

Bruce Almighty: the Problem of Individualism, and the Call to Communion
Paraskevè (Eve) Tibbs
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Bruce Almighty

With nothing else in the video store one particular evening, my husband and I reluctantly rented the movie "Bruce Almighty" starring Jim Carey. As was no surprise for such a youth-oriented film, there were some gratuitously unnecessary elements – but there were also, surprisingly, many positive messages being conveyed beneath the brash surface. Carey plays an immature man named Bruce, who believes he is the victim of everyone and everything. Life just is not going his way and he blames everyone else, and above all, he blames God. The trailer to the movie asks: "If you were given God's power for a week, what would you do? Who would you help?" And of course, the humor is found in that Bruce, after having been given God's power, immediately blinks himself a hot new outfit and a new sports car. He exacts revenge wherever he can, even cruelly sabotaging a co-worker to get a promotion. Bruce is also given the responsibility to answer prayers in Buffalo, NY, and very soon he is annoyed with everyone else's requests, so he grants every prayer to get them out of his hair. Everyone who bought a lottery ticket wins, but then only wins \$17.00, and as a result the angry lottery rioters nearly destroy the city. But Bruce knows it is entirely his fault and regrets his actions. The turning point in the movie is when Bruce realizes being self-focused is not what life is all about. He kneels down on the highway at night and prays: "God, I give my life over to you – do with me what you will." Then a truck hits him and he dies. But through comedy movie magic, by the end of the movie Bruce is alive and transformed, understanding that his life is fulfilling only when he is no longer preoccupied with himself – but when other people are the focus of his life.

This movie touches on the real and pervasive problem of individualism. In this article I would like to briefly discuss that problem, as well as offer the Orthodox Christian solution. Very simply, that solution is to be found in "communion." Like Bruce, who has also not asked, perhaps in a reflective moment by a mountain stream or after a really bad day at work in the city: "Why am I here?" "What is the meaning, purpose and calling of my life?" David, the Psalmist, and future King considering his own existence, asks the Lord in a similar way in the eighth Psalm: "what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" In other words, "God, why do you care about me anyway?" There is another line in the "Bruce Almighty" when Bruce realizes he is really bad at granting prayers and defends himself to God: "I just gave everyone what they wanted." The God character replies: "Since when does anyone have a clue about what they want?" In truth, only God knows who we are and what we need, because He created us. So although all of Holy Scripture is to help us understand our place in the grand scheme of things and learn how to live and act, we will find important answers in our creation.

Creation in the Image of God

In the creation account at the beginning of Genesis, God said: "Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness." What is this image – this "inner life" of the Trinity – in which we are created? You may be familiar with the beautiful icon (pictured here) entitled "The Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah" written by St. Andrei Rublev in the fifteenth century. Recall that in Genesis 18, the Lord visited the Righteous Abraham and Sarah by the Terebinth Tree at Mamre. Abraham sees immediately that there are three men there, and the dialogue makes it clear that the Lord God was a "they." Sarah prepares the finest she had to offer, three fine cakes, butter, milk and a calf. So this icon is called the Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah,



because there was that actual historical event, where they gave their best to the strangers, and where they were there promised a son. But at another level, this is considered to be a true image or icon (*eikon*) of the Holy Trinity. The three angels are portrayed as sharing together at table, something we humans understand to represent openness and hospitality. We not only notice the circular feel, with its fluid movement – but by superimposing a circle over the icon, we can see in fact, that St. Andrei explicitly intended the circle. The shape of the circle means that no one is more important than the other. There is a sharing – a unity – in the relationship, as in the composition of the icon.

The word for this relationship of the Holy Trinity is "*perichoresis*" which literally means to “to dance around” (*peri* – around, *chorea* – to dance.) *Perichoresis* is the eternal divine dance – the circular unending movement of each of the Persons of the Holy Trinity as they mutually share in the life of the others, so that none is isolated nor detached from the actions of the others. The three are “one composition” in this circle, as they are of “one essence” but are three unique Persons in communion, fully submitting and defining themselves in light of the Other. This is the True Image of One God in Three Persons. The “way of being” for God is in communion. Stated another way: "To exist is to relate."

