Discipleship Between the Traditions

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# David’s Journey

My journey with The Orthodox Church began when my oldest daughter told us that she was becoming Orthodox. That led to many intense conversations! She was fed up with what she called “MacDonald’s Christianity.” She wanted something with deeper historical roots, and a greater sense of mystery and wonder. I respect my daughter, and I identified with her motives. So, although I felt allergic to liturgies and robes and religious forms, my love for her led me to look past those forms to learn of a wing of the Body of Christ that had been invisible and unattractive to me.

Soon she was about to marry an Orthodox young man. She had shared about me with the monk who was to give the homily at her wedding, and he asked to have lunch with me the day after her wedding. Before we even ordered our meal, this monk told me that he had met Navigators when he was in college. He said that he had been quite impressed with them, but they did not know what to do with him. He said to me, “I know something about discipling young men. That’s what I do at the monastery. But we Orthodox are pathetic when it comes to reaching the unchurched. Do you think that The Navigators could help us?” That began a friendship and partnership that continues to bear fruit today. I’ve learned so much from my daughter and that monk, and it seems like I’ve been able to help them.

I want you to notice a couple of keys to Discipleship Between the Traditions that are embedded in this story.

## Humility

Each of us recognized and embraced the fact that we needed to learn from one another. A *disciple* is fundamentally a *learner*, and one must be humble to truly learn from another. We cannot have discipleship between the traditions without a humble desire to learn from someone in another tradition.

Where we cross paths with those from other traditions, pride tends to spring up with a vengeance. Rather than focusing on what we can learn from one another, we tend to mark out our territory and attempt to teach one another rather than to learn from one another. Jesus laid humility as the foundation of what He requires of His disciples. He began training the 12 with these words, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit.”* When pride cropped up among them, He impressed on them *“It shall not be this way among you.”*

I am learning so much from my Orthodox friends:

* Respect for tradition
* The beauty of multi-sensory worship
* The value of set prayers
* The power of communal faith
* The transforming power of theosis
* The long-term impact of God-parenting
* The importance of religious orders

I’m less qualified to guess what my Orthodox friends might learn from Navigators and Evangelicals, but I notice that they are attracted to our:

* Practical mastery and use of the Scriptures
* Orthopraxy, or application of the Scriptures in everyday life
* Effectiveness in reaching the unchurched
* Mobilizing of everyday people (laymen) to do the ministry
* Effective tools and practices

## Courage

It took courage for that monk to come to me. He and I have both been misunderstood and criticized by those from within our own traditions. There was a price tag for our collaboration. For me, part of that price tag was the $700 a month that one of our supporting churches withdrew when they learned that I was collaborating with an Orthodox monk. I will not tell you the story of one of our most fruitful examples of a Navigator collaborating with an Orthodox priest because we believe that it would ruin his reputation among his Orthodox colleagues. I’ve been told that among some Orthodox, being accused of being a Protestant is worse than being accused of being an unbeliever. So, from both sides it takes courage to pursue discipleship between the traditions.

It took courage for the apostle Peter to fellowship with believers in the new Gentile churches that were springing up around the region. When he was criticized for being involved with them, *“he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.”* Some of Paul’s most severe critics were Christians from his own Jewish religious background, but he went back to Jerusalem more than once to be among his critics and to work out the implications of their unity in Christ.

It took courage for Navigator missionary Taylor Hostetter to seriously explore being discipled by Orthodox believers in Serbia. I’m sure that he was afraid of being kicked out of The Navigators and losing support from those who were helping to fund his work there. It took courage for Orthodox leaders to endorse the discipleship materials that Taylor later published, materials that teach discipleship from the Orthodox liturgy.

One might wonder why conservative evangelical Navigators would get involved with discipleship in The Orthodox Church. These aspects of our Navigators Core Calling & Values naturally lead us discipleship between the traditions:

## The Kingdom

Our Navigator calling is *“to advance the Gospel of Jesus and His kingdom into the nations through spiritual generations of laborers who live and disciple among those who don’t yet know Jesus.”* The Gospel of the Kingdom is bigger than any particular tradition, so although we are predominantly evangelicals, we are non-denominational. Our founder, Dawson Trotman generously promoted actively serving other works. From the beginning he gave away some of his best leaders and time to other groups in the Body of Christ. That practice continues today.

