

*The Way*

*What Every Protestant Should Know About the Orthodox Church*

Clark Carlton

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*The Way* was written specifically for an Evangelical Protestant audience, but it is also useful for any Orthodox Christian who is involved in missionary discussions with Protestants. It is a sequel to Carlton's catechism, *The Faith*. Two more titles in this series are *The Truth* and *The Life*. Of these, the former focuses on a Roman Catholic audience, while the latter attempts to explain the Orthodox Doctrine of Salvation.

There is a lot to like about this book. First of all, the author's style is erudite, but not pedantic; candid, but not unrefined. Since the author has a background in public speaking (as a youth he was a popular Protestant preacher), one supposes that this experience has amplified a natural ability to get the point across to all kinds of people by using language that is clear, engaging, and easy to understand. This is not an academic work, but a missionary tool whose specific purpose is to draw others into the Orthodox Faith. The character and tone of the author's writing is personal, even friendly. Beginning in the Introduction with a rebuttal to an article, *Why I am Not Orthodox* by Daniel Clendenin, which appeared in *Christianity Today*, Carlton sets out to demonstrate the confusion and misunderstanding Evangelical Protestants have toward historic, Orthodox Christianity. He continues on a personal level in Part I, "From First Baptist to the First Century," by relating some of the history of his Protestant background and the events that brought about his conversion. In Part II, "Scripture, Tradition, and the Church," he provides much valuable information on Protestant misconceptions about the Church, including an explanation and critique of the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. The Epilogue discusses "Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement."

Carlton writes with all the pious zeal of a convert, yet is neither overbearing nor vindictive. Although the Introduction winds up with flatly stating, "... if you are a Protestant ... you are separated from the Body of Christ," he has nevertheless dedicated the book to his former Baptist mentors and writes, "they helped instill in me the love for the

Scriptures and the thirst for the truth that eventually led me to embrace the Holy Orthodox Church, the pillar and ground of truth.” The Introduction states moreover that “Orthodoxy and Protestantism are two fundamentally different religions,” an assertion which makes no bones about the exclusivity of the Faith. That conclusion is one that is often accompanied by the distress of a father or mother or dear friends who do not understand why a conversion to Orthodoxy is necessary. They are bewildered: “You accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour. We are the saved. God’s will is that we preach and minister to this lost and dying world. Why have you fallen for the pageantry of this foreign religion?” To make it worse, these people often are, as Carlton points out, “wonderful people,” filled with love, kindness, and every decency. What the newly illumined Orthodox needs is to be able to answer their questions in a way that takes into account the Protestant outlook and understanding. Not all Protestants will appreciate the assertions Carlton must make, but most will be compelled to read on, recognizing, as they will, the familiar territory Carlton creates by language and examples he pulls from his Baptist experience.

Protestant readers may be familiar with the phenomenon known as “testimony time,” or something similar in their gatherings, where one person jumps to his feet and relates his conversion experience, or something he thinks is edifying. In a similar spirit, in Part I, Carlton relates those events in his Protestant background which were to influence his decision to become an Orthodox Christian. Only this time the testimony has a surprisingly different outcome than it would at First Baptist. It is this forthright account which enlivens the book, giving it a sense of immediacy and personal appeal. Those who have had similar experiences and confronted the same issues will recognize the sentiments that propelled Carlton to search for the True Faith.

Carlton relates that as a teenager, he was a success as a Southern Baptist “preacher boy” (a term he says he detested), and his involvement in what has been termed “the cult of instant conversion,” which he declares a blatant betrayal of the witness of Scripture. He became disturbed with the pressure to perform well for the “preaching service” to make it a success. Often he did not even know what subject he should choose for sermon material, since Baptists and other Protestants provide no framework for this. It is left up to the individual and what the individual feels the “Lord has laid on his heart.” But the sermon *is* the central feature of the Baptist Sunday Morning service. It is at this

point he makes a rather remarkable observation: “Baptists say they do not believe in the sacraments, but they understand the sacramentality of the Word.” Eventually, preaching in the Evangelical Protestant context became revolting to him. He longed to worship God truly.

