

Encounters with Orthodoxy

*How Protestant Churches
Can Reform Themselves Again*

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Introduction

A Journey into Russian Orthodoxy

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.
The Jesus Prayer of the Orthodox tradition

In the spring of 2003 my family and I made a momentous decision. For five years I had been teaching systematic theology at a Presbyterian seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In another year, 2004–2005, I would be eligible for my first sabbatical. Most of my colleagues take sabbaticals to sit in libraries and write books. I, too, had a research project in mind.

But something much bigger than academic scholarship was at stake for me. I was deeply concerned about the state of the church in North America—particularly my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). I wondered where I fit in a church that was confused about its theology and divided over contentious moral issues. I found myself increasingly distressed about a church that had become politicized and had lost its grounding in the fullness of the apostolic faith. I sometimes asked myself how long I could remain with integrity in the Presbyterian Church when it lacked consensus about basic matters of Christian faith and practice.

A second concern weighed on me as well. Although I was thriving in my calling as a teacher at the seminary, I was increasingly frustrated with the world of academic conferences and papers to which theological scholars are expected to contribute. Too much of the academy seemed to me to avoid the deepest questions of human existence and instead issued an endless torrent of words about historical trivia or cleverly critiqued

and even dismissed the foundations of Christian faith in the name of one righteous political cause or another.

I could no longer see clearly where my church was headed or what my own vocation entailed. I needed distance on things: to stand back, take a deep breath, and try to make sense of my life and my faith again. The sabbatical, I hoped, would give me new perspective.

My wife, Deb, and I decided to do something that we would not have done otherwise and perhaps not ever be able to do again. We decided to spend a year abroad with Christians whose way of worshiping we knew to be profoundly different from our own. We decided to see what these Christians could teach us about living the faith and being the church. For a year we would become pilgrims in a foreign land in the hopes of finding our way back home.

We decided to live for a year in Russia among Christians who call themselves Orthodox.

Why Protestants Need Eastern Orthodoxy

This book is directed to those North American Protestants who worry about the future of the church, as I do. The issue is more than steep membership decline or contentious debates about moral and social issues, as troubling as these phenomena may be. Ultimately at stake is our longing for a deeper experience of God than we currently find in our own churches. We sense that North American Protestantism has lost something essential, although we cannot always put our finger on what. We have begun to look for wisdom and insight from elsewhere in the wider Christian tradition.

This book is especially addressed to Protestants who are intrigued by the Eastern Orthodox tradition and what it might have to offer us. Protestants increasingly want to know more about icons, relics, monasteries, seasons of fasting, and the Orthodox liturgy. Perhaps a brief visit to an Orthodox church or monastery prompted curiosity about the Orthodox tradition. Perhaps we once picked up a book with beautiful reproductions of icons of Mary, Jesus, or the saints and wondered why our own churches were so barren. Maybe we visited a historically Orthodox nation, such as Greece or Russia, and sensed something both strange and fascinating about a form of Christianity that otherwise seems hidden to us in North America.

In this book I argue that the Orthodox tradition has spiritual riches that Protestants desperately need if we are to find our way into the future. In

a time of theological confusion, Orthodoxy calls us back to what is most important in Christian faith and life. The point is not to romanticize the Orthodox tradition but to discover its unique value to us at this time.

Since that first visit to Russia I have immersed myself in Orthodoxy. I have attended hundreds of divine liturgies, visited ancient monasteries, lit candles before famous icons, and stood before miracle-working relics. I believe that I can help North American Protestants better understand what they can—and cannot—accept from the Orthodox tradition.

I do not try in this volume to convert readers to Orthodoxy. Many books are already available that offer the personal testimony of Protestants who have become Orthodox. My stance is different. As much as Orthodoxy has enriched my life, I believe that the Protestant Reformers and their followers were not all wrong. They raised critical questions about medieval Catholicism that Protestants should continue to pose to themselves and to the Orthodox. Moreover, thoughtful Orthodox acknowledge that they need our critique.

A significant encounter with Orthodoxy is nevertheless essential for Protestant churches today. In this book, I reflect on how Orthodoxy has already reshaped my life. Some of Orthodoxy's practices and disciplines have become my own. I have icons on my office walls, I observe days and seasons of fasting, I regularly attend the Easter Vigil at a nearby Orthodox monastery, and I continue to journey to Russia to experience Orthodox life in a significantly different cultural context. I invite other Protestants to join me on this pilgrimage to see how Orthodoxy can reshape our churches.

Although I remain a Protestant theologian at a Presbyterian seminary, I feel that I am no longer just Presbyterian. Orthodoxy has offered me a vision of God's beauty and glory that I want to know more about and that I long to experience more fully. When I step into Orthodoxy I find myself surrounded by a transfigured world. Icons, relics, the liturgy, and the Eucharist all bear witness to the almighty God who out of infinite compassion became human flesh and entered the world in Jesus Christ. This holy God, though transcendent, is also near. God invites us into his life, which is true life. We experience God's energy and light.

How to Learn from the Orthodox

In this book I focus primarily on Orthodox religious practice. For the Orthodox, a person comes to know God not primarily by weighing ideas but rather by participating in the life of the church. We do not wait to

come to worship until we have worked out an adequate doctrine of the Holy Spirit; on the contrary, because we experience God's holiness in the church's worship, we become aware of the Spirit and his work, and we worship God more truly.

Similarly, a person does not first come to know Christ by working out a theory of how two natures—one human, the other divine—come together in one person. Rather, we begin with an experience: the conjoining of divine and human life, as we receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation in the Eucharist. The Orthodox could add that we come to know the God-man not simply by reading or hearing about him but rather by walking with him through the events of Holy Week—until Saturday night becomes Sunday morning, the scales fall from our eyes, and we proclaim with the whole church, “He is risen! Truly he is risen!”

Because I focus on religious practice, I do not offer in this volume a systematic explication of Orthodox theology, even though I make my living as a systematic theologian. Neither does this book present an exercise in ecumenical theology, as important as it is for academic theologians to compare how Orthodox and Protestants (and Catholics) understand key church doctrines. Rather, I wish to introduce Protestants to what the Orthodox actually do as they worship and pray, helping us see what is theologically at stake for them.

