

From Protestant to Orthodox

Editor's note:

This is a very thoughtful and informative post that is worth sharing with any casual – or serious – inquirer into the Orthodox Faith. This article has been edited, removing the second Appendix.

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This will be the only post on this blog, and it's for the sole purpose of sharing my testimony of how I converted from Evangelical Protestantism to the Eastern Orthodox Church. After the text of the testimony, there are two appendices: the first is a breakdown of the earliest bishops in the Christian Church and their beliefs, and the second is a brief defense addressing from Scripture certain issues Evangelicals have with Orthodoxy. Enjoy.

”If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature. The old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” II Cor. 5:17

BEGINNINGS

When I talk with people “who knew me when”—during my first twenty years of life as an Evangelical Protestant—I usually am met with a variety of reactions when I tell them that, in the middle of my time at one of the nation’s foremost charismatic universities, I decided to convert to the Eastern Orthodox Church. Some are offended, as though I were rejecting everything I’d been taught to believe as a good Protestant; others react with genuine, open curiosity, since the Orthodox Church is still relatively unknown to many Americans; still others react with dismay, convinced that I’ve traded in biblical, relationship-based Christianity for the rules and regulations of the Pharisees, the exotic “smells and bells” of Orthodoxy’s “foreignness,” and the off-base traditions of men that only serve to take a soul away from a true, unadulterated relationship with Jesus Christ. It is my hope that this essay will help to shed light on the issues that were central to my conversion, as well as provide insight both to those who are thinking about converting to Orthodoxy and to those who have a loved one on the way into (or already in) the Orthodox Church and are concerned for their spiritual well-being. The Orthodox Church has been, for me, the ultimate revelation of what it means to be “in Christ”; my upbringing in Evangelical Protestantism has not only helped me appreciate this now, but was very much preparing me for this all along [\[1\]](#).

My childhood was one of sharp contrasts between my mother’s and father’s homes—they divorced when I was an infant—for while my mother (with whom I spent most of my time growing up) was devoutly religious and marked the week with several outings to Church, my weekends spent with my father were quite devoid of any religious observance. This is not to say

that my mother was a saint and my father a horrible person; I thank God for both of the loving, morally sound parents He gave me, and I feel the debt of gratitude that any child raised by good parents (even separately) feels upon reaching adulthood. Since, however, my religious environment was shaped almost completely by my mother's influence, we'll begin there.

My mother became a Christian around the time I was born, and was extremely devout and passionate about knowing God through reading the Scriptures. From the time I could understand what was going on, my mother and I read a chapter out of the Bible each night, almost without fail. My mother made it clear to me that this Bible was "God's book," and that in it He told us the story of His Son, Jesus, and how we could be forgiven of all our sins. It's perhaps not surprising that a small child would believe all this unquestioningly. What was surprising was how naturally I took to Scripture memorization and things having to do with Church, worship, etc. From the most impressionable years onward, I was given the steady example of a person who knew that, if God had really come down to Earth to live with us, then it was the greatest thing that had ever happened in history, and everything else should be seen in the light of this magnificent event, of this glorious Person. I thank God for my mother's influence, for the love of Scripture He instilled in me through her, and the desire to proclaim truth that she always lived out in front of me.

We attended a Bible Church, as Mom assumed that a denomination who named themselves after the Word of God itself would be unashamed to preach directly from it. Sadly, though, when I was in third grade, Tulsa Bible Church underwent a "split"—I don't remember what over—but I knew that many people were leaving, and that my mother had decided that we should, too. This was seen as an unfortunate event, but the reactions of the congregation were ones of recognition: *These things just happen, unfortunately.* We spent a few months looking around until we happened upon a Baptist Church and were pleased with how Scripture was taught, explained, defended and cherished. I stayed there for six years, during which time I attended a Christian summer camp where I heard that Christ had gone to the Cross for *my* sins. It was there that I had my first personal encounter with Jesus Christ. In high school I moved to another Baptist Church that had a more active youth ministry, since I was, by this time, what we called a "sold out and radical" Christian: the kind of Christian who believed wholeheartedly in the gospel, who desired to live according to the teachings of Christ and the rest of the Bible, and who was ready to share his faith with anyone who would listen. The experience of sharing my faith boldly both with people in this country as well as with those in other countries who had never heard of Jesus Christ, while perhaps something that needed to be tempered with wisdom and tact at the time, is something I will never forget and for which I will always be grateful, for it forced me to know why I believed what I believed, and showed me that my faith, if true, was something of which I should never be ashamed to defend or proclaim.

