



## From Evangelical to Orthodox

Source: [Orthodox Christian Faith](#)

“Perhaps I have always been spiritually hungry. Growing up in a devoted Christian home, I do not remember ever not believing in Christ, or not wanting in my heart of hearts to follow Him and do His will. Not that I was always able to fulfil that desire moment by moment, but the desire was certainly there.

I did all the things that good Christian boys are supposed to do. Baptised by profession of faith shortly before my ninth birthday, I attended services, youth meetings, Sunday school, went to Church camp each summer, participated in youth rallies, service projects, read the Scriptures and nearly anything else I could get my hands on. By the time I was in junior high school there was no doubt in my mind that I would enter the ministry in some way, shape, or form. I preached my first sermon (on prayer) in the ninth grade, taught Sunday School, and even taught the “Know What You Believe” series of classes at the lake Region Christian Assembly the summer after my junior year of high school.

After graduation, I entered Lincoln Christian College in Lincoln, Illinois, to prepare myself for ministry in the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ (a conservative evangelical Protestant sect, historically rooted in the Restoration Movement begun by Alexander Campbell and others on the American frontier in the early nineteenth century).

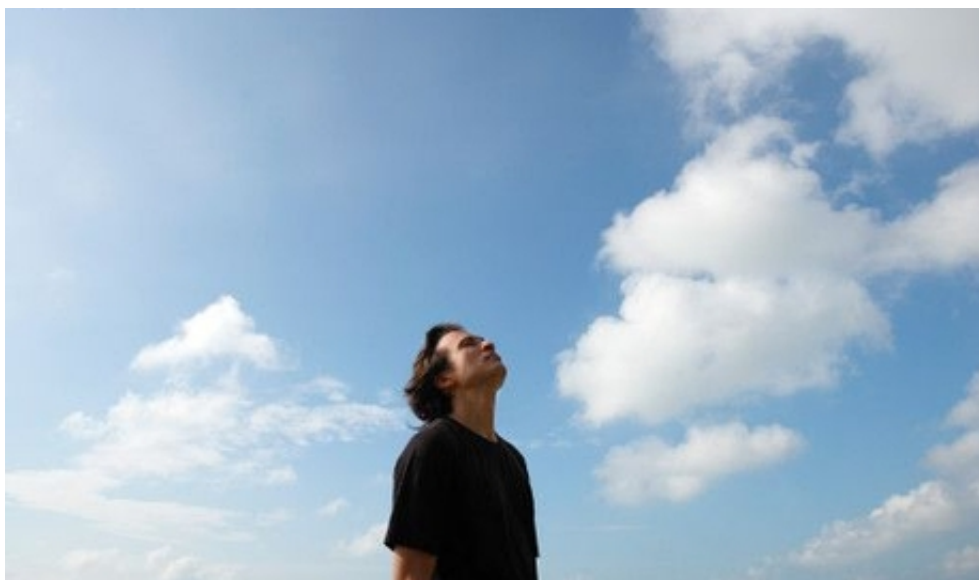
Always restless, as college students often are, and desiring to apply the things I was learning in a practical way, I took a position as Youth Minister at the deep River Church of Christ in Merrillville, Indiana, at the tender age of 18, while still a freshman.

Perhaps the best word to describe my approach to ministry at that point was serious. I was not interested in building a youth programme that was founded purely upon social events and gimmicks designed to draw people into the Church on a superficial level. The most important aspect of life was a relationship with Christ that touched the very centre of one’s being. So I worked to build a strong core of committed young people, seeking to make Jesus Lord over every aspect of life.



## Going Deeper

In this period, two themes dominated much of my thinking and effort spiritually and Church. One morning during my prayers, in all sincerity, but without a due as to what I was really saying, I told the Lord, “More than anything else, Lord, I want to be a spiritual man. I am willing to pay any price or bear any burden to become one. I don’t really know what that is or means, but that is what I want”. In many respects, much of the subsequent history of my life can be seen as an answer, or at least a developing answer, to that prayer. I wanted to know God, not just know about Him. I wanted to experience the sense of His presence, to grow in faith, hope and love. And I wanted to see His power worked in others through me, to see healing and repentance, growth and conversion in the lives of the people among whom I ministered.



My spiritual search led me in several different directions. I tried the teachings of Watchman Nee. I read C.S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jaques Ellul, and others. I read the works of charismatic leaders and sought to experience the reality of the Spirit of God that they seemed to touch. I worked on cultivating a life of prayer, with mixed results. I seemed to be unable to satisfy the longing that was within me for the experience of God, and powerless to overcome “the sin that so easily beset” me.

At the same time, I was struggling with the whole idea of what the Church of Jesus Christ was really called to be. The scriptural descriptions of the Church were certainly not true to what I was experiencing in my life. Saint Paul called the Church “[Christ’s] body, the fullness of Him Who fills all in all” (Ephesians



1:23). Where was this fullness?

