tells you." In this, she deliberately avoids any further confrontation. Of course, the narrative continues and informs us that there were six stone water jars placed there according to the Jewish rites for purification and that each of these pots held some twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus told the servants to completely fill-up the jars. When they had done this, He told them to take some of the liquid and give it to the chief steward. In his turn, the steward drank some of the water that had now become wine. We are informed that the steward did not know the origin of the drink but that the servants knew. At this point, the steward calls the bridegroom and tells him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now."

While this section definitely points to Christ Himself and can legitimately be viewed as an allegory of the feasting to come in the kingdom with the new wine of Christ, it has a concrete, in the present application. Jesus Christ Himself is present at the wedding. It is there that He performs the first of the signs which indicate who He is – the Lord and Savior. As a result of this, His disciples believe in Him. His very presence indicates that He is even the Lord of so common a human institution as marriage. Here, again, He is Lord and Master. He has raised what is sometimes viewed as a common human institution to the level of a sacrament, to the level of being God-ordained. It can be argued that what our Lord did at the wedding in Cana was a continuation and reaffirmation of what the Father did with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

In Holy Orders or Ordination, the Church continues its God-given mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Fallible human beings are given this task. The reception of this sacrament enables the recipient to function as

preacher, teacher, and celebrant at the supreme act of worship for an Orthodox Christian – the Eucharist, that is the Divine Liturgy. It is for this reason that he is ordained and it is in this fashion that he is to function. All that the priest does he does with the authorization and seal of the Holy Spirit. As a mere human being, he is just that, a mere human being. As priest, he is functioning as an officer of the Church, deriving all of his authority from our Lord Himself.

In this regard, John 15:16-17 is most illustrative: *“You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.”* Here we see that the priesthood is not something that we can choose. Rather, it is something for which we are chosen by our Lord.

Elsewhere, in the closing lines of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, we read our Lord’s command to the Apostles: *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

It is obvious from the above that it was our Lord’s intention that His work and ministry be continued. Such was not to end with the Apostles but was intended to continue until the end of time. The simple yet profound mechanism that was used by the Apostles to insure this result is what we refer to as ordination i.e. Holy Orders = the Laying on of Hands. We can see this clearly in Acts 6:1-6. In this section we see that the Apostles needed help in their mission. Accordingly, they chose Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus. The scriptural passage continues saying: *“They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands upon them.”* [Acts. 6:6]

Further on, in Acts 14:23, we read the following: *“So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”*

The above citations are but further examples of Apostolic Succession in action.

The continuation of such ordinations from generation to generation helps to insure the fidelity of the Church to its Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is the assurance that the Holy Spirit is operating in the Church and is a present and active participant at each and every ordination. For the Orthodox Christian ordination is not simply the authorization of someone by someone representing a larger group. It is the very seal of the Holy Spirit upon the individual and upon his calling to service. This process, done from one generation to the next, is referred to as Apostolic Succession. For Orthodox Christians this is important. For the detractors it is not important, most probably because they do not possess it.

However, a word of warning, this Apostolic Succession is not something that simply looks backward. It is something which impels the Church to the future to continue the very mission which was initiated by our Lord Himself and has continued to our own day. Through this process of Apostolic Succession – the passing of authority in the Church from one generation to the next – can be traced back in time to our Lord Himself and into the future until our Lord comes again, until the end of time. It is also a solemn proclamation that our Lord Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Church and it is ultimately He who gives legitimacy to all aspects of authority in the Church which the New Testament describes as His body in the various letters of St. Paul.

The last of the usual seven sacraments we will consider is what we refer to as Prayers for the Sick. In James 5:14-15 we read: *“Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.”* The prayer which is part of the conferring of this sacrament proclaims that it is Jesus Christ who dispels and takes away the pain and suffering of the world

Let’s look at that prayer: *“Alleviate the pain and heal the sickness of Your people, O Lord our God, and grant to all perfect health by the sign of Your all victorious cross by which You removed the human infirmities and condemned the enemy of our life and salvation. You are our life and salvation, O beneficent and most merciful God, who*

alone are able to forgive our sins and dispel disease and sickness from among us, and to Whom are made manifest our needs. O You Who bestow good things, bestow Your abundant mercy according to needs of each of Your creatures, by whom the All Holy Trinity is always glorified and praised now and forever and ever. Amen."

All four of the Gospels are replete with references to our Lord both curing the individual and granting forgiveness of sin. Looked at collectively, all of the sacraments, in one form or another, proclaim our Lord Jesus Christ as the Lord of all of life and of its various aspects. To limit these to only two seems inconsistent with a Christian commitment which requires us to proclaim that Lordship. Looked at from a broad point of view it can be reasonably argued that there are as many sacraments as there are occasions to proclaim Jesus Christ as the way and the truth and the life, the ultimate and complete Lord of all of life.

HOLY COMMUNION

*Take, eat this is my body.
This is my blood of the new covenant.
[Matt. 26:26-28]*

HOLY COMMUNION

Holy Communion is the visible symbol of the death of Christ, a perpetual memento of his atoning love and it is not the true body and blood of Christ. A holy life is the true mark of a saved soul. Therefore, it is to be administered to those carefully examined as to their knowledge of the doctrines of the Gospel and their personal piety, and who afford satisfactory evidence. [Chopourian – pg. 142]

To be sure, Holy Communion is a symbol and a remembrance. However, it is far more than a mere symbol or remembrance. It is the reality of the presence of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior wherever and whenever we are. To reduce it to simply a means of remembering the sufferings and death of our Lord on the cross is to miss out on the very essence of Holy Communion. To adopt such a view is also to take a distinctly anti-biblical stance toward Holy Communion.

When we look at Matthew 26:26-28, the statements are unequivocal: “*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’*” There are similar selections in Mark 14:22-24 and Luke 22:17-20. At no point is this action presented as simply a symbol or mere remembrance. When we add to this the comments in the closing lines of the Gospel according to Luke [24:13-31], the famous section on the journey to Emmaus, we can see that the earliest Church saw Holy Communion as THE means by which the Savior is revealed in a most unique way. Again, there is no wording or presentation that says or implies that this is merely a symbol or a remembrance.

In this vein, we must look at the comments of St. Basil of Caesarea in the famous *Address of St. Basil*. This is read from the altar of every Armenian Church during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy on Holy Thursday to commemorate the establishment of the sacrament of Holy Communion at the Last Supper on that first Holy Thursday, the day before our Lord's crucifixion. St. Basil says: “*Now*

the heavens open from above, and Christ, descending, rests on this holy altar, and all the hosts of heaven descend invisibly to the earth to serve the Son of God, and they circle round this altar, and the Holy Spirit unsparingly dispenses His gifts of goodness to those who draw near in Holiness. And now, do you, my brethren, with great fear and reverence, impress on your hearts not to contemplate only this visible bread and wine but to contemplate the great Mystery which is hidden from our bodily sight, and which may be seen only with the eyes of the soul by those who in holiness seek This, by which the spirit is nourished, and is gladdened with divine joy. For God has the power of converting It into flesh and blood, as has happened to one of the Saints. But because our senses cannot tolerate actual flesh and blood, therefore has God manifested It to us under the semblance of bread and wine. But do not look on it as bread, and do not you contemplate it as wine, for this is the Body and Blood of Christ.”

While it is true that the writings of St. Basil are not Scripture, they do accurately reflect the faith and view of the Church in the 4th century when St. Basil lived. He was simply expounding the faith as he knew it. That faith proclaimed that there is the real presence of Jesus Christ under the appearances of bread and wine. Our Lord Jesus Christ, for St. Basil and for the early Church and, throughout the centuries, for the Armenian Church, is truly present in Holy Communion. Once one has denied this fact, one has denied an important facet of the Christian faith. I here pose the question which is repeated elsewhere in this text: “If one denies what has been the historical faith of the Christian Church and in that denial sets up a rival institution, how can that person lay any legitimate claim to belonging to the Church which our Lord established?” Of course, the usual ploy is to maintain that the Church fell into error almost from the beginning and was simply waiting for the “reformers” to come along to again set things right. Such a view, again as noted elsewhere, is historical and theological nonsense and should be treated as such.

Further, the earliest liturgies of the Christian Church all point to the idea that in receiving Holy Communion the faithful were receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ. How? We explain this in terms of the action of the Holy Spirit. Let’s read the prayer of the Epiclesis which is the point in the Divine Liturgy when the elements of bread and wine become the body and blood of our Lord. The priest prays:

“We bow down and beseech and ask You, beneficent God, send upon us and upon these gifts set forth, Your co-eternal and consubstantial Holy Spirit, whereby blessing this bread, make it truly the body of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; and blessing this cup, make it truly the blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; and whereby blessing this bread and this wine, make them truly the body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, changing them by Your Holy Spirit.”

This act of changing is accomplished by the Holy Spirit. What is surprising is that while claiming the Holy Spirit can accomplish all manner of miraculous events, the detractors deny that the Holy Spirit can and does change the elements of bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. If He can give people the ability to speak in foreign tongues or tongues of ecstasy; if He can lead God’s people; if He can inspire the Church, the body of Christ, why can He not change bread and wine into the body and blood of our Savior? Here it certainly appears that the detractors are seeking to limit the power of the Holy Spirit rather than embracing it.

Additionally, when one looks at the 6th chapter of the Gospel according to John, one finds some twelve references made by our Lord Jesus Christ to “eating my body and drinking my blood.” Obviously He was trying to make a point. This point is all too clear to the Orthodoxy of the Armenian Church.

