

From First Baptist to the First Century Church

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In June of 1986, I attended the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention as a messenger from my home church. The temperature in Atlanta was hot, but not nearly as hot as the temperature inside the World Congress Center as Baptist moderates tried in vain to prevent a fundamentalist takeover of the Convention. As I sat in the convention center, I became convinced of one thing: the Southern Baptist Convention was in dire need of a reformation. I longed for the advent of a new Martin Luther, who would nail his ninety-five theses to the front door of the First Baptist Church of Dallas and mark the return of Baptists to their spiritual roots in the Radical Reformation.

The following August I moved to Wake Forest, North Carolina and began my studies as a Raymond Brian Brown Memorial Scholar at the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Within two years of my first and only trip to the Southern Baptist Convention, however, I would be officially received into the historic, Orthodox Christian Church and would be preparing to transfer to St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York. What happened? How could a fire-breathing, radical free-church, don't tread on me, Southern Baptist end up in a liturgical and hierarchical church, especially one so foreign to my Southern/American ethos?

I recount the story of my pilgrimage, not because my story is particularly important, but because of the importance of the issues associated with that move. These are not matters of obscure, theological debate. In the final analysis they have to do with what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. *Not everyone that saith unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven; but he that doeth the will of My Father Who is in Heaven* (Matt. 7:21).

My pilgrimage was influenced by many people, both evangelical and Orthodox, whose spiritual honesty and integrity were a beacon of light. To all of those who, knowingly or unknowingly, helped me on my journey, I owe a debt of gratitude. I can only hope that this article might help someone else find that Pearl of Great Price.

One final word of introduction to the reader: Whatever is true, whatever is good, whatever is beautiful in evangelical Protestantism has its source in the historic Orthodox Faith. One thousand years before the birth of Martin Luther; fourteen hundred years before the creation of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Fathers of the Orthodox Church had *already* wrestled with and decided the most important doctrinal issues facing the Christian Faith. Whenever an evangelical Protestant professes faith in the Trinity and in the Divine Manhood of Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of God, he is unknowingly

confessing the *Orthodox* Faith! This is an invitation for evangelical Protestants to return to their historic roots.

The Preacher Boy

While attending a college speech tournament at Tennessee Temple University in Chattanooga, Tennessee, I was approached by an earnest young student and asked if I had been saved. Although reared in a Southern Baptist church from infancy, I was nonetheless put off by both the abruptness of the question and the fact that it was coming from someone I had never met before. Though evangelical to the core, I was uncomfortable with this kind of in your face evangelism. I answered that I had been baptized, and that seemed to satisfy him. It was a good thing too, because if he had pressed me for an exact date and detailed account of my conversion experience, I would not have been able to satisfy him.

I can never remember a time when I did not believe in Christ or want to live as a Christian. For me, then, the obligatory walk down the aisle did not mark a conversion from the darkness of unbelief to the light of Christ, but was more of a rite of passage—a public affirmation of what I had always believed, a public commitment to follow Christ.

A part of me always resented the fact that such a public affirmation for one reared in the church was treated as such a momentous event, as if saying a prayer in my pastor's study was all that stood between me and the gaping jaws of hell. I was always uncomfortable with what I termed the cult of instant conversion. It is a blatant betrayal of the witness of Scripture to suggest that salvation could be reduced to a once-and-for-all decision to make Jesus one's personal Lord and Savior. Yet, the need for a single, momentous, life-changing decision was drummed into my head from Vacation Bible School to annual revival meetings to state-wide youth evangelism conferences.

One must also remember that according to Baptist theology, baptism is not a sacrament; it is not death and resurrection with Christ; it is not one's entrance into Life in Christ. On the contrary, baptism is nothing more than a ritualized, public profession of faith. Nothing is effected in baptism. The only thing that matters is one's own, personal faith. It should not be surprising then that I do not remember my baptism as a life-changing event. After all, I held the same faith after my baptism as I had held before it.

In high school, I began to take an active role in church youth activities, including assuming the role of pastor during Youth Week. Although I had never made a public statement about going into the ministry, by this time I was a marked man. Everyone just assumed I was headed for great things and so did I.

The staff at my church recommended me as a supply preacher to the smaller, local churches. During the latter part of high school and throughout my years in college, I was asked to preach at small, country churches that were friendly and encouraging to a young preacher boy—a term I detested. I was an especially big hit with the little old ladies. I will

always be grateful to the fine people of those churches who gave me encouragement and much valuable experience.

Interestingly enough, however, my disillusionment with evangelical Protestantism was actually heightened by my stints as a supply preacher. Initially I was disturbed by the pressure to perform. I was conscious of the fact that as the preacher, the success of the service was on my shoulders. In fact, in many rural churches, the Sunday service is referred to as the preaching service.

I was also conscious of the grave responsibility entailed in preaching the Word of God. Baptists say they do not believe in sacraments, but they understand the sacramentality of the Word. And yet, I never knew what to preach. I had no lectionary or church calendar to guide me. The congregation was completely at the mercy of my whims and tastes. How often I prayed for God to lay a message on my heart, and how often I ended up throwing something together at the last minute! Furthermore, I had no doctrinal plumb line against which to measure the content of my sermons. All I had was a pretty good notion of what would and would not fly in a Baptist church and the good sense not to say anything I knew would be controversial. I became acutely aware that the congregation was not simply hearing the Word of God, it was hearing the Word of God *according to me!*

While a seminarian I preached a sermon one Sunday in a church in rural North Carolina. As I sat on the platform, facing the congregation, waiting to go on, I remember asking myself if I wanted to spend the rest of my life preaching in Baptist churches. The answer was an immediate and definite, No! It was not that I no longer felt called to the ministry or that I had grown tired of preaching; it was the whole context of Protestant church services that I could no longer stand.

A. W. Tozer once called worship the missing jewel of evangelicalism. I longed to worship a God who was bigger than I was—a God who could not be contained by the chatty informality of an evangelical service or by Bill Gaither choruses. I longed to worship Him Who sits upon the throne of the cherubim. I did not want to be the star of the show!

My last years in high school also brought me into contact with a group of charismatic-leaning high school and college students who frequented a Christian coffee house. Here I was exposed to a kind of spontaneous informality in worship that made us Baptists look liturgical. Although somewhat wary of their Pentecostal leanings, I joined in gladly, thrilled to find young people like myself who wanted to truly follow Christ. The whole setting, however, was hap-hazard. Every guest speaker/singer had his own agenda. I do not think any of them would have known historic Christian doctrine if it had slapped them in the face; they were primarily interested in just praising the Lord.

With very few exceptions the spirituality of the coffee houses and the music they inspired was trite, superficial, and emotionally manipulative. To be sure, everyone was sincere, and there was enough youthful energy involved to create a lot of smoke, but very little real heat was generated. After all, Jesus never said, Sincerity will set you free. By the

time I graduated from college the thrill was gone, and I had all but quit buying contemporary Christian music, the staple of Christian coffee house worship.

It is only natural, I suppose, that young people should desire to express their faith in the popular idiom of their culture. Nor is it surprising that such an expression should take place on such a superficial level. It is disturbing, however, when people are never prompted to move beyond such shallow, sentimental, and emotionally manipulative expressions of faith. There has been a trend in many evangelical churches over the last few years to move toward more praise choruses and away from traditional Protestant hymnography. Thus, the slim doctrinal content of Protestant hymnography is being phased out altogether in favor of catchy choruses. Yet, where is it written that the praise of God must be bereft of solid doctrine or be aimed at manipulating emotions rather than uplifting the heart?