In chapter 1 I describe my family's journey into Russia and Orthodoxy. What was it like to enter into another culture and language? How did living like Russians help us better understand the witness of the Orthodox tradition? I argue that every Christian needs the disorienting and reorienting experience of stepping into a church tradition different from one's own in order to see one's own church tradition more clearly.

In subsequent chapters, I explore different aspects of my Protestant encounter with Orthodoxy,

In chapter 2 I focus on the profound sense of holiness that permeates Orthodox time and space. I look at why Orthodox worshipers make the sign of the cross when they enter the church, bow or even prostrate themselves before the eucharistic elements, and venerate relics—pieces of bone or skin—that they believe to have divine energy.

I reflect on the significance of ritual in Orthodoxy in chapter 3 and look at how ritual invites worshipers into this holy time and space. In particular, I ask why rhythms of fasting and feasting are so important to Orthodox believers.

The Orthodox emphasis on beauty is my topic in chapter 4—how icons use beauty to invite worshipers into a holy, transfigured world.

I explore the central place of miracles in Orthodoxy in chapter 5. Particularly challenging to Protestants is the Orthodox practice of praying to saints in heaven, as though they have miraculous power to assist us.

In chapter 6 I attend to the importance of the monastic life in the Orthodox tradition and consider why the Orthodox view monasteries as places of special spiritual power.

I examine Orthodox eucharistic theology and practice in chapter 7. In receiving the bread and wine, worshipers believe themselves to be truly united to the resurrected, transfigured Christ. Nevertheless, they also believe that they receive this new life only if they are rightly prepared. Questions then arise as to what constitutes right preparation.

In each of these areas I explore how religion can become empty ritualism and, even worse, a sinful effort to manipulate God. The traditional Protestant critique of religion is essential to my argument. I nevertheless believe that Orthodox religious practices, as strange as they are to most mainline Protestants, make an essential witness to us. They challenge us to recover what our churches seem to have lost: a sense of God as almighty, holy, transcendent and yet near, and therefore worthy of all honor and worship.

If Protestants need to learn from Orthodox religious practices, the question immediately arises as to whether they can faithfully do so without becoming Orthodox. I worry that those of us who discover Orthodoxy's spiritual riches do not always appreciate that they are part of the very fabric of the Orthodox Church. They commit us to the church that has preserved and cultivated them over the centuries, a church that regards itself as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The riches of Orthodoxy are not the kind of free-floating spiritual wisdom that a seeker finds on the Internet and downloads for one's own purposes.

In chapter 8 I therefore look carefully at whether and how Protestants can use Orthodox icons or participate in an Orthodox liturgy—and how Protestants should understand and deal with the fact that they are not allowed to receive the Eucharist. In doing so I reject the spiritual eclecticism of contemporary Protestantism, which desperately borrows religious practices not only from the Orthodox but also from Catholics and even non-Christian religious traditions. If the Reformers sometimes threw out the baby (vital church traditions) with the bathwater (ritualism), I fear that we sometimes want to rescue the bathwater (the rituals) without the baby (the specific church traditions that have preserved and guarded them). Protestants can benefit from the Orthodox tradition only if they respect its integrity.

I must note that these questions are, of course, first of all directed to me, as one who has immersed himself in Orthodoxy. While my reflections in this book remain tentative, I am nevertheless confident that Protestants who are willing to enter deeply into the Orthodox world will find that they, like I, can no longer think of themselves only as Protestants.

The first Reformation drove Protestants away from other Christian churches. A second Reformation will depend on a deep, thoughtful Protestant encounter with other Christian traditions and indeed other religious traditions. Mine began with Orthodoxy.

Encountering Orthodoxy

O Savior, who journeyed with Luke and Cleopas to Emmaus,
journey with thy servants as they now set out upon their way, and
defend them from all evil.

Orthodox prayer before beginning a journey¹

Of all the places that a North American Protestant theologian could choose for a sabbatical, why Russia? Neither my wife nor I have ethnic roots in that part of the world. Neither of us had ever studied the Russian language. If I wanted to study Orthodoxy, why not in Greece or, for that matter, Pittsburgh, which has its own share of Orthodox churches that served the Eastern European immigrants who poured into the city to work in the steel mills in the early twentieth century?

I think of what one of our language teachers in St. Petersburg told us as he lamented the long, brutal Russian winters: “If Peter the Great wanted a capital on the ocean, why couldn’t he have chosen the Black Sea instead of the Baltic?” The Black Sea is to Russians what Florida or Southern California is to North Americans: clear skies, warm sunshine, and beautiful beaches. Why had we and Peter chosen St. Petersburg instead?

Seeing God’s hand in events is easier in retrospect. More than twenty years earlier I had lived in East Germany when it was still under Communist rule. Under the auspices of the World Council of Churches I had spent a year as a guest student at the theological seminary of the Evangelical Church in East Berlin. That experience had resulted in many friendships and an enduring interest in the situation of the church during and after communism.

One of the great mysteries to me during that year in East Germany was

why it was so hard to meet Russians. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers were stationed in East Germany. Russian was the first required foreign language in the East German schools. The Soviet Union dictated many of East Germany's policies. Banners and posters everywhere declared eternal friendship between Russians and East Germans, but things were more complicated in practice.

East Germans could not easily travel on their own to Russia. Personal contact between most Russian soldiers and East German civilians was forbidden. Many East Germans resented the Soviet presence and still remembered the raping and plundering that took place as Russian soldiers pushed the Nazis back to Berlin at the end of World War II. Russian and East German scholars or businesspeople occasionally met, but for someone like myself—already a foreigner in the country—getting to know a Russian seemed impossible.

One day, my East German friend Thomas and I were waiting for a connection on a lonely train platform near Potsdam just as a group of Russian soldiers waited for theirs. I told Thomas that I was interested in talking to one of the soldiers. He exchanged a few words with their sergeant in Russian, but the man looked at us cautiously. The soldiers soon headed their way and we ours.