The next part of this statement, “A holy life is the mark of a saved soul,” is itself opened to further examination. Among the detractors, salvation consists of making an act of affirmation. Having done that one is considered “saved.” The only problem with this scenario is that it certainly appears to be a denial of comments in Matthew 25:31-46; John 5:28-29; and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. In these scriptural passages the following scenario is presented, in this order: 1.) the Second Coming of Christ; 2.) the Last/Final Judgment 3.) entry into a life of eternal blessedness or eternal punishment. In other words, in terms of the scripture, our salvation is not final until the judgment of our Lord is pronounced, regardless of what we may or may not have done prior to that event. The statement above, if taken literally, means that a final judgment is unnecessary. If we are in fact already saved

by making an affirmation of faith, why is there a subsequent need for another judgment?

As to the third part of the above statement: *“Therefore, it is to be administered to those carefully examined as to their knowledge of the doctrines of the Gospel and their personal piety, and who afford satisfactory evidence.”* It seems to ignore the fact that from a Christian point of view, we are all sinners who are in need of divine intervention. This intervention has been made by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He is the one who removes our sin and pays our debt. In receiving Holy Communion, we are acknowledging our need for the Savior and the intervention which He and only He can give. The statement, if taken at face value, means that there is a knowledge requirement for receiving Holy Communion. Certainly, there is no such view presented in scripture.

It is for this reason that the Armenian Church requires the penitent to go to confession and receive the Sacrament of Penance each time he/she wishes to receive Holy Communion. In doing this, the penitent 1.) accepts his/her guilt for sin 2.) repents of the sin 3.) asks for God’s mercy and forgiveness 4.) makes every effort to avoid the sin. Such is part of the requirement prior to the reception of Holy Communion.

From the point of view of the Armenian Church, none of us is ever truly worthy to receive Holy Communion. Yet, in spite of this, our Lord makes Himself available to us in this wonderful sacrament. Witness the words of the celebrant priest as the gifts of bread and wine are brought to the main altar: *“None of us who are bound by carnal passions and desires is worthy to approach Your table or to minister to Your royal glory; for to serve You is great and fearful even to the heavenly hosts. Yet through Your immeasurable goodness, You, infinite Word of the Father, did become man and did appear as our high-priest; and as the Lord of all did commit to us the ministry of this priesthood and this bloodless sacrifice...I beseech You, who alone are good and ready to hear, look upon me, Your sinful and unprofitable servant, and cleanse my soul and my mind from all the defilements of the evil one; and by the power of Your Holy Spirit enable me, who have been clothed with the grace of this priesthood,*

to stand before this holy altar and to consecrate Your spotless body and Your precious blood.”

Later in the Divine Liturgy, just prior to Holy Communion, the priest prays as follows: *“In faith do I believe in the all-holy Trinity, in the Father and in the Son and in the Holy Spirit; in faith do I taste of this, Your holy and life-giving and saving Body, O Christ my God, Jesus, for the remission of my sins. In faith do I drink of this, Your sanctifying and cleansing Blood, O Christ my God, Jesus, for the remission of my sins. Let Your incorruptible Body be to me for life and Your holy Blood for expiation and remission of sins.”*

The above statement as presented in Chopourian seems to present the idea that the reception of Holy Communion is a kind of reward for having lived a “saved” life. The reality of the sacrament as seen in the scriptures presents the idea that Holy Communion, the Body and Blood of the Savior, is the main and unique means for preparing for that saved life. In other words, there seems to be a real and obvious disconnect between the statements of the detractors and the statements of Scripture. Again, their statements are unsupported by the Holy Bible which they claim to be the basis of their faith and stance.

Let us close this section with a look at our Lord’s comments in the 6th chapter of the Gospel according to John. Here our Lord Jesus Christ says quite plainly: *“Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.”* [John 6:53-54] As mentioned above, such similar comments are made some twelve times in this section. How can they be ignored?

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE CHURCH

He who hears you hears me.
[Luke 10:16]

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE CHURCH

Christ is the sole head of the Church, Savior, Intercessor, and the only Atonement for sin;

Believing in the church does not mean believing all the Universal Church believes or the traditions it has received. – [Chopourian – pg. 142]

To be sure, the first statement above is beyond reproach. Our Lord Jesus Christ is certainly the sole head of the Church, Savior, and Intercessor and the only Atonement for sin. This point can be made by simply citing scripture. For example, in Matthew 16:18, our Lord makes the following statement: “*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.*” Here, He has clearly established the fact that the Church is His – He established it – and that He is its head.

In another clear reference to our Lord Jesus Christ, we read the following in Hebrews 7:25: “*Consequently, he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.*” In this same vein, we read in Acts 4:12: “*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.*”

Clearly then, we can see that our Lord Jesus Christ is sole Head of the Church, Savior, Intercessor, and the only Atonement for sin. For a moment, let us return to the statement that Jesus Christ is the sole Head of the Church. That is simply a truism. However, there must be someone in charge to run the affairs of the Church on a day to day basis. This task has been given to the Chief Bishop – whether he is called Pope, Patriarch, or Catholicos.

Ironically, the above statement serves both as a statement of Orthodox faith and as an indictment against the detractors. If Jesus Christ is the Sole Head of the Church, Savior, Intercessor, and the Only Atonement for sin, as He truly is, then how and by what logic does one separate one’s self from that Church, establish a rival institution, and then claim to be part of the Church which Jesus Christ established? The statement has been made elsewhere – Either one

belongs to the Church which Christ established or one doesn't. One cannot sever relations with that Church, go out and establish a rival entity and yet still lay claim to being a part of His Church. Such is a logical impossibility. We must remember, our Lord established a single Church, His Church. He did not establish denominations.

The second statement above is also untenable. What it proposes is a kind of smorgasbord Christianity. Given this approach, one can come to the Christian faith and pick and choose what he/she will believe. Elsewhere in this work, it was stated that the approach of the detractors is basically that of "do it yourself Christianity." There is no creed or core of beliefs that one must commit to in order to be considered a Christian. By this definition, one can claim to be a Christian while denying the divinity of Jesus Christ, denying His role as Savior, and look upon Him as being simply a teacher of ethics. Such an absurdity would be completely within the parameters of the above statement as presented by Chopourian. However, Christianity is not a "pick and choose" faith.

Yet, in pursuing this idea, the detractors have, as mentioned before, severed their relationship with the Church that Jesus Christ established and have established a rival institution. This can be plainly seen in their activities both historically and at present. Yet, this is not the first time in history that this has been done. During the third Christian century, as a result of persecutions of Christians by Rome, some fell away and denied their Christianity. Later, when the persecutions ceased, some of these individuals repented and sought re-entry into the Christian Church. A group, led by one Novatus, said, "No. Their denial of Christ prevented them from re-entry." The Church took the opposite point of view, claiming that in the spirit of the scriptures and the comments of our Lord, repentance was always in order. In response, Novatus and his followers established a rival institution to the Church. They had their own bishops, clergy, and ecclesiastical order. They laid claim to being the "true Church."

Of course, such a claim was unsustainable. Were there to be two "Churches" or one? The answer was simple and was given quite clearly by one who is known to history as St. Cyprian who was a 3rd century Church Father. His comment left no room for doubt. He stated

quite clearly, “*No one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as Mother.*” [De Unite Ecclesiae = Concerning the Unity of the Church]

The current application seems all too obvious. It has been clearly stated above. One cannot deny the Church which our Lord Himself founded, set-up a rival institution(s) and yet still have a valid claim to being part of the Universal Church which our Lord founded. Yet, this is precisely what the detractors of the Armenian Church have attempted and are still attempting to do.

As stated elsewhere, if one takes the scriptural comments seriously, one realizes that Christ’s Church and our Lord Himself are not mutually exclusive entities. They are not automatically in opposition, one to the other. The detractors evidently see themselves as “saviors of the Church.” Such a proposition is, as mentioned before, theological and historical nonsense. The Church is, as described by St. Paul in his various letters, the living body of Christ. Throughout the centuries, the Church in general and the Armenian Church in particular has endeavored to carry out the manifest will of our Lord under the most difficult and challenging of circumstances.

Elsewhere, Origen, another of the Church Fathers from the 3rd Christian century, observed: “*Outside of this house, that is, outside of the church, no one is saved; for if anyone should go out of it, he is guilty of his own death.*”

While it can be argued that the writings of St. Cyprian and Origen are not Scripture, for indeed they are not, it can legitimately be said that in the thinking of the Church Fathers of the 3rd Christian century, the idea of rejecting the Church while claiming to be Christian was not sustainable. To be a Christian for the early Church meant to be part and parcel of the Church. The two were not separable. One could not leave the Church while claiming to be Christian.

However, in order to justify their stance, the detractors have posited the fiction of an “invisible Church.” If one follows their logic, it seems to suggest the following scenario: 1.) The visible Church is imperfect and makes mistakes. 2.) The only true Church is the invisible Church. 3.) We, the detractors, belong to the invisible

Church which is innately superior to the visible Church. Such a stance stands in clear and direct opposition to historical, theological and scriptural reality. It is, however, a means which has been used to justify the various breakaways which have taken place throughout history.

One is not free to continually re-define the content of the faith. One either accepts it or rejects it. When one further realizes that the Church was originally conceived of as a community of faith, this point becomes even more salient. One unites with or doesn't unite with that community of faith. One does not have the right or the authorization to redefine the faith to suit his/her personal prejudices.

