

How do we handle, explain, and witness to our differences?

I. How do we handle our differences?

When we travel we are often uncomfortable when confronted with new and different situations. We find ourselves in strange surroundings and are not sure how to act. What are the customs of our new environment? Anyone who has travelled knows this feeling. Of course, we can ignore the local traditions and stubbornly behave the way we do at home, but this only marks us as rude and ignorant tourists. Or perhaps worse, we assume that similarities we see carry the same meaning as we know from our home. This can lead to embarrassing situations where our hosts misunderstand our actions as we have misunderstood their customs.

The same discomfort we sometimes experience in travel can apply to our interaction with Christians of a different tradition. The language, the worship, the practices are not like those of our tradition. We must ask ourselves, however, whether these practices are wrong or merely different from ours. And those that seem similar often carry different meanings.

Are all differences bad? Some are necessary for various reasons; male, female, different species, etc. St. Paul addressed the problem of differences in his first epistle to the Corinthians when he uses the illustration of the various parts making up one body. At times, the analogy is humorous. "And if the ear says, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not *a part* of the body'..." (I Corinthians 12:16) His point is that the body needs various parts, all the parts that God has arranged are necessary. What is pertinent to our discussion is St. Paul's comment that "those parts of the body that seems to be weaker are indispensable and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour." (I Cor. 12:22-23, NIV).

The impression we sometimes get when discussing the differences between Christians it is more like the eye addressing the ear and saying: "because you are not an eye, you are not part of the body." We value uniformity at the expense of necessary diversity. What does St. Paul's illustration have to say to the differences between our respective traditions?

St. Paul is speaking of spiritual gifts and how not everyone has the same gifting from God. "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."(I Cor. 12:4-8).¹

Note St. Paul's Trinitarian formula: the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God. This is the common ground we all share. St. Paul goes on to explain that these differences are for the common good. Unless we chose to be very narrow in our understanding, the common good must refer to body of Christ, that is

¹ Διαίρεσις translated "varieties," "differences" or "different works" in various translations only appears three times in the New Testament. All three occurrences are in these three verses in Corinthians.

His church, not merely our representation of His body, i.e. our tradition.² Furthermore, if we take our Lord and Saviour's word seriously that we are to make disciples of all nations then our gifting is ultimately for the benefit of the entire creation. (Matt. 28:19-20)

If, therefore, there are differences in the one body of Christ, how does that apply to our understanding of our respective traditions? Can we not only tolerate differences between us but even come to see how our different perspectives can be complimentary? Do the various giftings add to the knowledge of God? What does my sister or brother's gifting add to my knowledge of the Living God?

Often we find ourselves more concerned about what divides us than what we have in common. This is true not only of the divide between the Churches of the Orthodox East with a long liturgical history and tradition and the Reformation churches but also between the different Protestant churches.

There are variations in the interpretation of the Bible and specific theological understandings which appear to be momentous. Among the Protestant bodies the divides have been at times bitter.³ Arguments over modes of baptism, the Lord's supper, church government, Biblical hermeneutics are the old standards to which have been added the forms of worship and the current ministry of the Holy Spirit.⁴

All this to say the problem of differences is not merely between the Churches of the West and the Churches of the East.⁵ The Churches of the West have many similarities but many significant disagreements in doctrine and practice. The problem of not recognizing another tradition occurs among these churches. It is, however, theologically accurate to recognize a more significant divide between both the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Eastern Orthodox Churches from the churches of the West, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. The division between East and West was partly based on the theological understanding of the key Church Fathers in the post Nicene Church.⁶ Augustine and Chrysostom, contemporaries and interpreters of St. Paul, found different emphases on which to build their

² Once I did meet an evangelical pastor who believed that all the gifts had to be represented in his local church. To put it mildly, I found this very peculiar and without Biblical foundation.

³ One only needs to recall the Marburg Colloquy where the Lutherans and the Reformed split over the nature of the Lord's Supper. "This is my body," chalked on the meeting room table by Luther was his interpretation. Marburg Castle is for me a pilgrimage site as I contemplate the discussions that took place in 1529.