In 1986 I traveled to the Soviet Union for two weeks with a group of church representatives on a travel seminar sponsored by the National Council of Churches. We visited Orthodox, Baptist, and Jewish congregations, and for the first time I was able to visit Russians in their homes and have extended conversations with them. Inspired by my tales, my wife traveled with a group to the Soviet Union in 1991, just months before its collapse.

I now sat in Pittsburgh thinking about my sabbatical plans. The Cold War was long over. East Germany and West Germany had reunited. Russia and the United States no longer threatened each other with nuclear devastation, but that part of the world still seemed so far away and different. The possibility of a year in Russia was intriguing. Where larger political factors had once dictated enmity, friendship now seemed possible.

I also wanted to learn about the Eastern Orthodox tradition. My training had been almost entirely in the theology of the Western churches: Protestant and Roman Catholic. I had visited Orthodox churches in Russia and the United States, and in graduate school I had been fascinated by patristic theology, but my personal encounters with the Orthodox had been as limited as those with Russians. A year in Russia would allow me to broaden my theological horizons and investigate

stories of a miraculous rebirth of Orthodox religious life in Russia since the fall of communism.

These personal interests were, however, only part of the story. Each of us fantasizes about places we might someday visit, but not all fantasies can or should come true. Larger factors determine what we can do. We have limited time and money. Countries have laws about who can enter and for how long. Contemplating a move to a foreign country requires investigating whether you can obtain housing and what you will actually do in a place where you know no one and have to fend for yourself in a language and culture that are not your own.

If Deb and I were to have a sabbatical year in Russia we would need an institutional location and sponsor. We turned to the world missions office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and learned of a small, independent ecumenical institute in St. Petersburg headed by Vladimir Fedorov, a priest who had once taught theology at the city's Orthodox theological seminary and academy. Over the next months, Presbyterian Church officials would meet with Fedorov and discuss our interests.

In the meantime Deb and I began learning Russian. Administrators at the University of Pittsburgh agreed to enroll me as a guest student in their intensive summer language institute. For eight weeks in the summer of 2003 I lived and breathed Russian 101. Mornings were spent in classroom instruction. Afternoons were devoted to homework in the language lab and at a table in the great hall of the Cathedral of Learning, the massive neogothic tower at the center of the campus. In the evenings I reviewed at home for the next day's quiz.

My class had seven students. I was forty-eight years old; they were eighteen or nineteen, with brain synapses that fired much more quickly than my own. Their ability to recognize and reproduce new sounds, vocabulary, and rules of grammar dazzled me. The only thing I had going for me was self-discipline. The kids would come dragging in on Monday morning, talking about the weekend parties. I kept to myself and worked. There was not a minute to spare. Even on the bus to and from the university I reviewed vocabulary flash cards or formulated simple sentences in my head. I was the tortoise, and the young people were the hares. They would spring far ahead of me, but I always managed to keep them in sight.

Deb studied Russian on her own and then met regularly with a tutor, a young Ukrainian woman who taught in the university's language program. Once the summer ended, however, we had our usual work responsibilities and little time for language study. We hoped that we had enough

Russian to get us started, but I remember how I struggled to read even the opening verses of John's Gospel. Despite all of our language work, we still had the equivalent of only one year of college Russian under our belts.

By fall, Fedorov had promised that his institute would arrange for letters of invitation and help us find housing. His assistant, Marina Shishova, would be our key contact. But months went by, and in the spring we still had no invitations in hand. I finally arranged to phone Marina, but her daughter answered and told me that Marina had been hospitalized with a massive tooth infection and did not know when she would return home.

We were also trying to raise money for the trip. The seminary would provide my regular salary during the sabbatical, but we would have to pay for five airplane tickets. Too, rent in St. Petersburg would be much more expensive than in Pittsburgh. Thankfully, several church-related foundations offered support. Moreover, the seminary allowed me to draw on monies designated for faculty travel, and we arranged to rent our house for six of the twelve months that we would be gone.

Even though we did not yet have the visas, we decided to buy our plane tickets before they became too expensive. Other arrangements started to come together. Garth Moller, a Presbyterian mission coworker who lived in St. Petersburg and operated a Christian school, agreed that we could stay with him and his wife until we found housing of our own.

The school was an answer to prayer. We did not want to put our children in the Russian public schools. The language barriers would be too great to surmount, especially for our daughter in high school, where the advanced work required fluency. The American School and the British School were outrageously expensive, a reasonable option only for businesspeople whose companies would foot the bill. Instruction in the Mollers' school was in Russian, but an English-speaking international school for missionary children shared the building. We would be able to work out a viable program.

Ten weeks prior to our scheduled departure on July 4, we finally received an express delivery packet with the letters of invitation that would enable us to apply for the visas at the Russian Consulate in New York. Our relief turned to panic when we discovered that at least two of them had mistakes.

Another six weeks passed before new, corrected letters were issued. We quickly sent off our applications to New York, only to have a consular officer contact us for additional information. To receive a yearlong visa for Russia, one must submit the results of an HIV/AIDS test, and the

doctors had used different forms for Deb and me. The consulate insisted that the forms be identical. We were now within a week of our departure date. Rebooking the flights would be expensive, and seats might not be available for several weeks. We sent the new forms by overnight delivery and waited on pins and needles.

July 3, 2004, a Saturday, began as a beautiful summer morning. Bright sunshine streamed through the large trees on our street. The grass was still a deep green, and flowers were in bloom: orange daylilies, yellow roses, and Lazy Susans. We knew that the express delivery services worked only until noon. Would our visas come? Would we board our plane the next morning? Our church had commissioned us on the previous Sunday, and we had said good-bye to friends. We were packed. Our daughter Rachel's goldfish had already been delivered to the next-door neighbors. We had stopped our mail. Our phone was about to be shut off.

