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The Basis and Nature of the Orthodox Evangelistic Mandate

O God, cleanse me a sinner, for I have done nothing good before Thee. Deliver me from the evil one, and may Thy will be in me, that I might open my unworthy lips without condemnation and praise Thy holy name, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

When I received the assigned topic in the mail, “The Basis and Nature of the Orthodox Evangelistic Mandate”—with my name beside the topic—I tossed the paper on my desk and said “Lord, have mercy!” A quick succession of thoughts and emotions fluttered between my heart and my head: “Who am I to do this?” I could think of so many far more qualified to address this topic than I, and some are in this very room. Then I thought, “Did I not communicate clearly to my own Archbishop and other authorities that I would like to have three years of doing nothing but serving our mission in the Bluegrass of Kentucky as I marinate in the priesthood of the OCA?” I wanted to bask in the grace of the newly ordained! As I recall, it was shortly after one such conversation that I was assigned to the Department of Evangelization. Then it dawned on me, “Well of course! What did you expect? This must be the Orthodox way! Tell your Bishop what you think you need for your salvation, and he will do just the opposite.”

As I sat down to prepare, I began to grapple with the assigned title: “The Basis and Nature of the Orthodox Evangelistic Mandate.” To some it might seem like a simple, straightforward presentation. But my first question was, “Is this to be taught in one semester, or may I have two?” What a wonderful core class this could be in our seminaries!

I was reminded of one of our former catechumen, a woman named Victoria, a Ph.D. candidate in Agronomy (soil sciences) at the University of Kentucky. In the middle of catechism she asked in an exasperated voice: “Why does this all have to be so complex? The Christian Gospel used to seem so simple to me! Why does the Orthodox Church make it so complicated?” I said, “Victoria, you are getting a Ph.D. in dirt! Most of us see soil as a dirty, hazardous nuisance which needs to be purged, but you hold the same soil in your hands and you see a mysterious universe filled with potential life, and you are giving a prime part of your life to exploring this universe.” Victoria can say some simple things about soil, but her simple words come from the other side of complexity; they are reflections after countless hours turned into years of study and “field” research.

However, it was not the complexity of the topic that made me whisper “Lord, have mercy!” when I was asked to speak to you. I realized the assigned topic was intricately entwined with my own life story and my own pilgrimage into the Orthodox Church—this home for my soul, the Body of Christ. This topic, “The Basis and Nature of the Orthodox Evangelistic Mandate” is about my life, and the life of every “convert,” seeker, and catechumen. I was taught in my first classes in evangelism that it was very important to listen to the story of those coming into the faith, to find out how the process of change and conversion occurred. So rather than presenting this material in a more traditional or academic manner this morning, which would probably put me on much less vulnerable ground, I wish to tell my story, along with some other stories in which my life participates, as we contemplate the basis and nature of the Orthodox Evangelistic mandate. After all, my life is really all I have to offer you this morning. Each of our lives are a living Epistle, a letter which communicates one facet of the gem of the gospel.

Some of you might recall how the former professor of dogmatic theology at St. Vladimir's Seminary once responded when he was asked the question, "What is Orthodoxy?" Professor Verhovskoy simply said, "It is the lack of one-sidedness." If this is true, then please allow me to share one side with you this morning. I will trust each of you to give me the other sides during our days and years together.

My father was a third generation pastor in the Methodist Church in Kentucky. The family had long been strongly evangelical, with deep roots in the Wesleyan-Arminian revivalist and holiness tradition. At that time in the Methodist Church that meant that you believed the Trinitarian God existed and lived as if the Holy Scriptures were true, and other people needed to hear the message of salvation which they communicated. Our identity was derived as much from what we were against as what we were for; a characteristic of fundamentalist groups of any religion. In retrospect, we were heterodox, but pious. (We were not part of mainline Protestantism, which is dominated by Calvinism. Genuine students of Wesley, along with the Anglicans from which they sprang, believe in free will and prevenient grace. Wesley's doctrine of "sanctification" was based on his own personal experience of Theosis, influenced by his reading of the Fathers. Hearts of Anglicans and Wesleyans can be "strangely warmed" to receive the Orthodox Faith.) Four years after I was born my family moved to Indiana. While in Indiana, my father was asked by his bishop to go to a parish that was in trouble. The parish had barely survived eight pastors in eighteen months. The bishop was saying, "You can either go and try to raise the dead, or I will go to pronounce last rites." My father went, and although he had definite gifts for such parishes, he had little success. The strategies for reviving a mature parish were not working with these blue-collar workers

and farmers in this small town. They were no nonsense Midwesterners, and the local problems in their local parish had overwhelmed them. Their city had changed.