It is the same image of which God spoke at creation: “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness.” So as human beings, we are created to “be” or “exist” in relationships – in communion with God and with others – if we are to live according to this image of the Holy Trinity. And we have a choice, by the way. We have free will to ignore the image of God in us, or to honor it. But it is only in honoring that image that we will *ever* find meaning and purpose in this life.

Individual vs. Communion

In this present “Age of Self” our language is filled with phrases that glorify personal choice above all other values: “self-determination,” “self-knowledge,” “self-esteem,” “self-help,” even “do-it-yourself.” American Sociologist, Robert Bellah, found this hyper-privatization present in American religion today. In doing research for his book, *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah found that eighty-one percent of the American people believe that an individual should arrive at his or her own religious belief independent of any church or synagogue. Bellah concludes that those who claim to be Christians today are arriving at faith on their own terms – terms that make no demands on their behavior, and make no demands on them to be connected to others in any way. He interviewed a woman named Sheila, who embodies this attitude: "I believe in God," she said. "I can't remember the last time I went to church. But my faith has carried me a long way. It's 'Sheilatism.' Just my own little voice." Bellah concludes “In the absence of any objective criteria of right and wrong, good or evil, the self and its feelings become our only moral guide. ‘Being good’ becomes ‘feeling good.’”¹

Most mainline Protestant churches teach that the individual’s claim on Jesus as his or her “personal Lord and Savior” is the eternal guarantee of “being saved.” But Orthodox Christianity sees the dynamics of this relationship very differently. Salvation is based upon the notion of “participation” in God. We believe God is certainly a personal God, but we believe that none of us is saved in isolation from others. We are saved together in Christ in His Church. In Orthodox cultures, writes Anthony Ugolnik, "the encounter with God and the flash of insight that conveys religious meaning occurs not so often in private reflection as in encounter with another.... It emerges through the act of embrace.”² Not only have we been created with the same image of God, but we are inter-connected with each other as we grow in Christ-likeness. Saint Paul

¹ Robert N. Bellah, Madsen, R.; Sullivan, W.M.; Swidler, A. and Tipton, S.M. *Habits of the Heart*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

² Anthony Ugolnik, *The Illuminating Icon*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 50.

says we are "members one of another" in the Body of Christ. (Ephesians 4.25) Therefore, we embrace and are embraced because we are related to one another in Christ in a profound way. As the Body of Christ, we partake of the ultimate meal together at our Divine Liturgy. It is no coincidence that it is called "Holy Communion" because through the Holy Spirit we actually become the Body of Christ in this sacramental act of communion with God and with other Orthodox Christians. The Church is neither a building nor an institution. It is the people of God, both clergy and laity, in Eucharistic communion with one another, through the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ.

Moving Toward Center

In the early Christian world, Christians stood out from the rest of their culture by their unusual love for each other in their communities. This was not a simple matter of good feeling, but a way of being together – a way of prayer, and a way of living in the world, rooted in their experience and understanding of God, who had come to them in Jesus Christ. This Christian love, virtue, and prayer spilled over into how they interacted with the rest of the world, outside their Christian community. But in the sixth century, St. Dorotheos of Gaza needed to remind some of the monks at his monastery in the Egyptian desert what they were all about. He did this with an exercise in geometry, specifically the forming of a circle. He said:

“Take a compass and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The center point is the same distance from any point on the circumference. Suppose that this circle is the world and that God is the center; the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of human beings. Let us assume for the sake of analogy – that to move toward God, then, human beings move from the circumference along the various radii of the circle to the center. At the same time, the closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God.”³

Love stands at the heart of the Christian life. This is not an abstraction, but must be a concrete part of our daily lives. Saint John the Evangelist hits this nail on the head: "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also." (1 John 4.20)

But our American society in the twenty-first century tells us to move away from the center – away from God – away from one another. It tells us to stay mad at someone in righteous indignation instead of humble reconciliation. It tells us to take "time for me." Remember the commercial: *Calgon take me away!?* The problem of individualism shows itself in a society that tells us our bubble bath is more important than someone else in need. St. Dorotheos' diagram works here in reverse too. If you follow a single line from the center out to the edge again, you notice that all the lines become farther apart as they go away from the center. This, St. Dorotheos says, is because of the very nature of love.