One day one of our Navigator fellow workers began exploring helping Catholic Churches make disciples. This was controversial among us. But he pressed on with the encouragement of key Navigator leaders. Eventually the Lord led him to sincerely become a Catholic Navigator, before that he launched a ministry called Emmaus Journey, a ministry of Catholic Evangelization of and Discipleship in many hundreds of Catholic parishes. It is endorsed and promoted by Catholic bishops. Its purpose is *“to bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that, in living their faith in Jesus, they freely share it with others.”* We eventually encouraged Emmaus Journey to launch out on their own with our blessing, thoroughly embedded in the Catholic Church.

We did this because we are not called to advance the Gospel of protestant evangelical Christianity, but rather we are called to advance the Gospel of Jesus and His kingdom. One day I was sitting with my monk friend in a meeting at St. Vladimir’s seminary, and I asked, *“Explain to me again why we are here exploring partnering.”* He came up out of his chair and pounded the table as he said, *“We are here for the sake of the Gospel!”* That’s all I needed to hear.

## Spiritual Generations That Remain

Navigators are called to a distinct approach to advance the Gospel of Jesus and His kingdom: *“through spiritual generations of laborers living and discipling among those who do not yet know Jesus.”* We are called to birth and nurture long-term impact through movements of the Gospel that continue generation after generation. More specifically, we are called to generations that live and disciple among. This is amplified in one of our core values, *“Families and relational networks in discipling the nations.”*

This leads us to emphasize helping those we disciple to remain in their context. 1 Corinthians 7:17-24says, *“Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches.  Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised.  Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts.  Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him.  Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you--although if you can gain your freedom, do so.  For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave.  You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.  Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.”* Why was this important? The previous context shows that it was important to the flow of the Gospel through one’s family and relational network.

For this reason, Navigators generally encourage Catholics to remain Catholic and Orthodox to remain Orthodox. One day an Orthodox priest secretly asked a Navigator to disciple him, which he did for several years. As the priest grew, he became frustrated with his Orthodox fellow priests, and he decided to leave and start his own church. Our Navigator fellow worker urgently intervened and strongly persuaded him to remain in his context. As a result, the priest did remain and his discipleship ministry flourished there through generation after generation of Orthodox faithful.

## Interdependent Relationships

Our final core value as Navigators is “interdependent relationships in the body of Christ in advancing the Gospel.” 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 says, *“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.  And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord.  There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.  But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”* We simply need one another.

Where would our Navigator ministry in Serbia be without being rooted in the Orthodox Church there? Perhaps dead. Where would our Navigator ministry in Ethiopia be without Ralph’s integration into the Orthodox Church there? Much more limited and one dimensional. Where would the fruit of our Navigator ministry in Russia be without our blessing as they return to their Orthodox roots? Less fruitful and uprooted.

I am much richer because of what I’m learning from my Orthodox brothers and sisters. My prayer life is deeper. My faith is more deeply rooted. My experience of theosis is authenticated and strengthened. In short, I’m a better disciple.

Discipleship between the traditions requires much of us, but it offers much more to us:

* Discipleship between the traditions must be built on a foundation of *humility* that opens us to learning from one another.
* Discipleship between the traditions will require *courage* that overcomes our fear of criticism and rejection.
* Discipleship between the traditions is a beautiful expression and manifestation of something much bigger than any tradition: The *Kingdom of God*.
* To pursue effective discipleship between the traditions we need to agree to encourage those we help to *remain* where they are so that they are more likely to flourish into spiritual generations, whether Orthodox or Evangelical.
* Although we are disciples in quite different traditions, we truly do need to live in *interdependent relationships* to become all that God intends for us to be.

Discipleship between the traditions is a path less travelled. Robert Frost wrote,

*“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—*

*I took the one less traveled by,*

*And that has made all the difference.”*

Discipleship between the traditions is one of those paths described in Isaiah 42:16,

*“I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, a*

*Along unfamiliar paths I will guide them;*

*I will turn the darkness into light before them*

*And make the rough places smooth.*

*These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them.”*

Let’s join hands and go down that path together, as Ralph Lee and Taylor Hostetter have done in Ethiopia and Serbia.

