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ODYSSEY TO ORTHODOXY

By

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Let me first thank His Grace, Bishop Maximos for the opportunity of being here at this very enjoyable and fruitful dialogue. Also my thanks goes to Dr. C.B. Hastings of the Home Mission Board for his part in arranging for me to come.

BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

My own spiritual odyssey began 39 years ago when, at age 10, I "walked the aisle" of the Baptist Church of Pinson, Alabama, and gave my heart to Christ. Shortly thereafter, I was baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a very cold stream known as Turkey Creek. Later, at age 16, at a youth revival (as they are called in the South) in my home church in Palmerdale, Alabama, I surrendered my life to God's call to the ministry -- to be a missionary in Africa.

The night that I made my commitment to the ministry my first cousin, Dr. Arthur Walker, who is now secretary of the Education Commission of the Southern Baptist convention, was preaching. He had a great influence on my life as did another cousin, Gerod Cole who today is pastor of a large Baptist Church in Tuskaaloosa, Alabama. (In fact, I have five first cousins who are Baptist ministers and I'm sure that at this point they consider me the black sheep of the family especially with this clerical garb on. However, I do have a little spot of white here under my neck!)

My schooling was at Howard College, now Samford University, followed

by a one semester stint at Golden Gate Baptist Seminary when it was still in Berkeley, California, finally completing my B.D. degree at Southwestern Baptist Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas in July of 1959. I was one of those who crammed three years of Seminary training into five. I held student pastorates for my last two years of college in Alabama, was an interim pastor while in California, and pastor of First Baptist Church at Crowley, Texas, for three and one-half years while in Southwestern Seminary.

A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE

During Seminary our oldest daughter contracted bulbar polio and was very critically ill, being placed in an iron lung for some time. In addition, the polio went into encephalitis and it appeared that if she did live she would possibly have severe brain damage. One of the great miracles of that whole episode is that she came out of all of that with only a paralysis of the left arm and shoulder muscles. We had prayed that if the Lord spared her life, He would leave her with a good mind. He answered that prayer, and she went on to graduate from college magna cum laude.

The whole experience was a very trying one for my wife and me. It required that she drop out of seminary which meant she could not finish the remaining ten hours of school work required by the Baptist Foreign Mission Board for us to be appointed as missionaries in Africa. So we did the next best thing, and took a small mission church in Xenia, Ohio in 1960.

We saw that church grow from 65 enrolled in Sunday School to almost 550 enrolled three years later. However the baptized membership of the church only reached between 175 and 200 during that time. We built

buildings and worked vigorously during that three year period. I remember hearing the story of the little old lady who said, "I'd like to join your church, but I'm not physically able", and I thought that surely applied to us.

EVANGELISM AND CHURCH-PLANTING

While busy as a pastor I was at the same time chairman of evangelism for the Greater Dayton, Ohio Association of Baptist Churches and had a great burden for world evangelization. In fact I was actively involved in a number of evangelization projects including taking a large group of pastors and laymen to the island of Haiti for an evangelistic program.

Before leaving the subject of the planting of that church in Xenia, Ohio, I might mention that the Lord had given me an opportunity to constitute a Baptist Church in Leeds, Alabama, some years before so that last year I was invited to the Dayton Avenue Baptist Church in Xenia, Ohio to speak for their 20th anniversary, and then to the Valley View Baptist Church of Leeds, Alabama to speak for their 25th anniversary two months later. I have always considered it an honor and a privilege to have been used of the Lord in establishing those two churches.

At the conclusion of three years with those wonderful people in Xenia, we felt the Lord was calling us either into a missionary or evangelistic ministry. We had made strong efforts for my wife to complete the ten hours of schooling she was lacking, but on one occasion just three days before she was to enroll I was in a light plane accident that almost took my life. Then the next semester just four days before she was to enroll I had to take her into the hospital in the middle of the night for emergency surgery. At that point I told the Lord that I wouldn't make any more efforts and that if He wanted us in Africa He would have to do

It of His own accord.

THE MOVE TO CAMPUS EVANGELISM

Though we had been very happy in the work of the church in Xenia, it was because of a deep passion for evangelism and missions that I was especially open to an event that changed the course of my life. A friend told me about an organization called Campus Crusade for Christ which was devoted to the evangelization of the world in this generation. After investigating it and meeting the man who was, at that time, the Big Ten Regional Director of Campus Crusade, Mr. Peter Gillquist, and believing that the Lord was leading me into campus evangelism, I resigned the pastorate and joined the staff of Campus Crusade in 1963. For us it was a great step of faith and for two years I experienced some of the greatest joys of my life -- talking to thousands of college students about Christ. But all along I felt uneasy about the fact that we were a 'para-church' organization and that we were not truly doing what Christ commissioned His church to do, baptizing the disciples and bringing them into Holy Communion and church life.