QUESTIONS

Nevertheless, some issues came to the forefront of my mind during these zealous high school years. As a Baptist, I had been taught that Scripture alone must be our guide in telling us what we believed. This was usually contrasted with the Roman Catholic Church, whose unbiblical teachings (so I was told) were simply man-made traditions used to tear people away from the gospel message. And what was that gospel message? Simply this: God created Man, who then

sinned by disobeying God, thus separating himself from God. Man now owed a debt of sin to God, but since God was eternal, no human payment would be sufficient. Yet God loved us so much that He sent His Son Jesus to die for us, so that our debt of sin would be paid by Christ's blood, and simply by placing our trust in Christ's work on the Cross we would be restored to a perfect, immediate, and unbreakable union with God. Any of these other "traditions" of the Catholics—prayers to Mary and the Saints, Purgatory, the Pope, confession to a priest, infant baptism, the rosary, statues, communion *really* being the Body and Blood of Christ, ritualistic worship, works being necessary for salvation—that were not explicitly found in the Bible were seen as "traditions of men" that were tacked on later, when the Church slid into error. This, I was told, happened when the Catholic Church was made the religion of the Roman Empire and the leftover pagan influences crept in, thus corrupting the Church. By God's providence, however, the Protestant Reformation occurred, and the gospel of grace was "re-discovered" when people let the Scriptures—and only the Scriptures—be their guide. Our calling, as I heard it Sunday after Sunday, was "to get back to the New Testament Church" in all its purity, unified by the simple, biblical gospel message. It was with this mindset that I went to Latin America during the first three summers of high school with Teen Mania Ministries^[2]; so many people in predominantly Roman Catholic Latin America were misguided (although, I was convinced, well-meaning) individuals that simply had no idea what a true, living relationship with Christ was about. It was our job to go and give them what the Bible clearly taught.

Yet, this very idea—"what the Bible clearly taught"—proved to be a difficult issue once I went on these trips. In my Baptist churches, the issue was fairly easy—Man chose at one point in time to place his trust in Christ, and was at that moment eternally saved. Baptism then followed, but was only done out of obedience to Christ's command. Water baptism played no actual role in our salvation; it was merely a sign of what had already happened in our hearts through faith. Once Christ saved a man, it was impossible for said man to truly fall away. No deed of man was seen to be more powerful than the grace of God, and no God of love would ever leave us wondering if we were truly saved. This idea of "Once Saved, Always Saved," seemed to me to be a self-evident teaching of Scripture. Yet others in my missions group seemed to question this. They believed—and defended from Scripture—that if man could choose to accept Christ, he could choose to reject Him later. And one *other* fellow missionary—a Calvinist, the first one I ever met—believed something yet different: that man did *not*, in fact, choose to follow Christ in the first place, as that would be seen as man saving himself and having something to boast about. He, too, defended this from Scripture! This was very strange to me, and there were many long discussions—never arguments, thankfully—late into the night about these and other issues (such as speaking in tongues, the end times and the "rapture," worship style, etc.) but in the end our leaders told us that these teachings were all "non-essentials" to our salvation, and that we could safely believe in either position and still work together as brothers and sisters in Christ. This satisfied me at the time, but I still remember the lingering thought that I came back from my trips with: *Is there any way to know what the Bible really says about any of this?*

Added to this diversity of opinion was the even *greater* diversity seen in my high school's pan-denominational Bible Study, where everyone from Catholics to Baptists to Presbyterians to Methodists to Charismatics, as well as many others, came together to discuss the faith. The meetings themselves were orderly enough, with a leadership delivering sermons and a brief time

of worship choruses. But the conversations I got involved with outside the meetings got me wondering about even more issues:

- Baptism—whether it “saved” you or was just a symbol;
- whether or not infants should be baptized;
- communion—whether it was just a symbol or something more significant;
- faith and works—whether St. Paul and St. James were opposed to each other, or talking about different things, or talking about the same thing from different angles, as well as what qualified as “faith” and what qualified as “works”;
- church government—whether it was congregational or episcopal or presbyterian or something else entirely...

All of these issues seemed to have support in the Scriptures, but no one could prove conclusively that this is what the “original Church” believed, as we all seemed to be coming from the same source: the New Testament. My assurance that these were all “non-essentials” was still there, but it was wavering. Several questions loomed large in my mind by the end of my senior year: *How could I say that ALL of this was truly “non-essential”? How much do we have to assign to the realm of “non-essentials” in order to be unified? If we have no way of knowing how we “enter in” to Christ—baptism? communion? faith alone? once saved always saved, or not?—or what role the Church is supposed to play in our walk with Christ, do we really know how to live in the life Christ gave us?*

By the end of high school, however, I had come to a tacit acceptance of the idea that, truly, no one group could be expected to “have it all right,” and therefore no one denomination could be, by itself, the only Church of Christ. In spite of our differences in doctrine and practice, I reasoned, all denominations who confessed Christ as Lord, believed in Him as God, and placed their trust in His death, burial and resurrection somehow comprised “the Church,” with each different denomination bringing something unique to the table, each playing a different role in the Body of Christ. I therefore felt free to embrace certain aspects of the “charismatic movement,” a movement within Protestantism characterized by loud, passionate praise and worship services and an expectation of the Holy Spirit’s powerful movement on a regular basis. Because I now stood somewhere in the middle of “Baptist” and “Pentecostal”—I jokingly called myself a “Bapticostal”—I felt no qualms but rather a calling to go to Oral Roberts University, one of the most prominent charismatic universities in the world. It was here that my questions about coming to a consensus about the Bible and the traditions of the Catholic Church would finally find their answers, but not at all in the way I expected.

