

Unit One

Who Am I? Who Are We?

Lesson 1

We Are Orthodox Christians

heart to Heart

Lord, thank you for your gift of the beautiful season of summer and for all we enjoyed with the hearts and minds and souls you created.

We are all grateful for... _____

Create in us, Lord, a grateful heart to always be aware of life's blessings. Amen.



Believing Is Seeing

You've probably heard the expression "seeing is believing." Well, if you turn that phrase around you have a great way of imagining how belief affects our lives. Seeing with the eyes of faith is like having a special pair of glasses that allows you to see more clearly, to see what

is there that you couldn't see otherwise. Think of a microscope, which makes it possible to see all the tiny organisms that you can't see by just looking with your eyes alone. Faith is like that – knowing that God is the origin and center of all things means understanding the spiritual nature of the universe. Believing that Jesus Christ, Son of God, sacrificed himself on the cross for us gives us added insight into human nature and the value of living God's way.

There is a very touching (no pun intended!) story in **Mark 8: 22-25** about seeing. Open your Bibles and read it together.

This has often been considered a beautiful example of how faith impacts upon the way we see the world. Consider these questions together:

1. How did the man come to see Jesus?
2. What did the man need before he could see?
3. Were his eyes opened at once?
4. What would be a good title for this story (one that would sum up its message)? Write it here:



Verse Master

"Give thanks in all circumstances."

1 Thessalonians 5:18



What Do I Believe?

Circle your answer in each pair and think about why you chose the answer you did.

1. *What is your faith more like?*
2. *What do you think of when you think of Jesus?*
3. *Holy Communion is more like*
4. *Praying is more like*
5. *What do you think is most important to God?*

A balloon or a bowling ball?

Human or divine?

Command or promise?

Stumbling in the dark or walking in the light?

The beliefs we hold or the life we live?

We Are Orthodox Christians

Why are there different “families” of Christians? This unfortunate reality is simple to explain, for even though there is one Lord Jesus Christ and a canon of Holy Scripture that all churches accepted in the early centuries, people eventually began to differ in their *understandings and traditions*. Sometimes compromise proved impossible and over time the Christian Church began to evolve into three major divisions, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant. Of course, this was not our Lord’s wish when he left his earthly ministry in the care of “His Body” – the Church. Today, churches continue to work together to establish common ground through such large ecumenical bodies as the National Council of Churches or even smaller cooperative groups.

But despite this variety of Christian understandings, we



all share a common faith in Jesus Christ, in the fellowship of the church, and in some sort of sacramental life (although the extent of that life varies widely). And so, happily, our faith can indeed thrive and we can grow closer to God in the teaching and fellowship of our own small, specific church.

The Armenian Church belongs to the large Orthodox family. The Orthodox (which literally means “correct thinking”) trace their origins to the apostles and their beliefs to the earliest traditions and creeds of the Church. These teachings are considered the most faithful to the ancient understandings of the church. There are two groups within the Orthodox family known as “greater” and “lesser.” These terms are not about importance; they simply refer to the fact that the Eastern Orthodox are greater in number. “Oriental” simply refers to the fact that these churches are to the east geographically. Here’s a simple look:

The Eastern or Greater Orthodox Churches

Greek
Russian
Ukrainian
Antiochian
Romanian
Bulgarian
American and
others



The Oriental or Lesser Orthodox Churches

Armenian
Coptic
(Egyptian)
Syriac
Ethiopian
Malankara
(Indian)
Eritrean



Differences

The Eastern or Greater Orthodox

Accept the teachings and canons of seven councils as ecumenical (accepted by the universal church).

The 4th church council (Chalcedon) defined Jesus Christ as being two in natures (human and divine but one in substance).

Local traditions in worship, sacraments, prayers, feast day customs, of course, developed differently (Armenians bless grapes on the Feast of Assumption, for example, while Greeks, Russians, and Romanians bless fruit on the Feast of the Transfiguration).

