



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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In Kairos, we speak much 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 attempt to articulate just how important the practice is, and why.

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 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 a learning journey with us. Instead, we strive to welcome, appreciate, and desire the contributions of different Christian theological traditions. In this way, we encourage people to develop, understand, and share their convictions. We value difference. We believe those who are different from us have something to contribute to us.

Theological hospitality is actually crucial for having a deep understanding of ourselves. Most people 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.”

How, then, do we actually practice this? We acknowledge that theological hospitality is very difficult to do at all times, and especially now, in a world and a Church that are highly polarized. Committing to its practice, and the living it out in real relationships, requires extensive re-orientation, a radically different way of looking at ourselves, others, and the conflicts that seem to permeate so much of our world. Thankfully, God has given us at least three “lenses” through which we can better see, understand, and appreciate the practice of theological hospitality.

A Christological Lens

It is all too easy, when we see ourselves in the right, to attempt to use power to defend ourselves or our positions, or to try to protect “our side” from all challenges. Christians are not alone in this. The canvas of human history is a mural of great evil done in the name of defending good, or even defending God. That mural is filled with images and metaphors of battle, of conflicts both verbal and (sometimes) violent. The Epistle of James pointedly addresses this pattern, which is evident even among believers: “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” (James 4:1-2).

But Jesus invites us to do otherwise, and showed us how. We can thus call his perspective a Christological, or Jesus, lens. Paul gives us a glimpse through this lens with his dramatic description of Christ’s letting go of power, and its consequent invitation to all of us: “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8).

The way of Jesus is not to use one’s power for oneself, but rather for the sake of others, even others we think are wrong. This is extraordinary. Submission to, rather than domination over, is the appropriate response to difference. Of course, this is harder the more convinced we are of being right, but that’s exactly why Paul points out that proclaiming “a crucified [submitted] messiah” is “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). Except for the witness of Christ, it simply wouldn’t make sense to approach conflict by submitting to each other, even giving one’s life for others. It would be perceived, often even in the Church, as either weakness or foolishness. But Christ has shown us that better way and asked us to walk in it.

Therefore, epistemic humility—the awareness that, no matter how certain I may feel about what I think, I may indeed be missing the point—is embraced by us with the hope that God may actually break through our occasional self-deceit to correct our own errors. Through humble listening and mutual submission, we may become more like Jesus.

An Ecclesiological Lens

Some differences, however, aren’t really a judgment of right or wrong. This next lens invites us to see differences in a much more constructive way. It comes from what Paul was trying to help the Corinthians to see regarding another kind of difference that was wreaking havoc within their Christian community: the use of spiritual gifts. He reminded them that “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

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 Kairos, we recognize that the Spirit activates differences among Christians so that the Body of Christ may

do its fullest, best work in the world. We can thus call this an ecclesiological, or Church, lens. What Paul asked the Corinthian believers 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?” (I Corinthians 12:17). We thus believe that we should be hospitable because inhospitality may cause us to reject something good the Spirit is giving us, something necessary to do the work the Spirit has called us to do. The body can’t do its work without all the parts.

A Pneumatological Lens

With the third lens we see that theological hospitality helps us remain open to new things the Spirit is doing in our midst. We call it the pneumatological lens, or simply, the Spirit lens.

Scripture gives us a wonderful example of the use of this lens. It’s not an overstatement to say that the most significant theological conflict for the New Testament church was how the earliest believers (all Jewish, originally) were going to incorporate the new Gentile believers into their communities of faith. So, 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 a vision God tells him to eat things that God had consistently and very explicitly told the Jews to not eat! 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, though, Peter discerned correctly that the vision wasn’t actually about what he should eat, but about God’s love for the Gentiles. Specifically, at this moment, it was about whether or not Peter would accept the invitation to be a guest in the home of a Gentile named Cornelius. He chose to go, and the story of the Church changed dramatically that day.

Of course, it didn’t take long before the inclusion of the Gentiles turned into a conflict—a difference—regarding eating as well. Imagine the disruption to the early Church as they struggled with the tension between the Torah’s teaching about clean and unclean food, their traditions about how Jews were to act around Gentiles, and about the deep meaning of their circumcised bodies. What could they let go of? What should they hold onto? What did love of God, and love of their Christian brothers and sisters, require of them?

Following Jesus was turning upside down the worlds of both Jewish and Gentile believers. We, of course, know the end of the story. The Jerusalem Council discerned that all this disruptive change was actually the work of God’s Spirit in their midst! They concluded after long discernment that “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” to honor what God was doing among people who had always been different. We are the beneficiaries of their hearkening to the Spirit.

This is instructive for theological hospitality because sometimes conflict comes when the Holy Spirit is doing something new and it just takes time for everyone to get on board with it. This probably 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!

Jesus had told the disciples to expect this very sort of thing! He said that the Spirit would come and “guide them into all truth” (John 16:12). Their story is reminiscent of a well-known scene from the movie “A Few Good Men,” where Jack Nicholson’s character is being badgered on the witness stand by a defense attorney (played by Tom Cruise) to “tell the truth.” At last the witness explodes in frustration: “You can’t handle the truth!” Let us imagine the disciples likewise pressing Jesus to explain just what truth the Spirit would guide them into. His response would have surely been, “You can’t handle that truth! Not yet. So trust the Spirit, who will continue to reveal truth to you.”

Theological Hospitality at Kairos

With students, mentors, and partners located in many different contexts around the world as well as in North America, the Kairos community is obviously increasingly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, age, geographic location, cultural realities, and socio-political perspectives. We are also diverse in other ways, particularly in our theological affirmations. We can’t list here all of hundreds of denominations that are present within Kairos, but they include various kinds of Baptists, Wesleyans, Anglicans, Lutherans, Anabaptists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Brethren, Quakers, and many not affiliated with any particular denomination.

In other settings, these expressions of diversity would perpetuate a growing polarization we see in the world. Instead, we see it as opportunity. Most of us have been taught or encouraged to gather or relate to only with people with whom we already agree, or who look like ourselves, the Kairos community seeks to be different. We need 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. And we recognize that we interpret that authoritative Scripture differently at times. Yet we believe each person committed to this kind of radical hospitality 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.

The three lenses discussed above—Christological, ecclesiological, and pneumatological (or Jesus, Church, and Spirit)—provide us both the rationale and the means for the practice of theological hospitality in Kairos (and, we would argue, for the Church at large). As we said, it is not an invitation to abandon deeply-held beliefs and commitments. It is not reducing ourselves to the lowest common denominator. Rather, it is a robust, courageous practice of maintaining radical fidelity to truth and, simultaneously, radical commitment to love. It is a mystery that such a thing is possible at all, and it is a deep joy when we experience it in reality.

So, in summary, why do we practice theological hospitality within Kairos?

... Because its posture of humility is the posture of Jesus himself, and we are called to become more and more like him.

... Because the love displayed through hospitality is the divine love that binds the Church together as one body.

... And because the new thing offered to us through hospitality is the work of the Spirit, who guides us into all truth.

This is what we are called to do, and this is who we are called to be, as a faithful community of God's people in an often-inhospitable world.