WINDS OF CHANGE, BREAD OF HEAVEN

Oral Roberts University, as I’ve said, is one of the most well-known—and, in charismatic circles, well-respected—institutions in charismatic Christianity. Their school of education was quite rigorous (I studied to be and later became a teacher), and I’m very satisfied with the preparation I received academically. Furthermore, ORU was where I met some of the nicest, warmest, most sincere, well-meaning followers of Christ I’ve ever met—one of whom was the beautiful woman who was to become my wife and fellow Orthodox Christian! Unfortunately, in spite of all the good things that can and should be said about Oral Roberts U, the particular religious worldview

that permeated most aspects of the university was inescapable, and I quickly began to shed the “-costal” part of “Bapticoctal.” By the end of my first semester, I was willing just to be a good Baptist and involve myself as much as I could in my home church (at that time I was involved in the Spanish-speaking congregation as a hymn leader and Sunday School director).

Without going into too many particulars or naming names, suffice it to say that, at ORU, there were constant repetitions of three ideas:

- God wanted to “prosper” believers financially and materially
- Believers could take physical healing as something they were entitled to by virtue of their being Christians
- The Holy Spirit was meant to be manifested in a believer’s life by means of “speaking in tongues” and could even be seen in strange cries and moans, falling on the ground and laughing, shaking, etc.

These ideas, which I had heard mentioned in charismatic church services, were expressed much more often and with much more insistence at ORU. This bizarre spiritual environment helped me (and many others, who left their charismatic upbringings in droves and went to everything from Orthodoxy to agnosticism) see the logical conclusion of emphasizing such “signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit” in churches instead of the virtues of humility, patience, service and love (which, by the way, my Baptist church taught very well).

It was at this Baptist Church—Parkview Baptist Church in Tulsa, OK—where I believe I had the encounter with Christ that opened the next door of my conversion to Holy Orthodoxy. Following the end of my first semester at ORU, I was seated in the darkened sanctuary of the Anglo congregation for a Christmas Eve communion service. Now, the Southern Baptist Church firmly believes that communion, or the Lord’s Supper, is an observance that our Lord initiated and commanded us to have: “Do this in remembrance of Me,” He said. Yet Southern Baptists also firmly believe that the bread and the wine are only bread and wine when we eat them as an assembly. It is merely a *symbol* of Christ’s Body and Blood, they insist; no “special presence of the Holy Spirit” accompanies it, as Methodists and other more “sacramental” Protestants believe, and it *certainly* did not become the *actual* Body and Blood of Christ the way the Roman Catholics believe—even though our Lord said (and we repeated!) “This [bread] is My Body; this [wine] is My Blood.”

Regardless, there I sat, with quarter-inch-squared piece of bread in one hand and small, plastic cup of grape juice in the other, and for some reason, I looked at those two elements and a thought paralyzed me: *This is my entry into the very Kingdom of Heaven. This is the passage into salvation, the actual, physical flesh of my Lord, the spilled, red blood of my Lord.* I swallowed the bread and wine with more reverence than I ever had before, and began to sob silently there in my seat. I had touched something that had taken me to a different place, and it had happened through the bread and wine. My fellow Baptists would say later that I had merely done what our Lord had asked—namely, I had just remembered Him—and He had blessed me for my obedience with the warmth of His presence. Yet, I longed for that closeness again; I was convinced that something happened *through* the bread and wine, that God had used those physical elements to change me. I took to having my own, private communion services in my

dorm room—with Welch’s grape juice and pita bread—by reading Christ’s words of institution over my “elements.” The Baptists only held communion once a quarter, but I needed to taste the Body and Blood of my Lord more often than that now, and I was determined to do so. I also was now intrigued by the existence of confessions that, I knew, partook of communion every Sunday—the DOC[3], the Lutherans, the Episcopalians, and, yes, even the Roman Catholics, among others—and though I wasn’t quite ready to break ties with my Baptist congregation, I was fascinated that so many Christian confessions saw the same need as I did to approach the Table as often as possible.