⁴ In the realm of Biblical interpretation an interesting transition has occurred in the last fifty years. When I was a seminary student, seminarians at theologically liberal seminaries did not appear to take seriously the text of the Bible. That has changed as groups that seek justification for same sex attraction and same sex marriage interpret Biblical texts in ways that defy centuries of Christian interpretation. The Bible, albeit with non-traditional hermeneutics, has become a source of authority for those seeking to justify themselves.

⁵ This geographic distinction is more historical than actual as the various ethnic groups from the Eastern Churches have migrated to all six continents and missionary work, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, has likewise circled the globe.

⁶ On the East-West divide, a quote from Alexis Khomiakov is instructive. "To use the concise language of algebra, all the west knows but one datum a ; whether it be preceded by the positive sign $+$, as with the Romanists, or with the negative sign $-$, as with the Protestants, the a remains the same." (Alexis Khomiakov in a letter to an English friend, which was printed in W.J. Birkbeck, *Russia and the English Church*, p.67 and quoted in Timothy (now Kallistos) Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore, Md. Penguin Books, 1963, p. 9). However as we will note, this formulation both clarifies and obscures the theological understanding of the two traditions. For an explanation of the theological frameworks of the East and the West, see my book on Orthodox missiology: James Stamoolis, *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today*, (Maryknoll. Orbis Books) pages 6-18. The chapter starts with the following quotation: "The real difference between Eastern and Western Christian theology lies not in particular doctrinal points but in the difference between two ways of approach to the whole subject." E. Every, "The Orthodox Church," *The Christian East* 1 (April 1951): 153.

frameworks.⁷ In the Western Church, the Reformers followed Augustine. The post Reformation churches either copied the Reformers understanding of Augustine or reacted against it. When we come to discuss our differences we need to first understand our own respective positions and not assume that because our tradition has always held our theological view that it has been the position of all Christians at all times. Here I am speaking to my Protestant friends because most serious Evangelicals want to ground their theological understanding in the Bible and justify their ecclesiology as a continuation of the Apostolic Age.⁸

Within the wider Evangelical world, there are serious divisions along doctrinal lines.⁹ Furthermore in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, worship has become a contentious issue.¹⁰ This is not the place to discuss those differences, however I mention it because it adds another layer in the discussion between the forms of worship in the West and the ancient liturgies of the East. We all have convictions in this matter of worship and rightly hold to our convictions as the proper way to honour the Lord God Almighty. Is there, perhaps, room for allowing differences in how we address our heavenly Father. If earthly parents are thrilled when they hear their infants say their first words, might not our heavenly Father also be pleased with our effort when we begin to approach Him. Of course, parents enjoy watching their offspring mature and take pleasure in their increasing adult conversation. So our God makes allowances for our maturity as we approach His throne. Can we not refrain from judging our fellow Christians as they seek to express their love and gratitude to the Triune God? As St. Paul writes: "We who are strong must be considerate of those who are sensitive about things like this. We must not just please ourselves."¹¹ (Romans 15:1 *The New Living Translation*) We are not, however, to remain children but to grow up in all things to maturity in Christ. (Col. 1:28)

⁷ "To measure the distance between --and the unity of -- these two types of mind, one has only to compare St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine, both interpreters of St. Paul, both deeply engaged in the apostle's conception of the mystical Body, but the one to find therein directions for living, the other to draw out a theology of grace." M. J. Le Guillou, *The Spirit of Eastern Orthodoxy* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1962), pp.20-21 as cited in *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today*, p.6.

⁸ I have Baptist friends who would see a direct (apostolic) succession from John the Baptist to their current practice, claiming Montanists, Donatists, Waldensians and others as their linkage to the earliest practice of baptism. Likewise an Anglican friend (from Australia) claims his ordination was valid because of the Apostolic succession of doctrine.

