

I. Introduction

- A. Welcome to Pathway. This is Baptism Weekend, and a couple dozen brothers and sisters are about to stand up and declare they belong to Jesus. We'll get there. But first, I want to welcome every family member and friend who showed up today to watch someone they love go public with their faith.
- B. Let's open the book.
 - 1. *"You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood... But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people."* (1 Peter 2:5, 9)
- C. For the first half of my life I lived in Chicago. My best friend was Greek—Tony. I spent a lot of time at his house, and his mom, Olga, started grilling me. She was Greek Orthodox. I was the evangelical pastor. She wanted to know where we differed.
- D. One day I threw out a casual line: "If you ever want to do a Bible study with your friends and family, I'll teach it." I said it and immediately forgot it.
- E. A couple of months later I get a phone call and I hear the voice of a lady. She says "Hi Bill this is Olga." That's Tony's mom. She says, "Is nine enough?"
- F. I say, "Nine what?"
- G. "I have nine people for a Bible study. When can we start?" she says.
- H. And for the next year and a half I met with anywhere from 9 to 15 Greek orthodox people, mostly older, going from one home to another, to study the Bible. We studied from the Greek New Testament and they laughed out loud my horrible pronunciation every single week.
- I. I learned their world. They adopted me.
- J. The second best thing about the Bible study was... the food. I do not have words to describe the spread that got laid out from week to week. When you are a single man living alone, and you have Greek ladies competing to feed you, you have landed in a very good place.
- K. But the first best thing about that Bible study is that my newfound Greek Orthodox friends got saved. All of them.
- L. Last week I said, if you're going to be Catholic, be a saved Catholic. And today, I will say, if you're going to be Greek Orthodox, be a saved Greek Orthodox too.

II. Welcome

- A. This summer we're doing something direct: we're comparing what we believe as Evangelicals with what other faith systems teach. Not to attack anyone. Not to win arguments. Just to get clear on the differences so we actually know what we're talking about.
- B. We are doing this with nothing but love and respect. We are not interested in beating anybody up or in shoving our beliefs down anybody's throats. We want to be respectful.
- C. So the title of our summer series is: **What's the Difference?**
- D. We have 12 talks planned, and today is part 4.
 - 1. Every week you show up, we're handing out these cards. They give you the key points, the main Bible verses, and a simple way to talk about this stuff with your friends without sounding clueless.
 - 2. How do you get one? Come to church. How do you get the ones you missed? Go back in time and come to church.
- E. Today is part 4, and our topic is: **The Orthodox Church**

III. Orthodox and Catholic

- A. If you're not familiar with the Orthodox Church, this includes a whole list of churches, mainly ethnic. So there's the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Egyptian Orthodox Church (called Coptic), and many others.
- A. Each has their own leader, which they call a Patriarch. And they are fairly independent, though they are loosely united.
- B. I know that is a mouthful, but let me simplify this beautiful part of the Christian family.
- C. **There is very little difference between being Catholic and being Orthodox.**
 - 1. Let me cut straight to it. There is very little difference between being Catholic and being Orthodox.
 - 2. SACRAMENTAL: Both are sacramental. The rituals aren't just symbols—they're the actual pipelines that deliver saving grace.
 - 3. HIERARCHY: Both require a priestly hierarchy. You don't go straight to God for forgiveness or prayer. You go through the priest.
 - 4. BEAUTY: Both build ornate cathedrals filled with art that's impressive, inspiring, and beautiful.
 - 5. SAINTS & MARY: Both pray to saints and venerate Mary, adding extra layers of mediators between you and God.
 - 6. INFANT BAPTISM: Both baptize infants. We'll come back to that in a minute.
 - 7. Bottom line: On the core structures that define their theology, Orthodox and Catholic are far more alike than they are different.
- D. **There are numerous differences, but the main difference is the Pope.**
 - 1. They actually had a big fight over this.
 - 2. These church groups were growing and expanding. And they were very local and very independent. Every major part of the world had its own leadership.
 - 3. Somewhere in the tenth century A.D., the bishop of Rome asserted that he was the head of all the other bishops and all the other patriarchs, because, well, Peter. He declared himself Pope.
 - 4. Most of the churches in Western Europe, were good with that, and they stuck with the new Pope in Rome.
 - 5. But most of the patriarchs in the eastern churches said no way, we'll just stay independent.
 - 6. So on July 16, AD 1054, the Pope said, "Patriarch of Constantinople, I excommunicate you!"
 - a) And the patriarch said, "Pope, I excommunicate you!"

