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 2- St. Paul, in the New Testament, highly commended Moses' work on the Tabernacle, describing it as a copy and shadow of

mercy seat" (Exodus 25:18-20).
 faces of the cherubim shall be toward the wings, and they shall face one another; the above, covering the mercy seat with their wings. And the cherubim shall stretch out their wings above, covering the mercy seat with the mercy seat. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub at one end, and the other cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim at the two ends of it of one piece with the mercy seat. And the cherubim shall stretch out their wings above, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and they shall face one another; the faces of the cherubim shall be toward the mercy seat" (Exodus 25:18-20).

1- God instructed Moses on how to make the Tabernacle (The Tent of Testimony) and on what to include in it. Here's a part of these instructions:



Is it biblical to have icons in the Church?

- 1- Should the church have icons?
- 2- Is it biblical to place saints' relics in the church?
- 3- Should an altar be placed in the church?

Visiting an Orthodox Church for the first time leaves one with many questions to ask, not only about prayers and rites but also about icons, saints' relics, altar, crosses, incense, priests' vestments, Holy Communion, and others. In this brochure, let's answer three questions:

Is It Biblical to Have Icons, Altars, and Saints' Relics in the Church?



By Victor Beshir

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 We find the answer inside the Temple of Solomon: "Then he carved all the walls of the temple all around, both the inner and outer sanctuaries, with carved figures of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers" (1 Kings 6:29). Therefore, we can easily conclude that having icons in the church is based on biblical foundation and should not be confused with idol worship.

So, what about icons?

A careful reading of the second commandment discloses the intended meaning that forbids replacing worship of God with worship of idols.

20:4,5).
 them. For I, the LORD your God," (Exodus 20:4,5).
 you shall not bow down to them nor serve under the earth;



or that is in the water, is in the earth beneath, heaven above, or that of anything that is in image any likeness for yourself a carved second commandment, "You shall not make

instructions are not in contradiction with the Temple of Solomon (1 Kings 6:23-27). These cherubs' statues were also placed in the inside the Tabernacle, and Moses did. The two statues of cherubs in the Holy of Holies, So, God instructed Moses to include two big

heavenly things: "Who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, 'See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain'" (Hebrew 8:5).

"if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. (Matthew 17:20) or all Christians will be killed. The patriarch asked for three days. Then he asked all people to fast and pray for three days. On the third day Virgin Mary appeared to him, announcing the good news of moving the mountain. When the patriarch and Christians went to the mountain site and start praying, the mountain not only moved but it was broken into parts.

This story is recorded in history. We can easily recognize St. Mary's prayer for the church at that time and her intervention to save the church.



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 If all the above prophets and spiritual leaders who were appointed by God bowed down to the ground or knelt before the altar, then it is biblical and acceptable for us to do the same in the church.

"But I, by your great mercy, will come into your house; in reverence will I bow down toward your holy temple" (Psalms 5:7).

"And so it was, when Solomon had finished praying all this prayer and supplication to the LORD, that he arose from before the altar of the LORD, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread up to heaven" (1 King 8:54).

"Then Joshua tore his clothes, and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the LORD until evening, he and the elders of Israel" (Joshua 7:6).

three examples:
 before the altar of Solomon Temple. Here are and others used to do the same or kneel down was located inside the Tabernacle). Solomon face down to the ground before the ark (the ark Moses, Joshua, David, and others used to bow the Bible. After completing the Tabernacle, A direct answer to this question is also found in



Is it biblical to bow down before an altar in the church?

Then Moses and Elijah are not dead but alive and came to Jesus and were talking with Him.

3. In the rich man and Lazarus account mentioned by Jesus in Luke 16, we listen to a conversation between the rich man and Abraham. Dead or asleep people cannot get into a conversation.

4. In the Old Testament, we read about how Samuel who was dead talked with Saul about his spiritual condition and then told him, "Tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also deliver the army of Israel into the hand of the Philistines (1 Samuel 28:19). This means saints in heaven are aware of what's happening on earth.

Church Experience

Communion of saints is daily experience that have lived by the faithful from the beginning of Christianity. I will need volumes to write historical accounts of the relationship between the departed persons to heaven and those who still on earth. Briefly, I will mention here the historic account of how St. Mary saved all Christians in Egypt in the tenth century.

The Muslim ruler of Egypt asked the Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church either to move a mountain closed by Cairo to prove the truthfulness of the gospel that proclaims

Is it biblical to have an altar in the church?



Some people might reject having an altar in the Christian church, thinking that altars were erected only in the period of the Old Testament. But this claim is not biblically based, since the Bible explicitly talks about the altar not only in the Old Testament but also in the New Testament:

1- **“In that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD at its border”** (Isaiah 19:19). Since it was forbidden to have a Jewish temple outside Jerusalem, then this prophecy is not regarding a Jewish altar but a Christian altar in another country.