This stance of the detractors seems to assume that the Church is almost irrelevant to the Christian faith. It assumes that all that is necessary for one to be a Christian is, as the saying goes, "Me, my Bible, and Jesus." Then, if I am so moved, I will seek out a "church" that meets my needs. While such a concept is tempting and appealing to some, it bears absolutely no relation to the Church which our Lord Jesus Christ established and which has endured for some 2000 years. Such a view is simply another attempt to establish a kind of churchless Christianity.

Further, if one is not obligated to believe all that the Church teaches, what is the individual obligated to do? Is he/she obligated to believe anything the Church teaches? If he/she is so obligated, what is it that the individual must believe to be considered a Christian? And, who decides? If the argument is made that such is a personal decision, that argument cannot stand in view of Scriptural comments.

Must one believe in God? Must one believe in the Trinity? Must one believe in the Incarnation – that God became man in the person of Jesus Christ? Must one believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity and the Savior of the world? After all, *Believing in the church does not mean believing all the Universal Church believes or the traditions it has received.* As mentioned above, such a stance functionally means that one is free to accept or eliminate whatever he/she chooses and to define the Christian faith for him/herself.

Such a view, of course, explains why there are so many various “denominations” making what is, in effect, an unsustainable claim to being a part of the Church.

PRIESTS

You are a priest forever.
[Hebrews 5:6]

PRIESTS

Church and priestcraft cannot give salvation which is obtained by faith. [Chopourian – pg 142]

It isn't quite clear what is meant by the above accusation. Seemingly the accusers are looking at something akin to shamanistic rites in which the shaman is equipped with certain formulae which are supposed to produce certain predictable results. In other words, the detractors seem to be confusing Orthodox Christianity with some form(s) of magic.

Assuming that to be the case, it should come as no surprise to anyone that the Church does not view what it does in those terms. One can further conclude that the detractors have neither read nor understood the various prayers which accompany the conferring of the various sacraments. Of course, since they, out of hand, reject 5 of the usually accepted 7 sacraments, such lack of knowledge should come as no surprise. One must also ask whether this is what they had in mind when making the above statement.

Let's look for a moment at the sacrament of penance, more commonly known as confession. Quite frequently the accusation is made that no man i.e. priest can forgive sins. It is only in God's power to do such. Certainly, no one can argue this. It is for this reason that the following scriptural passages are most relevant. The scriptural citations have been given elsewhere in this presentation. We now pause to consider the following scriptural citation in this regard. Such a passage is found in Mark 2:1-12. A similar presentation is found in Luke 5:17-26. In both selections, we find the following sequence of events:

- 1.) Our Lord is teaching
- 2.) A paralytic is brought before Him.
- 3.) Jesus, looking at the paralytic and taking pity on him, says: "Your sins are forgiven."
- 4.) This comment is met with the retort: "Who can forgive sins but God only."

- 5.) Our Lord then proceeds to cure the man's paralysis and forgive his sins.
- 6.) The paralytic rises from his stretcher and walks.
- 7.) Those present praise God.

From the above, it can plainly be seen that it is God Himself who is the source of all forgiveness. Jesus Christ, as He who is God become man, has such authority to forgive sin. This He did and established His credentials. Unwittingly, the crowd also affirmed who He is by their comment that "Only God can forgive sins."

We now go to the famous passage "binding and loosing" which we find in Matthew 18:18: *"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."* One also finds this statement earlier in Matthew 16:19.

However, even more to the point is the following which we find in John 20:22-23; *"And when he had said this, He breathed upon them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'."*

Bearing in mind that the above statements were made by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself to His own chosen Apostles whom He commissioned to take His message and Church to the world, it certainly appears that His intention was that this power or authority was being granted to the Apostles and their successors in the Church. The purpose of the Church was/is the same as the mission of our Lord Himself, the forgiveness and remission of sin. He then commissioned His Apostles, as those who were to be the initial leaders of his Church, to carry on that mission.

I am personally at a loss to understand how those who claim to be "Bible believing" and "Bible based" do, with a shocking degree of regularity, ignore such passages as those above.

When we add the following scriptural passages to the above, we get a picture of what is intended in the sacrament of penance. We now

look at 1 John 1:9: *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

Yes, God can and does forgive sin. However, we must confess those sins. But to whom are we to confess? God *already* knows our sins. We are not giving Him any information which He doesn't already have. Bearing in mind that the early Church viewed all sin as sin against the community i.e. the Church, such a confession was made publicly to the Church. Over a period of time, in order to protect the penitent, this confession was made privately to the priest as the representative of the Church. Even in this context, it is not the priest who forgives sin.

We now look at the Prayer of Absolution. After the penitent has confessed his/her sins, either individually or in terms of the Form for General Confession, the priest recites the Prayer of Absolution:

Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

May God who loves mankind have mercy on you and forgive all of your sins, both those which you have confessed, as well as those which you have forgotten.

Therefore, with the priestly authority committed to me and by the Lord's command that “Whatsoever you forgive on earth shall be forgiven in heaven,” by His very word, I absolve you of all participation in sin, in thought, in word, and in deed, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And I reinstate you in the sacraments of the Holy Church, that whatever good you may do may be accounted to you for good and for the glory of the life to come. Amen. [trans. by Findikian]

As we take a closer look at this Prayer of Absolution, the following sequence presents itself:

- 1.) The penitent has confessed his/her sins.
- 2.) The priest asks for God's forgiveness for the penitent.
- 3.) God grants mercy and forgiveness for the sins.
- 4.) Because God has granted mercy and forgiveness, the priest, as the representative of the Church, absolves the penitent and
- 5.) reinstates the penitent into the full life of the Church.

6.) This is done with an eye to the life to come in eternity.

What the priest does in the context of the Sacrament of Penance is to rely on God's mercy and forgiveness for the penitent. Having this in mind, the priest is reassuring the penitent that such mercy and forgiveness are forthcoming. All that the priest says or does springs from this fact. In all that he says and does in the context of this sacrament, the priest is functioning as a representative of the Church with the authority granted by our Lord Himself. The biblical record supports this stance 100%.

This by no means is intended to imply that the process is simply mechanical. Crucial elements of this sacrament are sorrow for sins; repentance; a resolution and effort not to repeat the sin; and the sacramental aspect. To imply that the words of the priest, in the absence of the authorization by our Lord Himself and the above elements constitute the sacrament is to grossly misread both the Scriptures and the intent of the sacrament. It is not the intent to give the priest "shamanistic powers." Rather, the priest should be properly viewed as a representative of the Church, the Living Body of Christ, functioning in accord with the authorization(s) given to the Church by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and attested to in the biblical record. Unfortunately, what seems to be the issue for the detractors is not the pursuit of biblical truth but the forced protestantization of an Orthodox Church. In order to justify this, one must assume that such detractors stand on truth and that truth is their standard, therefore any accusations made which are in accord with the desire to protestantize are indeed legitimate and any effort to block them is seen as a selfish attempt to retain power, when in reality it is a forthright attempt to protect the Christian Orthodoxy of the Armenian Church from heretical incursions.

A priest is also called upon to offer prayers for people. Are priests, then, not to pray for themselves or for others? By the above accusation, are we to understand that prayer is of no avail? People regularly pray for each other. Are we then to understand that such prayer for another, indeed for anyone, is senseless and useless? What

about the scriptural admonition to “pray unceasingly.” [1 Thessalonians 5:17]

Given the admonition of our Lord to “go and baptize,” are we to understand that the priest is not to do that, that such is “priest craft”?

What about administering the other sacraments, prayers with and for people, Bible studies, and so forth? Are all of these to be regarded as “priest craft”? Such a stance seems to ignore the call which is issued by our Lord in John 15:16: *“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, He may give it to you.”*

Here again it seems that the detractors of the Armenian Church were not in search of truth, rather they were more interested in finding excuses for what was a major change in faith. It was a change which involved a change from Orthodoxy to the faith of the “reformers.” The two are not necessarily identical.

It must constantly be borne in mind that all the priest does is based upon authorization by our Lord Jesus Christ and that he is functioning as a representative of the Church, the living Body of Christ. The priest himself is not the author nor is he the bestower of graces. He merely operates as a result of such authorization. To claim otherwise is to claim what the Church itself doesn’t claim. Such a claim on the part of others serves as nothing more than a false accusation.

The following excerpt from one of the prayers recited at the ordination of a priest [and deacons] in the Armenian Church is an excellent example of what is meant by the above statements. This prayer is recited by the ordaining Bishop for both the ordination of deacons and priests. The text states: *“The divine and heavenly grace, which always fills the needs of holy service for the apostolic church, calls [name] from the [sub-diaconate or diaconate] to the [diaconate or priesthood] in the service of the Holy Church, according to the testimony of his own person and that of all the people.”*

This brief excerpt shows that the priesthood is of God and His grace. Its purpose is to serve the Holy Church which is the living body of our Lord Jesus Christ. To characterize the functioning of the priesthood, which is ultimately the priesthood of Jesus Christ Himself, as “priestcraft” is to do violence to Holy Scripture, to the Church as the Body of Jesus Christ, and ultimately to our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Is that what the detractors intended?

