

Wonder

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A Larger Orthodoxy

By Dr. Peter C Bouteneff

We are all used to the questions we get when we tell people we are “Orthodox Christian.” They say, “Do you mean Greek Orthodox? Russian Orthodox?” We continue to get that question of which ethnicity to apply when we are talking about ourselves as “Orthodox.” Apart from trying to explain that Orthodoxy inhabits but also transcends these boundaries, I’m here to tell you that we are faced with an additional challenge, one that is rife with possibility: to see “Orthodoxy” as something wider than we thought, wider than the local churches we now number as “Orthodox” or “Eastern Orthodox.”

I am speaking of a family of ancient churches that also self-identify as “Orthodox:” Syrian, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Indian churches. There are other names by which they are known, such as “Non-Chalcedonian,” because they all have in history rejected the Council of Chalcedon. That council, taking place in AD 451, is known in the Orthodox Church as the Fourth Ecumenical Council, a great and landmark event that established the Church’s teaching about Jesus Christ — the one unique person who is at the same time completely divine and completely human.

Now fast-forward to the second half of the 20th century, which saw a momentous opportunity for the Church: the Orthodox churches and the “non-Chalcedonian” churches found themselves under the same roof, meeting under the auspices of the newly-formed World Council of Churches. Fifteen hundred years after the event that divided these two church families, they saw each other face-to-face, and immediately inaugurated a process of dialogue. First through four “unofficial” meetings (from 1964-1971), and then through several meetings officially instituted by the churches themselves, some of the greatest theologians, canonists, and historians from both families met to discuss what it was that was keeping them apart, and what could be done to bring them back together.

Here I must pause to ask you some questions: Are you aware of this process? If you know about it, have you been hearing of it as something positive? Or have you been hearing about it as something dangerous, that would compromise the purity of Orthodoxy?

As is often the case on the internet and the “culture of complaint” which dominates it, what one is probably most likely to hear, if anything, is the negative reactions to these impulses towards unity. And this is a sad thing. Naturally we revere our faith and the saints who proclaimed it over the ages, and we have an appropriate caution towards compromises and false unions. But if Orthodoxy really is the true faith as we say it is, then shouldn’t our first reaction towards dialogue and possible reconciliation be one of welcome, of a healthy joy-filled curiosity? Those of us who are theologically inclined do well to study the dialogues carefully, to be challenged by

them and also to challenge them back. That study ought, among other things, be trustful of the first-class theologians who have been delegated by their churches to bring the dialogue forward.

Those theologians have made some groundbreaking discoveries. Through an exploration of the terms used by the different churches, in different time periods and in different languages, they have come to the conclusion that the vast and complex disagreements over the fifth-century Council of Chalcedon were substantially a question of language and terminology. The official dialogue statements came to the following conclusion, which is no less than stunning:

...we have now clearly understood that both families have always loyally maintained the same authentic Orthodox Christological faith, and the unbroken continuity of the apostolic tradition, though they have used Christological terms in different ways.

This is a remarkable statement of unity, yet an enormous set of obstacles remains. Because over the centuries, the apparent theological disagreements, as well as many political, ethnic, and other non-theological factors, served to perpetuate and deepen division to the point where that division became completely enshrined in the histories and identities of our churches. We have some different liturgies, we venerate some different saints, we understand and identify ourselves in distinction from each other. It is almost as if the theological agreements, which seemed so insurmountable and unbelievably complex, have come far more easily than the political, emotional, and ethnic ones.

That's where this process now lies: having made this breakthrough theological agreement, having put forward several pastoral agreements about how to handle marriages and baptisms across the two church families, both church families are currently digesting the conclusions and assessing what they may mean for a future reconciliation. In many cases the churches are finding it hard to fathom the possibilities. Habits of division formed over fifteen hundred years die hard.

Part of the shock of the theological agreement is that it leaves us looking back at history with questions such as: "Does this mean that the Church Fathers were wrong when they saw the non-Chalcedonians as heretics? Does this mean that we know better than the Church Fathers?" Good questions, but they have answers. No, we don't know better than the Fathers. But the intervening centuries have given us a lot of information that they simply didn't have. And it would be irresponsible of us to ignore that information. Tradition is alive. The Fathers themselves don't want us simply to parrot their formulas, they want us to take it all further, to account for what we have come to know, what we have been shown in by the Holy Spirit through history over the passage of the centuries. In this way we remain faithful to them. Could it even be, then, that the Fathers rejoice at the possibilities that are before us?

One thing is sure: no reunion of our church families will happen until there is a genuine thirst for it. Naturally we shouldn't rush ahead, or stifle all the caution. But let us not kill the possibility of union simply out of habit, out of irrational fear. Let us cultivate the knowledge of one another's traditions, welcoming what we recognize in each other as Orthodox, as apostolic, as true, as mutually "ours," and let us welcome with joy the possibility of a larger Orthodox witness in the world.

The full texts of the dialogue statements are available on the website orthodoxunity.org

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Discussion Questions:

How do you respond when someone asks you what Orthodoxy is? Can you challenge yourself to respond without reference to ethnicity or without giving a history lesson?

How is our definition of who Christ is important to how we live our lives of faith?

Is this process of slow discussion and reconciliation something to be celebrated and encouraged or something dangerous and threatening to our Church?