7. And ever since, there have been the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Catholic Church (a.k.a., Eastern Orthodox or just Orthodox).
 - a) And let me pause here to say that it is really sad when Christians fight Christians.
 - b) Yes, it happens.
8. And you will also be glad to know that the two sides have apologized, they've made up, they are friends, and they respect one another's differences to this day.

IV. Things I Admire

A. I came to admire a lot of things about orthodoxy over the years.

1. The Claim to Antiquity

- a) I went to a fast food place in Chicago with some friends and we were ordering hot-dog and Italian beef. When it was my turn to order, I asked for my hotdog. And the young man who is serving us recognized my voice. I had never met him before, but his eyes grew wide, and he said, "Are you Bill Giovannetti?"
- b) I said yes, and he said, "I listen to your messages. They really help me."
- c) I thanked him and asked him where he went to church. He told me he was Greek Orthodox. And then he added this: "We are the original church, you know. That's a fact. We are the oldest of all the churches."
- d) I will come back to this, but that claim to antiquity is beautiful and it carries a lot of weight.

2. The Liturgical Genius

- a) If you've ever been in an Orthodox church, you can literally feel the worship—the incense, the icons, the chanting, the corporate rhythm of worship. There's something beautifully formal and profoundly transcendent about it.
- b) I've been to Orthodox services, weddings, and funerals. The sense of continuity is awesome, reaching back many centuries into history.

3. The Theological Boldness

- a) If there is any Christian group that has stood against fads and trends it is the Orthodox Church.
- b) Orthodox theology stands strong on the teachings of the Trinity, which is taught in Scripture and affirmed by the Nicene Creed.
- c) They stand strong on the biblical teachings on the person and work of Christ, as affirmed by the Chalcedonian Creed.
- d) Orthodoxy is seen as a bulwark against modern theological erosion.
- e) And that takes guts in an age of incremental compromise. That's something respect.

4. I also respect that we have very real differences. Here are some of the most important ones, from my perspective:

V. Where We Differ

A. THEOSIS - What is Salvation?

- a) The Eastern Orthodox understanding of salvation is called "theosis." The word means "deification."
- b) Theosis describes salvation not as a verdict you receive that says God accepts you.
- c) Instead, salvation is your union with God you enter at baptism and slowly deepens all life long.
- d) In the words of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America,
 - (1) "Orthodoxy believes that each Christian is involved in a movement toward God which is known as *theosis* or deification. Theosis describes the spiritual pilgrimage in which each person becomes ever more perfect, ever more holy, ever more united with God." (Greek Orthodox Church of America Website)
- e) You being accepted by God and you being transformed by God are folded into one process. You're not fully accepted by God until you're fully transformed.
- f) Once you say this, you end up asking a different question. You don't ask, "Am I saved?" — which expects a yes or no.
 - (1) Instead you have to ask, "How far along am I?", which has no resting point built into it.
- g) A person's standing before God becomes permanently uncertain. You're never sure of heaven, or even of God's favor.
 - (1) This was the case with every single one of my friends in my Greek Bible Study. None of them had assurance of heaven.
- h) You can never be sure you're saved because your salvation is a never ending process.