Foundational members had gone to other churches or moved away. The world around them had changed but their vision had not. Finally it was extinguished altogether. For some of you, this might sound all too familiar. This can be a common stage in the life of a parish.

My father came to the end of his resources, and perhaps that is why he finally agreed to allow a reputable missionary board dominated by like-minded Methodists to come and sponsor a Mission Emphasis Week at his church. It was the Fall of 1969. I was nine years old, and I can remember that week like it was just last year. That lethargic little parish of barely 60 people in a sleepy little bedroom community were not prepared for what began that Sunday. Two missionary families arrived (home on furlough), from Haiti and Korea. They brought their families, their slides, their displays, and the stories of their lives and work. Missions and evangelism were no longer some special appeal offering for exotic work on the other side of the world. It was up-close and personal. The missionaries stayed in the homes of parishioners. By the end of the week, missions and evangelism had a face. Through those missionaries the people in that parish realized for the first time that there was a world out there filled with people more like them than not, who had either never heard the name of Jesus, or did not know enough about Him in order to believe in Him, and that they could participate in bringing the gospel to them. They could participate in the glory of God (Veronis 1994:6). They ate, laughed, and cried with people much like themselves who, in a leap of faith, had left work, home, and family, in order to obey God. Without realizing it, they were hungry for Saints and for the

holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, and this event would prove to be one more step in the right direction.

The greatest challenge in missions and evangelism today is not the lack of resources. It is not the lack funds. It is not the success of the heterodox. It is not the ravaging of the heretics or cults. It is not even the revivals of Islam and Eastern religions. The greatest challenge in missions and evangelism today is convincing Christians, even Orthodox Christians, that an evangelistic mandate actually exists, and that it includes their parish and their family. As Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos has most recently written in his new book, Facing the World: Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concern,

Christ completed His salvific work. The translation—both the literal and figurative—of His message to all the world was not to be His own work. He entrusted the responsibility to His Apostles (the Church he founded). And the Apostles in turn entrusted the continuation of their work to their successors. This spiritual relay race continues in the hands of the Church as a whole until the Lord comes again. This characteristic of Apostleship is indelibly wrought in the very nature of the Church and should be lived in every age, under new conditions and against new challenges. Mission is part of the Church’s genetic material, a fixed element in its DNA. It is a gift of grace organically fused to the Church, nourished as it is by the Eucharistic community; and the Church is, in turn, constantly renewed by the Apostolic calling. Evangelism and missionary outreach is part of the “DNA of our Church” (Yannoulatos 2003:5).

If you want to leave this session today with a basic formula, there you have it. Buy His Eminence’s new book and you will have all that I would need to communicate this morning.

Just over a year ago I was eating a Lenten meal in an Orthodox parish. I sat across the table from a well dressed, middle-aged woman. She asked me about our mission parish, and I made the mistake of trying to explain that we were “targeting” people who were unevangelized in our city. She said, “target? What in the world does that mean!” I

tried to explain, but she cut me off with, “Well, I am so glad that I am part of a parish that doesn’t go out and bother people, but we just let them come to us!” That might come as no surprise to you, but her response stunned me. I thought, “this is the church that truly holds the Pearl of Great Price! How can she say that?”

Archbishop Anastasios said the local parish was “renewed by the Apostolic calling,” and this is exactly what began to happen in that little parish in Indiana. Their own local problems did not disappear, but they shrunk to proper proportion as members of the parish were exposed to the burdens and sufferings of the world. Their great omission was the Great Commission, and in it they discovered a major purpose and a source of joy. That discovery began to fuel the fire of the Holy Spirit within them and things began to happen.

Later that year, thanks to an invitation extended by the missionaries, some of the lay people in that church visited them on their respective fields of service for a week or two. When they returned home, they were asked to share their experiences with the congregation. I remember the big gruff Hoosier farmer standing at the lectern, grasping it with white knuckles. This was one of the men who had been most opposed to having any kind of evangelism or mission’s event in the church to begin with. He began his talk by reminding us all of that fact, and confessing how he had angrily said in a church meeting, “Don’t we have enough problems of our own? We can’t even pay our own bills. How are we ever going to give money for people on the other side of the world who we don’t even know?” The church treasurer had agreed with him. Now he stood before us, lips quivering, tears rolling down his face, talking about how God had “broken his heart in Haiti,” and how he could never be the same. And he wasn’t! And neither were any of the

other lay people who went. That congregation made the missions and evangelism conference an annual event in the life of the parish, with monthly reports, updates and offerings. Every summer teams joined the missionaries on the field. Within three years, the church that the bishop was intending to close had tripled in membership and the budget had doubled, not counting special offerings to missions. Missions and evangelism must have a face in each parish. This is the nature of the incarnation. People affect people. Iron sharpens iron.