In no instance does the priest function on the basis of his own authority. Rather, he always functions as a representative of the Church which is the living Body of Christ. Both he and the Church which he serves have been specifically authorized to do what he is doing. To characterize his priestly ministry as “priestcraft” seems to assume that the mission of Christ’s Church can be carried out in a vacuum. Someone has to do the things that Christ’s Church has been authorized to do. How are prayers said, worship conducted, Bible Studies conducted, visits made, help extended unless someone does those things. It is the priest who, from the very beginning of the Christ’s Church, has been so authorized to do such. Again, to characterize such as “priestcraft” is to do violence to the priesthood and, ultimately, to our Lord Himself.

Ironically, in making this accusation against the priesthood of the Armenian Church, the detractors seem to be undercutting the very functioning of their own clergy and institution.

**ST. MARY
THE ASDVADZADZIN/
THEOTOKOS
MOTHER OF GOD**

All generations will call me blessed.

[Luke 1:48]

ST. MARY

THE ASDVADZADZIN/THEOTOKOS

The Virgin Mary was the Mother of Christ and not the Mother of God. [Chakmakjian – THE ARMENIAN EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT – pg. 16]

The above statement is presented by Chakmakjian as part of a larger statement by the 19th century detractors of the Armenian Church. What is amazing about this comment is that it is nothing more than a restatement of the Nestorian heresy. What is Nestorianism?

Nestorius was a 5th century Church leader in the east. He maintained that it was improper for Mary to be referred to as Theotokos [Armenian Asdvadzadzin] = Birthgiver of God. He said that the proper title for Mary was Christotokos or Birthgiver of Christ because she gave birth to Jesus in whom God dwelt as within a temple. The subsequent controversy was ultimately settled by the Third Ecumenical Council, the Council of Ephesus, which was convened in A.D. 431. The Council was composed of 150 bishops from throughout the Christian world. Under discussion was the question of the nature of Christ – was He human? Was He divine? How were these natures united in one person? In the final findings of the Council the formula of St. Cyril of Alexandria was adopted, describing Christ in terms of ONE UNITED NATURE OF THE WORD INCARNATE. This meant that the Church expressed the belief based upon scriptural material that Jesus Christ was at one and the same time completely and perfectly God and completely and perfectly man. He was truly God become man. He was this in all that He did. This was in contrast to the teachings of Nestorius who claimed that Jesus was some kind of a “split personality,” sometimes functioning as God, sometimes as man.

Such a stance on the part of the detractors shows 1.) How far they have strayed from the understanding and stated faith of the early Church and 2.) They have ignored clear statements in Luke 1:26-38: *“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in*

Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her."

It is strange that a group which claims to be biblical should adopt a view of Mary which logically ends in the questioning of the very nature of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ Himself. In effect, they are denying the divinity of Christ, knowingly or unknowingly. However, the detractors place no importance on the various Councils of the Church. Rather, they place their own individual opinions above those of the universal Church. They have again shown just how far they have wandered from the early Church.

Let us look at the following selection from John 1:14 which proclaims: *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."* Of course, the Word is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. This simple scriptural statement tells us that He became flesh through St. Mary. She gave birth to Him who is God become man. This understanding is deepened when we again consider Luke 1:35: *"And the angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.'"*

As one reads the scriptural story of the annunciation in which the Archangel Gabriel announced to St. Mary that she had been chosen to become the Mother of the Savior, the Mother of Him who is God become man, we are drawn to the comments which St. Mary herself makes about this announcement. After this annunciation by the Archangel, St. Mary travels to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who in her old age is also pregnant. She is destined to give birth to John the Forerunner [St. John the Baptist]. When the two cousins meet, St. Mary responds to Elizabeth's greeting by reciting what has become known as the Magnificat [Armenian = Medzatzoostzeh]

Here is the complete text of the Magnificat as it appears in the Holy Bible, Luke 1:46-55:

“And Mary said,

*‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God
my Savior,*

For he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.

For behold, henceforth all nations will call me blessed;

*For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is
his name.*

*And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to
generation.*

He has shown strength with his arm,

he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,

he has put down the mighty from their thrones,

and exalted those of low degree;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and the rich he has sent empty away.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

*as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity
forever.’”*

The attitude of the Armenian Church toward St. Mary is precisely that which is described in the Holy Bible: we honor her; we call her blessed; her picture is prominently displayed on the Holy Altar as a reminder of that her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God become man, is the Savior of mankind. It also serves as a reminder to us as individuals and collectively as the Church that we can and must

become the means for again bringing Christ into the world through our obedience to the will of God, just as St. Mary did.

What is ironic is that the detractors of the Armenian Church, in deprecating the position of St. Mary are, knowingly or unknowingly, also deprecating the role of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Again, this is a strange stance for those who claim the Holy Bible as their basis and foundation.

From my perspective, this certainly appears to be another case of the Armenian Church being solidly biblical and Her detractors being not only unbiblical but even anti-biblical.

The fact that they would subscribe to a Nestorian definition of Jesus Christ and St. Mary also shows either an unawareness or an ignoring of the history of Christ's Church. It also gives rise to the justifiable accusation that their stance is based not upon the Holy Bible but on a heresy which was solidly condemned by Christ's Church in the 5th century A.D., long before the so-called "reformers" came on to the scene. Such a stance forces us to take refuge in the strong comments of St. Paul in Galatians 1:8, to wit: "*But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.*" Please be reminded that these are the words of no less a person than St. Paul!

One is again motivated to ask how those who claim to be Christ-centered and Bible-centered can take a stance which is based on one of the earliest heresies to arise in Christ's Church, one that was solidly condemned by the highest authority in that Church, a universal or ecumenical council? Again, one is moved to ask about the legitimacy of a personal opinion voiced in opposition to what was and is a universal decision of the Christ's entire Church at the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431. Which carries more weight? Which should carry more weight?

In closing this section, we must again state the obvious. Jesus Christ is God become man – completely and perfectly God and completely and perfectly man. St. Mary gave birth to Him who is God become man. Therefore, she can properly be referred to as

Asdvadzadzin, that is Birthgiver of God. The stance of the detractors seems to reduce our Lord Jesus Christ to the status of simply being a teacher of ethics. Such a view can be accepted by anyone and is not necessarily an exclusively Christian view of Him. Even Hindus and Muslims would accept that kind of a Jesus Christ. One of the earmarks of being a Christian is to accept Jesus Christ as He who is God become man. The view of the detractors renders that view impossible!

NOTE: For additional information, see the addended article by The Rev. Dr. Krikor Halebian, entitled THE ORIGINS OF ARMENIAN PROTESTANTISM. Here, he associates Armenian Protestantism with just about every historical heresy, giving eloquent testimony to the relationship between Armenian Orthodox faith and the faith of the "detractors" and almost every historical heresy. The article appeared in the March, 2002 issue of FORUM, a publication of the Armenian Evangelical Union of North America. The article speaks for itself. It is also available on line at www.aeuna.org/origins.htm. It certainly seems to indicate how far they have wandered from the historical, apostolic faith.

VENERATION

You shall worship the Lord your God.
[Matt. 4:10]

VENERATION

The veneration of relics, crosses, and pictures, and the practice of praying for the dead, are all contrary to the Scriptures; besides God, no other creature is to be worshipped or adored and Christ is the only Mediator. – [Chopourian – pg. 142]

This particular item seems to be a hodge-podge and indicates a lack of understanding between venerating or honoring something and worshipping it. Further, it shows a lack of understanding regarding the practice of praying for the dead which, contrary to the detractors' statements, is in accord with the scriptures. Lastly, I am personally not aware of any article of Orthodox Faith which requires or even suggests that anything or person aside from Almighty God is to be worshipped. The last part of the statement, "Christ is the only Mediator," is the cap. Naturally, anyone who claims to be a Christian must be in agreement with that statement. Still and all if one truly accepts our Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Mediator between man and God, then logically, one must accept what He and scripture says about such a relationship.

Let's begin with a discussion of the question of the veneration of relics, crosses, and pictures. To begin with, the word venerate does not mean to worship. To venerate something means to hold it in honor, to treat it with respect. It does not mean to worship it. Earlier on, the church distinguished latria, dulia, and hyperdulia. Latria simply means that God and God only is to be worshipped. Dulia means that the saints, and by extension, relics, crosses, and pictures, especially those of our Lord and the saints, are to be treated with honor and respect, just as we would treat their persons if they were physically present. Hyperdulia is the honor extended to St. Mary the Mother of our Lord as the first among the saints because of her special role in bringing the Savior into the world. To kiss or otherwise honor a relic, a cross, or a picture is a far cry from worshipping it. God and God only deserves and should receive worship. It is only a superficial view which can conclude that rendering honor and respect to such crosses, pictures or relics is worship.

How would you treat a picture of your deceased mother? Would you honor it and respect it? Would it remind you of her? Would it evoke certain feelings on your part, not toward the physical picture, but to the real special human being in your life who is no longer physically with us? Would you kiss or otherwise embrace the picture? Does this mean that you are worshipping it? Of course not!

This same principle holds when discussing honoring or respecting relics, crosses, or pictures. In fact in the Armenian Church such items are anointed with special prayers, asking God's blessing upon them and dedicating them to Him. Since they are the property of God, that in itself demands that they be treated with honor and respect. Additionally, they deserve honor and respect because they call to mind special people, places, and things which proclaim the reality of God. To confuse this with worship is to deliberately misrepresent the reality. After all, the scriptures speak of the "anointing of the Holy Spirit." That is precisely what happens in the case of honoring relics, crosses, and pictures. We are simply acknowledging this real physical and spiritual anointing.