By the time I graduated from high school the battle for the soul of the Southern Baptist Convention had already begun. Little did I know at the time that the battle was really a holy war and that the fundamentalists had already erected their siege-works and were preparing for nothing less than total victory. The fundamentalists had been upset since the 1960s over the rampant liberalism in Southern Baptist colleges and seminaries.

On a strictly theological basis, I probably had more in common with the fundamentalists than with many of their opponents. I've never had any patience with liberal theology. Nevertheless, my inbred sense of Baptist independence felt threatened by what I saw as an attempt to make everyone think and act in the same way. Furthermore, some of the leaders of the fundamentalist group seemed to have adopted an "ends justifies the means" mentality with regard to political tactics.

Everything that I as a Southern Baptist stood for—the sovereignty of the *individual* believer, the *absolute* autonomy of each local congregation, and the separation of church and state—seemed threatened. Several prominent conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention opposed the fundamentalist takeover for these very reasons.

In a way, this struggle reflected a tension that has existed in Protestantism since the beginning of the Reformation. On the one hand, there is the commitment to what is perceived to be historic, biblical Christianity, and on the other hand there is an individualistic theological method. The Southern Baptist Holy War was simply the latest chapter in the age-old struggle between doctrinal conservatism and free church polity.

Not being one to sit quietly on the sidelines, I used the Youth Speakers Tournament, sponsored by the Tennessee Baptist Convention, as a platform to denounce the fundamentalist take-over attempt and urge Baptists to defend their birthright of religious liberty. I won the state-wide tournament and later delivered the speech before a large crowd at the Ridgecrest Baptist Assembly in Black Mountain, North Carolina.

As I look back on "My Heritage as a Southern Baptist"¹ I can only smile at my youthful exuberance and my unquestioning acceptance of the Baptist version of the

priesthood of the believer and soul competency. Being a Southern Baptist was all I had ever known. It would be several years before I would critically examine my Baptist heritage-before I would weigh it in the balance and find it wanting. In the summer of 1982, questioning was simply not on the agenda.

In my rhetorical tribute to all things truly Baptist I insisted,

The lifeblood of denominational existence is our absolute commitment to the freedom of the believer ... Our response to the Bible should be simply to approach it and obey it as we feel led; it is an individual matter ...

Obviously, I did not quote 2 Peter 1:20: *no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation*. In my defense, however, I must say that at that time I knew very little about how the Scriptures were written or how the canon came into existence. All I knew was what I heard from the pulpit or read in Protestant books.

I did not realize at the time that the Bible I held had become in fact an idol, an idol that I myself controlled. An infallible book is only useful if you have an infallible interpreter, which is where the Baptist doctrine of soul-competency came in. As an individual, I was that interpreter, the sole arbiter of what the Bible did and did not mean. The Reformation did not do away with the medieval Papacy and all of its pretensions, it merely democratized it and made everyone Pope! So, there I was, an eighteen-year-old, pontificating on the correct interpretation of Scripture.

I was not content, however, with merely warning of the dangers of a fundamentalist take-over. I also made a passing shot at the historical Church when I decried the tyranny of dogmatic formulae: Our heritage upholds the concept that each believer is free to explore for himself the mysteries contained in God's Word, and not to be bound by *meaningless creeds* and denominational directives.

I did not know anything about church history, about why the creeds were drafted, or even about what they affirmed. All I knew was that the very idea of a creed was un-Baptist, and therefore wrong. Of course, the slogan "No creed but Christ" is a creed, but that did not occur to me at the time; I was too busy being a *real* Baptist.

Today, I realize that a creed is only meaningless when the faith of the one who confesses it becomes so privatized and disjointed from the Body of Christ that the words can be recited with no inner conviction. In such a case it is not the creed that is meaningless, but the faith of the one reciting it. Yet, the ultimate question is not the sincerity of my belief or even the intensity with which I hold it, but rather whether or not *my* faith is the faith of Christ and His Church.

Fides Quaerens Intellectum

In August of 1982 I enrolled at Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tennessee, one of three colleges then owned by the Tennessee Baptist Convention. I came out of

college with the same commitment to Christ with which I had entered and an even intensified zeal for upholding my Baptist heritage. My thought processes were much more sober, however. I took fewer things at face value and had acquired the analytical skills that I would eventually use in examining those Protestant principles I held so dear. I was still a staunch Southern Baptist, but I had enough education to make me dangerous.

Two professors were particularly influential in my intellectual development at Carson-Newman. Don Olive and Paul Brewer were the philosophy department, and they acquired a devoted following among the many religion majors-turned-philosophy majors. Dr. Olive, a logician with a keen interest in linguistic analysis, brought his analytical faculties to bare on every topic under consideration. With his razor-sharp mind he was able to dissect every argument, and he taught us to do the same. Olive wanted to teach us *how* to think rather than *what* to think. I was trained to take nothing at face value. My motto became *fides quaerens intellectum*.²

The one thing I *did* take for granted, however, was my acceptance of those basic Protestant principles that I had defended so vehemently in high school. I had no trouble slicing the fundamentalists to shreds, but it did not occur to me to turn my analytical skills on my own faith. I simply *assumed* the absolute autonomy of the individual and his inalienable right to interpret the Bible for himself. It was not until I entered seminary that I turned my critical faculties on my *own* religious presuppositions and discovered that I had built my faith on a foundation of sand. Such critical, self-examination, however, would not have been possible had it not been for the influence of professors such as Don Olive.

I only had a couple of classes with Paul Brewer, but one of them, Introduction to Systematic Theology, was the single most enjoyable and edifying class of my college career. Brewer forced the class to take the historical development of Christianity seriously. He even split us up into small groups and assigned each an Ecumenical Council to study.

What really thrilled me, however, was his description of the place of Baptists in Christian history. In an effort to get it through the thick skulls of his more right-wing students that Baptists have their roots in the *Radical* Reformation, Dr. Brewer drew a diagram on the board illustrating the spectrum of Christian belief. On the far right was the Roman Catholic Church; in the middle were the mainline Protestant denominations; and on left-wing were the Baptists. I was right all along; the *fundies* were not *really* Baptists at all! Baptists stood for freedom of conscience, soul-competency, and in general all things good and wholesome. I was excited; I was motivated; I was a radical Christian.

A couple of years later, in the midst of the Southern Baptist holy war, I considered my position on the ecclesiastical spectrum and reflected upon Dr. Brewer's diagram. This time I saw myself not as a radical Christian, but as one out on a limb. Suddenly it occurred to me to ask, "How did I get out here?" I no longer wanted Christianity according to me. I was tired of an individualistic Christianity that needed to be reinvented every

generation. I wanted *the faith which was once delivered unto the saints* (Jude 1:3). I wanted the faith of the apostles, prophets, martyrs, confessors, ascetics, and of every righteous spirit made perfect in faith. In short, I wanted the faith of the Church that Christ founded, *the pillar and ground of the truth* (1 Tim. 3:15).

I will always be grateful to those teachers who were honest enough to admit the basic presuppositions of their faith. At the time I shared those presuppositions, and I left college with the determination to defend traditional Baptist principles against all attackers.

