

Is there a Theological Rationale for Cooperation in Theological Education?

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Cambridge, UK, 6 September 2017

My brothers and sisters, greetings in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Christ *is* in our midst!

In the Orthodox Church, we only recognize three “Theologians” in the strict sense of the term: St. John the Apostle, St. Gregory The Theologian (329-391), and St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022).¹ Having read and prayed with these theologians, I am aware I am not one of them. Yet, Orthodoxy is the lack of “one-sidedness.” Evagrius Pontus (345-399) wrote, “If you are a theologian you truly pray, and if you truly pray you are a theologian.”² The only-begotten Son came to bring us back into a personal, life-giving relationship with the Father, by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. This restored relationship involves intimate communion and communication, which is the only genuine basis of daring to say an authentic word about God (*theologia*).

With this presupposition, a theological rationale for anything would be based on the words of Holy Scripture read in context of the history of the interpretation and application of those words. This leads us to the source material of the Scriptures: the early liturgies and

¹ Συμεὼν ὁ Νέος Θεολόγος one of the first Byzantine monks to openly speak about his own experience of a personal relationship with God, and the need for all Christians to have such an experience. His writings are standard reading for Orthodox Christians and include: *Hymns of Divine Love*, *Ethical Discourses*, and *The Catechetical Discourses*, as well as entries in the *Philokalia*.

² http://www.amazon.com/Evagrius-Ponticus-Praktikos-Chapters-Cistercian/dp/0879079045/sr=8-1/qid=1170128702/ref=sr_1_1/104-2577367-9473514?ie=UTF8&s=books (Accessed 8/22/2017).

hymnography of the Church, the sermons and writings of the Fathers and Mothers of the Church, the exegesis and witness of the ecumenical councils, and the icons which were used to preserve and teach Who God is and who we humans are created to become.

Before proceeding, allow me to reveal another presupposition about “theological education” considering the sources noted above. The term *διδάσκοντες* (to teach) is primarily used in the New Testament in the context of revealing the truth about who God is—His real character—and who human persons are created to become, for we are “made in His image, called to His likeness” (Gn 1.26). This is Christian theological education and it begins with world view, which manifests itself in values, beliefs and finally behaviors. St. Paul warns the Romans that any distortion or lie about who God is becomes a lie about who we are created to become, and any lie about who we are becomes a lie about the character of God. On this basis, Christian theological education is not merely disseminating knowledge about God; rather, it is nurturing a life-changing and ongoing encounter with God the Father, through Jesus Christ, enabled by the Holy Spirit.

After highlighting these presuppositions, it is possible for me to give a word about the question assigned: *Is There a Theological Rationale for Cooperation in Theological Education?*

If there is agreement about who God is and who we humans are created to become, there is a strong case for cooperation and the question would be, is there a theological rationale for *not* cooperating?³

³ The writings of John Wesley and St. Isaac of Syria inspire me to strive to speak the truth in love (Eph 4.15). See John Wesley. Sermon 39. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-39-catholic-spirit> (Accessed 9/3/2017). A portion of this sermon is included in Addendum A. Also St. Isaac of Syria, *Against Zeal*. http://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2008/02/the-problem-wit.html (Accessed 9/3/2017).

In St. John's Gospel, read on the Sunday after Easter (St. Thomas Sunday), Jesus reminds His disciples of what is ahead: "Peace be with you. Just as the Father has sent me, I also send you" (Jn 20.21 NKJV). Jesus first articulated that vision when He invited twelve men to become His disciples: "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men" (Mt 4.19).⁴ This "Master Plan of Evangelism" suggests that the way to become a disciple of Jesus Christ is to participate in making other disciples.⁵

In the Orthodox Church, the purpose and mission of the Church is proclaimed on Great and Holy Saturday morning (the day before Easter) when the interior of the church is transformed as the vestments and paraments are changed from dark colors to white.⁶ The Royal Doors open and lights glow in anticipation of the first announcement of the Resurrection, and the Holy Gospel is read:

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen (Mt 28.18-20 NKJV).

In Greek, there is only one main verb in the passage: *μαθητεύσατε*. This verb is translated in English as "make disciples," "become disciples," "discipling," or "be disciples," depending on parsing and the presence or absence of a direct object.⁷ In this case there is a direct object, *πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*, so it translates as, "make disciples of all the people groups." There are also three supporting participles: *πορευθέντες*, *βαπτίζοντες*, and *διδάσκοντες*, which

⁴ Read on the Second Sunday of Pascha. Also found in Mk 1:17 and Lk 5:10.