After a while I was "promoted up the ladder" and became increasingly disturbed over my inner conflicts concerning the issues of Scripture and church life. During this time I did however become Coordinator of African Affairs and was given the opportunity of going to the continent of Africa twice and thus fulfilled a little bit of that desire to minister to Africans which had been implanted in my heart as a young sixteen year old boy.

TAKING A LEAP OF FAITH

In 1968 I resigned from the staff due to the increasing tensions that I have mentioned along with some administrative tensions which had

developed as well. The burden to see the Church established as we see it in the New Testament burned in my heart. But we had no leading from God to join any other religious or para-church organizations. Thus we were forced to rely entirely upon the Lord for our financial support. I promised my wife that if He did not supply our needs through the unsolicited gifts and support of friends, then I would find some kind of secular employment. We were continually amazed at how He so faithfully met all our needs, many times in nothing less than miraculous ways.

At that time, my wife and I and our four children (later we were to have a fifth child) moved to a farm near Mansfield, Ohio where we began, without really intending to do so, a ministry to the troubled young people of the late '60's and early '70's. With no advertisement whatsoever, young people began to appear at our door asking if they could stay with us for a period of time. Some of them stayed a few days and some a few weeks and some literally for a year or more. We found ourselves ministering to runaways, "Jesus Freaks", dope addicts of all kinds, as well as "straight" young people who wanted to deepen their commitment to Christ and learn something about Christian discipleship.

As a family we were still faithful in our attendance at the Southern Baptist Church nearby, but we could not succeed in getting the young people who were coming to our home and living there with us to attend our church. After some time had passed we had accumulated a number of young people who had made commitments to Christ and were trying to get their lives back together again. They began to ask me to hold services for them. My children joined in that request and finally I yielded to pressure to do so.

AN ANXIOUS BUT REWARDING STEP

We held these worship services in a large basement area in our home, and I'll never forget the first time we had communion there. I almost felt like lightening might strike since I had never had communion outside the four walls of a church building. Believing that the Bible taught that we were to have communion each Sunday, we instituted that practice and found it to be a very rich, blessed experience.

We saw many dramatic conversions and baptized many people within the first two years of our ministry at Grace Haven Farm. In fact, one night after a college and high school retreat I baptized 26 young people at 12 midnight in a spring-fed pond (keeping the ice from forming) in a driving snow storm. As odd as that may seem it was certainly a very powerful and memorable experience.

Along with the experience at the farm, I was teaching a number of Bible studies in Columbus, Ohio as well as in other cities and towns in northeast Ohio. After a year and a half, the work grew increasingly intense and we were joined by a co-worker who had formerly been the vice-president of Campus Crusade. He and his wife and five daughters moved into a home next to ours and we labored together.

With all of this activity we still had no real church government or structure. We were into a "let the Spirit lead" kind of form. There was little or no discipline, and we were attempting to live as "simple brothers in pure grace". I must say that though there were many exciting things happening, the overall experience was rather gruesome. The lack of discipline and structure was almost impossible to live with.

THE MOVE TO NASHVILLE

In 1972, feeling that there was perhaps one leader too many at the farm and having an opportunity to begin a similar ministry in Nashville, Tennessee, my wife and I pulled up stakes again and with our family moved to Nashville to begin all over again. We took with us three single young people and of course our own family. On our first Sunday in Tennessee, since we knew of no church that we might attend, we held communion in our living room. The next week some friends wanted to know where we had worshiped and we told them. They asked if they could join us the following Sunday. So again, we had this rather informal kind of church experience going on in our living room.

In addition I was teaching a number of Bible studies around the city in various homes, and these grew and prospered. However, the church did not do well because we were too unstructured and certainly too unsophisticated for the Nashville people.

A CRUCIAL REUNION

In 1973 a group of ex-Campus Crusade staff members met in Dallas, Texas. Out of that meeting of about 70 people came a group of men who continued to meet every three months for theological study and seeking the Lord's guidance in the development of the various works and churches which we had started since leaving the staff of Campus Crusade. After we had had about three of these quarterly meetings the leadership of the group had settled down to seven men all of whom had been very closely associated as fellow-workers in Campus Crusade.

As we sought the Lord's guidance about the kind of churches that we were developing, we went back to the ancient fathers of the church to see what they did in those years just after the New Testament era. One of

our men, Bishop Jack W. Sparks, put out an excellent edition of the Apostolic Fathers which was published by the Thomas Nelson Publishing Co. That caused us to study the fathers much more carefully and it was the reading of St. Ignatius that completely changed my whole view of ecclesiology.