As is our family custom on Saturdays, we made waffles. We ate on the back porch, but it was hard not to go to the other end of the house and look out the front door every five or ten minutes. At 11:30 a.m., a large brown UPS truck stopped across the street. My daughters and I piled on to the front porch and watched as the driver hopped out of his cab and walked up our driveway. We stood there gazing at him and holding out our hands as though begging for alms, and he must have worried that we were about to hug and kiss him, our eyes were so filled with hope and anticipation. But we still had to determine if all the documents were in order; we let him go, tore open the envelope, carefully examined the visa glued into each passport, rubbed our eyes in astonishment, and let out a squeal.

We were on our way.

Russian Realities

To decide to spend a year in another culture with a different language probably takes a good dose of romanticism. I think that Deb and I imagined something like this: We would get to Russia and live for a few days with the Mollers. Father Vladimir or Marina would help us find an apartment. In September, our kids would attend the Mollers' school. Deb and I would continue intensive language study. We would find an Orthodox parish in which to worship regularly. I would have a place at the ecumenical institute to read and do research. The members of the institute would direct me to key books and people with whom I should become familiar in order to understand Orthodoxy in post-Communist Russian society.

On evenings and weekends the family and I would enjoy the great cultural treasures of St. Petersburg: museums, parks, monuments, and concerts. The year would be demanding but exciting. We would eventually make new friends and come home with insights into Russia and Orthodoxy that would help us think in new ways about the church in North America.

These imaginings were not wild flights of fantasy. Much of the year indeed unfolded along these lines. What we could not know ahead of time, however, was just how complicated and demanding each of these pieces would prove to be.

Several weeks before our departure, Garth e-mailed us that he had arranged for us to live with Brian, a friend of his. The advantage, said Garth, was that Brian lived in the city, where we would have easy access to public transportation; Garth lived on the outskirts of the city, far from the metro. Brian happened to be in the United States in the early summer. I introduced myself to him by phone and clarified arrangements. I mentioned that my only need was that the apartment be reasonably quiet. Brian replied that he lived on a busy street but that no one who had stayed with him had ever complained.

Brian went on to ask a favor of us. He was in Russia to do mission work for the Plymouth Brethren, and he wondered if he could send us a couple of boxes to bring along. They would have supplies that he needed. I agreed, and a few days later, two huge boxes arrived, each weighing at least twenty-five pounds. They were filled with thousands of pins—the kind with a little slogan about God’s love that you can attach to your shirt or blouse. I began to wonder what I had gotten myself into.

The boxes arrived safely in Russia, however, and we sailed through customs. As we stepped into the airport hall, a neatly dressed, slender young woman stepped up to us. She introduced herself as Anna, a member of Father Vladimir’s ecumenical institute. A moment later, a man with a bushy beard and straggly hair greeted us: Garth. Garth and Anna introduced themselves to each other and briefly discussed, in Russian, the plan for the next day. The question apparently had to do with who was going to register us, a requirement for all visitors to the Russia Federation that must be accomplished within three days of arrival. We could not determine what they decided.

Garth then drove us to Brian’s. Brian turned out to be a lanky bachelor who had recently bought the apartment as a place both to live and to host his mission activities—Bible studies, Sunday services, and prayer groups. The first night I was too exhausted to notice, but by the next morning I realized that the guest bedroom was right next to the street, and that the

street was a major thoroughfare that included a tram line. To my dismay, the tram began at 5 a.m., ran every fifteen minutes, ended after midnight, and made terrible rattling and screeching noises as it bounced over the uneven tracks in front of Brian's apartment. The whole room shook as the tram passed by.

By now, it was also becoming clear that the question of registration was going to be complicated. Garth and Marina had spoken ahead of time about the matter but had come to different conclusions. Garth was arranging for our housing for the first days, so Marina thought that he would take care of our registration. Because the ecumenical institute was our sponsor, Garth assumed that Marina would take care of it. Brian was not willing to do so because utility bills were calculated according to how many people were registered at one's residence. In frustration, Garth finally arranged for our registration through a hotel, but several months later we learned that the hotel did not exist and that the registration was not legal—although Garth insisted that the government did not care as long as we had an official-looking stamp on our immigration cards.

Finding our own place to live proved equally challenging. The housing supply in a large Russian city like St. Petersburg is tight. Young people, even after marriage, typically live with their parents. People who move to the city for work either rent a room in someone's apartment or live on the outskirts of town and commute several hours a day. Marina connected us with a real estate agent who was only willing to show us apartments renovated to a "European standard."

These apartments were more luxurious than we needed and more expensive than we could afford. One of Brian's Russian friends eventually introduced us to someone who owned a "Russian standard" apartment regularly rented by Western missionaries. It was large by Russian standards (three rooms), moderately priced, a twenty-minute walk to the metro, and a forty-minute walk to the ecumenical institute. The kitchen was tiny, and the oven had only one temperature (Deb guessed it to be about 325 degrees F). Someone had knocked a hole through a two-foot wall to provide ventilation for the bathroom. A wooden block wrapped in a sock served as the on/off button for the vent. On one side was our apartment; on the other, the outdoors, with negative-twenty-degree temperatures in the winter.

By the end of the year, several of our new Russian friends had told us that they would not have been comfortable living in our neighborhood. Homeless men regularly gathered in a vacant lot next door, made bonfires out of old boards, and drank beer. Rows of railroad tracks ran behind

the building, which had originally been constructed to house railroad workers. Other buildings in the area were slowly being gutted and renovated. A cheap hotel stood across the street; kiosks that sold everything from gum to beer to socks to knickknacks were right outside.

We had more than our share of “typical Russian apartment-living” stories. The street was quieter than Brian’s, but our next-door neighbor was a young woman who liked to play Frank Sinatra records at full blast at 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. More than once we pounded on the wall with the heel of a shoe; eventually, we got up the courage to ring her doorbell and ask her to turn the music down. In the winter, rats invaded the apartment, and we had to call the city pest control. On Orthodox Christmas Eve, one of our drains backed up, and with Brian’s help I located a plumber (a Russian friend of his) and in my broken Russian tried to negotiate a price.