⁵ Taken from the title and premise of Coleman's seminal book, first published in January 1963: Robert E. Coleman, 1993. 3rd ed. *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, of Baker Publishing Group. Ebook edition created 2010), Accessed August 2015.

⁶ This is also the Gospel reading for every Baptism/Chrismation. Each new member receives this vision and mission.

⁷ See Thayer's and Strong's notes: <http://biblehub.com/greek/3100.htm> (Accessed July 2015).

explain the command of the main verb, *μαθητεύσατε*.⁸ These supporting participles (translated “go,” “baptize” and “teach”) elaborate on what it means to become a disciple and the making of new disciples.⁹ This was Christ's commission to His disciples (as well as to the disciples of His disciples) at His Ascension. This is what we as Christian theological educators are authorized and empowered by the Holy Spirit to do if we are given a gift of “teaching.” All our work will be evaluated according to this standard: Am I becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ by participating in making disciples of Jesus Christ?

Lest we assume the command was only for the original disciples, His Beatitude

Anastasios of Albania reasons this way:

.... apostolic activity is the work of every disciple who is "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Mt 5:13-14). The Churches of Antioch and Rome came into being when the leaders of the Church reached them. Of course, apostolic tradition rests upon the witness of the original Apostles. But the purpose of apostleship did not die out with the generation of the first Twelve. The Lord's final commandment ... did not concern only those particular disciples. In the same way, Christ's teaching and the other commandments that he gave to other groups of His followers, both large and small, did not concern those particular audiences exclusively, but were of relevance to the entire Church.¹⁰

The command is not simply to evangelize, or to make “converts,” or even to make “Orthodox Christians.”¹¹ The command is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.¹² Becoming and

⁸ From *Wycliffe Bible Translator's Handbook of Notation and Textual Apparatus* (Dallas, TX: Summer Institute of Linguistics).

⁹ See Xavier Leon-Dufour et autres (Ed.), *Vocabulaire de theologie biblique, 3eme ed.*, (Cerf, Paris: adores, 1974); Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Facing the World: Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*. (NY: World Council of Churches, 2003); Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

¹⁰ Anastasios Yannoulatos. "Rediscovering our apostolic identity in the 21st century." *SVTQ* 48 (2004): 3-20, 6-7.

¹¹ There are no “converts” in the Orthodox Church. God has no grandchildren. Every person comes to a point in life where they get to decide if God is going to be God of his or her own life. In this sense, every Orthodox Christian is a “convert” and in the process of being converted (i.e., that is in the process of *theosis, deification*).

¹² For examples of how statistics relating to evangelism in Protestant missions have been misinterpreted see: Allen J. Swanson, “Decisions or Disciples? A Study in Evangelism Effectiveness in Taiwan.” *Missiology* 17, 1 (1989): 53-

making disciples is to be manifested every time the Church gathers. This mission is being renewed in some Orthodox seminaries. In a doctoral course at St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary entitled "Liturgical Life and Pastoral Ministry," professor Grant White articulated the question in his syllabus: "How does the church today make explicit the implicit connections between its worship of God and its mission to proclaim the Good News and bring people into life-giving communion with God through Christ, in the Spirit?"¹³

Allow me to speak personally at this point. This connection between the Church's worship and her purpose and mission seemed clear to me as an apostolic worker (missionary). My love for the Eucharist and services of the Church was inseparable from a practical and utilitarian understanding of the vital connection between the services of the Church and Her mission. In three years of catechism we were taught that belief (*lex credendi*) could never be separated from prayer (*lex orandi*). All was for transformation and growth through communion with God in the context of doing (*praxis*) the ministry of translating and contextualizing the Good News (Gospel) in all its fullness. We call this process discipleship, or as it is often referred to in the Orthodox Church, *theosis* or *deification*.¹⁴

Forgive the simplicity of these words for I am conscious today that I speak to the "teachers of Israel," and these are catechetical precepts. It is too easy, however, regardless of our status, to forget our purpose and to drift away from our Lord's life-changing directive, first

68. Also see James F. Engel and William A. Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 114-115.

¹³ Grant White, Syllabus LT539. (Crestwood, NY: SVOTS, 2015), 12.

¹⁴ It is worth mentioning that our confusion grows out of a Western bifurcation between theological education and the Church — an inconceivable schism in Orthodox Judaism and Orthodox Christianity. This bifurcation between the Academy and the Church which seems to have permeated much of Western culture makes our dialogue here more difficult.

given to those fishermen after living with them for three years, concerning our mutual vision, purpose, and mission: "Go therefore and make disciples..." (Mt 28.19). This Great Commission is a mighty anchor for the Church and a motive for cooperation.

