

# Reflections on Becoming Orthodox

by Dr. Ed Rommen (Spring, 1999)

By now most of you have heard that I have joined the Orthodox Church. Reactions to my becoming Orthodox have varied greatly. I have been disappointed that some seem to have dismissed my decision and have shown little interest in the reasons behind my pilgrimage. Others appear to have assumed that they know what Orthodoxy is and that what I have done is wrong, theologically unacceptable and perhaps even dangerous.

I have every reason to hope that many of you have not reacted in that way and are therefore genuinely interested in both the theological and personal aspects of my spiritual journey. I count it a privilege to be given this opportunity to share something of my experiences with you. I would like nothing more than to have you engage me in serious and open dialogue. The bridges of understanding that we could build would certainly advance the cause of Christ around the world.

I don't remember exactly when or why we began to ponder Orthodoxy. I do know that the determination to study ecclesial alternatives was concretized during the spring of 1996. Over the years I had acquired some knowledge of the Orthodox Church. Since those investigations were driven by my academic interest in the Church Fathers and the missionary activity of the early Church, they rarely caused me to call into question my own denominational orientation.

Perhaps it was the seriously flagging interest in church that gradually developed during the decade after our return from missionary service in Europe in 1986. Our disappointment with the evangelical mission agency we served under, the failure of our efforts to get involved in and contribute to a local church, as well as the difficulties I have encountered teaching at evangelical seminaries most certainly encouraged critical reevaluation.

But these experiences can hardly have been the only or even primary source of what amounted to a growing uneasiness with the way evangelicalism defined and implemented the church.

During our first two years at Columbia Biblical Seminary my family and I visited a number of churches, which together represented most of the Evangelical spectrum. They included: charismatic groups, an independent church, the Nazarene church, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, a Methodist church, a variety of Baptist churches, several Presbyterian churches, and our own chapel services. Everywhere we went, we found the same basic atmosphere, patterns, and attitudes. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that, in spite of the external differences, each church we visited caused us to ask the same set of questions.

As a result our sense of estrangement continued to intensify. It was, of course, very unsettling to have to admit that I, who had spent a lifetime planting, teaching, and defending the Church, had come to prefer a ride in the mountains to the typical evangelical "worship" service. How could this have happened? As it turns out, our uneasiness ran much deeper than we could possibly have imagined. And no one could have been more surprised by the answer than we were.

That spring (1996) the vague dissatisfaction suddenly gave way to a set of concrete questions about the Church, which pressed themselves on us with such precision and urgency that we were left with no option but to investigate alternatives. (Here I will not spare you the strong language I used during that time, not because my perceptions were necessarily correct, but because it may give you some indication of the intensity with which we struggled.)

The catalog of questions was centered on one fundamental concern; what were the practical benefits of attending and participating in an evangelical church? I don't want to be misunderstood; we had not fallen prey to the common variety of consumer piety. What we were asking had to do with our spiritual walk, with sanctification, and with spiritual maturity. Were we being helped, encouraged, uplifted by the music? Hardly, since church music seemed designed to exalt the performers more than God. Could the bizarre scenes of stage performers undulating sensually to taped background music designed to allow them to do that for which they had no talent, be honoring to our God? Did the casual, "user-friendly" services facilitate worship or were they merely self-centered pep-rallies? I shall never forget my consternation at hearing that most irreverent expression of pseudo-piety the "Jesus Cheer." Were we supported by the fellowship with other believers?

What fellowship? Social interaction based on convenience and conformity can hardly pass for the communion of God's people. Or should we have focused our desire for spiritual nourishment on the ordinances, in particular the Lord's Supper. But here too, we were disappointed. The infrequently celebrated sacraments had long since been reduced to mere symbols, i.e., gutted of all divine power and mystery. But there was always the truth as presented in the teaching of the Word. But, poorly prepared, badly delivered homilies filled with jokes, platitudes and the individual interpretations did little to enhance growth and maturity. With what authority did our self-authenticating "pastors," "bishops" and "popes" teach?

And on it went. It soon became apparent that most of our questions were being answered in the negative, i.e., the answers consistently pointed to a desultory form of religious activism practically devoid of spiritual benefit. So it was that our quest for an authentic expression of the Christian Church began.

It was during this time of soul searching that I stumbled onto Frank Schaeffer's book *Dancing Alone*. In it he chronicles his conversion to the Orthodox Church. To my great surprise he had asked many of the very questions that occupied us and had arrived at some startling answers. So we decided to test his answers. To this end we proceeded along two tracks. One was to gather and read materials on the history, practices, and teaching of the Orthodox Church. My main concern here was to make sure that I was not abandoning the theological framework that had been mine for years. I was also concerned about compatibility with the doctrinal position of Columbia International University. The second path took the form of a search for personal experience, e.g. was Orthodox worship more spiritually beneficial than the evangelical variety.

My initial explorations yielded no insurmountable difficulties. During the next few months we proceeded through a series of steps that took us closer and closer to membership. Late in 1996 we made our first visit to an Orthodox Church. I was so overwhelmed by the worship service that I came away with the feeling that this was what I had been looking for. In February we entered a period of training called the catechumenate and were then received into the Church early in May 1997.

As I look back over this journey I am filled with gratitude for my own evangelical heritage and have a profound sense of gratitude at finally having found a spiritual home, the most obvious benefit of which has been a season of remarkable spiritual growth. However, in the process I seem to have lost almost everything that is familiar: many friends, my ministry, and only time will reveal what else. Nevertheless, I am convinced that I have made the right decision for the right reasons. As I look to the future I can not see very far. The only thing that is certain is a job

as a mechanic's helper at a construction firm. I have no idea what God has in store for me. But this seems to be an opportunity to trust him and expect great blessing.

Response: Stamoolis' Reflections on Becoming Evangelical