As one considers this accusation against the Armenian Church by its detractors, one is drawn to the conclusion that the detractors took this course in imitation of the so-called reformers whose anti-Roman Catholic bias is evident throughout their writings.

Just as you would not dishonor or disrespect a picture or remembrance of a deceased loved one, it would be inappropriate to dishonor or disrespect a picture or other remembrance of one of the saints or sacred symbols. The opposite of dishonor and disrespect is honor and respect.

In fact, in the theology of the icon or sacred picture, a theology which is more highly developed in the Byzantine branch of Orthodoxy, the icon or sacred picture is an earthly representation of a heavenly reality. It is the portrayal of a picture not made with hands. This theology also posits that Jesus Christ, as God become man, is the supreme icon. Given this understanding, it is no wonder that pictures, and by extension crosses and relics, are honored. The charge that such is somehow an anti-scriptural practice fades into ludicrousness when

viewed against the reality and actual practice of honoring and respecting these items, especially as used in the Church.

Again, relics, crosses, and pictures are not and never have been worshipped, only God is worshipped. However, since they represent and show heavenly realities they deserve honor and respect!

When we look at the issue of praying for the dead we need only look to the scriptures. In order to do this we must look to history. In the approximate time frame between 285 B.C. and 100 B.C. there was a Greek [Koine] translation made of the Hebrew scriptures. It was intended for use in the Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean world where Greek rather than Hebrew was the dominate language. In other words, this translation of the Holy Scriptures was intended for the Greek speaking Jewish communities. This translation is known as the Septuagint. It differed from the usual Jewish scriptures in that it contained additional books. It contained books which were not found in the Hebrew version. Such books as Tobit; Judith; Additions to the Book of Esther; Wisdom of Solomon; Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach [Ecclesiasticus]; Baruch; Letter of Jeremiah; Additions to the Book of Daniel – Prayer of Azariah and Song of the Three Youths, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon; Books of Maccaabees; Books of Esdras; Prayer of Manasseh; and Psalm 151. These books were in the Scriptures that the first Christians received. For them, these books constituted an inseparable part of the Holy Scriptures. In fact, one tradition says that the first Christians took a great deal of pride in this fact as they spoke to the Jews: “Our Bible has more books than yours.” Of course, this Bible was what we would call the Old Testament. These have been a part of the official Biblical canon or ordering of the books of the Bible since the beginning. They were given fixity in 419 A.D. at a regional Council of Carthage. They have remained a part of what is referred to as the Orthodox Canon of Scripture.

However, when Luther came along, he, on his own authority, dropped these books from the biblical canon in what has subsequently become known as the Protestant Canon. His reason for dropping these books was really quite simple – they spoke about and advocated things of which he disapproved. For example, Baruch talked about the

good of giving alms. To Luther this sounded too much like works based salvation. Again, among other things, 2 Maccabees talks about the efficacy of praying for the dead. To Luther this sounded too much like the Roman Catholic practice of indulgences. So, Luther removed these from the established canon of scripture and, in effect, established a Protestant Canon of scripture, based upon his own opinion.

At any rate, in Maccabees 12:44-45ff we find a clear reference to the efficacy of praying for the dead: *“For if he had not been expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been foolish and superfluous to pray for the dead. But since he had in view the wonderful reward reserved for those who die a godly death, his purpose was a holy and pious one. And this was why he offered an atoning sacrifice to free the dead from their sin.”* In other words, it is the resurrection of the dead which forms the foundation of praying for the dead.

However, even if one dismisses the comments in Maccabees, the practice of praying for the dead is solidly scriptural, especially when viewed against the totality of scriptural comment regarding prayer and the last judgment.

If one takes the time to look at 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 25:31-46, and John 5:25-28 a definite picture emerges. We see the following events unfolding in this order:

- 1.) the Second Coming of Christ in glory
- 2.) a gathering of all the then dead and living
- 3.) the final judgment of all
- 4.) the relegation of the evil to hell
- 5.) the relegation of the righteous to heaven
- 6.) the ultimate Judge in all this is our Lord Jesus Christ, Himself

When we pray for the dead, we are carrying forth the scriptural command to love one another and to pray unceasingly. We are praying in terms of events which have demonstrably not yet taken place. We are entreating our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the ultimate Judge of all, to judge with compassion on that final day. What the detractors seem to be saying is that there is no Final

Judgment and hence no need for prayers on behalf of all those who will be judged, ourselves included. Such a stance is clearly antithetical to both the letter and spirit of Scripture. Nowhere in the Holy Bible are we told that we should only pray for each other under certain circumstances. To the contrary, the recurring scriptural theme is, as mentioned above, that we should love each other and we should pray incessantly. The Prayer for the Dead is a supreme example of that concern and love for it takes the deceased into eternity. Could there be a more serious concern?

Let's now look at what is referred to as the Requiem Prayer;

Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

O Christ, Son of God, forbearing and compassionate

have mercy, in Your love as our Creator,

upon the souls of Your servants who are at rest,

especially upon the soul(s) of Your servant(s)

[name], for whom we are offering these prayers.

Be mindful of [him/her/them] on the great day of the coming of Your kingdom.

Make [him/her/them] worthy of mercy, of expiation and forgiveness of sin.

Glorify [him/her/them] and reckon [him/her/them] with the company of Your saints at Your right hand.

For You are Lord and Creator of all, Judge of the living and the dead.

And to You is befitting glory, lordship and honor, now and always and forever and ever. Amen.

What is unbiblical, indeed un-Christian, about praying that our deceased will be judged with compassion and in that compassion be judged worthy of the eternal kingdom? Would we not hope that someone will do the same for us?

THE HOLY BIBLE

*Stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught,
whether by word or our epistle.
[2 Thess. 2:15]*

THE HOLY BIBLE

The Scriptures are the revelation of God's will to man, the sufficient rule of faith and conduct, and the chief instrument appointed by Christ for the conversion of man.

Therefore, the Triune God alone is to be worshipped, not the interpretations of the Church. [Chopourian – pg. 143]

In the above statement, we are told that the Scriptures i.e. the Holy Bible is the revelation of God's will to man. Certainly, no one who considers him/herself a Christian can argue with this proposition. In fact, in Armenian, the Holy Bible is commonly referred to as *Asdvadzashoonch*, that is the *Breath of God*. Such a title in itself shows the respect, indeed, the awe, with which the Holy Bible is viewed by the Armenian Church.

This statement also asks us to accept that aside from the Scriptures, we need nothing else as a rule of faith and conduct. At this point, the authors of the above would have us believe that the Scriptures themselves are to be the chief instrument of our conversion and hence salvation. We are to reject the interpretations of the Church. Of course, the unspoken assumption in all of this is that it is the individual, not the Church, who is to interpret the Scriptures.

It is interesting to note the inclusion of the word "sufficient." This certainly seems to imply a kind of minimum daily requirement. In other words, an understanding of this term could easily be understood as the Holy Bible presenting the very minimum. Why should we be satisfied with the minimum? It must further be noted that even in what we call the Old Testament, the Bible came out of the lived lives of the people who are therein described.

In looking at the actual history of the Holy Bible, we must face the reality that the question of what actually comprised the Holy Bible was a question which was not finally settled for the Christian Church until the year AD 419 at the regional Council of Carthage. That means that for some 400 years or so there was no Holy Bible as we now know it. Yet, the Church existed. It preached, won converts, defined

doctrine, spread throughout the world, was persecuted and held councils to solve problems. Was the Church then not Christian until the canon of the Holy Bible was decided?

During the first 400 years of the existence of the Christian Church, a number of various works were considered and studied before the final canon of the Holy Bible was ultimately defined and accepted and declared by the Church. Among those works were the following: Epistle of Barnabas; Shepherd of Hermas; Paul's Epistle to the Laodiceans; Clement; Preaching of Peter; Apocalypse of Peter; Gospel According to the Egyptians and the Gospel According to Hebrews.

What caused these works to be excluded from the final canon and the canon which we presently have? Professor Felix Just, S.J. of Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, has clearly noted the criteria upon which the final selection(s) was made. He gives the following points: 1.) **APOSTOLIC ORIGIN** – Was the work written by and/or based upon the teachings of the first generation Apostles or their close companions? 2.) **UNIVERSAL ACCEPTANCE** – Has the writing in question been acknowledged by all major Christian communities (by the end of the 4th century)? 3.) **LITURGICAL USE** – Was the writing read publicly when the early Christians gathered for the Lord's Supper (their weekly worship services)? 4.) **CONSISTENT MESSAGE** – Does the writing contain a theological outlook similar or complementary to other accepted Christian writings?

Based upon a consideration and application of the above criteria, the Church made the decision as to what works would constitute the final canon of the Holy Bible as we now have it. We must remember that it was the early Church which wrestled with and finally solved the problem as to what the contents of the Scriptures of the Christian Church would be.

We must also remember that the Scriptures which the early Church received, that is the Old Testament, was a Greek language translation of the Hebrew Bible which was known as the Septuagint. This was a translation which was prepared for the Jews who were

living outside of Israel in what is known as the Jewish Diaspora. The work was done in Alexandria, Egypt roughly in the period between 285 BC and 100 BC which is regarded as the beginning of the Christian era. It contained books which were not found in the Hebrew version. Such books as Tobit; Judith; Additions to the Book of Esther; Wisdom of Solomon; Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach [Ecclesiasticus]; Baruch; Letter of Jeremiah; Additions to the Book of Daniel – Prayer of Azariah and Song of the Three Youths, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon; Books of Maccabees; Books of Esdras; Prayer of Manasseh; and Psalm 151.