He had a fleeting interest in the so-called “Christian Coffee Houses” and “contemporary Christian music” before his graduation from high school, but the highlight of this period of his life was the speech he delivered at the Youth Speaker’s Tournament sponsored by the Tennessee Baptist Convention. His speech, which won the state-wide event, was entitled, “My Heritage as a Southern Baptist,” and denounced the then occurring takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. In it he asserted that the interpretation of Scripture should be left to the individual to approach the Bible and obey it “as he feels led.” In retrospect, he notes that he did not make use of the Scripture quotation II Peter 1:20, where the Apostle says, “no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation.” Nor did he realize that “the Bible I held had become an idol—an idol that I myself controlled” (p. 43). Before the speech was over, he had also taken a parting shot at “meaningless creeds.”

In August of 1986 he entered the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, was a bit bored, but became animated by an interest in Liturgics. While studying, he noticed a lump on his leg that had to be surgically removed; the operation caused him to miss Spring Term and stranded him at school. During this time, he took advantage of the well-stocked library of the school and read an extensive selection of books by Pelikan, Meyendorf, Dostoyevsky, and others. The most important book he read was *Being As Communion* by John Zizioulas. It proved to be a difficult reading experience; but by the time he was finished, he had acquired an understanding of the Holy Trinity that falsified his Evangelical Protestant foundations, which, he says, were “shaken to the core.” From then on, he proceeded to make many new discoveries through his reading: how the desert fathers say the fire of hell is the love of God, how St. Athanasius says God became man so that man might become God, how the apostolic tradition has the same authority as the Gospel itself, and so on. He noted that all of these contradicted specific Evangelical Protestant teachings. Sin, he learned, was not a mere transgression of a commandment, but a denial of love, and of God and of His condescension toward us. Sin is the

conviction that autonomy and self-sufficiency are preferable to obedience. The irony, of course, is that Protestantism preaches that the autonomy and sufficiency of the individual is the starting point for salvation and “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”

In the fall of 1987, the Seminary suffered a disastrous takeover by the majority fundamentalist faction of the Southern Baptist Convention which threatened to change the school's established order overnight. He felt strangely apart from this major disruption because of his blossoming interest in Orthodoxy, yet was forced to examine the major presuppositions of his Baptist religion when confronted with the reexamination of every detail of the seminary's life and purpose. It was then he realized he would not be registering for the next fall, and soon after this, on Pascha, 1988, he received Chrismation and became a member of a small OCA parish which met in rented quarters.

That brings us up to Chapter 5, the end of Part I. Part II, “Scripture, Tradition, and the Church,” traces modern Evangelical Protestant ideas to the Reformers. He achieves this largely through reference to the cornerstone doctrine of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*, which he calls “the very bedrock of Protestant theology.”

Earlier in the book, Carlton wrote that the Church does not need to be reinvented according to the “blueprint” of the New Testament. “The Orthodox Church does not *imitate* the Church of the New Testament, She *is* the Church of the New Testament” (p. 84). The Reformers were the first to launch a major protest against the widespread abuses of the Latin church. But they, instead of embracing Holy Orthodoxy, thought that by returning to the Bible alone, Christianity could be “divested of all accretions and be returned to the pristine state of the early Church” (p. 91). The ideas of *sola Scriptura* are behind this vain and futile hope, which persists to this day. As Carlton points out, it is an irony that the Reformers sought to recreate the early Church by means of a doctrine wholly foreign to Her, for at no time did the Church ever subscribe to the belief that the totality of the Church's life and doctrine can be contained in the Scriptures. Such thinking had its beginning only in the Reformation. The very doctrine itself is a self-contradiction: it cannot be derived from the Bible (as the author goes on to demonstrate) and therefore its assertion that the only credible doctrines must be exclusively biblical is invalid.

