

Q. *A friend of mine, who is an Episcopalian, says that there are three “Branches” of the Church: Roman Catholic, Episcopalian and Orthodox. Some of my Catholic friends have told me that there is an Eastern and Western “Branch.” Does the Church have branches and are we just one of them?*

A. The idea that the Church is made up of branches that are all equally part of The One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, originated in the 19th Century with “High Church” Episcopalians. The theory was that each nation, or culture, might have its own entirely different expression of the Catholic Faith, with different worship, customs, and even differences in belief. For these people there were four things that held the Church together. These are Bishops, The Nicene Creed (in either the correct or incorrect form), the Bible, and the two Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist.

Neither the Roman Catholics nor the Orthodox bought into this “Branch Theory” when it was first developed. Both the Roman and the Orthodox Churches recognized that the One Church could not be divided in faith and united in fact. Later, however, in spite of the teaching of Orthodox Theologians, some Orthodox Christians began to act as though they considered Roman Catholics, and even Episcopalians, as though they were “Practically Orthodox”. This very dangerous idea was responsible for keeping generations of Anglicans, who might have become Orthodox, stuck in their false fellowship as it devolved from heresy, to chaos, to amoral anarchy.

Recently, Roman Catholics have been putting forward a version of the “Branch Theory” called the “Two Lung” theory. This is what you were referring to as the “Eastern and Western Church” theory. When I was a priest in Kansas City I taught in a Roman Catholic School and could not go to a funeral, which probably I shouldn’t do anyway, without some Roman bishop or priest bringing me a set of R.C. vestments and begging me to “concelebrate” with them because “you’re a real priest like we are.”

The fact is that there is only one Church. It is the Orthodox Church! It is absurd to believe that there could be a Church that was Holy and not Orthodox (Right believing and Right Worshiping). All other groups of Christians are just that: groups of Christians. They are not truly “churches” in any authentic sense of the word. Church means “ECLESIA” (those who are called out), and how can one be called out to serve and follow a half-truth, or an outright lie, or to serve God in “the wrong way?”

Now, I’m sure this all sounds hard, cruel and, perhaps bigoted. I am not saying that these people, some of them our friends and kinsmen, are not Christians, that they are going to hell, or even that they are not part of the Church. We know where the Orthodox Church is. We do not know where it isn’t. All believers in Christ are held in orbit by the fact that there is a real Orthodox Church in the world. Further, the closer their FAITH, WORSHIP and MORALS are to those of the Church, the closer they are to Orthodoxy. I remember several years ago when a group of

Anglicans asked an Orthodox Bishop if he considered their priesthood to be “VALID.” His answer was simply, “Your orders are as valid as your Faith is Orthodox.” Don’t make too much of this, but what it means is that the more like the Church one is, the closer to Orthodoxy he is. But being “close to Orthodoxy” is still not Orthodox.

We should view the Church, not as a series of branches, but as a stone lofted into a pond. Where the stone strikes the water, there and only there, can we say the Orthodox Church IS. The ripples out from the point of impact are the Armenians, Monophysites, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Calvinists, Evangelicals, etc., all held in being by and only by their relationship, however tenuous, to the ONE TRUE ORTHODOX CHURCH.