My father and mother began to pray along with others in the church that someone might be called into missionary service full-time from the parish. Little did they know how well those prayers would be honored. First the youth worker and his wife were sent out. Later a lay couple, and finally the pastor and his family. When dad left that little rural parish, their missions and evangelism offering was over \$25,000 per year—with no fundraisers. All the money was from special offerings in excess of tithe.

Our family was preparing for service in Korea when my father was asked to join the administration of the missionary organization and serve as the Regional Director of the Pacific Northwest. After spending part of the summer in Haiti we made the move to Portland in 1973. I was 13, beginning junior high. Like my namesake, I had a soft and tender heart that longed for communion with God. Following my father's example, I would rise in the early morning hours to read the scriptures and pray. To my parents' dismay, I even burned incense and lit a candle as I knelt by my bed. I didn't know why—it just felt right when I was in the presence of God. My bedroom was downstairs near two other guest bedrooms and there was a constant stream of missionaries in and out of our house. They would stay up for long hours to talk with me. Their hearts burned with the

love of Christ, and I could not forget the testimonies of the lay men back in Indiana who talked about hearts broken for Haiti, or India, or Colombia. So I prayed, “Lord, I don’t understand what having a broken heart means, but please God, take my heart and do with it as you please, in your time and your way.”

At that time I had little knowledge of the rich historical and biblical context of the Hebrew *leb* or the Greek *kardia*, both of which refer to not only the central organ of the body, but also of our conscious life--the seat of thought, will, emotions, passions, and desires. It would be another 20 years before I would read the Fathers and learn how to talk about *nous* and heart being purified and unified through asceticism into a central guidance system under the influence of the Holy Spirit. I had been taught none of that. But I had read the holy scriptures, how God saw that the “thoughts and intents of the heart” were evil in Noah’s day and enabled the people to see the consequences of broken communion (Gn 6:5). I had read how Moses spoke to the people of Israel, exhorting them to, “Seek Him with all your heart and soul” (Dt 4:29), and would later sum up the commandments in the *Shema*, commanding Israel to “keep these words in their hearts” and pass down holy tradition to their children. I was familiar with how God warned the Israelites to “circumcise the foreskin of your hearts, and do not be stubborn” (Dt 10:16). And how Saul was anointed as Israel’s first King, and how “God gave him another heart” (I Kings 10:9 LXX). I had read how King David, when repenting of his own sins gave to the entire Church a template for repentance, so much a part of Orthodox spiritual formation: “*Create* in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit with me. . . . Sacrifice to God is a broken spirit: a broken and humbled heart God will not despise” (Ps 50:10, 17 LXX). I also read that when King Solomon was given the opportunity to ask

God for anything, he remembered the character of his father, David, and he humbly prayed, “give me a heart to hear (*kardia akouein*)...and to discern between good and evil” (3 Kings 3:9 LXX). And I read in the New Testament how St. Paul, proclaiming Christ to the Jews in Antioch, quotes God’s own words about King David as “a man after My own heart, who will do all My will”(Ac 13:22). I was familiar with the account of St. Luke and Cleopas on the road to Emmaus following the resurrection, and how after walking with Jesus, they marveled saying: “Did not our hearts burn within us?” (Lk 24:32)

This prayer for a “broken heart,” I believe, set me on the path that would lead to the Orthodox Church. For such a prayer fosters grace. The kinsman of our Lord, James, sums it up this way (and he is the 4th person in the scriptures to say it):

For God opposes the proud, but give grace to the humble. Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands you sinners and purify your hearts you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up (Jm 4:6-10).