2. The Evangelical Reply

- a) For evangelicals we see a very different story.
- b) **Salvation is an event, not a process. It is once for all. Either you have it or you don't.**
 - (1) The prodigal son came home and the Father embraced him. "My son was dead and is now alive." Done.
 - (2) The thief on the cross was condemned, but instantly forgiven. "Today you will be with me in paradise." Done.
 - (3) Saul was an enemy of Christians, but then met Jesus and believed in him... and Saul the enemy because St. Paul the Champion of Grace... who wrote:
 - (a) "In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise." (Ephesians 1:13)
 - (b) You heard a message called the gospel. You believed the message. You were sealed once for all. Done. Finished. Complete.
- c) It is a verdict decreed in heaven, not a change in your behavior on earth.
- d) Yes, there is a process where God heals your heart and makes you whole... but that process comes AFTER salvation. It cannot be any other way. (HEBREWS 10:14)
 - (1) If it were any other way, nobody could ever say this:
 - (a) "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life..." (1 John 5:13)

e) God brought you here today so I could tell you that you can know that you are going to heaven.

B. BAPTISMAL REGENERATION - Where Does Grace Come From?

1. The Orthodox Position

- a) In Orthodox theology, baptism is not a picture of something that already happened. Infant Baptism is the event where salvation happens. The water regenerates.
- b) Hilary of Poitiers, writing in the fourth century, said the act of baptism "has the force of resurrection."
 - (1) Not symbolizes resurrection. Has the force of it.
- c) And the official catechism of the Russian Orthodox Church says baptism is the sacrament in which a person
 - (1) "receives remission of sins and is born again through grace."
 - (2) And the Orthodox churches baptize infants.
- d) And baptism is only the front door. In the Orthodox vision, grace is something delivered through the whole sacramental system — the Eucharist, confession, anointing — and the grace given at baptism must be preserved and renewed through ongoing participation.
 - (1) When you sin, the grace is repaired through the sacrament of confession.
 - (2) So grace is not a gift you were handed once and own forever. Grace is a supply you receive through a system, and must keep receiving to stay in.
- e) Without intending it, that is a big burden.
- f) If grace is mediated through the sacraments, then your standing before God depends on staying religiously faithful, because salvation is only ever as secure as your last sacrament.

2. The Evangelical Reply

- a) We see something different. Baptism is an ordinance, a symbolic ritual, not a sacrament, a mystical means of grace.
- b) The faith comes first. The water comes after, as the public testimony of a salvation already given.

3. If grace flowed through being baptized, St. Paul could never have written this: "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 1:17).

- a) If baptism were the pipeline of grace, that sentence is unthinkable. But Paul can say it — because the grace was never in the water. It was in the gospel, the message of a crucified and risen Christ, received by faith. Done.
- 4. What this means is your standing with God does not rise and fall with your last sacrament. It was settled at a Cross and an empty tomb once for all.
- 5. Jesus keeps the grace flowing, not you.

C. THE LAYERS OF MEDIATION - Who Stands Between You and God?

- 1. In Orthodox theology, you do not come to God's grace directly.
- 2. Grace comes to you through a chain of mediators.
 - a) Only a priest can consecrate the Eucharist.
 - b) Only a priest can hear confession and pronounce forgiveness.
 - c) Only a priest can administer the sacraments that carry the grace.
 - d) Chrysostom, in the fourth century, said it without flinching: no one enters the kingdom except by being born again through water and by eating the flesh of the Lord, and "all these things are accomplished only by means of those holy hands, I mean the hands of the priest" (On the Priesthood, III.5).
- 3. And there is a second layer. Alongside the priest stands the saint.
 - a) You are taught to ask the saints to intercede, to venerate their icons and relics as honored channels of grace.
 - b) They do not say Christ is insufficient. They would tell you that asking a saint to pray for you is like asking a friend to pray for you, and that the priest serves the Church rather than replacing Christ. I take them at their word.
 - c) But look at the structure that gets built, whatever the intent: sacrament, then priest, then saint.
 - d) Grace flows down through layers. I saw it in my Greek friends. They never felt good talking straight to God.
- 4. The Evangelical Reply
 - a) We keep going back to this:
 - (1) **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5).**
 - b) One. Not a chain. Not a class. Not the saints. Christ. And his work between you and God is not partial, waiting to be topped up by anyone else —
 - (1) *"He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:25).*
 - c) Completely. Always. There is nothing left for another mediator to add.
 - d) This is why, the moment Jesus died, the temple veil — the thick curtain that walled sinners off from the holy presence of God — was torn in two from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51).
 - e) Every barrier is gone so that you could "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace" (Hebrews 4:16).
 - f) You do not need a priest's hands to reach God. You do not need a saint to carry your request.
 - g) Through Jesus you can come to your Father directly — right now, from where you sit — and nothing and no one stands in the way.