One afternoon, a fire broke out in the apartment below us, and we had to evacuate the building. The lock to the entrance to the building was broken, and strangers would sometimes wander in and stand on the landing, smoking a cigarette, drinking a beer, or just warming up on a frosty winter day. Late one night we came home to find a young man strung out on heroin squatting helplessly next to the stairway that we had to climb to our apartment. Another evening, just a week before Christmas, two burly men tried to pull me into an alley and rob me as my daughter and I walked home with a Christmas tree. They sent my daughter on home with the tree, not wanting to get a child involved; a few minutes later I managed to break free and made a mad dash to safety.

Our landlady, Anna, was a middle-aged Russian living in Finland, several hours away by train. She had little interest in the apartment other than collecting rent. The window frames were rotting, several panes of glass had cracks, and the furniture was old and uncomfortably hard. The bathtub had terrible stains—dark streaks—from the heavy metal content of St. Petersburg water. The apartment was not quite a slum, but it was definitely headed in that direction.

Anna did not believe us when we told her about the rats. On her monthly run to St. Petersburg, I told her angrily that something had to be done. She insisted that they were nothing more than harmless mice and that a mousetrap would take care of everything. Just as she was about to leave, a rat suddenly dashed out of the kitchen and practically tripped her as it disappeared into a hole at the bottom of a wall where the plaster had deteriorated.

After six months, we had to renew our visas and our registration. Anna

insisted that she was not responsible for registering us, even though we were living in her apartment. When Marina finally talked her into it, Anna wanted to be paid for the favor.

The kids felt safe at the Mollers' school but faced new challenges. Having too naively imagined that the two younger ones, Luisa and Rachel, would quickly pick up the language, we had placed them in the Russian school. While they did learn a good deal, they never became comfortable speaking Russian, and the teachers had to make accommodations for them. Hannah, our oldest, did fine in the international school, but ended up having to teach herself in subjects for which there was not an adequately trained instructor.

Marina had warned us early on that we would feel welcome in only two or three Orthodox parishes in the entire city. Many Orthodox would look at us with suspicion; few parishes would know what to do with us. We eventually attended a church whose priest knew Marina. He spoke English fluently and was glad to talk to us about Orthodoxy. But even though we attended the liturgy every Sunday, no one else in the parish befriended us. We sometimes felt invisible to their gaze. We came and went without anyone saying a word to us. The feeling that we did not fit in was compounded by rituals of the Orthodox Church that were unfamiliar to us, such as people crossing themselves, falling prostrate on the floor, or kissing icons. We were not always sure when we could join in and when we had to stand back.

We had traveled as a family overseas before. Three years earlier, we had lived for two weeks in the heart of Prague and more than a month in a small town outside of Dresden. We knew that being a foreigner is lonely. But in preparing for Russia we had still managed to romanticize the challenges. We simply had not anticipated the extreme isolation and loneliness that we experienced once we arrived.

One factor was that we were Westerners. Russia in 2004 was still climbing out of the Soviet era. Some Russians were suspicious of Westerners, but perhaps the more significant factor was simply limited contact. Russia was not yet set up for Westerners to travel on their own as they might in Germany or England. Few signs at the airport or in the city were in both Russian and English. Foreign tourists had to apply for visas weeks ahead of time and acquire vouchers for hotels that they had booked. The Russian economy was still recovering from the financial collapse of the late 1990s, when many people lost life savings overnight. Russians sometimes regarded Westerners as wealthy and even condescending toward Russians' more primitive living standard.

Russians of this era still valued outer social conformity over expressions of individuality. When I rode the metro I would look at people's shoes, and 90 percent of the men wore highly polished black shoes or boots. In the winter, the preferred color for coats and jackets was also black. People did not speak much in public, and when they did, they kept their voices low. Russians had developed a knack for blending in. You tried not to draw attention to yourself because you did not want the police to stop you and ask for identification, nor did you want to attract troublemakers.

As a result, most Westerners and especially Americans did stand out. We could soon pick out our countrymen from the crowd on Nevski Prospect, St. Petersburg's main boulevard. Their clothes were tailored more loosely than the Russians' and had striking colors and designs. They wore expensive cameras around their necks and Jansport packs on their backs. They spoke English and spoke it loudly. Their facial features were not Slavic, and they looked well-fed and comfortable. They went into cafés and restaurants that were too expensive for most Russians. They looked like tourists—hesitating, trusting, and vulnerable.

People like Garth encouraged us to keep a low profile. We are low-key people to begin with, so we did not have to worry about showing off expensive clothes or jewelry. When we carried something, we used an ordinary plastic tote bag, as did the Russians. We usually did not speak among ourselves when we were in crowds, and if we did, we kept our voices low. We began to get streetwise: Whenever I went into the metro I took off my backpack and carried it, so that I always had an eye on it. Marina recommended carrying copies of our passports rather than the passports themselves, so that they would not be stolen by pickpockets or confiscated by policemen hoping to shake us down for a few rubles.

We probably never looked Russian, but we did begin to blend in as our faces became increasingly tired and haggard, like those of many Russians. Life in Russia, especially in a big city, wears people down; we were not the only people who had apartment problems. Public transportation was another stress—buses, trams, and the metro were constantly full, and at rush hour people crowded together until you could barely breathe. Everyday chores seemed to be twice as complicated and take twice as long as in the United States.

At the bank, train station, or post office, you typically stood in a long line, and when it was finally your turn, someone else might push his or her way to the front (giving the reason of being elderly or a war veteran or a member of another socially privileged group), or the clerk might

suddenly post a sign that she was on break—and then you had to queue up in another long line and try again. If you did finally reach the clerk, you had to talk to her behind a two-inch sheet of glass, a real challenge when you do not know the language well.

Perhaps that lesson was the year's most important: how much language matters. We were working hard at learning Russian, but especially in the first months we could not easily strike up a conversation with a stranger. Anyone speaking with us had to make almost as great an effort as we did. Just as we struggled to make sense of their words, even though they flowed so easily and smoothly, they struggled to understand our accented, grammatically flawed speech. We spoke slowly and haltingly, asking if this word or another were right, and they had to speak slowly, clearly, and simply. We longed for friendship—for people to be interested in us and to invite us to take interest in them—but the language barriers were overwhelming. It seemed as though we would have to take the initiative to reach out to others, but we did not have enough of the language to do so.