I was conscious, however, of one fact that would eventually play a major role in my conversion to Orthodoxy: I was still theologically more conservative than many of my professors.³ Although I shared their basic presuppositions, I did not always draw the same conclusions. At the time this did not pose a problem, but later I became aware of the dichotomy between my adherence to conservative doctrine and my individualist theological method. I believed in the Trinity and Incarnation and held a high (although certainly not fundamentalist) view of Scripture, but I did not know why; there was no ground for my faith other than my individual convictions. Only when I discovered the Holy Tradition of the Church did my faith find fertile soil in which to take root. Now I confess not merely my own, private convictions, but the Faith of the Orthodox; the "Faith which established the universe."⁴

The One-Legged Evangelist Learns to Read

In August of 1986, still breathing fire from the Southern Baptist Convention held that June, I enrolled in the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Of the six Southern Baptist seminaries, Southeastern had the reputation for being most firmly committed to those traditional Baptist principles I had come to hold so dear. I knew that the fundamentalists had targeted the school, but I did not realize how close they actually were to taking it over.

Moving to Wake Forest was like moving home because both sides of my family are from North Carolina, and I have relatives in the area. Everything was perfect except for one thing: I hated the seminary! I was bored beyond description. I was convinced, however, that God had led me to Southeastern and that my misery would ultimately not be in vain. Patiently I endured the tedium, telling myself that God had a purpose in all of this. Meanwhile I became acquainted with Orthodoxy through the school's amazingly well-supplied library. I became particularly interested in liturgics, wanting to expand my horizons in a subject about which Baptists know very little.

Things crept along at a snail's pace until one day in late fall when I felt a lump in the back of my right leg. X-rays revealed it to be about the size of my fist, and I was sent to an orthopedic surgeon in Raleigh for an examination. At a family gathering I jokingly told my relatives that if things turned out for the worse, I would become the world's first one-legged evangelist.

I had the tumor removed in Nashville, which was fortunate because further tests revealed that removing the tumor would be an extremely difficult task and that the recovery time would be longer than previously expected. By the grace of God the tumor turned out not to be malignant, and I healed quickly. After a few days in the hospital I went home to recuperate with both legs intact.

While my leg healed my mind wandered incessantly. By this time, I had become thoroughly disillusioned with evangelical Protestantism—at least with its outward manifestations. I knew just enough about Orthodox worship and spirituality to be dissatisfied with the usual Sunday morning Baptist fare. How can you keep a boy down on the farm when he has been to Paris? On the other hand, my theology had not changed substantively. I was attracted to liturgical worship, but I was still working with the same basic theological presuppositions I had always held.

While recuperating, I imagined starting my own church that would be basically Baptist in theology and evangelical in outlook (except for the once saved, always saved part) and at the same time liturgical. Mine would be a kinder, gentler evangelicalism. I realized, of course, that such a church would not satisfy everyone. Those who did not like liturgical worship or spirituality would be graciously referred to another church, where their particular interests could be served. In my theological universe, there was room for everyone whose theology was not too left-wing. My plan, however, had one fatal flaw: I had no theological reason for any of this; I was basically reacting to my own, personal tastes. Despite my growing appreciation for smells and bells, my whole theological outlook was quintessentially Protestant. I was completely immersed in the smorgasbord approach to Christianity.

At some point (I cannot remember whether it was before or after my operation) I bought a copy of Robert Webber's *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*.⁵ As the subtitle indicates, Webber wrote the book to explain why evangelicals are attracted to the liturgical church. The book perfectly described my own situation at the time. Here was the story of an evangelical college (Wheaton) professor and six others who joined the Episcopal church in search of mystery, worship, sacramentality, and historical connectedness. The book was very encouraging because the testimonies it contained told me that I was not alone, that others were also searching for that something more.

On the whole, however, the book was rather superficial. The writers discussed their understanding of the aesthetics of worship but never addressed the question of the nature and substance of worship. They wrote at length about historical connectedness and reclaiming their spiritual ancestors such as the early Church Fathers, yet they never dealt with the fact that Protestant theology is wholly incompatible with the theology of the Fathers. Everything in the book was left on the level of personal opinion; the question of Truth never surfaced. Indeed, the book would perhaps have been more accurately subtitled: What some evangelicals *like* about the liturgical church. Webber made it clear in the introduction that he was not trying to convert anyone; he was simply explaining a phenomenon—one that could help other Christians.

Several weeks after my operation I returned to Wake Forest, too late to register for the spring semester. I used my extensive free time to read just about everything I could get my hands on having to do with church history, worship, and spirituality. In fact, in that semester and the following summer, I probably read more books than I had read in three years of high school and four years of college combined. That operation was truly a Godsend!

Among the books I read was *The Vindication of Tradition* by Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan.⁶ In it Pelikan drew a distinction between the intellectual rediscovery of tradition and the existential recovery of tradition. In other words, there is a great difference between simply recognizing what has gone before and genuinely claiming it for oneself. I had discovered the Church of history, the wisdom of the Fathers, and the liturgy, but I had yet to come to grips with all that such a discovery entails.

Actually, I would amend Pelikan's formula slightly at this point, for a further distinction needs to be made. There is also a great difference between claiming tradition for oneself and *being claimed* by tradition. I, along with Webber and the contributors to his book, was perfectly willing to claim the historic Church and the liturgy for my own understanding of Christianity. Yet, *I* was still in control! I, in true Protestant fashion, was judge and jury of what would and would not fit into my kind of Christianity. I was willing to claim the historic Church, but I had yet to recognize Her claim on me.

It would take a great deal more reading and an even greater amount of prayer before I would be able to accept the historical Church on Her own terms and be judged by Her. Of all my readings in this area, the writings of Fr. John Meyendorff, dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary, were particularly helpful. Books such as *Living Tradition*⁷ and *Catholicity and the Church*⁸ helped me to understand that the Holy Tradition of the Church is not merely historical continuity or rootedness. It is the context in which the Church lives out Her divine life and carries out Her divine mission. Tradition is, to use Vladimir Lossky's phrase, the Life of the Holy Spirit in the Church.⁹

Gradually I came to recognize the fact that Holy Tradition has the same claim upon my life as the Gospel itself, for Tradition is nothing other than the Gospel lived throughout history. It is not my place to judge the Apostolic Tradition and decide how or if to incorporate it into my own religious tradition; rather Holy Tradition judges me and calls me to account for how I have handled that Good Deposit that has been committed to Christians. I finally began to understand Paul's admonition to the Thessalonians—a passage I had never heard preached on in a Baptist church—*Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle* (2 Thess. 2:15).

That same spring a group of almost 2000 evangelical Christians from across the country were received into the Orthodox Church under the jurisdiction of the ancient Patriarchate of Antioch. I had read a brief story about this group of Evangelical Orthodox a year or so before in *Christianity Today*, but I did not know much about them. It was not until early 1987 that I had any real contact with them.

One evening, when I was still in Tennessee recuperating, I asked God to show me what to do. The next morning there was an article on the front page of the Nashville *Tennessean* about a former Baptist minister becoming an Orthodox priest. There was a picture of Gordon Walker—a well pedigreed Southern Baptist/former Campus Crusade for Christ director—being ordained by Metropolitan Philip of the Antiochian Archdiocese. He and his community in Franklin had been officially received into the Orthodox Church. The article put me in contact with other evangelicals who were searching for something more in their Christian life and had turned toward historic Orthodoxy.

