

Book Report

From Baptist to Byzantium:

How a Baptist Missionary Traveled Halfway Around the World to Find the Ancient Orthodox Faith

By

Father James Early

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Introduction:

I first met Fr. James Early and Jennifer in Houston at St. Joseph Orthodox Church in 2005 after Liturgy during the churches annual picnic festivities. I was there along with Fr. Gordon Walker to preach to the congregation on Orthodox unity. The church was founded in 1994 by Fr. Matthew Mackay, a brilliant priest and former Episcopalian whom I got to know from my daughter Maria when she lived in that city. Fr. Matthew and I had a few long distance phone conversations and I knew that he was a “good one” and that his congregation mirrored ours at St. Luke.

At the church picnic that day. I was fortunate to pick up a conversation with Fr. James and Jennifer with their young children. Asking how he came to Orthodoxy, as I usually do to a convert, Fr. James exclaimed, “I was a Baptist missionary in Serbia (Bosnia) and frustrated over many unsuccessful attempts to get the Orthodox to Bible Study. After pondering what to do next and talking to my supervisor, I thought I would go to their worship services and see what goes on. With that my supervisor exclaimed,

“Don’t do that you will never come back!” He was right Lee, I found a whole new way about the faith as I viewed inside my first Orthodox Church and that set me on a road to Orthodoxy with my wife and kids.”

I never thought I would be writing this Book Review on Fr. James and his road to Orthodoxy. I can tell you that after this meeting with him his unusual response stuck to me to this day. What a way to come to the Faith! However, his story is far more than just that entry into the local Orthodox Church and this fine book greatly enhances my Sunday conversation with him. He has a wonderful, moving story to tell and I am thankful that the Lord has motivated him in telling it. While the book mirrors Fr. Peter Gillquist’s brilliant book, **Becoming Orthodox**, it is

different in that it is a testimony of one man (wife too) and his struggle to follow God's will and seek the truth. As one of my great friends and a founding member of St. Luke Parish, Pat Dravillas, said many years ago, "Religion is about the truth, Lee." This is a great story about finding the Holy Orthodox Faith while in foreign mission work. If you are a member of The Faith, I am sure this book will reaffirm your conviction in its truth. For those seeking the truth, this book will give you all you need to get started on the road.

The Struggle

We start with an account of a young man's struggle to become a committed Christian in the Protestant arena. James Early was a product of a father, Cleland a Colonel in the Marine Corp. and mother Bettye with three children until, lo and behold, at age 45 she was to give birth to one more - James.

"My parents were decent, moral people who imparted to me a strong sense of right and wrong. Still, neither of them had much interest in God or the Bible, and very rarely attended any type of church."

James closest friends in high school were Southern Baptists. In college, he visited every church within walking distance and settled on the Baptist for its preaching and enthusiastic people. Soon he was attending a Friday night Bible Study Series drawing 50-100 students per week. Enter Jennifer whom he met there and married with both committing their lives to serving God. Two years later he enters a Seminary and struggles with income at Ft. Worth, Texas. While in seminary he learns the importance of a daily time of prayer and meditation. However, his intensive study of Scripture:

"...raised many questions about the meaning of certain passages, questions that my professors and pastors could not answer to my satisfaction."

A first encounter with Orthodoxy is a history course on "Missions in Eastern Europe" by a Baptist Romanian professor who had them read **The Orthodox Church** by Kallistos Ware. While he whipped through it in a weekend, it would be seven years later before he would read it again with very different results.

In Bosnia, James and Jennifer matriculate to the city of Banja Luka which is mostly Serbian-controlled. Soon their study of Orthodoxy became more serious. They are to become career missionaries. However, they found out that many previous missionaries were able to get some Serbs to make "a profession of faith," yet none would leave the Orthodox Church. James decides to dig deeper into this problem. He asks himself,

“What is it about this faith that inspires such loyalty? Few of the people ever darken the door of a church, and yet they will not leave their tradition. In fact many have been willing to fight and die for it.”

Dangerous Reading

James begins going in more depth on Orthodoxy and one day receives a telephone call encouraging him to read **Becoming Orthodox:**

“It is about a group of men that used to work for Campus Crusade for Christ but who all converted to Orthodoxy” I thought to myself, “Why on earth would anyone want to do that? I just had to read the book and find out.”

Nearly all evangelical missionaries held Campus Crusade in very high esteem. Its workers were practically viewed as saints.

The book goes on to describe the truths of Orthodoxy in an easy-to-read and nicely detailed fashion. James review of Orthodoxy is based upon the truths of bible, liturgy, hierarchy, sacraments, Holy Tradition, baptism and Mary using a number of other good books. And, as is the case in of all evangelism, step two requires mentoring and he is especially thankful for help from these people along the way: Fr. Matthew Mackay, Fr. Gordon Walker and Bishop Basil.

An added feature of the book is the Appendix where Fr. James outlines his recommended reading on “How to Turn an Evangelical Protestants into an Orthodox Christian in Four Easy Steps” and recommended reading for Roman Catholics.

This book is a **MUST READ for all Orthodox Christians** for it a good general introduction to the Faith and is well written. Even better and more important, from a “grass-roots evangelistic standpoint, it is a perfect book to get one on the road to Orthodoxy. The journey is another enlightening testimony with much needed encouragement for everyone. Ancient Orthodoxy gets to the heart which is a way to the soul and to our salvation. Fr. James and Jennifer have shown us another unique but heart-warming story of the road-less-travelled these days. We thank the Good Lord for it!!!

Lee Kopulos

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