# The Navigators and the Orthodox Church in Ethiopia and Serbia

My encounter with Orthodoxy comes from Ethiopia, where I have worked for the Navigators for 16 years, 14 of those with my wife Sarah. During my first two years in Addis Ababa I attended the International Evangelical Church (IEC), established to serve the needs of the international community, and particularly those without any knowledge of Ethiopian language, but also a place where, at least for Evangelicals, it was relatively free to worship God and study the Bible without interference from Communist authorities, so many of the members of that church were Ethiopians.

In this context, observing Ethiopia, one thing was clear. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has been the most profound influence on the formation of Ethiopia and its culture. Missionary effort in Ethiopia had started in areas of the south where the Orthodox Church was not very strong, and this had made it possible for missionaries naïvely to consider the Orthodox Church irrelevant, but in Addis Ababa, and much of the north of the country this simply was not possible.

I sought to find out more about the Orthodox Church, and in doing so, I think there are some important lessons to pass on to this community, ones that are strongly reflected in many of the strong friendships that we can see.

I also speak on behalf of Taylor and Sally Hostetter. They joined the Navigator team in what was then Yugoslavia, in a place considered to be one of the most secularised nations of Europe, particularly the part that is now Serbia. Under the layer of atheistic communism, Taylor and Sally affirm that with their Western eyes and mindset they could not see the more than a thousand-year Orthodox Christian heritage of Serbia, and felt that they might have the opportunity to take the Gospel there! Taylor and Sally were not able to attend this consultation, because they are with a group of students Orthodox Christians from various Orthodox jurisdictions in the US, and from Omsk in Russia who have gathered for a month on a Navigator Summer Training programme in Belgrade, focussing on discipleship, and seeking to confront a common misconception that being Orthodox is primarily a cultural expression of being Serbian. They are connecting with many of the resources of Serbia’s heritage, through teaching, serving in various ways, and through studying icon writing, to grow in their faith, grow in their personal commitment to share their faith with others. This programme is carried out with the blessing of the Serbian Patriarch, and several American Orthodox bishops. Later in the summer they will participate in the St. Pachomius Summer Institute, with other young people from Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, the Republic of Georgia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Albania, Bulgaria, America and Romania will live together in Belgrade and at the monastery of St. Cosmos and Damian in the Serbian mountains.

Our goal in discipleship is expressed in many ways. The activity itself is rather simple, if we look at the life of St. Paul: he spent time with people, and he prayed for them and shared the Scriptures with them; and if he couldn’t, then he sent others to do the same, and wrote letters. One of our goals in discipleship is what St. Paul tells us in Ephesians, that we should be *renewed in the spirit of our minds, and to clothe ourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*

Ephesians 4 provides a very helpful framework for some principles that God has taught us in through our fellowship with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

## Our Common Ground

St Paul gives the most insightful advice on *Ephesians 425 “So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another.”*

The instructions are given to believers. The starting point is that we are *members of one another*. It is obvious in our community at LOI that this is the case, but it needs to be stated clearly. With the different trajectories of history that Evangelicals and Orthodox Christians have, we have to make a fundamental commitment to the fact that we are *members of one another*.

This is the only way that we can proceed with integrity. When my wife Sarah and I joined the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, we felt compelled by our consciences to say to the monk who was accepting us that if our joining was understood to be a rejection of our Protestant past (as I would be understood by many) then we could not do it. His reply was, ‘why should you do that? You are on a path, and you are taking another step on that path.’ He implicitly accepted that we were already *members of one another*. This leads to two aspects implicit in St. Paul’s instructions, generosity and honesty.