Fr. Peter Gillquist, national leader of this group of Evangelical Orthodox, recently commented on the journey of his group from free-wheeling evangelical Protestantism to the fullness of the Apostolic Faith. When asked why he and his group made such a long and at times heart-wrenching pilgrimage, he replied,

Ultimately, the change came for us when we stopped trying to judge and re-evaluate Church history, and for once invited Church history to judge and evaluate us ... Instead of asking if Christian forbears like Anselm, Augustine, Athanasius, and Chrysostom were in our Church, we began to ask if we were in theirs!¹⁰

By the spring of 1987, I had not quite reached this point, but by God's infinite Grace I was moving in that direction. My continued reading and the religio-political situation at the seminary forced me to examine the roots of my own faith and to take the claims of the Orthodox Church seriously.

One book that had a profound effect on my spiritual journey was Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is a novel about people who are struggling with life, with doubt, with God, and with death. Dostoyevsky's own life was no picnic, and his suffering as well as his joy is evident on virtually every page. In this book I discovered Orthodoxy not as a system of beliefs or religious propositions, but as blood and sweat, life and death. I was particularly impressed with the spirituality of one of the characters, the saintly Father Zosima, who was patterned after real monks in nineteenth-century Russia. Great joy welled up within me as I read the passages where Fr. Zosima described his life. What love! What utter God-centeredness! Here was a vision of life as God intended for it to be lived.

Without question, however, the single most important book involved in my conversion to Holy Orthodoxy was John Zizioulas *Being as Communion*.¹¹ This is also probably the most difficult book I have ever read. I had to read the first chapter three times before I even began to understand it. And yet, as I began to get a handle on what Zizioulas was saying, I realized that if he was even partially correct, I could no longer remain a Protestant—much less a free-church Baptist.

In short, Zizioulas introduced me, for the first time, to the Holy Trinity, in Whose image I had been created. Although Baptists profess faith in the Trinity; when you get right down to it, that belief is not much more than lip-service. The Trinity is rarely

mentioned in Baptist churches, except at baptisms, and has absolutely nothing to do with how the church is organized or how Baptists view themselves as persons created in the image of God. In the final analysis, the Trinity is simply the solution to a theological problem: how can Jesus be both God and different from the Father at the same time? The doctrine, as understood by Baptists and most other Protestants has no positive content. If every reference to the Trinity were removed from Baptist hymnals and books, few people would even notice.

What I learned from Zizioulas is that my own being as well as the being of the Church is inextricably tied up with the being of God Himself-but not simply with the *fact* that God exists and that I derive my existence from Him. Rather it is tied up with the *way* God exists, His *mode of existence*. For the first time I read that God is not an *individual*. If God exists, it is not because He is Necessary Being, but because He eternally begets His Son and breathes forth His Spirit in an unbroken communion of absolute love and self-giving. To say that *God is love* (1 John 4:16) is not to describe an attribute of God; it is to affirm that He is the Father Who exists by the total gift of Himself to His Son and His Spirit. In this manner the ancient world heard for the first time that it is communion that makes things be: nothing exists without it.¹²

The necessary conclusion from such an understanding of God is that the *individual*, that ultimate concern of Protestantism, ontologically *cannot* exist. Individualism is the denial of being, the content of which is love. For the first time in my life, the very foundations of my evangelical faith were shaken to the core. Certainly, I had grown dissatisfied with evangelical worship and had been searching for historical Christianity, but this was different. Now it was my understanding of God and myself that was tumbling down around me. In true Freudian fashion, I had taken my own fragmented, individualistic nature, endowed it with a host of superlative attributes, and called it God. Yet, when the real God – the God of Triune Love – revealed Himself to me and destroyed my idol, I shed no tears. On the contrary, my soul took wings because for the first time in my life Christianity made *sense*-I do not mean intellectually, but *existentially*.

I knew that God had made man to share in His eternal life and that man had blown the project by rebelling against God. God, in turn, sent His Son to fix the mess that man had made and restore to man the possibility of living a full and meaningful life. But why was the Cross so necessary? It seemed like an awful lot of trouble to go to just so that we could romp around on streets of gold for eternity. And was God really going to send billions of people to hell just because they refused to accept His Son into their lives as their personal Lord and Savior? Was the gamble of creation worth all of those souls who would spend an eternity in torment, so that some could find eternal bliss?

All my life I had been told that sin had left a crimson stain and that nothing but the blood could make me clean again because there is power in the blood. There was nothing I could add because Jesus paid it all, and if I would only trust Him one glad morning I would fly away. I knew all this and believed all this, yet there were questions just under the surface irritating my tidy, little faith. When I got right down to it, the sin of Adam

really did not seem to merit the punishment of eternal perdition and the bliss of heaven did not seem worth the price that had to be paid. In other words, hell sounded unreasonable and heaven sounded boring.

The problem was that in my evangelical Protestant theology, sin, righteousness, heaven, and hell were all essentially unrelated to my own being. Sin was a stain on my record that the blood of Jesus washed away (if I claimed it!); righteousness was a credit that God placed in my account because of my faith; heaven was a *place* of bliss where the saved would spend eternity; and hell was a *place* of torment where those who had rejected Christ would roast forever. All of these things impended on my life, of course, but only tangentially; they really had nothing to do with who I am.

I could not help but wonder why Adams sin should have such eternal consequences. Could it be that God is so proud and egotistical that His honor could really be offended by the sins of mortal men? What is sin, anyway? Is it the breaking of a law, the transgression of a code of ethics? I was not satisfied with the satisfaction theory of the atonement, and, not being a Lutheran, I was not particularly keen on blaming everything on the insatiable wrath of God. On the other hand, I did not have any real theories of my own. So, I just kept repeating the party line and traveling down that Roman Road.

I discovered, however, that sin is *not* the mere breaking of a rule, but is nothing less than the denial of love and, therefore, of life itself. When I discovered the Trinity, I also discovered the true nature of man, for man was created in the image of this God of Triune Love. Man was created precisely as a *personal* being, one who is truly human only when he loves and is loved. Sin-missing the mark-is not a moral shortcoming or a failure to live up to some external code of behavior, but rather the failure to realize life as love and communion. As Christos Yannaras put it, "The fall arises out of man's free decision to reject personal communion with God and restrict himself to the autonomy and self-sufficiency of his own nature."¹³ In other words, sin is the free choice of individual autonomy. Irony of ironies: that which I had been touting all of these years as the basis of true religion-the absolute autonomy of the individual-turned out to be the Original Sin!

An individual is not a *person*, but rather the antithesis of personhood and the denial of life. From this perspective, sin is repulsive to God not because it offends His honor, but because it is the denial of life itself, which is His gift to man. It is, in the final analysis, the denial of God's image in man and of God Himself. What makes sin so tragic is that it is self-destructive. God hates sin not because of what it does to Him, but because of what it does to man. Sin is not a blotch on my record, but in the words of Fr. Thomas Hopko, an act of metaphysical suicide:

Human beings can be individuals if they choose, with all kinds of relationships. But if they do so chose, to use the language of the Bible, they choose death, and not life; the curse and not the blessing (Deuteronomy 30:19). They destroy themselves in the act of metaphysical suicide in their self-contained and self-interested isolation which is the very image of hell.¹⁴

To begin to understand the essence of sin is to begin to understand hell as well. I had grown up listening to sermons describing the literal fire and the unmistakably physical nature of the torment. Yet, in Orthodoxy, I found a vision of hell far more terrifying than anything Jonathan Edwards could have concocted. Hell is that state in which men have rendered themselves incapable of receiving and responding to the love of God (or anyone else). To use the words of Dostoyevsky, "hell is the suffering of being no longer able to love ... And yet it is impossible to take this spiritual torment from them, for this torment is not external but is within them."¹⁵

Hell is, therefore, not so much an external condition of punishment as the inward suffering of self-isolation. When Christ returns in glory and God becomes *all in all* (1 Cor. 15:28), those who have sealed themselves off in the fortresses of their own egos—those for whom hell is other people—will be faced with the torment of His eternal presence. His very presence will be a judgment and a torment because He is life and love Himself, the ontological antithesis of self-contained individuality. In that Day, there will be no place to hide, no refuge from His burning presence, *for our God is a consuming fire* (Heb. 12:29). In the words of one of the desert Fathers, "The fire of hell is the love of God."