⁹ In addition to the issue of hermeneutics, which divide Calvinists and Arminians, the question of work of the Holy Spirit in administering "signs and wonders" in the present church age is a contentious question. Cessationists hold that these supernatural signs ceased after the Apostolic Age when the Biblical Canon was complete. Charismatics hold the miraculous gifts are still functioning in the church.

¹⁰ Those who appreciate traditional worship (meaning late 19th early 20th century hymnology) battle with those who value a more contemporary worship (meaning choruses and repetitive lyrics) over which is the proper way to worship God. Add to this the liturgical Protestant churches of whose ministry I am greatly appreciative and one can begin to comprehend the diversity manifested. It has been pointed out to me that in the UK, the division is over whether liturgical structure or "extemporaneous worship should reign." I owe this insight to my good friend and colleague Mark Oxbrow who was kind enough to read a draft of this paper and suggest that "while in the UK the newer songs, hymnology, wider range of musical instruments and styles has been embraced by most Protestant and Catholic ecclesial traditions but the division is greater over whether or not 'liturgical structure', or should I say form or rhythm, has a place in Christian worship or whether everything should be, so called, extemporary." (From an email to the author.)

¹¹ Another take on this verse comes from a new "translation": "Now, those who are mature in their faith can easily be recognized, for they don't live to please themselves but have learned to patiently embrace others in their immaturity." Romans 15:1 *The Passion Translation* While I can not endorse this translation which is really a paraphrase, I think it has an insight in this verse.

Then there are the differences of ecclesiology. Is it right to have a hierarchy? Is it right to even have an ordained clergy? What is the role of women? These are not questions that only divide the East from the West, they are questions that divide the various western traditions.

An interesting study is the role of miracles. Do they still happen? Here some of the western traditions are closer to the Orthodox world than they are to other Protestant traditions which hold the age of miracles has ceased. Charismatic worship looks nothing like the liturgies of the East, but the same conviction that drives the belief in miraculous healings in both traditions as a work of God needs to be examined.¹²

The above are real questions and important issues that over the course of Church history have been discussed, argued over and caused divisions in previously united bodies. As I suggest below, we might find that another tradition, which has a different perspective on a theme or even a doctrine, may open the Scriptures for us to understand, not only each other, but the depth of the revelation of God to humankind.¹³

What is the way forward? I purpose three points for discussion.

I. Acknowledge there are differences.

The first is to honestly acknowledge we have major differences. There are practices and doctrines that divide us from one another. In part these divisions come from a lack of understanding. We need to really listen to each other. It is not wise to pretend there are no differences. We also must acknowledge that some in our circles (both Evangelical and Orthodox) find it anathema to even consider looking for common ground. I have personally met representatives of both Eastern and Western traditions who are so adamant that the position they represent is correct there is no room for conversation, only conversion.¹⁴ Admittedly it is very difficult to find a commonality with a tradition seemingly very different from ours. This is of course compounded by the problem of the other tradition refusing to talk with us let alone being willing to recognize our tradition.

This is a great pity but it is a reality we must deal with. As I will suggest below, our recourse in such cases is to pray for God to open their hearts.

II. Look deeper for common themes

The second point is to look deeper into the various traditions to find common themes. Some Protestant Evangelicals have found common themes in the Orthodox Church in the areas of spirituality, for example the dialogues and studies by Wesleyan theologians.¹⁵ My Charismatic friends would do well to study the

¹² I would challenge my Protestants Charismatic friends to examine the history of miraculous healings in Eastern traditions, both Oriental and Eastern Orthodox. I am sure some western Charismatics would be amazed at how similar their concerns and experiences are.

¹³ Here I betray my Evangelical bias by referring to Scripture. But the same could be said about exploring Tradition and having a different perspective being discovered.

¹⁴ These "hardliners" are so convinced that not only are they right but there is nothing to be learned from another tradition. Conviction is a wonderful thing but sometimes it masks insecurity.