2- St. Paul made it clear that we have an altar in Christianity, **“We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat”** (Hebrews 13:10).

3- Even in heaven, there is an altar, **“Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne”** (Rev 8:3).

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Why does the Orthodox Church keep icons in the church?



In addition to the biblical foundation for having icons, the Orthodox Church places icons in the church because icons are open books that anyone can read. Looking at an icon, a person sees purity, holiness, humbleness, and love, just to name a few. We learn from saints' icons their lives of prayer, their devotion to God, and their sacrifices for the Savior.

The impact of icons in people's spiritual lives is well documented in the history. One example is **St. Mary of Egypt**, also known as Mary the Egyptian (344 – 421 AD). She was born in a small town in Egypt, and at the age of twelve ran away to the city of Alexandria where she lived an extremely dissolute life. Some authorities refer to her as a prostitute during this period.

After seventeen years of this lifestyle, she travelled to Jerusalem during the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. She undertook the journey hoping to find partners for lust in the pilgrim crowds in the ship and in Jerusalem. But, when she tried to enter the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, she was barred from doing so by an unseen force.

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Is it biblical to place saints' relics in the church?



Before answering this question, it is imperative to know that the relics of saints are source of spiritual power, such as healing. Those saints had obtained spiritual gifts from God during their lives on earth, and they continued to have spiritual power after their departure from earth. Here are biblical examples:

“Then Elisha died, and they buried him. And the raiding bands from Moab invaded the land in the spring of the year. So it was, as they were burying a man, that suddenly they spied a band of raiders; and they put the man in the tomb of Elisha; and when the man was let down and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet” (2 Kings 13: 20, 21).

So, the bones of Elisha raised a dead person! The church has a long record of healing that happened through touching the relics of martyrs and saints. Surprisingly, not only the saints' bones have spiritual power, but also saints' belongings emit spiritual healing.

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Realizing that this happened as a result of her impurity, she grieved, and on seeing an icon of the Virgin Mary outside the church, she prayed for forgiveness and promised to give up the world for a life of asceticism. Then she attempted again to enter the church, and this time was permitted in.

After venerating the relics of the true cross, she returned to the icon to give thanks, and heard a voice telling her, "If you cross the Jordan, you will find glorious rest and true peace." She immediately went to a monastery where she confessed her sins and took the Holy Communion. She crossed the Jordan River and retired to the desert to live the rest of her life as a hermit in penitence.

Communion of Saints:

After learning about the biblical basis, I need to add another dimension that is based on human nature. Do you think the love of a caring mother for her children would cease after she pass away? Now, will the love of grandfathers and grandmothers stop for their grand children after they pass away? Impossible, since "love never fails" as it was taught by the Bible (1 Corinthians 13:8). In fact, their love would greatly increase after they get rid of the weaknesses and illnesses of the flesh.

Now, let's ask about spiritual fatherhood and motherhood. All those saints consider themselves as great grandfathers and mothers for the faithful and they love us who are on earth and support us with their prayers. Since the Church established by Christ is one and we all are members of His body, as St. Paul says, **“But now indeed there are many members, yet one body”** (1 Corinthians 12:20), then we're all

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Here's an example from the New Testament: **“Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them”** (Acts 19:11, 12).

What happened with Paul's aprons in the New Testament also had happened with the mantle of Elijah after he was taken up into heaven:

“Then he (Elisha) took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, and said, “Where is the LORD God of Elijah?” And when he also had struck the water, it was divided this way and that; and Elisha crossed over” (2 Kings 2: 14).

In addition, when the Bible reveals the place of the martyrs in heaven, it was under the altar. Then it is biblical to have saints' relics inside the church.

“When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held” (Rev 6:9)

A Clear Distinction:

The Orthodox Church draws a very clear line between worship and honor. Worship is only offered to God while honor could be offered to martyrs, saints, and angels.

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united in Him with love, a love that was poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit Who connected us with a great bond of eternal love, those who passed away and those who still on earth.

The Church from its early time used the term "communion of saints," to express the deep relationship between the faithful who passed away and the other faithful who're still on earth. In fact, it referred to those who passed away as the Victorious Church, saying they support us with their love, care, and continuous prayers for us. The Bible recorded a wonderful seen as a witness to this relationship:

“Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne” (Revelation 8:2-4).

Are those who pass away alive and awake?

Some people think that those who passed away are in deep sleep or not alive. Back to the Bible, here what we find:

1. **“I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living”** (Matthew 22:32).

2. **“Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him”** (Mathew 17:1-3).

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