The Oriental Orthodox

Accept the teachings and canons of only the first three ancient councils as truly ecumenical.

They believe the nature of Jesus Christ is fully human and divine, united in him together as one substance.

They Share

Theology, governance, and understanding of Holy Tradition and the Bible are generally the same.

As a result of the one difference in their theological understanding of Christ's nature, these two orthodox families are not "in communion" with each other, which means they cannot receive Holy Communion in each other's churches.

We Are Members of the Armenian Church

The birth of the Armenian Church can be traced to two of Jesus' apostles, Sts. Thaddeus and Bartholomew, who went to Armenia at different times to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ. In what century would this have taken place?

Write it here: _____.

They are referred to as the "First Enlighteners" of Armenia.

Do you remember the event that gifted the disciples with the knowledge of languages and enabled them to go out into the world as "apostles" (literally: "sent out")?

Write it here: _____.





So the faith was slowly spreading, even though Armenia remained essentially a pagan nation. Finally, it was St. Gregory the Enlightener in the early 4th century who made the inevitable happen. Fate brought him to Armenia and to King Drtad's court and after a long series of events, including his imprisonment for 13 years, he baptized King Drtad, Queen Ashkhen, Princess Khosrovitookht (his sister and Gregory's protector), and the royal court and army in 301 A.D. Then he began the work of Christianizing the nation, the first in the world. He is referred to as the "Third Enlightener of Armenia."

How does being a member of the first Christian nation make you feel?



The first Armenian Cathedral, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, was built in 303 A.D. in Etchmiadzin, and was founded by St. Gregory – inspired by Gregory's famous dream in which Jesus came down and struck the ground with a

golden hammer (sound familiar?). He himself became the first Catholicos. And the rest is a rich and complex history during which the church grew and spread, sometimes over vast territories, often oppressed and persecuted, and out to other continents where Armenians eventually lived, including North America. And so here we are!

Basic Beliefs of the Armenian Church

1. Jesus Christ, Son of God, who made it possible for us to share in eternal life through his sacrifice on the cross.
2. The Holy Trinity: three persons in one Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Son and Spirit proceed from the Father.
3. The first three ecumenical councils and the Nicene Creed. You'll be learning more about that later. Additional local councils continued the process of defining the faith.
- 4 A life of sacrament when God is especially present and bestows a special grace. Those sacraments begin with baptism, which is the spiritual birth that follows our physical birth. Since we are all born with the tendency to do the wrong thing ("original sin"), baptism cleanses us of this sin and makes it possible for us to receive God's grace. The Armenian Church baptizes infants because we believe that children need to be full participants in the life of the church; the commitment to faith can be made on their behalf by the community, through their godparents. We have formalized seven sacraments: baptism, chrismation, penance, holy communion, ordination, marriage, and prayers for the sick (extreme unction – the final anointing - is reserved only for clergy).
5. Holy Communion, the most important sacrament, received at our Divine Liturgy or *badarak*. It is this gift of Jesus himself, bread and wine that becomes his body and blood, which feeds our souls.
6. The Church, the heart and hearth of our faith, a place where we worship, pray, serve, and learn together with the rest of our extended Christian family.
7. We are led in our worship and sacramental life by an ordained ministry, currently reserved for men, in three basic ranks: deacon, priest and bishop. We have both married and unmarried priests; these are distinct vocational choices. Only unmarried priests may be elevated to higher positions of authority as bishops.



Remember

The Armenian Church is a member of the Orthodox family of churches, specifically the "Oriental Orthodox."





Scenic Overlook

The 4th world church council of Chalcedon took place in 451 A.D. Armenians couldn't send representatives because, under the generalship of Vartan Mamigonian, they were at war with the Persians (the Battle of Avarayr). The Armenians did not consider the Council of Chalcedon as truly ecumenical and so could not adhere to its decisions, especially concerning the nature of Christ.



