

Never Changing Gospel; Ever Changing Culture

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8)

I

The title of this essay can be misleading for a few reasons. First, there is among Orthodox Christians the idea that ***nothing changes*** in the Church. In fact, we know that many adult converts have been lured to Orthodoxy by this misconception. Second, there is the idea that the gospel is a text. As will be stressed in what follows, the Gospel is first and foremost Jesus Christ – the pre eternal Word and incarnate Son of God. By no means does this presuppose disregarding the written text of the bible. It does, however, challenge the Orthodox Christian to be engaged with the text i.e. to wrestle with it by being in dialog with it. The biblical text is alive and inexhaustible. Its content demands ongoing interpretation. Third, the title might suggest to some readers that a clear i.e. black and white answer can be given to the interaction of Gospel and culture. The relationship of Gospel vis a vis the culture is the relationship of Christ and every person. To diminish this most fundamental aspect of Orthodox thought and life is nothing less than a distortion of the Gospel. Yet, as will be pointed out, this is precisely what is occurring in the Orthodox Church here and abroad. A “new and alien spirit” is displacing the authentic voice of the Gospel. The voice of Christ is being weakened by the voice of philosophical and ethical systems. The human person is being superseded by ideologies. Lastly, I want to stress that this essay has one goal – to encourage the reader to raise questions and not to fall prey to the fiction that all questions pertaining to God, human life and culture have been already raised and answered in the past.

While the past cannot be ignored it also cannot be the only point of reference for the Orthodox Christian. We are to focus also on the present and the future. The Eucharistic liturgy makes this abundantly clear. Before the elevation of the gifts we hear the presiding celebrant say; “Remembering this saving commandment and all those things which have come to pass for us: the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into heaven, the sitting at the right hand, and the second and glorious coming...” Joined in the present to the saving events of the past, the Liturgy binds us to the future. Here and now we are not only oriented to but also participants of the inaugurated eschaton i.e. to what is beyond time.

All of history is destined for the future. If the past is the Church’s only point of reference then it cannot be the Church of the Kingdom that is to come. “It was not until after the coming of Christ that time and man could breathe freely. It was not until after Him that men began to live toward the future.” (from Boris Pasternak’s, ***Doctor Zhivago***).

The past must always be a guide. But without acknowledging that the Holy Spirit continues to work here, now and in the future the past will easily be transformed into an oppressive tyrant. And without recognizing that Christ has come and will

come again history will not allow us to share the new life he has given us with all of creation.

II

The Church lives and grows in history. Since the time of Pentecost, the Church has existed in a plurality of cultures in which it has proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Over the course of history the Church has used culture so as to articulate and manifest as clearly as possible the coming of God's kingdom which has begun in time and space. Virtually every aspect of culture i.e. language, philosophy, art, science, law, music and architecture have been synthesized by the Church to offer the world ***the unchanging Gospel who is Jesus Christ***. So long as the Church lives in the world for the life of the world and its salvation this creative synthesis rooted in Christ and nurtured by the Holy Spirit will accompany the Church into the future – into the eschaton.

It must be kept in mind that over the course of history the creative synthesis relative to Church and culture has not always been smooth or consistent. To a large extent this is due to the Church having to focus its attention on surviving in cultures that either intentionally curtailed and minimized its involvement in society or sought to systematically erase it from existence. This struggle for survival has a protracted history. Beginning in the East the birth and spread of Islam, the collapse of Byzantium, the rise of the Ottoman Empire and the victory of communism isolated the Church from its surrounding cultures. In addition to these events in the East, the Orthodox Church was eventually cut off from the Church in the West. Culminating with the fourth crusade (1204) the wedge of schism separating "Greek East and Latin West" was driven deeper even though there continued a cross pollination of ideas.¹ Yet, over time, cross pollination would give way to Western dominance leaving the Orthodox Church intellectually weakened and ultimately unable to fully engage in and critically respond to the scientific, political, philosophical and theological movements coming from Western Europe. To a great extent this was due to Orthodox thought and life being unable to develop organically. In the East, in Greece and in Russia the Orthodox Church became a passive recipient of theological movements originating within Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. This ushered into the Orthodox Church what Father Georges Florovsky described as "a new and alien spirit."² Consequently, virtually every aspect of Orthodox thought and life would undergo a "pseudomorphosis" i.e. an intellectual, psychological and spiritual change no longer capable of natural growth and development.³ This "new and alien

¹ See Deno John Geanakoplos, **Interaction of the "Sibling" Byzantine and Western Cultures in the Middle Ages and Italian Renaissance (330 – 1600)**, Yale University Press, 1976, especially chapters 3 and 4.