¹⁵ Cf. *Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice*, ed. by S.T. Kimbrough, Jr. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005). There have been many joint studies on common theological topics, e.g. *The New Man: An Orthodox and Reformed Dialogue*, ed. by John Meyendorff and Joseph McLelland (New Brunswick, NJ: Agora Books, 1973). Among the topics discussed are the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* and sanctification in Reformed theology. John W. Beardslee III admits that "...we have no Reformed doctrine of sanctification. We have the experiences, convictions, and teachings of Reformed people, whose emphasis varies." p. 132.

various healing miracles in the Orthodox world, especially those connected with particular saints, shrines and icons. The phenomenon of the Holy Fire links with Charismatic worldview more closely than it does with other Evangelical traditions.¹⁶

Personally, my experiences with my African sisters and brothers have taught me much about how we should live as Christians. Their interpretative grid, arising out of their cultural context, sees things in the Bible that my western context completely misses. Likewise, my study of Eastern Orthodoxy has changed my thinking about how salvation is viewed in Western theology.¹⁷ A pressing concern for some evangelicals is the question of sanctification. Here I have been greatly helped by the Orthodox theology and the doctrine of *theosis*.¹⁸ Raised (theologically) in the necessity of justification, the concept of sanctification was given less attention where I did my theological education. I subsequently discovered other Protestant groups who had an obsession with holiness. But in my experience, these groups had external standards by which to measure progress in holiness. As long as they abstained from certain practices, their behaviour was an indication of sanctification. It seemed to me that St. Paul spoke to the externals when he wrote:

²⁰ If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ²¹ "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" ²² (which all *refer to* things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? ²³ These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence. (Colossians 2:-20-23)

Please do not think I am an antinomian. I am not suggesting libertine license. But I would suggest the Apostle Paul understands that true religion as opposed to self-made religion is a matter of the heart and not merely outward behaviour.¹⁹ While outward behaviour can be a useful indication of the outworking of our faith, outward behaviour must not be mistaken for the inner working of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁶ Cf. Haris Skarlakidis, *Holy Fire: The Miracle of Holy Saturday at the Tomb of Christ*, (Athens: Elaia Editions, 2011). Skarlakidis has collected 45 accounts from the 9th through the 16th centuries describing the descent of Holy Fire at the Tomb of Christ on Holy Saturday. The Holy Fire still falls as it has for more than a thousand years. *The Chicago Tribune* has recently run a series of articles on a weeping icon in a Greek Orthodox Church. See <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/ct-weeping-icon-chicago-investigation-20190911-re3jvlvxajbebf6vpyclx7ggpe-story.html> and <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/breaking/ct-weeping-icon-chicago-church-20190909-dvy34h3uo5gytqnum3bvwkote-story.html> The Orthodox faithful saw it as a sign of God's protection on their local parish.

¹⁷ I recall my seminary theology professor lecturing on the *ordo salutis* and puzzling over where to put "union with Christ." My professors of systematic theology are all now in the presence of God and therefore have an even sounder theology than they tried to teach me. As the hymn writer penned "Oh for that day when our faith shall become sight." The entire last stanza speaks of our Lord's return. "And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight, The clouds be rolled back as a scroll; The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend, Even so, it is well with my soul." "It is Well with my Soul" by Horatio Gates Spafford (1873) to the tune Ville Du Havre.

¹⁸ Cf. my paper "Justification, Sanctification, Theosis: An Evangelical View," in *The Mission of God: Studies in Orthodox and Evangelical Mission*, ed. by Mark Oxbrow and Tim Grass, (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2015).

¹⁹ One of my personal heroes is the 16th century reformer, Martin Luther. He is a model of someone who practised severe mortification of the flesh but found no peace until his eyes were opened to the gift of God in providing salvation.