8. A hierarchical leadership at the apex of which is the Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians who lives in the international headquarters of the Armenian Church – in Etchmiadzin, Armenia. The two other important Patriarchal centers are in Jerusalem and Constantinople.
9. The Holy Bible as the foundation and main source of a rich Holy Tradition that includes our sacraments, feasts, saints, canon law, music, art, and much more. All of these inform our faith. Since the Bible came about through an inspired process *within* the church, we need to read it regularly; it is best understood as we read it with the guidance of the church through its trained leaders. We also read it privately for ongoing spiritual support and enlightenment.
10. Prayer is our means of growing closer to God and his will for us. We pray with the community and through our own ongoing personal conversations. We believe that God fills us with his answers, slowly, over time.



Highlights

1. **Holy Day:** Sunday, The Lord's Day, in Armenian: *Giragi*, which comes from the word for "Lord."
2. **Holy Days:** Feast days commemorating the events related to the life of Christ, the church, and the saints.
3. **Holy Book:** The Bible (Old and New Testaments)
4. **Membership Rites:** Rites of initiation are celebrated at baptism and include baptism itself (immersion in water), chrismation (anointing with oil, being "sealed" with the Holy Spirit), and the baby's (or adult's) first Holy Communion.
5. **Leadership:** The Catholicos, first of all bishops; Council of Bishops; Primate, Diocesan Council and Diocesan Assembly (delegates elected and sent by the parish); priests, parish councils, and parish assemblies (consisting of all parish members) in the local parish.
6. **Most Basic Belief:** Jesus Christ, Son of God and God himself incarnate, who made it possible for us to share in eternal life through his sacrifice on the cross. God is understood as Holy Trinity: three persons in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Unit One

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Lesson 1

We Are Orthodox Christians

Key Concepts

1. People who believe in God share a distinctive view of the world and human life.
2. Christians believe in full realization and ultimate salvation through the Son of God, Jesus Christ.
3. Members of the Armenian Church belong to the family of Orthodox Christians known as the "Oriental" or "Lesser" Orthodox.
4. The Armenian Church has a unique history and holy tradition within that faith family.

Objectives

During this session students will

1. Talk about their summer activities.
2. Read Mark 8:22-25 and discuss what it means to believe.
3. Complete a values exercise about their beliefs.
4. Explore the basics of Orthodox Christianity.
5. Brainstorm their knowledge about the Armenian Church.
6. Review an outline of the faith of the Armenian Church.

Note to the Teacher

For Lesson Four of this Unit, you will be making a class trip to a Catholic or Protestant church (preferably one that is walking distance from your church to avoid transportation problems). Announce this to the class, advise them that you will be emailing or contacting their parents (if any are interested in joining you, they are welcome), and make sure the necessary permission slips are arranged for with your superintendent. Of course, your first step is to select the church, discuss the choice with your priest, and then contact the minister or priest (it might be better for your priest to do so) to let them know about your planned visit, part of a Sunday School unit on different Christian churches. Make sure you

confirm the time when services begin so you and your class can arrive on time. If you will not have enough time back at church to discuss the experience, ask students to fill out their "Visitor's Journal" during the week.

On the permission slip to parents, please remind them that their children should be appropriately dressed for church that day (and if your Sunday School has a lax dress code, you might want to be specific).