VI. Whose Church Is the Oldest?

A. Let me tell you a story to bring this home.

- 1. Because I want to talk about the ornate churches, the priestly vestments, the rituals and the exalted beauty in these churches.
- 2. Imagine you're starting a band in someone's garage. Just you, a few friends, some guitars, a drum kit. No contracts. No record label. No tour bus. Just the music. Everybody knows what you're doing. Everybody's invited. Everybody plays.

3. Then the music gets good. Really good. More people want in. So you move to a bigger garage. Then a warehouse.
 4. Then one day a record label shows up and signs you.
 5. They build you a professional studio. A manager. Security at the door. There are rules now. A hierarchy. A system.
- B. That's what happened to the church.
- a) Believers met in homes.
 - b) Anyone could pray for you. Anyone could baptize you.
 - c) They believed they were a kingdom of priests.
 - d) Everyone was a priest — no special class, no robes.
 - e) The faith was simple: Jesus died for your sins, He rose from the dead, trust Him. Direct access to God, with nothing in between.
2. Then the church grew. And growing things need structure. It didn't happen all at once — it crept in slowly, starting in the generation right after the apostles.
 3. A single bishop here. A little more ceremony there. And then, in the early three hundreds, the Roman Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity, and the church got its record deal.
 4. The structure was formalized. The robes came out. And the simple meal Jesus shared with His friends — just bread and wine, remember — became a magical moment only a priest was allowed handle.
 5. So when my Orthodox and Catholic friends say, "We're the original church — we go all the way back to the apostles," they're partly right.
 6. But if they go way back to their roots, the oldest churches were more like a garage band than a slick operation.
 - a) Listen the Jerusalem church was huge... it had 3000 people and was really organized and well planned.
 - b) But it was simple. It wasn't ornate. It wasn't fancy. There were no priests, no icons, no images, no altar.
 - c) Beyond Jerusalem, churches met in houses. Nothing mystical or magical there.
 7. Because the church doesn't live in a building. It doesn't live in an institution. It lives in anyone — anyone at all — who comes to Jesus directly, without a system standing in between.
 8. So go back to the young man at the hot dog counter, the one who looked at me with wide eyes and said, "We're the oldest church. That's a fact."
 9. I'm not going to argue with him. I'm going to go older.
 10. Older than the warehouse. Older than the record deal. Older than the robes and the councils and the marble. All the way back to the garage.
- C. **And the original church, the first church met on a knobby hill called Calvary.**
1. It was a small church, a church of two.
 2. Jesus and a dying thief.
 - a) The architecture was two pieces of wood nailed together.
 - b) The liturgy was a plea for mercy and heaven.
 - c) The sermon was a promise, "Today you will be with me in paradise."
 - d) The communion was what communion was always meant to be... a connection straight to God, with no priests or rituals in sight.
 3. Salvation, Done.
 4. That's the original church.
 5. Nothing fancy there.
 6. A sinner, coming straight to Jesus, saved on the spot. It is older than every cathedral on earth. And it has never, ever been improved upon.
 7. And do you want to see it? Do you want to see the oldest church in the world, alive in this room, right now?
 8. Brothers and sisters in T-shirts getting baptized by people in T-shirts.
 9. We started today with this Scripture:
 - a) *"You also... are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood... a royal priesthood."* (1 Peter 2:5, 9)
 10. That's you. The priest. Come straight to God.
 11. And the oldest, simplest, truest church on earth has room for one more.
 12. And that one more is you.