There is more in common between us in the observation of the ministry of the Spirit than some of our practices would seem to account for.²⁰ Our key text in this regard should be John 3:8, "God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (Common English Bible)²¹

It is the role of the Holy Spirit to lead us in all the truth.²² The disciples could not bear it. (John 16:12) Can we? The question we need to ask is the Holy Spirit finished leading the Church into all the truth? While some Protestants would claim with the closing of the Biblical Canon, there is nothing more for the church to be taught, this view is contradicted by the practice of even the groups who hold this view. The Bible (in their view) was completed at the end of the Apostolic Age, yet some of these groups would maintain that a hermeneutical methodology developed in the 19th century is the only correct way to interpret the Bible.²³ My purpose is not to argue the merits or demerits of their position, rather it is to point out that even "closed" advocates have acknowledged development.²⁴

St. Paul reminds us that we are only looking in a mirror and not a very clean one at that. (I Cor. 13:12) So we should be humble lest we think that what we see is a totally accurate reflection of our own reality.

I have been greatly helped by the concept of apophatic theology, that is the way of negation, saying what God is not. "God cannot be properly apprehended by man's mind; human language, when applied to Him, is always inexact."²⁵ This calls to mind John Calvin's admonition that God stoops to human understanding.²⁶

III. The command to pray for each other

The third point is that whether we agree or not, we need to pray for each other. As noted above it is a sad fact that not everyone wants to come to the table to discuss what we have in common. This is a pity for as

²⁰ An excellent essay on the common themes between Orthodox and Evangelicals is Bradley Nassif, "The Evangelical Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church" in *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*, ed. by James Stamoolis (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), pp.25-87.

²¹ ⁸ τὸ πνεῦμα ὅπου θέλει πνεῖ, καὶ τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ ἀκούεις, ἀλλ' οὐκ οἶδας πόθεν ἔρχεται καὶ ποῦ ὑπάγει· οὕτως ἐστὶν πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ πνεύματος. **SBL Greek New Testament (SBLGNT)**

²² ¹³ "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose *it* to you. ¹⁵ All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose *it* to you." John 16:13-16

²³ I am referring here to the classical dispensational theology which dates from the 1830s. A more extreme version of dispensational theology holds that only the epistles are valid Scripture for the current "age." I only bring this up to indicate that even Cessationists (which Dispensationists are) must admit to progress in understanding of the Bible.

²⁴ They would not call it a new revelation but would speak of discovering what had been hidden in the Bible but lay undiscovered. This of course is similar to the manner in which the promulgation of certain doctrines in the Roman Catholic Church are defended as having lay dormant in the Bible.

²⁵ Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 72. This book helped me in my journey to understanding. The other book that I always recommend is Ernst Benz, *The Eastern Orthodox Church*, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1963). Benz begins with a phenomenological approach, i.e. the importance of icons.

²⁶ "For who is so devoid of intellect as not to understand that God, in so speaking, lisps with us as nurses are wont to do with little children? Such modes of expression, therefore, do not so much express what kind of a being God is, as accommodate the knowledge of him to our feebleness. In doing so, he must, of course, stoop far below his proper height." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I, Chapter 13, Section 1. trans. by Henry Beveridge, Christian Classics Ethereal Library (<https://www.ccel.org/>)

St. Paul admonishes us, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." (Romans 12:18) The context is not even among believers but it is a general admonition to live in peace even among those who are persecuting you.²⁷ Can we live in peace with other Christians with whom we disagree? Or do the words of our Lord apply? "A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD."²⁸ It is a sad commentary that opposition often comes from within the household of God.²⁹ This is not a way to handle our differences but magnifies the points on which we disagree.

If we cannot agree as Christians then we should at a minimum respect our differences. Our Lord commands us to pray for our enemies.³⁰ If we only hate and do not love our enemies, can we honestly call ourselves followers of the Lord of Life?

Therefore it is incumbent on all Christians to pray for other Christians, even if those who differ from us, as a way to fulfill our Lord's command.³¹ Ultimately, this is the best way to handle our differences.