Procedure

1. On this first day of class, welcome students warmly and begin by asking them to describe something special or interesting or exciting they were involved in over the summer - perhaps a vacation, a book they read, a special visitor, etc. Write or have a volunteer record the events on the board, followed by the student's name. After a brief discussion, distribute texts, have students open to the first page of Lesson One and read the prayer in **heart to Heart** together. You will add the specific experiences (in italics below): "Lord, thank you for your gift of the beautiful season of summer and for all the special experiences we enjoyed with the hearts and minds and souls you created. *We are all grateful for....(and then itemize the students' experiences, i.e. John's family's trip to Arizona, Ara's visit from his favorite cousin...).* Create in us, Lord, a grateful heart to always be aware of life's blessings. Amen." 10 min.
2. Introduce the year's course of study by reviewing the Table of Contents in their text. Use the introduction to this manual to further describe each unit. You might also want to explain the four repeated features of **heart to Heart**, **Verse Master**, **Scenic Overlook** and **Remember**. Then direct students to **Believing is Seeing**. Read and discuss the questions. Answers: 1. Others brought him; this can suggest that sometimes people need our help to come to Jesus as the source of true vision; 2. Jesus; 3. No, in stages – first he saw people but they looked like trees; then (v.25) his eyes were opened and he "saw everything clearly!" 4. Possible: *We Need Jesus/The Hand of God to See Clearly!* 10 min.

3. Segue to the next activity: “So we can see that faith in God is an ‘eye opener,’ a foundation for all we understand about the world. But from that ‘big picture’ we become part of a specific faith family - like the Armenian Church - and we each begin to learn a unique understanding of God, a certain history, a set of guiding principles based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, the Church, the Bible, and all the different ways God reveals himself to us. And then we develop out of this our own understanding. For example, let’s see how each of you would answer a few questions...” Have students circle their answers in **What Do I Believe?** Then have them come forward to the front of the room as you ask each question. Show them a place on either end of an imaginary line where they would stand depending on their answer (e.g. “if your answer is ‘balloon,’ stand at this end; if it’s ‘bowling ball,’ stand there”). Discuss after each question, asking students to explain their answers. Allow for all answers; you’ll probably hear some very interesting comments! A few guidelines: 2. Of course the faith of the Armenian Church is that Christ is indivisibly human *and* divine but we all have images that emphasize one or the other depending on what stories of his life appeal to us most 3. Jesus *did* command us to “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19) but it also holds the promise of a fresh start, free of sin, and the promise of eternal life 5. Hopefully, the beliefs we hold will lead us to a life of Christian action and service. 10 min.

4. Read **We Are Orthodox Christians**. You might want to write key words on the board and diagram the Orthodox family. Review quickly by having students repeat basics. 5 min.

5. Say: “Let’s see what we know about our church.” Do the following “webbing” exercise (do it quickly and energetically!): Write “The Armenian Church” and ask students to provide any information about the history or faith of the Armenian Church. Draw lines from “The Armenian Church” to record student answers. Answers might include: 301 (founding of church), Sts. Gregory the Enlightener (helped make

Armenia first Christian nation), Sts. Thaddeus and Bartholomew (apostles who brought Christianity to Armenia), King Drtad & Queen Ashkhen (ruling Armenia at that time), Jesus Christ, badarak (divine liturgy), prayer, saints, worship, Bible, sacraments, baptism, etc. 10 min.

6. Now direct students’ attention to **We Are Members of the Armenian Church**. Read, pausing to discuss questions. (Many students forget that as Thaddeus and Bartholomew were Jesus’ disciples and since Jesus died in approximately 33 AD, his disciples would be living and teaching in the 1st century; the event was Pentecost; being the first Christian nation is both a source of pride but also a challenge: what have we done with that honor?) As you review the list of **Basic Beliefs of the Armenian Church**, ask students to be attentive; keep it simple, summarizing quickly and simply. You might want to ask each student to read a single item and then tie it up in just two or three words. (For example, after #1 say “Okay, first, Jesus Christ.”)
7. Conclude with a lightning round reading of **Highlights** and then: “Great! Today, we started thinking about the family of faiths by defining our own – good beginning! Next week we’ll look at another Christian family, the Roman Catholic Church.” End class with a prayer: “Thank you, God, for our time together. Bless and guide us in the week ahead. Amen.” 15 min.

Unit One

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Lesson 2

On This Rock: The Roman Catholic Church

Key Concepts

1. The Roman Catholic and Armenian Churches share many doctrines and traditions.
2. Nevertheless, they have diverged in their faith and faith expression over the centuries.