This point is vividly illustrated in Chapter 10 “Credo,” a chapter that appeared in a recent issue of *The Christian Activist*. What the *Symbol of Faith* has as an object of

belief is the Church, “I believe ... in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.” It is very interesting to note that the Westminster Confession of Faith, as well as other major Protestant confessions and statements of belief, begin with an affirmation of belief in the sole authority of the Bible, something which denotes a radical departure from the ancient Faith. “In the final analysis,” writes Carlton, “*sola Scriptura* is not so much an affirmation of the Bible as it is a denial of tradition” (p. 90).

Carlton goes on to examine four of the major presuppositions of the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. It is at points like these that he really shines, making this book an invaluable guide to understanding the errors of Protestantism. His discussion of the reasoning behind *sola Scriptura* is supported by alternating references to modern Protestant comments and the history of the Church.

He then examines the “proof-texts,” passages Protestant scholars and others claim lend credence to the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. There are many Evangelical Protestants who pride themselves on being masters of the Bible and through misinterpretation of the text remain entrenched in their error. Many of us have had experience with these wizards and may have been hard pressed to defend ourselves against them and to readily supply a solution for them. If so, Chapter Six, “*Sola Scriptura: the Proof-texts*,” provides a discussion of some of the passages of Scripture most often used. Those who cling to the accepted Protestant teaching on II Timothy 3:16-17, for example, which is perhaps the main passage thought to provide an apology for *sola Scriptura*, may be amazed to discover scriptural evidence for quite an opposite exegesis in the very same chapter. While Protestants are leveraging this passage as “evidence” of the sole sufficiency of the Scriptures, they overlook a small yet vital detail: in verse 8, reference is made to two of Pharaoh’s court magicians. The amazing thing is that St. Paul refers to them by name, “Jannes,” and “Jambres.” You may get a blank stare from your interlocutor when you prevail upon him to remember where else these names are mentioned in Holy Scripture—because there isn’t another place. That is because St. Paul is recalling the names not from Scripture, but from the equally reliable source of Tradition.

Perhaps then you will be able to point out other meaningful phrases in this passage which seem to easily elude the Protestant minded, such as, “continue in the things thou hast

learned, knowing *of whom* thou hast learned them.” The “*of whom*,” of course, speaks loudly in support of Holy Tradition.

A further point is that the Scriptures St. Paul refers to is the Old Testament. Yet somehow Protestants employ the passage as a defense of the canon of the New Testament scriptures, even though the canon for these books had not yet received conciliar approval in Ecumenical Council. “If Paul were asserting the sole sufficiency of the Scriptures (i.e. the Old Testament),” he writes, “it would obviate the need for the New Testament.”

As much battle cry as doctrine, *sola Scriptura* was the great hope that was to build anew the Western church. But no church was built anew, instead, hundreds of new religious sects appeared. Chapter Nine, “The Protestant Transformation,” shows that what resulted from the movement was not a reorganization of the Western church structure, but the generation of an entirely new and false tradition. Because of this new concept, which introduced the idea that everything necessary for the soul’s salvation could be confined within the pages of Scripture, Christianity was transformed (or perhaps more accurately, “deformed”) into a mere ideology, whose tenets could be subscribed to intellectually, making salvation available to the individual through the process of mere intellectual assent.

All of this makes very worthwhile reading. The author has demonstrated to us that he was a full-fledged Southern Baptist prior to his conversion, and therefore has insight into this material that only first-hand experience can provide. This personal history not only authenticates his discussions on *sola Scriptura*, but also shows the history of God working in the heart of an individual to bring him to the True Faith. So in several ways, the proof of Part II is in Part I. The agonizing soul-searching of the author, the hours of study he spent, and doubtless the earnestness of prayer, led to the concisely organized arguments found in Part II. In a sense, the entire book is autobiographical. The author has finally found the true Faith and “come home” to Orthodoxy, as certain of his brethren might put it.

The Epilogue, “Orthodoxy and the Ecumenical Movement,” however, casts a shadow of doubt on this foregoing conclusion. While the entire book has witnessed to the existence of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, Ecumenism denies it. Most Evangelical Protestants have excluded themselves from the Ecumenical Movement, even though the various bodies who call themselves Evangelical have no central authority. It is

a matter of conscience with them, since they perceive the spirit of worldliness and anti-Christ in the Ecumenical Movement. Clearly, Carlton must speak to this blatant contradiction: how can the Orthodox Church, which claims to be the only true Church, seek involvement in an organization or movement which denies and even abhors such a claim?