II. How do we explain our differences?

Let us begin with a wider question. How do we explain the differences in language and culture around the world? We have the story of the Tower of Babel where the Lord confused the language of the people so that they could not understand each other. (Genesis 11: 7ff) It needs to be noted that there were two consequences of this confusion. The first was the lack of mutual understanding, but the second fulfilled the Lord's purpose of scattering humans "over the face of the whole earth." The disobedience was not merely the desire of humankind to make a name for themselves but it was to "not to be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

The desire for uniformity is strong. Does not the tendency to think that everyone must be like us to be fully human stem from our sinful nature? Throughout history, the enemy is made to be less than human so that we can justify our killing them in war.

This is not the venue for a discussion of human cultural differences, how they arose and how they determine our response to those of another language, race or culture.³² But the response to differences

²⁷ Romans 12:17-19 New American Standard Bible (NASB)

¹⁷ "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. ¹⁹ Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."

²⁸ Matthew 10:36 which is a direct quotation from Micah 7:6.

²⁹ It is a sad commentary that in some countries, Christians of a different tradition inform on other Christians to the government and even resort to the courts to settle differences between Christian bodies, seemingly in clear violation of I Corinthians 6:1-8.

³⁰ ⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous."

Matthew 5:43-45 New American Standard Bible (NASB)

³¹ I am well aware of the diptychs in Eastern liturgies as a sign of who is in communion with each other. Cf. Hugh Wybrew *The Orthodox Liturgy: The Development of the Eucharistic Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite*, (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990).). Wybrew discusses the use of diptychs in determining who was in and who was out of communion. pp. 57-59. I am not suggesting that the liturgy be changed. However I know of no prohibition against praying for others apart from the liturgy. I would welcome those prayers even if the content of those prayers was that I would come to the light. Pray all you want, God knows I need it! When we pray for the other to be changed an amazing thing happens by the grace of God, we and the other can both be changed.

demonstrates how ingrained our own cultural understanding is and how we must fight against prejudice when we interact with other groups.

Transferring this across to the differences between various Christian traditions, we see that some of the things that divide us have a basis in culture rather than theology. This is a hard pill for us to swallow. We defend our tradition from our theological understanding. But what is the role of culture and here I include all aspects of culture, including our history, in determining our practice?³³

Worship is one of the most visible, if not the most visible, expressions of our tradition. To discuss the role of culture in determining our style does not invalidate our practice nor does it relativise all practices so that all forms are correct. But it does mean we need to reflect more clearly on what we think is the only way to worship God. If Orthodox theologians can discuss alternative liturgical forms as being legitimate way to worship the Living God, then perhaps we can see a way forward in tolerating (even if we are not able to endorse fully) other forms of Christian worship.³⁴

Whether we want to admit or not, worship is culturally conditioned. So the same liturgy will seem very different in an East African setting from a Northern European setting.³⁵ I am not merely thinking about what some have called liturgical churches because even evangelical churches in these settings are very different from each other. The mistake we make is to label one form (take your pick, African or European) correct and the other less pleasing to God. Do we really want to claim that we have the mind of God to know what pleases Him?³⁶ I think not. A safer course of action is to bless the worship of the Triune God wherever we see it and allow God to correct any excesses or deficiencies that He observes.

Therefore does it surprise us that here on earth we have variations in our worship? Can we not agree that certain forms may be more effective in communicating the truth of the gospel in different environments? We could even allow for development among the nations toward a more pure form of worship, perhaps thinking that our liturgy is best suited to God's praise.

The same can be said about our progress toward holiness. Very few children learn to run, let alone walk before crawling. Earthly parents are pleased when they see their offspring learning to move by crawling, then learning to stand and finally being able to walk without clinging to the furniture as they make their way across the room to the parent's arms. So too our heavenly Father is pleased when He sees us

³² Cf. Clotilde Rapaille, *The Culture Code*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2006). Rapaille explains how the culture a person grew up in affects the way they think about decisions. His particular interest is in commerce as his subtitle indicates: "An ingenious way to understand why people around the world buy and live as they do." While the reader may not agree with all of his conclusions, his cultural analysis is worth reading for anyone interested in the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

³³ In this regard it is worth mentioning an unofficial consultation between theologians of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches that took place at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, August 11-15, 1964. The papers of this consultation along with responses from the participants to each paper appear in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Volume X, no. 2 (Winter 1964-1965).