As a junior high boy I was yearning for a life of repentance and I didn’t even know it. It was hidden from me by evangelistic zeal. I was putting the cart of zealous good works before the horse of personal repentance and healing, but I was being prepared for Orthodoxy. God honored these prayers. Repentance is the life-blood of effective evangelism and missionary work. St. John of Kronstadt wrote, “The purer the heart becomes, the larger it becomes; consequently it is able to find room for more and more loved ones; the more sinful it is, the more it contracts; consequently it is able to find room

for fewer and fewer loved ones—it is limited by a false love: self-love” (Counsels 1989:183).¹

My first hint of this came not in Haiti, Korea, or Colombia, but at Rowe Jr. High School in Portland, Oregon, that next year. I prayed throughout the year for a heart that was broken and given to God all through seventh grade. It began in a very unexpected way. A teacher humiliated me in front of a class for something I didn't do and instead of feeling hurt or misunderstood, I walked out of that class into the crowded hall of a junior high school and I began to see other people as if I was standing in the icon of the crucifixion, at the foot of the cross, looking out at them. I saw my teacher and my classmates as lost and in darkness, deeply wounded, and I began to weep for them. I did not understand what was happening. My friends thought my feelings were hurt, and I tried to tell them it wasn't what they thought. At a very significant time in my life, I caught a glimpse of myself and others not from my perspective, but from God's—and that tiny momentary glimpse of His love for us absolutely overwhelmed me. Friends would later say I was never quite the same.

Portland was pagan. Few of my friends attended church, and cults were rampant, so I started a Bible Study in our home. Before long we had about 50 kids gathering every Thursday night to sing with guitars and read the Bible. Many of them became Christians, and at least three of them are in full-time evangelistic work themselves today. Oh, to have known of the Orthodox Church then! Oh to have had a priest like Fr. Theodore Pisarchuk to welcome them in and catechize them! We would have priests today and many Faithful from that group, I should think!

¹ See also St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and how repentance and holiness of life is intricately related to being "Ambassadors for Christ" (2 Co 5:17-6:18).

Later, my father was asked to open a regional office for the missionary organization in Tyler, Texas, and the same thing happened at Robert E. Lee High School. Many high school students became Christians in our home, and they were fed into active church youth groups. At least one of them is a pastor today.

Upon graduating from High School I chose to go to the school that had the best reputation for training pastors and missionaries in my Wesleyan-Arminian tradition. I went back to Kentucky to attend Asbury College. And I was miserable. The vibrant faith of my youth was tightly packaged into legalistic rules at the school, and the euphoria of high spiritual experiences on the mountaintop gave way to deep valleys filled with classes, exams, and mandatory Protestant pep rallies called “chapel.” All of this was powerless to help me cope with a multitude of temptations and all the emotional, psychological, and spiritual typhoons associated with late adolescence in our country.

However, there was one redeeming event. I spent the summer before my senior year in Colombia, S.A., in short-term missionary service, and ended up meeting the woman of my dreams. Rozanne was an American missionary kid who had grown up in Brazil. We were married in 1982 and committed ourselves to missionary service with the organization we had both grown up in. After a year of pastoral experience in Louisiana, we went to our first assignment in Japan, where we assisted a Japanese pastor in church planting and evangelism, and then returned to work in the Personnel Department as interns in a program designed to train leadership. During that time I received my M. Div. from Asbury Seminary.

In 1990, along with two children, we returned to Asia to begin what was to be a long-term assignment in Hong Kong and South China. While attending classes in

Cantonese and Chinese culture at Chinese University, I began to hear a slogan dating back to the 16th century during the Jesuit Roman Catholic expansion into Asia: “One more Christian, one less Chinese.” This alarmed me. I assumed that after four centuries of Roman Catholic missionary effort and two centuries of Protestant missionary activity, Christianity would be indigenous to the Chinese people. But I was wrong. It was still viewed very much as a foreign religion. In fact, if someone really wanted to be a Christian in Hong Kong, most of them would have to dress and act more like a Southern Baptist from Texas than a Chinese person from one of the world’s oldest people groups. I knew enough about missions and evangelism to know that something wasn’t right.

In order to discover the problem, we need to leave the Chinese people for a few minutes and go a bit further back. Let us look at Genesis 12:

“And the Lord said to Abram, go forth out of thy land and out of thy kindred, and out of the house of thy father, and come into the land which I shall show thee. And I will make thee a great nation, and I will bless thee and magnify thy name, and thou shalt be blessed. And I will bless those who bless thee, and curse those that curse thee, and in thee shall all the tribes of the earth be blessed” (Gn 12:1-3).