² **The Ways Of Russian Theology, Part 1**, trans. by Robert L. Nicols, Nordland Publishing Company, 1979, p.72

³ Ibid. p.72

spirit” continues to this day and plays a significant role relative to understanding the relationship between the never changing Christ and the ever-changing culture.

III

Only recently has the Orthodox Church had to come to terms with postmodern culture. To a large extent this is due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, globalization and the emergence of the culture wars waged throughout the world. As Orthodox Christians we can only be thankful that our Church is again coming to terms with all aspects of social life as it strives to preach Jesus Christ. This awareness – or reawakening – of the Church’s responsibility to and for the life of the world is forcing the Church to live and function in the 21st. century. For the Orthodox in America the advances of science and technology, an ever-expanding social and religious pluralism with respective ideologies and theologies are challenging the Church to navigate in uncharted waters.

For the Church to proclaim the never changing Christ as it meets the many and complex challenges of our time there must be a desire on the part of all the faithful – bishops, priests and laity - to allow the mind and heart to change and expand. This is nothing less than the ongoing process of repentance so as to encounter and engage ever more deeply the unchanging Christ. ***To preach the never changing Christ requires us to be ever changing.*** Our relationship with Christ, our relationship with each other and with our surroundings is a dynamic process that never ceases. This dynamism characterizes holiness given that our relationship with God and one another is always changing – always expanding. ***“And we all, with unveiled face, reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from glory to glory, for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Cor.3: 18)*** Without this “ascent,” without repentance (the changing of the mind) that expands the heart our faith, our Church and our Lord become dead idols bound only to the past.

To preach the unchanging Christ compels us to see that the orientation of our faith is not only the past but also the future. Proclaiming the never changing Gospel who is Jesus Christ in an ever-changing culture demands that we personally and corporately as the Church enter more deeply into the reality of the inexhaustible mystery of Christ the living and eternal Word of God.

The deepening of our relationship with God is simultaneously our Golgotha and Resurrection. It is Golgotha because, like our Lord, the dynamism of faith brings the Church and therefore us into the realm of loneliness and vulnerability. Like the Apostle Peter, we are called to walk upon the rough waters of culture ever keeping our focus on Christ. Our loneliness and vulnerability take us from the comfort and even smugness of familiarity which is dependent on the past. Golgotha leads us into the unknown – towards the eschaton – where we, here and now, begin to experience our Resurrection. Golgotha reminds us that we as the Church i.e. as the living body of Christ are responsible for taking upon ourselves the sins and burdens of the world. By moving into the unknown we have the possibility to deepen our

relationship with God and those around us. As the Church living in time and space, we are called into the never ending mystery of Christ “who is all and in all.” (Col.3: 11)

IV

If the never changing Gospel who is Jesus Christ is to have a credible presence and role in our culture then the Church can no longer ignore or condemn questions and issues that are presumed to contradict or challenge its living Tradition. Among the most controversial of these issues are those related to human sexuality, the configuration of the family, the beginning and ending of human life, the economy and the care and utilization of the environment including the care, dignity and quality of all human life. If the unchanging Gospel is to be offered to the culture then the Church, in and through the Holy Spirit will have to expand the understanding of itself and the world it is called to save. That there are Orthodox Christians who misuse the never changing Christ to promote a particular political agenda and ideology or as license to verbally and physically assault those they perceive as immoral along with those who would question the status quo of the Church impose on the Church a “new and alien spirit.”

If the Church is to engage culture, if it is to contribute to the culture and if it is to synthesize what is good, true and beautiful coming from the culture to further the Gospel then it will have to expose and ultimately expel the “new and alien spirits” that have weakened its authentic voice. Among these spirits are Biblical fundamentalism and the inability to critique and build upon the writings and vision of the Fathers. A tragic consequence of these spirits is a Christianity of ethical systems that usurp the voice of Christ and distort the beauty of his face. It is the saving and transfiguring voice and presence of Christ that we are expected to offer the ever- changing culture.

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