Worship in our tradition was weak at best. Our services consisted of a couple of songs, a brief communion service (conceived of as a meditative memorial on Christ's death), and a sermon. The sermons were usually good, instructive, inspiring, evangelical. But our services resembled good motivational lectures more than worship. Where was God? Where was the acknowledgment of His presence? Why were we together?

I also longed to experience community in the Church. The body of Christ is an image of interdependence, of connectedness. In much of my Christian life I was experiencing isolation. The Church community was not caring for one another like it should. Our system of pastoral care was inadequate to look after the needs of the people of God.

## **Starting from Scratch**

For some time I worked on reforming and developing these things in the Church where I served. But it became apparent that the kinds of things for which I was longing could never be found in the structure inherent in my situation. The expressions of worship could only go as far as the tradition of the Christian Churches would allow. And I believed God was wanting to take me on a spiritual journey like that of Abraham, to a land of which I knew not.

So in July of 1977, my wife, Pamela, and I left our ministry and unknowingly began our pilgrimage to Orthodoxy. A few friends gathered around us and we formed a small congregation dedicated to our pilgrimage. Everything was up for grabs, save the deity of Christ and the authority of the Scriptures. We consciously decided to re-examine all our beliefs in the light of the Scriptures and the experience of God's people through the centuries. And we committed ourselves to do the best we could to put into practice what we learned.

Through the relationships we had with dear friends from our days at Lincoln Christian College, we linked ourselves to the group of Churches connected with what was then the New Covenant – Apostolic Order (later than the Evangelical Orthodox Church. Together with the brethren, we examined a number of specific areas which we felt were of primary significance to our developing movement. These areas included:



1) Worship. I was partial to a loose, spontaneous, charismatic kind of approach toward worship, and expected to find that in the Scriptures and in history. To our surprise, our spontaneity itself began to lead us to order in worship, everything taking on a familiar pattern. Our study of the writings of Justin Martyr (about 150 A.D.) showed us that the Church has always had some kind of liturgical form to its worship. Even the New Testament showed evidences of this in the use of hymns and in the description of the meetings. So we began using liturgical forms of worship.

2) Scriptural Interpretation. Our theological studies led us to understand something that had never dawned on me before, that the Scriptures needed to be interpreted in the context of Tradition. In the Church in which I had been raised, it was fashionable to say, “No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible, no name but the Divine”. Yet, on the back of every Sunday bulletin was a statement saying, “We believe...” and listing several items ranging from the nature of salvation, who Christ is, and what constitutes a valid Christian baptism. What else is this except a creed? In fact, our three-part slogan above is creedal! And our positions were derived within the context of tradition – the Campbellite tradition.

We came to realise that the Bible does not exist in a vacuum or stand on its own apart from interpretation. The question was not “tradition or no tradition?”, but, “which tradition?” Are we to accept theological positions that are derived only from our own limited experience, or are we to examine and give authoritative weight to the consensual teachings of the Church through her history? We began to ask ourselves, then, how are we to interpret the teachings of the Scripture, and on what basis are we to evaluate the traditions we see?

We found at least the foundation of an answer in the writings of Saint Vincent of Lerins, a Latin father of the fifth century. In his *Commonitorium*, he cites three criteria for determining whether a doctrine is in keeping with the truth of the gospel. They are: a) universality: has this doctrine been believed everywhere in the Christian world and in every time by all, or almost all, of the recognised teachers of the Church?; b) antiquity: can this doctrine be found, at least in seed form, in the teachings of the Apostles, and maintained by the Fathers of the Church?; and c) consensus: has this doctrine been held by an ecumenical council, or by the broad consensus of the Fathers of the Church?

Using this hermeneutical structure, we began to examine doctrines and practices of both the historic and contemporary Churches. The results were revolutionary. We discovered that the Church’s worship had always been liturgical, founded in the practices of the Jewish synagogue and temple worship. So our worship became liturgical, modelled after the same pattern used in the historic Church.

3) The Sacraments. In our re-examination of the sacraments of the Church, we discovered the Eucharist is



more than just a memorial of the cross of Christ; it is partaking in a mystery of His glorified human nature, a sharing in His body and blood, a tasting of the powers of the age to come. Rather than being an addendum to worship, it is the focal point of our worship, the moment at which we supremely commune with God and experience His presence in the deepest portion of our being of our being.

Baptism is a sacramental means by which we are joined into union with Christ and share the likeness of His death and the power of His Resurrection. Doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation were no longer obscure, but came to be central in our understanding of God and we are in relationship to Him. Our salvation was shown to be not merely a mental assent to truth, but a living, sacramental union with Him which transforms everything that we are into His image and likeness.

4) The Church. Our studies also focused on the nature of Church itself. We began to see that an independent congregational form of government was alien both to the New Testament and to the early Church. Of all things, we began to see the Church needed leadership from all four orders: bishops, priests, deacons and the laity. We were strongly influenced by the writings of Saint Ignatius of Antioch in devising the structure of our sphere of Churches.