A person without a language is truly a foreigner. The great church father of the fourth and fifth centuries, St. Augustine, once wrote that a person would rather spend time with a dog than with a person whose language he cannot speak.² Communication enables community and communion. Conversely, inability to communicate makes trusting relationships difficult, even impossible. Whenever we opened our mouths, we felt vulnerable. People knew right away that we were not Russians. They might take pity on us or exploit us. They might be patient with us or turn away brusquely. They might help us or ignore us. We never knew what exactly would happen, and like any foreigner we embarrassed ourselves more than once.

The hardest thing was when we needed to negotiate delicate, sensitive situations. How could I explain to my landlady that unless she took care of a problem with the apartment, I was not going to pay my rent? My limited language abilities meant that I tended to get angry but also make myself laughable. How could I explain to the clerk at the train station that I needed a certain seat at a certain price on a certain day or that I needed to know other options if that seat were not available? I was fearful of annoying either her or the people in the line behind me, which would just grow longer if I took more time to finish my business. How could I handle situations in which people stopped me on the street asking for directions or the time? Sometimes when they noticed that I was a foreigner, they wanted to size me up. What was innocent curiosity, and what was about to turn into a threatening situation?

The feeling of vulnerability was compounded by cultural differences, especially relating to legal security. The Russia of that time was still rife with corruption, even among the police. Traffic police regularly pulled cars aside, ostensibly to inspect for safety and check paperwork, but in reality to collect small bribes to supplement their meager paid incomes. Other police officers would arbitrarily stop people on the street or in the metro, especially those who looked like Central Asians, to examine their passports and registrations and to harass them. For our Russian acquaintances, contacting the police was always a measure of last resort. You could not be sure how they might complicate matters.

I wanted to get to know Russian Orthodoxy, but that meant immersing myself in a world in which I could not yet function well. I could anonymously attend as many liturgies as I wanted in the large cathedrals, but talking to priests and parish members and coming to know Orthodoxy from the inside would prove much harder. I could sit at the ecumenical institute and read about Orthodoxy, but I didn't need to be in Russia to do that. Without mastery of the Russian language, I would have difficulty deciphering a host of unspoken rules about how to behave in church and participate in the most basic rituals. I would always feel like an outsider, a foreigner, a spiritual tourist, and perhaps even a fraud—a person claiming to be a scholar but in reality having no more purpose in Russia than a drunken bum stumbling down Nevski Prospect. Father Vladimir, Marina, and other staff members at the ecumenical institute were courteous and helpful but had little time. Many days I sat by myself, simply hoping that someone would eventually notice me and talk to me.

December came. The city was still pitch black at 8:30 a.m. when the girls set off for school. The sun did not rise until 10 a.m., and even then it just hugged the horizon and set by 3:30 p.m. Temperatures fell; streets became snowy and icy. Doubts began to nag at me. *What was I doing here? Why had I put so much time and effort into arranging this trip? Where did any of these new experiences fit with the rest of my life and my teaching and academic work?*

We burrowed in, and our loneliness grew.

New Beginnings

The next months slowly brought us out of our spiritual gloom. Daily life continued to be wearisome, but we could see that we were making progress with the language. One of our markers was the weekly sermon. Our priest, Father Viacheslav, was an inspiring preacher, and we began to

understand more and more of what he said. Another marker of our progress was that we grew better at accomplishing daily tasks: buying metro passes, asking directions, and deciphering public notices.

People at church slowly paid more attention to us. The relics of Saints Elizabeth and Barbara were on display for several days in our church. After venerating them (as best as a Protestant knew how), I sat on a bench nearby. A woman came up and sat next to me. "I've noticed you and your family in the liturgy," she said. "Are you from Germany?" We fell into conversation, and I learned that she and her husband had once lived in East Germany. They were now separated, although still on good terms. She had only a small income from occasional piano lessons and what her husband and children provided for her. During the remainder of our stay in Russia she took a special interest in us and helped me make contact with the director of a renowned Orthodox children's choir in St. Petersburg.

Deb and I became bolder about inviting new Russian acquaintances into our apartment for a cup of tea or a meal. Alexandra, one of Brian's friends, was willing to meet with us weekly to help us practice our Russian. Alexander, a teacher at a local Orthodox institute, agreed to meet with me to work through the liturgy in Church Slavonic, a language last revised in the seventeenth century. I quit sitting by myself at the ecumenical institute. Instead, I immersed myself as fully as possible in everyday Orthodox life. I got to know different Orthodox churches in St. Petersburg and attended liturgies several times a week. As a family we began to observe the church calendar, including the Wednesday and Friday fast days and then the Great Lenten Fast. Together we also experienced the liturgical rhythms of Holy Week, culminating in the dramatic Easter Vigil.

I visited monasteries and shrines. I bowed my head before miracle-working icons. I followed church processions that spilled into city streets. I joined Orthodox tour groups to holy sites in the countryside. I attended Orthodox programs for young adults, conferences on Orthodox theology and spirituality, and folk concerts by Orthodox musicians. I spoke to priests and laypeople about their beliefs and practices. Here and there I would meet someone who took an interest in me and wanted to help me become familiar with more aspects of Orthodox life.

So much of Orthodoxy was new and strange to me. I had been raised in a Calvinist tradition that valued simplicity and plainness in worship. Church buildings had little decoration beyond stained-glass windows and a cross on or above the Communion table. Ministers wore black gowns.

People rose to sing hymns, accompanied by an organ, but otherwise sat quietly in pews. Spoken words were the center of the service: prayers, Scripture readings, and especially the sermon. Communion was a somber event and celebrated only four times a year.

Going into the Russian Orthodox world was like going from black-and-white television to color. Church buildings were filled with icons of Jesus, Mary, and the saints. A wall of icons, the iconostasis, separated the nave (where the people gathered) from the altar area (reserved for the priest and deacons). Priests wore beautiful vestments sewn in different colors and with golden thread. The liturgy was elaborate, with the priest moving back and forth through the royal doors of the iconostasis. Worshipers regularly bowed and made the sign of the cross, and sometimes they fell prostrate on the ground. Clouds of incense filled the room.