Fishing in the seas surrounding Kodiak, Alaska, I have learned that the water's power should never be underestimated. Mighty currents can prevail over time and even a large ship chained to an enormous anchor can drift, and drift can be deadly. The insidious lies and distortions that the early Church battled, distortions about Who God is and who we are created to become, are alive and well today, though perhaps hiding under different labels. As sobering as this may be, the cults and heresies so obvious to us in this room are not necessarily the greatest threats to the Church, beating against the ancient anchors, provoking them to fail. The greatest enemy of "drift" is internal.

In a paper published in the St. Vladimir Theological Quarterly¹⁵ I highlighted a perennial challenge within the Orthodox Church, quoting Fr. Alexander Schmemmann's reflections concerning the Church's liturgical services, relating them directly to theological education:

Too often in our religious education the liturgical services are not explained ... the inner necessity which links together all these elements, making them an *order*, a service, is not revealed. There are people who *know* the services very well, so as to conduct them and sing them, yet know nothing of their meaning. Liturgical celebration becomes then a blind observance of meaningless prescriptions, which is incompatible with the definition of worship given by Christ Himself: "Worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24).¹⁶

¹⁵ Schmemmann's "Liturgical Crisis" *Fifty Years Later: Amnesia or Ανάμνησις*. SVTQ Vol. 61, Number 1, 2017, Pp 91-117.

¹⁶ Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgy and Life: Christian Development Through Liturgical Experience* (NY: Department of Religious Education, Orthodox Church in America, 1974), 24.

In all honesty, many Orthodox Christians are suffering from a type of amnesia. The Nobel Laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn put it succinctly in his acceptance speech for the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. In describing how an Orthodox people could succumb to atheism in the wake of the Russian revolution, he declared: “Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.”¹⁷ If we fail to teach the faith to the next generation, equipping them to respond to the call of God on their lives to become disciples of Jesus Christ, then we fail to obey our Lord’s command to make disciples among all people groups around the world. In so doing, we forfeit our apostolic identity, no longer manifesting the name Orthodox, according to our own Creed.¹⁸

In the Protestant world in a growing number of major denominations, the anchor of classical Christianity has been deliberately thrown overboard. Even among conservative evangelicals there is a concern over “drift.” Esteemed leaders, such as Engel and Dyrness are asking, “Where have we gone wrong?”¹⁹

Christ’s command to “go and make disciples of all the nations,” appearing in Matthew 28:18-20, has long been cited as the marching order for his church. . . . Our contention is that this call has been interpreted for many decades, especially in North America and parts of Western Europe, as *communicating a set of biblical propositions to a minimum number of people and declaring them as “reached” once this takes place*. In other words, go, evangelize, plant churches, and measure success by numerical response! ... This agenda has dutifully been propagated during this century by well-meaning missionaries to the point that it has come to dominate outreach strategies of the church around the globe. It is being expressed today by accelerated evangelism in the form of donor-developed strategic plans designed to sow the word of God everywhere....

¹⁷ The full text of his speech can be accessed at <http://orthodoxnet.com/blog/2011/07/men-have-forgotten-god-alexander-solzhenitsyn/> (Accessed August 20, 2015).

¹⁸ Alexander Schmemmann, John A. Jillions, Trans. *The Celebration of Faith, I Believe...* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1991), 117-118.

¹⁹ James F. Engel & William A. Dyrness. *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where have we gone wrong?* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000. These prolific evangelical Protestant scholars contributed greatly to their institutions and disciplines, all while seeking to live the Great Commission.

Western Christians must plead guilty, first of all, to the charge leveled by Dallas Willard [author] of *A Great Omission in the Great Commission*, through evangelism largely devoid of spiritual formation that.... In short, we have to a disturbing degree missed the full richness of the Great Commission by our single-minded focus on evangelism. A respected Christian leader in Francophone Africa declared with the enthusiastic amen of many others that “you missionaries brought us Christ but never taught us how to live.”²⁰

The authors go on to affirm that what has become “Mission, Inc.” has given rise to a sophisticated educational apparatus, complex lines of communications, patterns of fundraising all producing ever expanding layers of administration and organizations. They also note,

*While all of this can be quite impressive and has been important in the past, at present it does not facilitate mutual exchange between parts of the body of Christ or encourage spontaneity. The plot line we ought to seek is not the history of our mission, certainly not that of the imperial West, but that of the reign of God as it extends itself throughout, back and forth, and across the world.*²¹

Drawing from theologians and missiologists such as Mark Noll, Roland Allen, and Vinoth Ramachandra, they state:

*Our Western churches and agencies are still functioning in a world missions mindset established well over one hundred years ago. Furthermore, we have infected a world church with the disease of modernity through our failure to discern the signs of the times decades ago. As a result, we are bordering on the very edge of being judged as unworthy to carry the mantle God once placed on North American missions.*²²

I am an Orthodox priest laboring now in North America, but I came from an Evangelical Protestant missionary tradition. I would have been a fourth-generation Methodist pastor in my family. My great-grandfather was a Methodist Circuit Rider in the hills of Kentucky. He rode a mule, taking the Christian message to remote and isolated people groups—people groups who were ruled by their passions, quick-tempered, frequently violent, and extremely loyal to their

²⁰ Ibid, 21-22.