## Generosity

Early on I made one key friendship, who through his great generosity made it possible for me to begin to understand the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Joseph Bereded, now the godfather to my son Sebastian, a young architect who had joined the discipleship group based at the IEC, but who had never left the Orthodox Church. His Evangelical friends had been generous and had not pressed him to ‘convert’ probably because he showed so much maturity for a young man. Because of generosity he had been able to appreciate something through friends about working together with others who sought to walk with the Lord Jesus Christ, a discipling community. Yoseph was also generous and was able to answer questions for me about the Orthodox Church that no one else I knew could. He took me to Orthodox Churches (one of the marvels of Communist Ethiopia was that the city curfew in Addis Ababa, one of the longest in history lasting 18 years, was lifted (or was it just that it was impossible to impose it??) for the Nativity and Pascha vigil). I still remember going to Holy Trinity Cathedral in Addis late one night and encountering an Orthodox liturgy for the first time - sounds, smells, touch (not the least being jostled in the crowd), sights that I had never seen - and even taste in the holy water. It was extraordinary, and perhaps even a little frightening - I had little idea, but for what Joseph could tell me.

Generosity also means taking some punches. It is a natural, if not fallen, tendency of humans to be suspicious, and in crossing cultures too it is hard to always be sensitive. I was talking with the head of an Evangelical mission agency not long ago, and he asked me, 'is Christ's sacrifice sufficient for the Orthodox?' It was a genuine question, that came from a strong desire to understand. It would have been easy to take offence, but not doing so gave an opportunity to build a relationship that may influence the strategy and outlook of some Christian missions.

## Appreciation

Connected with generosity, is a need to develop a genuine appreciation of the impact of Christian heritage. Whatever problems our Orthodox brethren here may have with the Reformation, it had an undeniable impact on the lives of people, and on the ways that they could grow in their journey with God.

Cutting the story of how I grew to appreciate the Ethiopian Orthodox Church - over two years, through Joseph, and his remarkable father, Ato Bereded who had discipled his own son in the faith, taught me something very important that is still imprinted on my memory. It became clear to me that Orthodox Christianity was not a passing interest, it was not just some anachronistic bureaucratic edifice waiting to fade out, it was more than what we might call a strong influence on the country - the only way that I could describe it was that it was the very heartbeat of the country. Whether Ethiopians are Orthodox, Protestant, Muslim, or perhaps other things, Orthodox Christianity has formed the way they think, the way they see the world, the way society functions.

It is easy to find negative things in most churches, and generally from the expatriate community I was bombarded with negative comments about the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Things changed a little when the communist government was overthrown by military force in May 1991. Following bloodbaths in Monrovia in Liberia in 1990, and in Mogadishu in Somalia in January 1991, many feared the same in Addis Ababa. A few voices who knew Ethiopia well said that it wouldn’t be like that, and they were right. Hundreds, and thousands of defeated government troops fled the warfront, and came to Addis with all their weapons, and rather than looting and killing they sat on the streets with hands outstretched, begging for food. It is an unavoidable conclusion that the 1700 years of Christian witness in Ethiopia had made this possible.

Taylor’s experience in Belgrade was similar. Starting not able to see, through studying Byzantine art and architectural history at the University of Belgrade, he developed a virtual reality model of the frescoes at the Serbian Hilandar monastery on Mount Athos. Through many visits to Hilandar he developed deep relationships with the brotherhood there, and he and Sally began to look at other Orthodox Churches, and learned to see the glory of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ as presented their frescoes, and began to learn also the deep connection between architecture, iconography, theology, and the sacraments. What was presented there was a beautifully joined up view of life and worship, in which there was no dualistic separation of the physical and spiritual. Not only was this beautiful, but the approach, having been such a strong force in formation the Serbian nation was expressed in ways that their Serbian friends could well understand.

Evangelicals are generally good and knowing what they are good at! Evangelicals take the Bible very seriously indeed, and this has often been a bridge to building relationships across complex boundaries. But this can lead to a certain arrogance. Many Evangelicals told me in Ethiopia, and Taylor in Serbia, that the Orthodox don’t really take the Bible seriously, and they don’t read it for themselves. I remember vividly the encounter that I had with a young 23 year old traditional scholar in Ethiopia, who pointed out to me that the beginning of his studies, Bible 101, was to memorise the whole Bible in Amharic, and in the classical language of Ge’ez! Taylor found the frescoes of Hilandar saturated with biblical allusions, theological connections, and profound exposition. If we are to disciple across the traditions, we need to learn to see!

