

## On Orthodoxy and orthodoxies (Fr. John Parker)

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Adam Parker wrote two articles investigating the history of religious schism and

asking the question, “should religion’s goal be a ‘universal church’ or is religious diversity a good thing?” Adam states that in times of trouble and theological debate “some believers...react by reasserting orthodoxy.” I would like to take the liberty to explain why I believe there is no ‘little ‘o’ orthodoxy and to define and describe “Orthodoxy” as “Christianity from the beginning”. As a result we will see but one Jesus Christ, and the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

Little ‘o’ orthodoxy is a concept which inherently has no meaning, precisely because it is an idea used to defend certain Reformation and Post-reformation ideas, not all of which are held in common by those who would label themselves orthodox. Consider a few examples. Some Protestant Christians would interpret certain passages in the Holy Scriptures to defend the ordination of women, while others will interpret certain verses (often the same ones!) to condemn it. Some would interpret the Bible, defending adult-only baptism. Others would claim that baptism is unnecessary, using the same Bible. Some would baptize “in the Name of Jesus” only, citing the Book of Acts. Others would baptize “in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” referencing Jesus’ command in Matthew 28. Each of these might call themselves ‘orthodox’. The main question which should arise from this discussion would be, “who decides who’s orthodox?” Phrased another way, “whose interpretation is correct?” Little ‘o’ orthodoxy is a term which is gaining popularity in an effort to defend one’s own beliefs and denominational affiliations without checking all of them against the received beliefs of the Universal Church.

Orthodox (capital ‘O’), is a term which does have meaning, precisely because Orthodoxy is the Ancient Way of Christianity, believing and teaching that which has always been believed and taught about Jesus Christ and everything related to him: the Church, the Sacraments, missions, etc. When theological debate arises, we can always look back and ask, “what have Christians always believed?” We will find, in this search, two records. First, a long line of teachers (Bishops) stretching from the first century to the present day, whose sole task it is to guard and transmit this ‘faith once for all delivered to the saints’ (Jude 3). And second, we will find the content of their defense and teaching to be this long-held ‘body’ of belief. Both are critical to Orthodoxy. We can know the “mind of Christ” in every critical area by looking back from the beginning to see if what is being questioned is congruent or an innovation. We are looking for the golden thread of commonly held beliefs.

To hold all of these commonly held beliefs, and to profess them publicly in word and action, would make one “Orthodox”. To hold some of them, but not all of them would make one (again historically and theologically) “heterodox” (literally “a different glory or praise”)—and places one outside the Church. To teach against

these teachings and beliefs, especially from within the Church makes one a “heretic” (literally “an opinion holder”, “sectarian”, or “dissenter”), perhaps the most dangerous spiritual label.

Though not always, the heterodox and heretical views of Christianity often start with questions about me or my rights. For Christians, to start with the individual is a dangerous endeavor. “What will make me happy?” “What is my right as a human being?” “If I am like this, what must God be like?” “Why don’t you believe what I believe?”

Orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, takes God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, holds tightly onto it, and seeks to live it in every possible scenario, public and private. It begins something like this: “If God is whom he has revealed himself to be, what will make me genuinely me?” “If God is whom he has shown himself to be when he took on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, what is my responsibility as a human being?”

Heterodox Christianity and heretical views often take our present (read ‘fallen’) human existence as “the way we were created” and start there. Orthodox Christianity understands that God became man not only to conquer sin and death, but to show us what it truly means to be human. We understand that how we were born and how we are now are *\*not\** necessarily what or who we were created to be.

Orthodox Christianity stands, as the Church, already united in fullness of faith and shared belief. Receiving communion within the Orthodox Church is, in addition to its essential meanings, the outward sign of commonly holding these ancient beliefs about Jesus Christ and sharing a fullness of the faith. Within Orthodox Christianity, community is truly our common unity, and communion is our common union.

Heterodox Christianity and heretical sects are inherently dis-united and may or may not share some beliefs but not others, not only amongst themselves, but across time and geography. The act of receiving communion in these places is often the only common ground amongst them. The sacrament itself may or may not have essential meaning (depending on who is teaching), so communion is often reduced to “the union we have by doing something together, whether it means something or not.”

The questions of unity and community, union and communion, as well as the big question concerning “the Church” have been being answered since Jesus himself instituted the Church with the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Again, don’t take my word for it! Read not only the Scriptures, but also the history, starting with

the Apostolic Fathers (found online at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers.html>). Start also with the first bona fide, universally accepted “History of the Church” by Eusebius (found online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.vi.i.html> and also published as a Penguin Classic).

No, it is the deeper questions which are the more difficult: Am I willing to seek, to be found by, and to find the one, true Jesus Christ, who always has been—the same yesterday, today, and forever? Am I willing to accept that I am “fallen and I can’t get up”? Am I willing to believe what has always been believed about Jesus Christ, trusting that in this faith is found the fullest and truest life? When we come to this point, finally, we can heed the invitation so beautifully made in one of my favorite movies—Oh Brother, Where Art Thou: “Come on in, boys, the water is fine!”

*By Fr. John Parker*

*This article was originally published as Orthodoxy at heart of faith in Christ in the Charleston, SC, Post and Courier on Sunday, October 7, 2007*

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