Imagine my delight, then, when, after a mandatory chapel service at ORU (we met twice a week for a praise and worship session and a sermon from a faculty member or guest speaker), I heard the words, “Noon Communion will be held in the small chapel alongside our main chapel.” I had never had any reason to pay attention to this little advertisement before, but I was listening with new, hungry ears now. I went, and participated in a very nice, although truncated, communion service from the Anglican tradition. It was led by faculty, and sometimes a charismatic Roman Catholic professor would deliver a homily. I sat there and soaked up this, my first exposure to liturgy. I absolutely *loved* the reverence with which the elements were handled, the shared solemnity of the small, intimate group who gathered every Wednesday and Friday (this became a regular practice for me, as well) and, most of all, the words uttered by those administering the wafers and cups of wine—“The Body of Christ...the Blood of Christ...”—all of this served to feed my hunger for the contact with the Lord through His Meal that I had been experiencing. The quietness and somberness of the liturgy, though I “knew” it to be something imposed by the Roman Catholic Church later on down the line in Christian history, was much more a fitting tribute to the holiness of God than the “entitlement attitude” and “rock concert choruses” with shallow, often self-serving lyrics that I heard in the main chapel services each week or the bare, stark minimalism of a quarterly Baptist memorial meal. *There’s no way*, I thought one day after comparing Noon Communion to these two traditions, *that what goes on in either one of those places can be the “New Testament Church” I hear about at Parkview Baptist.* It was then that I realized something significant: *I, as an Evangelical Protestant, had no idea what the original believers actually looked like in worship, how the Church originally operated, what the Church’s role was, or what the role of the Eucharist was in the Church.* All my questions from my dialogues in high school came back, and I knew I needed to do some research to see what the Church of the New Testament looked like from other documents of that era.

Such information comes, at times, from places and in ways which one least expects. Being a college student in a dorm room with a high-speed Internet connection can be a dangerous thing! For me, it was the true start of my way out of Protestantism and into the Church of the first centuries. In particular, it was a website put out by a Roman Catholic gentleman that got me thinking[4]. He had taken certain tract booklets put out by a Mr. Jack T. Chick, a notoriously anti-Catholic fundamentalist Protestant, and dissected them page by page using Scripture and—to my surprise—the writings of the Christian bishops of the first, second, and third centuries—the era when the Church was still under Roman persecutions. His treatment of the “Chick Tract” entitled, *Are Roman Catholics Christian?* truly was thought-provoking. Many institutions claimed by the Catholics as original Christian teaching and decried by Evangelicals as man-made, anti-biblical traditions seemed to be supported, according to this gentlemen, by Christian leaders who either were themselves trained by the writers of the New Testament, or from those

leaders the Apostles trained—we're talking one or two generations away from the Apostles. This was a serious issue to me, for, if they all said the same thing so early on, it would be hard to refute the idea that their ideas truly were from the Apostles themselves! Most disturbing (and yet, in a way, comforting, even at that time) were the quotations about the Eucharist (the word used for communion, meaning thanksgiving) from St. Ignatius of Antioch (AD 90-120) and St. Justin Martyr (AD 120-150), among others, who seemed to state (according to this website) that the Eucharist was the *true* Body and the *true* Blood of Christ—the doctrine known as the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. To say it was not *truly* such, they said, meant to deny that Christ had come in the flesh, as some heretical groups were doing at the time. They believed that Christ had come *in the flesh* to live among men, and now gave us *his true Flesh and Blood* to eat and drink in the Eucharist; those who denied the transformation of the bread and wine did so because they did not believe there was any Flesh or Blood to begin with in the life of Christ. To these early Christian Fathers, the Eucharist was of primary importance in the life of a Christian, for it was *in reality*—and not just in symbol, as I had been taught—an encounter with Christ Himself. The creator of the website pointed to a verse in 1 Corinthians that, when I looked at it on the screen, I thought, *that can't actually be in the Bible, can it?!* It was 1 Corinthians 10:16, and it read as follows: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” Now this, admittedly, is not exactly the same as saying, “The bread *really does become* the Body, and the wine *really does become* the Blood,” but the word “communion”—*κοινωνια* or *koinonia* in the Greek—means “a participation in, a fellowship with, a union with.” Here was Scripture, telling me that the bread was the means of union with the Body, and the wine with the Blood. While I wasn't about to convert to Catholicism then and there, my world was forever changed. I knew I had to investigate this issue further.

SCRIPTURE ALONE?

Further issues followed, however, through the website, such as the claim that “the Catholic Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, gave us the Bible in its current form.[\[5\]](#)” According to the website's claims, one of Protestantism's faults lay in the way in which it tried to find truth: through an individual's reading of Scripture alone, or the idea called *sola scriptura* (“Scripture alone,” in Latin). The fact that *sola scriptura* was ineffective could be seen, said the website, through the many different doctrinal positions that contradicted each other in all the denominations that claimed to be guided by the Holy Spirit in their reading of Scripture. The remedy, said this gentleman along with other Catholic apologetics (both online and on campus), was to hear the uninterrupted, ancient tradition of the Catholic Church—which, far from being inventions that showed up centuries later, reached all the way back to the spiritual children and grandchildren of the Apostles who were cited in his arguments—and allow that tradition to guide us in our understanding of Scripture. For one man can say, “Scripture says ‘X,’” and another, “Scripture says ‘Y,’” which is oftentimes the direct opposite, and both are left with merely their own takes on the issue (or, usually, their own respective *traditions*' interpretations of Scripture, as no one interprets Scripture apart from a traditional method), throwing proof text verses back and forth at each other and going nowhere. Rather, the Christian should realize that the New Testament as we know it did not exist as one, whole volume until well into the fourth century; until that time, there was no one, authoritative list of books one could point to as “the Bible.” Each group had its own original letters sent to them by an Apostle (or copies thereof forwarded

to other churches, if possible), and the rest was transmitted orally to the churches.

