

## THE RELEVANCE OF ORTHODOXY<sup>1</sup>

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Acts 2:41-47

Then they that received his word were baptized: and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all, according as any man had need. And day by day, continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they did all take their food with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to them day by day those that were being saved.

Especially v. 42: And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers.

In recent years an ecumenical way of interpreting Holy Scripture has emerged. Let me illustrate this from my own experience. For some ten years I worked on the Commission on Christ and His Church in the Faith and Order department of the World Council of Churches. It was chaired by a Lutheran bishop from Sweden; in the early years its secretary was an Anglican, and latterly a Baptist. Among the regular members of the Commission were a Russian Orthodox, Professor

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1 This sermon was originally printed in the Alexandrian journal edited by Methodius Fouyas *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 2-3 (1970). It was subsequently reprinted in the form of a pamphlet by the Fellowship of St Andrew, *The Relevance of Orthodoxy* (Stirling, UK: Drummond Press, 1971). The occasion for the delivery of this sermon on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1970 in the historic Greyfriars Church in Edinburgh was the visit of several Orthodox bishops – the Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria, Nikolaos VI; the Archbishop of Thyteira and Great Britain, Athenagoras (Kokkinakis); and Torrance's close friend, Methodios, Metropolitan of Axum, Ethiopia – to Edinburgh to receive honorary doctorates.



Georges Florovsky, a Quaker, a Congregationalist, a Methodist, a member of the Church of South India, a Reformed theologian, and so on. We studied what the Scriptures have to teach us about the relation of the Church to Christ and sought to build up a doctrine of the Church with which we could all agree. Again and again, however, when passages of the Bible were being interpreted by others – Professor Florovsky, for example – I had to take a new, hard look at the Greek text of the New Testament to see whether it really did mean what he said, and again and again found that I had been misreading the New Testament because I had been looking at it through Presbyterian spectacles. Our conjoint discussion, to which we brought our several Church traditions and outlooks, enabled us in the give and take of criticism to read what was actually written in the Bible and to interpret it as far as possible undistorted by this or that ecclesiastical tradition. I myself learned, I think, from the Orthodox more than from any other.

This evening as we are met in prayer for the reunion of the Church, and to offer our worship together in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ who has made us one in Himself, let us seek to interpret this passage from the book of the Acts through the eyes of the Greek Orthodox Church whose representatives have been with us during the past week and one of whom, Archbishop Athenagoras, preached to us here in Greyfriars this morning. With their ancient tradition so firmly rooted in Early Christianity and in the Apostolic foundation of the Church, they have much to offer in helping us to understand this passage in its own early Church context. We shall concentrate our thoughts upon three themes: (1) Fidelity to Apostolic Doctrine; (2) the Communion of the Holy Spirit; and (3) the Eucharistic Worship of the People of God.

## **I. Fidelity to Apostolic Doctrine**

What do our Greek brethren mean by the term 'Orthodox' by which they characterize their Church? 'Orthodox' means having a mind that is *rightly related* to the truth. It does not refer to some sort of regimentation of the mind of the Church whereby the truth is imposed upon it from outside, but rather to a basic orientation of the Church to the truth of the Gospel, in which its opinions, teaching and actions fall under the guidance of the Apostles.

There are two chief elements here which we may note:

(i) *Fidelity* to the Truth of the Gospel is the seal of unity. What divides the church is not fidelity to the Gospel but always our infidelities. As soon as the Church becomes unfaithful to its foundations in Christ it introduces contradiction and inner disunity into itself, and that inevitably results in division. There can be no Church

unity except that which is grounded in the one historic faith of the Catholic and Apostolic Church – that is why the Nicene Creed plays such an important role in the Orthodox Church, for in it there emerged the fundamental framework within which the Church is directed in all its thought back to the apostolic foundation of the Church as handed down to us in the Holy Scriptures. The Nicene Creed was distilled, as it were, through careful exegesis of the Scriptures, in order to find a basic and accurate way of expressing those essentials of the Christian faith, apart from which it cannot remain faithful to the Gospel. Hence in the tradition of the Orthodox Church the Nicene Creed has the effect of throwing the mind of the Church back upon the Holy Scriptures, and making them central in all its worship, doctrine, and life. The way in which the Bible is treated with such veneration in Orthodox Worship, or the way in which the Bishop is consecrated as a guardian of the fidelity of the Church to the Gospel by having the Bible placed over his head, is sufficient indication of the exalted place given to the Word of God by the Orthodox Church.