³⁴ John Meyendorff noted in a book published in French in 1960 and in English in 1962 of the formation of a number of "Western Orthodox communities." He foresaw that this infusion could lead to "the return to Holy Scripture and to the true Christian Tradition of the Church, the movement toward reunion, the revival of patristic studies, a greater awareness of social responsibilities, and the liturgical movement." *The Orthodox Church: Its Past and Its Role in the World Today*, (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 188.

³⁵ I am reminded of the Kenyan proverb, "The person who has not travelled widely thinks his or her mother is the only cook" <https://www.afriprov.org/african-proverb-of-the-month/23-1998proverbs/133-august-1998.html>

³⁶ ³³"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! ³⁴For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR?" Romans 11:33-34 (NASB) Cf. Isaiah 40:13-14, I Cor. 2:16,

crawling toward Him. His desire is for us to run into His embrace, but He is looking for progress in holiness, not immediate perfection.³⁷

This metaphor works for other differences between us. It is our common confession that unites us, not our common practice. The great doctrinal formulations of the early church as they struggled to make sense of the reality of the Risen Christ and what that meant theologically are what we have in common.³⁸ This common faith divides us not from each other but from those who are not yet acquainted with the Living God. They are "without hope and without God" and therefore separated from Christ.³⁹

The issue is not uniformity but whether we can recognize (however strange) that the other form of worship is directed to the glory of the Triune God. This principle means that the cults which deny any aspect of the Trinity are not in conformity to the common ecumenical creeds.⁴⁰

Can we maintain that our tradition is better? Yes, if we recognize that it is our offering to God and our witness to the truth. We are free to share our view in humility realizing that our manner of worship is not to please ourselves but to serve God.

III. How do we witness to our differences?

This is the easiest of the three questions because we witness to our differences in two different spheres. To outsiders we present the picture of being a family, albeit a family which has at times difficult relatives.

Just like every family has a relative who is somewhat different or difficult, so our Christian family has within the fold individuals and groups who are problematic. Please understand I am not saying which part of the family is difficult or problematic. As we are cautious about eating Aunt Sophie's pie or drinking Uncle Earnest's homemade wine, so we are cautious about what we consume theologically from their table. But we recognize no matter how different from us our more distant relatives are, they are, by virtue of being related to our Heavenly Father, kinfolk. Some are more distant relatives, a branch of the family who separated from the homeland years ago and with whom we have lost touch. Nevertheless we can trace their lineage back to a common ancestor.

Continuing with the family metaphor, they are relatives who have developed some strange ideas, even about the family, and have some strange practices that are not in accord with the tradition of our family line. We don't have to accept their practice and secondary beliefs and it is entirely permissible at family gathering to discuss and even argue with them if need be. To do otherwise would not be loving or honest. It is, however, keeping with love to interact with them as fellow members of the household of God. The key issue is the common confession that we have discussed above.

Does this mean that secondary issues are not important? As we have seen above, this is not the case. Styles of worship, languages used in worship, cultural accommodation among other matters are important

³⁷ This certainly was and still is my own experience. Cf. C.S. Lewis: "As a great Christian writer (George MacDonald) pointed out, every father is pleased at the baby's first attempt to walk: no father would be satisfied with anything less than a firm, free, manly walk in a grown-up son. In the same way, he said, 'God is easy to please, but hard to satisfy.'" *Mere Christianity*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943), p. 158.

³⁸ I am aware of the division of Chalcedon (451), but all of us can accept Nicaea (325) as an expression of our faith.

