

Is Church Important (3), Faith of the Early Church by Ihab Mikhail

In the previous articles, we have learned that our Lord Jesus Christ Himself laid the foundation of the Church, her one faith she received from the Lord, the spread of that faith through the missionary work of the apostles and their successors.

We have also studied the problems faced the early Church and how some had left the true faith as handed down by the apostles. Consequently, today we have many “churches” were holding different flavors of the one faith St Paul wrote about: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” Ephesians 4:5.

The questions we need to answer how can we go back to the Church the Lord founded?

But before we answer this vital question, we need to look at how the early Church viewed this faith and how important was it to hold on to the true faith delivered through the apostles. After all, St. Paul warns us to “hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours” (2 Thessalonians 2:15)

Following are some quotations from individuals who lived during the time when the Church was still one before the schisms of 451, 1054 and 1517 which were covered in prior articles.

Exhorting the Local Churches to Hold on to the Faith Delivered Them:

While Ignatius of Antioch (A.D 110) was making the journey through Asia under the strictest military guard, he strengthened the diocese in each city where he stayed by spoken sermons and exhortations, and he especially exhorted them above all to be on their guard against the heresies which then for the first time were prevalent and he urged them to hold fast to the tradition of the Apostles to which he thought it necessary, for securities sake, to give form by written testimony (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3:36).

Unity of the faith of the Church throughout the whole World:

The Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth. For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same. For the Churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world. But as the sun, that creature of God, is one and the same throughout the whole world, so also the preaching of the truth shines everywhere, and enlightens all men that are willing to come to a knowledge of the truth. Nor will any one of the rulers in the Churches, however highly gifted he may be in point of eloquence, teach doctrines different from these (for no

one is greater than the Master); nor, on the other hand, will he who is deficient in power of expression inflict injury on the tradition. For the faith being ever one and the same, neither does one who is able at great length to discourse regarding it, make any addition to it, nor does one, who can say but little diminish it.

Irenaeus[1] (Against Heresies, Book 1 Chapter 10)

The One Faith as Handed Down by the Apostles:

True knowledge is the doctrine of the Apostles, and the ancient constitution of the Church throughout all the world, and the distinctive manifestation of the body of Christ according to the successions of the bishops, by which they have handed down that Church which exists in every place, and has come even unto us, being guarded and preserved, without any forging of Scriptures, by a very complete system of doctrine, and neither addition nor curtailment [in the truth which she believes]; and a lawful and diligent exposition in harmony with the Scriptures, both without danger and without blasphemy; and 'above all, it consists in] the pre-eminent gift of love, which is more precious than knowledge, more glorious than prophecy, and which excels all the other gifts of God.

Irenaeus (Against Heresies Book 4:33)

Different Ideas of the One Faith and the Need to Hold on the Delivered Faith:

Seeing there are many who think they hold the opinions of Christ, and yet some of these think differently from their predecessors, yet as the teaching of the Church, transmitted in orderly succession from the Apostles, and remaining in the churches to the present day, is still preserved, that alone is to be accepted as truth which differs in no respect from ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition

Origin[2] (On First Principles Bk. 1 Preface 2)

The Authority of the Church to Preserve the One Faith:

Without prefixing Consulate, month, and day, the Fathers wrote concerning Easter, "It seemed good as follows," for it did then seem good that there should be a general compliance; but about the faith they wrote not, "It seemed good" but, "Thus believes the Universal Church"; and thereupon they confessed how they believed, in order to show

that their own sentiments were not novel, but Apostolic; and what they wrote down was no discovery of theirs, but is the same as was taught by the Apostles

Athanasius[3] (Letter on the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia)

Importance of the Faith Delivered Through the Apostolic Tradition:

Of the beliefs and practices whether generally accepted or publicly enjoined which are preserved in the Church some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have received delivered to us 'in a mystery' by the tradition of the Apostles; and both these in relation to true religion have the same force. And these no one will contradict;-- no one, at all events, who is even moderately versed in the institutions of the Church. For were we to attempt to reject such customs as have no written authority, on the ground that the importance they possess is small, we should unintentionally injure the Gospel in these matters especially, or rather, should make our public definition a mere phrase and nothing more.

Basil[4], On the Holy Spirit (Ch. 27)

Apostolic Tradition in Relation to the One Faith

Don't you know that the laying on of hands after baptism and then the invocation of the Holy Spirit is a custom of the Churches? Do you demand Scripture proof? You may find it in the Acts of the Apostles. And even if it did not rest on the authority of Scripture the consensus of the whole world in this respect would have the force of a command. For many other observances of the Churches, which are due to tradition, have acquired the authority of the written law

Jerome[5] (The Dialogue Against the Luciferians 8)

[1] Irenaeus (130 - 200 A.D.)

[2] Origen (185 – 253 A.D.)

[3] Athanasius (296 - 373 A.D.)

[4] Basil (330 – 379 A.D.)

[5] Jerome (347 – 420 A.D.)