(ii) All of the Church's doctrinal formulations are recognised as falling short of the reality, the majesty, and glory of the ineffable God. While careful doctrinal formulations of the theology of the Church are essential they cannot be thought of as containing the truth in themselves, but rather as ways of directing us to the mystery of Christ and the mystery of the Holy Trinity. God is infinitely greater than we can conceive, so that the reality of God and the truth of the Gospel transcend our human formulations: the formulations are to be thought of as serving the mystery of God, both by preserving its sanctity for us and by opening up the avenues along which our minds may be rightly related to it. The truth of the Gospel cannot be imprisoned in our human statements, or tied down to fixed and unchangeable formulations. That is why at the Council of Chalcedon the Fathers of the Church insisted on speaking of the mystery of Christ in a negative way, for the mystery of Christ is more to be adored than expressed. Our statements of it must be of the kind that, instead of coming in between Christ and our understanding, allow Christ in all His wonderful reality and mystery to reveal Himself to us through them continually.

How does the Orthodox Church manage to hold these two great characteristics together, fidelity to the truth and respect for its mystery? The answer is found in the way in which it understands our text: *by persisting steadfastly in the teaching of the Apostles*. It is by keeping fellowship in a living, dynamic, and continuing way with the Apostles, by constantly dwelling in their teaching, that the Church maintains that basic orientation to Christ and His Gospel in which its mind is rightly related to the Truth, and in which fidelity to it and respect for

its mystery grown and develop together. The one Foundation of the Church is Jesus Christ Himself. It was the function of the Apostles to shape and ground the Church on that Foundation so that it is by keeping close to the Apostles throughout all its history that the Church is constantly kept close to and true to its living source in Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of the Church.

In this way the Orthodox Church presents a rather different picture from the Western Church with its regimented structures, its elaborate theological formulations, its teaching authorities and infallible pronouncements, whether we think of all that in Roman hierarchical or in Protestant confessional forms. The Orthodox Church is to be understood in the light of its central emphasis upon the Holy Trinity, for the Church in its historical and earthly existence is a communion of human life and thought that reflects the communion of love in God Himself. And it is organized in that kind of way: different Churches are centers of living fellowship and agreement who are knit together through their common foundation in Christ, by persisting steadfastly in the teaching of the Apostles. The Truth of the Gospel is alive in its midst and the Church remains faithful to it as it is continually assimilated to its dynamic and sanctifying power. That is to say, the Orthodox Church understands steadfast persistence in the Apostles' doctrine to be an essential part of its spiritual and sacramental continuity in Christ, for He continues through all history to communicate Himself to the Church through the word of the Gospel mediated by the Apostles, while the Church continues faithfully to find its life and light beyond itself in Christ and in the Holy Trinity.

## **II. Communion of the Holy Spirit**

Many years ago a Greek Orthodox Bishop asked me whether in my church we used the term 'fellowship' or the term 'communion' when we spoke of the Holy Spirit, for example, in the benediction. I realized then in discussion with him that the Orthodox Church considers 'fellowship' to be rather a superficial rendering of the Greek term *koinonia*. And of course they are right.

*Koinonia* or *Communion* in this passage refers to the wonderful event that had taken place at Pentecost, when God poured out His Holy Spirit upon the Church, and they knew that God Himself had come to be with them in such a way as to share with them the immediate presence of His own Divine Being and Power. The communion of the Spirit has, as it were, a vertical and a horizontal dimension. Vertically – and this is its primary meaning – it is our participation in the Holy Spirit, in which we come under the direct impact of God's uncreated energies in all their holiness and majesty, and are sanctified and renewed by

them – that is what the Greek Orthodox Church calls *theosis*, which is very badly rendered ‘deification.’ The Holy Spirit is God Himself in all His own eternal Being and Presence acting upon us personally and creatively: it is the most awesome and astounding experience we could think of.

Now when the New Testament speaks of the Church as being filled with the Spirit, the Greek Church interprets this in a different way from the Latin Church in the West – they hold it to mean that we are possessed by the Spirit and not that we possess the Spirit. It is at this point that we can see the fundamental difference in the notions of *Catholicity* in East and West. For the Eastern Church Catholicity means that through the Spirit the Church participates in the fullness or the plenitude of God and so is made to reach out far beyond its own bounds on earth or in history; but for the Western Church Catholicity means that the Church possesses the fullness of the Spirit and so may dispense the Spirit out of its own plenitude as the Body of Christ. It was St. Augustine who taught the Western Church to think of the Spirit as somehow the soul of the Church, animating its body and making it the extension of the Incarnation. But this gives the Church of the West a closed and delimited notion of Catholicity to which the Greek Orthodox Church objects. The Church is certainly made the Body of Christ by the fact that the Spirit takes possession of it and assimilates it to Christ, but the Church does not possess the Spirit and therefore cannot dispense the Spirit out of its own fullness in the way in which St. Augustine or even St. Thomas thought. The Holy Spirit takes possession of the Church as the transcendent Lord who cannot be dispensed or administered by the Church in any way. That is why the New Testament speaks of ‘the Lord, the Spirit’, and why the Nicene Creed speaks of the Spirit as ‘the Lord, the Giver of Life’.