²¹ Ibid, 50.

²² Ibid, 78.

clan. My forefathers handed down a passage from the book of Proverbs: “Where there is no vision, the people will perish” (29.18 KJV). Later, I learned a more literal translation of that verse: “Where there is no revelation of truth or purpose, the people will scatter (are let loose).”²³ This verse may help to explain why 73% of youth growing up in a Christian Church in the USA will drop-out after they graduate from high school, fueling an ever-increasing number of “nones” and “dones.”²⁴ We have failed to transmit the vision and to share Truth effectively.

When Jesus commanded the apostles to “make disciples” and described that process as one of going, baptizing and teaching (Mt 28), the term He used for “teach” evokes the image of a great treasure being carefully entrusted to another for safekeeping, until that person is able to entrust it to someone else. This treasure is Life itself. We who are charged with the ministry of teaching, who are called to entrust this treasure to others who will go and do the same, Evangelical Protestant and Orthodox Christian alike, bear an enormous burden, eternally accountable for our stewardship *and* our cooperation in fulfilling our Lord's life-giving command.²⁵

²³ Author’s translation based on Jay P. Green, ed., *The Interlinear Hebrew/Greek/English Bible* (Hendrickson Pub., 2005, 1578).

²⁴ Brett Kunkle, “How Many Youth are Leaving the Church?” February 24, 2009.

<http://www.conversantlife.com/theology/how-many-youth-are-leaving-the-church> (Accessed August 1, 2015). National studies surveyed include: 88%: The Southern Baptist Convention's Family Life Council study in 2002 ; 70%: LifeWay Research study in 2007 (LifeWay also found 35% eventually return); 66%: Assembly of God study ; 61%: Barna study in 2006. The average of these three studies is 73%. For “nones and dones” see John Parker. “Inspiring the Apathetic: Reaching Out to the Nones and the Dones.” Praxis, Vol. 15, Issue 1, Fall/Winter 2016, 41-50; Also note the full feature film to be released in the USA Fall 2017: *Becoming Truly Human*, Ancient Faith Films.

²⁵ Addendum B: 1 Cor 12.27-31; Jn 13.34-35; James 3.1-5

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Addendum A

John Wesley. Sermon 39. 1872 ed. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-39-catholic-spirit> (Accessed 9/3/2017).

Excerpt:

III. 1. One inference we may make from what has been said. We may learn from hence, what is a catholic spirit. There is scarce any expression which has been more grossly misunderstood, and more dangerously misapplied, than this: but it will be easy for any who calmly consider the preceding observations, to correct any such misapprehensions of it, and to prevent any such misapplication. For, from hence we may learn, first, that a catholic spirit is not speculative latitudinarianism. It is not an indifference to all opinions: this is the spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven. This unsettledness of thought, this being "driven to and fro, and tossed about with every wind of doctrine," is a great curse, not a blessing, an irreconcilable enemy, not a friend, to true catholicism. A man of a truly catholic spirit has not now his religion to seek. He is fixed as the sun in his judgement concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine. It is true, he is always ready to hear and weigh whatsoever can be offered against his principles; but as this does not show any wavering in his own mind, so neither does it occasion any. He does not halt between two opinions, nor vainly endeavour to blend them into one. Observe this, you who know not what spirit ye are of: who call yourselves men of a catholic spirit, only because you are of a muddy understanding; because your mind is all in a mist; because you have no settled, consistent principles, but are for jumbling all opinions together. Be convinced, that you have quite missed your way; you know not where you are. You think you are got into the very spirit of Christ; when, in truth, you are nearer the spirit of Antichrist. Go, first, and learn the first elements of the gospel of Christ, and then shall you learn to be of a truly catholic spirit.

Addendum B

1 Corinthians 12.27-31 (NKJV)

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. ²⁸ And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But earnestly desire the best^[a] gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.

John 13:34-35 (NKJV)

³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. ³⁵ By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

2 Timothy 4.1-5 (ESV)

4 I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound^[a] teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. ⁵ As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

James 3.1-5 (ESV)

3 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ² For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴ Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!