

Reflections on Becoming Evangelical

by Dr. James Stamoolis (Spring, 1999)

I appreciated Ed Rommen's honest reflection on his pilgrimage. Personally I am always interested in the way people make decisions on which spiritual path to follow. I think there is a lot to learn from his journey.

Any journey away from a tradition usually starts with some disappointment or lack of fulfillment. That is an evangelistic tool that all of us use when we try to present the Christian faith to those who do not know Jesus. It is also the reason many switch churches within the Protestant traditions. In part, what differentiates Ed's decision is that he has left the Reformation Tradition for an older expression of Christianity. I respect the difficulty of his pilgrimage because I made the pilgrimage the other way. I was raised an Orthodox, served as an altar boy, and was sincere in my devotion. It meant something to me, but I can say everything that Ed is saying the other way. There were forms, but they were devoid of meaning, there were homilies in our Orthodox parish, but they did not speak of the mysteries of the faith but of the necessity to support the activities of the parish, my fellow parishioners were more interested in social conversation than divine communion.

It was when I was introduced to an evangelical presentation of the gospel that communion with God through Christ became a reality to me, when worship became something I could participate in with my whole heart and mind and especially when prayer became real and meaningful instead of a repetition of words.

It is true that the gospel is contained in the Orthodox Church. I have argued that in print. It is also true that there are good and spiritual priests who care for the "souls" of their flock and take great pains to prepare them for spiritual realities. I count some of these men as friends and recognize in them the devotion to Jesus Christ that marks my evangelical friends. There are theological differences between western Christianity as represented by both the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Traditions and the different theological framework of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Again I have discussed these differences in my book, *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today*.

Many if not all of us in Missions could echo the disappointments that Ed Rommen found in Protestant churches. I cannot criticize Ed for his decision. The churches in traditional areas of Christian influence: Europe, Russia, and North America all need renewal in worship and expression of the reality of gospel faith. Some will find that renewal in charismatic churches, some will find new forms within their own protestant traditions, and some like Ed, will find that needed renewal in looking at a different form.

It should be the prayer of all of us that the Church in her many forms will be renewed and presented spotless to the Bridegroom when He comes.