## **Protestant Orthodox**

In 1979, it became apparent we were more than a loose confederation of Churches: we were in fact a denomination with a governing structure and a common set of beliefs. So we organised the Evangelical Orthodox Church on February 15, 1979, declaring ourselves to be, so far as we understood, “A denomination within the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”.

Our studies and pilgrimage continued over the next few years as we worked our way through the Seven Ecumenical Councils of the undivided Church, and found ourselves committed to the teachings of those councils. Realising that our theological framework placed us in the same category of thinking as the Orthodox Church, we actively began seeking a way to enter into communion with Orthodoxy. At the same time we continued to develop theologically, coming to a fuller understanding of the Virgin Mary’s role in our salvation, and of the veneration of the saints and of icons.

In the fall of 1981, in an effort to draw upon the expertise of others and to learn as much as possible about the history of the Church, I entered into a programme at the University of Chicago Divinity School in the History of Christianity. In 1983, I finished a master of arts in divinity degree, and at this writing have



completed my qualifying exams towards my PhD.

During this period of time, we began to discover some of the riches of Orthodox spirituality. To this point, we were experiencing the blessing of God in our corporate worship; we began to find Him more and more in our personal worship. For years I had struggled with consistency in my prayer life, trying to have devotions morning and evening. After failing at that, I cultivated the practice of prayer throughout the day, attempting what Saint Paul called prayer without ceasing.

Orthodox spirituality showed me a way to consistently approach God, one that would enable me to pray irrespective of my mood, my creativity, my spontaneity. Orthodoxy's emphasis on a rule of prayer, a consistent set of prayers to pray regularly, set my prayer free from enslavement to myself and my spiritual prowess. Further, the Jesus Prayer became an enrichment in my effort to cultivate the presence of God throughout the day. We eagerly read the works of Orthodox spiritual writers such as Theophan the Recluse, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, and of course, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, particularly the Philokalia.

More and more, we were becoming Orthodox in our outlook, our theology, our worship, our spirituality. The major issue facing us now was our relationship to the historic Orthodox Church. For some of us in the Evangelical Orthodox Church, it seemed enough to continue to do our best to recapture those things we saw in the ancient Church which needed to be restored in our age. In a way we were really Protestant Orthodox – Orthodox in many ways, but Protestant in our ecclesiology. Just as many Protestants believe they can look at the Scriptures, discern the proper blueprint for Church life, put that into practice, and call themselves the Church, so we thought we could recreate the practices of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and by so doing we could be such.

We began to see, however, that the Church is not built by following a blueprint. The body of Christ is a living organism, one that has had a continuous sacramental life over twenty centuries.

If it were really “the fullness of Him who fills all in all”, it could not have died, only to be repeated and restored by us after all these years.

So the questions became not what is the Church, but where is the Church? Once we came to see that the true Church is in historic continuity with the Church of the Apostles, the undivided One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of the first Christian millennium, we realised that we must become sacramentally



integrated into the Orthodox Church. It was not enough to copy her structures doctrines and practices. we must be integrated into her life, to participate in her history, and to share in her heavenly life, experiencing the life of Christ in communion with her.

## **The Church of Jesus Christ**

By the grace of God, in 1987, we presented ourselves to the Orthodox Church, not as reformers, nor as critics, but as pilgrims who had been on a long journey in a far country returning home to Mother. Metropolitan Philip Saliba of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America opened the door to us with the simple words of a loving father, “Welcome home”. My parish was received into the Church on March 21, 1987, and I was ordained to the priesthood the following day.

The pilgrimage had been a long and hard one. Some who began the journey with us have chosen other paths. There have been frustrations and disappointments, along with the joys. There have been criticisms and misunderstandings; relationships have been lost, and relationships have been formed. If I were searching merely for a Church in which there are no conflicts, no issues to discuss, no infallible human beings, I certainly have not found it – and, I suspect, I never will on this side of heaven itself. As someone once said, “If I found the perfect Church I should never join it, because if I did it would cease to be perfect”.

What I have found is the Pearl of Great Price, the Kingdom of God. I have found the true Faith, the true Church of Christ, the true sacraments, and true communion with God. That is the measure of what God has given. And like the cost of that pearl to the merchant, it has cost me my life. It is exactly what I was looking for: a relationship with God, and an experience of Him in the Church that could command my fullest energies, my deepest sacrifice. Nothing phony, nothing shallow. My purpose is to know Christ truly, and to make Him known.

To be sure, our journey has really just begun. But something immeasurable has changed. Instead of looking for the house whose builder and maker is God, we are learning to live within it, until that day when we no longer see in a glass darkly, but face to face. And in that day we will fully know what it means for the Church to be “the fullness of Him who fills all in all,” for “we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 John 3:2).”

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