The priest, deacon, and choir sang in Church Slavonic. Not only special anthems of the day but also prayers, Scripture readings, and the creed were sung. There was no instrumental accompaniment. The liturgy could take two and a half or three hours, and worshipers stood, although there were small benches where people could sit briefly (if there was room) as they waited for the priest to Commune behind the iconostasis and bring the eucharistic elements forward to the people.

Only the sermon was in Russian. In our church, it came at the end of the liturgy and could be as long (twenty minutes) as the typical Presbyterian sermon. But in contrast with many Presbyterian sermons, it had less to do with explicating the finer points of a biblical passage or speaking to contemporary social issues than with exhorting people to follow the good examples of the saints of the Scriptures and church history.

Differences in liturgy and worship were only the beginning. We soon learned about the history that had shaped Russia and the Orthodox Church so differently from the United States and the Protestantism that I knew in the Presbyterian Church.

A Post-Christian Age?

Presbyterianism has a reputation as a thinking faith. Presbyterians have embraced new intellectual and cultural trends and have tried either to imbue them with Christian meaning or to adjust the gospel to be relevant to them. We have believed that our brand of Christianity, like the Old Testament prophets, could guide and reform the nation and call it back to truth and justice.

At one time, Presbyterians were culturally influential. We sent more

presidents, senators, and representatives to Washington than almost any other Christian denomination. For decades, local school boards were firmly in the hands of Presbyterians and their allies. In my own town of Pittsburgh, Presbyterians were among the great financiers (the Mellon family) and industrial magnates (Andrew Carnegie) of the early twentieth century, and some (such as the Mellons) had financed the construction of the city's most magnificent neogothic churches. Presbyterians were intellectual and social leaders.

Much has happened in the last fifty years to alter this picture. Presbyterian worship has become more eclectic and diverse. Some influences have come from more evangelical forms of Christianity, and some have come from the ecumenical movement with its desire to recover practices of the early church. Communion is celebrated more often, and new styles of music are being embraced. Praise bands, dance ensembles, and PowerPoint slides have all become part of the standard worship repertoire of many a Presbyterian church.

Other changes are related to Presbyterians' social location. While Presbyterians have continued to think of themselves as cultural leaders and frequently embrace political causes, Presbyterians' social influence has diminished. Membership in the denomination has fallen by 50 percent since the 1960s. Presbyterian leaders are no longer regularly quoted in the *New York Times* or by the popular media about their stance on pressing social issues. Controversial questions that are dividing the nation are also tearing the denomination apart: abortion, sexuality, and foreign policy.

The version of a Christian America that Presbyterians once helped to construct is passing away. America's governing institutions have become more secular, and America's population has become much more diverse ethnically, racially, and ideologically. Religious and spiritual life has become more individualistic and less institutionalized. European Calvinism is just one among many religious and secular options that promise to help people make sense of their lives. Presbyterian churches in North America might yearn for the good old days of social influence, but those days are long gone.

The Russian Orthodox Church has also undergone profound changes over the last century. In its own way, the Russian Orthodox Church had once been as culturally established as Presbyterians and other mainline Protestants in North America. There were differences, of course: The United States had greater religious pluralism from the beginning, and its constitution prohibited state establishment of religion; the Russian

Orthodox Church had historically been both privileged and controlled by the Russian state. Despite the differences, American Presbyterians and other mainline Protestants and Russian Orthodoxy had articulated central values of their respective societies. Both had spread “a sacred canopy,” in the words of sociologist Peter Berger, over their nations.³ To be a Presbyterian had meant to be a good American citizen (though not necessarily vice versa); to be Orthodox had meant to be a good Russian citizen (and frequently vice versa as well).

For the Orthodox, these days came to an end with the rise of Bolshevism in 1917 and decades of brutal repression. No other Christian church in the twentieth century suffered the magnitude of persecution of the Russian Orthodox. In the 1930s, 80 to 85 percent of its priests were arrested; most were executed or died in prison camps. Of the seventy-five thousand houses of worship extant in 1914, fewer than two hundred remained open for worship by 1941.⁴

The church’s great monasteries were closed; the famous Solovki Monastery was turned into the first Soviet gulag. Church buildings were desecrated; some were razed while others were turned into factories, gymnasiums, or museums of atheism. Icons were often burned or confiscated; a few were declared national historical treasures and hung in state art museums. What church life remained was limited to celebration of the liturgy. Clergy had to be vetted by the KGB. Religious education and social outreach were forbidden.

World War II brought a loosening of Stalin’s antireligious policies, but the Khrushchev years (1953–64) were characterized by new church closings and waves of antichurch, atheistic propaganda and education, although few people died for their faith in this period. The years of stagnation under Leonid Brezhnev (1964–82) and his successors enabled the church slowly to rebuild parish life, but the state manipulated priests and bishops to be instruments of its “world peace” foreign policy initiatives.

The rise of Mikhail Gorbachev, perestroika, and glasnost in the late 1980s, and then the collapse of communism and the Soviet Union in 1991, seemed to the Orthodox like nothing less than a miracle. The church experienced dramatic rebirth. It quickly rebuilt churches, monasteries, and seminaries. It founded new educational institutions, including an Orthodox university in Moscow. The church organized diaconal work and institutions, such as hospitals, hospices, orphanages, and soup kitchens.

The church arts came back to life: icon painting, sacred music, and church architecture. Religious publications, bookstores, movies, and

conferences proliferated. The church's new patriarchs were prominent public figures who regularly appeared in the national media and met with government officials. The nation's leaders declared themselves to be Orthodox believers and regularly attended the Easter Vigil services at which the patriarch presided in the newly restored Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow. Vladimir Putin, after his inauguration as president in 2000 and 2004, walked to one of the Kremlin churches to receive a blessing from the patriarch.