This concept—that the Apostles trained their converts in person, orally, and thoroughly—seemed obvious to me, yet I had never thought about the ramifications of in-depth discipleship apart from the only materials I had at my disposal: the writings of the Apostles and the New Testament gospels. It did, however, shed new light on yet another Scripture that, though I'm sure I'd read it before, was most definitely not one an Evangelical is known to underline: 2 Thessalonians 2:15. This verse is a command by Paul for believers to “stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word *or* our epistle” (emph. mine). In other words, there were things that were taught to the churches by the Apostles *that were never written down in the Bible*, and this very fact is attested to *in the Bible itself!* This came as a total shock to me, for, as an Evangelical Protestant, I most certainly believed that the Bible contained everything that we needed to run the Church, to find salvation, and to live the Christian life. Yet I couldn't deny these claims I was hearing from devout Roman Catholics I corresponded with via email and spoke with on campus, as I myself had seen the confusion and disunity within the Protestant world among those who claimed to use Scripture alone as their guide.

With these two gauntlets thrown down at my feet—that the first Christians to hear and proclaim the Gospel believed in a sacramental view of the Eucharist and that they did so authoritatively without a concrete Bible in hand—flew in the face of my Evangelical preconceived ideas that the New Testament documents “founded” the Church, “clearly taught” symbolic views of communion, and were absolutely (and solely) necessary for knowing how to live the Christian life. However, not one to be content with merely taking “some guy's website's” word for it, I decided to devote my spare time to the reading of the “source documents”—those documents written by the men themselves—of the trainees of the Apostles, as well as those of the trainees' trainees, and so on, through the years wherein the Church suffered persecution for and was under the constant threat of martyrdom for her beliefs. If I was to ascertain the truth as to what Christians believed and were willing to die for in those early years, I thought, I'd have a much better grasp of the issues these websites and colleagues were making claims about. Over the next nine months or so, I did just that, and more, even to the detriment of my English Ed and Spanish studies (and sleep!) for a while. I became known as “That guy who's always reading those Greek guys I can't pronounce” around campus, but I didn't care. I was determined to see if the claims the Catholics were making were true, or even partially true, concerning the beliefs of Christianity as received by the original hearers. As it turns out, I didn't have far to go before I would leave Evangelicalism as a whole for good.

THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

I found the first group of documents I'd need, conveniently, in one little volume. The title of this quick, easy read is usually just *The Apostolic Fathers* and is available through many bookstores (or online [here](#)). The book gets its name—“Apostolic”—because the men who wrote the epistles that comprise the book were men who were trained personally by one (or more) of the original apostles. Here I read to my heart's content the beliefs of the immediately post-apostolic Church in their own words and, while certain things like free will vs. predestination were settled according to “my liking”—the Church declared with one voice that it was very much up to man to respond to the calling and grace of God—I have to say, what I read concerning other issues

troubled me quite a bit. There were several things that any good Baptist would take issue with within these men's writings:

- Baptism was seen as the moment when a believer is fully and truly born again
- Infants were admitted to baptism
- Worship was seen as liturgical and directly connected to Jewish ritual worship; spontaneous worship was nowhere to be seen
- Obedience to one's bishop and/or priest was seen as a direct measure of whether one was an obedient Christian
- Salvation was seen as something that was a process and which the believer could, after having started it, forfeit through later unbelief
- Fasting was outlined specifically before the end of the first century, and the way it was to be done was expected churchwide, not individually
- The departed saints, as well as the angels, were seen as and sought as intercessors in prayer for those still in the flesh
- The Church was seen as a single, visible body of believers that was guided by the Holy Spirit and protected from error; one of its chief characteristics was that its bishops (and, by extension, priests) could trace their ordination through the laying on of hands back to one of the apostles themselves
- Salvation was never discussed in terms of Christ paying a debt to God the Father, but rather in terms of His defeating death by His Incarnation, transfiguration, death, *and* resurrection
- The Eucharist was, time and again, referred to as the *true* Body and Blood of Jesus Christ Himself^[6]

My journey into the first century and a half of Christianity had left me, then, not with comforting answers of Evangelicalism's fidelity to the New Testament Church, but with many more issues to confront. The second century, with the insistence of Irenaeus and others on an intermediate state of the dead between the end of this life and the final Judgement, along with affirmation of the beliefs of the Fathers of the first century, offered little promise to aligning itself with my current beliefs. Either the Church had slipped *dangerously* "off the rails" *immediately* after the death of the last apostle, or my reading of Scripture—and that of Evangelicals everywhere—was *dangerously* off-base! Still, like any good Evangelical, my first retort to all this was...