There is a difference between the Eastern and Western forms of the Nicene Creed, for the Western Church speaks of the Spirit as ‘proceeding from the Father and the Son’ whereas the Eastern Church speaks of the Spirit only as ‘proceeding from the Father’, but actually the Eastern Church thinks of that as taking place *through the Son*, not as through the Church. Thus in spite of the different formulations of the East and the West the Eastern Church is more Christological and preserves the Mystery of the Spirit in a way that is so often lost in the West. One of the effects of the Orthodox doctrine of the Spirit is found in the way in which they regard the structures of the Church’s life and thought as open structures, shaped by the mystery of Christ and open to the transcendent Majesty and Lordship of God.

As I understand it, that is the way in which the Orthodox Church regards the Communion of the Spirit in this passage from the Acts of the Apostles. Vertically,

it refers to the direct presence of God to the Church, which opens the Church to the transcendent Majesty of the living God. That is why the Acts of the Apostles speaks of both fear and joy in connection with it: fear, for this is an awesome experience, to be directly bound against God in His sheer Holiness and Deity; and unbounded joy, for it means a unity and fellowship among the people of God – and it is just because they are possessed by the Spirit and are lifted up above themselves that they are given a wonderful unity in their relations with one another. In his commentary on this passage St. John Chrysostom stresses the Greek words here that lay such emphasis upon the unity of mind and body, the deep reality of community that results when we are possessed by the Spirit. Just because this is a sacred unity created by the presence of the Spirit, in which the Church not only is one in Spirit but shares out all that it has in having all things in common, it would be a fearful thing to break that unity. It would be like a sin against the Holy Ghost. That is what we find in the fifth chapter of the Acts in the sin of Ananias and Sapphira when they broke the bond of the Spirit between the outward and inward unity – they acted a lie against the Holy Ghost and were struck dead by His Majesty and Holiness. This may help us to understand why our Greek Brethren were upset at the idea that the celebration of the divine Eucharist might be interrupted in the Church – it would be like a sin against the Holy Spirit.

I believe the Orthodox Church has much to teach us in the West today about belief in the Holy Spirit – the Holy Spirit is not just the Spirit of the Church or some vague Christian Spirit at work in our consciousness. The Holy Spirit is none other than God Almighty, God Himself come to us in all His ineffable Majesty and Deity and Holiness and Power. It is therefore a terrible error to confuse the Holy Spirit with our spirit, and yet this is one of the most widespread mistakes of the Western Church, whether Roman or Protestant. Let us try to learn again what it really means to say in the Creed: 'I believe in the Holy Ghost'.

### **III. The Eucharistic Worship of the people of God**

Under this heading we may bring together what St. Luke speaks of as 'breaking of bread' and 'prayers'. In the 42nd verse it reads: 'They continued steadfastly ... in the breaking of bread and the prayers'; and in the 46th verse: 'They continued daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart.'

After Pentecost the Apostles went to the Temple daily to engage in the Worship of God, and thus took part in the on-going worship of God's House that had

continued for centuries; but they were unable to celebrate the Lord's Supper there, and so they came back from the Temple to gather in various homes for the celebration of the Eucharist. Here we see that the Early Church combined Christian worship with the age-old worship of God in Israel, and so they began to develop the liturgy of the Church on the basis of New Testament Gospel and Old Testament worship. Hence the Eucharistic worship of the Church, far from displacing the worship in the Temple, was daily associated with and echoed the worship in the Temple. St. Luke tells us also that after Pentecost a great number of the priests became obedient to the Faith; and undoubtedly they brought with them the liturgy of the Temple, and so helped the early Church to develop Christian worship by way of an adaptation of the worship of Israel set out in the Old Testament, by assimilating it to the worship of God through Jesus Christ.

It would be a very great mistake for us Protestants to imagine that the way in which we worship God is a return to the simplicity of the New Testament – our Protestant worship is very far removed from the worship of the Early Christians which was grounded on a profound unity between the Old Testament and the New Testament. It is that biblical combination which has been remarkably preserved and developed by the Greek Orthodox Church in its worship. This is very apparent when one examines its details, for example, in the rites for the making of deacons, the ordination of presbyters, and the consecration of bishops where all through they operate with Christian adaptations of the teaching of the Old Testament – the same is true of the Eucharistic rites, and that applies not least to the ancient Liturgy of St. Mark which is still used from time to time in the Alexandrian Church. But let me illustrate this by referring to the music used in the Greek Liturgy. After the war Dr. Egon Wellesz, Reader in the History of Music in Oxford, and himself a noted composer, deciphered the ancient musical notation which has so long puzzled scholars, and then there came a very wonderful discovery: it was found that the music of the ancient Byzantine Liturgy was a Christian adaptation of the Hebrew music from the Temple in Jerusalem before it was destroyed in A.D. 70. The Jewish priests who had been converted to the Christian faith in such numbers used the music and liturgy of the Temple to relate the Eucharistic celebration in the Church to the heavenly Temple of which St. John speaks in the Book of the Revelation, so that the Eucharistic celebration on earth was understood as an echo of the joyful worship around the enthroned Lamb of God above. That last book of the Bible is shot through and through with snatches of the Eucharistic liturgy of the Early Church, and there is woven all through it the life and Spirit of Jesus, the crucified, risen and ascended Lord, for it is He who is both the Altar and the Lamb of Sacrifice,