The early Church recognized that these books were not in the Hebrew canon but viewed their inclusion in the Septuagint as a sign of God's will in completing His revelation to man. They were dropped from the Protestant Canon because the "reformers" objected to some of the contents. For example, in the Books of Maccabees we find reference to praying for the dead. In Baruch there are references to the goodness of giving alms. These ideas were rejected out of hand by the "reformers." These books are now commonly known by the term *apocryphal* or *deuterocanonical* = *second canon*.

Are we to understand that for the first 400 years the Christian Church and the early Christians had no guide to faith since there was no Holy Bible as we know it? The answer is obviously, "No". They had a guide and that guide was the Church itself.

The reality is that the Christian Church existed for about 400 years before the Holy Bible as we know it came to be. This is another way of saying that the Christian Church pre-existed the Holy Bible. The simple historical reality is that the Church decided what would be included in the Holy Bible and what would be excluded. It is beyond the scope of this work to outline the development of the biblical canon as it came to be. Suffice it to say that the historical reality is that the Holy Bible came from the Church for the Church. The Christian Church gave birth to the Holy Bible, the Holy Bible did not create the Church. The Church existed as a community of faith for approximately 400 years before the Holy Bible as we now have it came to be.

In the case of the Armenian Church, the Armenian version and translation of the Holy Bible was presented to the Armenian people and the world in AD 434. To carry the above point along, we can say that the Armenian Church existed and functioned from the time of the Apostles St. Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew for over 400 years without the Holy Bible as we know it. The Holy Bible came from the womb of the Church; the Church did not spring from the pages of the Holy Bible. From the above, it certainly seems that those who detract from the Armenian Church are, in effect, also bad-mouthing the Holy Bible itself. In this case, the stance of the detractors is like having awe toward the laws of the United States but questioning the authority of the United States Congress to make such laws. It is a position which seems difficult to understand, if not impossible to justify.

To summarize, in the development of the Holy Bible as we know it, the Holy Bible came from the Church, for the Church. The Church did not spring from the pages of the Holy Bible. Such is simply a matter of historical accuracy and fact.

The Holy Bible is used extensively in the services of the Armenian Church. Most services feature at least a Gospel reading, plus extensive quoting of the Psalms. In the Divine Liturgy, the main worship service of the Armenian Church and Her sister Orthodox Churches, as well as of the Roman Catholic, and Episcopalian/ Anglican churches, there is a wealth of material from the Psalms, direct material from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, as well as a great deal of material which actually refers to direct biblical material. Aside from this, the Book of the Gospels [Avedaran] is kept enthroned on the altar at all times. At the conclusion of the services, the priest holds the Book of Gospels for the people to come and kiss as a sign of respect for the Word of God. None of these practices sound like expressions of disrespect for the Holy Bible.

The statement that the Scriptures are “the chief instrument appointed by Christ for the conversion of man,” is difficult to justify in terms of both historical reality and the scriptural witness itself. If one looks at and takes the following scriptural passages seriously, then one is left with the conclusion that it is the Church itself which is to be the chief instrument of for the conversion of man on the road

to salvation. Matthew 16:13-20 sees Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God and our Lord's establishment of His Church. In the closing lines of Matthew [28:16-20] our Lord gives full authority to the Church, through the Apostles, to carry His message to all the world and to baptize. In other words, He has given His Church the charge to carry on His mission and the requisite authority to do so.

Elsewhere, in John 15:8 our Lord tells His Apostles that it is His will to choose them and that He has appointed them to go on and bear fruit and that the fruit will be of a lasting quality. Then, in John 20:22 He gives the Church, again through the Apostles, the authority to either forgive or retain sins.

While the above citations are not exhaustive, they do give a picture of our Lord establishing His Church specifically to carry forth His mission until the end of time. This is the work of the Church as a community of faith in which the Holy Bible, as the Word of God, plays a major role. It is the Church which is to work for the conversion of man, to put him on the road to salvation. What the detractors have done is to separate the mission of the Church from the Word of God and to place them in opposition to each other. Meanwhile, the Church looks upon the Word of God as its resource, not as something posited in opposition to the Church's central mission. The detractors have thereby given to the Holy Bible the place which properly belongs only to the Church as the body of Christ to continue His work from generation to generation.

Taking this comment about the Holy Bible and their subsequent comment about the Virgin Mary being only the "Mother of Christ," it is easy to see why the detractors were opposed by the Armenian Church which was moving to protect the Holy Orthodox Faith as it had received it from St. Thaddeus and St. Bartholomew. The Church was protecting the Faith from what it viewed as heretical attacks. The statement that the Virgin Mary should be referred to as the "Mother of Christ" only is ultimately nothing more than a restatement of the ancient Nestorian heresy which was condemned by the universal Christian Church at the Council of Ephesus in AD 431. It appears that those who espouse this point of view and claim to be "returning to the

ancient faith,” are in fact departing from it and adopting an old heresy which was condemned and whose proponents were anathematized at the Council of Ephesus. This is a move away from, not toward, the historic Christian faith.

Truly, Jesus Christ is the unique Savior of mankind. His Church, by His own authorization, is to continue His work and mission of salvation as the Body of Christ. It is the Church which is to be His witness in each generation. This witness includes the totality of the Faith, both written and unwritten. The Church and the Holy Bible stand in complementary positions to each other, not in opposition, as the view of the detractors seems to imply.

Let us here consult the Holy Scriptures themselves regarding this question. In 1 John 4:14, we read: *“And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.”* This statement certainly seems to be quite clear. It is our Lord who is the Savior of the world, no other, not even the Holy Bible.

Let’s move along further in the Holy Bible. We now look at the famous passage of John 3:16 which proclaims: *“For God so love the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”*.

Let’s now look at Acts 4:10-12 which clearly states: *“...be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well. This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”* This certainly seems like a clear statement of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and His role in our salvation.

While substituting the Holy Bible for the Church might sound alright to the modern ear, the detractors have moved away from the scriptural message and witness itself and have substituted their own opinion for the God-given authority of the Church. These grants of authority are amply witnessed in the Holy Bible itself.

It seems that this is another case where the detractors of the Armenian Church show that their stance has no biblical basis or support whatever. Rather, it is the stance of the Armenian Church, a stance which they disparage, which is the biblically based stance.

Another assumption of the detractors is that in approaching the Holy Bible, individual interpretation is acceptable. It is their assumption that the message of the Holy Bible is sufficiently clear that any person of faith approaching it may interpret its meaning as the Holy Spirit leads him. Here is another case of a baseless and erroneous assumption which translates into a criticism of the Armenian Church. In fact, the Holy Bible itself makes precisely the opposite point. In 2 Peter 1:20, we read the following caution against such a practice: *“First of all, you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”*

If the individual is not free to interpret Scripture, then who is so authorized? Let us now look at Matthew 18:18 for the answer: *“Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”* This statement was made by our Lord Himself to His assembled Apostles – to the Church. This statement is part of the legitimate authority exercised by the Church.

As we think about the above scriptural passage, several realities should begin to dawn on us:

- 1.) The speaker is our Lord Jesus Christ Himself.
- 2.) He is addressing His Apostles
- 3.) It is the Church and its interpretations which have authority because. . .
- 4.) The Church is the living body of Christ
- 5.) Such authority of interpretation has been given to the collectivity of the Church, not to an individual.

The last part of Chopourian's statement as presented above is strange, indeed. Where and when has it ever been demanded or even stated that one must "worship" the interpretations of the Church? Looked at from the overview of history and scriptural comment, the Church has been given the authority to make such interpretations. The detractors claim that it is the individual who has this right and authority. Such a claim stands in obvious contradiction to scriptural prescriptions themselves. Remember the clear words of 2 Peter 1:20-21: *"First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.."*

Here again, we see that a claim of the detractors is without a biblical basis but stands in direct contradiction to what the Holy Scriptures specifically say.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In the previous pages, I have attempted to meet head-on the various criticisms of the Armenian Church which have been made over the years. I have attempted to meet and answer these with biblical material to show how baseless these various criticisms are. I have attempted to defend the Armenian Church rather than to attack others. Only God knows whether or not that attempt has been successful.

Certainly, the goal of all who consider themselves to be Christians should be the very goal which was stated by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself saying: “That they may be one.” [John 17:11]. It is no exaggeration to say that the division in the Armenian Church is a scandal. The divisions in Christianity at large are no less a scandal. Such division calls the legitimacy of the Christian Church and its God-given mission into question. As Christians, it is our duty to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ and his mission. Our divisions only serve to confound that sacred duty.

Yet, the basis for healing those divisions can only be an appeal to the ancient, established apostolic faith. It is this faith which literally traces its origins all the way back to our Lord Himself and His own chosen Apostles. It is this faith which has been in existence for 2000 years and has survived persecution after persecution. It is this faith which until relatively recent times has been held down and had war waged against it by an avowedly atheistic system. Whatever its shortcomings might be, it has survived and has continually proclaimed the truth of our Lord Jesus Christ and His mission of salvation.

It is up to everyone who considers him/herself to be a Christian to daily strive to make the oft heard slogan - *Unity in essentials; liberty in non-essentials; and charity in all things* - more than a historical slogan but an actual fact of life in our Christian journey.