If the locus of hell is the depth of one's own soul, then the Kingdom of God must begin there as well. Did not Jesus Himself declare, *the Kingdom of God is within you*?¹⁶ In my younger days that verse always bothered me; it certainly was not one that generated a lot of sermons. It seemed too subjective. And yet, this came from the lips of the Savior Himself. When, however, I embraced the Truth of Orthodoxy and encountered the life-giving Trinity, this verse began to make sense. Heaven is not a cosmic Disneyworld, but the state of perfect God-likeness, for which man had originally been created.

This, however, is quite a different picture of heaven than the one usually presented from Baptist pulpits. I have heard 45-minute sermons on heaven, which dealt almost exclusively on the literal streets of gold. God and Christ were mentioned only a couple of times. God built heaven, of course, and Jesus died on the cross so that those who believe in Him could go there. That was it! There was no mention of being changed into the same image [of Christ] from glory to glory (2 Cor 3:18) or of becoming partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). The typical evangelical vision of heaven is that of a giant religious theme-park—Heritage U.S.A. on steroids!

All of my life, salvation had been presented to me in negative terms: Jesus had saved me from hell and had enabled me to go to this place called heaven. He was the ultimate fire insurance! What joy I found when I discovered the *positive* side to Christianity. St. Athanasius said that God became man so that man might become like God. God had originally created man in His own image so that man might attain unto His perfect likeness. Christ, Who is the perfect Image of the Father, came not only to repair that which had been damaged by the fall, but to perfect humanity and fulfill the original intent of creation. *Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by Him were all things created ... All things were created by Him and for Him: And He is before all things, and by Him all things consist* (Col. 1:15-17).

Christ said that He had come to give abundant life to the world, but what kind of life? Biological existence? Life after death? I learned that the life that Christ came to give is nothing less than the Life of the Holy Trinity – or, more precisely, the Life of the Father, Who lives eternally as love Himself with His Son and His Spirit. *Verily, verily, I say unto you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in Himself; so hath He given to the Son to have life in Himself* (John 5:25-27). Because the One Who died on the cross was the Son of the Father – Life Himself – and not merely an innocent man, He crushed forever the tyranny of man's self-sufficiency and loosed the bonds of death. Through Christ, man shares in this Life-in-Himself of the Holy Trinity, life realized as an eternal relationship of love. *And this is life eternal, that they may know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, Whom Thou hast sent* (John 17:3).

After reading *Being as Communion*, everything else I had read about Orthodoxy fell into place. No matter what book I read, every author came back to the central theme of Trinitarian love. I then realized that Orthodoxy is not a set of propositions about God or even a well-planned theological system; it is an organic whole—a seamless garment. Orthodoxy is in the fullest sense Truth, that Truth which sets man free! Archimandrite Vasileios, Abbot of the Iveron Monastery on Mt. Athos, sums up the wholeness of Orthodoxy quite well:

Theology does not have a philosophy of its own, nor spirituality a mentality of its own, nor church administration a system of its own, nor hagiography its own artistic school. All these things emerge from the same font of liturgical experience. They all function together in a Trinitarian way, singing the thrice-holy hymn in their own languages ... There is one spiritual law, which has power over both heavenly and earthly things. All things flow and proceed from the knowledge of the Holy Trinity. All things emerge from the font which is the life of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit: from baptism in the death of Jesus.¹⁷

My world was transformed! Or rather, I was learning to see the world through new eyes. I began to realize that the freedom I had defended so vehemently was not freedom at all, but slavery to my own individual whims, to my context, to the necessities of my fragmented nature, and ultimately to death. This fact became increasingly clear to me as I began my second year at Southeastern and observed first-hand the death of a seminary and the inherent failure of Baptist polity to address the Truth of man created in the image of Triune Love.

Death of a Seminary

In the introduction to *Being as Communion*, Zizioulas writes, “for the Church to present this way of [Trinitarian] existence, she must herself be an image of the way in which God exists. Her entire structure, her ministries etc. must express this way of existence.”¹⁸ Reading this, I realized that the way the Church is organized is a matter of neither historical exigencies nor personal taste, but must be nothing less than a reflection

of her Trinitarian archetype: *that they may all be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us* (John 17:21). Anything less than this is doomed to failure— is manifestly not the Church.

This truth became crystal clear to me at the beginning of the fall semester of 1987 as I watched the seminary die before my eyes. Now I knew why God had led me to Southeastern. By being thrown into the middle of the Baptist holy war, I was forced to examine the basic presuppositions of my Baptist way of life. Southeastern was the laboratory in which I dissected every aspect of my dearly held, free church ecclesiology.

Things came to a head during the fall meeting of the board of trustees. For the first time the fundamentalists had a majority on the board, and they moved quickly to consolidate their control over the seminary.¹⁹ While the meeting took place, the campus was thrown into chaos. The local news media descended in droves as students protested and covered the campus with yellow ribbons in support of the faculty. Needless to say, classwork was forgotten as the future of the seminary became the sole topic of conversation everywhere on campus.

By this time, however, I had read too much and had come too far to defend those traditional Baptist principles I had once held so dear. The whole episode felt very strange to me, almost like an out-of-body experience. Somewhere along the way my mind and heart had ceased to be Protestant, and so I watched from above as the Seminary was dissected beneath me.

An image from that week is etched in my mind because it illustrates why I could not remain a Baptist-or any other brand of Protestant. A tee-shirt worn by one of the students during the trustee meeting had the word CREED written in black letters surrounded by a red circle and a slash through the middle. This creed-buster emblem sums up free church Protestantism perfectly and illustrates why it cannot make any claim to being an heir of apostolic Christianity. Of course, the eighteen-year-old who wrote *My Heritage* as a Southern Baptist would have probably bought one of those tee-shirts, but four years of college and a year of seminary had broadened my perspective considerably. By the fall of 1987, I had come to the realization that the slogan “No creed but Christ” was not only historically untenable, but was intellectually bankrupt.

Were there to be no parameters for belief, no immovable standards? I soon realized that all of this Baptist *credo-phobia* pointed to a much deeper problem than the historical disincarnation of Christianity. The ultimate concern of Protestantism is neither God nor the Scriptures nor anything that could reasonably be labeled Truth, but rather the absolute sovereignty of the *individual*. The freedom of the individual was to be defended from any attempt to impose a standard of orthodoxy, even if that standard happened to be the Truth. One Baptist wrote, “The very act of credal imposition itself, *whether the doctrine is correct or not* [emphasis mine], violates long standing religious convictions of Baptists...”²⁰ In the final analysis, Truth is what each individual says it is, and any attempt to suggest otherwise is a violation of individual freedom.

