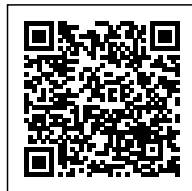


THE NECESSITY OF CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Posted on June 1, 2021 by Father Stephen Freeman



For a period of about three years in my late teens and early 20's, I was deeply involved in a charismatic house church. It was a deeply committed group of people (some of us lived in a commune together). Our services could run for hours with very intensive Bible teaching. A feature of that time and the charismatic movement was a concern for the "latest word." By that was meant new insights, new emphases, and a very heightened sense that we were hearing moment-by-moment what God wanted to say to His people. It was exciting. It was also exhausting. It was also spiritually problematic.

I will not describe all the problems (there's not time). For myself, I had a growing sense of questioning and unreliability. If the Church is led by the "latest word," then its reliability depends entirely on the personalities involved in bringing such news. A survey of the charismatic, pentecostal, and evangelical movements over the past 50 years would necessarily include the many failures of key leaders and of various dangers associated with ever-changing emphases and fashions.

My questions brought about a crisis of faith. I left that movement and floundered a bit, eventually settling into the Episcopal Church in a search for greater stability (mind you, this was the early to mid-70's). Of course, that move was something of a jump from the "frying pan into the fire." But my instinct was correct. Christianity is not rightly built on moment-by-moment updates, or "every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14). The history of the primitive Church is a consistent movement away from such excitement and towards the solidity of a reliable hierarchy grounded in a received body of teaching. Its instinct was that the locus of change was within the heart of each believer rather than a constant flow of fluctuating information.

The early heresies had just the opposite instinct. "Gnosticism," a label invented by modern historians, was never a single thing. Rather it is a collective term for scattered individual teachers who promised new insights, exciting, even "secret" information, which would grant its adherents a quick passage to a higher existence. There is evidence that these teachers (almost always existing outside the eucharistic structure of the Church) were already a problem within the time span of the New Testament. Modern liberal thought has sought to describe these teachers as "alternate Christianities," largely in an effort to discredit the traditional Church. Over time, these groups fell into silence, particularly in that they were deeply driven by single personalities. They lacked the institutional reality required for generational survival.

My abandonment of charismatic Christianity and move towards received tradition led me, over time, to

Orthodox Christianity. It was a renunciation of the "latest thing" in order to embrace the faith "once and for all delivered to the saints." It was a movement from charismatic excitement towards sacramental stability. When people are young, there can be an excitement that surrounds dating, moving from relationship to relationship, dreaming of possibilities and riding the wave of romantic energy. That is a far cry from the daily life of a stable marriage extending through the years, giving birth and nurture to generations of children. Christianity, in its traditional form, is like marriage, not dating.

The most institutionalized element of Orthodox Christianity can be found in its worship. We have documents describing, in some detail, the structure of worship from as early as the 2nd century. It is worth noting that the word "Orthodoxy" is perhaps best translated as "right glory" rather than right opinion or doctrine. What the Church teaches is primarily found embodied in its worship. An old Latin formula has it: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. It means, "The law of praying is the law of believing." It explains how it is that Orthodoxy's primary word of evangelism is "Come and see."

There are roots for this understanding that run deep into the heart of the Old Testament. Exodus 25 describes Moses' meeting with God on Mt. Sinai for a period of 40 days. In that encounter he is shown a "pattern" of the heavenly tabernacle, and given detailed plans for the building of the tabernacle and all that it contained. He is repeatedly told to build things "according to the pattern." This heavenly pattern was of great interest within the writings of both Jews and early Christians. The instinct within that interest was that the heavenly pattern served as a template for God's dwelling place among us. This was the understanding that marked the Temple in Jerusalem, and became a hallmark of Orthodox Christian understanding of worship, including the building itself. This pattern is itself an example of holy tradition. It was given by God to Moses (not simply evolved through Jewish practices). But if what Moses saw was a "heavenly" tabernacle, then his vision was also of eternal consequence and merit.

Orthodox Christian practice recognized this fundamental layer of tradition. St. Paul describes Christians as the "temple" of God (1 Cor. 3:16). St. John's apocalyptic vision centers around the temple in the heavens. The construction of Orthodox Churches has intentional parallels with the Jewish Temple, as do certain aspects of our worship. We speak of the Divine Liturgy as "heaven on earth," and describe ourselves as doing here what is being done there.

"Let us, who mystically represent the cherubim and sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-creating trinity, now lay aside all earthly cares, that we may receive the King of all, invisibly escorted by the angelic hosts. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."

This hymn was added to the Liturgy in the 6th century but represents a thought and understanding that is far older. Perhaps more striking, and echoing the deepest level of Orthodox tradition can be found in this excerpt from the first homily of St. Macarius. He looks at the imagery of Ezekiel's chariot vision, often understood as an image of the throne of God in the heavenly temple. St. Macarius applies it to the soul:

And this that the prophet saw, was true and certain. But the thing it signified, or shadowed forth beforehand, was a matter mysterious and divine, that very mystery which had been hid from ages and generations, but was made manifest at the appearing of Christ. For the mystery which he saw, was that of the human soul as she is hereafter to receive her Lord, and become herself the very throne of his glory. (H. 1.2)

His thought is of a piece with St. Paul's description of Christians as the temple of the Holy Spirit.

There is a dynamic present in these images that carries the very essence of tradition as a way of life. Modern thought imagines human existence and even its "improvement" as a process of ever-increasing personal choice and freedom. It is a product of the imagination in which the individual becomes whatever they might choose to be. It is a model well-suited to a market-driven world. In many ways, the constant change and "latest revelations" in many forms of contemporary Christianity, echo that instinct, with theological insights and biblical themes arriving as marketed ideas. Like clothing fashions, such changing insights help establish a spirituality that has its own sense of "coolness."

In the spirituality of Orthodox Tradition the point is to receive that which has already been given. There is nothing new to be revealed (as information), even though what has been made known is constantly revealed as life-creating truth within the soul itself. It is a life grounded in the Divine Life both in the temple of the Church (in praise and sacrament) and in the temple of the soul. It is ultimately within the soul that we perceive the face of God in Christ. It is in the soul that we perceive Him in the least of those around us and serve them as our service to God. It is in the soul that we offer the Eucharist (our giving of thanks for all things) in union with the earthly/heavenly Liturgy of Christ's Body and Blood.

There is a stability in this way of life, grounded in the stability of heaven itself (which never changes). That same abiding reality has weathered the storms of 2,000 years even as its saints and martyrs join themselves together with the souls who currently labor and fight on earth. It is not a movement, nor a revival, nor a new thing. It is stubbornly ignorant of market forces. It is a sweet promise and gift.

He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them.

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The [featured image](#) shows, "The Koimetesis" (The Dormition of the Virgin), ca. 1315-1321. Chora church, Constantinople.

