



THEOLOGICAL HOSPITALITY

In the Kairos Project, we talk a lot about “theological hospitality.” It is one of our defining practices and is essential for us to do the work God has called us to do.

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THE DIVERSITY OF THE KAIROS COMMUNITY

With students, mentors, and partners around the world, the Kairos community is obviously diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, age, geographic location, and cultural realities. We are also diverse in other ways, particularly in our theological affirmations and our social/political views. When thinking about diversity, it is important to remember that what unifies the Kairos community is our shared commitment to becoming more faithful followers of Jesus under the authority of Scripture as guided by God's Spirit.

That said, we represent a wide array of theological traditions. Currently, more than 70 denominations are present within Kairos. We can't list all of them here, but to help visualize the theological scope we have included a few examples here. The community includes people who...

- Are Baptists (of various kinds).
- Are Methodists/Wesleyans (of various kinds).
- Are Episcopalians/Anglicans (of various kinds).
- Are Lutherans (of various kinds).
- Are Mennonites/Anabaptists (of various kinds).
- Are Presbyterians (of various kinds).
- Are Christian & Missionary Alliance.
- Are Pentecostals (of various kinds, including "Jesus-only" Pentecostals)
- Are Catholics (of various kinds).
- Are Quakers (of various kinds).
- Are non-denominational (of various kinds).

We engage Scripture very differently from one another. This means some of us...

- Believe that the Scriptures are inerrant.
- Believe that there are better ways to express Scriptural authority than inerrancy.
- Believe in a literal 6-day creation.
- Believe that creation's 6-days should be interpreted differently.
- Believe that the miraculous acts of the Spirit described in Acts have ended.
- Believe that "speaking in tongues" is a necessary sign of the work of the Spirit.
- Believe that baptism is salvific.
- Believe that the relation of baptism to salvation is more testimonial.
- Believe that infants should be baptized.
- Believe that baptism is for professing believers.

We see Scripture through very different lenses, which leads to different interpretations regarding some of the current "hot topics" of our day. This means some of us ...

Believe that women should be ordained to pastoral ministry & leadership.
Believe that ordination to pastoral ministry & leadership should be limited to men.
Believe that LGBTQ persons should be ordained.
Believe that ordination should be limited to heterosexual persons.
Believe that marriages of LGBTQ persons should be blessed by the church.
Believe that marriage should be reserved for heterosexual couples

We engage with governments and political structures in very different ways; thus, we see our theology played out in politics in very different ways. This means we have...

“Vaxers” and “anti-vaxers,” “Trump supporters” and “Never-Trumpers.” We have Republicans, Democrats, New Democrats, Libertarians, Socialists, Green Party, Liberals, Anarchists, and many others given that we are present around the world.

While much of our cultural and historical formation has taught us to gather with people with whom we agree, the Kairos community seeks to be different. What unifies the Kairos community is our shared commitment to becoming more faithful followers of Jesus under the authority of Scripture as guided by God’s Spirit. We believe each person in our diverse community is welcome to fully participate in this community because we see our differences as an opportunity to learn from each other, to grow in our understanding of what God is doing in and through the diversity of God’s people in the world, and to practice the way of Jesus. [Back to top.](#)

THEOLOGICAL HOSPITALITY: A PRIMER

In the Kairos Project, we talk a lot about “theological hospitality.” It is one of our defining practices and is essential for us to do the work God has called us to do. In this white paper, we are going to dig deeper into theological hospitality to correct some potential misunderstandings and to better understand just how important the practice is.

Let’s begin with what theological hospitality is not. Theological hospitality is not theological neutrality. We don’t expect anyone in the Kairos community to take a neutral stance theologically on anything that is important to them or their tradition. We don’t ask participants to check their commitments at the door so that they can participate in the Kairos journey with us.

Over against theological neutrality, theological hospitality values deep theological differences and creates a context for each person to bring their theology into conversation with people of different views. When we

launched Kairos in 2014, we engaged in conversations with an array of folks dedicated to many different traditions in order to cultivate learning outcomes that Lutherans, Methodists, Wesleyans, Reformed, and several other theological traditions could journey together toward without denying their own deepest impulses.