I will now admit what I would have never admitted at the time: there really are honest-to-goodness theological liberals in the Southern Baptist Convention. I doubt if any of the faculty would have qualified for that particular moniker, but quite a few of the students certainly did. I knew students who openly questioned the Virgin Birth and the physicality of the Resurrection. They had read all of the *important* theologians and were not about to buy into that tired, old fundamentalist theology. Now the faculty certainly did not teach such nonsense, but on the other hand they did not go out of their way to correct these students either. After all, to correct someone would imply that one person is right and another wrong, and that would not do. In that theological democracy, one person's theological viewpoint was just as valid as another's, even if by the standard of historical Christianity that view point was utterly heretical.

It dawned on me that a Baptist church is, in the final analysis, nothing but a religious version of a social contract. It is a group of people with similar religious views who gather together for the purpose of mutual support and mission. Individual autonomy and freedom of association govern the life of the church. If someone is excluded from the fellowship of the church it is not because his theology is incorrect, but because the other members are free not to associate with those whom they do not wish to associate.

When someone comes forward at the altar call to join a Baptist church, the pastor will usually ask the congregation to make some sign of welcome or assent. What this new member probably does not realize is that he is actually being *voted* into the membership of the church. This process gained national attention when a black minister attempted to join Jimmy Carters church in Plains, Georgia. Enough people from the church voted no to block his membership. Carter and several others left the church in protest.

More recently, Paige Patterson, one of the architects of the fundamentalist takeover of the SBC, was refused membership in the Wake Forest (North Carolina) Baptist Church when he became the president of Southeastern Seminary in 1992. The reason cited for this denial of membership was Patterson's involvement in the denominational battle.

This is a perfect illustration of the religious social contract. First of all, church membership is dependent upon neither orthodox belief nor the objective character of the sacraments, but upon the mutual consent of the group. If the County Seat Baptist Church does not want to admit Mr. Smith into its fellowship for *whatever reason*; it does not have to. Second, if a group within the church does not like the way things are being run, they are free to move across town and set up shop on their own. Everyone is free, but is this the Church that Christ promised would withstand the gates of hell? Is this the *fullness of Him Who fills all in all*?

Furthermore, a local church can cooperate with other churches, or it can be completely independent; it too is free to associate with whatever group or groups it desires and under whatever conditions it desires.²¹ Everything is relative to the desires of the individual, be it the individual believer or the individual congregation.

Even confessions of faith adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention cannot be considered binding on either congregations or individuals. The introduction to the 1925

Baptist Faith and Message Statement states plainly that such confessions constitute a consensus of *opinion* [emphasis mine] of some Baptist body and that they have no authority over the conscience.²² In fact, the drafters of both the 1925 and 1963 statements were explicit in stating the fact that their statements reflected not only a consensus of opinion, but a consensus of opinion at a particular time.

Baptists are perfectly free to change their confession of faith whenever and however they see fit: "That we do not regard them as complete statements of our faith, having any quality of finality or infallibility. As in the past so in the future Baptists should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith as may seem to them wise and expedient at any time."

This is no mere rhetorical flourish, for Baptists have indeed changed their confessions of faith through the years. Early Baptist confessions were unmistakably Calvinist in their tone and explicitly affirmed double predestination. This was true of Baptist confessions well into the middle of the 19th century. Somewhere along the line Southern Baptists adopted an Arminian theology of conversion, though they managed to retain the perseverance of the saints.²³ By the time the 1923 Statement was published, double predestination had disappeared. Had God changed His mind? Of course not! Baptists would be the first to admit that these statements are nothing more than statements of their beliefs. In the early 19th century the majority of Baptists believed in double predestination; in the late 20th century most do not. What will Baptists believe in the 21st century?

In free church Protestantism, anything that constrains the individual—even the Truth—is viewed as a threat to his autonomy. It is no wonder then that Baptists have such a phobic reaction to the historic creeds of the Church. The *fact* that the Nicene Creed and other conciliar definitions of the Church exist threatens the free church Protestant. Why? Because they bear witness to a Faith that is *not* a matter of individual opinion and is *not* subject to revision. The *content* of those symbols is a threat because it is the negation of the very foundation of Protestantism itself: the individual. The ontological possibility for the unity of the Church (and, therefore, of mankind) is the very Life of the Trinity. This Trinitarian "even as" defines the Church as persons-in-communion and not as individuals-in-association. The difference between the two is literally the difference between heaven and hell.

Knowing this, it was impossible for me to remain a Southern Baptist or any other brand of evangelical Protestant. How could I stay in a church whose very existence and polity were a denial of the existential Truth of my own being? Someone may ask, however, why I simply did not join forces with the fundamentalists. After all, they certainly had no trouble with concepts such as truth. The answer lies in the fact that despite all of their differences and indeed their hatred for one another, the fundamentalists and moderates (and liberals) are all basically the same under the skin. That is, they all share the same basic presuppositions and theological method; the only difference is that the moderates and liberals are honest about it while the fundamentalists are not.

A discussion on ABC's Nightline between two of the holy wars more colorful figures perfectly illustrates the point. Ted Koppel invited W.A. Criswell, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas (also known as the Baptist Vatican), and Cecil Sherman, one of the fieriest defenders of traditional Baptist principles, to discuss the controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention. Sherman read a text-note on the book of Exodus from the *Criswell Study Bible* that offered a naturalistic explanation for the plagues that befell Egypt. Then, with his characteristic Texas drawl, Sherman said, "Now I do the same thing Dr. Criswell does; only difference is, I own up to it."

Although fundamentalists have no trouble saying, "This is the truth!," they have no more ground for making such assertions than do the moderates when they timidly express their opinions. The pronouncements of fundamentalists come not from the historic Church, but from the universal source of Protestant dogma: the individual interpretation of Scripture. The big difference between the fundamentalist and the moderate is that the fundamentalist is more likely to call his interpretation the truth.

In an interview with Bill Moyers, Criswell said that if the moderates would just approach the Scriptures with honesty and trust in the Bible's infallibility, they would interpret the Bible exactly the same way he does. To paraphrase Protagoras: Criswell is the measure of all things!

The bottom line is that fundamentalists are every bit as ahistorical and egocentric in their theology as their liberal adversaries. Cecil Sherman was right. The only real difference between himself and Criswell is the fact that he is willing to admit his basic presuppositions and methods. In the end, it was precisely those Protestant presuppositions and methods, shared by fundamentalists and moderates alike, which I came to unequivocally renounce.

To the extent that Baptists believe in the divinity of Christ, the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection on the third day, and other doctrines of the Church, I rejoice. But this facade of orthodoxy is just that, a superficial framework built upon the shaky foundation of individualism and subjectivism. Many of the mainline Protestant denominations have already collapsed in on themselves and are hardly recognizable as being Christian. It is inevitable that the same thing will happen to evangelicalism, regardless of how conservative it may seem today.²⁴ The size and wealth of the Southern Baptist Convention belies the fact that it is a house built on a foundation of sand.

By the end of the fall semester of 1987, the fundamentalist victory was complete. The president, the dean of the faculty, and many other administrators and faculty members had announced their resignations. The accrediting agencies had received complaints about all the turmoil and were planning investigations. Many students were preparing to leave after the spring semester. The mood was somber. I, however, was less upset about the fate of the school than about my own fate. After all, it is considerably easier to transfer to another seminary than it is to leave the church in which one was reared to join one on the other side of the theological spectrum.