BUT...THAT'S NOT IN THE BIBLE!

I quickly realized, however, that what I was really saying was, "That's not the way I *read* the Bible." I had already established to my own satisfaction that prefacing my beliefs with the phrase, "The Bible says," while being a recognition of Scripture's trustworthiness, was rather futile, as I could "make the Bible say" whatever I wanted it to say 2,000 years later, depending on my denomination's tradition. This was when what should have been obvious all along really hit home: *All denominations, even if they say they're just reading Scripture, are filtering it through a tradition of some sort.* Many Protestants will admit this readily, merely saying that their particular tradition is the most faithful to the authors' original intent. However, how will one prove this? By appealing to the Scripture? Other groups claiming as much do the same. The issue then becomes this: *who do we choose to tell us how to read Scripture?* If, therefore, we go

to the ones who first *received* the Scriptures (and had the added bonus of being trained by the very authors of the New Testament), we perhaps will receive some insight into those issues that divide us and resolve the difficulty. Indeed, on many issues that divide Protestants today, the early Church was united. Giving those bishops a voice in telling us how to interpret Scripture seemed only fair, since they were infinitely closer in time, language and culture to the actual writers of the documents.

Now, this is not to say that I just gave up reading Scripture and blindly “took these ancient guys’ words for it.” After reading the Apostolic Fathers, I went back and re-read the Scriptures I had always used to combat Roman Catholics (and others) concerning these issues, as well as ones that the Fathers themselves had made reference to. Almost without exception, the verses the Apostolic Fathers referenced were ones I had either “skipped over” unconsciously or had never been instructed on in detail by Protestant pastors or teachers. The joke among us former-Protestants-turned-Orthodox is that Orthodoxy *is* biblical; it’s just found in everything we didn’t underline in our Bibles as Protestants! I slowly began to see that the very doctrines I had fought so hard against as being “inventions of men” had, in reality, their roots in Scripture itself, and were elaborated on in the beginning by those who sat at the feet of the writers of Scripture themselves.^[7] All of these issues, however, began to pale in the face of one new question that, though both my newfound reading of Scripture and the insight from the Fathers, threatened to trump all other issues I might have...

“WHAT IS THE CHURCH?”

The Church, St. Paul says, is the “pillar and ground of the truth,” and the “household of God.” Christ said that the Holy Spirit would “guide [the Church] into all truth” and that “the gates of hell will not prevail” against Her. He also gave the apostles—the leaders of the Church—the power to forgive or retain the sins of other men: “If you forgive the sins of men, they are forgiven...whatsoever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.” There was an authority given to this Church that was founded on the apostles by Christ and that was directly related to heavenly grace being given to men. It was this Church, this community of faith, that wrote the Scriptures of the New Testament and eventually compiled them under this same claim of Holy Spirit inspiration. I began to realize that the reason I could trust the Holy Bible was because it had been compiled by a specific group, a certain assembly of clergy and laity that had as their promise from Christ Himself that they would be led into all truth and kept from error. If I trusted this Church to hear clearly enough from God to compile the Scriptures correctly, then I needed, at the very least, to give them a serious benefit of a doubt concerning the interpretation of said Scriptures. This was not, obviously, the first issue I investigated upon looking into the Fathers, but it was, quite possibly, the most significant question to face. The Church was seen, not as an “invisible” entity whose members were only known to God and who were all members of different and separate denominations who differed between themselves on major matters of doctrine. Rather, the Church was one, visible group of people one could definitively point out and who were unified in all matters of doctrine and practice, who took the Apostle Paul at his word when he proclaimed that there was “one Lord, one Faith, one baptism,” not several faiths or several dramatic variations on one faith who could be “separate but still one.” What this meant for me was that I couldn’t just be content to be a part of a denomination (or several ones at once) that held to doctrines that not only contradicted each other but (more importantly) the beliefs of

the initial and singular Christian Church and say that I was still, somehow, in that Church that Christ founded. If these were the beliefs of the one, authoritative, original Church, I needed to find out if this Church was still around. To summarize about a nine-month period of time in a half of a paragraph, I looked in the Episcopalian Church (as well as a couple of “offshoot,” non-mainstream Episcopal denominations), but many issues such as homosexuality and female clergy led me to search in Roman Catholicism for a time. I loved the (high) mass, as it was an extended version of the reverence I had seen in the ORU Noon Communion services. I had some issues, however, with the idea that one bishop—the Pope of Rome—held the authority of supreme bishop over all other bishops, as well as with the idea that Christians whose sins were forgiven in confession still had to go to Purgatory because they didn’t have enough “merit” to satisfy the justice of God the Father and enter heaven yet[8]. It was there, however, where I first heard about Orthodoxy. I knew almost nothing about the Orthodox Church at the time, but I looked a local parish up on the Internet and, on the Feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos in the Temple[9] of 1999 (Fall of my sophomore year), I attended my first Orthodox service in Tulsa, OK at a mostly-Lebanese parish.