Here again, as always, we say: *Glory to You, O God; glory to You. In all things, Lord, glory to You.*

Rev. Fr. Vartan Archpriest Kasparian
Lent - 2013

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"The Origins of Armenian Protestantism"

By Rev. Dr. Krikor Halebian

[from the March 2002 issue of Forum]

Many Armenians (including Evangelicals) seem to wrongly assume that Armenian Protestantism began some 150 years ago in Constantinople through the help of foreign missionaries. In what follows I want to bring to the attention of the reader that Protestantism among Armenians is very old, and in fact so old that it antedates the 16th century Protestant Reformation in Europe. All of the information that I will quote comes to us from Armenian Apostolic fathers who considered religious ideas outside the teaching of the Apostolic Church heretical. Thus we have to accept their opinion with a grain of salt. These so-called "heretical groups" who espoused Protestant ideas were known by their enemies by the name of Mtsghne, Paulicians, Tondrakians, and New Tondrakians.

We know very little about these religious groups except through the writings of their opponents. The earliest mention of the name "Mtsghne" comes to us from the Canons of the Council of Shahapivan held in 447. The canons essentially warn the Armenian believers to avoid these people and prescribe the punishment for those who harbor them. We have no further reference and scholars are left to speculate about the origin and nature of the group in question.

We know a little more about the sect of the Paulicians, for we have a number of tracts written against them. Evidently this group flourished in the 8th century, and the name of the group, scholars speculate, is derived from a certain man named Paul. The Tondrakians, however, were either a continuation of the Paulicians or a new movement, but we know that they were named after the village of Tondrak, and the earliest mention of the name comes to us from the 10th century. The so-called "New Tondrakians" appeared early in the 19th century, just before the Armenian Evangelical Movement in 1846. We do not know for sure if they were indeed the followers of the 10th century Tondrakians. Because many of their tenets are

similar to the teachings of the Protestant Reformation, some have argued that they were influenced by the Baptists or some other western denomination.

Here are some of the statements made about these groups by the Armenian Church fathers. In his tract entitled *Against the Paulicians*, Hovhannes Otsnetsi (ca. 650-728) gives the following details about the Paulician sect:

1. They dare to despise us and our orthodox "God-revealed" religion.
2. They consider our worship of the holy sign (the cross) to be idolatry.
3. They consider the worship of holy pictures abominable.
4. They do not accept our form of worship but pretend before others that there is no difference between them and us.
5. They lead astray the simple in faith and try to win them over.
6. They were reprimanded by Catholicos Nerses (5th century) and eventually withdrew into hiding and joined the iconoclasts of Albania.

Krikor Naregatsi (ca. 945-1003) gives us a summary of the doctrines of the Tondraketsis in his *Letter to the Abbot of Kchaw Concerning the Refutation of the Accursed Tondrakians*. Among other accusations he lists the following:

1. They deny our ordination, which the apostles received from Christ.
2. They deny the Holy Communion as the true body and blood of Christ.
3. They deny our Baptism as being mere bath water.

4. They consider Sunday as on a level with other days.
5. They refuse genuflection.
6. They deny the veneration of the cross.
7. They ordain each other and thus follow self-conferred priesthood.
8. They do not accept marriage as a sacrament.
9. They reject the madagh (ceremonial slaughter of an animal followed by a memorial meal which is shared with the poor) as being a Jewish practice.
10. They are sexually promiscuous. (This is a standard accusation to demonize them and discourage others from joining the sect.)

In another work of Krikor Naregatsi entitled Discourse Concerning the Church Against the Manichaeans Who Are Paulicians, we find a forceful defense of the "visible church" which the Tondrankians had rejected saying that the church is merely the gathering of the faithful. Furthermore, we also have Paul of Taron's testimony that the Tondrakians had "declared cross and church to be alien to the Godhead, nor permitted the sacrifice [badarak] to be offered for those who slept in Christ."

In the late 19th century, an important manuscript was discovered at the Etchmiadzin library by F. C. Conybeare, bearing the title The Key of Truth. Many scholars, having carefully studied this text, concluded that this was a very ancient religious manual belonging to the Paulicians of the 8th century. This manual was evidently confiscated by Armenian Church authorities in 1837 from a group of Armenians who evidently were followers of the Tondrakian sect. Some of the essential points with strong Protestant leanings found in The Key of Truth are:

1. The moral law, as given to Moses in the Decalogue, should be obeyed, but no trust should be reposed in external rites and observances.
2. Making the sign of the cross and genuflection is superfluous.
3. Pilgrimage to Etchmiadzin and Jerusalem and the keeping of fasts are human inventions and unnecessary.
4. The worship of crosses and pictures of saints is idolatry.
5. The sacrifice of the mass is a lie, and the elements of the communion are not the body and blood of Christ, but ordinary bread and wine.
6. The baptism and muron or holy ointment of the orthodox churches are false and only the mark of the Beast on the forehead; a handful of water is all that is necessary for the administration of Christian baptism.
7. A priest should not be called "Lord, Lord," but only a clergyman (literally "a man of orders"), for God alone is Lord.
8. Confession to a priest is of no profit for the forgiveness of sins; the penitent should confess his sins to God alone; saints cannot intercede for us.

These examples should suffice to show that Protestant ideas are very old among Armenians. These "heretical" ideas originating in Armenia were transported to many European countries by the followers of the above named sects who were fiercely persecuted by Armenian Apostolic leaders. As Conybeare has observed in his introduction to *The Key of Truth*, "The idea of a church without priests and sacraments, of a mysticism wherein the individual soul communes directly with God without such supports, was assuredly alien to the dark ages in which the Paulicians flourished, and was barely to be found in any age before our own."

This thesis, indeed, has far reaching implications. It means that the European Protestant Reformation of the 16th century was perhaps precipitated by the Armenians, a point defended by Charles Vertanes in his article entitled, "The Rise of the Paulician Movement in Armenia and its Impact on Medieval Europe" (Journal of Armenian Studies, Vol. 2, 1985-1986, pp. 3-26). Furthermore, this means that many Armenians, far from the notion that they changed their faith in the mid-19th century, were Protestants all along.

For a more detailed study of Armenian heretical sects, see Nina G. Garsoian, *The Paulician Heresy: A Study of the Origin and Development of Paulicianism in Armenia and the Eastern Provinces of the Byzantine Empire* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1967).

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THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

By Vahan Tekeyan

The Armenian Church is the birthplace of my soul.
Like a vast grotto it is simple and profound, dark and light -
With its hospitable court, ample tribune, and hushed altar
Standing in the distance as though it were a ship afloat.

The Armenian Church I see with my eyes closed.
I breathe and hear it through the clouds of incense
Which rise towards the feet of the Infant Jesus,
And through the fervent prayers vibrating its walls.

The Armenian Church is the mighty fortress of my forefather's faith.
Raised by them from the earth stone by stone,
And descended from heaven, a dewdrop and a cloud at a time.
In it they unfolded themselves peacefully and humbly.

The Armenian Church is a great embroidered tapestry
Behind which the Lord descends into the chalice, and
Before which all my people stand with bowed heads
To commune with the past through life-giving bread and wine.

The Armenian Church is a peaceful haven across turbulent seas.
It is fire and light in the cold of night;
It is shady forest in the scorching midday sun
Where lilies bloom by the River of Hymns.

The Armenian Church, beneath every stone in its floor.
Holds a secret passage leading up to Heaven.

The Armenian Church is the shining armor
of Armenia's soul and body.
Her crosses rise to protect her;
Her bells ring forth and her song is always Victory.

SUPREME PATRIARCHS OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

St. Thaddeus the Apostle (43-66)
St. Bartholomew the Apostle (60-68)
St. Zacharias (68-72)
St. Zementus (72-76)
St. Atrnerseh (77-92)
St. Mushe (93-123)
St. Shahen (124-150)
St. Shavarsh (151-171)
St. Leontius (172-190)
St. Merozhanes (240-270)
St. Gregory I the Illuminator (303-325)
St. Aristages I (325-333)
St. Vrtanes I (333-341)
St. Husik I (341-347)
Daniel I of Armenia (347)
Pharen I of Armenia (348-352)
St. Nerses I the Great (353-373)
Sahak I (373-377)
Zaven I (377-381)
Aspuraces I (381-386)
St. Sahak I (387-428)
Brkisho of Armenia (428-432)
Samuel of Armenia (432-437)
St. Hovsep I (437-452)
Dvin era 452-927
Melitus I (452-456)
Moses I (456-461)
St. Kyud I (461-478)
St. John I (478-490)
Babken I (490-516)
Samuel I (516-526)
Mushe I (526-534)
Sahak II (534-539)
Christopher I (539-545)
Ghevond I (545-548)
Nerses II (548-557)
John II (557-574)
Moses II (574-604)

Abraham I (607-615)
 Gomidas I (615-628)
 Christopher II (628-630)
 Ezra I (630-641)
 Nerses III the Builder (641-661)
 Anastasius I (661-667)
 Israel I (667-677)
 Sahak III (677-703)
 Elias I (703-717)
 St. John III the Philosopher (717-728)
 David I (728-741)
 Dertad I (741-764)
 Dertad II (764-767)
 Sion I (767-775)
 Isaiah I (775-788)
 Stephen I (788-790)
 Joab I (790-791)
 Solomon I (791-792)
 George I (792-795)
 Joseph I (795-806)
 David II (806-833)
 John IV (833-855)
 Zacharias I (855-876)
 George II (877-897)
 Mashdotz I (897-898)
 Aghtamar era 927-947
 John V the Historian (898-929)
 Stephen II (929-930)
 Theodore I (930-941)
 Yeghishe I (941-946)
 Arghina era 947-992
 Ananias I (949-968)
 Vahan I (968-969)
 Stephen III (969-972)
 Khachig I (973-992)
 Ani era 992-1058
 Sarkis I (992-1019)
 Peter I (1019-1058)
 During this time the see was transferred to Cilicia, from 1058 till 1441
 Catholicoi of the Mother See of Holy Echmiadzin and All Armenians
 Second Echmiadzin era 1441-present
 Giragos I (1441-1443)
 Gregory X (1443-1465)