Our practice of theological hospitality strives to welcome, appreciate, and desire the contributions of those from different Christian theological traditions. In this way, we encourage people to develop, understand, and share their theological convictions. We value difference. We believe those who are different than us have something to contribute to us. No, theological hospitality is not an aspiration to be theological neutral. There are many other things it is not, but we will save those for another day.

Theological hospitality is a practice that requires humility. It is an invitation to care about our posture toward others as much as our theological position. Theological hospitality is difficult because it cultivates fellowship in the midst of difference. It is quite easy to see difference as a direct challenge – a challenge to ourselves, to truth, or to one's community. We experience this challenge as being about right and wrong, as us good and others bad, or about truth and error. It is shaped by the metaphor of the battle where we take "sides," "attack positions," and "defend" our position. This approach situates difference as essentially a power struggle. It is reflected in James 4:1-2:

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.

As followers of Jesus, we know that it is all too easy to use our power to defend ourselves, to build ourselves up, or to protect "our side" against all challengers, especially when we believe we are right. The canvas of human history is a mural of great evil done in the name of defending good. Our suggestion is to view difference through a Christological lens. Jesus teaches us to reject this approach to power.

Paul draws on Jesus' revelation of this truth in Phil 2:4-8 where Paul admonishes the Philippians:

4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross. (NRSV)

The way of Jesus is not to use one's power for oneself, but rather for the sake of others. Submission, rather than domination, is the appropriate use of power. Of course, this is hardest when one is convinced of being right, but that's exactly why Paul points out that proclaiming "a crucified messiah" is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23). It simply doesn't make sense to approach these kinds of conflicts by submitting to the other, even giving one's life for the other. It is perceived as either weakness or foolishness.

It is when we face difference perceived as error that we most need a good dose of "epistemic humility." Epistemic humility is the recognition that as sure as I am that I am right about something, I could be wrong. I don't think I am (obviously!) and I have good reasons to think the way I do (or I wouldn't be so convinced of them), but nevertheless I could be wrong. Such a posture provides us opportunity for mutual submission as we invite others to help us see where we might be getting it wrong. There may be flaws that we cannot see. There may be errors to which we are blind.

If we are honest, we know it's the case because we know that there have been times that we didn't want to see the truth even though it was right before our eyes. This reality is reflected in the prophet Jeremiah who reminds us that "the heart is deceitfully wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9). We must embrace humility with the hope that in taking such a posture toward things we believe to be true it is more likely that God may actually break through our self-deceit to correct our own errors and by the power of the Spirit make us more like Jesus.

And that is the goal. At all times and in all ways, we are seeking to follow the way of Jesus while inviting others to join us on that journey. [Back to top](#).

WHY WE PRACTICE THEOLOGICAL HOSPITALITY (PART 1)

Let's explore why theological hospitality is so important to us. After all, theological hospitality is difficult. Why would we make it a core practice in the Kairos Project? There are probably many reasons we find difference hard. Part of the answer is that difference almost always brings to mind conflict and most of us prefer to avoid conflict if we can. In our April 2019 Kairos Gathering we focused much of the Gathering on thinking about conflict, the different ways we experience it, and what we do with it. In my opening plenary session I invited participants to view conflict through three different lenses. These lenses provide us with three ways to think about the practice of theological hospitality.

The first lens is the lens most familiar to us and pretty much our default when we think about conflict or difference. It is the lens by which we see difference as a direct challenge. We experience this challenge as being about right and wrong, as good and others bad, or about truth and error. It is shaped by the metaphor of the battle where we take “sides,” “attack positions”, and “defend” our position. This lens situates difference as essentially a power struggle. It is reflected in James 4:1-2:

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.

I suggested that we view this kind of difference through the Christological lens. This is in part because Jesus teaches us about power. Followers of Jesus know that it is all too easy, when we see ourselves in the right to use our power to defend ourselves, to build ourselves up, or to protect “our side” against all challengers. The canvas of human history is a mural of great evil done in the name of defending good. Jesus teaches us to reject this approach to power.