I absolutely couldn’t stand it.

The worship was so foreign and repetitive, the chant so Middle Eastern, the saints so unknown—in spite of the fact that there *were* certain resemblances to Hebrew worship, I was wanting to go back to the familiar, more western services I found so beautiful. Nevertheless, I stayed and told the parish priest afterwards about some of the things I’d been wrestling with. To my surprise, he was quite knowledgeable about the very documents I had been reading. After a few more visits to the parish and a few more talks with the priest (as well as a lot of prayer), I began to get a feeling that, in this Church of supposedly “strange” worship and “foreign” practice there just might be all the things I had read about in the Apostolic Fathers and beyond. By the end of that school year, it was clear to me: here is a Church where the doctrines and spiritual disciplines of true prayer and fasting of the early Church are all accepted and practiced, a Church which could trace its origins directly back to the apostles themselves, and who saw themselves as the “one, holy catholic and apostolic Church” that they confessed in their creed every Sunday, a Church who worshipped the King of Glory as a great God who is greatly to be praised, in a manner worthy of all of His might and holiness--the one Church which was founded by Christ. After approximately another year and a half of further questions, more regular attendance (I had to eventually give up my post at my Baptist Church, obviously), and much more prayer and fasting according to the ancient and glorious rule of these Middle Eastern Christians, I was received into the Holy Orthodox Church by chrismation[10] on Orthodox Holy Saturday[11], 2001.

Editor’s note: this practice is not the absolute manner in the Orthodox Church for receiving converts. For an excellent and patristic explanation of the opinion of Baptism, see the monumental work of Saint Cyprian of Carthage titled On the Unity of the Church.

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iv.v.i.html>

I was blessed, then, to have my first taste of the true Body and Blood of my Lord on Pascha (or Easter) night. It has been a long journey, but I feel as if I have truly arrived at the “ground zero” of Christianity, to the simple faith of our Incarnate Lord and His twelve Apostles. My discovery has led to the most intimate of ways of being “in Christ” that I’ve ever known: baptized into His

very death and brought out of the water as from a womb (or tomb) into His life, anointed with oil and given His Holy Spirit, nourished in body and spirit by feeding on and merging with *His very* Body and Blood, and taught by the direct spiritual descendants of the New Testament writers—all this, in order to acquire the Holy Spirit and to be changed into Christ’s image and likeness—a life-long process called *theosis* [12]. It’s my hope that Evangelicals everywhere will discover how the “New Testament Church” truly was and come home to the mother of all Churches: holy Orthodoxy.

She’s waiting, and so is her Lord.

APPENDIX: THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS ON SEVERAL ORTHODOX DOCTRINES

The Didache: Meaning “the teaching of the Twelve,” it was written during the heart of the New Testament era. Clear instructions for baptism were given, and it was to be done by triple immersion, not single as had been done to me. Fasting rules were also given, which was something I had not had exposure to as a church-wide expectation but only as an individual prompting. Most interesting were the instructions for the Eucharist; the service had prayers prescribed for it, and the service was seen as a sacrifice akin to the Old Testament tabernacle service, with the bread being the “Lamb,” that was slain—again another reference paralleling Christ to the bread—and the means by which we were all united to each other.

I and II Clement: Here things got a bit hairier. One of the first bishops of Rome—not the first, but still trained by an apostle—made clear distinctions between clergy and laity in terms of spiritual authority—submission to the bishop in all things being one of the points alluded to—and an interesting phrase: “Preserve your baptismal garment” until the last day. Not only did Clement seem to attach some significance to baptism that Baptists, themselves *named after* the institution, did not, he also seemed to say that one needed to work to *preserve* one’s salvation instead of believing in “once saved, always saved.”

Ignatius of Antioch and The Martyrdom of Ignatius: If I had been concerned about issues of the authority of (and our submission to) a bishop or priest posed by Clement, I was about to get those concerns pushed to new levels with Ignatius. Placed in Antioch by either Peter or Paul (probably both had something to do with it), he was ordained a bishop in the heart of the New Testament era by two very reliable sources. Yet here he was, saying things like, “Where the bishop is, there is the catholic Church” and “It is clear, therefore, that we should look upon the bishop even as we would upon the Lord Himself.” Most interestingly, though, was the realization that I could not refute the Roman Catholics’ claims of Ignatius’ support for the Real Presence in the Eucharist; the quotes they took from him were most definitely in context. Ignatius was a bishop at the beginning of the second century (right after the apostle John died in exile on Patmos) and he was martyred during the first half of that century. After his martyrdom, the faithful who were under his care were praying together, no doubt to console themselves, when Ignatius himself appeared in their midst, and he appeared to be dripping with sweat, as if he had undergone a great trial (which, obviously, he had just done). More than that, he was praying for them. This idea—that departed Christians could pray for us—was one of the main objections we Evangelicals had against Rome, yet here it was, in the first/second century AD, attested to by a

beloved presbyter of the Church. So now, not only did I have a sacramentally-minded Father on my hands, but one who, in unison with his Christian brother in Rome, insisted on submission to a hierarchical system of “bishops, priests and deacons” and who revealed to his flock--after his own departing from this life, no less!--that the Christians in the next life pray for those in this one. More questions loomed...