From a cultural anthropologist’s point of view, there is something quite wrong with this passage. The first part is typical of ancient Semitic tribal religions: if you are faithful and loyal to your tribal god, then he will protect you from your enemies and bless you by making you a great, prosperous and powerful clan. “I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you.” This is exactly what we would expect a tribal god to say, for after all, that was the purpose—the very reason for existence—of tribal deities. However, the prologue to this covenant does not end here; “and in thee shall all the tribes of the earth be blessed.” To my knowledge, this is the only case in ancient Semitic culture

where a deity is even the least bit concerned about anyone or anything other than the local tribe. A god who is concerned about other peoples who are not like us? Unheard of! A god who desires to bless people of a different language and culture which was not our own? Incomprehensible! Why would anyone even want a god like that? After all, the purpose of a god is to bless me, take care of my family, and defeat and destroy my enemies, but certainly not to bless them! But this god who seems to be so familiar to this man, Abram, and his family is different. This god not only cares about other people groups, but calls Abram away from his own clan and country for a purpose that reaches far beyond them (Richardson 1986:25-7).

Beginning with Genesis 12, we have a new concept of deity: a god who cares about all the peoples of the earth. If this were the only mention of such a deity, it could well be ignored as a later addition to the text or a mistranslation, but this is only the beginning. It is the beginning of revelation instigated by Divinity; God rebuilding lines of communication with His creation in order to once again reveal the true nature of human persons and the true nature of Divinity in order to restore the communion that was intended to exist between them.

So Abram obeys and leaves his homeland and his own people (or at least he makes an effort to obey—for he takes his nephew, Lot, with him, contrary to the instructions he was given). On his journey he is forced into the land of the Egyptians due to famine, and to his surprise, he learns that his God is concerned about the Egyptians, and even calls Abram to account for lying to them about his wife, Sara. A Semitic tribal god who is concerned about Egyptians? Unbelievable!

In chapter fourteen Abram's nephew Lot is taken prisoner after the four warring tribal kings of the north attack the southern kings in the Dead Sea valley, which include the city of Sodom where Lot has chosen to live. In a dramatic rescue, Abram saves Lot and as he returns southward, he passes by the city that would one day be known as Jerusalem, but at this time is known as Salem ("peace"). Here an extraordinary thing happens. The King of Salem, Melchizedek, comes out to greet Abram with bread and wine. Melchizedek is identified by the text as "the priest of the most high God." Melchizedek greets Abram as one who serves this same most high God—the God who made heaven and earth--and he blesses Abram and receives a tithe from Abram. This is truly a fascinating twist of events. After all, wasn't it Abram that God chose to reveal Himself to, and wasn't it through Abram that all the people's of the earth were supposed to be blessed? How is it that Abram should treat this foreigner, Melchizedek, as a priest of his God? It becomes more and more apparent that this is not a local tribal god, created by Abram and his people to serve and protect them. This deity is different. This most high God who created all things is revealing Himself to His creation out of concern and even love for them. And He is doing it in two ways: General Revelation and Specific Revelation. The world has been prepared for the Gospel. The Gospel has been prepared for the world (Richardson 1986:27-33).

In chapter 16 of Genesis, God takes the initiative again and reveals to Abram that he and all generations which will come from him are to be in an eternal relationship with God, and this is illustrated in covenant. This covenant, like the one before it with Noah, and the ones which will follow, with Moses and David, will continue to reveal a God who is concerned about the entire world. Hebrew words associated with this covenant are

“covenant love, covenant goodness, covenant peace, and covenant solidarity” (Douglas 1982:240). At this time, according to customs often associated with covenant, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham.

In chapter 18 of Genesis God continues to reveal Himself to Abraham through the three heavenly beings or angels at the Oak of Mambre. This story is of course the source of our continued contemplation of the nature of God as Trinity through the Hospitality of Abraham icon written by Rublev. In this holy visitation, God once again affirms the covenant, in spite of Sarah’s barrenness, and then says, “Shall I hide from Abraham my servant what things I intend to do? But Abraham shall become a great and populous nation, and in him shall all the nations of the earth (παντα τα ἔθνη) shall be blessed” (Gn 18:17-18). Abraham indicates that he is beginning to comprehend the covenant and the character of God as he now intercedes for the people of Sodom. Abraham knows God well enough by this time to discern that this God who cares about all the nations would spare two entire cities just for the sake of ten people (Gn 18:32).

Before we leave Abraham there is one other example worthy of note. In Genesis 20, following the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrha, Abraham moves south to Gerara, where once again, out of fear for his own life, he lies to king Abimelech, claiming that his wife is his sister. Once more the God in covenant with Abraham demonstrates his compassion for this foreign king and his people:

And God came to Abimelech by night in sleep, and said, “Behold, thou diest for the woman for whom thou hast taken” But Abimelech had not touched her, and he said, “Lord, wilt thou destroy an ignorantly sinning and just nation? Said he not to me, She is my sister, and said she not to me, He is my brother? With a pure heart and in the righteousness of my hands have I done this.” And God said to him in sleep, “Yea, I knew that thou didst this with a pure heart, and I spared thee, so that thou shouldst not sin against me, therefore I suffered thee not to

touch her. But now return the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live” (Gn 20:3-7).