Paul draws on Jesus’ revelation of this truth in Phil 2:4-8 where Paul admonishes the Philippians:

4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
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being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (NRSV)

The way of Jesus is not to use one’s power for oneself, but rather for the sake of others. Submission, rather than domination, is the appropriate use of power. Of course, this is hardest the more convinced one is of being right, but that’s exactly why Paul points out that proclaiming “a crucified messiah” is “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23). It simply doesn’t make sense to approach these kinds of conflicts submitting to the other, even giving one’s life for the other. It is perceived as either weakness or foolishness.

It is when we face difference perceived as error that we most need a good dose of “epistemic humility.” Epistemic humility is the recognition that as sure as I am that I am right about something, I could be wrong. I don’t think I am (obviously!) and I have good reasons to think the way I do (or I wouldn’t be so convinced of them), but nevertheless I could be wrong. Such a posture provides us opportunity for mutual submission as we invite others to help us see where we might be getting it wrong.

We realize that this posture toward our deeply held truths to which we have committed our lives and our futures is not a posture shared by everyone. In fact, some say that epistemic humility is a vice if you really believe God’s truth. That’s one reason we put theological hospitality front and center as an essential practice in the Kairos Project.

We are all too aware that as compelling as our reasoning is, or as clear, evident, or even obvious is the truth of the way we see things, we recognize that there may be things of which we are unaware. There may be flaws that we cannot see. There may be errors to which we are blind. If we are honest, we know it’s the case because we know that there have been times that we didn’t want to see the truth even though it was right before our eyes. This reality is reflected in the prophet Jeremiah who reminds us that “the heart is deceitfully wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9). It is reflected in philosophers from Demosthenes to Wittgenstein who remind us that there is nothing as easy as self-deceit. This humility is embraced with the hope that in taking such a posture toward things we believe to be true it is more likely that God may actually break through our self-deceit to correct our own errors and through humility and mutual submission to make us more like Jesus. [Back to top.](#)

WHY WE PRACTICE THEOLOGICAL HOSPITALITY (PART 2)

Here’s one common way we tend to view difference: those who are different are wrong. If I am right and you disagree with me then you must be wrong. This is a posture to position differences in a power relationship that too often leads to us defending ourselves (rather than truth) and promoting self-deception. We noted that viewing difference through Jesus invites us to take into consideration the interests of others rather than those of ourselves and promotes epistemic humility. Now we are going to look at difference through a couple of other lenses as well.

Although difference is sometimes an issue of truth and error, it isn’t always. Some differences aren’t really a

judgement of right or wrong. This next lens, what I call the ecclesiological lens, invites us to see difference in a much more constructive way. It comes from First Corinthians and is what Paul is trying to help the Corinthians to see regarding another kind of difference within the Christian community. I want to call particular attention to chapter 12: 4-7:4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

There is so much we could unpack from this passage but what is important for us to hear in this context is that there are differences that can actually serve the common good. There is substantial, important diversity that is necessary to achieve the good God wants us to achieve. Paul develops this way of thinking about difference into one of the most powerful metaphors for the church: the human body. There are many different parts to a body and each is necessary for the body to function as it should.

In the Kairos project, theological hospitality is a practice that recognizes that the Spirit activates differences among Christians so that the Body of Christ may do its work in the world. As Paul asks the Corinthians he asks us as well, “what good would it be if the whole body were but an eye, a foot, or an ear? What would become of the work of the body?” We believe that we should be hospitable because in our inhospitality we may be rejecting something the Spirit is giving us that is necessary to do the work the Spirit has called us to do. The body can’t do its work without all the parts.

The third lens for viewing difference that I talked about at the Gathering also plays an important role in our practice of theological hospitality. This lens also recognizes that difference is a work of the Spirit but different than the work highlighted in the ecclesiological lens. Through this lens we see that we practice theological hospitality to help us remain open to the new things the Spirit is doing in our midst. I call it the pneumatological lens, or simply, the Spirit lens.