the one Self-offering to the Father on behalf of us all, and it is through Him and in Him that all the worship of heaven and earth is gathered up and concentrated. As often as we worship God and celebrate the Lord's Supper it is into that on-going heavenly worship that we are lifted up by the Spirit.

I have been describing the worship of the Early Christians, but that is just what the worship of the Orthodox Church is. No doubt the liturgy has become more elaborate through time, largely through further adaptations of the Old Testament ways of worship, but it remains essentially the same, and it is, I believe – let me say it quite frankly – still the most biblically grounded worship I know: grounded in the whole Bible.

Contrast Orthodox worship with Protestant worship for a moment. Modern Protestant worship has tended to become a way of *expressing ourselves* in worship before God, and therefore it inevitably takes up into itself the patterns and habits of our cultural and national ways of life in this or that country or in this or that age, and is shaped by those patterns and habits. When we develop our worship in that way, then worship divides us from one another, for then all kinds of self-interest, egoism, nationalism, etc., lurk behind our worship and are entrenched in it. That is why it is over ways of worship that we Protestants can be so bitterly divided. But if worship is something different, in which we are lifted up above our peculiarities and cultural and national divisions, to participate in the on-going heavenly worship of Christ Himself, then it is in and through worship that we can transcend our differences and be united with one another. The basic pattern of our worship which unifies us, will, of course, be governed by the life and pattern of Christ Himself, for then it is in His Name, and not in our own name, that we will worship God the Father, and our worship will not be a way of expressing ourselves but a way in which Christ confesses us before the Father through His own self-offering on our behalf.

Actually that is the way in which John Calvin used to understand Christian worship, as a participation in Christ's own self-oblation to the Father. Jesus Himself is the great Leader of our worship, but more than that, He is Himself our worship: we come before the face of God in Him and through Him, with nothing of our own: it is to Him we cling, and when we appear before God it is Christ and His Cross that we hold aloft in the hands of faith, pleading His merits and His only sacrifice – that is what the Lord's Supper is about. So that when we worship God in the Spirit, we are lifted up by the Spirit to participate in the on-going worship in the heavenly Temple not made with hands, where Christ alone is our High Priest, and where He constitutes in Himself our only true offering and worship with which the Father is well pleased. Calvin himself did not know



as much about the worship of the Early Church as we do, and unfortunately he allowed the mediaeval Jewish scholars to have too great an influence on his interpretation of the Bible so that he swept away many of the biblical forms of worship handed down from the Early Church. One can understand that in the light of the mediaeval elaborations that seemed to obscure the Gospel. Nevertheless Calvin penetrated into the heart of Christian worship, taking his doctrine of worship from Athanasius, Cyril, and Chrysostom. If we follow his lead, we in the Reformed Church can find ourselves drawing much closer to the Greek Orthodox Church and, what is more, grounding our worship again in the same biblical way as the early Christians in the Church of the Apostles. It is indeed along this line that the Church of Scotland through its Aids to Devotion Committee has brought to the General Assembly a fine report on the theology of worship as centered in and mediated through Jesus Christ. This is a theology that has clearly learned much from the Greek Fathers, as well as from Calvin, and learned from both how to ground Christian worship in the teaching of the Apostles.

Our text has from the Holy Scriptures: 'They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and the prayers', and we have tried to understand it through the eyes of the Greek Orthodox Church, concentrating our meditation particularly upon Fidelity to the Apostolic Doctrine, the Communion of the Holy Spirit, and the Eucharistic worship of the people of God. But let our Greek brethren teach us one final thing about our text: fidelity to the truth of the Gospel, belief in the Holy Spirit, and worship of the Father in and through Jesus Christ cannot be separated from one another. It is above all in the Eucharist, where Christ clothed with His Gospel is in the center, that we are lifted up through the power of the Spirit to worship the one Triune God; and it is only as we continue steadfastly and faithfully in that Holy Communion, that we are assimilated with all the people of God into a living sacramental unity as the Body of Christ. The reunion of the Church so tragically fragmented in history will not be achieved through regimented structures of our own devising, but through the breaking of bread and prayer through the Communion of the Spirit, and through continuing steadfastly in the teaching of the Apostles.

Now unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father, to Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.