



Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy

by the Rev. Mike Wernick, EDWM's Ecumenical and Interfaith Officer
and rector of Two Churches,

Having grown up outside of Christianity (in a Jewish home and “framework”), I perceived what I later learned some therapists call “magical thinking.” Televangelists would furrow their brows and shout prayers towards what they feared might be a disinterested God, and magical thinking said that if they prayed long enough, or hard enough, or with the right words, God would answer their prayers. But perhaps more importantly, perhaps what would improve the efficacy of their prayers more than anything, was an underlying orthodoxy—or right belief.

During the [Avignon Papacy](#), for example, when there were three Popes (two in France and one in Rome), magical thinking pressured Catholics to figure out who the legitimate Pope was, because listening to the right one would ensure that you'd get into Heaven, and listening to the wrong one would send you straight to Hell. It was “right belief” that determined whether your teeth would gnash when you had no longer had any need of them. But even still, some denominations propose that not even right belief can ensure membership in the [144,000 elect](#) who will be saved.

Magical thinking informed the beliefs of Family Research Council President Tony Perkins, who (for years) said that God sends natural disasters to punish gays. But



in last month's devastating floods in Louisiana, when his home was destroyed by flood waters, Perkins said that this natural disaster, this time, occurred because it was an “incredible, encouraging spiritual exercise to take you to the next level in your walk with an Almighty and Gracious God who does all things well.”

There is great power in human consciousness, but magical think-

ing doesn't feed the hungry or heal the sick or clothe the naked. Orthopraxy does this. Right action does this. And in his book [The Road Less Traveled](#), author M. Scott Peck asserted that love is a verb. It is making a commitment to support the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being of our partner or spouse and those in our families and communities. It is not about belief. It is about what we do (in spite of how we may feel in the moment).

In the Two Great Commandments, Jesus exhorts us to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus exhorts us to do. He says nothing about belief. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, when the lawyer agreed that it was the Samaritan who acted with mercy, Jesus said: “Go and do likewise.” Not “Go and believe likewise.” But do.

At [Two Churches](#), we are fortunate enough to have a wireless connection to our outdoor LED sign (it's like magic). And in response to this spring's spate of tragic shootings and bombings around the world, I sent a message to it that said: **How We Behave Matters More Than What We Believe.** Soon thereafter, we received an email from someone who took great exception to

that. An email which asserted—in no uncertain terms—that what we believed mattered much more than how we behaved. An email from someone who put orthodoxy ahead of orthopraxy. It is a widespread sentiment which values what we'll do with our teeth after we die more than it values how we feed and care for others here and now.

And around the world, many of the conflicts which end in violence, seem to be rooted in a similar orthodoxy. Religious factions asserting that their beliefs are right while rejecting a broader understanding of God. And there is, unfortunately, great divisiveness in our current political cycle.

But there is hope. Religious leaders are beginning to “love into action” the realization that divisions do not serve us well. They are beginning to experience that whenever we draw a line between ourselves and The Other, that God is always on the other side of the line with them.

And so, theologians officially representing the Churches of the Anglican Communion and the Oriental Orthodox Churches made history in 2014 by signing an agreement on their mutual understanding of Christology (what we believe together about the Person of Jesus Christ). This agreement addressed a major point of theology that divided Christians following the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, and left the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Byzantine and Western Churches separated from one another.

Late last year, over twenty-five

prominent Orthodox rabbis in Israel, the United States and Europe signed “To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians,” which calls for Jews and Christians to cooperate in addressing the moral and religious challenges of our times. The real importance of this Orthodox statement is that it calls for fraternal partnership between Jewish and Christian religious leaders, while acknowledging the positive theological status of the Christian faith.

At about the same time, The Archbishop of Birmingham, the Most Rev. Bernard Longley, signaled that restrictions which can be traced back to the Reformation, might be “reconsidered” as a result of “deeper sharing” between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. Although he insisted that he was expressing a “personal view,” the Archbishop’s comments will be closely watched since he is the senior Catholic cleric responsible for dialogue with the Anglican churches. And his remarks were warmly welcomed by leading figures in the Church of England who said it was time for closer ties.

At last month’s ELCA Churchwide Assembly, Lutherans accepted the “Declaration on the Way,” a unique ecumenical document that marks a path toward greater unity between Catholics and Lutherans. At the heart of the document are thirty-two “Statements of Agreement” that state where Lutherans and Catholics do not have church-dividing differences on topics about church, ministry and the Eucharist.

And for the first time ever, in October, an Imam from one of Grand

Rapids’ mosques will offer the Invocation at the Kentwood City Commission’s monthly meeting.

In the Eucharist, we ask that in the fullness of time, God bring us, with all the saints from every tribe and language and people and nation to feast at the banquet prepared from the foundation of the world. This speaks to us of healing and unity, and not about division. And as technology continues to bring the world into our living room, and we become increasingly aware of The Others who have always been there, it will also become increasingly critical to strive for justice among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. There is no magical thinking about it. Jesus did not say that we must like everyone—only that we love them. It is as Yoda said: Do. Or do not. There is no try.

Holy God, make it so.