No Turning Back, No Turning Back

Since the spring of 1987, I had been visiting the Greek Orthodox parishes in Durham and Raleigh. On a couple of occasions I was deeply moved by the sense of worship and devotion in these parishes, but more often than not I was left cold by the fact that the services were mostly in Greek. On the advice of the priest in Durham, I found a tiny mission parish of the Orthodox Church in America. When I first attended St. Gregory's, sometime in the summer of 1987, it did not have a priest and was conducting lay-led Reader Services in a rented room of the Raleigh YWCA. Needless to say, the surroundings evoked none of the splendor or gold-encrusted cult thick with the smoke of incense so often associated with Byzantine worship.

Despite the humble surroundings and the simplicity of the services, there was something that kept me coming back. I was made to feel welcome and encouraged to participate in the services, but there was more to it than that. The simple melodies stayed with me throughout the week, and I began to look forward to the weekend. The setting may have been humble, but there was a subtle nobility about those services that the Wake Forest Baptist Church could not match.

Toward the end of 1987 word came that St. Gregory's would be getting a priest. Fr. Vladimir and his family were very devoted servants of the Church and brought a great deal of enthusiasm with them. Unfortunately, however, the marriage between Fr. Vladimir and St. Gregory's was not a happy one; there was a definite personality clash that made his brief stay there (about nine months) rather rocky. Nevertheless, those months were very important for me as I became more active in the life of the mission. Fr. Vladimir's presence offered me the opportunity to take the final plunge and do what my heart told me I *had* to do. Fr. Vladimir was encouraging and helpful, but the final decision was still a difficult one.

Joining the Orthodox Church is not like switching from one Protestant denomination to another. I was acutely aware of the fact that I was not becoming a Methodist or a Presbyterian; I was rejecting the very religion in which I had been reared. I would embrace a Body that claims to be nothing less than *The Church*. I knew if I took that final step, there could be no turning back. During that time, I was greatly encouraged and consoled by John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. He had traveled down a road not unlike the one I was traveling and had experienced the turmoil involved in leaving the church of his childhood for the Catholic Faith.

So it was that I wrestled with that momentous decision during the first couple of months of 1988. In my heart I knew there was only *one* real course of action, but an inner tendency to over-dramatize things made taking the final step more agonizing than it should have been. Besides, I was not looking forward to telling my family about this.

Yet, there was only one Door open for me. Having discovered what I had discovered, I could find peace only in the motherly embrace of the holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. On the Feast of Feasts, Great and Holy Pascha (Easter) of 1988, my fate was sealed-literally. With the mystery of Chrismation, I was sealed with the Gift of the Holy

Spirit and united to all the holy Fathers and Mothers who throughout the centuries have faithfully confessed the *Faith once delivered to the Saints*.

The outward circumstances of my Chrismation hardly reflected its eternal significance, however. The whole episode was a comedy of errors. The mission was using an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting room in a Roman Catholic Church at that time. For Holy Week, however, the church allowed us to use their small chapel located in the balcony of the main sanctuary. The Liturgy scheduled for Holy Saturday morning had to be postponed for several hours because of a wedding going on down-stairs. The Easter services, scheduled to begin at 11:30 p.m. did not start until after 12:30 a.m. Everything was a mess-but a joyous mess, nonetheless.

I relate all of this to make one point. I did not come to Holy Orthodoxy because I was attracted to a rich, booming parish with beautiful facilities and a dynamic outreach program. I was not shopping around for a church that met my needs or was compatible with my lifestyle. I was searching for *The Church*, and I found it in a YWCA meeting room!

The singing at St. Gregory's might sound pretty pitiful compared to the choral singing at the Crystal Cathedral, but every time Orthodox Christians gather to offer the Sacrifice of Praise, they join the angelic chorus around the Throne of Glory. Orthodoxy does not mean smells and bells; it means right belief and right worship. The claim of the Orthodox Church to be *The Church* does not rest upon the splendor of Her great cathedrals or the majesty of Her services, but upon the simple fact that She faithfully confesses the true God and worships Him in Spirit and in Truth.

A quick glance at the churches section of the yellow pages reveals an almost innumerable list of denominations-all of which claim to represent true Christianity. Furthermore, every major brand-name is itself split into several competing denominations. Baptists, for example, come in almost as many flavors as Baskin-Robbins ice cream. There are Southern, American, National, General, Particular, Regular, Primitive, Landmark, Conservative, and Free-Will Baptists, not to mention the independent, fundamentalist Baptists who will not have anything to do with the others because they are not really Christian. In Washington, D.C., I even ran across some Seventh Day Baptists!

Some of these groups, such as the Particular Baptists, are strict Calvinists. Some, such as the Free-Will Baptists, are strict Arminians. And most, namely the Southern Baptists, cannot make up their minds. And yet, every single one of these groups claims that the Bible is the *sole* source of authority for faith and practice in their churches.

If there is such a wide difference of doctrine between those who call themselves Baptists, imagine the differences between all of the other major denominations and their off-shoots. Some denominations are congregational and free church in their polity, others are presbyterian, and still others are more hierarchical. Some denominations, such as the Pentecostal groups, maintain that the Baptism of the Holy Spirit is a separate event from baptism and is marked by certain gifts such as speaking in tongues. Some groups, on the

other hand, such as the Campbellites, go so far as to say that the gifts of the Spirit ceased when the last Apostle died. Yet if each of these denominations confesses that Jesus is Lord and uses the Bible as their sole source of authority, why can they not agree on something as simple as whether or not baptism is necessary to salvation and whether or not it can be administered to infants? *Is Christ divided* (1 Cor. 1:13)?

Every Protestant denomination has its roots in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. There are, of course, groups that maintain that they did not come out of the Reformation, being direct descendants of the New Testament Church, but such assertions are utterly absurd and historically groundless.²⁵ The fact of the matter is that every Protestant on the planet, whether he wants to call himself a Protestant or not, is the spiritual descendent of the Reformation and its cardinal principle: *Sola Scriptura*.

Protestants all claim to interpret the Scripture by the light of the Holy Spirit, and yet they manage to come up with a multitude of *different* interpretations of the same passage. Now either the Spirit is playing games with these people or there is something wrong with their theological method. After all, Calvinists and Arminians cannot *both* be right; all the dialectic in the world cannot reconcile two completely irreconcilable doctrines.

The problem is not that Protestants lack sincerity or piety, but that they are cut off from the living context in which the Scriptures were written and canonized and in which they are to be interpreted. In short, they are cut off from the living, Apostolic Tradition of the Church.

When Jesus ascended to the Father, He left only one thing behind. He did not leave a book or instruction manual – as far as we know the only thing He ever wrote was some scribble in the sand. He did not leave a school. Rather, He left His Body and sent His Spirit.²⁶ Jesus promised His abiding presence to His Body, the Church, which *is the fullness of Him Who filleth all in all* (Eph. 1:23). He promised to send the Holy Spirit Who would guide the *Church into all truth* (John 16:13). The fact is, the Church wrote the Bible; the Bible did not create the Church. The Church decided which books were canonical and which were not, and the Church alone rightly defines the Word of Truth.

The Church's authority, however, is not a matter of juridical governance or even divine right. It does not rest upon the infallibility of Her leaders (There is no such thing!). Rather, the authority of the Church derives from Her divine-human nature—from the fact that She is the Body of Christ, animated by the Holy Spirit. When the Apostles gathered in council as recorded in Acts to decide what to do with the Gentile Christians, they announced their decision with the words, *it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us* (Acts 15:28). This is the authority of the Church: the abiding presence of Her Lord in the action of the Spirit.