When Abimilech confronts Abraham asking him why he did this to him, Abraham replies, “Why I said, surely there is not the worship of God in this place, and they will slay me because of my wife” (Gn 20:11). It seems that Abraham has every right to be surprised. The concept of a god without geographical, ethnic or political boundaries was new, or rather forgotten.

St. Justin the Martyr, in his second apology addressed the Roman Senate said:²

For whatever either lawgivers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word (*λογος*). But since they did not know the whole of the Word, which is Christ, they often contradicted themselves. . . . And Socrates, who was more zealous in this direction than all of them, was accused of the very same crimes as ourselves. For they said he was introducing new divinities, [and did not consider those to be gods whom the state recognized. But he cast out from the state both Homer and the rest of the poets, and taught men to reject the wicked demons and those who did the things which the poets related; and he exhorted them to become acquainted with the God who was to them unknown, by means of the investigation of the reason, saying, “That it is neither easy to find the Father and Maker of all, nor, having found Him, is it safe (possible) to declare Him to all.”³ But these things our Christ did through His own power.]

For no one trusted in Socrates so as to die for this doctrine, but in Christ, who was partially known even by Socrates (for He was and is the Word who is in every man, [and who foretold the things that were to come to pass both through the prophets and in His own person when He was made of like passions, and taught these things), not only philosophers and scholars believed, but also artisans and people entirely uneducated, despising both glory, and fear, and death; since He is a power of the ineffable Father, and not the mere instrument of human reason (ANF1:191-2).]

I confess that I both boast and with all my strength strive to be found a Christian; not because the teachings of Plato are different from those of Christ, but because they are not in all respects the similar, as neither are

² Quotations in brackets were omitted from the oral presentation.

³ Plato, *Timaeus*:28 (the word “possible” is used here by Plato and not “safe”).

those of the others, Stoics, and poets, and historians. For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word, seeing what was related to it. . . . Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians. . . . For all the writers were able to see realities darkly through the sowing of the implanted word that was in them (ANF1:192-3).⁴

Therefore, when we enter a new culture, we do not enter as if the Holy Spirit has not gone before us to prepare the way. The Gospel will confront and challenge the sins of every culture, for every culture suffers from broken communion with God. But the seeds (*logos spermatikos*) for communicating the Gospel will already be there, if we take the time to look for them carefully. This is a job that cannot be rushed. We are wise to utilize some of the tools of linguistics, cultural anthropology, psychology, and historiography which can teach us how to observe and how to listen, in order to discover the footprints of God in every people group (Jones:186-187). If we do this, then the Gospel will really be good news to many of the people who are hearing it.

This was exactly what St. Paul did when he took the Gospel to the Greeks, and the record of his presentation at the meeting of the Areopagus or Mars Hill Society in Acts 17 is a classic case study in evangelism. You know the account. It was part of our Epistle reading just last week. But do you understand what happened long before St. Paul came to this hill? The altar to “*agnosto theo*” has a fascinating story behind it, and there is strong evidence that St. Paul knew that history, since in his letter to Titus (1:12-13) he quotes the Greek prophet who was involved with the raising of this altar 600 years earlier (Richardson 1986:21-25).

Now back to the Chinese in Hong Kong, who were saying, “One more Christian, one less Chinese.” They were asking questions Protestants had never even thought about.

⁴ James 1:21 “Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the

So I asked a simple question: “What is the oldest body of Christians in the world most like the Chinese in culture? Perhaps they can help us.” And that’s when I remembered something about the Eastern Orthodox Church back in seminary, but I didn’t know anything about it. About that same time, my wife discovered an article in one of the leading missiological publications in Asia about a large group of evangelical Protestants who joined the Orthodox Church. It was written by a Father Peter Gillquist. I ended up corresponding with Father Peter for the next three years. Since I could find no Orthodox presence in Hong Kong, I read books Fr. Peter sent to me and began to discover what I thought was a lost missiological gold mine for evangelism in the Chinese context. I am more firm in this conviction today.