Carlton concludes that the Orthodox should not be involved in the WCC. This is admirable, yet his conclusion is not reached in a well-developed manner, nor in a way that is consistent with the facts. Some might say not to nit-pick here. After all, it is not a small thing for someone from the modernist jurisdiction to make such a statement—that Orthodox bodies ought to withdraw from the WCC—and it is not a small thing, because it is not at all popular with their hierarchs who have become resolutely entrenched in the Ecumenical Movement. In fact, our author is walking on eggshells every step of the way.

But to maintain that Orthodox have been involved in the WCC only on the basis of enlightening others to the true Faith is simply not true. We could bend a little and say, “no longer true,” for this was the original strategy when, for example, in 1957, the theme for the WCC Conference in Oberlin, Ohio was “The Unity We Seek.” The response drafted by the Orthodox stated, “Unity has never been lost...For us this Unity is embodied in the Orthodox Church.” But in 1968, at Uppsala, amid the relentless and frenzied ecumenistic policies of Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras (who, oddly enough, is not even mentioned in the Epilogue), the Orthodox took the final step of becoming organic members, in effect giving their approval to the principles, statements and undertakings of the WCC. Before the sessions at this conference in Uppsala, the Orthodox joined the Protestants in a common prayer which stated, “O God, Father... Your love is stretched out upon all men, to seek the Truth, *which we have not known.*”

How can any Orthodox Christian vocalize a prayer like that and hope to remain Orthodox? And this occurred nearly 20 years before the debacle of the Canberra Assembly, with its blasphemous references to our Saviour, the pagan rituals, and the common eucharistic celebration, all of which were attended by Orthodox hierarchs, who are themselves full members of this ecumenistic organization. Not one of them raised his voice in protest or refused to participate. Is this witnessing to the truth of Orthodoxy?

And yet, to his credit, Carlton can be very clear about the correct stance of the Orthodox regarding the Ecumenical Movement. On page 218 he states:

Protestants, for the most part, see the Church as some invisible entity, or perhaps as an entity that is yet to be fully realized. Many are content to engage in ministerial cooperation and common worship, while leaving long-standing doctrinal disputes unresolved. The ‘unity of the Church’ is something to be achieved through dialogue.

For the Orthodox, this approach is not merely mistaken, it is decidedly heretical.

Archbishop Dimitry, in the *Foreword* to this book, refers to Carlton’s comments on ecumenism as “correct and balanced.” I wonder if those who have erected statues and formed associations to honor the efforts of Patriarch Athenagoras would have a similar opinion? Would they not rather proclaim, as Athenagoras did in a “decidedly heretical” fashion, “Let the dogmas be placed in the storeroom,” and “Theology equals love.” Those phrases sound trite, dated and hopelessly fatuous to many nowadays, but the intent behind them remains just as misleading as ever. They are statements that have never been retracted, and they completely contradict what Carlton has written.

No reference is made to the question of the Calendar issue. It is well-known that Orthodox involvement in the Ecumenical Movement began with the forced adoption of the New Calendar by the Ecumenical Patriarch Meletios Metaxahis, who was seeking to facilitate ecumenical relations with the West by instituting a common festal calendar. This is a watershed event. Just as it is impossible to explain Protestant theology without reference to the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, so is it impossible to explain how the Orthodox got involved in the Ecumenical Movement without reference to the change of the Church’s calendar in 1924.

Carlton’s conclusion is correct. The Orthodox ought to get out of the WCC. But his assessment is not correct. The Orthodox hierarchs who are presently members of the WCC and participate in their meetings have joined out of sympathy for the ideals of the Ecumenical Movement, as is witnessed by the many agreed statements signed throughout the years and participation in joint-prayer services and even pagan rituals. It is clear that they no longer witness to the truth of the Orthodox Faith. The only course to follow is that which should have happened many years ago: repent of a very great error and exit at once. But given the present circumstances, that is a happy conclusion few can hope for.