The Church, therefore, is a divine-human Mystery. But more than that, She is the Mystery of Trinitarian Life: *that they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee ... that they may be one, even as We are one* (John 17:21-22). This Trinitarian “even as” is the Life of the Church; it is the reason God became man. Authority in the Church, therefore, is the Truth of being itself. It is not a tyranny or a threat to man because it is the Truth of

his own existence; it becomes a threat only to those who prefer the autonomy of self-existence to the Truth of their Trinitarian archetype.

Why am I so confident that the Orthodox Church will preserve the Apostolic Faith inviolate until the return of Her Lord? I am confident because the Lord Himself promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church (cf. Matthew 16:18). If the Church moved Her foundations or failed to guard the deposit of Faith, She would falsify the Truth of Her own Trinitarian existence and cease to exist. To be sure, many have fallen away from the Truth and been severed from the Apostolic flock, and no doubt many more will fall away. But the Church *qua* Church cannot fall away.

It is the absolute height of blasphemy to suggest that the Church could be restored or recovered as if in some point in history She had ever been lost. If the Church has ever ceased to exist, even for a millisecond, it would mean that Christ had failed to do what He said He came to do: bring Life to the world. This is so because the Church is *not* simply a human institution, however religious or good. She is the Body of Christ inseparably united to Her Head. If the Church ceased to exist, Christ would cease to exist!

Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world (Matt. 28:20). This promise was made not specifically to the world, but to the Church, the sacrament of His presence. And yet, it is precisely Christ's abiding presence in the Church that is His saving presence in the world. When Christ comes in glory, He will come as a Bridegroom to receive not the kingdoms of this world, but His spotless Bride, the Church (cf. Eph. 5:25-27).

The Good News for modern man is that the Church exists. This apostolic flock, this Trinitarian leaven that enlivens the whole world is among us, *holding fast the word of life* (Phil. 2:16) and *baptizing men in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Matt. 28:19). The Church does not need to be reinvented, neither can she be created out of whole-cloth using the New Testament as a blue-print. *For other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ* (1 Cor. 3:11).

The Orthodox Church does not *imitate* the Church of the New Testament, She *is* the Church of the New Testament. To a world torn by strife and to a world of Christians divided among themselves in the myriad of their denominations, the revelation of this apostolic community and Trinitarian Unity is truly Good News. It is a threat and a condemnation, however, to those who prefer the traditions of men to the Apostolic Tradition-to those who prefer the autonomy of their individuality to the Truth of Trinitarian love.

When I encountered the Orthodox Church, I was confronted with the Truth-the Truth about God, about the world, and about myself. Only two choices lay before me. I could reject what I had learned and return to the self-sufficiency and idiosyncrasy of evangelical Protestantism, or I could submit to it and find that Freedom and Life that comes only from the renunciation of self: *For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whoever shall lose his life for My sake and the gospels, the same shall save it* (Mark 8:35). Jesus prayed for His disciples was that they be one even as the Trinity is one. I realized that this is possible

only within that Trinitarian flock that Christ Himself founded, for that flock is His Body, and Christ cannot be separated from Himself.

The Church is not an institution, though She has Her institutional dimensions. She is not a society, though in Her Bosom people from every race and walk of life live together in unity. Rather, She is *a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation* (1 Peter 2:9). She is the *pillar and ground of the Truth* (1 Tim. 3:15). She is *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit* (2 Cor. 13:14).

To all who would take up their cross and follow Her Lord, She bids, Come. To all who earnestly desire to worship in Spirit and in Truth, She bids, Come. To all who would taste of the fountain of immortality, She bids, Come. *The Spirit and the Bride say, Come* (Rev. 22:17).

Endnotes

1. The full text of the speech was published in the weekly newspaper of the Tennessee Baptist Convention: *Baptist and Reflector* 148:28 (July 14, 1982), p. 7.
2. "Faith seeking understanding."
3. This is not to suggest that any of these professors were classical theological liberals.
4. From the *Synodikon* of Orthodoxy, read each year on the first Sunday of Great Lent.
5. (Waco: Jarrell, 1985).
6. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984).
7. (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1978).
8. (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1983).
9. Quoted in Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 206.
10. Sealed! 5 Years Later, in *Again* 15:1 (March, 1992), pp. 4-7.
11. (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1985).
12. Zizioulas, p. 17.
13. *The Freedom of Morality* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1984), p. 30.
14. Imago Dei: The Basis of Our Worth in *Again* 10:2 (June, 1987), p. 18.
15. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Tr. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1991), pp. 322-323.
16. Luke 17:21.
17. *Hymn of Entry* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1984), p. 11.
18. Zizioulas, p. 15.
19. The boards of trustees of institutions owned and operated by the Southern Baptist Convention are appointed by the Convention. As soon as fundamentalists gained control of the national Convention, they appointed only their people to fill vacant slots on the boards. One of the trustees at Southeastern was a recent graduate of the school whose appointment to the board was obviously a reward for his obedient service to the fundamentalist faction.
20. Gordon James in *SBC Today* 5:1 (April, 1987), p. 7.
21. In 1992, two Southern Baptist churches in North Carolina were declared to be not in friendly cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention. Pullen Memorial in Raleigh had voted to bless the union of two men, and Binkley Memorial in Chapel Hill had licensed an openly gay man to the ministry. This is yet another example of the church as social contract. The members of the SBC simply exercised their

freedom of association by refusing to admit certain churches to their fellowship. The SBC has no power to remove pastors from their churches-it is merely a national association of absolutely independent congregations. See the *Baptist and Reflector* 155:25 (June, 17, 1992), p. 3.

22. Quoted in the introduction to the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message Statement, published by the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

23. Apparently the contradiction between an Arminian theology of conversion and a Calvinist doctrine of perseverance either does not occur to or does not bother Southern Baptists. Not only is the BF&M a consensus of Baptist opinions; in this case it is a consensus of opinions that are not internally consistent.

24. A startling example of the drift from extreme Protestant conservatism to a non-Christian religion is described in the September 15, 1996 edition of the Nashville morning paper, *The Tennessean* (pg. 1A). Entitled, "Baptist No More," the article describes the spiritual pilgrimage of J. David Davis and his flock at what was once the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Athens, TN. Davis, a graduate of Tennessee Temple University in Chattanooga, was a fundamentalist Baptist preacher until his careful study of the Bible led him to reject the basic teachings of the historic Christian Church as additions to the simple teachings of Jesus. Thus, he and about 80 of his followers jettisoned the doctrines of the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ in favor of a quasi-Jewish religion of his own invention based on the seven laws of Noah. Historically, Baptists have been very susceptible to such doctrinal drifts. Both Continental Anabaptists and General Baptists in England were drawn to Unitarianism in large numbers.

25. Aside from the fact that there is not one scrap of historical evidence to support such claims, one only has to look at these churches to see their ecclesiastical pedigree. These churches are organized congregationally and conduct services just like other congregationalist Protestants. They sit in the same, neat rows of pews and sing many of the same hymns. All of the pews face a platform in the front of the building, and the pulpit is placed in the middle to signify the centrality of the Word of God. You cannot get any more Protestant than that. Now if a church looks like a Protestant church, and worships like a Protestant church, and believes in *Sola Scriptura* like a Protestant church, what does that make it?

26. Archimandrite Vasileios, p. 17.

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