Aristages II (Coadjutor) (1465-1469)
Sarkis II the Relic-Carrier (1469-1474)
John VII the Relic-Bearer (1474-1484)
Sarkis III the Other (1484-1515)
Zacharias II (1515-1520)
Sarkis IV (1520-1536)
Gregory XI (1536-1545)
Stephen V (1545-1567)
Michael I (1567-1576)
Gregory XII (1576-1590)
David IV (1590-1629)
Moses III (1629-1632)
Philip I (1633-1655)
Jacob IV (1655-1680)
Eliazar I (1681-1691)
Nahabed I (1691-1705)
Alexander I (1706-1714)
Asdvadzadur (1715-1725)
Garabed II (1726-1729)
Abraham II (1730-1734)
Abraham III (1734-1737)
Lazar I (1737-1751)
Minas I (1751-1753)
Alexander II (1753-1755)
Jacob V (1759-1763)
Simeon I (1763-1780)
Luke I (1780-1799)
David V (1801-1807)
Daniel II (1802-1808)
Yeprem I (1809-1830)
John VIII (1831-1842)
Nerses V (1843-1857)
Matthew I (1858-1865)
George IV (1866-1882)
Magar (1885-1891)
Mkrtich I Khrimian (1892-1907)
Matthew II (1908-1910)
George V (1911-1930)
Khoren I (1932-1938)
George VI (1945-1954)
Vazgen I (1955-1994)
Karekin I (1995-1999)
Karekin II (1999-Present)

CREEDS OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

CREED OF THE ORTHODOX FAITH

We confess and believe with most perfect heart,
in God the Father, uncreated, not born,
and without beginning,
and in the Son, begotten of the Father
and in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father.

We believe in God the Word, uncreated,
begotten and proceeding from the Father
before all ages,
not after and not less,
but as much as the Father is Father,
the Son with Him is Son.

We believe in God the Holy Spirit,
uncreated and timeless,
not born, but proceeding from the Father,
of the substance of the Father
and glorified with the Son.

We believe in the Holy Trinity,
one nature, one Godhead,
not three gods, but one God,
one will, one kingship, one power;
Creator of all things, visible and invisible.

We believe in the Holy Church,
the remission of sins,
and the communion of saints.

We believe one of the three persons,
God the Word, begotten of the Father before all ages,
in time, descended into the God-bearer,
the Virgin Mary,
taking from her blood and uniting it to His divinity
waiting patiently in the womb of the pure virgin for nine months,

and was perfect God and perfect man,
in spirit, in mind, and in body;
one person, one countenance, and one united nature.
God become man without change and without any alteration,
without semen and purely born;
so that there was no beginning to His divinity
and no end to His manhood;
for Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and for all ages

We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ lived on earth
and that after thirty years, He came to baptism.
The Father from on high witnessed,
"This is my beloved Son,"
and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove.
He was tempted by Satan and overcame him.
He preached salvation for mankind.
He labored in the body, hungered, and thirsted.
After, He willingly came to suffer
and be crucified and died in the body,
yet lived in His divinity.
His body was placed in the grave united with
His divinity; and, with His spirit undivided
from His divinity, He descended into Hades.
He preached to the souls in Hades,
destroyed Hades, and delivered them.
After three days, He rose from the dead
and appeared to the disciples.

We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ,
with the same body ascended to heaven
and sits at the right hand of God the Father.
And that He is to come with the same body
and the glory of the Father
to judge the living and the dead,
which is to be the resurrection of all mankind

We believe in the reward of works,
for the just, eternal life;
for sinners, eternal punishment.

NICENE CREED

We believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Son of God, begotten of God the Father,
only begotten, that is of the substance of the Father.

God from God; light from light; true God from true God,
begotten and not made;
Himself of the nature of the Father,
by whom all things came into being
in heaven and on earth,
visible and invisible.

Who for us men [humans] and for our salvation
came down from heaven and was incarnate,
was made man,
was born perfectly of the Holy Virgin Mary,
by the Holy Spirit;

By whom He took
body, soul and mind and everything that is in man,
truly and not in semblance.

He suffered and was crucified and was buried
and rose again on the third day
and ascended into heaven with the same body
and with the glory of the Father,
to judge the living and the dead;
of whose kingdom there is no end.

We believe also in the Holy Spirit,
the uncreate and the perfect;
who spoke in the law and in the prophets and in the gospels;

Who came down upon the Jordan,
preached through the Apostles
and dwelt in the saints.

We believe also in only one, universal [catholic] and apostolic
holy Church;
In one baptism of repentance for the remission and forgiveness
of sins;
In the resurrection of the dead,
in the everlasting judgment of souls and bodies,
in the kingdom of heaven
and in life eternal.

BAPTISMAL CREED

We believe in the all-holy Trinity,
in the Father, in the Son, in the Holy Spirit;
in the Annunciation of Gabriel,
in the Birth of Christ,
in His Baptism,
in His Sufferings,
in His Crucifixion,
in His Burial of three days;
in His Resurrection,
in His Ascension as God,
In His sitting at the right hand of the Father
and in His awesome and wonderful Second Coming.
We confess and believe.

CREED OF HOLY COMMUNION

We believe in the Holy Father, true God;
we believe in the Holy Son, true God;
we believe in the Holy Spirit, true God;
we confess and believe that this is the living
and life-giving body and blood
of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
which shall be for the remission and forgiveness of our sins.
We confess and believe

COMMENTARY

The Creed of the Orthodox Faith appears in the first pages of the Book of Hours [Zhamakirk, where it follows a formal renunciation of the "devil and his wiles". This precedes the first of the daily services of the Armenian Church, the Night Service.

The Nicene Creed comes at the conclusion of the Synaxis of the Divine Liturgy. The Synaxis is the second major portion of the Liturgy and is the portion which is devoted to teaching and learning. It is during the Synaxis of the Divine Liturgy that the Holy Scriptures are read and the place where, properly speaking, the sermon should be given. In this position, the Nicene Creed precedes the most important part of the Divine Liturgy, the Holy Sacrifice. It also is the ideal conclusion for the Synaxis. Once the Scriptures have been read and the sermon given, it is appropriate to recite the Creed as a kind of summary of the faith.

The Baptismal Creed, just as The Creed of the Orthodox Faith, is recited after a formal renunciation of evil and all its forms, the Devil. According to the rubrics of the Baptismal Service, it is only after the recitation of this creed that the one to be baptized is taken into the church. We should here note that according to the directions for the Baptismal Service, the service is to begin at the door of the church.

The Creed of Holy Communion is chanted by the deacon immediately before Holy Communion is offered to the faithful during the Divine Liturgy. It is only when he has finished proclaiming this Creed that Holy Communion is actually administered.

It seems that the very placement of these creeds in the various services is indicative of a certain attitude of the Armenian Church. In each case, the declaration of faith which is contained in the particular creed is solemnly proclaimed before beginning an important, vital act in the life of the Church.

LOOKING AHEAD

The year 2015 marks the centennial of the first Genocide of at least 1 1/2 million Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman Turks. Lives were lost; schools, churches and monasteries were destroyed; homes were pillaged; and families were uprooted.

Yet, the centennial marked a profound change. The date of April 24 became a day of victory rather than a day of defeat; it became a day of life over death; we ceased being victims and became victors. There were a number of causal factors.

We here list the major factors, hoping that in the near future some will prepare a full presentation for the general public. Among these, we can list the following: the canonization of the martyrs as saints of the Church; the mass celebrated by Pope Francis with the inclusion of elements from the Armenian Divine Liturgy and the inclusion of His Holiness Karekin II and His Holiness Aram I. It was here that Pope Francis fearlessly proclaimed the events of 1915 as the first Genocide of the 20th century and declared St. Gregory of Nareg as a Father of the universal Church. We also recall the ecumenical service in Washington, D.C. in the National Cathedral [Episcopal]. For us here in the United States another major highlight was the celebration of the Armenian Divine Liturgy at the Roman Catholic Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. by His Holiness Karekin II, the Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians. These events marked the strengthening of the bonds between the Armenian Church and the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand and the Armenian Church and the Anglican/Episcopal Church on the other. To say nothing of the inspiring cooperation between the two historic Sees of the Armenian Church. We cannot forget the cooperation among all the various religious elements of the Armenian community.

As we look to the future, we can only hope that these fraternal bonds will continue and grow stronger. We must remember that the sum total of these events and their influence turned what had been a

day of mourning into a day of rejoicing. Our martyrs have joined the choirs of angels in heaven proclaiming the victory of Christ our Savior.

During the Genocide, our people who were being martyred were derided with the comment, "Where is your Jesus now?"

At long last, the answer has been given - "He dwells among the saints?"

May the love and cooperation which was apparent during the various commemorative events be continued and become a living part of our daily lives.

June, 2015



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