In 1993 I was offered a doctoral scholarship at Asbury Seminary for further study in this area. Finally, in June of 1993, we walked into our first Divine Liturgy in an Orthodox parish. I had done a lot of study and preparation for this event. I knew the Orthodox mission history of the Goths, Huns, Iberians, Cochis, Cucasus, Celts, Persians and Armenians, and of course the Slavs, and the resulting evangelization of Alaska, and all of this in spite of much persecution and turmoil. I was particularly impressed with the Orthodox record of planting authentic, indigenous, eucharistic communities (Veronis 1994:13). They did this by carefully observing and learning the language and the culture, and then providing dynamically equivalent translations of not only the Holy Scriptures, but also the liturgical texts and writing of the Fathers (Veronis 1994:13). I knew the Orthodox were hundreds of years ahead of the Western Church in this process. The East never believed in using only Greek, Hebrew and Latin, as was practiced in the West. According to Archbishop Anastasios, within the first centuries of Eastern Church history

implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”

more than 70 languages were in use by the Church (Yannoulatos 1964:146). When the early evangelists encountered an unwritten language, they laid the foundation for the written script. St. Cyril's Cyrillic alphabet, St. Stephen of Perm's Zyrian transcript, and St. Innocent's work in Alaska are such examples. I used the phrase dynamic equivalent translation because these missionaries showed tremendous sensitivity and respect for the culture of the people. Missiologist Jim Stamoolis, in Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today, called this trait "the hallmark of the best of Orthodox mission work" (1986:61). Just as the Word became flesh to dwell among us, so the missionary is an imitator of Christ, and we ourselves become broken bread and poured out wine as we translate the Gospel into another culture.

The best way to effectively incarnate the gospel is to raise up indigenous leadership for the Church. It was common for the Orthodox to take the most promising Newly Illumined and ordain them as quickly as possible (Veronis 1994:14). St. Innocent sent out a host of Readers and lay men and lay women to conduct weekly worship when a priest could not attend. St. Nicholas did the same in Japan, sending out lay leaders as evangelists to translate and proclaim the gospel.

Another characteristic of Orthodox mission and evangelism was the commitment to establishing self-governing churches (Veronis 1994:15). The desire to be overly paternalistic was recognized and often avoided. Many daughter churches were allowed—and even encouraged—to grow up, mature, and bear their own fruit as self-governing, autonomous, or even autocephalous Churches.

Knowing all this from my theological and historical studies, I was a bit taken back when I walked in to that first Liturgy in 1993. I felt like a foreigner in my home state. I

could not sing the songs or even follow the melody. I could not follow the service. And no one offered assistance. I was open to being transformed by the culture of the Kingdom of God, but I didn't think I had to become Syrian or Greek for that to happen. And after 10 years, I still don't.

Later that summer we visited what is now St. John the Forerunner Orthodox Church in Indianapolis. Back then it was Holy Trinity Evangelical Orthodox Church. When we visited, I thought they had just not changed their sign yet, since according to Fr. Peter Gillquist's first edition of Becoming Orthodox, all the EOC churches had become Antiochian. This was corrected in the second edition. But we attended that morning thinking we were in an Antiochian parish. I wept throughout the entire service. The beauty and message of the Divine Liturgy was effectively communicated in ways that made sense to me, and I knew Orthodoxy was what I had longed for my whole life. I was finally home. When the service was over many gathered around us to welcome us, and they wanted to hear our story. They didn't have many Protestant missionaries from Hong Kong visiting their services. For over an hour a large group of people talked with us in the Narthex. Their bishop was away that Sunday, and they invited us back to meet him. When we returned for another visit they took us out to a park for a picnic lunch and we spent the afternoon together. They asked how they could help us, since we lived in Kentucky over three hours away, and I said I would like to experience catechism as part of my doctoral research. They were planting two missions in Georgia at the time and they would be willing for a priest to stop by Lexington as he traveled between Georgia and Indiana. A group of friends and colleagues gathered around us who were also interested

in learning about Orthodoxy, and for the next two years we would spend part of a weekend each month together with a priest, being formed in the Faith.

In our first catechism the priest quoted St. Isaac of Syria, saying, “This life is given to you for repentance; do not waste it on vain pursuits.” And later he quoted St. Seraphim of Sarov: “Acquire the Spirit of peace, and thousands around you will be saved.” I thought, if these words are true, my whole life is going to change. My whole identity had been derived from being a missionary. In good American fashion, I was defined by what I did; the role I played as a useful member of the Kingdom of God. Now I was being introduced to what Veronis and Yannoulatos refer to as the “passive” missionary tradition of the Orthodox Church (Veronis 1994:11). If one put being before doing, then one’s life might become a centripetal force, in the fashion of the Desert Fathers, for example. St. Gregory Palamas and St. Isaac of Syria, for this reason, warned against zeal, even when it was for God. I could relate to the active missionary work of St. Paul or SS. Cyril and Methodius, but the deep waters of monasticism were over my head. But such a balance—or “absence of one-sidedness” was exactly what I needed.