## Honesty

Again, Ephesians 4 commends us to deal honestly. Shortly after my wife and I moved to Bahir Dar in the north of Ethiopia, where I was teaching in the university but also seeking, with the Navigators of Ethiopia, to find ways of connecting with the Orthodox Church. We wanted to see if we, as Navigators, could do what Navigators do in many universities around the world, to meet with Christian students, to read the Bible together as a way to grow in our faith.

We started attending the Orthodox Church, and I am sure that pretty much every Ethiopian at that church wanted to know why, but being Ethiopians, they didn’t ask, or if they did they were so indirect that we didn’t get it! After some months, we were introduced by a good friend to a Monk, Abba Yibbabe. This remarkable man has given me more insight into the monastic tradition of the Orthodox Church than any textbook! Monks in Ethiopia are countercultural, and Abba Yibbabe expressed this by being very direct, ‘Why are you coming to our church?’ Struck by his directness, the only sensible option was to reply in the same way, and I replied, ‘my wife and I seek to help young people become strong in their faith and to reach out to others to make them strong, making the church strong.’ There was what seemed like an interminable pause, ‘this is what God has brought you here to do,’ was the reply, and, ‘from today you are to be called Abraham, because Abraham and Sarah lived by faith in a foreign land, and that is what you must do to achieve this goal (and by the way, your wife already has the right name).’

There has been a history in Ethiopia of Protestant churches developing 'Orthodox friendly' - a term for which I have come to have an intense dislike. The fundamental objective of many such ministries is 'to teach the Orthodox the true Gospel.' We must be clear that there is nothing whatsoever 'Orthodox friendly' about such approaches. In practice, such ministries promote conformity to Protestant ways of worship, and of reading the Scriptures that fundamentally undermine a person's ability to thrive within the Orthodox Church, and in many cases in Ethiopia the result is people joining Protestant churches, or even forming their own churches! For me this approach is fundamentally dishonest – many Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia consider missionaries to be ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing’ for this very reason.

Another aspect of this is seeking deep understanding of each other. Generosity and honesty are hard things. In our journeys together, we need to understand that moving forward in relationship is difficult. We need to be tenderhearted in our relationships, forgiving one another as we have been forgiven. When we moved to Bahir Dar we prayed for a cultural counsellor, one who would forgive our questioning and mistakes, who could help us to understand more deeply the Orthodox faith. The Good Lord provided that for us in our dear friend Fasikaw.

Taylor found this through his studies and being welcomed by the Hilandar community. Taylor was honest about the things that he didn’t understand, or even struggled with, and the generous hearted community took those questions, they saw his heart, and they taught him.

## Genuine Enquiry

I can remember after a short time in Bahir Dar thinking that I could have done with a long period of study to prepare me for the encounter with the Orthodox Church. After eight years in Bahir Dar we returned to the UK to do just that, and I did a further four years of study, which has turned in to a significant part of my work. The natural outcome of seeking to be generous and honest, is a desire to develop deep understanding. This will not resolve all issues. As I have studied Orthodox Christianity, and I know that Taylor would echo these sentiments, and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity in particular, I have found:

* Things that I have found difficult to understand
* Things that I have found it difficult to embrace
* Things that just make a lot of sense
* Things that have been transformational in my spiritual journey

One of the characteristics that many of us westerners struggle with is the need to resolve things quickly, and this can create problems. We ask questions like, ‘are they saved?’ My Orthodox friends don’t always understand this, and have a very different outlook. They are content to live with paradox, and they are content to live with things unresolved, seeking to move towards resolution.

## Conclusion

One of the Fathers of the Church who has inspired me the most is Ephrem the Syrian. In chapter 1:18 of his commentary on the Diatessaron says that understanding the word of God is like drinking water from a fountain – we can be fully satisfied and yet leave behind much more that we take out, leaving plenty more to return to. This expressed our need to be humble as we approach the Scriptures, not sensing that we have worked it all out. This seems to me to be the way we need to approach each other as we seek to be generous towards one another, and work together in discipleship.