³⁹ ¹² "remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." Ephesians 2:12 New American Standard Bible

⁴⁰ Here I have in mind "Jesus Only" groups as well as cults like the Jehovah's Witness and the Mormons which deny the nature of the Second Person of the Trinity.

to our witness to outsiders, i.e., those not in the family of God. We must remember that God's purpose is bring the knowledge of salvation to the entire world.⁴¹

When those outside of Christ point to our divisions as a sign of the untruth of the Gospel, we must be quick to defend our fellow Christians and point to the things that unite us as Christians. The common confession of faith, as symbolized in the Nicene creed and our common adherence to the Bible as the word of God for humankind, far outweighs our differences.

Returning to the family metaphor, I can complain all I want about my relatives. That is an internal conversation I carry on within the family. But let someone outside the family dare criticize my relatives and my defensive mechanism comes into play. Perhaps this illustration works for me because I am really a Mediterranean person and not an individualistic American. It is hard for me to decipher this in my life since I was raised in the United States. It seems my Greek culture runs deeper than where I was born. Or to put it another way, being born in a family outweighs where the family lives. This helps to explain why immigrants and their descendents adhere to the culture of the homeland.⁴²

I think it applies to Christians as being part of the family of God. How ever much and however strongly we disagree within the family, we are family. Outsiders need to know that. Our similarities greatly outweigh our differences no matter where we were born. Our common faith in God produces in us a bond that those on the outside should be able to see.

Our Shared Witness of the Martyrs

I have, however, saved the best for last. What unites us as Christians is our identification with those who died for the testimony of Jesus. The early Christian martyrs are our martyrs. I read of their defying the Roman authorities and can not help both admiring their faith and wondering if my faith would stand up to the test. As a historian I bemoan the lack of historical knowledge of my fellow (non liturgical) evangelicals. They don't know of the great heroes of the faith. They are missing out on examples of Christian witness that would strengthen their souls. As we read in the book of Hebrews those " of whom the world was not worthy" (Hebrews 11:38)

Lest one think that the age of persecution is over, one only needs to read the newspapers and see on the media that Christians are again being killed for their faith.⁴³ This is not ancient history, it is today's news. Western Christians who had never heard of the Coptic Orthodox Church became aware of the faithful witness of the 21.⁴⁴ Respectfully, these saints belong to the Coptic Church which nurtured them and

⁴¹ ³ "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men, *the* man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony *given* at the proper time." I Timothy 2:3-6 NASV

⁴² It is an interesting study to trace the roots and resurgence of ethnic identity in immigrant populations. These makes forming a national identity more difficult in some countries.

⁴³ More Christians died in the 20th century than all previous centuries combined. It is estimated that around 45 million died in the past century compared to 25 million from 33 AD to 1899. Agne Nordlander, "A Theology of Martyrdom" in *Freedom of Belief and Christian Mission* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2015), p. 58. The entire volume is worth reading.

⁴⁴ We must also note the 150 other Coptic Christians killed in terror attacks and those Christians killed in Iraq and many other countries.

raised them up to be faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴⁵ But in another wider sense, they belong to the whole church which recognizes them as true witnesses.

Those who executed those Christians saw them as representatives of the Crusaders.⁴⁶ Obviously they did not know their history as the Coptic Church participated in no crusade. But the men in black, without knowing it, got one thing right. They killed Christians and we all, Coptic, Oriental, Eastern Orthodox and evangelicals of various stripes, are Christians united by our common confession and our faith in our one Lord and Saviour.

May the witness of the 21 and all the other Coptic martyrs remind us that whatever divides us, Christ reunites us in a common witness.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Required reading for every believer should be Martin Mosebach, *The 21: A Journey into the Land of the Coptic Martyrs*, (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2019).

⁴⁶ *The 21*, p. 22.

⁴⁷ Archbishop Angealos in his presentation in New York City at the book launch of *The 21* explains that the book introduced him to Bruderhof community. His eminence makes so beautifully the point that I have been trying to make, namely we can always find differences between but the martyrs bring us together.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cL9jk3t67MQ>