In 1996 our world as we knew it crashed down around us and a new one began to immerge. With the birth of our third child we felt we had to become part of the EOC. The relationships were the healthiest we had ever experienced, and the fruit in our lives was self-evident. We wanted Andrew to be baptized, and that meant we needed to be chrismated. Based on the reaction to our decision from our parents, relatives, mission organization, and seminary, you would have thought we had either died or become Mormons. I was not prepared for such a strong negative reaction, or the alienation that followed. The one pillar of unwavering support was my doctoral mentor, who fortunately

had the power and prestige to gradually legitimize our decision in the eyes of many—if he had lived long enough. Two weeks after I had finished the first rough draft of my dissertation, after three years of doctoral work, he died in seconds of a heart attack. Our champion was gone. I was forced to resign from the mission board we had been with for nearly 13 years—our extended family. After three months of mourning this loss, I walked out of the doctoral program with no intention of returning. The fire of the dissertation and degree had left me. I carried the mail for three months for the post office and then began to teach technology at an elementary school. Our parents must have thought we had gone crazy. All I wanted was God, and I knew I could find Him in the Orthodox Church. We were held in the loving arms of the EOC during that time of loss in very tangible ways. Not least of all, they wept with us.

We thought at first we would move to Indiana and become part of the church there. But the group of catechumens that had gathered around begged us to stay and start an Orthodox mission. This had never been our plan, but that is what happened. I functioned as a Reader, and began to prepare for ordination. From the beginning of our catechism, all the missions had the expectation of someday moving into the fullness of the Orthodox Church. We did not want to be separatists or schismatic. We had a growing awareness of our need for the tradition and resources of the “canonical” Church. It was out of loyalty and obedience to our bishop and confusion as to which “jurisdiction” of the Church we should approach that kept us in the EOC.

In the meantime, a relationship had developed between the Rucker family and Father Ted Pisarchuk. Back in 1995 we had sent a family of seekers to his church, and fortunately, they ended up being good models of the Faithful at St. Justin the Martyr

Orthodox Church, in Jacksonville, Florida. Evidently they often talked about us, and Fr. Ted insisted on meeting us the next time we visited. He treated us like long lost friends. His prayers and encouragement always left us feeling affirmed and blessed, and that would mean so much in the days to come. Every time we went near Jacksonville, we would stop in to visit with Fr. Ted and our friends. We had lived in Jacksonville just before going to Hong Kong in 1990.

In 1999, our EOC bishop unexpectedly announced his retirement. During our final meeting with him, we realized we had two options. Either we could accept the interim bishop the EOC wanted to assign to us, or we could take this opportunity to enter into the fullness of the Church. We went to our parishes to contemplate the decision. My first thought after returning home was to call Fr. Ted. I wanted his prayers and his counsel. I briefly told him about our situation, and then I asked, “Father, if some of our churches wanted to enter into the fullness of the OCA, who would I need to talk with?” He said, “Well actually I don’t guess I have mentioned that I am the Missions Director for the Diocese, and since Kentucky is part of this Diocese, you can begin by talking with me.” I went to the next meeting of EOC clergy and I related my conversation with Fr. Ted, and almost every priest wanted his name and phone number. Before I knew it, I was on a plane to meet His Eminence, Archbishop DMITRI, and the other parishes were following with us, or close behind.

There was never any question for me about which Orthodox jurisdiction was my home. The missionary history of the OCA had influenced its attitude, and this was evident in the way we were welcomed and loved. You incarnated the gospel of Christ to my family, and we are eternally grateful. I doubt today if many of you assembled

together in this place really understand your influence and power. Do you really know who you are? Do you “Ambassadors of Christ” really comprehend what is at stake? The fields are white unto harvest and there are millions waiting to hear. And where do they have left to go? Americans have been ravaged by spiritual terrorists and the wolves long enough! The Orthodox Church in America is surely the end of the road.

St. Paul explains his apostolic motivation to the church in Corinth in this way:

Knowing therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men. . . . For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. . . . Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. . . . Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. . . . Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation (2 Cor 5:11, 14-15, 18, 20-6:2).

I end with words we could have easily began with this morning:

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen. (Mt 28:18-19)

It was once the custom in China for a scholar or teacher to end a lecture or address with these words: “Where I am in error, please instruct me.” I would ask the same of each of you today.

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