OUR CONVERSION TO ORTHODOXY

Realizing that he was the third bishop of Antioch, and that he served from about 70A.D. to 107 A.D. and reading his description of the bishops and presbyters and deacons of his time was revolutionary to me. Also his view of the Eucharist was exciting. And troubling. We began to see that hermeneutic which had rejected bishops and sacraments as a later aberration of church history was not on solid historical ground.

As this group of men continued to study and debate we finally got to St. Athanasius and the ecumenical councils. If anyone could be credited with our acceptance of orthodoxy it would have to be St. Athanasius and St. Ignatius. These men have become great heroes of ours along with many others of the ancient Church.

But this did not come without many struggles. As we taught these things to our people, they reacted quite strongly and some were convinced we were headed in the wrong direction. Thus quite a number left us and have since become outspoken critics. I'm sure we have made numerous blunders in our struggles to assimilate what we were learning. But our commitment to our growing understanding of orthodoxy and to the catholicity of the Church drove us to continue on, no matter what the cost.

In the mid 1970's we formed the New Covenant Apostolic Order and the number of workers involved in planting and developing churches grew to

about 20 men. At that time we had churches in the mid-west, the east, the south, the west, the north-west, Canada and Alaska. In reality, we took 20 or more denominations and made them into one. Sadly though, in 1978 my former co-worker from our ministry in Ohio chose not to continue with us on this path toward orthodoxy and left. In doing so he took with him the churches in Ohio and the east. The sorrow and acrimony resulting from that separation have been difficult to live down. But recently we have been making some positive steps toward renewing our old friendships, for which we thank God.

THE E.O.C. IS BORN

By February of 1979, we had grown into a very close-knit and highly committed body of workers and churches. We knew that the Lord was leading us to take another step toward unity with orthodox bodies in the United States and we felt that the best way to do that was to declare ourselves to be a denomination of orthodox churches.

In doing this, we did a very un-canonical thing -- though we were not aware of how un-canonical it was at the time. We were already functioning as bishops on the Ignation model in our churches, so the six of us (out of the original seven) who founded the movement secured a liturgy for the consecration of bishops, formed a circle and consecrated one another. Then went to our first official council and consecrated thirteen other men. That day, February 15, 1979, the Evangelical Orthodox Church was officially born.

We have continued to grow in numbers and spiritual strength. Our churches are very close-knit communities of love and service. And it is a great joy to see the health and beauty of these communities. We have

developed a strong catechetical procedure and we have, to the best of our ability, entered into orthodox theology and worship.

The Eucharist has become the center of our lives, whereas the emphasis before was only on mission and service. It's not that we have abandoned those two very important aspects of church life -- we see them coming more and more into focus -- but at the present time our emphasis is on a proper and complete worship.

STEPS TOWARD CATHOLICITY

By "chance" one of our bishops, Rt. Rev. Dale S. Autrey, met Bishop Dmitri of the Orthodox Church of America. Then later one of our men met Father Ted Wojcik of St. Innocent's Orthodox Church in a suburb of Los Angeles. Later, Father Schmemmann and Father Myendorff came from St. Vladimir's and lectured in our academy of theology. The result has been an official dialogue with the O.C.A. which is currently in progress.

Then recently Bishop Peter Gillquist had the good fortune of meeting Bishop Maximos who had kindly invited him to speak to several Greek Orthodox gatherings in Pittsburgh. As a result, we have begun to experience increasingly warm and gracious fellowship with our Greek Orthodox brethren. The outcome of it all is that we are moving toward full communion with the Orthodox Church. We don't know when it will happen but by the grace of God we believe it will surely be within this decade.

To get where we are required a great deal of humbling ourselves and eating "banquets of crow". For me to put on clerical garb was one of the most humbling experiences of my whole life since I had spoken against it so fervently. But it never hurts anyone to be humbled.

MUTUAL BENEFITS AND BLESSINGS

Numerous orthodox priests and bishops have told us that we are serving as a catalyst to help stir them up to more evangelical fervor as well as to prod them to taking more vigorous steps toward becoming more unified. On the other hand we have received immense blessings already from our association with them such as a great love for history, for richness of worship, for theological accuracy and spiritual understanding that far exceeds anything we ever knew before. But the greatest blessing has been a deepening understanding of the Incarnation and subsequent deepened love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

I am also very grateful for my Baptist heritage and roots. From them I gained and never lost my deep love for the Bible as God's Word. Thus it is a great joy to teach Bible in our St. Athanasius Academy of Orthodox Theology, and I intend to spend the rest of my life teaching and preaching Holy Scripture. Furthermore, the fervor and zeal for evangelism and missions comes by way of my Baptist heritage. In addition there has been planted in my heart a deep desire for genuine piety and holiness which I owe to my Baptist up-bringing.

I stand before you today as one who owes a great debt to both the Baptists and Orthodox. It is with all humility and sincerity that I say a warm "thank you"!

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