Russia has continued to be a highly secular society. Many of its citizens (70 to 80 percent) call themselves Orthodox, but fewer than 5 percent regularly attend services, know the church's beliefs, or observe its basic practices.⁵ Russia is also becoming a more pluralistic society as it enters the global marketplace. Scientologists, Mormons, and North American evangelical groups have sent missionaries to Russia and founded new churches, although with limited success. Western-style consumerism and construction of a personal lifestyle are becoming people's priorities.

Nevertheless, the Russian Orthodox Church wants to win the hearts of the people again. Whereas most North American Presbyterians and other mainline Protestants accept that the United States is and will remain secular and pluralistic, many Orthodox believe that Russia can and should again become Christian. The next years will tell whether the church's program of *votserkovlenie* [in-churching (i.e., bringing people back into church life)] will actually succeed, but Orthodoxy does seem to provide a new unifying story and set of values for the nation. Moreover, despite separation of church and state in the new Russian constitution, state policies and actions regularly favor the Orthodox Church and enhance its social influence.

Deb and I suddenly realized that we were in Russia at a unique historical moment. We had the opportunity to learn just how the Russian Orthodox were making sense of their new situation. I did not need to justify my year abroad by sitting in a library or writing a scholarly book. I did not have to figure out exactly why I was there.

I just needed to keep my eyes open.

Pilgrim in a Foreign Land

By the end of my year abroad, I had rethought basic questions of Christian faith and life. I went to Russia as a Presbyterian and returned with a deep appreciation of the distinctive gifts and limitations of my church and its tradition. I went as an academic theologian and returned with

strong convictions that theologians must learn not only out of books (as important as they are) but also by participating in the life of the church, especially its worship and spiritual practices. I went in hopes of clarifying the way of the church in societies that are becoming more secular and pluralistic; I returned with greater insight into the complex ways in which religion and culture interact.

Being a foreigner is not easy, but it can help us see things about another culture that the natives take for granted, as well as things about our own culture that we otherwise miss. Whenever Americans travel to another country—even if just on vacation and within an enclosed and safe world of international hotels, resorts, and restaurants—we look back at our nation with a different set of eyes. We admire the public transportation systems of Japan and France and wonder why the United States cannot do as well. We are impressed with the slower pace of life in rural India and Malawi but give thanks for the quick access that we have as Americans to sophisticated medical care. The impact of a foreign culture is all the greater on us when we remove the protective insulation of the travel industry and immerse ourselves in another people's language. We begin to appreciate how different languages frame reality in different ways. The fact that translation between languages is rarely exact reminds us that human communication is complicated and fraught with misunderstanding.

Immersion in another people's way of life is equally important and expands our understanding of the human condition. Because of distinctive historical experiences and geographical locations, different peoples develop different mentalities and ways of doing things. People everywhere struggle to make a living, find meaning for their lives, deal with sickness and tragedy, and raise families. But these similarities must not obscure the real differences that also exist. People in the United States, because of our economic dominance in the world today, may be especially tempted to assume that everyone else wants to be just like us. But other peoples sometimes have values that conflict with our own.

The meaning of democracy in Germany and Russia is not identical to that in the United States. Controversies over preservation of historical buildings and monuments have a different emotional edge in countries with longer histories than the United States; in such places, just digging a foundation to a new house may mean disturbing archaeological remains and altering history. Different cultures also resolve questions about social welfare, gun ownership, or relations between men and women in diverse ways.

A similar thing happens when a person from one Christian tradition immerses him- or herself in another Christian tradition, especially in a

different part of the world. Suddenly one's own tradition appears in a new light. You can no longer take your own way of worshiping or believing for granted. You are confronted by the reality of other churches with their own coherence and vitality, and you have to ask yourself whether one way is better or more faithful to the gospel than another or whether these different ways complement each other.

Mainline Protestants face particular temptations. We easily assume that denominational differences are accidental and unimportant. Our ethic of celebrating diversity tempts us to overlook real differences—differences that can even result in vigorous theological disputes between churches and obstacles to eucharistic fellowship. Immersing yourself in the life of a different, even foreign church forces you to recognize that your assumptions are not always the same as other people's.

I believe that the time has come for North American Protestants who care about the Christian faith and the future of the Christian church to take our own journey into an expression of the Christian faith that is foreign to us. Such a journey has to be more than a kind of religious tourism that briefly dabbles in other people's traditions; rather, we have to immerse ourselves in ideas and practices that are so foreign that they jar us and push us to more honest self-evaluation about where our Reformation traditions got things right or wrong.

Such a journey can give us the space we desperately need to ask again the most important questions about who God is and who we are. Perhaps we will finally step back from the trivialities that inevitably fill most of our daily existence and seek again what is of ultimate value. We may come to new insight about the way of the church in changing social circumstances and about the kind of disciplined academic reflection the church needs to speak to its situation.

In one of his famous novels, Charles Dickens follows the life of the young David Copperfield as he grows into adulthood. David makes a series of bad decisions that increasingly come to haunt him. With the tragic death of his young wife, whom he had married more out of youthful romance than true love, his world finally comes crashing down. He spends the next two years of his life wandering through Europe, trying to make sense of his life again. He has to become a pilgrim before he can find his way back home.

Augustine used the image of the pilgrim to describe the church and the Christian life.⁶ For Augustine, the world is a place both of profound tragedy and of God's providential care. The events of this life repeatedly remind Christians that they have no lasting home on earth. We are

not without some sense of the good, but all of our efforts to realize it go astray. We are inevitably caught in the ambiguities of history, never wise or courageous enough to find the right way forward. The result is bitter competition, disagreement, and even war among different groups and peoples and within our very selves.

As North American Protestants we have to take the pilgrim road before we can find our way home . Only along that path can we learn how to rely on spiritual sustenance from beyond ourselves. The way of the pilgrim directs us especially to worship, where by God's grace we glimpse a world of ultimate beauty and peace behind and yet within the fallen world that we traverse. We travel together as pilgrims, and we hold each other up. We grow weary but are also blessed beyond measure by God's steady presence.

I invite you to walk with me and my family into Russia and Orthodoxy.