“The more we are turned away from and do not love God, the greater the distance that separates us from our neighbor. If we were to love God more, we should be closer to God and through love of Him we should be more united in love to our neighbor; and the more we are united to our neighbor the more we are united to God.”⁴

Unlike our society, our Fathers and Mothers among the Saints tell us that the "Life in Christ" is selfless – it sees not ourselves at all, but Christ alone, and it sees the image of Christ in the other.

³ St. Dorotheos of Gaza, in Roberta Bondi, *To Pray & to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 14ff.

⁴ Ibid.

Salvation: A Process of Response

The gift of the image of God, like all gifts of God, come to us freely, with no strings attached. But they do require from us an equally free response in order to exercise them, because of our free will. This is a continuing response, as human beings are intended to continue to grow in this gift of sharing in the Divine Life. All through the New Testament we find an anthropology of response: a “gift” and a “task.” St. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians “we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Ephesians 2.10) St. Maximus the Confessor states that “Divine life is a gift, but also a task which is to be accomplished by a free human effort.”⁵ Our way of life is to be the continuing response to the gift of the image given at creation.

How do we “exercise” the image of God in us? In other words, how do we participate in Divine Life? We exercise the image of God in us only in communion, because as we glimpsed through the icon of the Holy Trinity, God exists in Trinity as pure love and ideal communion. Likewise, Holy Scripture tells us over and over that only in considering others first, can we become what we should be as Christians. Christ Himself pointed out that the entire meaning and purpose of the law and all the commandments is love. St. Paul tells us explicitly: “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.” (Phil 2.3,4) Why should we behave in this way? St. Paul continues and gives us the reason: We should consider others first because of the example of Christ, who being God, made Himself of no reputation (lit. “emptied Himself”) (Phil 2.7) for our sake. Jesus Christ, the eternal God, made Himself nothing out of love for humanity.

Following Christ means that we too are to empty ourselves of self-focus and live for the “other.” Once, as Mother Theresa passed by a crowd in Detroit, a woman in the crowd was overheard by a reporter to remark: “Mother Theresa is nothing.” Listening closer the reporter heard the completed thought: “therefore God can use her for anything.” It was in emptying herself of self-ambition that Mother Theresa became a model for our generation of a Christ-centered, and by definition, “other-”centered life. Contrast this with another voice of our culture, instead from a self-proclaimed spokesperson of New Age “spirituality,” Shirley MacLaine: “The most pleasurable journey you take is through yourself...the only sustaining love involvement is with yourself...The only thing you have is working to the consummation of your own identity. And that’s what I’ve been trying to do all my life.”

Our Christian ideals are completely opposed to our culture in its emphasis on self. Our culture tells us to find self-fulfillment at all costs - even if it requires letting the helpless – or others who depend on us – fend for themselves. Our life as Orthodox Christians tells us something quite different. We are saved together, but it has been said, “we fall alone.” A.P. DeVries writes: “We are not here to see through each other, but to see each other through.” In this simple quotation is found the answer to the question “Why am I here?” “What is the meaning of life?” We are called to share of ourselves and to help our families, our children, our spouses, our friends, our students – to work at becoming holy - more and more like, or conformed to the divine image in us – so that we may be saved together in the Church.

I appreciated the ending of “Bruce Almighty” which was also not typical of a youth-oriented Hollywood film. It ended not with the usual victory, where the “hero” is on top of the world and everyone else has received some humorous punishment for getting in his way. Instead, Bruce humbled himself and made amends with everyone he had hurt or ignored, remaining in the same low-level job, surrounded by the same people whom he previously thought were his greatest problems. But the difference was that he now had new

⁵ See John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, (New York: Fordham, 1974), 138f.

eyes with which to see the unique value in every person, and he was less concerned about himself than he was concerned about the needs of others. We might even say that Bruce was a better “emptier” Bruce, and that he was now doing a better job of honoring the divine image of God in which he was created.

Like Bruce, we each have our own adventure in finding the proper way to respond to the gift of the divine image of God in which we have been created. God created a world for us in which we are to continually learn to love in the way He intended – in the way of the Holy Trinity. This way, very simply stated, is to put others first. The meaning of our life, and the way to true fulfillment lies in learning how to truly be part of the One Church – to grow in communion with others, and thereby grow in communion with God.