Polycarp of Smyrna: Polycarp of Smyrna was also a bishop in the late first and early second century, the direct appointee of John the Apostle. He, too, was martyred by being burned at the stake, and when asked to renounce Christ, said that he had been a Christian for all his 86 years--not just after he had grown to the age where he could decide for himself to become a Christian--and since Christ had never denied him, he would not deny Him. Along with being an amazing story of commitment of Christ even to the point of death, this also attested to the practice of infant baptism within the infant Church.

Justin Martyr: Justin was a learned Greek philosopher who converted to Christianity and wrote several defenses of the faith in response to pagan misunderstandings. Within his writings we once again find an insistence—spelled out correctly in the quotes by the Roman Catholics—that the Church insisted on the change of the bread and the wine into the *true* Body and Blood of our Lord, “who was crucified for us.” More than that, however, Justin elaborated on the set prayers found in the *Didache*. He had a set order of worship that mirrored first the Jewish synagogue service with the reading of the Old Testament, plus whichever New Testament epistles a congregation happened to have (if they had any at all), then the Jewish Temple sacrifice (which was no longer done by that time, as the Temple had been destroyed) through the offering of the sacrifice of the Eucharist, with the consecration of the elements of bread and wine being prayed over by the “president” of the congregation and afterwards being consumed as the Body and Blood of Christ, and no longer as mere bread and wine. I was to read later a third-century bishop, Hippolytus, repeat this same exact order of service, only to follow it with the claim that “all Christians, in all places, worship in this manner.”

The Shepherd of Hermas: This was an epistle written in the first, perhaps early second century. Notable here is the continued emphasis of salvation at the moment of baptism, and the intercession for the living by heavenly beings (in this case, an angel).

The Fragments of Papias: “Fragments” because much of the original manuscripts have been lost. Nevertheless, he sat at the feet of one “who sat at the feet of John, who sat at the feet of Christ” and not only records sayings of the Lord that were not recorded in the gospel, but holds the oral passing down of information to be more reliable than “even the written word.”

[1] It should be stated at the outset that this essay is not meant to be a justification of every single doctrine of the Orthodox Church, nor is it meant to reflect every struggle or issue I encountered on my way to the Church. Rather, it will merely summarize the main problems I found within Protestantism, and the main points that convinced me of the Orthodox Church’s faithfulness to original Christianity.

[2] Teen Mania Ministries is a non-denominational ministry, taking in Christians from very different confessions, though the ministry itself is defined as “charismatic.”

[3] The DOC, or “Disciples of Christ” (also known simply as “The Christian Church”)

[4] This website was entitled “Don’t Be Fooled By Jack T. Chick Tracts” and, at the time of the first draft of this essay, could and perhaps still may be found at <http://mafg.home.isp-direct.com/jtchick/jtc02r.html>.

[5] <http://mafg.home.isp-direct.com/jtchick/rcathf00.htm>

[6] See Appendix A for a more detailed summation of each of the Apostolic Fathers’ treatments of these issues.

[7] See Appendix B for a more detailed (though not exhaustive) treatment of the Scriptures concerning these issues.

[8] Neither of these issues, as far as I’ve read, are mentioned anywhere in Scripture or the Apostolic Fathers, though the Fathers *do* stress that there is a state of the dead souls in between this life and the judgement wherein they feel a taste of either the coming glory or the coming judgement of when they are reunited with their bodies at the Resurrection.

[9] According to the extra-biblical (and, therefore, originally unwritten) tradition of the Church, Mary (who is called “Theotokos,” or “God-bearer” in Greek) was a miracle pregnancy for her parents, Joachim and Anna, and, in gratitude to God for taking away their shame of childlessness, they dedicated her to help serve in the Jewish Temple. Here she stayed until her betrothal to Joseph and the Annunciation.

[10] Chrismation is the sacrament of anointing with oil wherein the believer is sealed with the Holy Spirit.

[11] Holy Saturday, as well as all of Lent and Easter (which the Orthodox call “Pascha”) is often on different dates from the Lent and Easter of the western churches.

[12] This process of living one's entire life "in Christ" is called *theosis*, or deification, is referenced in many of the Early Fathers. By coming in contact with the Holy Spirit through the sacraments, prayer, and fasting, we are truly made (and not merely declared) righteous by God in His Son through His Holy Spirit, we are illumined with the grace of God to do and be what Christ called us to be as humans, and we are brought into union with God.