I don’t think it’s an overstatement to say that the most significant theological conflict for the New Testament church was how the earliest believers (all Jewish) were going to incorporate the new Gentile believers into their communities of faith. We can hardly imagine the impact of the inclusion of the Gentiles into the covenant community of Israel.

Imagine yourself in Peter’s place in Acts 10. As a Jewish man, Peter knew that the dietary restrictions of the Torah were central to what it meant to be faithful to God. Nevertheless, in his vision God tells him to eat things that God had consistently and very explicitly told the Jews to not do! How could that be? Imagine the confusion he must have been experiencing. Imagine the challenge to everything he knew to be true about being faithful to God.

With a knock on the door, Peter figures out that the dream isn’t really about what he eats, but about his Gentile visitor and whether or not he would be a guest in Cornelius’ home. Of course, it didn’t take long before the

whole thing did become an issue of

eating as well. Imagine the disruption given the Torah's teaching about clean and unclean food, how Jews were to act around Gentiles, what it meant to be circumcised or uncircumcised, and how one was to be faithful to the Torah. Following Jesus was turning both Jew and Gentile's worlds upside-down.

Now, we know the end of the story and that the Jerusalem Council discerned that all this disruption and change and the new directives for how to engage with Gentiles, whether or not the new male converts were to be circumcised, and the new way for Jews to be faithful to the Torah was the work of God's Spirit in their midst. Acts 15: 28 records the discernment made that "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..."

This is instructive for theological hospitality because sometimes conflict comes because the Holy Spirit is doing something new and it just takes time for everyone to get on board with it. In the meantime one can expect "no little conflict" arising. I suspect this happens any time God does something new. It takes time for the Spirit to work throughout the community. And, who would have thought of the magnitude of the changes the Spirit would inspire in these early believers.

Of course, it's not like the disciples hadn't been warned that this was coming. Jesus had told them to expect this sort of thing. In John 16:12 Jesus tells them that the Spirit would come and "guide them into all truth." They couldn't have conceived of what this would actually mean for them.

When I think of this exchange, I am always reminded of that scene from the movie *A Few Good Men* when Jack Nicholson's character, Colonel Nathan Jessup, is being badgered on the witness stand by the defense attorney (played by Tom Cruise) to "tell the truth" about whether or not he had ordered an illegal "code red" disciplinary act. At last Jessup explodes in frustration: "You can't handle the truth!" I enjoy imagining the disciples pressing Jesus as to just what this truth is into which the Spirit would guide them? His response would have surely been "you can't handle the truth."

This lens helps us recognize that we practice theological hospitality because we know that the Spirit of Christ will lead us into truth for which we had previously been unprepared. Although it may cause us to leave behind clear and explicit previously received and unquestioned acts of faithfulness, the Spirit is at work moving us into the new creation which God is bringing about.

These three lenses, the Christological, ecclesiological, and pneumatological, or the Jesus, church, and Spirit lenses provide us insight into why the practice of theological hospitality is so important for the Kairos Project. I want to add one more important reason why we need to practice theological hospitality: self-identity.

Theological hospitality is crucial for having a deep understanding of who we are. We tend to think that identity

is most powerfully formed in communities of like-mindedness. That, no doubt, has its place and offers benefits as well. But what we are discovering is that without diversity we don't really understand the important things which make us who we are, at least in comparison to others. We need each other to challenge each other, to hold each other accountable, to learn to see what we can't see without those who see differently than we do. It is in communities of difference that we more deeply learn what is most determinative about who we are. The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas talked about it as the "epistemic necessity of the other."

For these reasons, and many more, theological hospitality is an essential practice of the Kairos Project. As we see it, as we learn to practice theological hospitality we open ourselves up to the work of the Spirit in a way that is essential for our being faithful to who God has called us to be. We learn to see difference, not as a challenge to faithfulness but rather as a gift from God to help us become more like Jesus. We believe becoming more like Jesus is at the heart of the Kairos journey and necessary to faithfully become the people God has called us to be. [Back to top.](#)